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Mary Jane Jacob, *Dewey for Artists*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2018.

When John Dewey presided over the Curriculum Conference at Rollins College in 1931, he was already an iconic figure. His passionate call for reform in the public schools, *School and Society*, had been among the most discussed books for educators 30 years before. His compelling case for schools to form citizens of a democracy, *Democracy and Education*, had made its impact 15 years before. His name had become the brand of "progressive" education and he was in demand as a speaker across the US and the world.

Yet if Rollins's president Hamilton Holt had brought him in as an expert authority on progressivism and reform in liberal arts education, Dewey immediately demurred. As he called the conference to order, he noted that he had given his career to primary and secondary education, not higher education. He had little to say at the Conference, which is always good for a moderator. But that left the floor open to his colleague Goodwin Watson and his acolytes, for whom Progressive Education should be in the nominative case. Watson had a doctrine which he advocated not only in his writing but in his many consultations with colleges. There were principles to be followed for a college to be considered "progressive."

On the side of the room sat an observer from the Rollins faculty who saw at once that Dewey was a kindred soul. John Andrew Rice was an iconoclast who punctured pretense with rapier wit and viewed all programmatic schemes as oppressive and misguided. He skewered Watson as the "jackass" who dominated discussion and admired Dewey for his attentive silence. Malcolm "Mac" Forbes and Ted Dreier of the Rollins faculty were also in the room, both from prominent New York families who were friends of Dewey's. When they joined Rice in starting a college in Black Mountain from scratch two years later, it is little wonder that John Dewey came to visit – not once, but three times, the first in 1935.

He proved to be a popular visitor, and not only because he liked to chat with students over a beer. He observed the two courses required of all students – Josef

Albers on the art of seeing, and Rice on the Greek classics taught in his masterful Socratic dialogue style. Dewey's comments that are recorded are spoken in admiration and reinforcement of the college's character: a focus on the individual student; a curriculum with artistic practice in the center; and a spontaneity, informality, and innovative spirit that stirred Dewey to say at one point that he wasn't sure the college should ever move toward having formal graduation with a degree. His presence helped give the college a certain cachet in the press and in higher education circles.

Mary Jane Jacob's concise and accessible book only touches on this BMC history, but as another kindred soul of Dewey's she indirectly illuminates the many ways in which his ideas may have influenced the college. On my first reading of her book, I had two reactions. The first and by far the more important was Jacob's remarkable facility at making Dewey readable. I confess to my own challenge of plowing through his writing – his abstract terms and his definitions of every single one, his tedious paragraphs. Jacob inspires me to try again, for there is much to be gained from his insights.

My second reaction was, to put it baldly, who cares? What could possibly persuade today's artists or students of the arts to consider a philosopher born before the Civil War most of whose major works were published a century ago? Jacob explains that in part her discovery of Dewey was provoked by their shared connection with Chicago. Dewey was a contemporary of Jane Addams and partnered with her and Hull House in his early years as a professor at University of Chicago. Hyde Park was the home of Dewey's innovative Laboratory School for K-12 students. He left his imprint on the city.

To this point Jacob might have persuaded Chicagoans to care. But she goes well beyond that to demonstrate that Dewey remains among the most compelling voices for moving Western culture beyond the old dualisms that have plagued it: theory/practice, art/craft, mind/body, individual/society. This was a broadly held position of what came to be called Pragmatism, but it's striking that Dewey never published a book with that word in the title. Nor does Jacob settle for eliding questions by using that term. In fact, she eschews engagement with any of the extensive literature on Dewey and pragmatism. She takes Dewey at his word, Dewey as Dewey, not what others say about Dewey. In

this way, with her plain reading of his texts, in each of the book's sections, step by step, she persuades the reader that Dewey does indeed have something significant and profoundly transformative to say.

Jacob divides her book in two halves: "The Artist's Process" and "The Social Value of Art." Each half is in turn divided into three chapters: Making, Experiencing, Practice; and Democracy, Participation, Communication. Throughout she demonstrates a canny eye for the apt quotation of Dewey's prose, drawing widely from across his works but especially on his 1934 *Art as Experience*, and his 1925 *Experience and Nature*. Her interpretation is amply illustrated by public art projects on which she has worked or consulted, exemplifying in her own artistry the intimate connection of art and life to which Dewey was so committed.

Photographs of Dewey without his three-piece suit can be hard to find, but nonetheless, he was a rebel against the conventions of educational and aesthetic theory. Jacob likewise "fled the marketing-oriented, donor-obligated arena of the art museum" to break boundaries and rediscover art as a means of giving "visibility and agency" to people whose lives are obscured by economic inequity and social prejudice (2). Her vivid descriptions of these many projects make an engaging read in themselves. And they are enriched by the voice of a philosopher whose ideas have also been obscured by the dominance of the market, standardized mass education, and a democracy in the clutches of moneyed power.

The chapters in the section on the artist's process capture Dewey's wisdom, as timely today as in his day, for the life and work of any artist. But Dewey's approach is couched in a larger argument against the separation of art from life, a protest against the isolation of fine art as something "esoteric" and out of reach for the untrained eye and ear. If art belongs only within the confines of a museum building (with a great deal of it in storage and rarely seen), selective of the art "works" favored by donors and the acquisition department, it is cut off from the life experience not only of the artist who made it, but of the spectator who stepped into the building from the flow of everyday life.

Jacob draws on Dewey to argue emphatically that art is not set apart for spectators. A work of art, a creative act of making, becomes fully itself only in engagement with the world through the experience of those who interact with it. The

materialism of consumer society seduces all of us to be spectators of our own lives, surrounding ourselves with things already made. For Dewey, art gives us agency in our lives and the shared lives of our communities. Art arises from the poetry of everyday life, and conversely, making our lives every day in itself is an art and a practice. So the reader should not assume what the title of this book means. The text is not addressed (only) to students in art school or to painters, sculptors, and print-makers. We are all artists of our own lives.

The distinctions between the chapters on the social value of art are rightfully blurred; the section as a whole is really one argument for the Deweyan thesis that the arts are critical in forming and sustaining democracy and its citizens. The arts can give voice to the unheard, visibility to the unseen. The arts can empower through the sense of agency that drives them. The arts advance compassion and empathy, virtues without which democracy withers.

Jacob's last four paragraphs are the capstone of her book (141-42). The kernel of her reflecting and acting, as for Dewey, is the call

> for all of us to be as artists in our own vocation: to live life as a continual act of creation, conscious and caring about the consequences of our actions . . . we live life as a process, learning from what it teaches us along the way, sensing more clearly what matters to us, the values we hold, how the world affects us, and what effect we might have on it.

I close the book thinking, "Mary Jane Jacob would have been a transformative faculty member at Black Mountain College."

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