

# **We Teach Art, but Can Art Teaches Us? John Dewey on the Significance of Art for Human Life**

**D. Rio Adiwijaya S.Sn., M.Hum**

DKV New Media BINUS University  
Jl. KH. Syahdan No. 9, Jakarta 11480, Indonesia  
(6221)5343830 ext. 2107 | 0811910694  
email: rioadi@binus.ac.id | rioadi@gmail.com

## **Abstract**

Those who pursue an academic career in art and design universities most likely are aware of one of its most puzzling dilemmas. On the one hand, as a subject situated in a post-industrial university setting where the progressive accumulation of scientific knowledge – mostly in propositional form and explaining how things work in our physical or social reality – constitutes its primary academic purpose, art and design are unavoidably driven to adopt the same outlook. On the other hand, most artistic/designerly activities are not aimed to produce or derived from experimentally replicable objective research statements but conducted to generate new and unique artifacts, performances, narratives or experiences in order to enhance artistic/designerly universe. However, considering their being as non-propositional, unique creations of art and design are unfortunately regarded as mere products of subjective emotional preferences, where its appropriate functions are nothing more than museum spectacles, entertainments or ornaments, which at the same time testify its marginal relationship with the knowledge or greater purpose of life. However, this predicament is not as self-evident as it looks since it eventually results from a particular philosophical outlook, namely, an outlook that bifurcates mind and body, rational (scientific) and emotional, subject and object, and so forth that comes down to us from Platonic and Cartesian tradition. It is precisely the holistic yet radical thought of John Dewey, the forerunner of everyday aesthetics, that profitably conceives art prior to Platonic/Cartesian bifurcation that would be studied and presented in this paper. Art, for Dewey, is not a product of subjectivistic emotions, but instead emerges through/as “experience,” understood as primary/pre-linguistic/embodied human-environment “transaction.” Located in such a primary experiential domain, art obtains its utmost significance and even becomes, in Dewey’s terminology, a “handmaiden of science.”

**Keywords:** *art, knowledge, philosophical bifurcation, experience, john dewey*

## INTRODUCTION

In many world societies that are increasingly tied to the global network of information economy, there is surely nothing more precious to cultivate than knowledge. Accordingly, policy conceptualizations within the global economy tend to prioritize funding for knowledge areas having the highest possible (and measurable) socio-economical impact, namely, scientific and technological research. This kind of policy has challenged the future of faculties such as traditional humanities and creative arts, for their alleged speculative and aesthetic traits are regarded as less significant in terms of research. However, how these faculties reconfigure themselves for the information economy eventually has become more and more crucial for their own continuance. The emergence of the exciting yet polemical notion of creative arts as research in part is driven by this kind of policy in the global economy (Cazeaux, 2017, pp. 1-4). But can art truly become research? How could we comprehend the idea of creative arts as ‘research’ and as ‘knowledge production’ while its outcomes are still primarily artworks and performances rather than propositions that systematically explain, predict or describe how things work in our natural and cultural world? Where can we find art’s truth value? Are they implied in the written concepts? However, no matter how invaluable concepts are, they do not isomorphically translate into and from artworks or performances. For how can we premeditate and ‘paraphrase’ isomorphically in verbal terms, let us say, a picture or a musical piece?

Immediately sensed aesthetic dimensions or embodiment is stubbornly present in all art creation and reception. And unlike scientific or even social research which attempting to ‘represent the actual’ through explanatory and descriptive propositions, art foremostly ‘present the possible’ (hence imaginative) through direct presence or performativity of sensory works. So, in what way that we can comprehend art’s significance as research? If we insist that artistic research and its alleged knowledge are necessarily embodied in the artifacts or performances, there are many fundamental questions concerning embodied knowledge that should be answered, e.g., what kind of knowledge it, in fact, is? How sensory works embodying ‘imaginative’ content could be regarded as equal to ‘factuality’ of scientific knowledge resulting from rigorous research. Furthermore, does embodied knowledge have the same explanatory/predictive/descriptive function as scientific knowledge?

Regarding the above questions, this article would like to seek philosophical insight from John Dewey who in some way had dealt with similar issues, albeit in his time, namely finding a significant place of art in the age of science-driven industry. However, Dewey philosophical oeuvre was not confined to the context of art per se. Instead, Dewey challenged the whole foundations of traditional Western philosophy, which consists of metaphysical, epistemological, and ethical/aesthetic

dimension. It is his critical reconstruction of the metaphysical and epistemological aspect of Classical/Modern philosophy that yields rehabilitation of the aesthetic dimension of art, which will be outlined in this paper.

### **Dewey Against Intellectualistic Dualism**

Difficulties we suffer in recognizing art's sensory presence/performativity as embodying significant knowledge, according to Deweyan view, are due to the old yet prevailing philosophical notion that bifurcates mind from body, intelligible from sensible, thought from feeling, spiritual from material, thinking from doing/making, *et cetera*, and places the former half of each binary pair as more primary, essential and superior than the latter. Mind or reason, for example, is commonly taken to be essential and superior faculties of human beings compared to bodily senses or passion. From this 'intellectualistic dualism' rooted in Platonic philosophy, knowledge is seen as an abstract quasi-thing or a fixed body of propositions capturing the true *Forms* or essence of things, attainable only through human intellect insofar it is 'purified' from any sensory/sensualistic biases. Accordingly, art as an epitome of the sensory definitely appears as having no significant relation to propositional knowledge.

Modern philosophy since Descartes has brought deeper complications by inducing more segregation into Platonic dualism, namely, the sharp division between subject and object, inner and outer, self and world. Thanks to Cartesianism, there are now familiar divisions between what is considered to be merely subjective or occurring inside the mind, and truly objective or taking place in the outside world. The impact of this Cartesian dualism to art is more devastating. For being a result of human making, art appears to be a mere sensory externalization of subjective thought or feeling of its own creator, and in turn, causes a merely subjective fantasy or emotion rather than cognitive and factual understanding in its viewer. Conversely, it is science that is granted the status as a genuine form of knowledge, for its allegedly passive, detached and purely cognitive way of inquiry is regarded to have resulted propositional body of claims that objectively represent the external world. Insofar we still hold on to this Platonic-Cartesian dualism or the "folk theory of disembodied mind" (Johnson, 2018: 3-4), any attempt to give art significant status as embodying serious knowledge seems to end in vain.

The question is, then, how can we make sense of ourselves, the world, and the arts outside or beyond the 'perimeters' of the all too familiar Platonic/Cartesian binary? Following John Dewey, one of the critical ways is to see that bifurcated pairs such as mind-body, cognitive-aesthetic, subject-object, inner-outer, *et cetera*, are not the actual constitution of the real but instead results of philosophical abstraction or conceptualization. However, Dewey is not against conceptualizations *per se* for he himself is a philosopher whose job is making conceptual distinctions.

One thing we should carefully avoid is to fall into “fallacy of hypostatization,” which is defined by Dewey as “conversion of eventual functions into antecedent existence” (Dewey, 1981: 34). When we reify some static quasi-entities out of the temporal flow of life activities that precede any philosophical abstraction, hypostatization fallacy occurs. In other words, we commit the fallacy when we treat the abstraction as self-sufficient entities and forgetting its origin as results of analysis (as in the case of Cartesian *res cogitans* or mind, which is conceived to be a ‘mental thing’ that can exist independently from the body or material thing).

To avoid such fallacy which contributes to fatal segregation and compartmentalization of life, Dewey himself prefers the term ‘body-minds’ to “capture the intimate and intricate interaction of the corporeal, interpersonal, and cultural dimensions of our selfhood. Body and mind are not separate realities, but rather aspects or dimensions of a process of organism-environment interaction, in which organism and environment are interrelated, interdependent, and interdefined” (Johnson, 2018:14). Indeed, Dewey did not merely play around with few neologisms but wholeheartedly anchoring his philosophy as in *Experience and Nature* and *Art as Experience* in the temporal continuum of life context prior to mind-body, subject-object, or self-world split.

### **Life As Experience**

If one begins from hypostatized mind-body or subject-object split, the only logical way to bridge the allegedly ‘natural’ gap between the split is through the mediation of conceptual knowledge (since we are solely subjects with minds). In an almost comparable fashion to phenomenology, Dewey radicalized version of naturalism emphasizes the primacy of his version of *Lebenswelt*, the *lived-world* prior to our abstract theorization of ourselves and the world, hence we and the world are not yet separated mind and world, or subject and object. In this raw, unmediated and pre-reflective mode of existence, we and the world, according to Dewey, are both parts of continually developing flow of organism-environment transactions. We live and become who we are only in and through a series of embodied interactions with multivarious facet of our physical and socio-cultural environment. In this pre-theoretical yet primary mode of existence, our interactions are *directly experienced* rather than mediated by conceptual knowledge. Since it signifies our unmediated interactions, experience for Dewey is neither a psychological event that occurs inside the mind nor merely felt occurrence of physical stimulus.

Experience is of as well as in nature. It is not experience which is experienced, but nature—stones, plants, animals, diseases, health, temperature, electricity, and so on. Things interacting in certain ways are experience; they are what is experienced. Linked in certain other ways with another natural object—the human organism—they are how things are experienced as well. Experience thus reaches down

into nature; it has depth. It also has breadth and to an indefinitely elastic extent. It stretches. (Dewey, 1981: 12-13)

In other words, the whole life itself firstly and primarily emerges or occurs as a stretched field of experience that encompasses both organism and environment, rather than as atomistic subject knowing various discrete objects. Indeed, this is Dewey's basic philosophical stance in overcoming intellectualistic dualism.

However, how can people orient their life interactions without being mediated or informed by some instances of explicit knowledge? Dewey's answer is through directly felt pervasive quality of experience itself. Mark Johnson has an excellent illustration:

"We dwell in a world of qualities... the fresh, earthy scent of a cool breeze coming in through the window on a spring morning, the sounds of children playing, the honking of horns in congested traffic accompanied by the smell of exhaust and the feeling of cars and trucks pressing in around us, and the refreshing shock of the cold mountain lake after a strenuous sweaty hike. We act to realize some qualities and avoid others... all of which are experienced qualitatively without any need for reflective thought." (Johnson, 2018: 247)

Our interactions in/with the world are indeed meaningful even without explicit language, as when we silently exchange gestures with others in daily interactions, or effortlessly enjoy our drive around town without having to think consciously about car mechanism and maps. This is not to say that symbolic language has no role in enriching our possibilities for meaningful interactions. Instead, Dewey's point is that linguistic meaning is parasitic on embodied qualitative meaning, and not the other way around. The problem is, intellectualistic dualism has confined the qualitative aspect of experience merely 'inside' the human 'mind.' In other words, quality is deemed to be merely 'subjective.' However, since subject-object and inside-outside split themselves are results of hypostatization, putting quality in the subject's mind and quantity in the objective world is even more untenable! For Dewey, immediately felt pervasive qualities belong to the world as well as to the humans. It is neither subjective nor objective but encompasses both, insofar as both the experiencer and the experienced interact.

As can be expected, this qualitatively meaningful field of embodied experience is precisely the Deweyan philosophical context for making sense of creative arts in a very significant way. However, there is still more to say about experience since it is precisely Dewey's most central concept. Furthermore, whenever we are immersing in qualitatively meaningful experience, for Dewey, we are dwelling in its most primary mode. Conversely, our conscious, conceptually mediated, and detached encounter with the world constitutes secondary mode of experience. Overall flow of one's life experience hence consists of switching back and forth between its primary and secondary mode, whereas the latter always comes

from and feeds back to the former in terms of consummating (or disappointing) it. These cycles of feedback loops eventually make possible one's life experience as a whole to be continuously growing or developing (Fesmire, 2015:71, 192) transforming a person's state from inexperienced to become more mature or cultivated.

Recognizing this difference between primary and secondary experience is also crucial in understanding Dewey's differentiation between art and science. Art, due to its embodied character which is directly related to immediately sensed qualities, mostly operates in primary mode of experience through enacting possible meanings, and values *via* artworks. While science with its abstract-conceptualizing process that seeks generalizations operates as secondary mode of experience. (Johnson, 2011: 147) However, since secondary or experience always emerges from and feeds back to the primary one, science in the Deweyan sense can also be said to be art, albeit involving its own qualities, *i.e.*, its own norms and ideals. And lastly, since the whole life itself for Dewey is a temporal flow of experience taken at large (*i.e.*, cultural history), art and science's most profound role is continuously improving how the world is qualitatively experienced.

### **Art and the Temporality of Experience**

Dewey's thick exposition in *Art as Experience* chiefly focuses on how art relates to the 'temporality' of experience. However, to make sense of this notion of 'temporality' that belongs to experience, we better make a comparison with the one which is merely 'spatial.' As we have discussed above, experience for Dewey is encompassing. It envelopes both the experiencer and the experienced with an immediately felt pervasive quality. For example, we immediately feel a 'formal' pervasive quality of our office room when we attend a meeting, a 'casually cheerful' quality when we have lunch in the cantina, *et cetera*. So it can be said that we dwell in such multivarious 'space' of qualitative meaning. Still, it is a commonplace, banal, or mundane space because it leaves us only a fleeting impression as soon as we no longer dwell in it. However, there is another kind of experience which does not only envelope us in qualitative space but unfolds over time, connecting past, present, and future events that culminate as a whole in a very singular yet deeply meaningful way (Jackson, 1998: 44-45). For this kind of experience, Dewey adds an article 'an' in front of the word experience, so it is 'an experience'.

Some simple examples of 'an experience' is perhaps a graduation day, a successful first concert, the birth of a child, a funeral of the beloved one, *et cetera*. In attending the funeral of our beloved parent, for example, we are not merely dwelling in a qualitative space called cemetery in a temporally fleeting way. Within only a few minutes of the ceremony, suddenly moments of our past related to our parent begin to unfold and flash before our eyes. It does not stop in connecting our

present to our past, but it also opens up the future possibilities of our own belief, temperament, and disposition for action. Perhaps there is some guilt from our past that has just emerged, and in some harmonious synthesis with gratitude, inspires us to become a more caring person in the future. The latter probably constitutes the singular climax of our temporal experience which does not necessarily resolved at the funeral at once. The funeral moment with its related past memories may still echo for years ahead, receiving selection and refinements, and in some consummatory moment, it finally resolves into one of the most meaningful synthesis regarding the whole chain of moments, leaving the experiencer a lasting meaning, and even a change of life, signifying it as 'an experience'.

We have an experience when the material experienced runs its course to fulfillment. Then and then only is it integrated within and demarcated in the general stream of experience from other experiences. A piece of work is finished in a way that is satisfactory; a problem receives its solution; a game is played through; a situation, whether that of eating a meal, playing a game of chess, carrying on a conversation, writing a book, or taking part in a political campaign, is so rounded out that its close is a consummation and not a cessation. Such an experience is a whole and carries with it its own individualizing quality and self-sufficiency. It is an experience. (Dewey, 1988: 42)

The question is then, what is the relationship of an experience with art? Dewey's answer would firstly ask us to carefully pay attention not to the story, or the 'content' of the example of an experience above, but to its structured narrative 'form' which is akin to work of art in general. An experience of a common man might not be reaching its consummatory phase in the same structural quality as narrative designed by a very good team of movie writer, director and editor. But that is precisely Dewey's point. Art originates in spatial and temporal experience of common women and men. But its finest example is epitomized, precisely in art.

In short, art, in its form, unites the very same relation of doing and undergoing, outgoing and incoming energy, that makes an experience to be an experience. Because of elimination of all that does not contribute to mutual organization of the factors of both action and reception into one another, and because of selection of just the aspects and traits that contribute to their interpenetration of each other, the product is a work of esthetic art... The 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, 1988:48)

*Art as Experience* is indeed filled with thick analysis of artwork's structure and process. But Dewey did not apply his analysis exclusively to art objects as in formalism. If we remember his philosophical starting point, Dewey is against

dualism which gave birth to formalism, i.e., aesthetic objectivism in art. Since human beings and their environment are interpenetrate to each other spatially and temporally through experiences, there are structural features of the environment (i.e., artworld and artworks), that can be found in the human, and *vice versa*.

Another possible objection that can be addressed to Dewey's aesthetics is his rendition of temporality of experience is akin to psychological analysis of mental activities, which at first glance seems to assume mind-body and inner-outer dualism. But if we read Dewey's notion of experience more carefully, we can also read that his analysis of the temporality of experience is still an extension of his concepts of organism-environment transactions. In Dewey's own words:

Experience in the degree in which it is experience is heightened vitality. Instead of signifying being shut up within one's own private feelings and sensations, it signifies active and alert commerce with the world; at its height it signifies complete interpenetration of self and the world of objects and events. Instead of signifying surrender to caprice and disorder, it affords our sole demonstration of a stability that is not stagnation but is rhythmic and developing. Because experience is the fulfillment of an organism in its struggles and achievements in a world of things, it is art in germ. (Dewey, 1988:19)

## REFERENCES

- Cazeaux, Clive, *Art, Research, Philosophy*, Routledge, London, 2017.
- Dewey, John, "Experience and Nature" in *The Later Works of John Dewey, Vol. 1*, Jo Ann Boydston (ed.), Southern Illinois University Press, Carbondale, 1981.
- \_\_\_\_\_, "Art as Experience" in *The Later Works of John Dewey, Vol. 10*, Jo Ann Boydston (ed.), Southern Illinois University Press, Carbondale, 1988.
- Fesmire, Steven, *Dewey*, Routledge, London, 2015.
- Jackson, Philip W., *John Dewey and the Lessons of Art*, Yale University Press, New Haven, 1998.
- Johnson, Mark, *The Aesthetics of Meaning and Thought: The Bodily Roots of Philosophy, Science, Morality, and Art*, The University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 2018.
- \_\_\_\_\_, "Embodied Knowing Through Art" in *The Routledge Companion to Research in the Arts*, Biggs & Karlsson (eds.), Routledge, London, 2011.