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Aesthetic Education between Judgment and Experience:

Dewey in *The Radical Aesthetic*

John Dewey's aesthetic philosophy has long hovered in an uncertain zone between the unfashionable and the untimely. It's never been hip, certainly not in English departments. But at the same time Dewey's effort to reorient the philosophy of art around the continuity of everyday and aesthetic experiences has had an impressive roster of enthusiastic readers in the art world (Marcel Duchamp, John Cage, Allan Kaprow) and just enough adherents within literary studies to be available as a resource for critique.¹ Precisely *because* his approach, intellectual reference points, and—let's face it—flat writing style have kept him off the literary theoretical syllabus, his insights remain perennially fresh, just enough out-of-step with disciplinary habits of thought to intervene when, as regularly happens, the conversation about aesthetics falls into one of its usual ruts.

Such, indeed, is Dewey's role in Isobel Armstrong's *The Radical Aesthetic* (2000). He is one of the "eclectic group of thinkers"—alongside D.W. Winnicott, Gillian Rose, L.V. Vygotsky, André Green, and others—that Armstrong assembled to combat the theoretical Left's rising distrust of the category of the aesthetic in the 1990s.² His "enormously important remapping of the aesthetic" lends support to her own attempt to "ground the aesthetic in experience everyone must have" (19, 16). That the major nay-sayers at the time—Eagleton,

¹ Mary Jane Jacobs, *Dewey for Artists* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2018), 2, 6.

² Isobel Armstrong, *The Radical Aesthetic* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2000), 3. Subsequent citations appear parenthetically.

Derrida, de Man—seem never to have even *heard* of Dewey, much less to have read *Art as Experience* (1934), only made his thinking more valuable for her project.

When I first encountered *The Radical Aesthetic* as a graduate student, Armstrong's simple recognition of Dewey was enough to win me. I was, and remain, one of those few who find in Dewey and the wider pragmatist tradition a philosophy that has all the nimbleness of post-structuralism without the fixation on aporias and abysses that so often accompanies the high-theoretical rejection of absolutes. I had studied *Art as Experience* in a college philosophy course and arrived at grad school with a Dewey-inflected understanding of aesthetics. But I quickly came to realize that Dewey was not where the action was. Not in aesthetics, and not even—believe it or not—in literary theoretical versions of pragmatism. At that time, pragmatism meant Richard Rorty, and Rorty had dismissed *Art as Experience* as an embarrassing metaphysical throwback. So I read, instead, Eagleton and Larry Grossberg and *Truth in Painting* and *Aesthetic Ideology*—all fascinating and very often brilliant but also, to my mind, too quick to dismiss the enterprise of aesthetics based on a narrow interpretation. When I came across Armstrong's careful dissections of those dismissals, and saw Dewey invoked as an ally in the fight, I took heart. *The Radical Aesthetic* joined a slim canon of books within literary studies that made Dewey seem do-able.³

Such possibility-opening work is an essential part of any book's legacy and worth praising at the outset. But my reasons for returning to Dewey's role in Armstrong's argument are more than personal. Dewey occupies a different and more central place in *The Radical Aesthetic*

³ The other books and essays included Ross Posnock's *The Trial of Curiosity: Henry James, William James, and the Challenge of Modernity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), Winfried Fluck's "Pragmatism and Aesthetic Experience," in *REAL: Yearbook of Research in English and American Literature*, 15: special issue "Pragmatism and Literary Studies," ed. Winfried Fluck (Tübingen: Gunter Narr Verlag, 1999), Giles Gunn, "The Pragmatics of the Aesthetic," in *Aesthetics in a Multicultural Age*, eds. Emory Elliott, Louis Freitas Caton, and Jeffrey Rhyne (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), and, later, Jane Thraikill's *Affecting Fictions: Mind, Body, and Emotion in American Literary Realism* (Cambridge, M.A.: Harvard University Press, 2007) and Kate Stanley's *Practices of Surprise in American Literature after Emerson* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018).

than any of the other figures in Armstrong’s “eclectic” group, even those given more attention, like Rose. This is because Dewey provides the blueprint for the entire project of rethinking the aesthetic along democratic lines. Where others offer useful concepts—the broken middle from Rose, mediation from Hegel, play from Winnicott and Vygotsky—Dewey models the ambitious effort to reboot the aesthetic from within a different conceptual framework. And so it shouldn’t surprise us that Armstrong turns to Dewey to counter John Guillory, whom she sees as her worthiest and most generative opponent. In what follows, I’ll begin by sketching important affinities between *The Radical Aesthetic* and the broader pragmatist tradition before returning to, and lingering on, this juxtaposition between Dewey and Guillory. Armstrong uses this pairing to weigh the relative merits of hitching a democratic program of aesthetic education to either judgment or experience. That, I’ll argue, is still a live critical question. By focusing on Armstrong’s use of Dewey, we can better grasp the ways that *The Radical Aesthetic* raises, confronts, and yet at times oversimplifies still urgent issues of aesthetic value and the teachability of aesthetic experience.

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Given Armstrong’s obvious affinity for the British psychoanalytic tradition, my insistence on Dewey’s “centrality” to *The Radical Aesthetic* may sound like special pleading. Yet he’s the only one of Armstrong’s interlocutors who sets out explicitly to recast aesthetic experience in terms of “the everyday events, doings, and sufferings that are universally recognized to constitute experience”—that’s Dewey—or what Armstrong rephrases as the “processes and practices of consciousness” that “are common to everyone.”⁴ The psychoanalytic thinkers provide content for the “processes and practices of consciousness”—Green on affect,

⁴ John Dewey, *Art as Experience* (New York: Perigee Books, 1980), 3; Armstrong; *The Radical Aesthetic*, 2. Subsequent citations to *Art as Experience* appear parenthetically as *AE*.

Winnicott on play, Wilfred Bion on dreaming—but only Dewey insists that these might form the basis of an expanded notion of the aesthetic. Insofar as the goal is to ground aesthetic experience in “what the early Marx called species being,” Dewey is the guide (3).

Dewey also belongs to an intellectual tradition that, not least because of its roots in Williams James’s philosophical and psychological works, developed images of thinking, emotion, and mediation that chime with those developed in *The Radical Aesthetic*. One of the foundational gestures of pragmatism was to reject the “spectator” theory of knowledge that assumed an absolute separation between the knowing subject and the object known. As James wrote, in a take-down of Herbert Spencer, “the knower is not simply a mirror floating with no foot-hold anywhere, and passively reflecting an order that he comes upon and finds simply existing.” Rather, “The knower is an actor, a co-efficient of the truth on one side, whilst on the other he registers the truth which he helps to create.”⁵ Having a foothold means being situated: in a body, in a culture, in a world. It means that it’s impossible to separate out the act of knowing from the fact of feeling, not least because—on the pragmatist account—knowing begins in doubt, and doubt, as we all know, has an unsettling affective character.⁶ It provokes us to act. And when we act, we don’t “passively reflect” the world but rather transform it, or *mediate* it, to use Armstrong’s term. Knowing is a mediating activity that involves us in the ongoing activity of the world: a co-efficient and register, each in turn.

In other words, when Armstrong counters the too-stark divisions between immediacy and mediation, or between affect and thought, Dewey is right there with her. Just as Armstrong insists that thinking-as-mediation “changes something, reworking the object by the very process

⁵ William James, “Remarks on Spencer’s Definition of Mind as Correspondence,” in *Writings, 1878-1899* (New York: Library of America, 1992), 908.

⁶ I’ve borrowed the phrase “fact of feeling” from Joan Richardson’s *A Natural History of Pragmatism*, another important literary critical study of pragmatist aesthetics from the early 2000s. Joan Richardson, *A Natural History of Pragmatism: The Fact of Feeling from Jonathan Edwards to Gertrude Stein* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006).

of positing it,” so too does Dewey describe knowledge as a “reconstruction” of experience, an act that creates the object of knowledge and, in the same stroke, recreates the knower. His background in education shows here: unlike most philosophers, he’s interested in *learning*, as a process, not *knowledge*, as a possession. Learning changes the situation by changing what students can do with what’s in front of them, be it an algebra problem or a passage from Hegel’s *Encyclopedia Logic*. A new skill or way of seeing changes the object by making it available for new tasks. Learning remakes the mediating relations that define both knower and known.

Similarly, when Armstrong insists on the need “to include affect under the sign of cognition and enable it to be comprehended in the definition of knowledge,” I think of the radical empirical rejection of what Dewey called “the philosopher’s fallacy” (59).⁷ Building on James, and echoing related thinkers including Alfred North Whitehead, Dewey denounced the tendency for philosophers to treat what is *known* as an exemplary case of what’s *real*. Yes, knowledge plays a role in the construction and reconstruction of reality, but Dewey maintained that our relations to reality are far wider than those usually included under the category “knowledge.” Moreover, he argued that if we lose sight of those wider relations by focusing myopically on the clarified *results* of thought as opposed to the messier *activity* of thinking, we risk throwing whole realms of experience under the bus. When that happens, emotions and the feeling body get demoted to the “irrational,” along with (as Armstrong shows but Dewey doesn’t) the women supposedly associated with them. This is why Jamesian thinkers in the early twentieth century tried desperately to convince readers that the default notions of “knowledge” and “reality” in modernity were dangerously thin, not least because they had been theorized in isolation from their wider experiential matrix.

⁷ Dewey, *Experience and Nature*, (Mineola, N.Y.: Dover Publications, 2000), 29.

Witness the example of Susanne K. Langer, a student of Whitehead's and follower of James's who gets a brief mention in *The Radical Aesthetic* as a reference point for Veronica Forrest-Thomson's poem "Ducks & Rabbits" (1971). As a woman sidelined in a male-dominated profession, Langer was keenly aware both of the narrowness of traditional epistemology and of the risks of countering "reason" by embracing "emotion." So in *Philosophy in a New Key* (1942) she developed an expanded notion of reason—based on the activity of *symbolization*—that encompassed not only logic and mathematics (the privileged forms) but also dreams, ritual, myths, and the arts. Like Armstrong, Langer described these myriad activities as instances of mind-as-mediation. She hoped that by redefining thinking along these lines she could "bring within the compass of reason much that has been traditionally relegated to 'emotion' or to that crepuscular depth of the mind where 'intuitions' are supposed to be born."⁸ In her follow-up book, *Feeling and Form*, Langer went several steps further in the direction of *The Radical Aesthetic* by using this enlarged notion of thinking to frame a philosophy of the arts.

All of this is simply to say that there are clear resonances between Armstrong's characterization of mental life and the picture of thinking, knowledge, and feeling presented in the Jamesian tradition. I cited Langer but could have just as easily pointed to Louise Rosenblatt or Kenneth Burke, both of whom brought Deweyan insights to literary studies. I note this not to complain that Armstrong should have discussed that tradition further. We all have our reference points, and she's upfront about her commitment to "psychoanalytic language" (114). Rather, I want to suggest that pragmatism provides deep resources for continuing the important project that Armstrong started, and that Dewey, in particular, can lead the way—for reasons she acknowledges, and for those she doesn't. Armstrong recognizes that Dewey's "hyphenated"

⁸ Susanne K. Langer, *Philosophy in a New Key: A Study in the Symbolism of Reason, Rite, and Art* [1942], 3rd ed. (Cambridge, M.A.: Harvard University Press, 1957), 97.

account of experience—his refusal to break experience along the classic divisions of subject and object, reader and poem—ticks many of the boxes she designates as necessary for the radical aesthetic (168). It attends to the dynamic back-and-forth of mediation and immediacy; it refuses to separate thought and feeling; and it countenances modes of modes of cognition unrecognized by narrow empiricism. But unlike Vygotsky or the psychoanalytic thinkers in Armstrong’s study, and somewhat to the contrary of how he’s presented in *The Radical Aesthetic*, Dewey doesn’t start with a novel understanding of consciousness and then derive an explanation for art. He doesn’t, that is, use scientific insights to explain aesthetics, despite his supposed biologism. Rather, he begins by appealing to aesthetic experience and, from there, criticizes the dualisms and rigidities of the science and philosophy of his day. Aesthetics offers the model for reimagining what and how we know.⁹

Something of this bolder approach is hinted at in chapter five, “Beyond the Pricing Principle,” when Armstrong pits Dewey against Guillory. This is where *The Radical Aesthetic* gets really interesting. For though it remains instructive to watch Armstrong swat down reductive and misogynist readings of the aesthetic by Eagleton and de Man in the early chapters, the sport is almost too easy, at least for those in sympathy with Armstrong’s aims. But the stakes rise when she turns to *Cultural Capital*: here she’s taking on another theoretically astute attempt to “remake the category of the aesthetic,” one she deems, respectfully, an “ambitious failure” (153).

Why does Guillory fail? Let’s start with his method. Armstrong puts her finger on the way that sociological approaches to the field of artistic production are unable to grasp aesthetic experience almost by definition. We can understand “aesthetic experience” at this point in a relatively naïve way: as the quickened feeling of absorption and creative engagement that attends

⁹ See, e.g., the chapter on “The Challenge to Philosophy” in *Art as Experience*, as well as “Experience, Nature and Art” in *Experience and Nature*.

our most cherished encounters with cultural objects. When we're lucky enough to have such encounters, we spontaneously attribute their power to the artworks themselves. The power of sociological explanations of aesthetic judgement as cultural capital is that they reveal a different agency shaping those experiences: the pleasure attributed to the painting turns out, upon analysis, to derive from the benefits accrued from being the kind of person whose education has equipped them to go to art museums in the first place. As revelatory as such insights are, they win their explanatory power by changing the subject. To their credit, both Bourdieu and Guillory recognize this limitation. Armstrong quotes Bourdieu on how "belief in the value of a work of art" is "part of the full reality of the work of art" and yet throws up "one of the major obstacles to the constitution of a science of aesthetic production." Or, as she glosses the quotation, "The ideology of the aesthetic is intrinsic to the meaning of aesthetic production," but a "science of art" can have no more to say about the matter. The aesthetic is "the problem to be explained" rather than a source of explanations (156). And so "a descriptive-structural analysis and an evaluative-affective analysis of the aesthetic will always be in tension" (19). You can either see art as cultural capital or as aesthetic experience—but never both at the same time.

Dewey and Guillory acknowledge this tension in reciprocal, almost opposite, ways through the structure of their investigations. One of the thrills of reading *Art as Experience* after having encountered Bourdieu, Adorno, and other theoretical sophisticates is to see Dewey begin by referencing the histories of capitalism and imperialism that shaped the modern ideology of art, only to warn readers not to conflate those histories with the aesthetic as such. As Armstrong notes—even more, as she imitates in the very aims of *The Radical Aesthetic*—Dewey acknowledges the role that art has played in the performance and maintenance of class status, but then responds by articulating a democratic notion of aesthetic experience (163). He's already

working along those lines by page 13. Guillory, on the other hand, only turns to aesthetic experience as disarticulated “from the class structure and from the markets” in the final moments of *Cultural Capital*, and then only after explicitly dropping the analytical rigor of the preceding 330 pages to indulge in a “thought experiment” (337). An admirably conscientious scholar reluctant to speculate beyond the claims warranted by his framework, Guillory recognizes both the irreducible role of aesthetic experience in any full account of art and the inability of his own sociological methods to say anything precise or interesting about such experience.¹⁰

Yet as Armstrong argues, the troubles don’t stop with method. When Guillory breaks professional character and imagines how the aesthetic might be remade outside the determinations of class, the version of aesthetic experience he proposes is curiously inert. First, to prepare the ground for a democratized aesthetic, Guillory distances himself from what he observes as a sleight-of-hand in Bourdieu’s analysis of cultural capital. In short, Bourdieu allows the *discourse* of aesthetics—which for him is a discourse of purity, epitomized in Kant’s transcendental method and instantiated in an acquired delight in “pure” form—to slide into a characterization of aesthetic *experience*, which in fact isn’t “pure” in this way at all. As a result, Bourdieu has to maintain the absurd position that “aesthetic experience is really *restricted* to the experience of High Cultural works,” when everyone—not least the working class respondents to Bourdieu’s surveys—knows that aesthetic experience has a much wider reach. Thus, Guillory concludes, “the recognition of cultural capital, otherwise known as aesthetic judgment, must deny, as a condition of its exercise, the ubiquity of aesthetic experience, the fact that such

¹⁰ An appeal to aesthetic experience makes a similar late-breaking entrance in the closing pages of Guillory’s *Professing Criticism*. John Guillory, *Professing Criticism: Essays on the Organization of Literary Study* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2022), 373-79.

experience utterly pervades the field of cultural production”—a fact that, in the so-called experience economy, anyone with eyes to see and a phone to look at knows all too well.¹¹

Armstrong agrees with the broad point here, but she smells something fishy in Guillory’s rendering of aesthetic experience. For in his attempt to recognize the “universality” of such experience—and so to disarticulate it from “an aesthetic *discourse* of value” tied to the class structure—Guillory leaves it strangely “undefined” (161). We’ve already seen how his sociological approach prevents him from saying anything interesting about aesthetic experience, but Armstrong goes even further. She argues that in the separation of the discourse of value from the fact of experience, Guillory relies on the old dichotomy of the linguistically mediated (associated with thought and analysis, coded masculine) and the experientially immediate (associated with the sensing body and intuition, coded feminine). So of course he doesn’t trust aesthetic experience to carry the weight of a democratized aesthetic, since what must be changed is not the bare occurrence of experiences of art but the social conditions of aesthetic judgment, the rules determining who gets to say which aesthetic pleasures are “better” than others. His Utopia is a world in which everyone has equal access to cultural goods and equal status as a judge. Armstrong deems the costs of this thought experiment as too high. “The problem here isn’t the Utopianism,” she explains, but “the fetishization of the act of judgment.” And that, in turn, is linked to his anemic notion of aesthetic experience, because “a democratic discourse of value” is “a strangely abstract process in a context where aesthetic *experience* falls out of analysis.” The final problem with Guillory, Armstrong explains, is that he “mystifies aesthetic experience as ineffable, unnameable” (161).

¹¹ John Guillory, *Cultural Capital: The Problem of Literary Canon Formation* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993), 336.

Armstrong, in contrast, wants to locate aesthetic experience in the realm of the intelligible, even if this means dropping judgment altogether. In fact, she thinks that “abandoning hierarchy”—a taken-for-granted goal for a democratic aesthetic—“might mean the abandonment of the centrality of judgement.” That is, if we want a “complete redefinition of the field of aesthetic experience,” we have to give up both hierarchies and their maintenance through acts of judgment. And that’s why she turns to Dewey: she praises him as someone “who tried to think through the aesthetic by abandoning hierarchies of experience, and who turned to an analysis of the sensuous without surrendering it to the ineffable” (161). The contest is set: judgment on one side, experience on the other. And the prize is a hierarchy-free aesthetic.

The discussion of Dewey that follows this grand introduction gets a lot right. I’d send any interested student to these pages for a cogent presentation of Dewey’s distinctive notions of form, emotion, and thinking in *Art as Experience*—no small praise, given that Dewey is so often reduced to caricature (and given that Armstrong’s reading in both Dewey and Dewey scholarship seems to have been, ahem, focused). But is it true that Dewey rejects judgment? Or that his version of democracy refuses hierarchies of all kinds? Here Armstrong overreaches. For not only does Dewey retain a use for judgment; he *needs* judgment, understood on his terms, to make sense of how aesthetic experience can be formed, developed, in a word: educated.

The penultimate chapter of *Art as Experience* is titled “Criticism and Perception,” but its refrain, starting with the first sentence, is “criticism is judgment” (298). What’s the relation between perception and judgment? And how does that relation define the nature of criticism? These are the questions that Dewey takes on, and his first move (a characteristic one) is to differentiate a common understanding of judgment from the one he endorses. In particular, he discards the “legalistic” meaning as it has seeped into criticism: he rejects criticism that acts like

a judge, working from a set of pre-established principles to pass a verdict on a work. In addition to being hung up on the exercise of authority—with all the psychological vulnerabilities that hang-up can involve—such “judicial criticism” tends towards the unthinking defense of “tradition” or the rote application of separately held moral or philosophical beliefs (AE 301, 302). It therefore trips at the most important hurdle, that of discerning “the emergence of new modes of life—of experiences that demand new modes of expression” (AE 303). This is the point of critical judgment for Dewey. “The function of criticism”—which, remember, is synonymous with judgment—“is the reeducation of perception of works of art; it is an auxiliary in the process, a difficult process, of learning to see and hear” (AE 324). Judgment, on Dewey’s account, doesn’t deem poems good or bad, Art or not-Art, but rather models ways of seeing them, ways of realizing them in experience.

Or rather, praising a poem as good—as beautiful, interesting, or intense—is simply one way of helping others to see it as the critic does. As Richard Shusterman, one of Dewey’s great champions within contemporary aesthetics, wrote in an early essay: the reasons offered for critical judgments don’t operate like logical reasons, nor as causal accounts, but as instructions for seeing. They “function as devices for focusing the reader’s perception in such a way that he will see the work as the critic sees it. Perception is the proof.”¹² When, for instance, Armstrong asks us to notice significant repetitions in “Tintern Abbey” or the “constitutive blanks” in “Ducks & Rabbits,” she is providing perceptual instructions aimed at modifying our experience of the poem (68). That’s critical judgment, and it has experience as its origin and aim.

¹² Richard Shusterman, “Aesthetic Argument and Perceptual Persuasion,” *Crítica: Revista Hispanoamericana de Filosofía* vol. 15, no. 45 (December 1983): 51-74, 61. Full disclosure: Shusterman, who made his name with the Dewey-inspired *Pragmatist Aesthetics* (1992), is discussing Wittgenstein here, which is why his definition finds its way into Linda M. G. Zerilli’s *A Democratic Theory of Judgment* (2016), a relevant book for questioning Armstrong’s suspicion that a democratic aesthetic requires jettisoning judgment.

The hard opposition between experience and judgment is thus a false one, and for reasons that Armstrong should endorse. One upshot of Dewey's definition of judgment as the "development in thought of a deeply realized perception" is that the considered reflections of criticism loop back into perception, just as perception is the ground of judgment (*AE* 300). In other words, the mediations of thought intermingle with the immediacies of sensory perception: precisely the picture of cognition that Armstrong labors to develop in the first half of her book. The philosopher Alva Noë is one of the best contemporary explicators of this dynamic relation within pragmatist aesthetics, because he recognizes that the obvious "immediacy" of aesthetic experience—the way it involves qualitative and sensuous response—doesn't preclude it from being the result of mediations, even linguistic ones. Rather, he claims that "aesthetic experience, insofar as it is a unitary phenomenon at all, is essentially a critical or discursive one."¹³ Our efforts to say what we see and feel—the seeds of criticism—shape how the experience unfolds, how the object comes into view. Judgment feeds perception. And this back-and-forth is possible because aesthetic experiences are not instantaneous, nor are they confined to our own minds. They are less like events in consciousness with definite durations, like headaches, and "more like patterns of curiosity, interest, or caring," of the sort characteristic of a "concern for a political cause" or a relationship with an intimate.¹⁴ That temporal spread leaves them open to reconstruction. We can learn to see differently by talking with others.

For all the lip service paid to aesthetic education in *The Radical Aesthetic*, Armstrong actually has very little to say about this process of learning to see. What matters to her is simply that the aesthetic be conceived democratically, meaning that everyone has equal access to it. But what exactly does this mean, and how far does it take us in answering her question, "What would

¹³ Alva Noë, *The Entanglement: How Art and Philosophy Make Us What We Are* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2023), 166.

¹⁴ Noë, *The Entanglement*, 165.

today's aesthetic education look like?" (80). Again, her handling of Dewey is telling. She praises him for locating a "common propensity" for aesthetic experience in all humans, as part of our "species being" (167). And she argues that this very gesture slips the aesthetic beyond the nets of value. Because Dewey "has established the literal existence of inherently qualitative experience and the *necessity* of this experience to both biological and mental life," she explains, he has made questions of value "irrelevant" (168). Well, to an extent. That is, *Art as Experience* does make a powerful case that the aesthetic can't be reduced to its modern manifestations under capitalism, but that shouldn't allow us to think that those manifestations aren't also instances of the aesthetic, however partial or distorted. Once the category of the aesthetic has been remade, there's still the job of linking it to those paintings, compositions, and novels we more readily class as works of art.

The relation between an expanded definition of aesthetic experience and the traditional practices usually classed as "arts" is, in fact, a perennial issue in the reception of Dewey's aesthetics. The biggest headline in *Art as Experience*—that art is continuous with everyday experience—has very often been taken as an invitation to abandon traditional art practices and their institutional location in the museum in favor of celebrating the aesthetic potential of *any* activity. See, for instance, Kaprow's "happenings." Armstrong, too, notes that it's possible to argue that Dewey's "understanding of the artwork is so inclusive that it disappears into the experience of everyday life" (169). At one point she even offers a muted endorsement of this possibility, first by approvingly citing resonances between Dewey and other theorists of everyday aesthetics (Lefebvre, de Certeau, Elaine Scarry on flower catalogues), and then by lamenting a "hidden hierarchy" in Dewey's book. Dewey, she explains, still holds "the fully constructed artwork" as "his model of the achieved aesthetic object" (169). Bizarrely, Armstrong

sees this as a liability. It's the reason why "the revolutionary possibilities of *Art as Experience* remain implicit" (169). But must we believe that a radically democratic opening of aesthetic experience renders specialized art practices obsolete or, worse, *retrograde*? Surely not, given the use to which Armstrong puts Blake, Wordsworth, and others in her book. So what's going on here?

The Radical Aesthetic offers a clear instance of what Michael Clune has described as the conflict between "dogmatic equality" and aesthetic education.¹⁵ In *A Defense of Judgment*, Clune argues that recent efforts to revive the discourse of aesthetics have foundered on the unwillingness of critics to acknowledge that criticism, by definition, involves judgment, and that judgment, by definition, involves hierarchies. We don't have to take on board the whole of Clune's argument about authoritative expertise to agree that, in this case, Armstrong's commitment to defining the aesthetic as equally available to all cuts short any explanation of what a reformed aesthetic education would entail. Why else call out Dewey for not going all the way in dispensing with the traditional arts altogether? It's as if, at the mere suggestion of hierarchy, Armstrong had to react. I'm not suggesting that Armstrong should take up the "judicial" mode of criticism. But I am saying that her abstract approach to crafting a democratic aesthetic makes it difficult to move from the species-being model of aesthetic experience to the particular problems of literary criticism and its institutional situation. Where Guillory's *Utopia* calls for a change in the conditions of education that would shift the role and meaning of aesthetic hierarchies, Armstrong's rests at defining the aesthetic as "a biophysical and cognitive necessity"—something so ingrained that it can be likened to an "involuntary" process—and then trusts that this alone will take care of any problems that attend the teaching of particular artforms (169). But there's still the question of what to teach, and how.

¹⁵ Michael Clune, *A Defense of Judgment* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2021), 63.

I don't see this as a major problem for Armstrong, only as an opportunity to tighten the links between the various threads of her argument. Throughout, she valorizes the "emancipatory" ability of aesthetic experience to transform categories of thought as a "prerequisite of political change" (41). Noë makes a similar argument, defining the aesthetic as the domain through which we reflect on and make visible the ways our lives are organized, so that they might be remade. The aesthetic, for him, is that reorganizing process, the effort to see something differently. But Noë then makes a useful clarification that applies to both Dewey and Armstrong: the arts—painting, choreography, writing, etc.—are practices through which this aesthetic process is activated, concentrated. "Art *targets* the aesthetic," he explains; "By this I mean: artworks stage occasions for that distinctive passage from not seeing to seeing, or from seeing to seeing differently, that is the very hallmark of the aesthetic."¹⁶ A radical aesthetic demands not just a universalized capacity for response but also a set of techniques aimed at stimulating and directing that capacity. Judgment, as a reeducation of perception, then serves as a discursive practice aimed at expanding access to the stimulating powers of particular works. By learning to see as a critic sees—even better, as many critics see—we undergo the aesthetic transformation of experience, becoming practiced in playing with the ways we are organized.

A democratic aesthetic doesn't require the refusal of judgment and hierarchies so much as their democratic exercise. In "Democracy is Radical" (1937), an essay written against Soviet and National Socialist claims to represent a truer form of democracy, Dewey insisted that democratic ends can only be achieved through democratic means.¹⁷ You can't force people to adopt democratic principles and claim that you've achieved democracy. This political proposition finds philosophical expression in Dewey's commitment to experience as the sole seat

¹⁶ Noë, *The Entanglement*, 168-69.

¹⁷ John Dewey, "Democracy is Radical," in *America's Public Philosopher: Dewey's Essays on Social Justice, Economics, Education, and the Future of Democracy*, ed. Eric Thomas Weber (New York: Columbia University Press, 2021): 19-23.

of authority. “Democracy,” he explains, “is the faith that the process of experience is more important than any special result attained, so that special results achieved are of ultimate value only as they are used to enrich and order the ongoing process.”¹⁸ You can hear in this sentence—with its emphasis on enrichment and order—how central the cultivation of aesthetic experience and the arts that target it are for Dewey’s understanding of democracy as a way of life. And you can also hear how the legalistic exercise of critical judgment is anathema to this project. Though Guillory and Clune help us to recognize where *The Radical Aesthetic* stops short, Armstrong’s allegiance to a radical form of democracy, in the Deweyan sense, reminds us that nothing will be solved by appealing to “submission to the expert’s judgment.”¹⁹ Judgments are openings in a conversation, not authoritarian mandates. And the final proof is in perception.

Armstrong described Dewey’s approach to aesthetics as “both more and less sophisticated than those that followed him” (163). That still sounds about right. *Art as Experience* remains ripe for use, starting where so many other books leave off, but in order to be brought into our century it needs tempering, qualifying, and extending in relation to other approaches. That’s exactly what Armstrong shows us how to do, and what we should now do with *The Radical Aesthetic*. Twenty-five years ago Armstrong turned to Dewey to envision a more radically democratic aesthetic in response to the pervasive charge of art’s elitism, its separation from life. Now, as more and more English departments are subjected to brutal cuts and UK secondary schools are teaching fewer and fewer students A-level literature, elitism is not the prime danger. But the need to insist on the necessity of acknowledging and cultivating the ways of thinking, feeling, and experiencing showcased in the arts is more urgent than ever, not

¹⁸ John Dewey, “Creative Democracy—The Task before Us,” in *America’s Public Philosopher*, ed. Weber, 64.

¹⁹ Clune, *A Defense of Judgment*, 30. There’s a weak sense in which Clune is obviously right: students should be open to what their teachers ask them to read. But teachers, too, should be open to having their own judgments tested and reformulated in response to conversation. See John McGowan, “Teaching the Art of Judgment,” *PMLA*, vol. 138, no. 1 (January 2023): 206-11.

least because there aren't as many institutional spaces in which to do it. I've suggested that the wider pragmatist tradition offers resources for making that case; *The Radical Aesthetic*, in turn, shows us how to assemble such resources to address a present concern.