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## The legacy of John Dewey's *Art as experience*: from Black Mountain College to “happenings”

### Abstract

*This is a companion piece to an article in a previous issue of the journal that offered an overview of the contrasts between John Dewey's naturalistic aesthetics, primarily as presented in his classic work *Art as experience*, and the more formalist aesthetics of art collector, philanthropist and educator Albert Barnes. This contrast was then used to explore and explain their disparate compatibilities and relationships with the pioneering work of the iconic 20<sup>th</sup> century American artists Thomas Hart Benton and Jackson Pollock. The current article does the same with respect to the avant-garde art and artistic legacy of the members of the creative community who lived and worked at Black Mountain College in North Carolina. As with the previous article, this examination ultimately underscores both the genuine catholicity of Dewey's aesthetics and its deep roots in the endless meaning-making possibilities of everyday experience. The article then concludes with a brief discussion of the educational implications of these findings for our thinking about Dewey in the context of art and aesthetic education.*

### Keywords

*Dewey, Aesthetics, Art education*

Dedicated to my mother, Julia Merriwether Arnold

### 1. Introduction

There is perhaps no more intriguing aspect of John Dewey's personal and professional life than his over thirty-year friendship with the inimitable art collector, philanthropist and educator Albert Barnes. While their personalities were by all accounts vastly different – Dewey the humble, reserved, and pensive New Englander, and Barnes the brash, irascible, and opinionated Philadelphian – it seems clear that

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Dewey and Barnes' relationship benefited both men. For his part, Dewey acquired much of his working knowledge of the plastic arts from Barnes, while also being one of few people to enjoy unrestricted access to the latter's unrivaled collection of Impressionist and Post-Impressionist paintings. On the other side, the groundbreaking art-education programs at the Barnes Foundation (originally located in Merion, Pennsylvania<sup>2</sup>) were designed with a conscious eye towards Dewey's philosophical-psychology and theories regarding aesthetic expression and perception. In addition, the Foundation's charter and bylaws, designating it as a non-profit educational institution, were in spirit consistent with Dewey's egalitarian commitment to participatory democracy.

However, over time many commentators have observed that Dewey's aesthetics relies much less than Barnes' on formalistic philosophy and analysis (e.g., concerning elements of color, light, line and space), while being embedded more deeply and consistently in the generative conditions of everyday experience (for more on Barnes' and Dewey's aesthetics, see Granger 2018a and 2018b, Alexander 1987, Dalton 2002, Martin 2002 and Ryan 1995). Dewey's principal work on art and aesthetics, *Art as experience* (LW 10)<sup>3</sup>, thus provides a consistently broader, more naturalistic vision of art than Barnes typically proffers. Moreover, there is considerable evidence that, as a consequence of its organic naturalism, artists tended to find more of value in Dewey's *Art as experience* than either aestheticians or art critics, who commonly dismissed it as insufficiently rigorous and intellectually antiquated, while the obverse better characterizes Barnes' magnum opus, *The art in painting* (Barnes 1937).

An article in a previous issue of this journal explored these significant differences between Dewey's and Barnes' aesthetics through their contrasting compatibilities with the work of two iconic 20<sup>th</sup> century American artists: Thomas Hart Benton and Jackson Pollock (see Granger 2019: 61-85). More specifically, it sought to reveal the manner and extent to which the disparate artistic sensibilities of Benton's

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<sup>2</sup> Now situated more prominently in Philadelphia's Logan Square, the Foundation remains an active center of the arts and art education today.

<sup>3</sup> All future citations of Dewey's writings (The Southern Illinois University Press *Collected works* edition) are given in the text in this standard form, consisting of initials representing the set (*EW*, *MW* and *LW* for *Early works*, *Middle works*, and *Later works*, respectively), the volume number, and the page number.

Regionalism and Pollock's Abstract Expressionism underscore the greater versatility of Dewey's aesthetics as well as its sensitivity towards the infinite meaning-making potential of the human encounter with the everyday world. This follow-up article examines similar Deweyan motifs in the conception and role of the arts at Black Mountain College, viewed through the eyes of founder John Andrew Rice, prominent painter and faculty member Josef Albers, and one-time student Robert Rauschenberg, but finds them recontextualized in a conscious attempt to move away from the subjective interiority of Abstract Expressionism and its appropriation by the artworld as part of the cultural elite<sup>4</sup>. The avant-garde aesthetics of American composer John Cage, and the "happenings" he and Allan Kaprow inspired, likewise looked to repudiate these pretensions and reaffirm the roots of art within everyday experience.

As it examines the above issues this article will seek to address the following questions: how and to what extent might Dewey's ideas on the experience of art (often in contrast with his friend and tutor Barnes) be relevant to the avant-garde art and artistic legacy of the members of the creative community who lived and worked at Black Mountain College? Further, how and to what extent might Dewey's thinking have influenced or otherwise contributed to the work of these this artists and their artistic legacy? And, finally, what might this mean for our thinking about Dewey in the context of art and aesthetic education?

## 2. *Black Mountain College*

Arguably the most substantive link between Dewey and the artistic avant-garde in America is Black Mountain College (1933-56). Located in the foothills of North Carolina, this groundbreaking experimental

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<sup>4</sup> In this article the term "artworld" refers to that contingent of institutionally enfranchised persons (e.g., museum curators, art critics, aestheticians) whose status has historically provided the authority to regulate the criteria used to decide if a given object should be conferred the status of art. Moreover, it does so independently of questions of the object's actual value or significance to the wider public. "Artworld art", then, refers to art that is largely created to respond, either positively or negatively, to the particular concerns, values, and practices established and regulated by the artworld. For more on this subject, see Dickie 1974.

school was designed as a working community of faculty and students committed to social progressivism and democracy as a way of life. Former members of the community make an impressive assemblage of writers and artists: Josef and Anni Albers, Willem de Kooning, Robert Motherwell, Merce Cunningham, Clement Greenberg, Buckminster Fuller, John Cage, Robert Rauschenberg, Ruth Asawa and many other notable figures spent time at Black Mountain<sup>5</sup>. In addition, Jackson Pollock, as a leading-light of the avant-garde, had been invited to teach at Black Mountain for a special summer session in 1950, but apparently turned down the offer. He was by then at the height of his popularity, but unfortunately his disruptive struggles with alcoholism continued unabated (see Duberman 1993: 347; this book will be referred to as Duberman with page numbers in the text for all subsequent citations).

The main inspirational force behind Back Mountain was classics scholar John Andrew Rice. A great admirer of Dewey's educational philosophy, he looked to its substantive incorporation wherever feasible at the college. In particular, Rice followed Deweyan principles in desiring that the students' education be an ongoing, multifaceted affair. Life in and beyond the classroom were to be experienced as two parts of one integrated whole. As historian Martin Duberman explains,

All aspects of community life were thought to have a bearing on an individual's education – that is, his growth, his becoming aware of who he was and wanted to be. The usual distinctions between curricular and extracurricular activities, between work done in a classroom and work done outside it, were broken down. (Duberman 1993: 26)

This outlook meant respecting the values and interests of students and realizing (in both senses of the word) their broad contributions to the larger community. This, too, is consistent with Dewey's thinking. As he argued in *Democracy and education*,

not only does social life demand teaching and learning for its own permanence, but the very process of living together educates. It enlarges and en-

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<sup>5</sup> The first African-American to attend Black Mountain, or any other college in the strictly segregated Jim Crow South, was musician, educator and scholar Alma Stone Williams in 1944.

lightens experience; it stimulates and enriches imagination; it creates responsibility for accuracy and vividness of statement and thought. (MW 9: 9)

To enhance the “process of living together” conventional institutional structures and rules were also relaxed considerably at Black Mountain, permitting the free flow of ideas and activities into all corners of the campus. And against fixed and finished doctrinaire forms of progressive education, which Rice saw as tragic perversions of Deweyan philosophy, the school, like the education offered, was to be an ongoing experiment in living and learning together (Duberman 1993: 24. See also Harris 2002: 15; this book will be referred to as Harris with page numbers in the text for all subsequent citations).

Art was very much at the center of the activity-based curriculum at Black Mountain. The art department was initially chaired by German émigré and former Bauhaus member Josef Albers. Albers had migrated to the U.S. in 1933 after Nazi incursions forced the closure of Gropius’ innovative school, best known for its novel approach to design and liberal integration of crafts and the fine arts. Later most recognized as a Geometric Abstractionist painter, Albers had also spent several years in his youth as an elementary school teacher in his hometown of Westphalia before training as an art teacher in Berlin. Another avowed Deweyan in his philosophy (it’s possible that he had read German translations of Dewey’s *Democracy and education* and *School and society*<sup>6</sup>), Albers became deeply opposed to all forms of compartmentalization in the arts. This was abundantly evident in his 1935 article for *Progressive education*, *Art as experience*, which closely mirrored Dewey’s thinking and phraseology in arguing for the mindful continuity of art and everyday life. Albers thus freely embraced Rice’s Black Mountain credo, which he interpreted this way:

If art is an essential part of culture and life, then we must no longer educate our students either to be art historians or to be imitators of antiquities, but for artistic seeing, artistic working, and more, for artistic living. Since artistic seeing and artistic living are deeper seeing and living – and school has to be life – since we know that culture is more than knowledge, we in the school

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<sup>6</sup> It has been argued that the Bauhaus knew Dewey’s work and that Albers himself had striven to “[reorient] the Bauhausian analysis of materials and structures along the lines of the American pragmatism of such philosophers as John Dewey” (see Foster, Krauss, Bois and Buchloh 2005: 345).

have the duty to remove all the fields of art from their decorative side-place into the center of education. (Albers 1935: 2)

This reads in substance very much like a re-statement of Dewey's professed *raison d'être* in *Art as experience*. Dewey was sufficiently intrigued by what he heard about the school to make two visits to Black Mountain between 1934-35, one accompanied by Barnes to celebrate the latter's publication of a substantial volume on the art of Renoir. While students at the College were initially surprised to find Dewey rather quiet and unassuming, they, like Rice, soon came to appreciate his "calm and almost majestic wisdom" (quoted in Duberman 1993: 94). Instead of drawing attention to himself, Dewey, apropos of those who knew him, "preferred to chat informally, attend classes (he went to Rice's every day) [and] wander around unobtrusively" (Duberman 1993: 94). Deeply impressed with what he saw and heard, Dewey readily accepted an offer from Rice to join the school's Advisory Board. As he would later write in a letter of encouragement to co-founder, physicist Theodore Dreier, during a rather deep financial crisis at Black Mountain,

The work and life of the College (and it is impossible in this case to separate the two) is a living example of democracy in action. No matter how the present [financial crisis] comes out, the need for the kind of work the College does is imperative in the long run interests of democracy. The College exists at the very "grass roots" of a democratic way of life. (quoted in Duberman 1993: 94, 483)

Not surprisingly, these sentiments are consistent with those Dewey voiced in praise of the mission of the Barnes Foundation exactly a decade earlier. For his part, however, Barnes found Black Mountain unique and intriguing, but generally not to his liking. His main target was Albers and his rather intuitional, idiosyncratic pedagogy. As Mary Ann Meyer's writes, "Barnes responded sympathetically to the spirit of Black Mountain, but he took away a poor opinion of the teaching ability of Albers, who at the time spoke very little English. The ideal teacher, in Barnes' view, was one whose 'intellectual and emotional capacities enter[ed] into respectable balance'" (Meyers 2004: 192-3). From what Barnes had witnessed, though, Albers was too melodramatic and not studious or systematic enough; and it's certain that anything that smacked of sentimentalism and lacked the intellectual ri-

gor of his distinctively formalist methodology (known by Barnesian adherents as “the way”) would very likely meet with his disapproval.

It is indeed true that Albers had his own, at times unpopular way of achieving certain aesthetic and pedagogical goals, goals that, in fact, Barnes’ democratic leanings might in the end have appreciated. As a means of distancing himself from the subjective interiority and “heroic genius” persona of Abstract Expressionism<sup>7</sup>, while engaging purposefully with the people and things of everyday, Albers, like Dewey, began to conceive his task, as both artist and teacher, as one of helping people to see and appreciate the extra-ordinary in the ordinary. Former Back Mountain student, novelist Peggy Bennett Cole, remembers that “we all became ever more conscious of many kinds of beauty to which we’d previously been blind – the beauty of ordinary appearances we had been taking for granted, the beauty of the extraordinary world we’d learned to ignore” (quoted in Duberman 1993: 58)<sup>8</sup>. Albers liked to say that his purpose in life was to “open eyes”, much as his fellow artists and new environs in the Blue Ridge mountains of rural North Carolina had done for him.

In speaking of “opening eyes”, Albers was referring to an active, temporal process rather than something instantaneous. Moreover, it was a process involving the whole person and not just the visual apparatus. The objective was to move beyond habitual or conventional ways of seeing and making sense of things, what Dewey often dis-

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<sup>7</sup> Here we find common dualistic misinterpretations of Dewey. Albers was at times critical of Dewey’s aesthetics for, as he (erroneously) saw it, conceiving of art primarily as a means of self-expression, whereas Dewey argued that emotion, the “inner” raw material of expression, becomes distinctively aesthetic and funded with meaning only as it is organically connected with some “outer” raw material, namely, a medium such as paint, sand, or clay. Motherwell, on the other hand, an Abstract Expressionist, praises Dewey (erroneously) for the same thing: demonstrating philosophically that “abstract rhythms, immediately felt, could be an expression of the inner self”. That said, Motherwell, Mark Rothko and other Abstract Expressionists remained concerned with the social efficacy of their work and valued public engagement. In a nutshell, they viewed abstraction as a vehicle of democratic freedom, and a reaction against the restrictions of growing fascism in Europe (see Lane 1990: 37 and Caws 1996: 86, 90).

<sup>8</sup> In an oft-quoted passage from *Art as experience*, Dewey writes that art “introduce[s] [us] into a world beyond this world which is nevertheless the deeper reality of the world in which we live in our ordinary experiences. We are carried out beyond ourselves to find ourselves” (*LW 10*: 199).

missively calls “mere recognition”. Opening eyes, for Albers, resonates more closely with what Dewey terms “perception”. Whereas recognition is immediate, identifying something simply in terms of its generic or customary purpose (in a sense, learning to “ignore” it), to perceive something, to have one’s eyes opened the possibility of the extraordinary in the ordinary, requires that one attend to “*this* individual thing existing here and now with all the unrepeatable particularities that accompany and mark such existences” (*LW 10*: 181). For example, Albers

made his students see that no chair is an abstraction, and so should never be treated as one – just as no individual, he would say, ever should. He had enormous contempt for categorizers, for those who dismiss the special qualities of an object (or a person) by saying, “Oh, well, that’s only a chair”. To categorize anything was to take it for granted, to forget its unique properties – in other words, to ignore its reality, its life. (Duberman 1993: 55)

As Albers saw it, this often-challenging process, and the “new modes of perception” (Dewey’s term) it makes possible, requires opportunities for aesthetic experimentation and a posture of active and open engagement with the features of one’s immediate environment. It also plainly entails a substantial break with the formal rules for interpretation and criticism embraced by Barnes and the predilections of many less adventurous aestheticians and art critics of the day.

Albers’ preferred teaching methods were conceived with these goals in mind and clearly harkened back to his formative experiences as a schoolteacher. He strove to achieve with his art students what he liked to call “disciplined freedom”. Distrusting “verbal expositions and explanations”, Albers “replaced ideology, rhetoric, theory, and talk, with the application of a disciplined yet creative mind to practical [hands-on] work – a process he defined as ‘thinking in situations’” (Horowitz and Danilowitz 206: 70; see also Lane 1990: 38). Like Dewey, then, he often conceived art as a form of problem-solving and equated learning (and teaching) with personal growth and the sense of empowerment and satisfaction that it provides. As Albers explained in *Art as experience*, the

aim is a general development of an open-eyed and open-minded youth seeking out the growing [...] problems of our days, not closed to his environment; and forward looking, with the experience that interests and needs are chang-

ing; a youth with criticism enough to recognize that so-called “good old forms” sometimes can be over-used, that perhaps some great art important to our parents does not say anything to us; one who has reverence for earnest work and working, even though it seems at first new and strange to him, and is able to withhold judgment until clearer perception comes; who knows that one’s own experience and discovery and independent judgment are much more [valuable] than repeated book knowledge. (Albers 1935: 2)

To help them develop this kind of informed, independent judgment, Albers “gave his students direct contact with material – wood or string, wire, paper, stone”. To discipline themselves to “see that the life of an object involves its inner qualities, its external appearance and, finally, its relationship to other objects”, he wanted them to “handle the material thoroughly” and “initially forbade the use of tools”. Moreover, Albers “believed that learning was facilitated when students continually compared their different solutions for identical tasks – and also when each student compared his own work from earlier and later periods” (Duberman 1993: 52-3).

Among Albers’ better-known students at Black Mountain was the American painter and sculptor, Robert Rauschenberg. Rauschenberg, a Texan, had spent a three-year stint in the US Navy during WWII. While in the service he worked as a neuropsychiatric technician in a California hospital, where he helped care for traumatized sailors, an experience that significantly reinforced his pacifist sentiments. Having concurrently developed a desire to become an artist after visiting an art museum in nearby San Marino, Rauschenberg began his formal art studies in 1947 at the Kansas City Art Institute before moving on to Paris’ famed Académie Julian in 1948. Returning to the States later that same year, he enrolled in Black Mountain in the fall with Albers as his painting instructor.

Rauschenberg subsequently said of the experience that Albers had encouraged him essentially to unlearn everything he had previously been taught, especially during his time in Kansas City and Paris. It seemed that Albers found Rauschenberg, like other of his more practiced and proficient students, somewhat impetuous and self-indulgent, while his new charge initially struggled with Albers’ persistent focus on self-discipline as a means to a more substantive kind of artistic freedom. This self-discipline is in fact something that Rauschenberg knew implicitly that he needed – even if Albers, who was often very hard on him, didn’t recognize it – and he came increasingly to appreciate over

time the value and broad applicability of what he had learned from Albers:

He didn't teach you how to "do art". The focus was on the development of your own personal sense of looking. [...] I found his criticism in class so excruciating and devastating that I never asked for private criticism, which you could do there. Years later, though, I'm still learning what he taught me. What he taught had to do with the whole visual world, and it applies to whatever you're doing, gardening or painting or whatever. (Tomkins 1980: 29; this book will be referred to as Tomkins with page numbers in the text for all subsequent citations)

While Rauschenberg came to see Albers as the most important teacher he ever had, it unfortunately seems that Albers too often could not look past Rauschenberg's previous art school training to really see and acknowledge the motivations and desires his student.

One thing that Rauschenberg came very candidly to share with Albers was an urge to steer clear of the pronounced subjective-interiority and artworld elitism that had come by that time to characterize Abstract Expressionism. Like Dewey, they placed a greater emphasis on accessibility – the aesthetic possibilities of shared meanings and values artistically re-presented for the attentive perceiver – while deemphasizing the personal "inner landscape" of the artistic genius exalted by Abstract Expressionism and, increasingly in the 1950s, many sympathetic adjudicators within the artworld. This is especially true where this "inner landscape" was said to provide a path to a transcendental realm or higher reality of some kind beyond the common world and things of everyday. Nor did evolving mid-century class structures make this any easier. As Robert Motherwell explained at the time, "The artist's problem is with what to identify himself. The middle-class is decaying, and as a conscious entity the working class does not exist. Hence the tendency of modern painters is to paint for each other" (quoted in Grieve 2009: 176-7).

Since Rauschenberg and Albers were living and working in an experimental democratic community permeated by the Deweyan desideratum of the continuity of art and life, they sought an artistic means that was in ways both radically new or different and capable of resonating with the broader public and the aesthetic possibilities of everyday activities and materials. Albers, who was apparently already familiar with this aspect of Dewey, more or less brought this mindset with him to Black Mountain from the Bauhaus and incorpo-

rated it in his increasingly simplified geometric abstractions. For Rauschenberg, it was the *modus operandi* of what came to be known in the mid-1950s as the “combine painting”, an innovative hybrid art form that allowed him to act in, and thereby shape meaningfully, the “gap between art and life”. It also afforded the opportunity to apply what he had learned from Albers while simultaneously developing his own individual style.

Essentially, Rauschenberg attempted with the combines to reconcile the overt interiority of Abstract Expressionism with the overt exteriority of Pop art and its novel transfigurations of objects from popular and consumer culture (see, on this subject, Danto 1981). This means that the basic elements of Rauschenberg’s combines – consisting of the artist’s paint and various common or found objects – were carefully assembled so as to carry equal weight and meaning aesthetically. As one of his biographers, Calvin Tompkins, explains, Rauschenberg felt increasingly that

all his work [...] was a form of collaboration with materials. He wanted to work *with* them, rather than to have them work *for* him. [...] It was fun to search the beach or the city streets for objects he could use. He was always surprised by what he found, and the objects themselves never failed to suggest new possibilities, combinations he might never have thought of otherwise. They set up resistances he found useful. (Tompkins 1980: 79)

By their very nature, the combines underscore, at an experiential level, the artistic and aesthetic limitations of many conventional art forms and genres and their normative either/or logic (e.g., something is either a painting or a sculpture, created or found, private or public, of instrumental or aesthetic value).

As a logical extension of the collage, the combines were, structurally-speaking, “all-at-once”, organic compositions (analogous to the distinctive “all-over” aesthetic of Pollock's canvases), rather than linear or sequential. And like the naturalistic organicism one finds in Dewey’s aesthetics, the various elements of the combines purposely deny the perceiver the experiential finality or closure of a perfect sense of harmony and determinate meaning(s). As Tompkins puts it, “The balance in a Rauschenberg is a balance of elements in tension, each one retaining its own freshness and individuality” (Tompkins 1980: 50). The juxtapositions Rauschenberg utilizes in the combines – for example, oil paint with paper or fabric, a piece of newspaper, an item of cloths, or perhaps a piece of wood or glass – play visually and seman-

tically on the energies of tension and resistance they produce. These energies were not to be constrained or limited, as with more conventional compositional forms, but rather utilized as active forces in the creative process:

Sometimes [...] you see a piece of metal, for example, of a certain shape and color, and you know just the place it's going to go in the picture, but then it does not go there after all; it's too big, or too heavy, or you don't have the tools to put it there, so you put it where it *will* go and then everything else in the picture has to be adjusted to that. Sometimes, of course, objects just insist on being themselves. (Tompkins 1980: 79-80)

Rauschenberg's combines are, in the end, a kind of living entity. They inevitably frustrate the impulse for stable meanings and expositional certainty. Put in Deweyan terms, they call forth from the viewer new modes of perception that initially challenge or defy the familiar interpretive contexts of habit and custom.

Composer John Cage was a further member of the Black Mountain community to experiment earnestly with novel means of exploiting the gap between art and life (though he perhaps wished to efface it altogether), while using a different kind of experiential palette. Indeed, he and Rauschenberg eventually developed a very productive creative partnership toward that end in the 1950s, along with dancer Merce Cunningham (for more on the relationship between Rauschenberg and Cage, see Joseph 2003). Yet another popular denizen of the New York avant-garde scene, Cage, too, wished to challenge accepted conventions concerning the nature and purpose of art while attempting to demonstrate that even the everyday and commonplace have aesthetic potential. Not unlike Rauschenberg's collages and "combine paintings", he worked in the aesthetic realm of associations of meaning and found linear or sequential modes of experience and meaning-making unnecessarily limited and limiting. And while Cage helped Rauschenberg to see that there were forms of freedom that allowed for aesthetic possibilities beyond the "disciplined freedom" espoused by Albers and his adherents, Rauschenberg's increasingly adventurous creations emboldened the composer to push his distinctive aesthetic into radically new and uncharted territory.

### 3. John Cage, "happenings", and Allan Kaprow

John Cage was born in Los Angeles, California, in 1912 to freethinking parents who readily nurtured his precocious desire to push creative boundaries and see the world. Restlessly crossing disciplines as though it was perfectly normal, Cage studied, both formally and informally, theology and philosophy (Eastern and Western), literature and poetry, and the plastic arts before eventually deciding to focus his energies on music and composition. Even then these other interests very much stayed with him and became inseparable from the sources of inspiration and unique ingredients of his extra-ordinary compositions. After studying music briefly at The New School with Adolph Weiss, a former pupil of the great Arnold Schoenberg, Cage himself apprenticed for a time with the Austrian-born twelve-tone master with the promise to dedicate his life to music. Caged worked closely and admiringly with Schoenberg from 1933-35 but never developing a feeling for harmony, and thus finally resolved to strike out on his own. Tellingly as well, Cage would later refer to himself as an inventor, the professed vocation of his father, and not a composer.

In May of 1951, at a solo exhibition at the Betty Parsons Gallery in New York, Cage first met Rauschenberg, who was thirteen years his junior. It was there also that he encountered the artist's soon-to-be-famous *White painting*, which consisted of seven identical panels of canvas smoothly painted with a roller in a monotone white. While some critics were either bothered or baffled (or both) by the apparent emptiness of Rauschenberg's curious piece, it was to provide a crucial moment of clarity for Cage. As Rauschenberg later explained, reflecting back,

I always thought of the white paintings as being, not passive, but very – well, hypersensitive. [...] So that one could look at them and almost see how many people were in the room by the shadows cast, or what time of day it was. (quoted in Tomkins 1980: 64-5)

Cage described the paintings similarly as "airports for lights, shadows, and particles", proclaiming "Hallelujah! The blind can see again. [...] Beauty is now underfoot wherever we take the trouble to look" (quoted in Leonard 1994: 169). While this confirmed for Rauschenberg that there was no such thing as a completely empty canvas, it reminded Cage that there was no such thing as absolute silence (just

as silence can be imbued with what occurs before and after it), that the everyday world of people and things might offer its own kind of music<sup>9</sup>. In what they came to experience routinely as “utter agreement”, Cage had immediately grasped that Rauschenberg “saw the complexity of an empty surface [...] that no painting needs to be made since an empty surface already has images and events”. The timing was to prove auspicious. As he later admitted, “I was reluctant to do the silent piece until I had the encouragement from Rauschenberg’s white paintings” (quoted in Harris 2002: 231). The “silent piece”, destined to become his personal favorite, was titled *4’33”*.

Cage’s *4’33”* premiered in Woodstock, NY, in August 1952 with piano, though it can be performed with any instrument or combination of instruments. As the piece proceeded, his friend and collaborator, pianist David Tudor, discreetly yet visibly raised and lowered the keyboard lid to signal three distinct time lengths or movements (30”, 2’23” and 1’40”), giving the piece an observable hallmark of conventional musical structure. The duration of each movement was determined by chance operations, a system Cage would use often and in a variety of ways in his compositions (Cage frequently used a method for producing random numbers found in the ancient Chinese divination text *I Ching*). Not unlike Pollock’s “drip technique”, chance effects could freely occur, in this case incidental or ambient sounds, many audible to the audience, in the performance venue. However, just as Pollock’s “drip technique” and its utilization were far from haphazard (indeed, he worked years to refine and develop them), Cage as composer (or inventor) still played an important role in the performance, purposively framing or choreographing a situation whereby listeners were led to attend to the sounds in their immediate environment in a

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<sup>9</sup> It is interesting to note in this context that both Cage and Dewey have been associated with Zen Buddhism. Cage became interested in Zen after attending lectures by Daisetsu Teitaro Suzuki at Columbia University beginning in the late 1940s. He claimed to learn from Suzuki, who was himself influenced by Emerson and Thoreau, of the need to be alive to the present moment, to be open to the new and different, and to resist Western individualism and the temptation to assert his own ego in his work (e.g., in identifying art with self-expression, an idea also rejected by Dewey). Dewey embraced these ideas in some form as well, while Suzuki came to see Zen Buddhism as a variety of radical empiricism (see Alexander 1987: 304). In addition, Dewey’s descriptions of religious and aesthetic experience are very evocative of the idea of “just being there” depicted in Zen haiku (see Yasuda 1973).

way that they otherwise would not. To further delineate 4'33" as a particular composition,

Tudor always insisted that Cage composed 4'33" on staff paper in a score now lost. He said the composer laid out the three movements in proportional notation on empty staves whose silence Tudor read by a stopwatch, just as he had read the sounds (and silences) of *Music of changes*, the parent work of 4'33". (Holzaepfel 2002: 174)

Still another way to shape the listener's experience, "Tudor gave careful consideration to its place in the program, experimenting with the program order several times before placing the new work (the only première on the program) in the penultimate position" (Holzaepfel 2002: 174). Though many in the audience were understandably perplexed by Cage's offering, much like early viewers of Rauschenberg's white paintings, the setting of this debut performance of 4'33" was rather fortuitous. The concert took place in a semi-outdoor auditorium that opened onto a wooded area. As George Leonard reports,

A rainstorm was about to strike, and in the first movement the audience heard the wind "stirring" the trees. "During the second, raindrops began pattering the roof" and after that there were the sounds of people walking out. No matter. 4'33" would go on to become Cage's most famous work, even a beloved work. (Leonard 1994: 170)

Since this première Cage's piece is more typically performed in indoor urban venues, where the ambient sound palette is rather different (and perhaps more challenging aesthetically for the listener), adding an aural dimension to the urban themes common in Rauschenberg's later combine paintings.

Whereas Rauschenberg had learned from Albers the importance of "opening eyes", Cage would increasingly task himself with the mission of "opening ears". He did this by framing an experience for the listener in a way that created certain expectations but left them (at least initially) unfulfilled. As Douglas Kahn explains, Cage's audience was asked to "continue to be obedient listeners and not engage in the utterances that would distract them from shifting their perception toward other sounds", hopefully "set[ting] into motion the process by which the realm of musical sounds would itself be extended" (quoted in Nelsen 2012: 107). Dewey characterizes this experiential posture as a kind of "engaged resistance", maintaining that it is in

some form a necessary component of aesthetic experience when artfully initiated. In the case of *4'33"*, the *aporia* or paradox Cage presented to those in attendance prompted a charged moment of resistance, one that "demanded that the audience listen differently and participate". Meanwhile "[t]hose unable, unwilling, or unprepared for such a demand by the artist dismissed the performance as a stunt or silliness" (Nelsen 2012: 108; see also Dewey *LW 10*: 171-2).

Along the same lines, in the late 1960s Cage performed a piece where he dragged acoustically amplified music stands around an otherwise empty stage. On another occasion he gave a lecture in which he threw hundreds of sheets of paper from the podium onto the floor, in silence deliberately crumpling them up one by one. Cage also composed numerous pieces for "prepared piano", initially to accompany dances choreographed by Cunningham, placing screws or bolts, weather stripping, pennies, bamboo strips and other objects on or between the strings to alter the tone quality and duration of the notes (see Granger and Morse 2011: 165). In time, Cage's bold use of chance operations (or, as they were later termed, aleatory techniques), experimental rhythmic structures, and alternative sounds and performance practices had a major influence on numerous 20th Century composers and performers, from Pierre Boulez to Karlheinz Stockhausen, George Crum, Steve Reich, Philip Glass, Frank Zappa, and John Zorn.

In all of the above examples Cage attempted to arouse, reorient, and then expand and retrain the audience's aesthetic sensibilities, to prompt them to engage with what might otherwise remain hidden or ignored. This is wholly consistent with Dewey's pragmatist aesthetics and transactional conception of experience. Joan Retallack makes this point compellingly,

For John Cage the significance of art lay, not in the production of artifacts, but in the making of meaning in an active collaboration with medium, performers, and audience. So the work that John Cage has left behind can be seen as just that – "work", which has always yet to be done – to be engaged in by a participatory audience, viewer, reader at a specific intersection of material, place and time occasioned by a performance, an exhibition, a screening, or the presence of a text. [...] In this way, Cage's work – as well as our continuing collaboration with Cage – unfolds within the American pragmatist tradition characterized by the aesthetic theory of philosopher John Dewey. (Retallack 1994: 243)

As Retallack's remarks effectively demonstrate, collaborating with Cage's work in this way is analogous to the artfully-cultivated reciprocal interaction between self and world that lies at the heart of *Art as experience*. An art object, as Dewey liked to say, is a potential means of aesthetic experience, but "the actual art work is what the [object] does with and in experience" (*LW 10*: 9). Thus the art work is never "that" painting, sculpture, dance, or piece of music "out there" in its sheer immediacy. This means that no objects (as, potentially, events with meaning) have any aesthetic value outside of the "work" they do in the meaning-making process. And without a sustained period of open and active participation by the audience or perceiver, the "workingness" of objects summarily dissolves and loses much of its possible meaning and significance (see Granger 2006: 120).

As different as they might otherwise be, Albers, Rauschenberg, and Dewey are joined by Cage in conceiving and esteeming art as inherently educative in nature. That is to say, they all underscore the capacity of art to re-present the world to us in a way that enhances our perceptual acuity, enabling us, in Dewey's words, to "share vividly and deeply in meanings to which we had become dumb". It also has the democratic impetus, at its best, "to remove prejudice, do away with the scales that keep the eye from seeing [or the ear from listening], tear away the veils due to wont and custom, perfect the power to perceive" (*LW 10*: 248, 328).

This is so far consistent with Barnes' understanding of the nature and purpose of art. He also clearly appreciated the analogue in the experience of music. Indeed, while Dewey is often described as having no ear for music and wrote about it rather sparingly relative to the other arts<sup>10</sup>, Barnes was a great admirer and supporter of the musical arts and clearly recognized their educative potential. In 1925, Barnes asked his Merion neighbor, Philadelphia Orchestra conductor Leopold Stowkowski, to speak briefly "on behalf of the artists of

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<sup>10</sup> This is not to say that Dewey had no appreciation for music or music education. In addition to emphatically asserting the aesthetic, moral and intellectual value of music education in *The School and society* (1899), Dewey fought hard to keep music in the Laboratory School curriculum when University of Chicago President William Rainey Harper suggesting cutting it due to a budget shortfall. Indeed, Dewey urged that music education (and instruction in the fine arts more generally) were particularly important at the grade school level since they were often not provided for at the time in colleges (see Dewey *MW 1*: 64).

America" at the formal dedication ceremony of the Barnes Foundation. In addition, Barnes was known frequently to host private recitals in his home (some including Stowkowski on piano) and he regularly listened to music – the great masters mostly, but not exclusively – while viewing and lecturing guests about the paintings in the Foundation gallery.

But just as Barnes struggled with abstraction in the visual arts, it's likely he would have had more difficulty than Dewey making sense of and accepting philosophically the artistic merits of the "chance effects" and mutable structures of many of Cage's unorthodox compositions. There were always specific kinds of aesthetic forms and meanings that Barnes was seeking intellectually in the arts. For example, the music Barnes played in the gallery rooms was carefully matched to coincide with the formal qualities of the wall ensembles appearing in each particular room. These ensembles were purposefully designed to highlight certain formalist themes in objects often from very different historical times, places, and artistic styles. The chosen music therefore served as an aural equivalent of what Barnes took to be universal formal qualities evident in both music and the plastic arts. This again suggests that he was more conservative in outlook aesthetically than he liked to admit, and certainly more so than Dewey. His restrictive view of the "human contribution" to art, and its prescribed relation to form in particular, inevitably constrained his aesthetic sensibilities<sup>11</sup>.

At Black Mountain College in 1952, the same year *4'33"* was first performed, an apparently unexceptional set of circumstances led to the first of those collaborative multi-media events later famously dubbed "happenings" by practitioner Allan Kaprow. *Theater piece no. 1*, as it came to be known, wasn't designed to make a big splash artistically, though in hindsight it proved momentous in the history of American theater. The basic idea emerged out of a lunchtime conversation between Cage and Tudor on the possibility of creating a piece of theater made up of events not causally related, but where each event would nonetheless have an impact on audience members in unique and unforeseen ways. To make this practically executable and

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<sup>11</sup> Stowkowski himself is said to have expressed concern after the Foundation dedication ceremony that Barnes' "analytical method [...] made of art a task rather than an enjoyment" (see Schack 1960: 162).

not merely chaotic, event segments were assembled either linearly or simultaneously (i.e., they would overlap), by prior arrangement with each performer. This early experiment in performance art took place later that same day in the dining hall, with the audience seated in and among the performers. As Mary Emma Harris explains,

Each performer was assigned a time bracket determined by chance procedures within which he or she was to enact a particular activity. Although Cage had an idea of what each person would do, specific assignments had not been made. Each person was simply himself rather than a fictional character, and there were no rehearsals, no script, and no costumes. The seats for the audience were arranged in concentric circles (or squares), which were divided by four aisles into four triangles. [...] The plan was not, however, a conventional theater-in-the-round because the action occurred in the middle of the circle, in the aisles, and outside the circles. (Harris 2002: 226)

The performance was indeterminate in the details, allowing sufficient opportunities for “chance effects”, but as with Cage’s musical compositions it was obviously not completely random. Here again the *modus operandi* was freedom within limitations<sup>12</sup>.

The performers’ activities included (1) several readings, among them Cage standing on a ladder reciting from his *Julliard* lectures, (2) Cunningham dancing in and around the chairs (joined at some random point (appropriately) by an interloping dog), (3) Rauschenberg standing under his white paintings while playing records of Edith Piaf at the wrong speed on an old wind-up record player, (4) Tudor playing a prepared piano and operating a small radio, and (5) a final contributor projecting movies and still pictures upside down on a wall at the end of the dining hall (Harris 2002: 228). The performance lasted 45 minutes in total.

Not surprisingly, reaction by the largely-friendly audience varied considerably, as were later accounts of what actually occurred that evening, depending on where individual people were seated and their diverse powers of memory. Many recall witnessing a good deal

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<sup>12</sup> The degree of indeterminacy permitted in “happenings” would later develop into a point of considerable discussion and debate as they became increasingly popular, and increasingly anti-establishment, in the 1960s. Interestingly, the recent “flash mob” phenomenon, formally begun in 2003 as a type of performance art, can be seen as an evolutionary development of “happenings” and shares some of the same elements of Dewey’s aesthetics.

of joy and laughter, some confusion, and even anger (composer Stefan Wolpe supposedly got up and left in protest; Duberman 1993: 372-9). For Kaprow, a student in Cage's course in Experimental Composition at The New School, this first "happening" (or "proto-happening") would help to pave the way for his future as an artist just as Rauschenberg's white paintings had been an invaluable precursor for Cage. Among other appreciable sources of inspiration was Dewey's *Art as experience*.

Allan Kaprow was born in 1927 and hailed from the popular resort city of Atlantic City. Suffering from chronic illness in his early years, Kaprow was raised and spent most of his childhood living on a ranch in Tucson, Arizona, where he attended boarding school and developed a fondness, which later became a passion, for communal living and activity. Kaprow later returned to the east coast after suffering a series of illnesses and enrolled in a high school for music and the arts in New York City before matriculating at New York University, where he majored in art and philosophy and first encountered Dewey's *Art as experience*. Kaprow then received an MA in art history from Columbia University, studying with Dewey's friend Meyer Schapiro. One could say that Kaprow was, at the end of the day, equal parts artist and philosopher.

Kaprow's attraction to performance art developed in several stages from art shows he participated in as one of the founders of New York's Hansa Gallery, named after his former NYU art professor, painter Hans Hoffman. As Tompkins explains, Kaprow

had moved from highly expressionistic abstract paintings to expanded collages, and then to a vast collage "environment" that filled the gallery with huge sheets of plastic, tinfoil, crumpled cellophane, tangles of Scotch tape, bands of colored cloth, Christmas tree lights, and five tape recorders playing electronic tapes. It occurred to Kaprow at this point (1958) that every visitor to his environment became a participant in it, willingly or not, and this in turn suggested giving the participants a more active role. (Tompkins 1980: 137)

With the first official "happening" that would soon follow in the spring of 1958, Kaprow, like his Deweyan predecessors at Black Mountain, sought to explode customary either/or dichotomies and replace them with a distinctly communal and quotidian aesthetic environment. In his attempt to diminish the gap between art and life, artist and audience, Kaprow proposed an "astonishing synthesis of two seemingly incompatible modes – Cage's anti-expressive commin-

gling of art and everyday life, and Pollock's violently self-expressive attempt to transcend life" (Tompkins 1980: 138). While the earliest "happenings" were as a result rather individualistic and closely scripted for maximum effect, they involved substantial audience participation, both mental and physical. Over time, they would become less scripted and not as surreal in content, further eroding the distinction between artist and audience while allowing the audience's participation, its spontaneous way of connecting ideas and events, to make each performance a unique experience: a "happening".

By this time also the avant-garde Fluxus Movement was well underway and became a validating artistic home for Kaprow and his like-minded peers. The movement was supported by a community of international artists and intellectuals utilizing diverse media and genres, but all with an interest in experimental performance art. It gleaned from figures like Cage and Dewey a conception of art as a transformational experience, entailing an integrated aesthetic sensibility, and not simply a fabricated object. It likewise refused to separate process and product, viewed artistic genres and media as fluid rather than consisting of fixed, *a priori* categories, and embraced the notion that a work of art is the locus of interaction between artist and audience and not a pre-existing, self-substantiating object (for a thoughtful analysis of Dewey's relationship to the Fluxus Movement, see Higgins 2002).

Indeed, indications of incipient interest in these themes can be found penciled in the margins of Kaprow's well-worn personal copy of Dewey's *Art as experience*. Critic and curator Jeff Kelly, in his Introduction to a collection of the artist's essays, gives careful attention to Kaprow's rough transcriptions of Deweyan phrases like, "art is not separate from experience [...] what is authentic experience? [...] environment is a process of interaction". "With these and other scribbles", he observes, "Kaprow grounds himself in American pragmatism and forecasts the themes of his career" (Kelley 2003: XI; this book will be referred to as Kelley with page numbers in the text for all subsequent citations). Because Kaprow had learned early on as an artist to attend to the meanings of experience, rather than trying to comprehend the meaning(s) of art, he "positions himself in the flux of what Dewey called 'the everyday events, doings, and sufferings that are universally recognized to constitute experience'" (Kelley 2003: XIII). Following Dewey's ruminations on the constituents of experience, Kaprow was prompted later in life to undertake his own investigation

of the various natural and/or social forms of everyday experience, its "boundaries, density, and duration" and its "particular qualities", especially in the context of aesthetic experience (Kelley 2003: XVI-II). Through this explication of Kaprow's development as an artist, Kelly also divines Dewey's relationship to the dynamic urban and rural thematics of Benton's American Regionalism, as well as the rhythmic forces and bodily movements evident in Pollock's deeply transactional relationship with his "all-over" canvases. Further, he recognizes in Kaprow's poetic verification of existence substantive points of contact between Dewey's pragmatism and some of the Zen motifs deeply embedded in the American avant-garde. As he observes, "Zen mistrusts dogma and encourages education, seeks enlightenment but avoids formalist logic, accepts the body as well as the mind, and embraces discipline but relinquishes ego-centered control" (Kelley 2003: XIV). "Though he is never mentioned in [his] writing", Kelly concludes, there is ample evidence suggesting that "John Dewey is Allan Kaprow's intellectual father" (Kelley 2003: XXVI).

#### 4. Conclusion

The companion piece to this article identified a variety of significant avenues of influence of John Dewey's *Art as experience* on the art and aesthetics of Thomas Hart Benton and Jackson Pollock. The above findings, regarding the avant-garde art and artistic legacy of the members of Black Mountain College, are I believe equally compelling and deserve the same careful consideration for any assessment of Dewey's contribution to 20<sup>th</sup> century American art. And, again, this is especially important given the frequency with which aestheticians and art critics in Dewey's day disparaged or ignored *Art as experience* as being, to their way of thinking, insufficiently rigorous and intellectually antiquated. While these writers generally found *Art as experience* inadequate to their methods and purposes as theorists and critics, many artists clearly found considerable inspiration and edification in Dewey's aesthetics. It seems clear as well that the formalist aesthetics of Dewey's friend and tutor, Albert Barnes, is less able to speak meaningfully to the artistic avant-garde in America than the aesthetics of Dewey's organic naturalism.

To sum up, we have seen the following themes in investigating aspects of the art and artistic legacy of the members of Black Moun-

tain College that resonate with Dewey's thinking about the arts: (1) that the social dimension and accessibility of art can substantially augment its aesthetic meaning and value in enhancing the continuity (or "closing the gap") between art and everyday life and experience (e.g., in the move away from the pronounced subjective interiority and artworld elitism of certain forms of Abstract Expressionism), while realizing a kind of democratic openness, (2) that the normative either/or logic of conventional art forms, media and genres can be both artistically and aesthetically limiting (e.g., something is either a painting or a sculpture, created or found, private or public, process or product, of instrumental or aesthetic value) as opposed to the creative possibilities of a more wholistic both/and logic, (3) that art can be a way of opening eyes and ears (and the senses in general) to the extra-ordinary in the ordinary (even (apparent) emptiness), enhancing perceptual acuity by re-educating habits and furthering the process of cultural renewal, (4) that experiencing and appreciating art in all its fecundity involves "work" on the part of the audience or perceiver, even to the point of a form of overt participation (i.e., while an art *object* is a potential means of aesthetic experience, an art *work* is what the object does with and in experience such that art might be conceived as a form of problem-solving), (5) that freedom (e.g., "chance effects") and discipline or structure in the artistic process can be complementary and are not inherently antagonistic or incompatible, (6) that the sense of finality or closure often provided by linear or sequential modes of experience and meaning-making can be unnecessarily limited and limiting, constraining or denying energies of tension and resistance that can enable art to attain a kind of freshness and individuality for different perceivers as well as over time.

I would argue that we would be wise to keep in mind the themes from this and the preceding article when considering the intellectual and practical value of Dewey's aesthetics and of his continuing relevance to art and aesthetic education. This is especially true if we are not to treat Dewey as a mere curiosity of the past, but, instead, as a genuine visionary who might still have something to teach us about the arts and the aesthetic dimension of human experience. What is more, allowing our appraisal of Dewey's aesthetics to be governed by the dismissive pronouncements of aestheticians and art critics of Dewey's day (and in some cases, even today) effectively hampers our ability to recognize and appreciate the richness of Dewey's organic

naturalism and its influence on the many artists who continued to find value in his work well after the publication of *Art as experience*.

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