

THE EDUCATIONAL TURN AND BLACK MOUNTAIN COLLEGE – FROM AUTONOMOUS AESTHETIC TO THE FUNCTION OF AESTHETIC IN THE IDEA OF “LIFELONG LEARNING” OF MAN

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Abstract: *Black Mountain College was launched in atmosphere of decentralization of American educational system, developing liberal democratic education system and “lifelong learning” of man. In terms of curricula, that institution possessed all the qualities by which liberal arts colleges differed from other models of undergraduate education at the time. However, the primary specificity of Black Mountain in relation to other educational institutions of a liberal arts college type was emphasized by a special role of artistic work in the education of an individual and recognizing the specific nature of artistic experience in the development of receptive and experiential skills of man. The founders of the College took advantage of the reforms of the education system undertaken during the thirties of the twentieth century to launch an experimental curriculum in which the work in domains of different artistic media represented an equally important area of liberal arts in addition to science, history, philosophy and languages. When designing the goals and methods of the educational program, with an emphasis on the role of art in the “lifelong education” of man and almost a central function of artistic work Black Mountain’s founders looked to philosopher, a sociologist and a theorist of education John Dewey, author of *Democracy and Education* and *Art as Experience*. Dewey explicitly replaced the concept of art as the creation of objects intended for disinterested aesthetic enjoyment with the concept of art as a process where the means and the goal is the activity itself – acquisition and development of experience through the artistic work, which can then be applied in an encounter with other forms of human activity.*

Keywords: *liberal arts college, Black Mountain College, progressive education, John Dewey, “lifelong learning” of man, aesthetic experience*

Black Mountain College started operating in 1933 in the context of specific social and political situation. The situation of social life after the fall of the US stock market in 1928 and the crisis of the ruling political and economic establishment was marked by the Great Depression, and the nation as a whole responded positively to the reform ideas of the New Deal in all its segments. The New Deal was

designed as an American national government program of Franklin D. Roosevelt's administration. That program had an aim to establish economic and cultural reform and stability through a number of public works of various profiles under the auspices of the state in the period from 1933 to 1939. According to the plans of the New Deal, significant financial investment in the development of the culture of American society meant the first major investment of the US government in the domain of artistic work, education and employment of artists of different profiles. Numerous cultural programs of the government during the 1930s – Public Works of Art Project (1933–1934) or The Works Progress Administration (1935–1943) – were determined by an attitude that art should be associated with all aspects of daily lives of individuals. Until 1936, the results of government projects included around 2,500 murals painted on public buildings, about 180,000 paintings, 80,000 sculptures, 500,000 photos, some 40,000 employed composers, performers and actors, 2,000,000 public posters, 22,000 references published by the Index of American Design and establishing around a hundred art centers in 22 states.¹

An important feature of all government programs was related to the awakening of awareness of the role of art both as the foundation of the cultural heritage of a society and within the framework of the pursuit of establishing a democratically-oriented education system. In accordance with the democratic policy to create conditions for the fulfillment of liberal human rights, the New Deal reforms in terms of execution of reforms in the education system were based on the idea that education should be available to every individual. In relation to educational institutions such as liberal arts colleges, Black Mountain College being one of them, those reforms brought a reorganization of curricula and shortening of the duration of general education.

Unlike vocational or technical curricula that were characteristic of specialized programs of universities, liberal arts colleges were distinguished by curricula that aimed at imparting general knowledge and developing general intellectual capacities of an individual. That type of a reform of educational institutions in America already began in the mid-nineteenth century with gradual abandoning of strictly determined areas of study in favor of developing optional programs that secured a sufficient degree of maturity of students for the selection of fields in which they would improve their knowledge further.² Contemporary liberal skills included studies of literature, language, philosophy, history, mathematics and science. During the four-year education process, a student had a free choice

1 Pam Peckham: "Realism and Modernism", in: *Varieties of Modernism*, ed. Paul Wood. New Haven–London: Yale University Press, 1993, pp. 85–86.

2 Floyd W. Reeves: "The Liberal-Arts College", *The Journal of Higher Education* 7/1 (1930), pp. 373–383, here pp. 373–374.

between major and minor areas of study during the first two years of study, and then, students were required to define the direction of their two-year specialization within a college or another university. At the beginning of the twentieth century, that led to questioning the future survival of liberal arts colleges with regard to the fact that a large number of students used to leave those institutions after completing the second year and complete their education at universities with specialized programs.³ In that regard, discussions were initiated about the purpose of colleges within the American education system. The solution was found in shortening the duration of curricula to two or three years of education. That defined the role of liberal arts colleges in the direction of schools that offered general, preparatory education for the next, more advanced level of learning and specialization in the field of pedagogy, art or science. Given that the main educational objective of a liberal arts college was included in the transfer of general knowledge and the development of intellectual abilities of an individual, that type of an educational institution coincided with the requirements of liberal democratic goals at the time. With the implementation of the reform of the New Deal in the domain of educational institutions during the thirties of the twentieth century, the number of newly established liberal arts colleges grew. In addition to Black Mountain College, flexible and experimental curricula in higher education were to be found, for example, at Bennington College and Sarah Lawrence College, too.

DEMOCRACY AND EDUCATION / PROGRESSIVE EDUCATION

Within the reforms of the New Deal, curricula of liberal arts colleges were restructured based on the ideas of *progressive education movement*. Those ideas involved the view that an individual achieved the best results in education when learning took place through daily activities in a community with other individuals. Progressive education implied: emphasis on learning by practical doing; insisting on critical thinking and effective problem solving; group work and developing social skills; developing the ability of understanding and taking practical actions as learning objectives as opposed to passive acquisition of knowledge; collaborative and cooperative learning processes; education aimed at social responsibility and democracy; integration of social instances and instances of the educational project in everyday life experience of an individual.⁴ Progressive education ideas were developed on the basis of the democratic philosophy of education, which

3 Ibid, p. 375.

4 See C. A. Bowers: *The progressive educator and the depression: The radical years*. New York: Random House, 1969.

was formulated and presented in 1916 in the study *Democracy and Education* by an American philosopher of pragmatism, a sociologist and a theorist of education John Dewey.⁵ He based his explications on the theses that education and learning are social and interactive processes of a society, and that school is, therefore, an important potential institution of implementing social reforms in the direction of a democratic society.

Dewey defined his work as “the philosophy stated in this book connects the growth of democracy with the development of the experimental method in the sciences, evolutionary ideas in the biological sciences, and the industrial reorganization, and is concerned to point out the changes in subject matter and method of education indicated by these developments”.⁶ Those changes were supposed to eliminate the risk of creating a gap between the experience gained through direct human relations and the experience acquired at school. “This danger was never greater than at the present time, on account of the rapid growth in the last few centuries of knowledge and technical modes of skill”.⁷ It was necessary to link knowledge acquisition to work or occupations in daily communal life. School had to be reformed to form a small community and establish a direct connection with other forms of experience gaining outside institutions of the educational system.

The significance of Dewey’s philosophy for the development of democratic ideals was contained in conceptualizing the differences between the traditional concept of education as an area of passive acquisition of knowledge and democratically determined education that took place as a process of an individual learning how to live and cope in everyday life. In that regard, Dewey conceptualized education not as the adoption of curriculum prescribed skills, but as encouraging the development of overall potentials and abilities of an individual, which then would be used for the realization of general wellbeing of a society. Education was seen as the means to spread democracy among all social classes. It was supposed to be different from the traditional school system which was based on the socio-economic differentiation. New education was supposed to offer equal opportunities to all individuals within a community where knowledge was acquired.

As the key methodological tool in learning Dewey singled out the development of *experience* through a direct relationship with the environment in which an individual is, as opposed to the passive acquisition of knowledge mediated by stating opinions only. Education of an individual meant development and improvement of

5 John Dewey: *Democracy and education. An introduction to the philosophy of education*. New York: The Macmillan Company, 1916.

6 Ibid, p. v.

7 Ibid, p. 11.

human experience and their receptive capacities in relation to the environment in which their life took place. Developing personal characteristics of an individual and improving skills that he wanted to develop, it was possible to achieve desired progress in education because it was diversity only that allowed for changes and progress of a democratic society. “It would be impossible to find a deeper sense of the function of education in discovering and developing personal capacities, and training them so that they would connect with the activities of others”.⁸ In that way, education of an individual in the direction of professional training for quality performance of certain tasks was replaced by the idea of “lifelong learning” of man.

BLACK MOUNTAIN COLLEGE / IN THE EDUCATIONAL SYSTEM

Black Mountain College was launched in the described atmosphere of decentralization of American educational system, developing liberal democratic education system and “lifelong learning” of man. In terms of curricula, that institution possessed all the qualities by which liberal arts colleges differed from other models of undergraduate education at the time. Acquiring general knowledge included a two-year study of the liberal arts, after which students opted for the basic area of study, so their undergraduate education usually ended up at one of the universities. By the appropriate development of internal relationships of members of the community and the environment in which learning took place, the College provided an atmosphere of working together as a necessary condition for the implementation of appropriate democratic education. “the very process of living together educates. It enlarges and enlightens experience; it stimulates and enriches imagination; it creates responsibility for accuracy and vividness of statement and thought”.⁹

However, the primary specificity of Black Mountain in relation to other educational institutions of a liberal arts college type was emphasized by a special *role of artistic work* in the education of an individual and recognizing the specific nature of *artistic experience in the development of receptive and experiential skills of man*. The founders of the College took advantage of the reforms of the education system undertaken during the 1930s to launch an experimental curriculum in which the work in domains of different artistic media represented an equally important area of liberal arts in addition to science, history, philosophy and languages. While in the school curricula of liberal arts colleges art was largely present as an extra-

8 Ibid, p. 104.

9 Ibid, p. 7.

curricular activity for which students did not get any credits, in the curriculum of Black Mountain art courses had the same significance in relation to other subjects and were presented to students as the most important courses. “As an inevitable result of this point of view, Dramatics, Music, and the Fine Arts, which often exist precariously on the fringes of the curriculum, are regarded as an integral part of the life of the College and of importance equal to that of the subjects that usually occupy the center of the curriculum. In fact, in the early part of the student’s career, they are considered of greater importance; because, in the first place, they are, when properly employed, least subject to direction from without and yet have within theme a severe discipline of their own; and also because of the conviction that, through some kind of art-experience, which is not necessarily the same as self-expression, the student can come to the realization of order in the world; and, by being sensitized to movement, form, sound, and the other media of the arts, gets a firmer control of himself and his environment than is possible through purely intellectual effort. This is a theory, but a theory which has met the test of experience. It has already been shown to the satisfaction of those who have had a share in it that the direct result of the discipline of the arts is to give tone and quality to intellectual discipline”.¹⁰

When designing the goals and methods of the educational program, with an emphasis on the role of art in the “lifelong education” of man and almost a central function of artistic work “Black Mountain’s founders looked to John Dewey, author of *Democracy and Education*, who wrote that to develop one’s creative abilities was ‘an inalienable right’. In *Harper’s Magazine* in May, 1937, Rice explained his theory that the arts ought to be an educational activity rather than simply a subject of study: ‘What you do with what you know is the important thing. To know is not enough’”.¹¹ However, it seems that in determining the goals and work of Black Mountain the founders of the College found Dewey’s philosophical work *Art as Experience*¹² to be equally important as his study *Democracy and Education*.

ART AS EXPERIENCE

In fact, the study *Art as Experience* acted as a fundamental philosophical reference in regard to which not only the founders of the College but also many artists within

10 Anonym.: “Black Mountain College. A foreword. Reprinted from the First Catalogue, 1933”, p. 4, <http://blackmountaincollegeproject.org/PUBLICATIONS/CATALOGUES/1933%201934%20BMC%20A%20FOREWARD/1933%201934%20BMC%20A%20FOREWARD.htm> (24.3.2017).

11 See Rachel Galvin: “Wild intellectuals and exotic folks”, *Humanities*, 22/4 (2001), pp. 12–18, here p. 14.

12 John Dewey: *Art as experience*. New York: Perigee Books, 1980.

Black Mountain and the wider artistic scene of America developed their poetic ideas. Thus, for example, Holger Cahill, the head of the Federal Art Project of the US government,¹³ said in his speech at the celebration of the eightieth birthday of Dewey in 1939 that behind the practical results of the Federal Art Project there was a hidden idea that man was encouraged to participate in the experience of art with all their resources.¹⁴ Such a goal resulted in the rejection of Western European concept of art as an archive of outstanding masterpieces and the idea of *l'art pour l'art* in favor of artistic work that contributes to the overall social welfare. The thesis of John Dewey that life in all its aspects is an active process, when applied to art, resulted in the statement that the aesthetic experience is always an act of the campaign in which disinterested contemplation plays a very small role. Passive contemplation of a work of art was replaced by the idea of artistic work as a means of establishing an active perceptive relationship of man to the environment.

Dewey sought to show that different forms of human activities are always subject to the same process of cognition, as each form of human experience develops through a process of relations that are established between environment and human consciousness. The process of establishing those relations was marked by constant tensions, which, according to Dewey's opinion, are mastered and reflected best in the process of artistic work.¹⁵ The artistic work is *par excellence* the process of overcoming tensions that are established between an individual and their environment, and a piece of art is a result of man's experience and ability to build relationships to the perception of reality. A work of art is a product of the artistic work as the activation of all experiential skills of an individual. In that sense, Dewey argued that the boundaries of different media and art disciplines were artificially established, and that the synthesis of simultaneous operations in different artistic media – as opposed to the modernist specialization of vision or hearing – is closer to everyday life experience which requires activation of all human senses. Dewey noted that novelties in the conceptualization of aesthetic experience would cause many technical problems to artists, because art would

13 Federal art project (1935–1943) was an integral part of the Works Progress Administration (WPA), which, apart from the Federal Art Project, included special sectors for the development of music, theater, literature and preserving artistic and historical heritage. Each sector was managed by one director and a year after the first meeting of directors, more than 40,000 artists and cultural workers were employed across the United States of America. Cf. Don Adams and Arlene Goldbard: "New deal cultural programs: Experiments in cultural democracy", <http://www.wvcd.org/policy/US/newdeal.html#FAP> (24.3.2017).

14 Holger Cahill: "American resources in the arts", in: *Art for the millions: Essays from the 1930s by artists and administrators of the WPA Federal art project*, ed. Francis V. O'Connor. Greenwich, CT: New York Graphic Society, 1974, p. 33.

15 Dewey: *Art as experience*, pp. 15–16.

stem from the need for new experiential models.¹⁶ In that regard, Dewey pointed to the artificial separation of art from nature and from everyday human experience and work, as well as the axiology of art being conditioned by class struggle. He pointed out that the strengthening of the capitalist social order had a big impact on the development of museums as centers for corresponding works of art, which promoted the idea that art was something different from everyday life experience. Storing artifacts in isolated spaces of museums and private collections outside the course of everyday human life meant that objects which had been valuable and important in the past because of their role in the life of a community, would be isolated in that way from the original terms of their existence. “The *nouveaux riches*, who are an important byproduct of the capitalist system, have felt especially bound to surround themselves with works of fine art which, being rare, are also costly. Generally speaking, the typical collector is the typical capitalist. For evidence of good standing in the realm of higher culture, he amasses paintings, statuary, and artistic *bijoux*, as his stocks and bonds certify to his standing in the economic world”.¹⁷

Circumstances that led to the “gap” between the subject creating art and the recipient consuming art during the development of modern civilization also contributed to the establishment of artificial differences between everyday life experience and experience acquired by artistic work. Dewey explicitly replaced the concept of art as the creation of objects intended for disinterested aesthetic enjoyment with the concept of art as a process where the means and the goal is the activity itself – acquisition and development of experience through artistic work, which can then be applied in an encounter with other forms of human activity. “When artistic objects are separated from both conditions of origin and operation in experience, a wall is built around them that renders almost opaque their general significance, with which esthetic theory deals. Art is remitted to a separate realm, where it is cut off from that association with the materials and aims of every other form of human effort, undergoing, and achievement. [...] This task is to restore continuity between the refined and intensified forms of experience that are works of art and the everyday events, doings, and sufferings that are universally recognized to constitute experience”.¹⁸

Dewey determined the aesthetic experience *as the primary phase of human experience* distinguishing aesthetic as an integral part of everyday life, on the one hand, and traditional, high-modernist aesthetic as disinterested enjoyment

16 Ibid, p. 141.

17 Ibid, p. 8.

18 Ibid, p. 3.

compared to an integrated piece of art, on the other hand. “The material of esthetic experience in being human – human in connection with the nature of which it is a part – is social. Esthetic experience is a manifestation, a record and celebration of the life of a civilization, a means of promoting its development, and is also the ultimate judgment upon the quality of a civilization”.¹⁹ If artistic work is an activity which integrates and drives all possible aspects of the establishment of man’s relationship to reality – doing, feeling and thinking – then, the characteristics of aesthetic experience can be seen in everyday forms of human experience which involve activation of all aspects of human personality regardless of whether those experiences are of moral, political or practical nature. Artistic work is an evidence that man uses natural materials and energy in order to expand boundaries of their own lives. He does so in accordance with his organism which involves activities of the brain, sensory organs and muscle system, thus proving that man is capable of consciously turning back to the unity of nature – community of feelings, needs and actions as a feature of living beings. This means that artistic work accumulates in the most direct possible way what is fundamental to nature and different forms of life experience, which were traditionally understood as an independent field of human activity.²⁰ By that Dewey drew a distinction between the *primary aesthetic and artistic aesthetic*. While primarily aesthetic is the initial stage of everyday human experience, which involves activation of all sensory domains of man’s manifestation of relationships to the world of – the interaction of action, feelings and thinking, artistic aesthetic means the intentional development of primary aesthetic through artistic work in order to improve receptive capabilities of an individual. That led to ‘abandoning’ of a high-modernist paradigm of aesthetic experience as an experience of a special sort which came from a sensory, disinterested meeting between a recipient and artifacts as a result of the non-utilitarian human action. There was a turn in understanding the experience gained in everyday activities and the experience gained through artistic action, they became balanced and their differences were mutually annulled.

By conceptualizing aesthetic as only one segment of everyday life experience it was possible to attach artistic value to any subject or activity, even to life itself. At the same time, it was possible to establish a new practice of life which was based on artistic work and which, therefore, represented an alternative to the former receptive abilities and aspects of man’s relationship to the surrounding world. That was another step which undermined western high-modernist paradigm of art as something other and artificial to what was created by the work of nature. According

19 Ibid., p. 326.

20 Ibid., 57.

to Dewey, art is not inserted in relation to the natural experience; it is only development of a natural and spontaneous phase of everyday human experience. "There are substantially but two alternatives. Either art is a continuation, by means of intelligent selection and arrangement, of natural tendencies of natural events; or art is a peculiar addition to nature springing from something dwelling exclusively within the breast of man, whatever name be given the latter. In the former case, delightfully enhanced perception or esthetic appreciation is of the same nature as enjoyment of any object that is consummatory. It is the outcome of a skilled and intelligent art of dealing with natural things for the sake of intensifying, purifying, prolonging and deepening the satisfactions which they spontaneously afford."²¹

The essence of Dewey's interpretation of the role of aesthetic experience in the development of human perceptual abilities did not imply the idea of conducting a comprehensive aesthetization of reality, because aesthetic was seen as an integral phase of the process for any human experiences. Dewey's philosophy of art and theory of aesthetic experience was developed in the framework of the philosophy of pragmatism and education as his primary fields of interest. That philosopher interpreted artistic aesthetic experience, or the experience of artistic work as directly related to the educational potential of that experience, i.e. as a means of achieving improvement of man's everyday encounters with the world. The fundamental characteristic of art is not contained in the material existence of art, in the object of art as an integral piece, but the essence of artistic work is found in *developing experience through the creation of artistic material*. Experience is the process by which an individual establishes their relationships with the surrounding environment, it significantly affects the quality of life, so improving the experience is fundamental to the development and education of an individual, and their encounters with everyday life practices. In this way, the focus was shifted from aesthetic experience based on finished works of art to the aesthetic experience that was achieved during *the process of artistic work*, through the very process of artistic activity. Unlike the traditional understanding of the recipient as a passive entity developing disinterested aesthetic enjoyment in relation to a work of art, Dewey emphasized the state of an individual who takes part in the art-making process and, thus, improves their daily life experience. In other words, the boundaries of the West European-oriented paradigm of Kantian aesthetics were disturbed by displacing art from the field of exceptional human activities to the space of everyday life experience.

21 John Dewey: *Experience and nature*. New York: Dover Publications, 1958, p. 389.



Reflecting Dewey's ideas in many ways, the practice of Black Mountain was special in the way that the social life inside the College was directed towards developing creative potentials of each and every individual, with a significant base in artistic work. In that way, everyday work was turned into artistic work and vice versa. That led to the crossing of boundaries and division of work in culture and art that had the significance of an avant-garde novelty. Still, the work of the College did not have the idea of a utopian society as the practice of education within the College was offered as an existing part of an already existing democratic platform which offered an individual a possibility to exercise their liberal rights inside a given society. In accordance with Dewey's ideas, the basic postulates of the College program were: functionalizing of artistic experience while studying other disciplines; the values of experimental learning; development of inter-disciplinary artistic work with undermining of traditional modernist boundaries of media and disciplines of art; the practice of democratic rule of staff and students; relocating learning environment outside classrooms; eliminating control and monitoring of the 'outside' subjects that supported the College financially.

By the new system of education that allocated the key role to artistic work, the practice of Black Mountain challenged the whole western aesthetics, comprehension of art and artistic criteria in modern West-European society. Artists were not just engaged in producing finalized works of art, but they also expressed themselves through processes of doing and challenging current issues of art being a social category and its role in education. The activity of Black Mountain was established as one of the possible contexts of creating material establishment by which the American society of the Great Depression and the New Deal was realized and recognized as a specific liberal democratic society. The work of the College turned out to be a representative area of the turn from art as an autonomous social practice to artistic action as the means of building the American democratic political and educational identity.

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