

The 471st Convocation

Address: “Art as Education”

By Bill Brown

December 13, 2002

I want to begin, of course, by celebrating your accomplishments, congratulating you on the hard work and the success that has brought you here this afternoon. In typical Chicago fashion, though, I don't want to congratulate you without also, in the same breath, prodding you further: toward new ambitions and achievements, and toward new engagement. I do this—perhaps one always does this—selfishly.

Three years ago someone might have stood here with enough temerity to describe a world of unprecedented national economic prosperity and relative peace. Today, with genuine humility, I'm asking you to do what you can to help the world think beyond its current state of social, political, and physical fragility. This accomplishment may seem to require considerable *thinking* at the expense of *feeling* precisely because we now live in a nation that feels threatened and that threatens. These feelings are not easily overcome, and they can readily add up to the epistemological effects that one associates with war: foreclosing significant debate; simplifying complexity; dichotomizing the world into the evil and the good, the ignorant and the enlightened; diminishing experience to two dimensions. The will-to-simplicity seeks to compromise, if not to arrest, “education” in any meaningful sense of the word.

I take it as axiomatic, though, that in the time you've spent at Chicago (be this one year or eight), you have not only learned the content of one field or another (biology or economics or philosophy) but also learned the passion to learn and to keep educating yourselves. Still, chances are—whether you're a B.A. about to work for an NGO, an M.B.A. about to enter a corporation, or a Ph.D. about to pursue a teaching or research career—that this passion will have to be realized, first off, through increased specialization. By what means, then, will you stay engaged by more general objects of knowledge? And how can any of us preserve something like “human experience” as a meaningful object of our attention? Just as being a responsible citizen of the world now means inhabiting both a local and a global milieu, so too it means thinking as the

specialist and as the generalist, able to participate in, and to enact, what John Dewey conceived of as a self-conscious community of individuals dedicated to the adventure of thinking toward the goal of social good.

Although Dewey only taught at the University of Chicago for a decade (1894–1904), I suspect that his name and his thought have been invoked as often as anyone’s on occasions such as this—not only because he left such an imprint on the institution by founding the Laboratory School, but also because his ideas of that decade both sustained his thinking and the institution’s thinking for decades to come. Among the most profound of those ideas was his redefinition of the school as such, the school conceived not as an instrument for schooling but as an extension of civil society, as “the living present” that is the “prophecy for the future,” and as the setting where one experiences the instability of knowledge and the context-dependent claims of truth. But it is a topic of Dewey’s that he did not address in that decade that I wish to take up this afternoon.

For despite all his accomplishments in the field of educational theory, in psychology, in epistemology, and in ethics, when he was asked to give the inaugural William James lectures at Harvard in 1932 (in a year when the United States was beginning to face an unprecedented state of economic and social fragility) Dewey unpredictably spoke about art, suddenly venturing into the field of aesthetics. Those lectures became the basis for a book, *Art as Experience*, published in 1934, that implicitly, and then explicitly, imagines art and the experience of art as an essential response to social crisis—as, indeed, a mode of apprehending crisis and the depth of its ramifications in our psychic and social lives. It is on the grounds of that work that I’m fool enough to want to imagine with you how listening to more music, visiting more museums, attending more plays and films, and reading more poetry can save us from our specialist selves, on the one hand, and, on the other, animate a creative intelligence that will disrupt the conceptual blockage we confront in the papers every day.

Dewey actually appreciates Plato’s commitment to censoring poetry and music, for instance, just as he appreciates the regulation of the content of religious art ordained by the Second Council of Nicaea, because these clearly mark the social and political influence that the arts once had. In contrast, he recognizes the “isolation of art” as a symptom of the “incoherence” of modern

American civilization. Nonetheless, rather than waxing nostalgic and arguing on behalf of some new organic role for art, he points out that art “thrives on resistance and conflict.” Moreover, he goes on to describe a theory of art in which aesthetic experience—by definition—remains integral to everyday life.

He does this by thinking beyond two dichotomies, two binary oppositions, the first of which I’ll call the “life of the mind” and the “life of the senses.” His point here is to insist that the practice of art is a practice of thinking just as the practice of science is a practice of creative imagination. “That the artist does not think as intently . . . as a scientific inquirer is absurd,” Dewey argues, concluding that the production of art “probably demands more intelligence” than the “so-called thinking” of “intellectuals.” In some sense, then, Dewey continues a line of thought that emerged within English Romanticism, crystallized by Shelley’s claim that “Poetry . . . is at once the center and circumference of all knowledge.” But Dewey never isolates poetry from other literary genres or from the other arts; he writes without the grandiosity of a Shelley; and he resists reducing art to any form of knowledge. The point is, rather, that art transforms knowledge “into something more than knowledge because it is merged with non-intellectual elements to form an experience worthwhile as an experience.” This is to say that art has no truck with that opposition with which I began, between thinking and feeling. Its power resides in its capacity to provoke thinking in the midst of strong feeling, and its capacity to enrich thought with an affective dimension. It enacts a will-to-complexity wherein passions are not permitted to displace thought.

As the title of his book would suggest, it is this concept of experience that Dewey uses to rethink aesthetics, and it is the concept with which he breaks down the second dichotomy, between art and everyday life. For his point is that there can be an aesthetics of the everyday, and that art is a quality that *can* saturate experience, that in fact does characterize our experience whenever we are able to pause, and to differentiate an experience from experience *tout court*. In general, though, experience is too “dispersed” and “miscellaneous” to grant us *an* experience: things happen, they start and cease, without genuinely beginning or concluding, and without the form, the rhythm, or the intensity of *an* experience. This general kind of experience Dewey designates as “anaesthetic.” The role of art, then, is to expose this “anaesthetic” quality of life and thus to provoke us to create new economic, social, and political conditions that would grant everyone

access to aesthetic experience—that is, to art within the everyday. Art (art as such) “insinuates possibilities of human relations not to be found in . . . admonition and administration.”

For Dewey, art “is the most direct and complete manifestation there is of experience as experience,” exemplifying “what experience itself is in its very movement and structure.” This is why the philosopher must turn to art to “understand what experience is,” why we learn from art about the human “hunger” for experience, and why we must learn, by his light, that “the values that lead to the production and intelligent appreciation of art” must be “incorporated into the system of social relationships.”

Such convictions, as I read them, license us to transpose Dewey’s “art as experience” into “art as education,” although he himself is “repelled by any suggestion of teaching and learning in connection with art.” That repulsion, though, is based on customary notions of teaching and learning, which art itself challenges, and which Dewey challenged throughout his philosophical career. Indeed, Dewey goes on to say that art can become an “incomparable organ of instruction.” Art instructs—it educates—not simply by changing the proclivities of eye and ear as media of perception, nor simply by challenging the dominant mode of narrating events . . . not simply, even, by incorporating reflective intelligence within a moment of impulsive feeling. The point, rather, is that art teaches us what is missing from everyday life, what we ourselves have missed, and what will continue to be missed until our anesthetizing habits of feeling and thought are displaced by the aesthetic adventure of thinking.

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