

BOOK REVIEW

Jackson, P.W. (1999). *John Dewey and the lessons of art*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 204 pages. ISBN 0-300-007213-9.

Reviewed by John Howell White¹

Kutztown University

What can we learn from Dewey's reconception of aesthetics, from a term applied to independent objects or sensory states to an interactive coupling of the perceiver and the perceived? This is the question addressed in Philip W. Jackson's book, *John Dewey and the Lessons of Art*. Jackson is a past president of the John Dewey Society and the David Lee Shillington Distinguished Service Professor in the Departments of Education and Psychology at the University of Chicago. He makes it clear that this volume is not an attempt to synthesize Dewey's ideas about art and education, an understandable but disappointing limitation (the book's title implies this if the reader associates "lessons" with schooling). He even admonishes educators who might believe that Dewey's ideas about the change that is possible through the viewing or making art could be considered a standard for educational success: "It seems fruitless to expose students to art objects or to have them construct such objects in the simple hope that doing so will dramatically change their lives" (p. 95). Jackson limit his ambitions to two aims. The first, to share the historical importance of Dewey's ideas, primarily found in *Art as Experience* (1934), with contemporary readers, will appeal to those who have yet to read Dewey. Seasoned readers will value the second, to fill in Dewey's discussion about art with ideas developed in Dewey's other texts.

Jackson accomplishes both of these goals in the first and longest chapter in the book. Because Dewey is known for his awkward writing style and his propensity for musing about issues rather than building a focused analytic case, most audiences will value this clarification of the general tenets of Dewey's positions. In this regard the chapter works quite well. Jackson moves the reader through the rethinking that needs to take place in order to understand Dewey's ideas about experience and art. Jackson makes it clear that an experience is a dynamic process that alters the futures of the observer and the observed and that the educational value of an experience is its capacity to "prepare a person for later experience of a deeper and more expansive quality" (p. 6). Artworks provide exemplary models that unify the intellectual, emotional and practical dimensions of

¹Correspondence concerning this review should be addressed to John Howell White, Associate Professor, Department of Art Education and Crafts, Kutztown University, Kutztown, PA19530

human response, and in so doing provide insights into what life lived as an experience might be like.

Jackson's discussion goes a long way toward dispelling criticisms that tie Dewey to a sensory or even a strictly psychological view of aesthetics. On the contrary, Jackson situates Dewey as an early poststructuralist to the degree that Dewey views all objects, events and ideas as contextual, always in motion, always positioned. In discussions of Dewey's ideas about both perception and aesthetics, it is the relational quality and the historical permeability of objects that are revealed as we experience them. Perception and aesthetics are not limited to sensation but rather are states of fully developed engagements with the world. The value of artworks is that they provide us with opportunities for consummatory experiences, change, and instruction in what an experience might entail.

One test of the relevance of Dewey's aesthetic is the question, "Is Dewey's philosophy a useful tool for understanding post-historical art works?" Jackson recognizes the urgency of this question and dedicates the second chapter of his book, "The Spirituality of Art Centered Experiences" to his answer, exploring the question in relation to the art of John Cage, Carl Andre, Robert Rauschenberg, Elizabeth Bishop and Michael Heizer and the writings of George Leonard, Arthur Danto, Peter Schjeldahl, and Mark Taylor. As Jackson works through the fascinating material related to these artists and critics, readers may become a bit anxious that Dewey has disappeared from Jackson's book. Put your separation anxiety to rest. Dewey returns by chapter's end to reclaim his centrality in the art /life question. In the meantime, the philosophers and artists introduced are used to flesh out unsettling questions related to the end of art.

Pragmatists are notorious for considering the use value of any thought or action. Do Dewey's ideas about aesthetics and "an experience" transfer into our everyday lives, help us to understand and reconfigure our worlds? In the third chapter, "Experience as Artifice", Jackson takes up this question through an examination of three contributors to the self-help industry that has grown over the past 20 years, Jon Kabat-Zinn's (1994) "Wherever You Go, There You Are", Corita Kent and Jan Stewart's (1992) "Learning By Heart", and Frederick Frank's (1973) "Zen of Seeing." Again Jackson's strategy is to view practices of others through Dewey's philosophy. Of historical interest is the reference to Dewey's personal self-help strategy of choice, the Alexander Technique.

This group of self-help books provides an interesting but problematic ground for this discussion. Central to Dewey's conception of an experience is his admonition that perception is more than mere recognition. Jackson uses these books to demonstrate ways that individual might move from states of recognition to states of perception. Each of the texts dis-

cussed stress a conception of awareness that takes place when individuals are immersed in solitary exercises (meditation, looking, and drawing) where perception involves self-control in a relatively static environment. Jackson points out the limitations of such states. For Dewey, perception is an active, fully-embodied field that takes place in a world that provides real time resistance. Jackson's self-help examples provide insight into the body as a component in Dewey's conception of perception, and they also make reference to thought as an artifact. But as examples that explore contexts (social and environmental), which provide real time resistance, they are less convincing. Jackson attends to this limitation and consequently helps us to reframe Dewey as proto-constructivist. However, I felt that the inclusion of a fully contextualized, in-the-world self-help example would have pushed this argument along more effectively.

While the middle chapters direct readers' attention to the work of others, the final chapter returns to Dewey as teacher. Although I found Jackson's segue from the arts to education weakly developed, this chapter's concentration on Progressive Education and Dewey-as-teacher at Columbia will fascinate readers interested in the history of education, pragmatism, or their own teaching.

Exemplary Dewey-inspired classrooms and artworks, as Jackson states, share in a concern for experience as the central issue, beyond democracy, in the development of a life. What the arts offer teachers are models through which viewers can develop and expand their capacities for experience. Teachers who conceive of classrooms as analogous to art works, in that they provide models of perfection which challenge learners to rethink their presumptions, will have moved a long way toward learning "the lessons of art."

References

- Dewey, J. (1934). *Art as experience*. New York: Capricorn Books.
 Franck, F. (1973). *Zen of seeing*. New York: Vintage Books.
 Kabat-Zinn, J. (1994). *Wherever you go, there you are*. New York: Hyperion.
 Kent, C. & Stewart, J. (1992). *Learning by heart*. New York: Bantam.