

Dewey for Artists

by Mary Jane Jacob

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AMERICAN UNIVERSITY OF KUWAIT

The author introduces *Dewey for Artists* as a book that offers a thematic application of John Dewey's philosophy for contemporary artists, curators, and arts educators. However, not only does this book explain Dewey's philosophy at a more understandable level than Dewey's own publications, such as *Art as Experience*, but I think it also speaks to a general public by connecting art to essential aspects of human beings: Dewey defined art as an action of "affection" that can be found in anyone doing anything that they "care" about. In his book *Man the Unknown*,¹ Nobel laureate Alexis Carrel also said that art can be found in anyone, even medical doctors. Further, John Dewey's early twentieth-century discourses in art in relation to all human beings find an ally in Academy Award winning filmmaker Saul Bass, who said that creativity is a basic human instinct.² Ultimately, Mary Jane Jacob's book supports the wellness of

¹ Alexis Carrel, *Man the Unknown* (Seoul: Chunggrim Publishing, 1990), 128.

² "Why Man Creates," Pyramid Media, accessed October 6, 2018 from <http://www.pyramidmedia.com/homepage/search-by-title/academy-awards/why-man-creates-detail.html>.

human beings in today's society by discussing the essence of art and humanity.

Part 1, "The Artist's Process," focuses on the internal development of the self, and Part 2, "The Social Value of Art," looks at external relationships in society. Yet Jacob explains that, to Dewey, both paths are one, as they take form within a "conscious being." It is interesting that the author relates "conscious being" with art, because in today's society, art is often perceived as a luxury whose price is rising ever higher. On the contrary, Jacob's book shows the genuine characteristics of human beings found in art and how the arts support us today in essential, meaningful, and perhaps universal ways which can speak to any individual.

In chapter 1, "Making," the author says, "To Dewey, [making] was far more than bringing something into existence and giving it concrete form. ... Care is invested." According to the Jacob, Dewey wrote that the person "engaged in his job, interested in doing well and finding satisfaction in his handiwork, caring for his materials and tools with genuine affection, is artistically engaged." Jacob suggests that this creative potential inside everyone, not just those who identify as artists, was key to Dewey's philosophy of life. In short, because everyone has creative potential, anyone who does not put care and "full attention" in what they do in everyday life could be missing essential human aspects of that life. This kind of engagement challenges everyone. Perhaps this is why Jacob states that "creating art, or any invested making, ... [offers] us an uncommon chance to feel a sense of wholeness within ourselves and connectedness to something beyond. We feel a sense of completeness—not just of having completed a task." As such, we can learn a great truth from this perspective on art: Living a meaningful life is perhaps possible simply by caring about what we do. This message starts simple and small, but connects and expands to everything of our life. Who does not want to live a meaningful life? Living meaningfully may just be about how to live life well, and an answer to what that means can be found in this book.

Dewey also provides a perspective on art that makes it easier to understand different art styles from different historical periods, such as ancient art, the relevance of which may have diminished from perspective of today's world which has changed so much over time. For example, the details found in an ancient carving of a seal would not be valued as highly if the work had been produced in the era of abstractionism, when Kandinsky's simplified style, for

example, was the main focus. There are many complicated and nuanced ways of defining what art is, and such exalted descriptions may be appropriate for something as multi-faceted and amazing as art; yet as is proven in Jacob's book, this great world "art" can belong to anyone, and everyone deserves to have the kind of greatness carried in art in their life.

Jacob opens up the role of art museums as well: instead of keeping them as a place of selective choices, she calls upon museums to be more essential and therefore wider. As an example, Jacob refers to the Barnes Foundation museum in Philadelphia, which exhibited African art relatively early on ("geographical expansion"), introducing this work to an unaware general public. Further, the Barnes Foundation used the garden as a way of educating their visitors about the close relationship between nature and art. Jacob's book truly opens up the unbounded world of art by explaining the essentials—the relationship of art to *nature*, which is essential to everyone. That is what art is: something very common, even the everyday life activity of anyone, that can fulfill our entire being. This notion recalls another statement of Carrell's, that human beings are happier when they create, even if the object of creation is small, rather than being a part of mass production.

In chapter 2, "Experiencing," the author states:

In aesthetics, it is the experience that matters, so through Dewey's understanding we come to see that both the artist and viewer contribute to making art. Such aesthetic experiences enable us to make meaning and, thus, grow.

The chapter introduces the video "About Beauty," by Jeon Joonho, in which Joonho's father tells his life story. As the author describes it, "In less than five minutes, the older man, eyes closed as if in a dream state, seeks to arrive at the essence of his own passage from youth to retirement, from purposefulness to meaninglessness, then offers in reflection":

When you grow old, you sleep less ... So if I woke up around dawn, I wandered around here and there ... Ah! The sun was rising from the sea over there. It was truly a spectacular sight. ... I am able to see this beautiful scene because I am alive. Why hadn't I appreciated this beauty until now?

To this, Jacob adds: “Just as an experience of something in life (like seeing a sunrise) can be transformed into a work of art, our experience of works of art can become part of life as they become absorbed or reignited in us.”

One of the most problematic issues in South Korea, *gapjil* (the arrogant and authoritarian attitude of privileged people in South Korea), could be addressed if people experienced others’ experiences, finding in others’ experiences their own feelings. Such experience can be provided through art. Art offers many opportunities for greater understanding and empathy, and can help human beings to be more conscious. It is wonderful to see the hope that creating art experiences can allow us to grow further without attacking the integrity of someone else.

Jacob also introduces in this chapter the site-specific exhibition *Places with a Past*, which she had curated for the Spoleto Festival in Charleston, South Carolina, in 1991. Jacob notes:

Working in that small city was more than curating sited works: art was situated within the living history of people...artists had sought to make powerful but lesser-known aspects of American history visible through sited installation.... Only now in retrospect can I say that all these efforts were intended for viewers, residents, and visitors to perceive Charleston in a Deweyan aesthetic way: creating greater consciousness, gaining greater agency.

In Chapter 3, “Practice”, Jacob defines practice as “not a technique we get right and then repeat by habit; rather, as Dewey advocated, we are consciously present, so that each instance is lived anew.” In this “organic” sense, the author says, “Dewey recognized that when making happens in this way and we trust the process, knowledge expands in unexpected, fruitful ways”; i.e., “living our life as art.” This is practicing with ‘trust,’ and this depends on our mindset! The American artist Chuck Close, who suffered a devastating spinal injury, had to overcome his situation by changing the style of his work. Still, Close has said that he simply goes to his studio every day and creativity comes along the way. Knowing that living with trust is a practice that can grow is another hopeful point for individuals in today’s society, which is sometimes so dynamic to the point of chaos. Additionally, in today’s interdisciplinary society, career paths open so many ways so

that there is no single clear way, which can be challenging. In “The Millennium Project: World Future Report 2018,” Young Sook Park says that future society will offer many opportunities for people who are motivated, but it will be challenging for the people who are less so. In these situations, having and practicing trust to move on to the next step can be a successful strategy. We can still learn from the ancient stories of the Sphinx and Oedipus, whose meanings, according to Chul-Hyun Bae’s work *Abys*,³ teach us that the basic nature of human beings includes overcoming fear. This lesson is valuable to remember as we face the future of our interdisciplinary swirl, where clear and distinct paths cannot be provided to today’s younger generation as readily as perhaps before.

Part 2, “The Social Value of Art,” discusses about how human beings can become more conscious through art, such as how to *respond to* instead of *ignore* a society we are living in—in other words, how to be responsible. In chapter 4, “Democracy,” Jacob suggests that “we need to find balance to achieve the ideal of equality and be true to the common good...This, too, is the art of social practice: the practical experiments of artists who employ, as Dewey advocated, democratic means for democratic ends.” In chapter 5, “Participation,” John Dewey’s democratic actions are introduced, from his early activism in Chicago’s 1894 Pullman Strike to his stewardship of Leon Trotsky’s trial in Mexico City in 1937, and his cocreation of some of the major social organizations throughout the first half of the twentieth century. The author states, “As Dewey appreciated, forming such associations is not only a way of making social change but a way we understand what it is to be a public.”

In the sixth and final chapter, “Communication,” Jacob asserts that the “experience of empathy” is what John Dewey believed was foundational to human life. Jacob says writes:

Empathy causes us to feel and to care. When we receive art in a caring way—giving ourselves to be present and fully situated, attentive to the world of which we are a part—then empathetic, aesthetic experiences transpire. We are transformed.

³ Chul-Hyun Bae, *Abys* (Paju, South Korea: Book21, 2016).

Interestingly, according to the author, “some research is finding that these new technologies inhibit our neurological ability to make connections, decreasing our capacity for empathy.” The relationship between today’s digital era and human communications seems sometimes to ignore what Dewey asserted: in-person communication is necessary for us to fully understand each other. Perhaps this point helps to explain, as David Saks introduces in his *The Revenge of Analog*,⁴ why analog businesses are still in high demand even in places like Silicon Valley.

The social activities of John Dewey and the contemporary artists discussed by Jacob show us that art can influence society actively. As the author explains, although these art actions might be radical, they also have value as human responses; what is important is not to ignore what is going on around us. And so, all in all, this book speaks not just to art—this book is likewise about a more essential matter: how a human being can live a life *well*.

Living life well might not sound special, but as an educator, I find that what today’s educational system needs is more human-based teaching rather than a transfer of knowledge; information can be easily imparted to students by the help of technology, whereas *humanity* cannot. Even lawyers and doctors in the future will be replaced with artificial intelligence unless they have good person-to-person communication; they need—and we need them—to possess humane aspects. The importance of humane aspects are already discussed as a key category of job interviews rather than information that we now can access through artificial intelligence. Some of the questions we need to ask to understand the importance of supporting human beings at an essential level, and to be able to act accordingly, can be found in this book.

⁴ David Saks, *The Revenge of Analog* (Seoul: Across Publishing Co., 2017), 79.