

Contemporary Aesthetics (Journal Archive)

Volume 0 Special Volume 1 (2005)
AESTHETICS AND MOBILITY

Article 5

2005

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Recommended Citation

Määttänen, Pentti (2005) "Aesthetics of Movement and Everyday Aesthetics," *Contemporary Aesthetics (Journal Archive)*: Vol. 0 , Article 5.

Available at: https://digitalcommons.risd.edu/liberalarts_contempaesthetics/vol0/iss1/5

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Aesthetics of Movement and Everyday Aesthetics

Pentti Määttänen

Abstract

How the general notion of experience is understood determines to some extent what one thinks about art and aesthetic experience. Pragmatism widens the concept of experience from that of sense experience. Action, practice and movement are epistemologically significant elements of experience. The environment is not just perceived, it is experienced also by acting, moving around and participating in different practices, as can be spelled out in terms of Peircean semiotics. From the pragmatist point of view, aesthetic experience is not characterized only as disinterested contemplation of art works and other elements of our environment as objects of perception. Aesthetic experience is intertwined with different social and cultural practices in the flux of our everyday life. [1]

Key Words

aesthetics of movement, pragmatism, semiotics of space

1. Semiotics of Space

According to Charles Peirce, the main idea of pragmatism is to widen the concept of experience beyond that of sense experience. [2] The epistemological role of action must be taken into account. We are embodied beings, living organisms that are in continuous interaction with our environment. The Cartesian dichotomy between internal and external does not make sense in the pragmatist account. We are in this one world already, and the important distinctions are those between different kinds of activities in this world, as opposed to the distinction between what is inside (in the head or in the mind) and what is "out there" in the external world.

The semiotic theory of Peirce is an essential element of his pragmatism. According to this theory, signs are three-place relations between objects, sign-vehicles and interpretants. A sign-vehicle refers to its object, but not by itself. It must be interpreted to refer to its object, and the interpretant serves that purpose. There are different kinds of interpretants, but the most important one is the final logical interpretant, a habit of action that terminates the chain of interpretation. [3] There are different levels of meaningful activities, linguistic, artistic and so on, but our bodily action in the physical environment is also meaningful action.

What a thing means, Peirce says, is simply what habits it involves. [4] Chairs and tables, doors and windows, buildings, squares and the like, all literally objects of perception, are interpreted through habitual activities (actual or potential) that are related to them. As moving pieces of flesh, we interpret the environment in the course of everyday life through our habits. As cultural beings, we also attach symbolic meanings to objects of perception; therefore we have a multilayered system of meanings corresponding to different kinds of interaction with our physical and cultural environment. [5]

We also experience the social environment it, as moving parts of it, by moving around, walking and jogging and using cars, buses and trams. Fellow citizens are experienced in terms of what they are about to do, how they are about to act. This mutual anticipation of one's own and other people's actions is a way of thinking about and interpreting social reality. Strictly speaking, one cannot perceive social reality. We can perceive a police officer, but the institution of law and order cannot be reduced to him. From the symbols that an officer carries, we can conclude that s/he will probably behave in a certain way in certain circumstances. But such activity is perceived only after it begins. Social reality thus exists as habits of social action and is also experienced through action by participating in habitual social practices.[\[6\]](#)

Meanings, on the other hand, exist as habitual social practices, i.e., habits are meanings. This is one way to express the principle of meaning as use, and not only by way of linguistic expression, but by use of any object like tools, instruments, buildings and so on. The wider notion of experience leads to a wider notion of meaning as well.[\[7\]](#) This notion of meaning entails that when we experience our environment as meaningful, when we attach meanings to it, we experience it as places and objects related to different kinds of meaningful social practices. A church, for example, is associated with certain religious texts as well as with different ceremonies and rituals performed by people coming to the place and behaving in appropriate ways. An art gallery or a concert hall is interpreted to be not only a specific place for exhibiting and performing works of art but also a place associated with various cultural practices, conventions and conceptions, including views about aesthetics.[\[8\]](#) Museums and galleries are the places where paintings and other objects can be experienced in an impersonal environment not too closely connected to the pleasures and sorrows of practical, everyday life. Similarly, musical scholarship suggests that the idea of concert halls as places where musical 'works' could be completed apart from everyday matters developed along the same lines and for the same reasons as museums and galleries.[\[9\]](#) In this way the environment can be seen as a system of signs, a sort of spatial code, interpreted with linguistic and other meaningful practices.[\[10\]](#)

In moving around we move in the middle of this system of signs that are interpreted in terms of these meanings to the extent we are acquainted with the practices in question, as well as when we are not actually participating in these practices. All places and locations are saturated with these meanings which, in one way or another, affect our everyday experience.

2. Art as Experience

There are different sorts of pragmatism, but if we take seriously one of the incentives of classical pragmatism, namely the theory of evolution, the conclusion is that as products of nature we do not have access to any transcendental spheres. Thus, the Neo-Kantian conception of aesthetic experience as disinterested appeal to the transcendent cannot be accepted. Instead, all experience is interpreted in terms of meanings, and all meanings are tied to different kinds of actions.

Therefore we cannot have experiences completely devoid of practical engagement. We can, however, distinguish between two kinds of action.

Aristotle defined *praxis* as action the goal of which is the action itself and *poiesis* as action the goal of which is the product of that action.^[11] For example, building a boat is *poiesis*. The best example of *praxis*, on the other hand, is life. To live a good and happy life is the highest purpose of life itself. Life as *praxis* has no specific product or outcome that could be of higher value, and we are not in the world for the purpose of being transported to transcendence. Ethics is concerned about what kinds of choices are proper for living a good and happy life. For Aristotle these problems are always contextual; the choices are about particular acts in concrete circumstances.

In a similar way, one can distinguish between two kinds of experiences: experiences that are valuable in themselves and experiences that are primarily means for some further experiences. This is precisely the distinction that John Dewey used as a basis in his definition of aesthetic experience.^[12] This notion is completely at odds with the Kantian notion of aesthetic experience.^[13] Of course, Dewey had much more to say about aesthetic experiences, but this basic distinction enables us to define disinterestedness in a relative way. Aesthetic experience is disinterested in the sense that it is relatively independent of activities that one has to perform in order to achieve some further goals. For example, usually one has to buy a ticket for a concert, but few people go to concerts in order to have ticket-buying experiences. Usually they seek musical experience. Dewey's distinction is also formal in the sense that it does not specify the content of an aesthetic experience. Something can be experienced as beautiful, sublime, horrifying, exiting or whatever as long as it is something that is pursued for its own sake.

Consequentially and importantly, then, aesthetic experiences in general are not separated from practical activities. On the contrary, they are forms of *praxis*, important elements of a good and happy life, and they can be neatly intertwined with other practical activities that can be considered forms of *praxis*. In general we are not dealing with categorical but with relative distinctions. An aesthetic experience may have a further goal, such as self-education, and it is possible to be so enthusiastic about one's work that it becomes almost a goal in itself. Aesthetics in this sense is intertwined with life; it is a kind of everyday aesthetics rather than a doctrine about transcendent matters.

A good example of this kind of everyday aesthetics is the so-called praxial philosophy of music and music education. It is based on the Aristotelian notion of *praxis* but not limited to it, as becomes clear from Thomas Regelski's extensive analysis.^[14] However, praxialists usually refuse to use the word 'aesthetic' because the term is quite often understood in the spirit of Neo-Kantian aesthetics that is strongly criticized by them. Another reason is the fact that it is often hard to tell what exactly is meant by the word, the Kantian, Deweyan, or some other meaning. Regardless of this terminological issue, the point is that works of art are discussed in the context of

other social and cultural activities without the theoretical burden of the aesthetic views developed in connection with gallery art. Music as "good time," - literally, as "worth while" time, time well-spent, to use Regelski's expression, is a good example of a Deweyan sort of aesthetic experience.

3. Aesthetics of Movement

Dewey's definition of aesthetic experience is based on the distinction between means and ends. In a similar way, moving may be determined by a need to proceed to a certain place -- home, work or somewhere else -- in an efficient way. Then it is purely a means for getting to that place. On the other hand, people may be moving around without any definite ideas about where to go. In this case movement is a kind of end in itself. These kinds of differences in the motives of moving have an effect on ways of moving, for example on whether one goes on foot or uses vehicles. As in Dewey's aesthetics, the distinction between movement as means and as an end is relative. Both aspects may be present.

Now the question arises whether those experiences of moving and experiences related to movement that are pursued for their own sake can be called aesthetic experiences in Dewey's sense. At least it can be said that they satisfy Dewey's formal definition of aesthetic experience. If the consummatory aspect^[15] of the overall experience of movement is dominant, it is quite safe to conclude that movement can be an element in our everyday aesthetics. This kind of movement may even be a part of the pragmatist slogan "make your life a work of art." Actually the pragmatist framework is not even necessary for this, as is shown by the modernist example of the *flaneur*.

There is no movement without context, without physical and social environment. Various elements of the environment may give rise to experiences that contain elements of consummation. An old metaphor compares the urban environment with a machine. But machines are not designed for the purpose of serving the needs of their own constituent parts, the nuts and bolts, wheels, bearings and gears of the machine itself. Machines, instead, are designed for the purpose of maximum output with sufficiently good quality. What, in comparison, is the output of the city-machine? Is it profit for some people, or is it a good life for the moving parts of the urban machine, that is for the people living in that environment?

4. The Ethical Dimension

Aesthetics is intertwined with ethics. Aesthetic *praxis* is not so different from other forms of *praxis*. Aesthetic goals and other goals of good life cannot be categorically separated, and there are no easy solutions to what specific choices are good. Aristotle defined the good by saying that good is that for which people strive. The problem is that people seem to strive for different goals. No one of these goals can be taken as a common denominator of all possible good things, as *the* moral good by virtue of which other good things are good. This is related to the accusations of the so-called naturalistic fallacy. These accusations are, however, based on a kind of aprioristic fallacy, the assumption that some common denominator exists

and that it can be found out with *a priori* conceptual reasoning. However, nothing guarantees that such a common denominator actually exists.

Aristotle observed that ethical choices depend heavily on context. The pragmatist notion of meaning, according to which meanings are habitual practices, entails that it is not possible to find sufficient and necessary conditions that govern all kinds of phenomena. The true character of *praxis* is that it leaves room for different kinds of goals that can be considered to be good goals from certain points of view. The relevant problem of philosophical ethics is not the problem of a one-and-only definition of moral good as opposed to all natural goods, but of finding a way to contribute to the creation of circumstances in which people can discuss and negotiate how to accommodate their respective goals in a fair and equal way.

These considerations all have some consequences for the urban machine in which some of us live. If the machine is designed with "*poietic*" principles, just to function smoothly and efficiently to produce an output distinct and separate from the machine itself, it probably is not the best machine for *praxis*, for the happy life of the moving parts of that machine. These parts have slightly different values and goals, different ways of life and points of view, not to mention different tastes in art. The friction caused by these differences should be diminished, not by forcing all moving parts to move and function in terms of efficiency, but by using enough lubricant to allow for realizing individual (but not individualistic) purposes. Art in an everyday context can play some role in this lubrication.

The stress on art in everyday context does not, of course, mean that galleries, museums and concert halls should be closed. Neither does it mean that art works as physical objects should necessarily be different. The same physical entity can be interpreted in different ways. To take something as a work of art is to interpret it with meanings, and these meanings are linguistic, educational and so on. The variety of these practices and traditions implies that there will always be as different as theaesthetic views and attitudes with which people evaluate art works and other objects of the environment. The pragmatist point of view easily allows for this pluralism as it denies the possibility of *a priori* ethical standards and analyses of cultural phenomena in the relevant practical context.

The environment around us is quite complicated. The physical environment of buildings, squares, roads and vehicles can perhaps be made to function as a machine, but that environment is loaded with cultural meanings and is intertwined with our social environment. The social reality exists as habitual social practices and is interpreted and experienced in the same way as physical reality: through habits of action, by participating in these practices. This provides one possibility for characterizing art located in the middle of the various and ubiquitous practices of life: It is art on the move.

Endnotes

[1] The work on this paper has been supported by the Emil Aaltonen Foundation. I am indebted to Thomas Regelski for

insightful comments on this topic.

[2] Charles Peirce, *Collected Papers*, ed. Charles Hartshorne and Paul Weiss (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1932-1958), passage 1.336.

[3] *Ibid.*, passage 5.491.

[4] *Ibid.*, passage 5.400.

[5] Pentti Määttänen, *Action and Experience*, *Annales Academiae Scientiarum Fennicae*, B 64 (Helsinki: Academia Scientiarum Fennica, 1993).

[6] Pentti Määttänen, "Space, Time, and Interpretation," *Proceedings of Nature, Culture, Semiotics: Location IV, September 23-26, 2004, Tallinn - Tartu* (forthcoming).

[7] This wider notion of meaning can be found also in Ludwig Wittgenstein's later writings about language games. Pentti Määttänen, "Meanings as Use: Peirce and Wittgenstein," *Time and History. Papers of the 28th International Wittgenstein Symposium, August 7-13, 2005, Kirchberg am Wechsel*, ed. Friedrich Stadler and Michael Stöltzner, Contributions of the Austrian Ludwig Wittgenstein Society, Vol. XIII (Kirchberg am Wechsel: Austrian Ludwig Wittgenstein Society, 2005).

[8] The place may thus have an effect on the reception of an artwork because of the meaning associated with the place.

[9] Lydia Goehr, *Imaginary Museum of Musical Works. An Essay in the Philosophy of Music* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992).

[10] 'Spatial code' is Henri Lefebvre's term. The views of Lefebvre and Peirce are compared in Pentti Määttänen, "Semiotics of Space: Peirce and Lefebvre," *Proceedings of The 8th Congress of IASS, July 7-13, Lyon* (forthcoming).

[11] Aristotle, *Ethica Nicomachea. The Works of Aristotle*, Vol. IX (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1925), 1140 b 6-7.

[12] John Dewey, *Art as Experience* (New York: Perigee, 1980), p. 57.

[13] Pentti Määttänen, "Aesthetic Experience: A Problem in Praxialism," *Action, Criticism & Theory for Music Education*, 1, 1 (2001) <http://mas.siu.edu/ACT/index.html>.

[14] Thomas A. Regelski, "Social Theory, and Music and Music Education as Praxis," *Action, Criticism & Theory for Music Education*, 3, 3 (2004) <http://mas.siu.edu/ACT/index.html>.

[15] 'Consummatory' is Dewey's term for expressing the idea that an experience has a character of fulfillment, is satisfactory and self-sufficient. See John Dewey, *ibid.*, p. 35.

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Published December 21, 2005