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The Social Role of Art in Gadamer and Dewey

Elena Romagnoli

1. Introduction

- ¹ Hans-Georg Gadamer and John Dewey are two pivotal figures of hermeneutics and pragmatism, respectively. My aim is to show that, despite the different philosophical contexts in which their conceptions emerged,¹ Gadamer and Dewey share a double intent: the critique of the aestheticism typical of the modern age, and the attempt to recompose the continuity between art and everyday life. Moreover I will claim that this common goal entails a fundamental reassessment of the relation between the work of art and the public – a reassessment that has crucial consequences on the social role of art.
- ² My aim is not at all to assert that the two positions perfectly overlap. I rather want to stress the fact that these communalities show the possibility of a fertile, and partially overlooked, dialogue between hermeneutics and pragmatism. In the last few decades, a growing number of scholars – in particular the so called “post-analytic pragmatists,”² such as Rorty (1982) and Shusterman (2001)³ – have devoted significant inquiries to the dialogue with hermeneutical philosophy. However, the role of art in this picture remains partially overlooked.⁴ I believe that the reflection on Gadamer’s and Dewey’s conception of aesthetic experience will help clarify certain fundamental and maybe unexpected commonalities between the two positions. For both, art constitutes a fundamental key to reassess the basic assumptions of the philosophical tradition: in contrast with any dualistic conceptualization of the distinction between subject and object, the two focus on the interaction between human beings and their world.
- ³ I claim that both Gadamer’s and Dewey’s reflections on aesthetic experience lead to highlight the social role of art and its connection to other human practices, without taking refuge in a nostalgia for the “great art of the past” and without suggesting that

art “lost its aura” in the contemporary world. In this respect, they develop a reading of art that can tackle the most important innovations in technology and everyday life, uncoupling art from the theory that sets it upon a remote pedestal, as mere “art for art’s sake.”⁵ Moreover, this comparison will cast a new light on Gadamer’s philosophy, often accused of being an anti-modern or conservative theory:⁶ the comparison with pragmatist philosophy is precisely what enables us to show new potentialities in Gadamer’s thought,⁷ thereby overcoming some American philosophers’ reluctance to dialogue with the hermeneutical tradition.

- 4 In this paper, I will first show the commonality between Gadamer and Dewey in relation to their critiques of the role of art in the modern age. Secondly, I will show how this critique relates to the aim of rethinking the aesthetic experience as a perfection of everyday life. Finally, I will show the consequences of this analysis on the reassessment of the relation between the audience and the work of art; this is strictly connected to the proposal of a different relation between the individual and society.

2. Art for Art’s Sake. A Shared Critique of the Aestheticism of the Modern Age

- 5 A fundamental point of convergence between Gadamer and Dewey consists in their critique of the modern concept of art, accused of being secluded from everyday life and considered a mere aestheticism.⁸ Indeed, both authors propose a peculiar historical-anthropological reading of the consequences of the separation of art from life, a way in which they tackle the vexed question, first raised by Hegel, of the “past-character of art”:⁹ what is the role of art if “neither in content nor in form is art the highest and absolute mode of bringing to our minds the true interests of the spirit” (Hegel 1975, vol. 13: 9), or, we can say, of society? This question is connected to the tendency, typical of the modern age, to distinguish art from any other dimension of life.
- 6 As is known, Dewey specifically devotes his philosophical inquiry to art in the decade between 1925, in chapter IX of *Experience and Nature*,¹⁰ and 1934, with the development of his theory in *Art as Experience*, the fundamental work that Dewey entirely devotes to art. *Art as experience* has an anthropological and a theoretical starting point. Both meet in the fundamental aim that underpins Dewey’s essay: “To restore continuity between the refined and intensified forms that are works of art and the everyday events, doing and suffering, that are universally recognised to constitute experience.” (Dewey 1934: 9). Indeed, Dewey’s intent is to criticize those theories that deny any connection between the aesthetic experience and other kinds of experience, upholding the unique value of the work of art:¹¹ a conception he calls the “esoteric idea of fine art.”¹²
- 7 Dewey’s anthropological argumentation is based on the awareness of a historical fracture that occurred in the role of art, focusing on the contraposition between the role of art in ancient Greece and in the modern age.¹³ For the Greeks, art was strictly connected to the life of the community and was not conceived as an aesthetic product: this is exemplified by the Parthenon, which “has aesthetics standing only as the work becomes an experience for a human being” (Dewey 1934: 10). Indeed, the Parthenon emblematically manifested the Athenian citizens’ connection to the entire community: it was an expression of the religious and political sense of citizenship, built “not as a work of art, but rather as a civic commemoration” (*ibid.*). With modern industry and

commerce, a historical change happened, so that art lost its indigenous status and acquired a new one, i.e., being fine art and nothing else (*ibid.*: 15). Dewey underlines that art is now created as a product for sale. This is connected to the birth of museums, that he considers monuments to nationalism and imperialism: every nation was required to possess a collection of plundered specimens, as a symbol of power (*ibid.*: 14). Moreover, he conceives modern artists as exemplars of aesthetic individualism and isolation that end up in eccentricity (*ibid.*: 37).¹⁴ All of this led to the phenomenon that Dewey (1934: 14) defines as “art for art’s sake,” or “the compartmental concept of fine art” (*ibid.*): i.e., the idea that art must be set “on a remote pedestal” (*ibid.*: 11) distant from everyday life.

- 8 Like Dewey, Gadamer considers art a fundamental key to his philosophy: as is well known, the first part of *Truth and Method* (1960) is entirely devoted to art. It is subdivided into two distinct conceptual phases: the first aims to highlight the limitations of the so-called “aesthetic consciousness,” while the second tries to conceive art, once again, in relation with truth. Following Heidegger’s reflections,¹⁵ he states that the birth of historical consciousness, the symbol of nineteenth-century historicism, went hand in hand with the relegation of art to the context of the *Erlebnis*, namely the isolated experience of the individual, detached from any connection to common life. The aesthetics of *Erlebnis* considers the artistic experience something totally alien to life: “Aesthetic experience is not just one kind of experience among others, but represents the essence of experience per se. As the work of art as such is a world for itself, so also what is experienced aesthetically is, as an *Erlebnis*, removed from all connections with actuality.” (Gadamer 1989: 60). *Erlebnis* represents the modern tendency of experiencing art as an individual moment that is separate from everyday life.
- 9 Like Dewey, Gadamer focuses on the role of art from a historical point of view, opposing the Greek conception to the modern one and underlying that, in the Greek world, art was understood in connection to nature as its perfection: fine arts were considered “a perfecting of reality, not appearances that mask, veil or transfigure it” (*ibid.*: 71). Modern age brings forth a new consideration of art, described as a process of abstraction: “By disregarding everything in which a work is rooted (its original context of life, and the religion or secular function that gave it significance), it becomes visible as the ‘pure work of art.’” (*ibid.*: 74). This process of “aesthetic differentiation” is connected to practical and anthropological implications: “the ‘universal library’ in the sphere of literature, the museum, the theatre, the concert hall.” (*Ibid.*: 75).¹⁶ Moreover, the separation of art from the domain of common life is expressed by the figure of the artist, free to the point of being eccentric: his creativity and independence lead to the figure of the bohemian artist, totally separated from the common life of society (Gadamer 1989: 76).
- 10 This issue can be summarized as the common consideration that Gadamer and Dewey give to the above-mentioned “past-character of art”: in modern age, art acquired a new role, no longer connected to the community and its rituals, and became a form of aestheticism. Gadamer has explicitly focused on this Hegelian claim¹⁷ and, in *Truth and Method*, he refers to Hegel’s thesis of the “past character of art,” quoting the expression “the beautiful fruits torn from the tree” (Gadamer 1989: 160)¹⁸ to underline how the role of art changed in our society. As for Dewey, the reference to Hegel’s aesthetics is less explicit,¹⁹ though it turns out that he understands the pastness of art as the loss of

self-evidence of art, that is detached from social and political life. In contrast, Dewey claims that “works of art that are not remote from common life, that are widely enjoyed in a community, are signs of a unified collective life. But they are also marvellous aids in the creation of such a life.” (Dewey 1934: 87).

3. Aesthetic Experience as Perfection of Everyday Life

- 11 What emerges is that the two philosophers manage to discuss the role of art in the context of the twentieth century, highlighting the separation of art from everyday life, as well as its confinement to the individual sphere, eradicated from the life of the society. These historical and anthropological reflections are prompted by a common theoretical critique of the dualist conception of art (attributed to Kant),²⁰ as well as the aim to formulate an integral conception of experience (that has Hegel as its common model).²¹ For both, experience stems from the original interaction between human and the world:²² the conception of isolated art is the emblem of a wrong concept of experience as such. It follows that reassessing the role of art can be considered a fundamental way of reconsidering the relation between the human being and the world: this means opposing a philosophy of aesthetic experience to the aestheticism of modern age.²³
- 12 For sure, Dewey shows a specific aim to affect the relation between art and education in the American society of the twenties:²⁴ “In the degree in which art exercises its office, it is also a remaking of the experience of the community in the direction of greater order and unity.” (Dewey 1934: 87). This aim is obviously not precisely shared by Gadamer. However, far from being a merely conservative or mere classicistic theory,²⁵ hermeneutics can be seen as practically capable of providing key answers to the question of the modern role of art.²⁶ In the fundamental essay *The Relevance of the Beautiful*, Gadamer actually claims that “the understanding of what art is today present a task for thinking” (Gadamer 1998: 9). For both Gadamer and Dewey, art must be a reassessment of reality, a praxis able to influence everyday life.
- 13 I claim that Gadamer’s and Dewey’s critiques of modern art do not represent a merely coincidental consonance, being rather rooted in the common reassessment of experience as integral experience, as opposed to any dualistic theory that is associated with the modern age. Indeed, they aim to re-establish the abandoned continuity between art and everyday life.²⁷ The two authors share the claim that art is the *perfection* of ordinary experience: there is neither an abyss nor pure indistinction between the two. The perfective nature of art relates to the reassessment of the concept of experience as integral experience. Indeed, both Gadamer and Dewey aim to conceive experience in a holistic way: experience is not a single, isolated event, fruit of a genius’s creation, but rather a process or activity that constitutes a human praxis.²⁸
- 14 The relevance of Dewey’s concept of experience comes to the fore in *Experience and Nature* and it achieves an explicit connection to aesthetics in *Art as Experience*.²⁹ Dewey states that an experience can be defined as such when “the material experienced runs its course to fulfilment” (Dewey 1934: 42). He mentions several common experiences taken from everyday life, such as an accomplished task (consuming a meal, playing a match, etc.). The common element is the fact that “such an experience is a whole and carries with it its own individualizing quality and self-sufficiency. It is *an* experience.” (*Ibid.*). Taking his cue from such assumption, he states that the element that gives unity

to that experience is a “quality” (*ibid.*: 44). This is for Dewey the *aesthetic* aspect that constitutes every experience: even “an experience of thinking has its own aesthetic quality” (*ibid.*: 45). What distinguishes a proper aesthetic experience from any other lies in the fact that the former does not merely aim at the end of movement, but rather at the movement together with its completion: in an intellectual experience, the end is a value in itself, whereas, as Dewey states, in the aesthetic experience “the end, the terminus, is significant not by itself but as the integration of the parts [...] a drama or novel is not the final sentence” (*ibid.*: 61).

- 15 Every artistic phenomenon is experience and, more importantly, a proper experience must be originally aesthetic for it to be *an* experience: this is emblematically expressed in the title of *Art as experience*, which exemplifies such binomial relation. Dewey connects this claim to the relation between the organism and its environment, with a nod to the Darwinian tradition. In brief, every organism lives in a certain environment and contributes to the constitution and development of that environment. The very existence of the organism is structured on the basis of its relation with the environment: this relation alternates phases of harmony with phases of dyscrasia, in a certain rhythm, and the restoration of harmony constitutes the moment of maximal wellbeing for the organism. This argumentation is situated at the basis of Dewey’s conception of aesthetics, as he himself mentions: “These biological commonplaces are something more than that; they reach to the roots of the aesthetic in experience.” (*ibid.*: 20). According to Dewey, the restoration of the harmony with the environment, after a period of “disruption and conflict,” provides “a consummation akin to the aesthetic” (*ibid.*). The specific characteristic that distinguishes the human being from other living creatures consists in this awareness, which translates in the emotion for the fracture or for the renewed equilibrium.
- 16 Despite the manifest differences that set them apart, in particular the reference to the Darwinian terminology, a similar reflection on the concept of experience can be found in Gadamer’s crucial argumentation, which presents the history of two fundamental words, i.e., *Erlebnis* and *Erfahrung*, the German terms for “experience.”³⁰ Gadamer aims to criticize experience as *Erlebnis*, by reassessing the concept of experience in relation with truth, by referring to *Erfahrung* as an integral experience that does show the dynamical process of the relation between the human being and the world. In particular, he states that “if the concept of art is defined as appearance in contrast to reality, then nature no longer represents a comprehensive framework. Art becomes a standpoint of its own and establishes its own autonomous claim to supremacy.” (Gadamer 1989: 71). In this respect, he advocates the need to rethink experience in a different way, “so that the experience of the work of art can be understood as experience [*Erfahrung*]” (*ibid.*: 84).
- 17 In the transition from Kant’s idea of art as “expression of the moral” to the Hegelian concept of “presentation of man with Himself” (*ibid.*: 43), Gadamer sees a fundamental step as an emblem of the reassessment of art as *Erfahrung*, namely as an integral and processual experience (*ibid.*: 84-5): “For this we can appeal to Hegel’s admirable lectures on aesthetics. Here the truth that lies in every artistic experience is recognized and at the same time mediated with historical consciousness.” (*ibid.*: 84). From this point of view, art is connected to truth, overcoming a dualistic subject-object view: “The work of art is not an object that stands over against a subject for itself. Instead, the work of art has its true being in the fact that it becomes an experience that changes

the person who experiences it.” (*Ibid.*: 103). This is emblematically expressed by the concept of play: the subject is not the player but the play itself. This element is called by Gadamer the “medial sense” (*ibid.*: 105),³¹ which helps to compare the play with the work of art. The distinctive feature of the play is the fact that it is “self-represented,” and the transition to art consists in the fact that this event is represented for someone: “That this possibility is intended is the characteristic feature of art as play. The closed world of play lets down one of its walls.” (Gadamer 1989: 108).

- 18 Remarkably, even though their terminology differs in many respects, the two authors show notable similarities that converge in the conception of aesthetic experience as a consummation, namely a perfection of everyday life. Dewey speaks of experience as “heightened vitality,” mentioning that human appetites are “transfigured”³² when reflected in the mirror of art. Gadamer similarly claims that art is an experience of “transformation [*Verwandlung*]” that modifies he who undergoes it, an “increase in being” (Gadamer 1989: 135) where the play achieves ideality (*ibid.*: 110).³³ In this sense, they both aim to rethink art as an “open process” that can never be exhausted.³⁴ Such an exhaustion would be the death of the “organism” (Dewey) or the end of the “play” (Gadamer).³⁵ This point can help rethink Gadamer’s conception of art (in particular his “*pars construens*”) that has been accused of being a metaphysical or idealistic theory, unable to account for contemporary phenomena.³⁶ In light of the comparison with Dewey’s position, some of this Gadamerian claim can be set apart and those reductive interpretations can be overcome, while developing a line of thought that already featured in Gadamer.

4. Creator and Spectators: the Democratic Issue of Art

- 19 Gadamer and Dewey converge in the attempt to reconnect the aesthetic experience with everyday life, while stressing the processual aspect of the experience in which the subject is engaged: something that is strictly connected to the reconsideration of the relation between the work of art and the public. This has relevant implications for the role of art in society, as explicitly claimed by Dewey and implicitly present in Gadamer as well. These implications can be made more explicit precisely via the comparison with pragmatism.³⁷
- 20 That an aesthetic experience is intrinsically processual entails, for the two authors, that art is not something preestablished that is received by the spectators. On the contrary, the experience of art is created when the artistic product comes into contact with the “spectators” and is able to change their habits, thus creating a new world. Art is not just a mirror representation of the world, but rather a productive process whose development depends on the different circumstances of the context where it is situated, without this implying a mere relativism.
- 21 As I previously underlined, when it comes to the concept of play presented in *Truth and Method* and developed in *The Relevance of the Beautiful*, Gadamer stresses that the participant plays an active role in shaping the experience:³⁸ the same goes for the role of the spectator in the constitution of the artistic experience. In *The Relevance of the Beautiful*, Gadamer appears to abandon the “metaphysical” approach to art derived from Neoplatonism,³⁹ adopting an anthropological approach, when it comes to the concepts of play, symbol and feast. The notion of play in particular is understood as self-presentation: “Play appears as a self-movement that does not pursue any

particular end or purpose so much as movement as movement, exhibiting so to speak a phenomenon of excess, of living self-representation.” (Gadamer 1998: 23). The peculiarity of the play entails that “the act of playing (*spielen*) requires a ‘playing along with’ (*mitspielen*)” (*ibid.*). The concept of play is explained as participation, thus overcoming the subject-object dichotomy. Gadamer explicitly supports the applicability of this claim to contemporary works of art, that requires the active participation of the public: “I think this point is enormously significant for the contemporary discussion of modern art. What ultimately concerns us here is the question of the work. One of the basic impulses of modern art has been the desire to break down the distance separating the audience, the ‘consumers,’ and the public from the work of art.” (*Ibid.*: 24).

- 22 Moreover, it is relevant to underline that Gadamer develops this understanding of the mutual relation between the work of art and the spectators in the analysis devoted to poetry in his later writings, where poetry becomes predominant over the other arts.⁴⁰ The participation of the spectator emerges in the fact that, for Gadamer, every reading or interpretation of a poem provided by the reader has an indissoluble connection to the poem itself, thus re-constituting and increasing the meaning of that work of art. Thus, every reader plays a fundamental role that is comparable to that of the creator: they participate in the formation of the work of art: “An interpretation is correct only when it is finally able to disappear completely, having entered completely into a new experience of the poem.” (Gadamer 1997: 165). This entails that it is possible for the readers to be *on the same level* as the poet: the view of the author does not come from a privileged standpoint, being rather one of the many interpretations that constitute the meaning of the work of art.
- 23 As for Dewey, already in his early works,⁴¹ he strongly criticizes the separation between the so called “artistic” aspect (i.e. the act of production, making and doing), and the “aesthetic” aspect (i.e. the experience of appreciation and perception).⁴² In particular, he complains that “we have no word in the English language that unambiguously includes what is signified by the two words ‘artistic’ and ‘esthetic.’ Since ‘artistic’ refers primarily to the act of production and ‘esthetic’ to that of perception and enjoyment, the absence of a term designating the two processes taken together is unfortunate.” (Dewey 1934: 53). He claims that, on the contrary, a true work of art must be artistic as well as aesthetic, framed for enjoying a receptive perception. In fact, art is what binds activity and reception together: only in that moment of unity can an experience be a proper experience. When the artist creates a work of art, that creation must include a continuous act of perception, which enables them to modify their work in progress. Symmetrically, the perceiver of the work of art is not placed in a purely passive position: in order to perceive, the beholder must *create* their own experience, in a way comparable to that of the artist. Following Dewey’s terminology, the perception is an act of going out of the “energy” of the organism in order to receive, not a withholding of “energy” (as in usual experience the organism has with the environment).
- 24 Indeed, Dewey rejects the theory of the genius that creates the work of art in his interiority and then sends it out to be passively received by the public. Actually, every experience must be inherently active and passive at the same time. This means that an act of perception is present in the creation itself: “The process of art in production is related to the esthetic in perception organically [...]. Until the artist is satisfied in perception with what he is doing, he continues shaping and reshaping.” (*Ibid.*: 56).⁴³

Moreover, the act of perception is not merely passive, but entails an act of creation: the contact with the work of art starts a complex structure of movements that are associated with a certain emotion and tend to assimilate that specific experience (Dewey 1934: 60ff.): a process of organization that is connected to the specific situation of the perceiver. All of this is very similar to what happens to the creator of the work of art.

- 25 This fundamental reassessment of the relation between audience and creator is connected to the fact that every aesthetic experience is *situated*: it is shaped by its interactions with the environment. Dewey highlights the situation where every work of art, as well as every event, is set in a specific context, “has a *local habitation*” (*ibid.*: 96). In this respect, he emblematically speaks of the “act of expression,” which believes to be at the root of the work of art, a “fusion between the single element of art and the environment” (*ibid.*: 92), as the result of the interaction with the environment. The “fusion” between the internal emotion and the external event creates a new object belonging to a multitude of “spectators.” Moreover, Dewey states that the author “did not approach the scene with an empty mind,” but rather with a receptive mind, and this implies that there is “bias and tendency” at work. The work which results is “a function of what is in the actual scene in its interaction with what the beholder brings with him” (*ibid.*: 93).
- 26 Gadamer similarly states that an aesthetic experience can be possible only if it is situated, namely recalling the historicity of every experience⁴⁴ – as opposed to historicism, accused of historicizing everything except its own point of view (Gadamer 1989: 255ff.). In the “hermeneutical situation,” the perceiver as well as the creator are inevitably situated, and that does not prevent the understanding of the “other,” being instead the only chance of building a proper relation between human beings. This implies that the spectators play a fundamental role, by contributing to the constitution of the work of art. Each reader engages in this process from the specific situation they find themselves in: “No reader can understand without specialities, and yet every reader understands only when the speciality of the occasion is sublated by the universality of occasionality.” (Gadamer 1997: 134).
- 27 To sum up, for both authors the work of art is never something pre-established, coming from the artist’s inner world and then simply given to the public. Art is not a privilege of the elites produced by the elites, but rather something universally accessible. In both authors, this peculiar understanding implies a social conception of art. In this respect, Dewey clearly stresses the democratic aspect of the work of art, which can thus have an ameliorative purpose in the lives of the individuals.⁴⁵ Dewey urges the spectator to perform an activity that makes the work of art itself possible, claiming that “the one who is too lazy, idle, or indurated in convention to perform this work will not see or hear. His ‘appreciation’ will be a mixture of scraps of learning with conformity to norms of conventional admiration and with a confused, even if genuine, emotional excitation.” (Dewey 1934: 60-1).
- 28 Art is set into the very social fabric of the democratic society envisaged by Dewey. In fact, he highlights the connection between art and politics, with the intention to rethink art beyond elitism, which entails the massification of custom for the majority of the population.⁴⁶ The core aspects of this conception hold true for Gadamer as well, who proposes a sort of “ameliorism” in the use of the mass media. The modern forms of art, connected to the new technologies, are not a purely negative element per se, but

only when “the passivity that is produced when the channels of cultural information are all too instantly available” (Gadamer 1998: 51). Gadamer states that “it is a profound mistake to think that our art is simply that of the ruling class” (*ibid.*) and moreover, referring to all modern social technologies and mass media, he continues: “We should recognise that all these things can be used in a rational way.” (*Ibid.*). For Gadamer, only at the time our “thirst of knowledge” is proactively applied to these phenomena would a real experience of art be possible.

- 29 By toning down some aspects of Gadamer’s conception of art (namely the metaphysical overtones in *Truth and Method*), a way of considering Gadamer’s reflection on art as a reflection of the individual in connection to society can be found: a theory that can tackle contemporary forms of art.⁴⁷ No reader or spectator is a passive receptor of the work of art, being rather on the same level as the author: both contribute to create and expand the meaning of the work. This entails that, as for Dewey, for Gadamer too the artist is not a mystical, isolated figure but rather an “interpreter or creator” among many, namely the spectator:⁴⁸ both are placed in society.
- 30 In the scenario of the contemporary philosophies of art, hermeneutics and pragmatism do show a corrective approach to the role of art in modern society, as opposed to mere destruction and justification:⁴⁹ they point to the possibility to reassess the role of art, without banning a form of art on account of its being “too popular.”⁵⁰ In both authors, the reassessment of the aesthetic experience has practical impacts on the reassessment of the relation between the work of art and society.

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NOTES

1. For Gadamer, theological hermeneutics and historicism; for Dewey, anthropology and Darwinism.
2. See Kremer (2018: 48).
3. On the relation between pragmatist aesthetics and Gadamerian philosophy, see again Kremer 2018. Moreover, Shusterman himself has stressed the relevance of Gadamerian philosophy for his turn to Pragmatist Aesthetics, see Shusterman 1988.
4. Recently, the connection between hermeneutics and pragmatism has been at the center of in-depth inquiries in the studies of Bernstein 2010 and Fairfield 2011. However, they do not focus on the concept of art. For this topic, see the works of Gilmour 1987, Jeannot 2001, Kirby & Graham 2016, and Dreon 2018a.
5. For a practical application of the Gadamerian conception of art to contemporary and less classical phenomena see Nielsen 2016. As for Dewey, it is sufficient to mention an exhibition of contemporary artists at the *Museum Ludwig* of Köln, explicitly inspired by Dewey's claim of rethinking art as connected to everyday life, see *John Dewey, Who? New Presentation of the conception of Contemporary Art*, curators B. Engelbach, J. Mitchell, Museum Ludwig, Köln.
6. See Habermas 1981, Caputo 1987 and Bernasconi 1995. In contrast to these readings, I claim that a complete understanding of Gadamerian philosophy requires that we consider not just *Truth and Method* (1989), but also the series of subsequent essays that Gadamer focused on art, gathered in *Gesammelte Werke* (1985-1995) VIII and IX.
7. See the scholarly tradition, inaugurated by Risser 1997, Vilhauer 2010 and recently developed by Walhof 2017 and George 2020, that interprets hermeneutics underlining the theme of the "sensus communis" and the democratic implication as implying an openness to the other.

8. It is merit of Dreon 2018a to focus this fundamental point. She also notes that Dewey arrives to this analysis 26 years before Gadamer's reflection.
9. By "past-character of art," Hegel means that, after its "classical" phase in Antiquity, art ceases to represent the highest moment of the absolute: with the coming of the Christian revelation, art must make way for religion and philosophy. This in no way means the "end" of art in the modern world, as the recent *Hegel-Forschung* has underlined, e.g. Gethmann-Siefert 1994. On the contrary, the specificity of pastness, namely the loss of self-evidence, constitutes an improvement of art in its modern manifestations.
10. In particular in the huge volumes of Dewey's writings, the theme of art is present in his early works (see Dewey 1887), despite not being at the center of a specific analysis, as it happens starting from the chapter of *Experience and Nature* (1925). In this work, however, the role of art is considered in light of the "systematic" intent as the culmination of nature, connected to a more "idealistic" terminology (see Dewey 1925: 293-4). While in *Art as experience* (1934) art arrives at an autonomous and predominant position. For a development of Dewey's conception of art, see Alexander 1987.
11. In particular, Dewey's controversy is targeted to the theories of Clive Bell, a British art historian, the upholder of an irreducible difference between works of art and other human activities. See Bell 1914.
12. See Dewey (1934: 90).
13. In the section of *Experience and Nature*, this point was not addressed. Conversely, he focused on the Greek depreciation of art, conceived as a creative practice: in fact, practical activities were considered to be below theoretical activities, namely, contemplation, which belongs to *episteme*. See Dewey (1925: 266-8).
14. See also Dewey (1925: 272-3).
15. See Heidegger's famous essay *The Origin of the Work of Art* in Heidegger (1971: 65-6; and 77ff.) and his critique of art as *Erlebnis* in Heidegger (1979: 77-91).
16. This does not mean that Gadamer shares the socialist overtones of Dewey's thought. See Sigwart 2013.
17. He deals with this theme in other essays specifically focused on Hegel's past-character of art: *Ende der Kunst? - Von Hegels Lehre vom Vergangenheitscharakter der Kunst bis zur Anti-Kunst von Heute*, in Gadamer (1985-1995, vol. VIII: 206-20), and *Die Stellung der Poesie im System der Hegelschen Ästhetik und die Frage des Vergangenheitscharakters der Kunst*, in Gadamer (1985-1995, vol. VIII: 221-31).
18. See Hegel (2018: 432).
19. Here, I cannot focus on their reception of Hegelian aesthetics. Suffice it to say that both authors have been influenced by Hegel's aesthetics, something that is well known in Gadamer (see, among others, Risser 2002) and less stressed when it comes to Dewey. See Shook & Good 2010 and, on the specific theme of the "past-character of art," Dreon 2020.
20. I cannot focus on their respective critiques of Kantian philosophy, nor on assessing the correctness of their analyses. Both authors consider Kant a symbol of the typical dualistic concept of the modern age, see Bernstein 2021 and Fairfield 2011.
21. Dreon 2020 clearly states that, in this respect, both are influenced by Hegel's conception of experience (expressed in particular in the *Phenomenology*) as well as by his idea of art as the concrete representation of the truth of a situated historical period (as in Hegel's *Aesthetics*).
22. Jeannot (2001: 6) speaks of the concept of "transaction" to express the relation between the individual and the world. I prefer to use the concept of "interaction" to express the communitarian and social aspect of experience.
23. Despite the author's limiting his analysis only to Gadamer's and Dewey's masterpiece, as to convergence not only in the critique of the role of the modern age, but also in the intention to rethink the concept of experience, the work of Jeannot (2001: 6-9), is relevant.

24. See Dewey 1938-1939.
25. In *The Relevance of Beautiful*, Gadamer explicitly claims that a proper concept of art must explain both the past and the contemporary forms of art: “I shall proceed initially from the basic principle that our thinking in this matter must be able to cover the great traditional art of the past, as well as the art of modern times (Gadamer 1998: 9). As for the concept of “tradition,” he often states that “of course, tradition means transmission rather than conservation” (*ibid.*: 49). For a comparison of Gadamer and Dewey as to the concept of play, see Doebler 2012: he states that for Dewey tradition is “forward looking” and for Gadamer it is “backward looking,” but both relate to the past and the “classic” (Gadamer 1998: 7).
26. As appears in particular in Gadamer 1998.
27. See Jeannot 2001. Rasmussen & Gørgens 2006 also try to show such continuity and to apply this topic to the specific experience of “applied theatre practices.”
28. The two positions can be compared with the recent position taken by Bertram 2014 that explicitly stresses the role of the arts as human praxis.
29. His later philosophy has been considered a “philosophy of experience,” see Alexander 1987.
30. The two concepts had already been expressed by Heidegger (1971: 77ff.) and later systematized by Gadamer. For a reflection on the concept “immediate experience” from a pragmatist perspective see Dreon 2018b. For a broader analysis of the concepts of *Erlebnis*, *Erfahrung* (and *Lebenswelt*) see Iannilli & Matteucci 2021. The two authors argue for a more complex conception of *Erlebnis*, as presented in Dilthey, irreducible to an instantaneous and punctiform experience, as affirmed by Gadamer (*ibid.*: 44-7).
31. On the potential relation between Gadamer and Dewey as to the Schillerian concept of play in an anthropological sense, see Jeannot (2001: 4-5). See also Kirby & Graham 2016 for a comparison between John Dewey’s *Knowing and the Known* and Gadamer’s *Truth and Method* on the concept of play.
32. See Dewey (1934: 83).
33. Interestingly, the editors of the English version of Gadamer’s *Truth and Method* use the word “consummation” to translate the German *Vollendung*.
34. See Kremer (2018: 53).
35. Gilmour focuses on some fundamental communalities, among which he proposes a parallelism between Gadamer’s concept of “transformation into structure” and the Deweyan argumentation that the medium changes the ordinary, natural elements of perception (Gilmour 1987: 211). However, he also claims that there is a fundamental difference in the role of science for the two authors, suggesting an incorrect and reductive reading of Gadamer’s philosophy. Here I cannot focus on this topic, but it is noteworthy to recall that Gadamer’s conception is not an antimodern or antiscientific theory, but rather he expresses the fact that science retains its value while being included in the more general horizon of human praxis. On this point see Marino 2011.
36. See Caputo 1987 and Bernasconi 1995.
37. Following a different path, Sigwart 2013 aims to make explicit the political issues of hermeneutics via the comparison with the Dewey’s philosophy (and Hannah Arendt’s too). In particular, he stresses how the political revindication of the “sensus communis” provided by Gadamer in the first part of *Truth and Method* is abandoned in the second part. However, the relation between the individual and the historical context can be intended as a “we,” i.e. not an individualistic experience at all, but rather a communitarian experience made by citizens in the community (*ibid.*: 9-18). See also Gilmour (1987: 211).
38. Vilhauer 2010 stresses the relevance of the play in Gadamer as a way to propose a different kind of experience as an alternative to the paradigm of the *Naturwissenschaften*. See also Grondin 2001.

39. As it emerges, in connection to beauty, at the end of *Truth and Method*, see Gadamer (1989: 472ff.).
40. See volumes VIII and IX of his *Gesammelte Werke*. See, in particular, the fundamental essay *On the contribution of poetry to the search for truth* and *Who am I and who are you?* (in particular, the Epilogue to the Revised Edition). Vessey 2010 claims that a fundamental difference between the two lies in the fact that for Gadamer there is a prominence to poetry, while for Dewey no preeminence is given. However, I do not agree with Vessey's conclusion that this happens because for Dewey language is a mere tool.
41. See Dewey (1971 [1894]: 301-2).
42. I do not mean to claim that such distinction features in Gadamer as well. I just want to show that Dewey's distinction goes in the same direction as Gadamer's reassessment of the spectators' role in the constitution of the work of art.
43. See also Dewey (1925: 267ff.).
44. See the fundamental concept of the "principle of history of effect [*Wirkungsgeschichte*]," Gadamer (1989: 299ff.).
45. See Dewey (1987: 181-90).
46. More than for Gadamer, Dewey's philosophical intent is strictly and explicitly connected to the political claim of democracy: see, among others, Westbrook 1991 and Cometti 2016.
47. See George 2020.
48. This aspect clearly sets Gadamer apart from the implications of Heidegger's conception of art (think of Heidegger's reading of Hölderlin as a mystical and prophetic figure). See Heidegger 2000.
49. In this sense, both Gadamer and Dewey are distant from the "shamanic" tones of Heidegger's philosophy as well as from the nostalgic shades of critical theory.
50. For a philosophical reconsideration of "popular arts" see Shusterman 2000.

ABSTRACTS

In this paper I tackle Gadamer's and Dewey's conceptions of art, showing a possible dialogue between American Pragmatism and Gadamerian Hermeneutics. Despite the obvious differences, it is possible to show fundamental commonalities between the two philosophies when it comes to the role of art. They share the double goal of critiquing the aestheticism of modern age, the conception of art as a mere "art for art's sake," and of recomposing the continuity between aesthetic experience and everyday life. I argue that this common goal entails a reassessment of the relation between the work of art and the public, a reassessment that has fundamental consequences for the role of art in our societies. The present comparison will also help shed new light on Gadamer's conception, often accused of being a merely conservative theory. For both Gadamer and Dewey art does not consist in a product of the elites that is given to the spectators: rather, the spectators cooperate with the author in the creation and development of the work of art itself.

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