

*Art of Thing; Thing of Art*  
Aesthetic Transaction and Answerability

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## **Abstract**

Art of Thing; Thing of Art: Aesthetic Transaction and Answerability

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This work's theoretical exploration delves into the varied meanings and implications of aesthetics, transactions, and answerability, drawing heavily on the theories of John Dewey, Mikhail Bakhtin, and Louise Rosenblatt. It synthesizes their contributions to understand how experiences shape and are shaped by transactions with the environment. The analysis is organized into chapters that examine texts and reflect on practices in writing and teaching, connecting these activities to the central themes.

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## **Dedication**

For Mark

## **An Introduction**

A few years ago, standing by the meat counter at a local grocery store, I was startled by an unfamiliar hand on my shoulder. I distinctly remember feeling terrified — an intense instinctual fear that, on ordinary days, goes unnoticed. A million questions ran through my mind, like where is the nearest exit? Should I scream? Do I make a run for it?! Then I turned around.

Standing next to the top round steaks was a woman with kind eyes on the verge of tears. “Do you write stories on grief in that magazine?” she asked. But before I could answer, she let her floodgates open. She went on to tell me about a group of women who read my monthly magazine columns about grief together. It was a bereavement group made up primarily of young widows who, by societal standards, were too young to have such a devastating mark in their history. Then, she raised the stakes.

A member of this precious group, already connected by loss and tragedy, became gravely ill with a fatal diagnosis. When she had to move to a Boston hospice to die near her family, the group started a new tradition of clipping my articles and mailing them to her with handwritten notes. I was floored.

After some camaraderie about our daily heartbreaks, we took a selfie amid various beef cuts and parted ways. But I couldn't gather my thoughts or emotions to continue shopping, so I dropped my basket and left the store. In a daze, unable to fathom the immensity of what had just happened, I walked into the mean streets of Manhattan and continued to walk for hours. The moment has never left me since - a distinct and lovely scar in my historical DNA as a writer.



Now, you might be thinking I must have written some wonderfully poignant and spiritually insightful features — a how-to guide on transforming yourself from a down-and-out widow to a wise and graceful swan of a woman, someone like Jackie O. or Coretta Scott King. Well, I didn't. I wrote about just the opposite, the *uglies*. I did a series on the financial blows of your partner dying and how much it sucked going from a two-income house to one, especially if you were the one that made significantly less. I also did a feature on online dating and how I kept getting ghosted after they found out I was a widow. But most letters to the editor came in after I wrote about getting fat because I was eating too much and too often to cope with the fact that I was so damn sad one hundred percent of the time. Essentially, I wrote about the not-so-pleasant experience of re-entering the world after the worst personal catastrophe of my life. But with humor and a healthy dose of hope, which I suppose was always the point.

I share this life *thing* because it is central to this work, and with it, I would become a scholar and theorist. The rawness of those times compelled me to examine how personal narratives intersect with broader social currents—the invisible strings that hold us together—that were previously invisible to me. This realization led me to academia, where I could explore deeper into the connections between personal experience and cultural discourse. How did my reader and I find each other?

Dewey (1934) wrote, "Words furnish a record of what has happened and give direction by request and command to a particular future action" (p. 359). The passage is not only remarkably hopeful but distinctly instructive. Dewey suggests that creating meaning and expressions goes beyond documenting past events or replaying happenings. The narratives and stories people create in their minds influence their

future choices and behaviors – the things they do in the world. Thus, each internal narrative has the potential to change and transform personal lives, acting as an instrument and agency in shaping future realities and environments.

My unexpected encounter by beef steaks, far from being an anecdote, emerges as a testament to the force of shared experience and the unspoken bonds it might and can create, even amongst strangers. The story, rooted in the two women's unabashed recounting of grief, loss, and the clumsy, painful process of healing, illustrates the essence of *Art of Thing; Thing of Art: Aesthetic Transaction and Answerability*. It highlights the belief that our lives, with all their messiness, sadness, and moments of humor and happiness, are not just personal journeys but shared narratives, our greatest works of art, resonating with others in unexpected ways when we make the artistic choice to share them. This work explores the entanglements of experience, relationships, and the mutual pursuit of meaning-making as the art of the things we do and the world's response to us.

### ***Art of Thing; Thing of Art***

I am a writer. Writing is the steady *thing* that holds my daily life together. I would be utterly lost without it. I don't identify as a writer because I am a skilled writer, but I consider myself a writer because I care deeply about all aspects of writing. From overcoming my often terrible writing to teaching writing at a college, my daily activities are riddled with caring about my and other people's writing. Hence, writing is my *thing*, and I think and do my *thing* every day.

There are all kinds of reasons why I use the word *thing* to describe one of the most important aspects of my life. By definition, a thing can mean anything that one

need not, cannot, or does not wish to give a specific name to. A thing is everything you need it to be or nothing at all. Think about a *thing*. A thing can be used to reference an unseen dangerous being like in movies or an emotional connection that's more than a friendship but not quite entirely romantic. That's the thing about a thing; the possibilities are infinite and leave much space for interpretation, personalization, and meaning making.

Now, consider the phrase, "She's doing her thing." Far from just acknowledging an activity or a task, the well-known and often-used expression can also subtly capture a person's idiosyncrasies, quirky habits, and creative passions. One can even say the phrase is entangled with the person's identity. Take, for example: "Claudia's doing her thing." The simple line conveys more than writing but also includes my distinctive style, genre, and the themes that permeate my work – the *thingness* or the relationship I have with my writing. Essentially, my thing is a fundamental part of who I am as it embodies my essence.

Writing shapes how I engage with the world and express myself within it. I pour every aspect of my being—my personality, my past, and my aspirations—into my work, developing a unique *thingness* that defines it. Thus, "doing my thing" transcends the action of writing, the essence becoming a vibrant and colorful form of personal expression that continually shapes and reshapes my identity, my involvement, and my way of creating meaning in the world. The art of doing a *thing* transforms into an ongoing journey of self-discovery and evolution through constant engagement with my work—the art of *thing*.

There is another line by Dewey (1934) that strikes a deep chord with me when I think of my meat counter moment: “The past is carried into the present to expand and deepen the content of the latter” (p. 24). I love this line because it tells me that our encounters and responses to life situations are a culmination of everything that has happened so far. In other words, experiences are not isolated incidents but part of a continuous flow, as the past constantly informs and shapes our present experiences. The past colors in our current moments and paves for future encounters. *Nothing is wasted in the experiential economy.*

Dewey's theory suggests that every experience, no matter how trivial it may seem, contributes to the complexity and depth of a person's current self, as he posits that each lived moment serves as a valuable piece in constructing one's present identity. The perspective redeems even mundane or difficult experiences, presenting them as essential elements of one's broader meaning-making framework. According to Dewey, past experiences are not historical relics but are integrated, shaping current perceptions, choices, and actions. The loveliness of this idea lies in its assurance that every previous action, thought, and moment serves as a resource that enriches the path forward and leads to more informed and nuanced future transactions and experiences.

When exploring how experiences build upon each other, I always draw a parallel to Claude Monet's painting technique. At first glance, each of Monet's brushstrokes—small, precise, and distinct—might seem like a minor detail. Yet, each stroke is essential to the overall impact of his paintings. His method demonstrates how individual elements, even those that might appear chaotic or weird up close, coalesce into a coherent and beautiful whole from a distance. The aggregation of strokes creates a

stunning landscape, with every mark playing a vital role in the overall masterpiece. Thus, Monet's approach to painting, both literally and metaphorically, involved crafting his work of art one brushstroke at a time, illustrating how separate parts contribute to a greater whole.

Dewey (1934) also theorized, "Through habits formed in intercourse with the world, we also in-habit the world. It becomes a *home*, and the home is part of our every experience" (p. 108). His play on the words "inhabit" and "in-habit" is significant here: through the habitual things we do, we come to inhabit the world, which means that our habitual doings are much more than doing as they are a means of integrating ourselves into the world (inhabit). Our repeated actions and routines actively construct the world in which we live. In this way, our habits not only influence our experience of the world but also shape how the world presents itself to us. The relationship between habit and inhabit is *reciprocal* as our habits shape our environment, and our environment, in turn, influences our habits. It's the art of the things we do (art of thing) and the things that art does to us (thing of art). The notion clarifies why I habitually write. Writing serves as my means of engaging with the world and integrating my experiences, thoughts, and emotions into a cohesive framework. Through writing, I continuously construct and inhabit my reality, making sense of my place in the world and allowing my environment to shape my understanding and expression.

Dewey's (1934) theorization of "home" is significant here, as "inhabit" refers not only to residing in the world but also to the subtle process by which the world becomes integrated into one's being through regular engagement (p. 108). He explains that the world transforms into a *home* beyond the physical notion of a dwelling, evolving into a

personal, comfortable space shaped by individual routines and habits. These habits embed the world into a person's psyche, personalizing and internalizing their environment and transforming it into a space where they are both creators and inhabitants.

To clarify, while Dewey (1934) distinguishes between "art products" and works of art in daily life, he strongly maintains that the boundaries between art products and everyday aesthetic things and experiences are fluid and continually intersect (p.1). Dewey observes that art products crafted by artists convert everyday materials into expressive media through skilled craftsmanship. But he also acknowledges the aesthetic value in everyday things, activities, and events that are embedded into daily routines, serving practical purposes while delivering aesthetic experiences.

A central challenge in the philosophy of aesthetics, as articulated by Dewey (1934), 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" (p.2). Essentially, the traditional binary categorization of what constitutes art and what does not is challenged by the reality that aesthetic experiences and everyday experiences are intensely connected and overlap. Dewey proposes that by recognizing the aesthetic aspects of everyday life and acknowledging their shared qualities with formal art, the boundaries between what is and isn't considered art can be blurred. Thus, central to Dewey's aesthetic theory and throughout this work is the notion that the relationships between people and their environments can transform any *thing* into art and works of art. It's a matter of perspective.

Mikhail Bakhtin (1990) also explores the idea of home as integrating oneself into the world of others to achieve a deeper and more nuanced understanding of existence. He suggests that one must "feel at home in the world of other people," meaning that one must become comfortable and familiar with the perspectives, experiences, and contexts of others (p.111). It's about moving beyond one's isolated viewpoint and embracing the diversity of human experiences. Initially, people may focus on "confession—to objective aesthetic contemplation," expressing their inner thoughts and struggles (p.111). And yet, the process of self-expression should eventually lead to a greater engagement with the world outside oneself, fostering a reciprocal exchange of ideas, understanding, and meaning making. By doing so, people can cultivate a richer, more inclusive sense of self that is connected to the broader essence of human experience and life. Bakhtin also argues that, instead of constantly engaging in "questions about meaning and searching for meaning," one can start to see the world "as a beautiful given" (p.111). The transition signifies a move towards acceptance and appreciation of the world as it is rather than fixating on uncovering hidden meanings.

While not immediately apparent, Bakhtin's theorization connects to Dewey's concept of home because both emphasize the importance of habitual actions and transactional relationships in shaping one's experience of the world. Dewey highlights how people's habits and routines allow them to in-habit the world, making it a home. Bakhtin, on the other hand, highlights the need to feel at home in the diverse world of others to fully appreciate its beauty. Both perspectives emphasize that environment and experiences are intensely interconnected with the sense of self and the understanding

of the world. In this respect, the theory of aesthetic transactions and answerability is an exploration and study of *home*—the continuous transaction, experience, meaning-making, and response between people and their internal and external environmental spaces.

Sara Ahmed (2010) theorizes how transactions with things in the environment are greatly entwined with emotions and meanings, noting, "We are moved by things. And in being moved, we make things" (p.33). The relationship indicates that things influence emotions, and conversely, emotional responses help shape perceptions, transactions, and the creation of meaning with these items, suggesting that the *thingness* of things is anchored in the very transactions that connect individuals to them. Ahmed observes that the emotional impact of things heavily relies on their context—where they are located and when they appear. Expanding on this, she explains that emotional engagement with things extends beyond the items themselves to include their surroundings and histories, emphasizing, "To experience an object as being affective or sensational is to be directed not only toward an object but to 'whatever' is around that object" (p.33). The perspective demonstrates that the essence of things is dynamic and continuously shaped by the interplay of emotions, context, and transactions. Through these complex networks of relationships and associations, things gain significance and affective value, reshaping the understanding of how individuals connect with the world around them. It's the *thing* of art.

### ***The Four Main Theorists at the Discussion Table***

I have brought to the discussion table the previously mentioned Dewey, Bakhtin, and Ahmed, along with the newly added Louise Rosenblatt. Each offers unique



perspectives and theories on experiences and the creation of meaning. Despite their varied theoretical orientations, all four scholars emphasize the significance of relational transactions between people, their contextual environments, and the meaning-making framework.

As noted, Dewey (1934) theorized the intersectional relationship between individuals and their environments, emphasizing the intricate, web-like relationships that define both personal and collective experiences. Dewey's focus centers on these interwoven occurrences, which are characterized not by linearity but by the connectedness of actions and their consequences—what he terms the intersection of "doing" and "undergoing." The notion highlights the reciprocal nature of experiences with surroundings. Dewey writes, "An experience has pattern and structure because it is not just doing and undergoing in alternation but consists of them in a relationship" (p. 45). The idea posits that experiences are embedded and integrated, where the act of doing and the impact of these actions (undergoing) are tightly interlinked, culminating in a unified experience. The essential aspect here is their interconnection, ensuring that no experience is arbitrary or isolated, but a structured thing shaped by the ongoing relationship between a person's actions and the environment's responses. The continuous and evolving relationship creates discernible patterns and structures within experiences, endowing them with meaning.

Dewey uses the example of placing one's hand in a fire to illustrate a point about experience. Simply touching the fire does not complete the experience because the action and its consequences must be perceptually linked, indicating that an experience transcends a physical response, such as feeling the fire's heat. It involves the mental

processes of recognizing, processing, and understanding the relationship between the action and its painful results. Without integrating sensory perception, recognition, and understanding, the event of touching the fire remains fragmented and cannot be considered a complete experience.

Bakhtin (1990) contributes the aspects of other people to the experiential meaning-making theoretical framework, and I found his analysis of "urgency" incredibly clarifying (p. 70). Bakhtin theorized how "urgent" situations or tasks immediately captivate people's attention due to their perceived importance. Yet, the initial sense of urgency often starkly contrasts with the more subtle, deeper influences of the "otherness" within individuals—those profound elements that may not demand immediate attention but significantly shape people's perspectives, responses, and overall meaning-making (p.159). For instance, consider a writer who responds rapidly to a deadline. The urgent task, demanding immediate focus and action, obscures deeper, more enduring issues such as job satisfaction or career alignment, which significantly affect long-term professional behavior and decisions. These underlying elements, though not prompting immediate reactions, are essential in shaping an individual's attitude and approach to their work and career choices. Bakhtin's observation suggests that while urgent situations capture our immediate attention, they often act as a veil over more significant social influences—the strong undercurrents and power drivers of people's actions.

Here, Bakhtin (1990) uses the term "otherness" to describe the complex amalgam of values, norms, and perspectives that individuals incorporate through their relationships with others. He contends that these embedded elements influence

thoughts and actions. According to Bakhtin, choices are significantly shaped by the "valued being of otherness," which melds the voices and perspectives of others into one's own (p. 159). The integration highlights how reactions or answers to the environment and the external influences on decisions reveal a fundamental interconnectedness in experiences. Rather than navigating life in isolation, people are entangled in a complex web of relationships and cultural contexts. The interconnectedness means that actions often reflect a broader social dialogue, where external voices and values significantly impact and continually reshape perceptions and actions. Bakhtin posits that these transactional relationships create an intricate network of influences, intertwining personal agency with societal forces, thus molding perceptions and meaning-making frameworks.

Additionally, Bakhtin's exploration of answerability highlights the accountability people have in their responses, which are not just personal expressions but are shaped by external factors such as the voices, values, and experiences of others that individuals internalize. The perspective highlights how individuals are deeply interconnected with their social surroundings, influencing and being influenced by them. Each response is a personal expression as well as a reflection of broader social relationships and cultural dialogues. The connection points to the responsibility people carry in their transactions and responses, positioning them as active participants in a web of social transactions and cultural influences. Therefore, every act of response embodies both personal agency and shared experience.

To deepen the exploration of relationships, experiences, and meaning-making, I am incorporating Rosenblatt, who offers a nuanced theory on the depth of transactional

relationships essential to meaning-making. Her analysis emphasizes that transactions, or interpenetrating exchanges of meaning, are fundamental to these frameworks. Her theories include distinctions between aesthetic and efferent transactions and their interrelation on a continuum. Aesthetic transactions involve a more immersive, personal engagement with a text, focusing on the lived experience and emotional response of the reader. In contrast, efferent transactions are oriented toward extracting information and practical application from the text. The continuum suggests that these modes of reading are not mutually exclusive but are interlaced, with readers often subtly shifting between aesthetic and efferent stances.

Rosenblatt (1978) presents the multifaceted nature of meaning-making, illustrating how people construct meaning through a blend of personal emotional engagement and practical, analytical thinking. She also notes that "the transactional view of the reading act is simply an exemplification, with highly rarefied complications, of the basic transactional character of all human activity" (p. 20). Essentially, Rosenblatt views reading as a microcosm of all human transactions, where the exchange between reader and text reflects the intricate happenings that define most daily human activities. Therefore, the act of reading mirrors the broader complexities of human experience, demonstrating how meaning is continually negotiated and co-created through these ongoing transactions.

Further, Rosenblatt (1978) defines the "poem" beyond the literary genre and views it as a real-time unfoldment – a "coming-together" or "co-penetration"—between a reader and a text – an aspect of aesthetic transactions that manifest as the transactional event unfolds (p.12). In this respect, the poem represents a transition from

a tangible "thing" to "thingness" — the lived experience that gives rise to "a new order, a new experience" (p. 12). Thus, the essence of the poem lies in the experiential bond between the reader and the text, highlighting the energetic nature of meaning-making. The "new order" represents a fresh, personalized arrangement of thoughts and emotions contributed by the person to the transaction. In contrast, the "new experience" signifies that each encounter is distinct and original, not a repetition of what has come before.

As a writer, I find myself drawn to Rosenblatt's (1988) concept of the poem as thingness, especially her theorization of "live ideas" (p.10). She explains, "For the writer, faced with a blank page, the need for live ideas — i.e., ideas having a strongly energizing linkage with an experiential base — is even greater" (p. 10). Blank pages and screens are my least favorite things, so I always prewrite by doodling and scribbling the day before, planting the seeds for these live ideas. Essentially, I dip my toe in. But once I finally dive in, the live idea (or poem) manifests in real-time, injecting vitality and relevance into my writing. To me, live ideas serve as bridges between abstract thingness and vivid, tangible thing. I bring this up because creative expression is an essential aspect of meaning-making, continuing the cycle of reciprocity and engagement with the world around us, creating meaning as we go. The notion is significant to the theory of aesthetic transaction and answerability as it emphasizes the active and responsive relationship between the creator and their environment.

Ahmed (2017) brings the principles of aesthetic transaction and answerability into real-world environmental scenarios, stressing the necessity of both internal and external responsive engagement. Her notion of "sweaty concepts" bridges the gap between the

physical body and abstract occurrences that may not be visible or audible but are intensely felt and often destabilizing experiences (p. 12). In her descriptive work using these concepts, Ahmed articulates two main ideas. First, she disputes the notion that conceptual work is distinct from describing real-life situations, viewing situations as inherently demanding a response that encompasses immediate circumstances and significant events. Second, by employing "sweaty concepts," Ahmed highlights that intellectual and emotional engagements with these scenarios are entangled with all kinds of things and essential for deep reflection, analysis, and answerability.

Essentially, Ahmed argues that intellectual and emotional reactions are not just academic exercises but are significant, lived experiences that require active transactions and experiences with the world. The method dissolves the traditional boundaries between the thinker and the thought, the observer and the observed, placing the creation of knowledge and meaning making within the context of lived experience.

### ***Recurring Questions, Curiosities, and Wonderings In this Work***

From this brief framework, I'd like to discuss some of the recurring questions and curiosities that permeate this work. Some staple inquiries are related to the origin of inspiration and the creative impulse. What ignites the desire to create, and how are these sparks related to our past experiences and future aspirations? Additionally, I explore how responses to external environments and life events encapsulate the cumulative nature of our experiences. The discussion also extends to the impact of the intersections between individual agency and cultural forces on our personal experiences and reactions. How do interactions with others influence our ways of understanding and

engaging with the world, and how do these interactions contribute to a collective process of meaning-making? By examining these dynamics, the conversation opens up to consider how cultural, social, and personal factors intertwine to influence our creative outputs and the ways in which we interpret and react to the world around us. Each of these aspects highlights the intricate web of influences that mold perceptions and actions, demonstrating the depth and breadth of the continuous dialogue between the individual and the collective in shaping experience and creating meaning.

Additionally, I examine the role of creative expression as a component of meaning-making, considering its impact both on self-understanding and on engagement with the broader world. How does personal creative expression aid in our understanding of ourselves and our role within the wider context? How does it foster a deeper connection with our surroundings and enhance our capacity to create and decode meanings? By probing these questions, I aim to uncover the complex ways in which individual and collective narratives are interwoven, perpetuating the cycle of experiences and the continuous process of meaning-making and responding. Moreover, at the core of this exploration is a curiosity about the convergence of circumstances that led my reader and me to connect at that precise moment in time and space amidst an environment filled with raw beef cuts. What series of events and decisions shaped this meeting point, highlighting the serendipitous and orchestrated elements of our encounter?

### ***A Little Road Map of this Book: Chapter Previews***

The following chapters are threaded together by an exploration of the intricate relationship between meaning-making and expression in everyday life. Each chapter

examines how theories and concepts from Dewey, Bakhtin, Rosenblatt, Ahmed, and other scholars broaden the understanding of aesthetics, experience, and both conscious and unconscious answering, emphasizing the active and reciprocal nature of human transactions and relationships with the world. The chapters argue that aesthetic experiences are not isolated events but integral parts of daily life, entangled with personal agency, responsibility, and collective engagement in answering life.

In **Chapter One: Aesthetics are the Things We Do**, Dewey and Bakhtin's theories concerning aesthetics are explored. Dewey broadens the definition of aesthetics to include everyday social relationships, suggesting that these transactions are forms of artistic expression. He emphasizes that recognizing these daily encounters as artistic requires conscious reflection and awareness, enhancing participation and perception of the world, thereby turning ordinary exchanges into avenues for creative and meaningful connections. Bakhtin introduces the architectonic aspects of aesthetics, illustrating how different elements systematically interconnect to create cohesive wholes and highlighting the inseparable and continually influential relationship between art and life. His notion of the "excess of seeing" frames perception as a dynamic, creative act similar to authorship, where individuals actively construct their realities.

**Chapter Two: An In-Depth Look at Transaction, Experience, and Aesthetic Experience** examines the various components that makeup transactions, experiences, and aesthetic experiences. Rosenblatt's theory identifies two primary types of transactions: aesthetic and efferent. Rosenblatt argues that these modes exist not as fixed binaries but along a fluid continuum, allowing for shifts between emotional and factual engagement depending on the reader's needs and context. Linking Rosenblatt's



transactional ideas to Dewey's concepts of experience and aesthetic experience, Dewey posits that experiences are shaped by the transactions between a person and their environment or activities. He conceptualizes experience as dynamic reciprocity, emphasizing that individuals are not just passive observers but active participants who are influenced by and influence their surroundings. Active engagement is essential for meaning making, requiring both involvement and reflective thinking. According to Dewey, an aesthetic experience is marked by a deep sense of involvement and fulfillment. In these aesthetic moments, individuals do not simply receive sensory input from the world; they actively engage with it, influencing and modifying it through their responses, thereby integrating thought, emotion, and action, creating the wholeness of the experience.

**Chapter Three: Answerability as a Thing of Art + Life, Utterance, and the Super Ethical Superaddressee** evaluates the responsibilities tied to artistic expression and critiques the separation of art from daily life. Bakhtin introduces the concept of "answerability," which links art to life through meaningful engagement. At the core of this concept is the superaddressee—an ideal, abstract audience that holds artists to the highest ethical and aesthetic standards. The chapter also argues that artistic expression serves as an utterance within a dialogic process requiring responsive exchanges. The superaddressee serves as both an ethical and aesthetic ideal, pushing utterances beyond immediate social norms to achieve a more significant ethical impact. The perspective assigns greater responsibilities to artistic expression, urging creators to consider the broader implications of their work.

#### **Chapter Four: Carnavalesque Aesthetic Transaction and Answerability**

argues that Rabelais's work, as interpreted by Bakhtin, supremely exemplifies aesthetic transaction and answerability. Rabelais's use of humor, satire, and the grotesque serves as a profound critique of authoritarian structures, illustrating Bakhtin's theorization of art and answerability. The chapter highlights the intersection and reciprocity between the artist and the other, where both actively engage in a dialogue that transcends mere consumption of expression to include active participation and critique. Additionally, Bakhtin's portrayal of the grotesque body as a dual symbol of decay and renewal sets the stage for the following chapter.

**Chapter Five: "Burning the Sweaty Happy Sticky Wedding Dress,"** explores my transformative journey of visually representing *Art of Thing; Thing of Art* through the perspective of Ahmed's feminist and affect theories, entangled with my personal narrative. The chapter opens with the story of a vintage wedding dress that, for me, embodied both joy and shame, aligning with Ahmed's concepts of "sweaty concepts" that manifest in the body and her notion of "happy objects." I explore the intricate relationships between things, emotions, and experiences, focusing on the relational and contextual dimensions of affect and how both personal and collective histories influence transactions with the external, material world. The examination uncovers themes of personal agency, the transformative power of aesthetic engagement with things, and the resilience found in the female experience. Through the discussion, I aim to illuminate the connections between art, the body, and the process of meaning-making, constructing a comprehensive framework for the visual aesthetic expression.

In the concluding **Chapter Six: "Aesthetic Transaction and Answerability in the Yet-to-be,"** drawing on Brian Massumi's (1995) insights from "The Autonomy of Affect," I suggest that affect theory offers a rich avenue for examining how emotions and sensations shape transactions and experience with aesthetic expressions. The perspective and framework, I contend, represent the next frontier in exploring aesthetic transactions and answerability. And I expect will uncover new layers of meaning and understanding that hold great promise for deeper inquiry and discussion. I also narrate my journey toward becoming a writer, a process characterized not by a singular moment but by a gradual awakening and evolution. I discuss how writing for an audience redirected my focus from personal exploration to public communication, highlighting the responsibility to create stories that resonate with readers. The shift reflects Dewey's ideas about obligation and Bakhtin's concept of answerability, redefining writing from a solitary pursuit to a collective experience. Through this continuous process of aesthetic transactions and embracing answerability, both my personal narrative and communal engagement strengthened.

## Chapter One: Aesthetics as the *Things We Do*

My initial encounter with Dewey's work in graduate school introduced me to his progressive, experiential-based educational philosophies, which align closely with my values and beliefs as an educator. However, it was his theories on the artistic dimensions—the aesthetics within everyday social transactions—that became a game-changer, transforming my perspective both as a writer and a writing teacher.

Like some, I associated aesthetics solely with all things related to beauty—those surface-level *things* left for style and fashion editors to consider. Dewey (1934) disrupts this narrow interpretation by expanding the scope of aesthetics to include how people form meaningful relationships with their surroundings. He theorizes that many people unknowingly practice an art form when engaging in conversation, writing that "spoken intercourse with others" is an act of aesthetic expression (p. 249). The notion implies that even casual exchanges at the water cooler or two recent widows crying together by slabs of raw beef are acts of aesthetic creation and meaning making. Dewey also notes that appreciating such everyday aesthetic encounters demands a conscious awareness and reflection as they can enhance one's perception of and participation in the world around them.

Expanding on the idea, Dewey (1934) explains, "When the natural and the cultivated blend in one, acts of social intercourse are works of art" (p. 65). He draws a distinction between natural behaviors, which are instinctive and spontaneous, and cultivated behaviors, shaped by cultural, educational, and social influences. Dewey contends that these two aspects converge in social transactions and relationships, elevating ordinary actions into forms of aesthetic expression. The fusion doesn't seek

balance but rather aims to create a new mode of expression that marries the genuineness of natural instincts with the refinement of learned behaviors, enriching both personal and shared experiences. An example of this could be the practice of storytelling at communal gatherings. Here, the spontaneous and authentic sharing of personal anecdotes is elevated by the art of narrative structure, learned through cultural exposure to stories. The blend transforms a simple recounting of events into a powerful social ritual that strengthens communal bonds and perpetuates connection, embodying Dewey's vision of social acts as aesthetic expressions.

Bakhtin's theorization of aesthetics intersects with Dewey's, though from a different perspective. Bakhtin views aesthetics as a dynamic and creative process of shaping disparate elements into a coherent whole, which he terms consummation. The process is both creative and authorial, emphasizing the connection between aesthetic consummation and a broader understanding of authorship. It involves the active integration of various elements into a unified perception, central to aesthetic activity, and underlines the intentional and participatory nature of perception. Bakhtin highlights the active role people play in constructing their reality through continuous engagement and creative reconstruction. The transformative process turns chaotic and raw experiences into structured, interpretable things, emphasizing the individual's role as a creator—akin to artists or writers who transform the abstract or mundane into meaningful narratives and works of art. In this way, aesthetics is redefined not just as an evaluative stance but as an essential part of the ongoing creation of life's meaning.

In this chapter, I first explore Dewey's concept of aesthetics, characterized by participatory and dynamic engagement with works of art. He asserts that active

involvement is essential for both the creation of meaning and the aesthetic appreciation of art. Subsequently, I examine Bakhtin's ideas, which, though distinct, enhance Dewey's theories. Bakhtin views aesthetics as a creative endeavor and introduces the notion of consummation, a process through which disjointed elements are integrated into a unified whole via active engagement. According to Bakhtin, perceiving works of art is similar to being an author, as individuals actively shape and make sense of the chaotic aspects of reality into structured, significant forms. Thus, chapter one argues that Dewey and Bakhtin expand the definition of aesthetics to include everyday social interactions as forms of artistic expression, suggesting that recognizing daily encounters as artistic enhances our perception and participation in the world.

### **1.1 Dewey's Aesthetics is in the Work of Art**

Dewey's (1934) aesthetic philosophy suggests that the value of art lies in its function—the work it is meant to perform. He posits that the artistic or aesthetic process necessitates a harmonious integration of external and internal "visions." Artists must "submit themselves in humility to the discipline of the objective vision," engaging deeply with the external world to comprehend and interpret its structures and rules (p. 268). However, the engagement does not diminish the importance of their "inner vision," which serves as an essential guide (p. 268). Dewey emphasizes that these external and internal visions are not separate or conflicting forces but interdependent elements that enhance and deepen artistic expression. According to Dewey, the successful amalgamation of these visions enables artists to create works of art that are not only technically proficient but also personal and resonant with experience.

Dewey (1934) further elaborates that the artist's inner vision serves as an intermediary, managing and interpreting the external, objective world. He describes the process as "the organ by which outer vision is controlled, and it [begins] to take on structure as the latter is absorbed within it," highlighting a continuous conversation between personal insights and external realities, facilitating a dynamic transactional exchange (p. 268). Dewey identifies these relationships of internal and external visions as the essence of imagination—a fusion where external realities meld with internal interpretations and aspirations, driving the creative process forward. As the imaginative process matures, "the work of art is born" (p. 268). Thus, creating works of art is not an isolated or purely internal act but an intersection where the artist's inner world engages with and transforms the external environment. He also suggests that the artist's inner vision doesn't replicate the external world but actively transacts with it, crafting both perceptions of reality and personal responses into something new and meaningful.

Dewey (1934) offers a compelling argument that "the experience of thinking has its aesthetic quality," challenging the traditional confines of aesthetics and fostering deep reflection (p. 40). Sometimes limited to fine arts like painting, music, and literature, aesthetics, Dewey argues, should also encompass intellectual pursuits such as mathematics, which share abstract and symbolic qualities. He explores the relationship between aesthetic and intellectual processes, debunking the myth that they are entirely separate modes of thought. He emphasizes that both types of experiences involve an "interaction of the live creature with his surroundings," suggesting that their core structures are similar, differing only in emphasis and rhythm (p. 14). Dewey critiques the oversimplified view that "an artist does not think, and a scientific inquirer does nothing

else," attributing these perceived differences to "tempo and emphasis" rather than to a difference in kind (p. 14). He posits that intellectual efforts have their aesthetic moments when ideas surpass abstraction and take on "the corporate meanings of objects," thereby forging a deep connection with the physical or experiential world (p. 14).

Dewey argues that the processes of artistic creation and scientific inquiry are fundamentally similar in their aesthetic essence. Both involve a creative process where thinking extends beyond problem-solving or object creation to include an appreciation of the beautiful interpenetrating transaction between the mind and its environment. The interconnectedness, whether mediated through a painter's brush or a mathematician's equations, constitutes an aesthetic activity that enriches experience and perceptions of the external world. Additionally, Dewey points out that artists engage in thinking through their transaction with materials and media, with their thoughts directly manifesting in their creations. Unlike scientists, who might work with abstract symbols like mathematical signs, artists' tools are intimately connected to their work, ensuring a seamless integration of thought and physical expression. Dewey notes that for artists, thought is "more immediately embodied in the object" (p. 14). He asserts that both artists and scientists engage in thinking, though their expressions differ in medium and pace, underlining that all these endeavors are, indeed, works of art.

As this section progresses, I will investigate key elements of Dewey's aesthetic philosophy. The exploration will address how perception and experience intersect, evaluate the influence of works of art within broader cultural contexts, and discuss how these concepts foster relationships infused with what Dewey refers to as "obligation" (p.



140). The section concludes by considering the vibrant nature of art in a constantly changing world.

### ***Dewey's Aesthetic Perception and Experience***

Dewey (1934) posits that "an [a]esthetic experience, the work of art in its actuality, is perception" (p. 162). The principal highlights that experiencing works of art requires more than passive observation as it demands immersive and transactional engagement that forms a relationship between the person and the work of art. In this engagement, the observer responds to the subtleties of the aesthetic expression, allowing their perceptions and emotions to shape the transaction. Dewey elaborates, stating that "esthetic rhythm is a matter of perception and therefore includes whatever is contributed by the self in the active process of perceiving" (p. 163). The passage suggests that the rhythm of an aesthetic experience isn't a fixed attribute of the work itself but rather is crafted by the person's active participation. The act of perceiving rhythm is much more than recognizing patterns or movements—it encompasses the observer's emotional and intellectual responses during the engagement. Thus, the perceived rhythm of a work of art is influenced significantly not by its physical properties per se but by the personal and perceptual involvement. The interpenetrating transaction energizes the rhythm, deriving its vitality from the connection between the work of art and the person's perceptual framework, including their senses, emotions, and mind.

Dewey (1934) describes the aesthetic experience as an "outgoing of energy," where individuals actively extend themselves toward the object of perception, transforming the interaction into a participatory event (p. 55). He employs the metaphor of "plunging into a subject matter" to highlight the deep engagement required, likening it

to diving into water where total immersion is vital (p. 55). The notion underlines Dewey's assertion that aesthetic experiences demand a significant personal energy investment, where intense sensory and perceptual involvement allows someone to establish a personal and unique connection with the work of art, rendering the experience personal. Dewey views such aesthetic engagement as an intimate exchange where the person actively merges with the work, effectively blurring the lines between self and art.

Dewey (1934) also warns against the risks of passive observation, which he argues can overwhelm individuals to the point that "for lack of answering activity, we do not perceive that which bears us down" (p. 55). In such cases, engagement is hindered, leading to a superficial grasp of the subject and allowing the environment to overpower the observer, thereby precluding deep insights or interpretations. Passivity results in disengagement and cursory understanding of one's surroundings. To combat this, Dewey advocates for "answering activity," a mode of active participation where the person is not a passive receiver but an engaged responder, and such level of involvement necessitates summoning energy and adjusting it to a responsive pitch to fully absorb the experience (p.55).

For this work, Dewey's assertion that "We must summon energy and pitch it at a responsive key in order to take in" is pivotal as he clarifies that engagement is not about observing or even receiving but involves an interconnected transaction with the aesthetic expression (p.55). This requires a level of energy and *attunement* that shifts passive consumption to an active, interpretive process. Dewey explains that engagement with works of art or any aesthetic experience extends simple observation as it includes a mutual exchange demanding both awareness and active participation.

He emphasizes the need to fully immerse oneself in the process, employing both emotional and mindful energy to transact with and respond to artistic expressions. Such active participation deepens the experience and enriches one's understanding of the work of art, contributing to its ongoing interpretation and significance. This makes the aesthetic experience energetic and personally transformative. Dewey stresses that this energetic entanglement is essential for thoroughly understanding and appreciating the complexity of an experience. By tuning one's energy to sync with the experience's demands, people can unlock possibilities for new insights and forge more meaningful connections with their environment.

Dewey (1934) also explores the transformative impact of works of art on perception and experience, focusing on the concepts of the "inertia of habit" and the "imaginative" (p. 270). The "inertia of habit" refers to how reliance on established perceptions and routines can stifle openness to new ideas, leading to dull, uninspired experiences. The dependency on familiar patterns confines people to repetitive thoughts and behaviors, diminishing their ability to embrace and appreciate new concepts and thus curbing creativity and innovation. The "inertia of habit" thus establishes a comfort zone that not only blocks the influx of fresh ideas but also hinders expansion and diversification. Dewey emphasizes that works of art possess the capacity to break these entrenched habits by infusing the "imaginative" into everyday life, and the engagement with the imaginative enables people to imagine alternatives and explore possibilities beyond their conventional meaning-making frameworks, rejuvenating their perceptions and experiences with the world.

Dewey (1934) characterizes the influence of works of art as "the quickened expansion of experience," highlighting how it can uniquely broaden our perspectives and reveal insights that alter our perception of our environment (p. 270). Therefore, works of art can catalyze change, prompting individuals to question, reinterpret, and transform their relationships with their environments. Through such a transformative process, works of art can create opportunities for innovation and creative thinking, challenging the status quo and fostering a more exploratory response to life.

### ***Works of Art; Thing of Art***

Dewey (1934) draws parallels between the nature of works of art and language, suggesting that both originate from individual expressions and evolve into shared experiences. He describes that "language involves what logicians call a triadic relation," further detailing that "art is the connecting link between artist and audience" (p. 106). At their core, both art and language act as mediums of communication, facilitating a complex network of transactions that connect the creator, the creation, and the receiver. By identifying and clarifying the transactional relationships as a "triadic relation," Dewey emphasizes essential components of the communication process: the person who initiates and creates the expression, the work of art serves as the medium, and the other who interprets the expression and creates a personalized meaning. Essentially, these happenings revolve around connective relationships, focusing mainly on their transactional and reciprocal aspects. The reciprocal aspect is significant because it highlights the mutual influence between the creator and the other. The reciprocal nature of works of art ensures that communication is not a one-way transmission but a conversation that allows for the exchange of ideas and emotional responses. Thus, the

work of art becomes a living *thing* that facilitates this ongoing exchange, continuously shaped and reshaped by the transactions it supports.

Dewey emphasizes that the artist's role extends beyond producing an art expression; the entire creative process is critical for engaging meaningfully with the other. The intentions, techniques, and choices an artist makes throughout their aesthetic journey significantly shape the work's expression and, consequently, how it is received, interpreted, and endowed with meaning by others. While creation might be a solitary act, Dewey notes the importance of the artist adopting the perspectives of both the creator and the anticipatory other. He writes, "The work is there in progress, and the artist has to become vicariously the receiving audience" (p. 110). The necessity compels artists to continually consider how their work will be perceived and experienced by others, effectively placing themselves in the other's shoes.

Dewey (1934) theorizes that by accounting for the other's perspective beforehand, artists can better predict the emotional and mindful reactions their work might provoke, allowing them to "observe and understand as a third person might note and interpret" (p. 111). The dual perspective encourages artists to view their creations from an external standpoint, making adjustments to enhance the work of art's impact and clarity. The notion transforms the creative process into a conversation between the artist's internal vision and the anticipated reactions of the other, crafting an expression that integrates both solitary creation and empathetic engagement. The intersection between creation and observation not only colors the aesthetic expression but also ensures it conveys the artist's vision in a way that can also resonate with the other – the thing of art.

Moreover, Dewey (1934) observes that "works of art, like words, are literally pregnant with meaning," highlighting that artistic expressions are imbued with multiple layers of significance and potential interpretations that vary based on each person's context, cultural background, and personal experiences—their perceptual point of view (p. 122). The rich, layered communication enables works of art to cultivate connections with others, often unveiling complexities and unexpected meaning-making that surprise the responder. In this sense, the essence of art's "thingness" is its ability to evoke a wide range of interpretations and emotional responses, making each encounter and engagement with it uniquely personal. Dewey articulates the idea by saying, "Art expresses, it does not state" (p. 140). He contends that the intrinsic value of works of art lies in their suggestiveness—their power to hint at ideas and emotions rather than to delineate them explicitly. The subtlety invites people to explore and interpret through their perspectives and meanings, which are not imposed but discovered – the art of thing and the thing of art.

### ***Dewey's Social Relationships and Obligations in Aesthetics***

Dewey (1934) theorizes the complex dynamics of social relationships within the spaces of aesthetics, characterizing these relationships as rich exchanges of emotions, responsibilities, creativity, and mutual influence. He specifically refers to them as "an affair of affections and obligations, of intercourse, of generation, influence, and mutual modification" (p. 140). At their heart, affections and obligations denote the emotional bonds and responsible or ethical commitments that form the cornerstone of relationships, creating the trust and respect necessary for meaningful transactions. Dewey considers these elements foundational to all social relationships in the aesthetic

context, providing a framework of community. Such a foundation is ideal for the vibrant exchange of creative expressions that define aesthetic experiences.

Dewey also discusses the role of "intercourse," or the continuous dialogue and exchange among people (p. 140). It is in this ongoing engagement that creativity thrives, enabling the emergence of new artistic forms and expressions from these social exchanges. "Generation" in this context refers to the creation of new insights and innovations that arise when diverse perspectives converge (p. 140). The melding of ideas creates an environment ripe for "influence and mutual modification," where people not only impact each other's thoughts and creations but are also transformed by these exchanges (p. 140). The energetic process highlights the fluidity and ongoing evolution within the aesthetic space, where every transaction has the potential to reshape individual perceptions and contribute to the collective cultural landscape.

Dewey characterizes "intercourse" as the ongoing communication and discourse between individuals, which transcends mere information exchange to include the sharing of ideas, emotions, and values that collectively enrich and color the participants' experiences (p.140). Thus, "influence" and "mutual modification" highlight the transformative power of these relationships (p.140). People not only impact each other but are also changed in the process, demonstrating the reciprocal influence that fuels the evolution of personal identities and cultural expressions. Dewey argues that social relationships are not peripheral to aesthetic experiences but are deeply formative, actively shaping the creation, perception, and meaning making. Within such a vibrant cultural milieu, works of art are perpetually evolving, driven by the ongoing intersectional happenings of individual creativity and collective influence.

Dewey (1934) theorizes the significant role of works of art in bridging gaps between individuals and enhancing community life. He remarks that "expression strikes below the barriers that separate human beings from one another," illustrating how works of art transcend social and personal boundaries to forge meaningful human connections (p. 270). Works of art act as a powerful conduit for breaking down cultural, linguistic, and personal barriers, allowing individuals to engage with both the aesthetic expression and each other. Additionally, Dewey describes it as "the most universal and freest form of communication," emphasizing its unique capability to convey complex emotions and ideas beyond the constraints of spoken language (p. 270). The universality enables works of art to articulate emotions that are often difficult to express verbally, and he observes that the collective emotions stirred by works of art can possess a "definitely religious quality," highlighting the connections it can foster (p. 270). To further his point, Dewey links the function of works of art to historical and cultural practices, such as rites and ceremonies that commemorate significant life events—birth, death, and marriage. He posits that works of art elevate the importance of these rituals, enhancing and deepening human experiences through shared expressions that resonate across all facets of life.

### ***The Work of Art in a World in Flux***

Dewey's (1934) exploration of the relationship between experiences and expressions sheds light on the artist's role as a mediator in a rapidly changing world. He notes, "An environment that is changed physically and spiritually demands new forms of expression" (p. 316). As the world experiences continual changes—be it technological, ecological, social, or cultural—artists are compelled to develop new methods to express



these shifts. Thus, artists are at the forefront of interpreting and reflecting the evolving nature of the world. They act as cultural translators who not only depict changing realities but also help shape public perception and discourse. Thus, the active role in society requires artists to continuously innovate and adapt their methods and mediums to keep pace with the world's transformations. By doing so, they provide the broader culture with fresh perspectives and critical insights, helping to navigate the complexities of modern life. Dewey's perspective highlights the indispensable role of artists as both witnesses to and participants in the unfolding narrative of societal change, underlining the connection between artistic expression and the ever-evolving human experience.

Dewey criticizes traditional art criticism for often failing to acknowledge the innovation and essential spirit of new artistic movements. He argues that a significant new movement in art "expresses something new in human experience" and establishes "some new mode of transaction of the live creature with his surroundings," which "facilitates the release of powers previously cramped or inert" (p. 316). The critique is imperative as it highlights the transformative power of aesthetic expressions. By introducing fresh perspectives and modes of engagement, artistic movements unlock dormant capabilities within people and communities. These innovative expressions challenge established norms and drive both cultural and personal advancement.

Dewey points out that traditional critiques frequently overlook how these movements rejuvenate human experience, emphasizing works of art's role as a dynamic force in molding human consciousness by "releasing powers previously cramped or inert" (p. 316). In essence, Dewey highlights that traditional art criticism often misses the impact of new artistic movements, which not only change art forms and

expressions but also transform human perception and engagement. These movements are significant shifts, not just stylistic changes, that energize the way people transact with the world and each other, promoting both societal and individual transformation and continuous evolution.

## **1.2 Bakhtin's Architectonics of Aesthetics**

Bakhtin's (1990) aesthetic theory largely derives from his earliest published work, "Art and Answerability." Authored during a period marked by intense intellectual activity and considerable socio-political upheaval, the essay reflects Bakhtin's experiences in early 20th-century Russia amidst revolutions, wars, and rapid societal shifts. His philosophical inquiries were deeply connected to the critical issues of his era—art, ethics, responsibility, and culture. In many respects, his investigation of these subjects went beyond the theoretical, addressing the practical aspects of coexistence and community building amid ongoing conflicts and disparities. By integrating these concerns into his aesthetic theories, Bakhtin developed a philosophical approach to aesthetics that links personal actions and broader cultural context, arguing that every creative act has ethical and cultural ramifications.

Michael Holquist (1990), in the preface to *Art and Answerability*, highlights the importance of these essays for fully comprehending the scope of Bakhtin's philosophical investigations. Holquist proposes that these writings are not simple preliminary sketches or casual reflections but fundamental to understanding Bakhtin's intellectual development, paving the way for his subsequent theories on dialogism. Holquist emphasizes that a comprehensive understanding of Bakhtin's early works is crucial to fully appreciating the breadth of his ideas. These initial writings offer valuable insights

into the development of his theories. Thus, exploring the early essays from his youth is fundamental for comprehending the complexities of Bakhtin's later work, which moves deeper into the sophisticated and nuanced essence of language and how meaning is constructed through dialogue.

Holquist (1990) also introduces the collection of early essays by Bakhtin, noting that they differ significantly from his previously published work. Readers might feel they are encountering a "new Bakhtin" due to the style of these essays (p.x). He suggests that part of Bakhtin's appeal is his relatively accessible writing compared to other theorists. However, these early essays are described as "extremely difficult," requiring readers to have substantial knowledge, synthesis skills, and patience (p.x). The essays use terms and concepts that are considered outdated, such as "author," "hero," and "aesthetics." Specifically, the monograph "Author and Hero in Aesthetic Activity" demands additional imagination and sympathy from its readers (p. x). As such, you will notice that I frequently defer to Holquist's interpretations and use them as a guiding light in understanding Bakhtin's theories in *Art and Answerability*. These interpretations have been instrumental in piecing together and comprehending not only the text but also Bakhtin's intentions.

Holquist (1990) points out that Bakhtin's interpretation of "aesthetics," like Dewey's, extends well beyond traditional definitions (p. xix). Instead of confining aesthetics to spaces related to beauty or artistic appreciation, Bakhtin enlarges it to encompass deep philosophical questions about knowledge (epistemology), ethics, and the essence of existence (ontology). The broader perspective redefines aesthetics as an essential framework for exploring the core aspects of human life.

Holquist (1990) highlights a significant statement by Bakhtin that embodies this idea: "Life is not art, and art is not life, but the two cannot be separated from each other" (p. xxx). Through this, Bakhtin emphasizes the intrinsic connection between art and life. While they are distinct, they are interconnected as the diverse experiences of life fuel art, and in turn, they profoundly influence how individuals perceive and engage with their environments. Bakhtin stressed the symbiotic relationship between art and life, showing how each continuously enriches and reshapes the other. Therefore, the connection between art and life is not merely complementary but deeply symbiotic, with each constantly influencing and redefining the other in a dynamic exchange.

In this section, I explore Bakhtin's theories on aesthetics, particularly examining the various facets of perspective and its function as a creative act akin to an author crafting a narrative. I explore how Bakhtin's idea of aesthetic perception is pivotal in the ongoing process of meaning-making, showing how people construct narratives from their experiences through continuous transactions with their surroundings. The discussion highlights the proactive role individuals assume in molding their encounters and experiences as it illustrates how individual creativity and collective experiences converge to form both personal and communal realities.

### ***Bakhtin's Architectonics of Aesthetics and Perception***

Bakhtin's interpretation of aesthetics represents a distinct shift from traditional views, focusing on how lived experiences are integrated into meaningful actions. Holquist (1990) notes that Bakhtin characterizes all that is aesthetically valid as "not a void, but the persistent... directedness to meaning on the part of an act-performing life" (p. xl). The concept argues that aesthetic value arises from an ongoing engagement in

the search for meaning. The passage continues and asserts that "before assuming a purely aesthetic position in relation to the hero and his world, an author must assume a lived-life position, a purely cognitive-ethical position" (p. xl). This emphasizes the importance of authenticity and ethical involvement in the artistic process. It highlights that creators must deeply engage with real-life contexts to infuse their art with genuine aesthetic and ethical depth.

Bakhtin's core argument posits that aesthetic judgments and creations must be rooted in an understanding of life itself, linking aesthetics closely with the dimensions of human experience. He contends that artists need to immerse themselves in real-life experiences—both their own and those of others—to authentically transform these experiences into aesthetic expressions. The perspective challenges the notion of art as an isolated or purely formalistic endeavor. Instead, Bakhtin views art as an intensely human activity that not only reflects but also critiques. Essentially, he sees art as a vital element of human experience, inherently connected with and reflecting the complexities of life.

Holquist (1990) also explains Bakhtin's theorized aesthetics through the perspective of architecture, highlighting what Bakhtin describes as the "aesthetic event" (p. xxiv). In this framework, Bakhtin integrates aesthetics into a broader philosophical discourse, emphasizing how different elements interconnect to create meaning. By definition, architectonic means the scientific study of architecture, but in philosophical terms, it refers to the structure and organization of thought, which is how Bakhtin applies the term. He uses it to describe the structured way in which various elements of aesthetics are systematically arranged and interconnected to form a cohesive and

meaningful whole. The structuring enables a deeper exploration of art, not as isolated pieces but as integrated systems that reflect, interpret, and influence human experience. In this sense, architectonics in aesthetics guides the understanding of how art forms develop their frameworks and how these frameworks interact with cultural and personal perspectives to shape the overall aesthetic experience.

As noted by Holquist, Bakhtin delineates between "general aesthetics," which articulates universal principles, and "special aesthetics," which explores the distinct characteristics of various art forms. The distinction underlines the complexity and depth inherent in the study of aesthetics (p. xxiv). According to Bakhtin's framework, engaging with aesthetics means understanding how diverse elements converge to create a unified whole, all interpreted through the observer's perspective. The central idea is that perception is not just observation but an energetic and creative process that places people at the center of interpreting art and culture.

Furthermore, Holquist (1990) observes that Bakhtin expands the concept of aesthetics by introducing more intricate concepts such as "isolation," "outsideness," and "consummation" (p. xxiv). Bakhtin considers perception to be an active process similar to authorship, where the observer arranges the chaotic elements of reality into cohesive things. In this case, the act of perception is compared to writing a story, casting the perceiver as a creator who crafts objects, texts, or even people into complete, meaningful forms. The process of forming these coherent wholes, or "consummation," is portrayed as an authorial act, highlighting the creative potential embedded in the act of perceiving (p. xxiv). The redefinition of aesthetics emphasizes the transformative power

of the observer, not as a recipient of art but as an active participant in its ongoing creation and interpretation.

Bakhtin reimagines the role of the other in the aesthetic experience, elevating them from observed to active co-creators. The perspective asserts that the other is not absorbing what is presented but is actively involved in shaping the interpretation and meaning of the art. By engaging in this creative act, the other exercises a form of authorship, reorganizing and interpreting the raw materials of reality into structured, meaningful *things*. Thus, the aesthetic experience becomes a dynamic transaction, where the boundaries between creation and reception blur, allowing each observer to leave a personal imprint on the art they encounter. The notion highlights the impact that active perception can have, not just in appreciating art but in contributing to its ongoing evolution and significance.

### ***Bakhtin's Perceptual Relationship Between the Self and Other***

Holquist (1990) discusses Bakhtin's aesthetic ideas, focusing on how people perceive their existence versus that of others. Holquist identifies a "problem" in how people "architecturally order" the world, highlighting the significant differences between personal self-perception and the perception of others (p.xxix). People see themselves as the central point of value, experiencing their lives as an ongoing presence without clear beginnings or ends. Meanwhile, they perceive others as having distinct boundaries in time and space, existing within a shared environment that feels less personal, and intimate compared to their unique perspective.

According to Bakhtin, for oneself, mortality allows the embodiment of "time and space as particular values," where one's "self" operates as if it were continuous with

consciousness (p.xxix). This creates a sense of existing in a "perpetual present" without clear boundaries of beginning or end, which means that one's personal experience of the world is uniquely intimate and centered around one's own goals and perceptions. In contrast, others are seen as finite entities, existing within a shared environment that lacks the same personal significance and immediacy. Bakhtin highlights a dichotomy in how people perceive their existence versus how they perceive others. While an individual might experience their life as an ongoing, seamless flow, deeply intertwined with their consciousness and lacking clear temporal or spatial boundaries, they tend to view others as distinct, bounded entities. The distinction underlines the inherent subjectivity of human experience—each person's reality is primarily shaped by their perspectives and objectives, imbuing their individual experiences with a richness and depth that might not extend to their understanding of others. The difference in perception not only influences how people make meaning with the world around them but also affects their relationships as they navigate a world where others may not share the same sense of continuity and immediacy in their experiences.

In contrast, others are perceived as "limited in time," with observable beginnings and ends and consistent behaviors that tie them to their physical form (p.xxix). Holquist emphasizes that this perception is not only temporal but also spatial, as individuals view others as part of a broader, shared environment that is not influenced by personal intentionality. While one's world feels intimate and uniquely significant, the world of others is experienced as more objective and less personalized, defined by external boundaries and shared experiences rather than individual perspectives. Thus, people perceive their world from a "horizon," viewing everything through their "unique angle of



vision," with meanings specifically tied to their personal goals (p.xxix). Thus, others exist in an "environment" that is shared and not shaped by individual intentions, suggesting that while one's world feels intimate and uniquely significant, the world of others is experienced as a broader, more objective space where others are seen as finite entities within a shared environment (p.xxix).

People perceive others within the confines of a more detached, collective context that might lack the personal connection they feel with their own experiences. This creates a dichotomy between the subjective, fluid perception of one's existence and the more static, objectified perception of others, who are seen as existing within fixed boundaries and predictable patterns. The viewpoint frames the personal world as a dynamic space entangled with one's intentions and experiences, whereas the world inhabited by others is seen as a more static, common space governed by shared rules and external structures. The distinction emphasizes how people navigate and interpret the world in fundamentally different ways, depending on whether they are considering their own lives or the lives of others.

Bakhtin's ideas, referenced by Holquist, are significant to aesthetics and the framework of architecturally ordering the world as they highlight the fundamental differences in how individuals perceive their existence compared to that of others. From an aesthetic perspective, the distinction is important because it informs how people construct and interpret their realities, impacting their artistic and creative expressions. There is also emphasis that each person views themselves as the center of their world, experiencing it through a "horizon" filled with specific meanings tied to personal goals and perspectives (p.xxix). This subjective experience, shaped by one's mortality,

creates a unique and intimate reality. In contrast, others are seen as part of a shared "environment," perceived as finite entities with observable beginnings and ends and not influenced by the individual's intentionality (p.xxix).

Thus, there is a pronounced split between the intensely personal perspective in which one engages with and understands one's own life and the more generalized, objective perspective in which one perceives the lives of others. The split affects not only personal perceptions but also extends to how people engage with and create art. The personal horizon from which one views the world is filled with meanings and purposes that deeply influence one's creative outputs, imbuing them with a subjective quality that reflects individual experiences and aspirations. On the other hand, the way others are viewed—as elements within a shared, more uniformly understood environment—guides the creation of works that are perhaps more universally accessible but less colored by personal nuance. Thus, Bakhtin's insights reveal how the fundamental separateness and connectedness of human perception influence the aesthetic and structural organization of both personal and communal spaces.

As Holquist (1990) explains, Bakhtin theorizes that people see others with clear beginnings and ends, observing "the repeatable rhythms of behavior that fix him as an activity identical with his physical body" (p. xxix). Then, the perception of others is bound by observable patterns and physical limitations, reducing them to finite things within a shared environment. Unlike self-experience, which is intimate and continuous, our view of others is more detached and objective, framed by their external behaviors and physical presence. The contrast highlights the complexity of human perception and the ways in which our subjective experiences differ from our observations of others.

Holquist (1990) also highlights Bakhtin's view that the self is "not reducible to the temporal or spatial restraints" that typically define the perception of others (p. xxix). This suggests that the self extends beyond the conventional boundaries that often limit the understanding of others. According to Bakhtin, an individual's self-conception is expansive and fluid, free from the strict timelines and spatial confines but usually applied to others. The broader perspective allows individuals to see themselves as part of a continuous and evolving narrative, where identity is not static but constantly reshaped by experiences and interactions. In contrast, perceptions of others are often more static and restricted, framed through observable external characteristics and behaviors that seem more fixed and less adaptable. The contrast between how individuals view themselves and how they view others highlights the complexity of personal identity and the dynamic nature of self-perception.

However, as noted by Holquist, Bakhtin also stresses that "only that which is consummated can be perceived," indicating that while one's existence may feel continuous and fluid, perceptions and judgments of others are often based on their completed actions and discernible, finite characteristics (p. xxix). This creates a fundamental gap between self-perception and the perception of others, underling the ethical challenges in fully understanding and appreciating the true nature of another person's existence.

Thus, Holquist (1990) elucidates how Bakhtin integrates concepts similar to Jean-Paul Sartre's notions of "pour-soi" (for-itself) and "pour-autrui" (for-others) to examine the ethical nuances of self-perception. Bakhtin posits that individuals "clothe" their inner selves with the same values and frameworks they use to perceive others.

This dual perception—the "I-for-others" and the "I-for-myself"—generates an ethical tension between how one sees oneself internally versus how one is perceived externally (p. xxx). Bakhtin also equates perception with authorship, deepening the ethical implications of this theory. He contends that individuals shape their own identities and those of others in the same way that an author shapes characters, suggesting that perceiving oneself and others is not just a passive observation but an active, creative act that carries an ethical responsibility. The notion emphasizes the importance of thoughtful and engaged perception in recognizing and valuing both self and others.

Holquist (1990) discusses Bakhtin's claim that "life is not art, and art is not life," yet highlights their inseparability, emphasizing the bond between lived experience and artistic expression (p. xxx). The relationship portrays transactions with the world and others as akin to an artistic process, where ongoing creation and interpretation profoundly influence our understanding and ethical perspectives. Bakhtin's examination of perception and the self offers a comprehensive framework for understanding the many dimensions of human experience. By differentiating the contexts of self and others, Bakhtin illuminates the challenges and responsibilities involved in perception. His comparison of perception to authorship stresses the proactive and creative role individuals assume in crafting their narratives and relationships with the world.

The implications here are compelling, suggesting that people are not passive observers of their environment but active participants in shaping their realities. The artistic-like engagement requires a constant reinterpretation and reevaluation of both the self and the external world, mirroring the processes of revision and creativity found in artistic endeavors. Bakhtin's framework implies that art is dynamic and constructed

through an ongoing dialogue that involves self-reflection and transaction with others. The perspective not only challenges individuals to consider their actions and beliefs as deliberate choices but also frames their transactional relationships as potentially transformative experiences that can redefine their understanding and moral landscapes. Thus, Bakhtin elevates everyday decisions (all the things we do) to the level of art, requiring a similar depth of thought, imagination, and creativity.

### ***Self-Authoring Experiences***

Holquist (1990) explains Bakhtin's reimagining of aesthetics, integrating concepts such as "isolation," "outsideness," and "consummation" (p. xxiv). Bakhtin envisions aesthetic activity as a process of making sense of the world by piecing together its disparate elements into unified wholes, much like an author developing a narrative. Within this framework, perception is recast as an act of authorship, transforming the act of perceiving into active aesthetic creation. People, through their distinct perspectives, actively shape their reality, rendering each act of perception a creative endeavor. The process involves the selection, organization, and interpretation of elements to forge understanding and meaning. Such a perspective casts everyone as the author of their experiential narrative, perpetually composing and revising their life's story through transactions with and interpretations of the world around them.

Holquist (1990) elaborates that within Bakhtin's theoretical landscape, aesthetics revolves around the active construction of elements into a cohesive whole, a process Bakhtin calls "consummation," which he considers a creative, authorial act (p. xxiv). The aesthetic consummation is connected to a broader concept of authorship, where merging diverse elements into a unified perception is central to aesthetic activity. The

notion highlights the intentional and participatory aspects of perception, emphasizing the active role that people take in shaping their realities and understandings through continuous creative engagement and reconstruction.

For Bakhtin, aesthetics extends beyond critiquing forms; it involves active participation in meaning-making and transforming chaotic, raw inputs of experience into organized, interpretable entities. Further, Holquist explains Bakhtin's idea of "totalizing strategies" in art, which, though often criticized for enforcing a uniform vision of diverse experiences, can be seen in a positive light (p. xxiv). Bakhtin suggests that these strategies allow artists and observers to integrate complex realities into coherent narratives. Within this framework, a totalizing method does not diminish individuality but rather enhances understanding and expression by uncovering the connections that bind disparate experiences together.

Furthermore, Holquist (1990) discusses Bakhtin's "first law of human perception," which suggests that perception is always influenced by our unique personal perspectives (p. xxiv). Bakhtin refers to this as an "excess of seeing," where each views the world through a lens molded by their distinct circumstances and experiences (p. xix). According to this principle, people may perceive elements of the world that remain unseen by others, influenced by their particular situational contexts. The idea highlights the personal and subjective nature of perception, emphasizing the diversity and multitude of human experiences and the framework of how meaning is made. Essentially, the principle reveals that reality is not a fixed or universally experienced phenomenon but a mosaic of individual perceptions. Each person constructs their

version of reality based on a unique set of experiences, background, and context, making their perspective inherently subjective.

### ***Exploration of Bakhtin's Excess of Seeing***

Bakhtin's concept of "excess of seeing" offers a distinctive insight into how perception works, stressing that each individual's viewpoint is distinctly shaped by their circumstances, which in turn influences their understanding of the world. Holquist (1990) explains Bakhtin's idea that "perception can only occur from a unique position within a broad range of possible viewpoints" (p. xxv). The notion emphasizes that each person's perspective is inherently singular, crafted by their specific place in time and space. Bakhtin labels this individuality as the "excess of seeing," suggesting that each person is able to perceive aspects of the world that are invisible to others due to their distinct perspective (p. xxv).

To illustrate this concept, Bakhtin employs the metaphor of two individuals observing each other. As Holquist (1990) relays, Bakhtin noted, "I shall always see and know something that he...cannot see himself" (p. xxv). This can include aspects of the other person's appearance, the environment behind them, and various other objects and relationships. The metaphor shows that each individual possesses a perspective that is inaccessible to others. Holquist further emphasizes Bakhtin's idea that individuals feel unique because they are "the keepers of their uniqueness" (p. xxv). Essentially, people have an innate awareness of their distinctiveness, which is preserved and shaped by their unique experiences and perceptions. The perspective is not a static result of their position but actively influences how they transact with and understand the world around them. Therefore, each person's viewpoint enriches the collective

understanding of reality, as everyone contributes insights and observations that others cannot see.

Bakhtin (1990), in his own words, explores the relationship between readers and confessional self-accounts, such as autobiographies and personal diaries, to underscore his concept of "excess of seeing" (p. 148). He notes that while these texts are often created without artistic intentions, readers frequently approach them with an aesthetic mindset. As they engage with confessional narratives, readers do more than just process the content as straightforward life data; they treat these accounts as canvases for artistic reinterpretation. Rather than viewing confessions as factual records or simple expressions of self, readers see them as "biographical artifacts" that can be molded into aesthetically engaging pieces (p. 148). The transformation is driven by the reader's perspective, which is informed by their background, historical context, and personal interpretations, leading them to "aestheticize" the narratives (p. 148).

Bakhtin (1990) describes the happening as an "excess of seeing," where readers add interpretative layers and meanings that extend beyond the confessions' original intent (p. 148). The excess arises because the reader's unique perspective allows them to see beyond the immediate context of the confession, uncovering broader implications and possible interpretations that the original author might not have considered. The phenomenon exemplifies a type of self-authorship, where the reader actively reshapes the narrative through the "excess of seeing," readers are not passive recipients of stories because they reimagine them, embedding the original texts with new meanings and insights drawn from their own experiences and societal frameworks. The process elevates the reader to the role of co-author, who re-crafts existing narratives into new



forms. By participating in the creative endeavor, readers exhibit their ability to interpret and influence cultural and personal histories, showcasing the participatory nature of reading and the ongoing creation of meaning.

However, the uniqueness does not result in isolation. As Holquist (1990) cites from Bakhtin, recognizing our unique perspectives actually leads us to a paradoxical realization that we require others to understand ourselves fully. Bakhtin argues that "the human subject defined in this way is not condemned to subjectivism," suggesting instead that our distinctiveness demands the presence of others to complete our identity (p. xxv). In essence, it is through our relationships with others—observing how they perceive us and the world—that we attain a more comprehensive understanding of ourselves and our role within the broader context. The dialogic process of self-discovery and mutual recognition deepens our identity, highlighting that personal identity is not solely self-constructed but also sculpted through our ongoing interactions with others. Thus, individuality is both delineated and fulfilled by relationships, making human connections vital not only for creating personal meaning but also for forming identities.

Additionally, Holquist references Bakhtin's assertion that "the ever-present excess of my seeing, knowing, and possessing in relation to any other human being is founded in the uniqueness and irreplaceability of my place in the world" (p. xxv). The passage indicates that although each person occupies a distinct position, they are never genuinely isolated since everyone else also occupies their unique positions. Bakhtin's concepts highlight the "situatedness of perception" and the "uniqueness of the person," yet they refute the idea of absolute isolation (p. xxv). The paradox lies in the fact that while each person has a unique perspective, these viewpoints are intrinsically linked.

The interdependence of perspectives underlines the necessity of dialogue and transactions among individuals, reinforcing the essential role of communication in comprehending and engaging with the world. Interconnectedness also influences decision-making across all facets of life, suggesting that aesthetics involves all the things we do to connect and stay connected to the world around us.

### **1.3 Aesthetics as Pursuit of Mutual Meaning-Making**

Once, during a twelve-step recovery program meeting, I heard about a Brazilian fish with a distinctive two-lensed eye. The upper lens surveys the world above the water—sunlight and air—while the lower lens explores the depths below. This dual vision allows the fish to navigate two contrasting realities simultaneously, though how it integrates this divided knowledge remains a mystery. I believe, similarly, humans possess a comparable perceptual ability, albeit in a different context and form. Unlike the physical properties of the fish's vision, human sight extends beyond the immediately visible, enabling people to explore spaces of creativity, thought, and the happenings unseen that are not confined by rigid facts. In other words, people can perceive and interpret layers of reality that extend the observable, allowing them to envision potential futures, dream up new possibilities, and engage with concepts that transcend the tangible – the perspective of thingness.

Take, for instance, the act of writing. When crafting a narrative, the writer operates much like the fish with its two-lensed eye. On the one hand, the writer draws upon lived experiences, observable details, and concrete facts—the world above the surface. On the other hand, they also dive into the space of imagination, abstract ideas,

and future possibilities—the depths below. The dual vision enables the writer to create stories that are rooted in reality yet infused with creativity and foresight.

Rosenblatt (1988) describes writing as an energetic and evolving engagement with words and ideas and observes that "an unexpected juxtaposition of words, the challenge of a new context, or an unsettling question, may open up new lines of thought or feeling" (p. 9). The notion suggests that creatively arranging words or posing provocative questions can unlock new insights and emotions. As writers craft sentences, they simultaneously close off certain interpretative paths—since "each sentence tends to eliminate certain possibilities as to the meaning to be built up"—and open up new ones. Rosenblatt points out that a new sentence "may reveal implicit areas not thought of before," fostering the development of fresh ideas through unique word combinations and phrases (p.9). Consequently, these new insights may prompt writers to reconsider and refine their initial drafts, "choosing to start all over again with a firmer guiding principle of selection, a clever purpose" (p. 9). The iterative and reflective process deepens the writer's engagement with the text, transforming writing into a journey of learning and discovery.

Further, Rosenblatt (1988) theorizes the complexities of the writing process, specifically how writers choose literary elements that resonate with both their personal feelings and the expectations of their readers. She describes the idea as the "selective process," which involves integrating elements that align with "the writer's inner sense (p.13). The point is significant as it emphasizes that writing is not merely an act of self-expression but also an act of communication.

Rosenblatt (1988) highlights the importance of choosing elements in writing that should "set in motion the invisible reader with symbolic cues evoking an experience" (p.13). She notes the significance of the "invisible reader" in the writing process as the concept represents the audience the writer imagines while developing their narrative, with the intention of impacting the reader through symbolic cues within the text that trigger specific emotional or intellectual responses. The writer's goal is to forge a connection through these deliberately selected cues that prompt distinct experiences or reactions in the reader. Thus, the selection process in writing is dual-purpose: it must satisfy an internal aesthetic or emotional need while also engaging the reader through symbolic, evocative cues. This dynamic and reciprocal transactional relationship between the writer, the text, and the reader aligns with Dewey and Bakhtin's understanding of aesthetics as a participatory activity where meaning is created collaboratively.

From my unexpected encounters on the streets of Manhattan with readers, it has become clear that this relationship holds many dimensions. I've already discussed the meat encounter, but there was another moment on the subway when a reader who recognized my work revealed that a story, I wrote that month resonated as "bullshit" to him. He was holding the magazine folded to the page of my column, and while it was all said in good jest and we both had a good laugh, there was an undeniable element of connection—a mutual pursuit of meaning-making that stuck with me. It became another mark in my DNA as a writer.

To me, these countless encounters exemplify the multifaceted nature of the writer-reader relationship. The act of writing, much like the dual-lensed vision of the fish,

allows for an invisible conversation that transcends the text, encompassing various unseen and energetic exchanges that, most of the time, the writer cannot perceive. As theorized by both Dewey and Bakhtin, aesthetics explain that people and their experiences are not standalone units but part of a complex network of relationships and influences. The perspective disputes the notion that the things we do can be neatly segmented into discrete, self-contained units. Instead, it suggests that everything is interconnected, with each facet of existence—whether personal, professional, or social—transacting with and influencing others. The web of interconnections means that the things we do in one area of life can have repercussions across all areas, often in ways that are not immediately observable. Thus, like the two-lensed fish, people navigate multiple layers of reality: the one visible in the sunshine and the lower, unseen aspects that lie beneath the surface. Therefore, Bakhtin’s architectonic-aesthetic framework effectively works.

Bakhtin expands aesthetics to include philosophical questions about knowledge (epistemology), ethics, and the essence of existence (ontology). The broader perspective redefines aesthetics as an essential framework for exploring all kinds of meaningful aspects of human experience with life. Bakhtin noted that life and art are interconnected because the diverse experiences of life fuel art, and in turn, art influences how individuals perceive and engage with their environments. Much like the relationships between my readers and me, the connection is reciprocal. The stories I create are born from my lived experiences, and once shared, they become part of the readers’ own experiences. The ongoing exchange enriches both me and the reader, creating a continuous loop of influence and inspiration. The relationship between life

and art, and between writer and reader, is thus a symbiotic one, with each continuously shaping and reshaping the other. The implication here is pretty deep as it suggests that the act of writing is not just a creative endeavor but also a lived experience in itself, which leads to my next point.

As a writer, acknowledging the symbiotic relationship between art and life means recognizing the responsibility of storytelling to shape and be shaped by others. Dewey (1934) refers to this as "an affair of affections and obligations, of intercourse, of generation, influence, and mutual modification" (p. 140). He emphasizes that expression and experience carry the potential to affect and be affected by others, creating a ripple effect across various aspects of life. The interconnectedness requires active engagement with surroundings and with each other. I find his use of obligation and mutual modification significant because it highlights the notion of care – care about the work and care about the reader.

To me, obligation highlights the responsibility writers have toward others, suggesting that actions and expressions carry weight and consequences. It involves recognizing that the words chosen, and the narratives created can resonate beyond the immediate moment of writing, entering the lives of readers and influencing their thoughts, emotions, and actions. Mutual modification points to the ongoing, reciprocal influence people have on one another, illustrating that no relational connection or creation is one-sided.

The intersection of affections, obligations, and mutual modification together suggests that both the writer and the reader are seeking a connection. In the middle lies a responsibility on both parts, as mutual modification implies a transformation. Aesthetic

expression, therefore, becomes a collaborative act where both the writer and the reader contribute to the creation of meaning and changes as a result. Thus, the act of writing becomes more than personal expression but a communal engagement that acknowledges the interconnectedness of human experiences.

Years have passed since my meat counter aesthetic transaction and experience, and in that time, I have changed one thing—*everything*. Yet, I often mindfully revisit that moment, now viewing it through a dual perspective, much like the Brazilian fish with its two-lensed eye. The upper lens surveys the world above, reflecting on what transpired between us—sunlight and air—while the lower lens endlessly explores the depths of the happening, examining what I didn't see or feel at the moment. That encounter remains unforgettable, and I continue to excavate that moment in time and space, each visit gaining new insights. This work is a testament to my ongoing exploration of the depths below the surface above the ever-changing waves.

## Chapter Two: An In-Depth Look at Transactions, Experiences, and Aesthetic Experiences

At the very start of this work, I would freely interchange transaction and experience as if the two terms were synonymous. At the time, I chalked it up to the fact that both terms articulated the general take-in, understanding, and memorial imprints of things that happened around us, so *whatever*. Well, I soon learned that there is no such thing as *whatever* in theory. Whatever is the worst enemy of theory, as it's an attitude of being careless or not caring at all. Now, with a couple of years of working with theories under my belt, I suspect that nuance, implication, and maybe-this-is-what-they-meant guesses are the bread and butter of theorists. It's what makes theory, well, a theory. So, instead of a blasé *whatever*, I suppose to be a proper theorist, one must *do whatever* it takes to shake out an idea. So, here I am, writing a whole chapter about the two terms I once considered the same.

Fundamentally, it was Dewey's (1938) succinct and direct phrase that created the framework that I use in this work to differentiate transaction and experience. He wrote, "An experience is always what it is because of a transaction taking place" between the person and whatever thing is happening (p. 43). Now, he wrote this in *Experience and Education* as part of his argument that genuine learning is rooted in active *doing* that results in meaningful experiences and reflection. These meaningful experiences happen through transactions between the student, the material, and the environment. To be more precise, the transaction is the back-and-forth interconnection, interpenetration, and any other inter-you-can-think-of that influences how students make connections to gain insight and a general sense of understanding. It's a lively exchange



where ideas, information, and personalized reflection move freely between the student and whatever thing, or things are piquing their interest. Basically, they are doing their *thing*.

Dewey argued that such methods foster a more integrated kind of learning, where knowledge is built through active questioning and practical application. Students are encouraged to participate fully with their learning materials rather than passively absorb information. Moreover, Dewey emphasized that meaningful experiences enable students to integrate their knowledge by applying it to real-world scenarios. The notion implies that education transcends memorization and theoretical knowledge, focusing instead on linking learning to everyday life. Students come to appreciate the relevance of their studies and grasp the impact their knowledge has on the world, which in turn boosts their engagement and eagerness to learn. By connecting academic concepts to real-world applications, education equips students not only for academic success but also for thoughtful and active participation in society. Thus, the goal for teachers is to develop young people who are not only well-informed but also capable and responsible members of society.

But isn't it true that humans do the same thing every day—from birth until death? From infancy, meaningful connections begin to form, whether it's instinctively crying when in need or making friends on the playground by learning to play games with others. As adults, these skills are refined through more complex transactions and contextual situations. I don't know about you, but I find adulthood extremely challenging as I navigate workplace dynamics, forge meaningful personal and professional

relationships, and fulfill civic and social responsibilities, all of which require me to apply and expand upon the lessons learned in childhood and just yesterday at the drugstore.

Dewey noted that "When the natural and the cultivated blend in one, acts of social intercourse are works of art" (p. 65). That's to say, works of art extend to everyday relationships and social engagements that reflect a harmonious integration of instinctive behavior and refined skill. When someone seamlessly combines genuine, spontaneous expressions with learned cultural behaviors, the things they do achieve an aesthetic quality or thingness. Such moments of connection become artistic expressions in themselves, embodying the depth of human relations and the cultural context in which they exist. In this chapter, I explore the makeup of such aesthetic happenings.

In this chapter, I explore the concepts of transaction, experience, and aesthetic experiences, setting the stage for a comprehensive framework that ties these elements into a cohesive whole. Inspired by Bakhtin's description of the aesthetic as architectonic, I dissect these concepts down to some of their core components. The analysis exposes the various facets of the complex, mutual relationship between individuals and their environments, underscoring the numerous transactions that influence experience and meaning making. Each component is examined to reveal its unique role in shaping the intricate web of transactions and relationships that define aesthetic experiences.

## **2.1 Unraveling the Multifaceted Nature of Transactions**

In my inaugural class as a doctoral student, I encountered Rosenblatt's transactional theory. Initially, the term "transaction" seemed jarringly out of place to me, evoking images of cold, mechanical exchanges more suited to the world of business

than writing and the teaching of writing. As someone very much invested in the notion that writing is an art, the idea of framing my artistic experiences as "transactional" felt almost offensive, like being at a writing treat and someone deciding to talk about math. Me, an artist of words, dealing in transactions? No, thanks.

However, with time, further research, and actually reading the material, I began to recognize the significance of our transactional nature in artistic endeavors, and I started considering the idea that aesthetic transactions, similar to contractual ones, might involve a mutual agreement to share our exploratory aesthetic journeys with others. Essentially, experiencing an aesthetic transaction bestows a particular privilege and, with it, an implicit responsibility to communicate that experience for the benefit of others, thus completing the "aesthetic transaction" and honoring the cosmic contract. Of course, the idea evolved into aesthetic transaction and answerability, but you get the idea.

I also came to understand that Rosenblatt's transactional theory, often associated with reading response due to its focus on textual interpretation and meaning making, extends beyond literature to all facets of daily life and the continuous creation of meaning. Rosenblatt posits that every transaction—whether with texts, works of art, or routine occurrences—constitutes an interpenetrating exchange. In this exchange, people actively construct meaning influenced by their own experiences and contexts. Thus, Rosenblatt's transactional theory broadens the understanding of how people perceive and make sense of the world around them, emphasizing active involvement in shaping perceptions and realities. Rosenblatt (1978) references Dewey's concept that "an experience, an aesthetic experience, is merely the intensification and completion of

an event of everyday life," suggesting that deep engagement and reflection can elevate ordinary experiences to the level of aesthetic experiences (p. 37). She posits that aesthetic elements can be found in all aspects of daily life, not just in traditionally artistic encounters. When people fully immerse themselves and thoughtfully reflect on their daily happenings and moments, these experiences can transcend to become aesthetic in nature.

Additionally, Rosenblatt (1978) draws on Dewey's idea that "there is nothing to prevent a man sipping his tea from enjoying the shape of the cup," illustrating that even routine activities can be infused with aesthetic appreciation (p. 37). However, she notes that such enjoyment "cannot be taken for granted" and requires individuals to consciously "turn their attention to their response to the contours of the cup in their hand" (p. 37). This notion highlights that recognizing the aesthetic value in everyday life demands a deliberate shift from focusing solely on functionality to appreciating the qualitative aspects of experiences. The overarching message is that meaning is subjective and crafted through participatory engagement and conscious effort.

In this section, I continue exploring Rosenblatt's (1978) transactional theory, focusing on the distinct elements between aesthetic and efferent transactions and their interconnection across the continuum. Although I examine her theories through the lens of text, Rosenblatt views reading as a microcosm of human transaction, where the exchange between reader and text mirrors the intricate processes that result in meaning-making. I also theorize the connection between the poem, Bakhtin's concepts of the excess of seeing, and the notion of thingness. The purpose of this section is to expand Rosenblatt's transactional theory beyond literary interpretation to encompass all

aspects of daily life and the continuous creation of meaning. The theory posits that every transaction—whether with texts, works of art, or routine occurrences—constitutes an interpenetrating exchange where people actively construct meaning influenced by their experiences and environmental contexts.

***Rosenblatt's Transaction (Not Interaction!)***

Referenced by Rosenblatt (1978), Dewey and Arthur F. Bentley critiqued the traditional notion of interaction in an experience for its oversimplification and inability to represent the complexity of experiential processes fully. Instead, they advocated for a transactional approach, which views experiences as interconnected and mutually influential within a cohesive system. Rosenblatt embraced the perspective and reinterpreted it by emphasizing that "knowing" involves an active transaction between the "knower" and their environment, showing that knowledge is dynamic and continuously evolves through transactions between individuals and their surroundings (p.15). The interdependence indicates that both the knower and the environment constantly influence and reshape each other. As individuals engage with their environment, their personal experiences, perceptions, and interpretations actively contribute to shaping and refining their understanding and knowledge. Consequently, meaning and knowledge are not passively received or isolated as they are co-created through active participation and contextual involvement.

To clarify, Rosenblatt (1978) proposes that meaning emerges from a series of integrated exchanges between a person and the text. These exchanges are not interactions but deeply interpenetrating transactions. This distinction is essential as it captures the depth of these exchanges. Rosenblatt argues that an interaction suggests

that the person and the text are separate, distinct things "acting on one another," like billiard balls in a simple cause-and-effect scenario (p.17). In contrast, a transaction indicates an integrated and reciprocal engagement, where the reader and the text act as partners in an energetic exchange that together co-constructs meaning. In this symbiotic relationship, both the reader and the text are mutually interdependent, continuously influencing and transforming one another as meaning is actively developed in real-time.

Rosenblatt emphasizes that in a transaction, the reader integrates their personal experiences, emotions, and intentions with the potential meanings embedded in the text, contingent on the context. This element of Rosenblatt's transactional theory resonates with Bakhtin's (1990) ideas of "excess of seeing" and "aestheticizing," as both theories highlight the insights that emerge from the interpenetrating transaction between the observer and the observed (p. 148). Bakhtin suggests that individuals bring a depth of understanding and perspective that surpasses the immediately visible or apparent. Similarly, in Rosenblatt's model, the reader's contributions enrich the engagement with the text, ensuring that each reading transcends the text's explicit content. The transaction results in a more layered experience where the text is not simply consumed but is co-created through collaboration. This idea mirrors Bakhtin's view that meaning is constantly evolving within a communal dialogic exchange, a process Rosenblatt describes as occurring along an aesthetic and efferent continuum.

### ***Aesthetic and Efferent Transactions***

According to Rosenblatt (1978), there are two modes of transaction between the reader and the text: the efferent and the aesthetic. In the efferent mode, the reader

prioritizes the text's practical aspects, setting aside its qualitative elements to focus on extracting actionable information, concepts, and instructions. Rosenblatt highlights the functional nature of this transaction, noting that textual symbols are designed to steer the reader toward specific, "utilitarian" outcomes (p. 27). Essentially, efferent transactions revolve around acquiring and retaining information, where the essence of the approach is what is "carried away" from the reading, tailored for situations that demand goal-oriented actions and immediate application of concrete knowledge (p. 27).

Rosenblatt illustrates this mode with the scenario of an adult reading instructions after a child accidentally ingests poison. In this critical moment, an efferent reading stance becomes crucial as the reader seeks vital information and clear directives to address the emergency swiftly. Emotional responses are temporarily put aside to focus on decoding the text and extracting practical steps. Thus, while the context may be inherently emotional, the primary goal in reading the instructions is to understand and act on them rapidly.

In the aesthetic transactional mode, the emphasis is on the qualitative aspects—emotions, personal interpretations, and engagement with the experience. The mode intertwines the personal with the artistic, diminishing the distinctions between observer and observed as intense involvement heightens sensory and emotional responses. Such transactions color the experience with distinctive personal shades, enabling a more profound and potentially transformative connection. When reflecting on aesthetic transactions, I often mention my affection for F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*, a cornerstone in my literary exploration. While other girls admired Elizabeth Bennet, I was

captivated by Gatsby, repeatedly drawn to the lyrical elegance of Fitzgerald's prose and the vivid imagery capturing both the extravagance and the despair of the Jazz Age.

Rosenblatt (1978) also articulates that every reading experience encompasses both "public" (factual) and "private" (emotional) components, with the balance between these varying (p.185). In readings that are more fact-oriented or efferent, the emphasis tends to be on the public aspects of the text, which are designed for straightforward comprehension and practical application—this includes factual data, direct statements, and explicit content that can be objectively evaluated and verified. Rosenblatt categorizes these aspects as "public" because they are accessible, universally understandable, and not dependent on individual interpretation (p.185). Such readings engage with the text primarily at its explicit or surface level, fostering a common understanding among readers, independent of their emotional reactions or personal interpretations.

On the other hand, aesthetic readings prioritize private feelings and personal reactions, immersing readers in a subjective and deeply personal engagement with the text. The term "private" in this context refers to the unique experiences, emotions, and interpretations each reader brings to the text (p.185). Shaped by one's personal history, cultural background, and individual feelings, these elements significantly influence the perception and experience of the text. In aesthetic reading, the focus shifts away from the objective content to the emotional resonance and impact of the text on the reader, making the experience profoundly personal and intimate. The reading underlines an emotional and experiential connection with the text, turning reading into a process of personal exploration and reflection. Thus, each reader's engagement with the text



becomes a unique journey through their internal experiential landscape, influenced by the narrative but enriched by their personal experiences and emotional responses.

### ***The Transactional Continuum***

Rosenblatt (1978) argues that reading is a complex activity that intertwines and embodies efferent and aesthetic dimensions simultaneously. She explains that engagement and transaction occur on several levels, including "the cognitive, the referential, the factual, the analytic, the abstract" as well as "the affective, the emotive, the sensuous" (p.185). Thus, reading transcends a straightforward, linear process, manifesting instead as a vibrant intersection of intellectual, emotional, and physical responses that collectively deepen understanding and augment the personal relevance and meaning of the text. Rosenblatt opposes the clear-cut separation between efferent and aesthetic transactions, proposing instead that these styles exist along a continuum, described as "a series of gradations between the non-aesthetic and the aesthetic extremes" (p.35). The perspective highlights the fluid nature of reading, suggesting that readers oscillate between analytical and emotional engagement with the text, influenced by their unique contexts and needs at any given moment.

Rosenblatt (1978) observes that "most reading hovers near the middle of our continuum," capturing the nuanced dynamics between extracting practical information (public) and engaging emotionally or aesthetically (private) with texts (p. 35). The positioning often sees readers shifting their focus between the informational and the aesthetic elements of a text. Such movement along the continuum highlights the intricate nature of reading, where practical and personal intersections enhance both the understanding and enjoyment of the text. Rosenblatt's theorization of the continuum

underlines an adaptive, transactional process in reading and meaning making, where engagement is adjusted according to the context, purpose, and emotional state of the reader. For instance, a student may start reading a historical novel primarily for the factual details needed for a school assignment but find themselves increasingly drawn into the emotional narrative and depth of the characters, thereby enriching their overall experience with the book.

Rosenblatt (1978) also expands on the idea that a text can be "experienced at different points of the continuum by different readers, or even by the same reader under different circumstances," emphasizing the variability in how texts are perceived (p.36). The variability means that interpretation and engagement with a text are personal, shaped by a reader's background, emotional state, and changing life situations. For example, a novel that impacts someone in their youth might strike them differently in later years as their life experiences and perspectives evolve, altering their understanding and emotional reactions to the story. The fluid nature of reading highlights how literature can continuously offer fresh insights and provoke new emotional responses, mirroring the ongoing development and transformation in a reader's life. As a result, reading becomes a personalized and context-sensitive activity, cultivating a wide range of interpretations and transactions with the exact text.

Rosenblatt (1978) actually highlights the importance of readers learning "to handle their multiple responses to texts in a variety of complex ways," emphasizing the need to harmonize efferent and aesthetic responses (p. 36). She proposes that the ability allows readers to extract deeper and subtler insights from their readings, fully engaging with both the factual and artistic aspects of texts. Effective and affective

reading goes beyond simply collecting information or reacting emotionally. It entails a sophisticated intersection and reciprocity between these aspects, which enhances understanding, appreciation, and the creation of meaning from the text. By integrating these diverse responses, readers can discover the nuanced meanings and artistic subtleties within the text, resulting in a more comprehensive and satisfying reading experience.

Additionally, Rosenblatt (1993) theorizes how readers approach texts "in terms of [their] fund of past experiences," emphasizing that it is both possible and necessary for them "to reinterpret [their] old sense of things in light of this new literary experience, in light of the new ways of thinking and feeling offered by the work of art" (p. 102). The notion implies that a reader's perspective is constantly evolving. Each transaction with a text not only broadens their understanding but also compels them to reassess their existing beliefs and assumptions critically. The ongoing transaction reshapes the reader's limited personal experiences by linking their habitual responses and desires to the broader emotional and intellectual contexts presented by the author.

Every engagement with a text can enrich the reader's worldview and equip them with new insights and frameworks to navigate future interactions, both literary and real-life. Thus, according to Rosenblatt (1993), such transactions enhance the reader's personal experiences, linking their routine responses and desires to the broader emotional and intellectual frameworks presented by the author. The result is "a wider perspective and a readjustment of the framework of values with which to meet further experiences in literature and life" (p. 102). Therefore, the reading experience becomes transformative, altering the reader's worldview and perspective toward both future texts

and life scenarios. The ongoing reflective process not only deepens their appreciation of literature but also provides them with a flexible and enriched framework for interpreting the world—capturing the essence of the relationship between art and life.

Rosenblatt's transactional theories echo Dewey's perspective on the seamless flow of experiences, emphasizing how each part of an experience not only contributes to but also gains distinctness within the overall continuum. Dewey (1934) describes this process, noting, "As one part leads into another and as one part carries on what went before, each gains distinctness in itself," illustrating how each component enriches the entire experience (p. 36). He elaborates that "The enduring whole is diversified by successive phases that are emphases of its varied colors," indicating that different phases add depth and complexity (p. 36). Thus, both Rosenblatt and Dewey highlight the interdependent nature of experiences, suggesting that each part is integral to a unified, meaningful whole.

Dewey (1934) further emphasizes the uninterrupted nature of authentic experiences, asserting, "Because of continuous merging, there are no holes, mechanical junctions, and dead centers when we have an experience," highlighting their cohesive and seamless quality (p. 36). The seamless integration, according to Dewey, ensures that the entire experience remains unified and meaningful. The notion aligns with Rosenblatt's transaction between the reader and the text, where both continuously influence and reshape each other. It also resonates with broader aesthetic theories by Dewey and Bakhtin, which propose that individuals and their experiences are interconnected within a complex network of relationships and influences.

***Rosenblatt's Poem and Bakhtin's Excess of Seeing as Makings of Thingness***

Rosenblatt (1978) defines the "poem" beyond the literary genre and views it as a real-time unfoldment — a "coming-together" or "compenetration"—between a reader and a text (p.12). The aesthetic transaction involves the reader bringing their whole self, including past experiences, present personality, and future anticipation, and transacting with the structured symbols of the text to synthesize a new experience. Simply put, the poem is the ever-elusive thingness that happens while meaning is co-constructed.

In this respect, Rosenblatt (1978) makes a significant point that without the reader's experiential aesthetic engagement, titles like "Hamlet" or "Moby Dick" are just black marks on paper or sounds in the air (p.16). In other words, the *thingness* between the reader and the work of art transforms the symbols on the page into a vibrant and living *thing* capable of evoking emotions, sparking imagination, and provoking new inspirations. The energetic relationship breathes life into the text, allowing it to resonate with readers across different contexts and times, continually generating new meanings and experiences.

Rosenblatt extends this idea by comparing the reader's role to that of an actor like Barrymore or Gielgud, who personalizes Hamlet with unique interpretations (p.16). Each reader, like an actor on stage, brings a personal touch to the text, creating and recreating the narrative as they read. She notes that as the reader engages with Shakespeare's script, they must summon the sounds, rhythms, and intended meanings of the words, effectively directing not just Hamlet but the entire cast. The aesthetic process highlights that reading is an active and creative act where the reader, guided by the text, brings the narrative, characters, and scenes to life. The experience is deeply

personal and dynamic, transforming the text into an event in the reader's life where thing and thingness converge.

Here, I find the parallels between Rosenblatt's concept of the poem and Bakhtin's excess of seeing particularly compelling. Bakhtin (1990) describes the "excess of seeing" as the reader's capacity to infuse the text with interpretations and meanings that surpass the author's original intentions, essentially engaging in a form of "self-authorship" (p. 148). The additional layer of meaning emerges from the reader's unique perspective, shaped by a context and time distinct from that of the narrative, allowing for the exploration of implications and interpretations the author might not have considered. This notion isn't the only parallel.

Bakhtin (1990) elaborates on the process by changing contexts from reading to exploring what he called the observer's unique perspective, or "excess of seeing," which transforms into a complete and aesthetically rich understanding of another person. He describes the necessity for the observer to "fill in" the horizon of the person being contemplated, meaning to fully understand and complete their perspective without losing their uniqueness. To achieve this, the observer must "empathize or project" themselves into the other person's position, seeing the world as the other sees it. This involves a temporary shift where the observer inhabits the other person's viewpoint ("put myself in his place"), gaining insight into their values and perceptions.

After this empathetic engagement, the observer returns to their perspective and uses the "excess of seeing" to "fill in" and complete the other person's horizon from their unique vantage point. The observer must "enframe" the other, creating a "consummating environment" out of their excess of seeing, knowing, desiring, and

feeling. This means that the observer provides a contextual frame that enhances and completes the observed person's experience, integrating the observer's insights without overriding the other's individuality. The process is about enriching the understanding of the other through a blend of empathy and the observer's unique external perspective. Then, like Rosenblatt's poem, Bakhtin's observer is not just a passive recipient but an active participant in the creation of meaning. Both theories emphasize the collaborative nature of interpretation, where the reader or observer brings their entire being—past experiences, emotions, and insights—into the transaction with the text or person. The engagement transforms the initial encounter into an energetic and evolving relationship, continuously generating new layers of understanding and significance.

## **2.2 Exploring the Nuances and Varied Dimensions of Experience**

In the previous chapter on aesthetics, I examined Dewey's (1934) perspective on aesthetics and experience as inherently structured and patterned, emphasizing the significance of forming "relationships" that integrate various energetic elements (p. 45). Dewey posits that experiences are neither random nor isolated occurrences but are intricate systems evolving through continuous transactions with surrounding environments. Basically, he contends that each experience is composed of many interconnected parts.

Dewey also explores how experiences between the person and their environment are not only continuous but mutually influential, shaping both *things* as he emphasizes the roles of "doing" (actions) and "undergoing" (reactions) in forming the interpenetrating transactions that define experiences. An example would be the process a writer goes through while drafting a story. As the writer crafts sentences and develops

plotlines (doing), they are continuously influenced by the feedback from their narratives and characters (undergoing). The feedback might come in the form of new ideas that emerge as the story unfolds or emotional reactions that adjust the course of the narrative. The transactional relationship between writing and responding to the evolving story exemplifies Dewey's notion of experience as a transaction where both the writer and the text actively shape each other.

Dewey's (1934) perspective highlights that creating experience is reciprocal, not linear or straightforward. Each decision and its consequences contribute to a feedback loop affecting future behaviors and outcomes. Dewey thus sees the experience as a co-creative process, where every transaction with the environment not only transforms the person but also alters the environment. The ongoing exchange ensures that both the individual and their surroundings evolve in tandem.

In this section, I develop a framework that links vital elements of Dewey's concept of experience: the mind, the senses, and emotions. Exploring the intersections of these aspects reveals that Dewey sees experience as a cohesive and interconnected process. While each element operates semi-independently, their combined effect creates a unified experience and facilitates meaning making. The examination within Dewey's framework demonstrates that experience is not a series of isolated events but a web-like sequence of interconnected happenings.

### ***The Mind + Body as Meaningful Verb***

Dewey (1934) critically addresses the common notion that separates the mind from the body, creating a dualism between mental processes and physical actions. He argues that such separation has led to an understanding of the "mind" as something



detached from bodily functions and the external environment, capable of operating independently (p.274). He observes that this perspective has skewed the understanding of mental activities, contrasting sharply with the realities of physical labor and influencing perceptions. Dewey contends that this artificial division undermines people's understanding of how mental and physical efforts are intertwined and mutually reinforcing in daily life.

By treating the mind as a separate thing, there needs to be more appreciation of how cognitive processes (ways of thinking) are embedded in physical activities and how physical conditions and actions influence mental and emotional states. Therefore, when the mind is considered distinct from the body, it overlooks the ways in which thoughts, emotions, and perceptions are intertwined with physical experiences. The separation ignores the reality that mental states are not only reflections of internal mindful processes but are also deeply affected by bodily engagements and the environments navigated. Recognizing this interconnectedness is necessary for a more holistic understanding of human behavior, where physical and mental dimensions are seen as components of a unified system influencing and shaping each other continuously.

Thus, Dewey advocates for an integrated perspective where mental and physical aspects of human experience are seen as interconnected. He emphasizes that effective and affective meaning-making and engagement with the world require acknowledging the intersectionality between thought, feeling, and physical action. Dewey argues that mindful capacities are not isolated but deeply interwoven with bodily experiences and actions. The holistic view challenges the traditional mind-body dualism, suggesting

instead that the mind emerges not only from brain activity but through dynamic reciprocity with the physical environment – they are interdependent.

Dewey (1934) suggests that in daily use, the "mind" encompasses a broad spectrum of activities that blend intellectual mindfulness and emotional aspects, all connected to our transaction with the environment (p.274). The concept of the mind extends beyond simple cognitive functions, incorporating emotional care and practical involvement with tangible problems and concerns. For instance, "mind" refers to various actions such as remembering ("We are reminded of this and that"), focusing attention ("We bring the mind to bear on our problems"), and indicating intent ("We have a mind to do this and that") (p.274). Significantly, the mind is also engaged in emotional care, exemplified by a mother who "minds her baby," showing concern and affection beyond intellectual processes (p.274). Moreover, Dewey notes that "to mind" encompasses reactions ranging from cautious behavior ("we mind our step") to compliance ("children are told to mind their parents"), highlighting its role in guiding actions that are both practical and intentional within social and personal contexts (p.274).

Dewey highlights that the mind is an active, energetic, and moving force that influences every aspect of human experience and decision-making. The expansive interpretation challenges the simplistic views of the mind as isolated from action, emphasizing its essential role in both shaping and responding to the environment. Understanding the mind in such a comprehensive way sheds light on the continuous and intricate nature of experience and its connections to everyday life and broader cultural contexts.

Dewey suggests reimagining the "mind" not as a noun—a static entity solely responsible for cognitive functions like attention, intention, care, perception, and memory—but rather as a verb (p.275). He emphasizes that the "mind is primarily a verb," highlighting its active role in engaging with the various situations individuals encounter (p.274). The notion means the mind should not be viewed simply as a storehouse of thoughts or an abstract thing but as an integral part of everyday actions and responses, continuously transacting with the world. The perspective suggests that minding is not a passive activity but an embodied one, where the act of minding is inseparably connected to physical actions (the doing). Thus, through active engagement, the mind both influences and is influenced by its surroundings, making our mindful processes indistinguishable from the contexts in which they occur.

An example of mindful doing would be a writer crafting a novel. As the writer develops characters, plots, twists, and settings, the act of minding is not merely about stringing words together or drawing on literary techniques. Instead, it involves actively engaging with the emerging narrative and the emotional resonance of the story. The engagement encompasses attention to detail, intention in storytelling, and perceptive adjustments based on the narrative's direction and impact. The mind, in this scenario, is deeply connected to the physical action of writing and the intellectual activity of crafting a story. Each decision the writer makes is a result of this continuous, mindful transaction with the text, showing how the mind actively shapes and is shaped by the creative process of writing.

Another reason Dewey (1934) criticizes the view of the mind as an isolated thing is that such a perspective disconnects it from the bodily and transactional processes

that are fundamental to human experience. He points out that the separation is problematic because it "removes the mind from necessary connection with the objects and events, past, present, and future, of the environment with which responsive activities are inherently connected" (p.275). According to Dewey, the notion not only misrepresents the nature of the mind but also diminishes the body to "a dead lump," severing it from the vital processes of the mind (p.275). By neglecting the transactional nature between the mind and its physical and social environments, the perspective fails to capture the full complexity of human experience, where the mind is actively involved in both influencing and being influenced by the surrounding world. Therefore, reintegrating the mind with the body and environment is crucial for a more accurate exploration of human experience.

Additionally, Dewey (1934) elaborates on the idea that the "mind is more than consciousness," depicting it as a stable yet evolving base where consciousness serves as the more immediate, perceptible layer (p.277). The concept is significant as it highlights the mind's dual role as both a repository and an active processor of experiences. The multifaceted function enables the mind to move beyond the immediate space of consciousness, merging past insights with present encounters. Consequently, the mind is not cataloging events but actively interpreting and responding to them, cultivating a level of understanding and adaptability vital for managing complex environments. Dewey describes the mind's transformation as occurring through "the joint tuition of interest and circumstance," indicating a gradual evolution that incorporates and integrates experiences over time (p.277). In this capacity, the mind operates like an archive, constantly absorbing and synthesizing experiences from both

past and present. These experiences persistently mold and modify the mind's framework, affecting how individuals react to new challenges. Therefore, the mind is not simply a static backdrop but an active force in shaping perceptions and transactions, subtly yet significantly evolving through continuous meaning-making and the intricacies of lived experiences.

Dewey (1934) portrays consciousness as characterized by its rapid shifts, highlighting the transactional reciprocity between established personal dispositions and new external circumstances. He describes the transaction as the "continuous readjustment of self and the world in experience" (p. 277). In this framework, consciousness serves as the immediate platform where personal habits, ideas, and predispositions encounter the ever-changing external world. The exchange is marked by high energy, with consciousness providing the spaces for real-time adjustments and adaptations. As people encounter new scenarios, their consciousness actively engages, processes, and integrates these experiences, continually recalibrating the relationship between the self and the external world to preserve a coherent reality.

The intensity and clarity of consciousness, as presented by Dewey (1934), vary according to the demands of these adjustments, becoming "more acute and intense" when substantial readjustments are necessary, especially when adapting to new challenges or environments (p. 277). Furthermore, Dewey describes the state of consciousness as "turbid" during periods when the mind's meanings are being contested or redefined without a clear direction, indicative of confusion or uncertainty (p.277). Such periods are often characterized by ambiguity or upheaval and cloud cognitive clarity as individuals strive to assimilate new information or adjust to changes.

The state typically precedes growth and adaptation, signaling the integration of new experiences and perspectives that challenge established frameworks. Although turbulence can be disorienting, it is a necessary phase in the developmental process, setting the stage for a more refined and comprehensive understanding of one's surroundings.

However, as Dewey (1934) observes, when "a decisive meaning emerges," clarity is restored (p.277). The notion indicates that consciousness achieves tranquility and clarity when a balance between old dispositions and new circumstances is established, facilitating smooth transactions and reducing friction. Thus, consciousness is a dynamic process that fluctuates between clarity and confusion, depending on how effectively it integrates new experiences with existing cognitive frameworks. When new information seamlessly aligns with pre-existing beliefs or knowledge, consciousness experiences minimal disruption. But when there is a substantial discrepancy between new experiences and established knowledge, consciousness enters a turbulent state as it attempts to accommodate and reconcile these differences. Therefore, consciousness not only mirrors our immediate responses to the world but also represents our efforts to understand and adapt to it.

### ***Sensory Aspects of Mind and Body Experiences***

Dewey (1934) theorized that "much of our experience as it is actually lived under present economic and legal institutional conditions" fails to engage the senses or bring meaningful realizations into daily life (p.22). Although he wrote this line in *Art as Experience* at a very different time, culture, and context, observations remain strikingly relevant.

Many of my freshman expository writing students write about their struggle with their complex relationships with social media. They often observe that these platforms render daily transactions and relationships abstract and impersonal, distancing them from the tactile and personal connections that Dewey treasured. Dewey (1934) noted that sensations are frequently reduced to "mechanical stimuli or as irritated stimulations," diminishing their true significance (p.22).

A recent study titled "The 'Stickiness' of Face-to-Face Principle" delves into the enduring importance of face-to-face communication in an era dominated by remote communication technologies. It poses a thought-provoking question: "What has made face-to-face communication so hard to abandon?" (Collins, 2022, p.117). Despite the proliferation of digital communication tools, the necessity for face-to-face interaction continues, emphasizing its crucial role across various professional fields. The study presents detailed case studies involving Linux software developers, international retail managers, emergency forest fire teams, and university staff during the COVID-19 pandemic, showcasing that although remote communication is widespread, the unique benefits of direct, in-person interactions remain indispensable.

Collins (2022) argues that face-to-face communication holds a "stickiness" crucial for deeper understanding, trust, and collaborative efficiency—attributes that remote communications cannot fully replicate (p. 116). Despite the advantages of these technologies, they often lead to a reduction in physical, face-to-face transactions. People frequently become more absorbed in digital screens than engaging with those around them, experiencing life through notifications and curated digital feeds rather than

engaging directly with the world. The trend mirrors the kind of detachment from direct experiential understanding that Dewey critiqued decades ago.

Further, Dewey brings back the idea of the tendency to dissociate the mind from the body, which leads to scenarios where the senses are used "to arouse passion but not to fulfill the interest of insight" (p.22). This means that practices often emphasize immediate emotional reactions over deeper mindful involvement. He contends that such an approach limits people's capacity to process and reflect on their experiences fully. Instead of promoting a nuanced understanding of the world, it fosters superficial transactions where sensations serve merely as triggers for emotional responses rather than openings for thoughtful analysis, learning, and meaning making. The separation not only diminishes experience but also impedes people's ability to make meaningful connections with their environment and themselves.

To illustrate this point, using social media as an example, the phenomenon that Dewey is addressing is evident in how these platforms often feature sensational or emotionally charged content. Social media algorithms are designed to prioritize content that triggers solid and immediate reactions, such as shock or joy. The emphasis on evoking emotional responses can eclipse opportunities for deeper understanding or substantive conversation. Users find themselves in a loop of reactive engagement, drawn to the emotional allure of the content rather than contemplating its broader context or the insights it might offer. The fervent environment promotes a type of transaction that prioritizes quick, visceral reactions over thoughtful contemplation, echoing Dewey's concerns about the separation of the mind from the body and the consequent neglect of insightful and meaning-making engagement.



Dewey (1934) also highlights the issue that "different senses do not unite to tell a common and enlarged story," pointing out the fragmentation of sensory experiences in contemporary settings (p. 22). Rather than sensory inputs coming together to provide a holistic understanding of the environment, they often function independently. Each sense conveys its data in isolation, which leads to a piecemeal perception of reality. The separation impedes the development of a unified perspective where the senses work in concert to enhance interactions with the world. Dewey notes that people might see without feeling or hear without the additional context provided by sight, creating a disjointed and incoherent sensory experience. Thus, he advocates for an integrated sensory environment where sight, sound, touch, taste, and smell are harmoniously combined, thereby enriching experiences and fostering more meaningful engagement with one's surroundings.

Consider the dynamics of short video-sharing platforms like TikTok, where users frequently engage with short, rapid videos crafted to grab attention immediately. *The New York Times* highlighted that "TikTok's recommendation algorithm, which figures out what users like and populates a customized feed of addictive videos, drives the content delivery on these platforms (Maheshwari, 2024). Such social media platforms rely heavily on algorithms that favor virality, often focusing on content that is visually striking or emotionally provocative. The environment pushes creators to produce content that is instantly captivating but typically lacks depth or narrative continuity, with each video existing as an isolated piece rather than part of a larger story. This style of engagement promotes quick, sensory responses at the expense of reflective or analytical thought. The fleeting nature of these encounters means that content is consumed in quick,

separate spurts, potentially hindering a user's ability to integrate these fragments into a comprehensive understanding of a topic. The focus is on quick gratification rather than prolonged engagement, reflecting Dewey's critique of the fragmentation of sensory experiences and the superficial quality of such interactions.

Therefore, Dewey (1934) posits that "sense" covers a wide range from "bare physical and emotional shock to sense itself—that is, the meaning of things present in immediate experience" (p. 23). The passage suggests that sensory experiences span from basic physical sensations and emotional responses to more profound, interpretative understandings and meaning making. Dewey views the senses not as passive receptors but as active agents in the creation of meaning. As people engage with their environment, their senses do more than simply register information; they interpret and assign significance to their experiences, transforming raw data into meaningful insights that can deepen their continuous transaction with the world.

As such, Dewey (1934) envisions the senses as active elements in the world, akin to the mind, allowing people to discover "the varied wonder and splendor of this world" through the qualities they perceive and interpret (p. 23). The perspective portrays sensory experiences as energetic processes that actively mold one's understanding and appreciation of the world. Through active sensory perception, people can transact purposefully and intensely with their surroundings, making sense of and finding meaning in them. Dewey argues that the senses, much like mindful functions, are essential for navigating environments, enabling individuals to recognize and cherish the wonder and beauty inherent in everyday life.

Dewey's theorization that the senses actively participate in the creation of meaning underlines the integral connection between the body and mind, emphasizing their inseparability in the spaces of experiencing and meaning making. By considering the senses as active agents rather than passive receivers, Dewey notes that sensory inputs are not just collected but are interpreted and integrated into one's mindful framework. The idea highlights the ongoing transactions and reciprocal influences between the body through sensory experiences and the mind through interpretation and meaning making. Once again, this notion challenges the dualism that separates mindful processes from bodily sensations, suggesting instead that meaningful experiences emerge from the intersection and reciprocity of sensory data and mental processing. Thus, Dewey emphasizes that perception—encompassing mind, body, and senses—is a dynamic, transactional process involving continuous feedback loops between the external environment and the internal mind. Thus, Dewey posits that the senses collect information that the mind interprets, and these interpretations, in turn, guide further sensory engagements with the world, demonstrating a continuous exchange of information between mind and body – an embodied mindfulness.

### ***The Emotional Mind***

Dewey (1934) theorizes that emotions are often perceived as simple and sometimes vague sensations, akin to labels such as joy, sorrow, or anger, and they can also be viewed as static phenomena that suddenly arise and "remain unchanged for various durations" (p.43). Simply put, an emotion appears, and that's the end of it. However, Dewey counters this notion by noting that "emotions are qualities, when they are significant, of a complex experience that moves and changes" (p.43). In essence,

Dewey suggests that emotions are not static but energetic attributes that reflect significant shifts within complex experiences. Emotions evolve and adapt, mirroring the ongoing transactions and transitions in people's lives, such as forming new relationships, encountering challenges, or achieving personal milestones. Each of these situations elicits different emotional responses influenced by past experiences, current circumstances, and future expectations.

Dewey (1934) also views emotions as integral elements of the experiential narrative or "drama" of an experience, evolving as situations progress (p.43). For example, the initial feeling often described as "falling in love at first sight" is not the entirety of love but the start of an emotional journey that deepens over time, incorporating feelings of affection and care (p.43). The perspective is essential for meaning making because it illustrates how emotions develop in response to changing contexts and deepen through continued transactions and experiences. Emotions such as love, sparked by a fleeting encounter, can expand and morph as ongoing actions and mutual meaning-making sustain them. This means emotions are neither isolated nor static but part of a continuous narrative, influencing and being influenced by people's transactions and relationships with their environment and others. Recognizing the developmental nature of emotions allows for an understanding of their role not just in marking moments of interest and change but also in contributing to both personal and collective human experiences. When considering collective human experiences driven by the drama of emotion, examples like social movements come to mind, where shared feelings of injustice, hope, and solidarity evolve and deepen, fueling collective actions and shaping the course of history.

However, Dewey distinguishes between physical reactions and genuine emotional states, explaining that physical reactions are immediate, reflexive responses to stimuli or things. In contrast, genuine emotional states are more intricate and involve a reflective component. For example, a sudden jump caused by a scare or an immediate blush from embarrassment is initially a reflex. They only become *emotional*—fear or shame—when integrated into a larger, meaningful context. The jump becomes part of emotional fear when it relates to a perceived threat that needs addressing or avoiding. Similarly, a blush transforms into the emotion of shame when connected to a perceived negative judgment from others. Essentially, emotions are colored and defined by their context, transforming initial physical reactions into states that can influence decisions, shape transactions, and meaning making.

Therefore, Dewey (1934) theorized the transformative impact of integrating the mind and emotions in shaping experiences, drawing an analogy between physical combinations and experiential synthesis. He likened the amalgamation of physical objects from various regions—like mixing ingredients from different cuisines to create a distinctive dish (think fusion dishes like Asian egg crepes and taco pizza)—to the convergence of experiences and ideas within the mind. Dewey noted, "The miracle of mind is that something similar takes place in experience without physical transport and assembling" (p.45). The metaphor emphasizes how, within the mindful space, disparate emotions, experiences, and new ideas from diverse sources and contexts converge to create new meanings. In essence, the mind functions as a melting pot, where different elements blend to form innovative insights. The process is ongoing, reflecting the mind's ability to assimilate and transform a variety of inputs into a cohesive whole.

Dewey (1934) also highlights the essential role of emotion in such mindful synthesis, describing it as a "moving and cementing force" that not only selects compatible elements but also infuses them with a distinct essence, thereby providing a qualitative unity to components that may be "externally disparate and dissimilar" (p.45). In other words, emotions act as a transformative agent within the mind, guiding the integration of various experiences and perceptions. They enable the mind not just to collect but to connect ideas and feelings, integrating them into a cohesive narrative. Emotional engagement facilitates a sense of continuity and coherence, turning isolated bits of information into meaningful, *lived experiences*. The transformative happening illustrates how emotions influence the mind, enhancing its ability to understand and relate to the world in a more meaningful way.

### ***Experience as Spaces for Aesthetics***

Dewey (1934) characterizes an "experience" as a moment charged with an enhanced sense of life and engagement, awakening the mind, bodily senses, and emotions (p.18). In such instances, a person is deeply immersed, vividly perceiving the world around them using all available faculties. This is not just solitary contemplation but involves "active and alert commerce with the world" (p.18). Essentially, it represents an active interpenetrating transaction with the environment where mind, body, perception, and emotion seamlessly blend—a "complete interpenetration of self and the world of objects and events," fostering a connection and fluid exchange between internal experiences and external realities (p.18).

Dewey (1934) also emphasizes that experiencing a happening is not about yielding to randomness or chaos but rather about maintaining what he calls "stability

that is not stagnation but is rhythmic and developing" (p.18). Essentially, Dewey suggests that experiences exhibit dynamic stability, where changes occur within a structured and coherent framework. This type of stability fosters continuity, not through rigidity but through a rhythmic progression that mirrors the natural ebb and flow of life. Such experiences are vibrant with movement and transformation, enabling understanding and meaning making within a dependable yet adaptable structure.

Further elaborating on the balance in experiences, Dewey (1934) draws on Aristotle's concept of the "mean proportional," relevant to both virtue and aesthetics (p.42). He clarifies that "mean" and "proportion" are not strictly mathematical terms but are qualities inherent in an experience as it moves toward fulfillment (p.42). Dewey proposes that an experience is interconnected and holistic, intended to reach a resolution that completes an energetic cycle rather than stagnating or remaining unresolved. He asserts, "Every integral experience moves toward a close, an ending since it ceases only when the energies active in it have done their proper work" (p.42). Therefore, Dewey views the culmination of an experience as a necessary and natural conclusion that emerges when its various components have effectively transacted to achieve a sense of completeness. The process involves a finely tuned balance that integrates and harmonizes different elements, ensuring that the experience concludes in a way that is satisfying and complete, with no potential unexplored or aspect unresolved. But that's not to say that it ends there.

Dewey (1934) argues that a complete and unified experience lacks "holes, mechanical junctions, and dead centers" and is instead marked by "pauses, places of rest" that enhance its flow (p.39). These pauses prevent the experience from dissipating

or losing impact, infusing it with a distinctive quality. Natural breaks provide opportunities for reflection and assimilation, allowing individuals to absorb and appreciate the experience fully. Additionally, these pauses contribute to the rhythm and coherence of the experience, making it more meaningful and impactful. By strategically inserting these rests, the experience remains cohesive.

Dewey (1934) also views an experience as the "fulfillment of an organism in its struggles and achievements in a world of things," representing the essence of aesthetic expression (p.18). He posits that even the most straightforward experiences carry the "promise of that delightful perception which is aesthetic experience" (p.18). Essentially, every genuine experience holds the potential for aesthetic appreciation and artistic realization, providing a window into the meanings derived from fully engaging with life. Dewey maintains that the aesthetic value of an experience stems from its ability to integrate and harmonize diverse components into a cohesive whole, and the unifying process transforms everyday transactions and relationships into moments of insight and pleasure, lifting them to the realm of the aesthetic.

### **2.3 Navigating Intersecting Paths of an Aesthetic Experience**

As I mentioned earlier, when I began this work, I was burdened with a plethora of misconceptions, misunderstandings, and various other mis-fill-in-the-blanks. Frankly, I was unaware, and in my ignorance, I often resorted to making assumptions. While adopting a *whatever* attitude toward theoretical work is frowned upon, relying on assumptions is decidedly more problematic because it involves fabricating ideas or facts without any basis. Well, I did it anyway, and they were about aesthetic experiences.



I believed that an aesthetic experience meant you felt inspired, creative, and very motivated. Essentially, you felt *awesome*. I may have even written a little essay on how I chased aesthetic experiences as a working writer for a graduate school assignment. Oops! I soon discovered that Dewey's (1934) theories on aesthetic experience had nothing to do with feeling awesome or otherwise as he notes, "the undergoing phase is by itself pleasurable or painful is a matter of particular conditions and indifferent to the total aesthetic quality" (p. 42). His main point is that aesthetic quality is not about immediate emotional reactions—whether positive or negative—but about the deeper engagement and connection that an experience fosters. Dewey emphasizes that the actual value of an aesthetic experience lies in its ability to integrate and enrich our understanding, transforming perceptions and emotions into a cohesive and meaningful narrative. The integration makes an experience aesthetic, not just the surface-level feelings it evokes.

Dewey's concept of an aesthetic experience resonates with Bakhtin's (1990) reflections on the distinctive aesthetic experience derived from an author's comprehensive perspective of the characters within a narrative. Bakhtin refers to this as the "invariably determinate and stable excess," which encapsulates the depth of insight and overarching understanding that the author inherently possesses about each character's motivations, struggles, and arcs, exceeding what is directly observable or known by the characters themselves (p.12). The elevated perspective is essential for crafting a narrative that is not merely a series of disconnected events but a harmonious and meaningful artistic creation. By fully understanding each character ("the whole of each hero") and skillfully interweaving the threads of their lives into the broader tapestry

of the story ("the whole of the event which constitutes their life"), the author produces a complete, unified work ("the whole of a work") (p.12).

When interpreted as an aesthetic experience, Bakhtin's perspective suggests that the beauty of a literary work of art stems from the author's ability to transcend individual character perspectives and merge them into a cohesive and compelling narrative. The synthesis, guided by the author's all-encompassing vision, creates an aesthetic unity that invites readers to experience the narrative not merely as observers but as participants in a shared artistic journey, thus enhancing their appreciation and understanding of the literature. This mirrors how an aesthetic experience should transform and deepen the engagement with the art, bringing about a profound connection and consummation between the artwork and its audience.

But who's to say that people are not engaging in a similar process of consummation with their own experiences? Just as an author orchestrates a narrative, people also integrate their experiences into a meaningful life story, where moments are not isolated but linked, creating a personal and collective journey that resonates with their sense of identity and understanding of the world. The ongoing narrative construction is a creative process that shapes how they perceive, feel, and respond to life's complexities, much like how readers transact with a story.

In this section, I explore essential shades of Dewey's theories on aesthetic experiences to present the argument that the essence and value of an aesthetic experience lie in its ability to cultivate deeper engagement and create a cohesive, meaningful experience rather than in eliciting immediate and surface-level responses. First, I examine how imagination significantly influences our perceptions, playing a

pivotal role in shaping how people interpret and engage with the environment. Next, I discuss the ubiquity of aesthetic experiences in everyday life, highlighting how moments of aesthetic engagement can emerge in the most mundane settings. Additionally, I explore the creative and aesthetic processes fundamental to creating works of art, considering the intricate dynamics that artists navigate to bring their visions to fruition. Finally, I address the various factors that can impede or obstruct these aesthetic experiences, analyzing the barriers that can disrupt the reciprocity between perception and creativity, which consummates into an aesthetic experience.

### ***Aesthetic Experience is in the Imagination***

Dewey (1934) explores the intricate relationship between imagination and aesthetic experience, drawing insight from Keats' philosophy. He quotes Keats: “The simple, imaginative mind may have its rewards in the repetitions of its silent workings coming continually on the Spirit with a fine suddenness”—a remark Dewey considers essential for understanding the psychology of productive thought (p.35). The statement suggests that imagination is not just a mechanism for crafting fantasies but a dynamic process that continually revisits and refines ideas, significantly and unexpectedly impacting the spirit. Dewey elaborates that imagination is a vital mindful force that enriches engagement with the aesthetic aspects of experiences, thereby enhancing our perceptions and emotional responses. He emphasizes that imagination acts as a bridge connecting abstract thought with tangible experience, thereby infusing daily life with enhanced depth and beauty. Thus, continuous engagement with the world through imagination doesn't just generate or replicate things; it transforms perception into a resonant, deeply felt experience.

Dewey (1934) highlights two pivotal ideas from Keats' views. First, he discusses how "reasonings" start chaotically, like the erratic movements of a wild animal, but evolve to become spontaneous and "instinctive," eventually transforming into expressions that are "sensuous and immediate, poetic" (p.35). The evolution illustrates how raw, untamed beginnings of thought processes, through the nurturing of imagination, develop into intuitive and impactful insights with poetic immediacy. Dewey emphasizes how initially disorganized and impulsive thinking, once refined by imaginative faculties, metamorphoses into an instinctive and elegant articulation of ideas characterized by their sensuous and poetic nature (p.35). The transformation reveals that even the wildest, most unstructured thoughts, when shaped by the creative force of imagination, lead to profound, eloquently expressed insights.

The process not only enhances the thinker's connection with the subject but also elevates the experiential quality of the thoughts, allowing them to resonate on both an emotional and aesthetic level. Thus, Dewey notes how chaotic mental stirrings, through the application of imagination and consummation, become significant and evocative aesthetic expressions. It is reminiscent of how writers start with a simple observational note—a decaying flower, a fleeting emotion, the dimming light of dusk, or the slight aroma of iron when surrounded by raw beef—and transform these initial sparks through imaginative engagement into layered narratives that capture the complexity of human experience. Like Keats' poetic insights, prose thrives on such transformation, turning everyday moments into reflections on life, art, and identity.

The second point Dewey (1934) discusses is Keats' belief that reasoning alone, which excludes imagination and sensory elements, cannot fully comprehend truth.

Dewey quotes Keats' poetic line, "Beauty is truth, truth beauty—that is all Ye know on earth, and all ye need to know," to emphasize that Keats saw beauty (a product of imagination) as synonymous with truth (p.34). This aligns with the philosophical tradition Keats wrote within, where 'truth' pertains more to wisdom and the lore of good and evil rather than mere factual correctness. Keats connects truth to the human condition—specifically the grappling with good and evil, life and death.

For Keats and Dewey, by extension, philosophy fails to answer existential questions without the aid of imaginative intuition. Keats rejects the idea that only divine revelation or empirical reasoning can resolve these questions. Instead, he posits that the insight of imagination is sufficient. This belief is encapsulated in the essence of aesthetic experience, where intense perception offers not just solace but a profound conviction. Dewey concludes by contrasting two philosophies: one that embraces life's uncertainties and mysteries, using imagination and art to deepen the experience, epitomized by Shakespeare and Keats, and another, not detailed here, likely characterized by its reliance on empirical or rational certainties.

### ***Consummation of the Artist and Aesthetic Thing***

Dewey (1934) explores the intricate process of aesthetic creation, emphasizing the need to transform both the raw material of physical substances and the internal, emotional content to achieve aesthetic expression. He asserts that "the primitive and raw material of experience needs to be reworked in order to secure artistic expression" (p.77). Reworking is often crucial in cases of intense inspiration, as the emotion initially evoked by the original material must be modified and integrated with new material. Thus, artistic creation is not merely a physical act of assembling or molding materials

but also an introspective process where the artist's internal visions and emotions transform. The dual process of external craftsmanship and internal reflection ensures the transformation from raw to refined, both materially and emotionally, bridging personal experience with tangible *things*.

As Dewey (1934) explains, while it is universally recognized that physical materials in art must transform—marble must be chipped, pigments laid on canvas, words composed—it is less commonly understood that a similar process must occur with the "inner" materials such as images, observations, memories, and emotions (p. 77). These internal elements must also be progressively re-formed and managed to create a cohesive and expressive aesthetic act. Dewey underlines that such transformation is not a matter of two separate operations—one focusing on the physical materials and the other on the internal content. Instead, he argues that "the work is artistic in the degree in which the two functions of transformation are effected by a single operation" (p. 78). To be more precise, the artistic process involves a seamless integration where the alteration of physical materials and the refinement of emotional and intellectual content occur concurrently. The dual process allows for a more profound synthesis or consummation, where the external creation reflects the internal vision of the artist. It's full engagement of both the mind and the medium, entangling together the tangible and intangible into a single expressive *thing*.

Dewey (1934) also notes that whether an artist works out their original emotional idea through auditory or visual imagery or directly in the actual medium is relatively minor. "The physical process develops imagination, while imagination is conceived in terms of concrete material" (p.78). The interdependent development of inner and outer

materials is essential for producing something beyond a mere technical document or a familiar illustration. The point is significant as consummation, like Bakhtin's theorization of creating the hero, highlights the transformation and integration that occurs within the creative process. In Bakhtin's perspective, the author's deep engagement with each character's world not only shapes the narrative but also allows the characters to emerge fully formed and compelling, like how an artist's engagement with both the physical and emotional aspects of their works allow for a richer, more textured expression. The synthesis where thought and material coalesce produces works of art that are not only aesthetically expressive but also meaningful, embodying a nuanced translation of life's complexities into art. Thus, the artist, much like Bakhtin's author, crafts a narrative or visual art piece where the depth of creative engagement brings about a synthesis and consummation that is both reflective and transformative, echoing the continuous dialogue between the creator's vision and the medium's potential.

Additionally, Dewey (1934) notes that the emergence of works of art is not sudden but a gradual process of refinement and transformation. If one could trace this process from its inception, one would find that it begins with an "emotion comparatively gross and undefined," which gains definite shape through changes in the imagined material (p.78). What many lack to be artists is not the initial emotion or technical skill but the "capacity to work a vague idea and emotion over into terms of some definite medium" (p.78). In other words, the true challenge and skill of the artist lie not in possessing emotional depth or technical ability but in the ability to channel and mold these raw elements into a coherent and expressive form that communicates effectively with others. The process of transformation—wherein the undefined becomes defined,

and the inchoate finds form—is at the heart of aesthetic creation as it requires a dynamic transaction between the artist's inner experiences and the chosen artistic medium, demanding a sensitive negotiation that balances raw, spontaneous energy with thoughtful, deliberate crafting. The metamorphosis of raw emotional and conceptual material into works of art illustrates not just a mastery of technique but an alchemy of human experience, turning the personal and universal into some-*thing* tangible and evocative.

Therefore, Dewey (1934) explains that if aesthetic expression were merely a straightforward task, artistic creation would be simple. However, between conception and realization lies a long gestation period, during which both inner emotion and external material are transformed. The transformation changes the character of the original emotion, making it "distinctively esthetic in nature" (p.70). As such, "emotion is esthetic when it adheres to an object formed by an expressive act," reflecting the profound and interconnected nature of artistic creation as defined by Dewey (p.79). This means that the essence of an aesthetic experience is not found in raw emotions alone, nor in the physical creation of art. Instead, it arises from a complex process where emotions are refined and intertwined with creative expression, culminating in a work that is more than the sum of its parts. The dynamic synthesis of feeling and form is what imbues the work of art with its emotional resonance and transformative power, enabling it to communicate on a profound level with its audience. In essence, Dewey highlights that works of art transcend simple craftsmanship as they are the embodiment of human experience, crafted through a meticulous process of emotional and material alchemy.



On a different note, Dewey (1934) discusses the nature of aesthetic emotion and how it is differentiated from more raw or natural emotions through the act of artistic expression, noting that "Expression is the clarification of turbid emotion; our appetites know themselves when they are reflected in the mirror of art, and as they know themselves, they are transfigured" (p.80). The passage highlights the transformative power of art in clarifying and refining emotions that are initially unclear or muddled. The reflection of these emotions in works of art allows them to be understood and fundamentally altered, becoming what Dewey describes as an "emotion that is distinctively aesthetic" (p.80). The notion is significant because it focuses on the role of works of art not just as a form of thing but as a vital means of emotional exploration and communication. Aesthetic expressions act as a catalyst that transforms personal, often chaotic feelings into a shared language that can be appreciated and understood by others. The process not only enriches the individual's emotional life but also bridges personal experiences with universal themes, fostering a connection between individuals and cultures. In this way, works of art become an essential tool for human connection, illustrating that aesthetic experiences are essential for more than just artistic appreciation—they are foundational to the very way people process and transact with emotional realities.

Furthermore, Dewey uses the example of an irritated person to illustrate how emotions can be redirected constructively through aesthetic expression. He describes how an individual overwhelmed by irritation can choose not to act directly on this emotion, which could lead to destructive outcomes, but instead channel it into an activity like "tidying" a room (p.80). The indirect expression of emotion is not a suppression but

a transformation: "He uses his emotion, switching it into indirect channels prepared by prior occupations and interests" (p.80). According to Dewey, the process orders the emotion, aligning it with the orderly state of the room, thereby transforming the raw emotion into something aesthetic. Then, the transformation doesn't just manage the emotional energy but creatively repurposes it into productive and satisfying tasks, turning potential negative outbursts into positive actions that have tangible results. By reorganizing the environment, the person not only calms their immediate irritation but also enhances the surroundings, thus experiencing a sense of accomplishment and aesthetic pleasure. The emotional state is not eradicated but evolved, and the changed external conditions reflect the internal emotional adjustment, embodying Dewey's belief that artful expression and aesthetic experience are deeply interwoven with everyday activities and, dare I say, personal growth.

Thus, Dewey (1934) highlights that the essence of aesthetic transformation involves converting natural emotional impulses into aesthetic expressions through indirect, constructive activities. By redirecting emotions in this way, an individual not only prevents potential destructive outcomes but also transforms these emotions into something both beautiful and fulfilling. Dewey explains, "The emotion that attaches itself to or is interpenetrated by the resulting object is esthetic," underlining that aesthetic emotion emerges from how emotions are creatively managed and expressed. So, next time, don't get mad. Clean your room!

***Everyday Aesthetic Experiences and Dangers of High Art***

Dewey (1934) disputes the notion that art is separate from everyday life, arguing that such a division leads to misconceptions about the nature and essence of art. He observes that art is often revered and placed on a "remote pedestal," yet many daily activities are imbued and colored with inherent aesthetic qualities (p.4). Dewey points to examples such as movies, jazz music, comic strips, and sensational tabloid news stories (a personal favorite), highlighting that these are vibrant and meaningful forms of art for many. However, they are often overlooked because they are so integrated into daily life rather than displayed in museums or galleries. The perspective resonates with my experience as a former magazine writer and a writing teacher as it argues for the importance of recognizing and valuing the aesthetic merit present in various media forms.

Recently, I accompanied a group of college students to the Museum of Modern Art in New York City. To my astonishment, the first-floor exhibited items reminiscent of my childhood, including a putty-colored Macintosh computer—the very model on which I played the video game *Oregon Trail*. For those unfamiliar with the game, back in the day, it operated purely on text-based scenarios, prompting players to *write* responses. Now, both the computer and the game are considered pieces of technological art, marking significant milestones in the evolution of digital interfaces and computing technology.

Dewey's notion reminds me of Ahmed (2010), who noted, "To be affected by something is to evaluate that thing. Evaluations are expressed in how bodies turn toward things. To give value to things is to shape what is near us" (p. 31). She suggests that emotional and physical responses to thing and environments are not merely

reactions but active evaluations that dictate how individuals orient themselves towards them. Giving value to these things, Ahmed argues, essentially shapes one's immediate surroundings. The process involves a dynamic interplay between perceptions and the objects encountered, allowing for the transformation of ordinary items into subjects of aesthetic value based on engagement and the meanings attributed to them. This aligns with Dewey's idea that everyday objects can gain significant aesthetic and cultural value through changes in perception and context, illustrating a continuous dialogue between individual experiences and the evolving significance of the thing around them.

Ahmed (2010) articulates how pleasure and preference influence engagement with the world. Things that provide pleasure integrate into what she describes as the "bodily horizon" (p.32). The horizon serves as a living archive of preferences, which in turn shape and define identities. She proposes rethinking the bodily horizon as a "horizon of likes," highlighting that personal and emotional landscapes are sculpted by preferences (p.32). These preferences arrange the immediate environment, drawing certain things closer while keeping others at bay. Openness is essential here as the incorporation of new things into one's life depends on how these things resonate with existing likes. If a thing aligns with preferences, it is welcomed into the "near sphere"—the personally curated space around oneself (p.32). In contrast, things that clash with these preferences are excluded, reinforcing the boundaries of this personal space. Thus, selective engagement with things not only defines the immediate surroundings but also marks the limits of willingness to explore and interact. By distancing from disliked objects, individuals define the territories they avoid and set their personal limits. These boundaries, both emotional and psychological, determine not just where

individuals go but also who they are in relation to the world. Ahmed's framework demonstrates that personal likes and dislikes are crucial, shaping how individuals construct meaning in the everyday.

Ahmed (2010) also explores the social impact and relationships of how things circulate within communities and affect relationships. She describes things as "sticky" because they come pre-loaded with values—deemed either good or bad, capable of bringing happiness or unhappiness (p.35). Stickiness is not merely about the physical properties of things but about the emotional and social values attributed to them. Ahmed suggests that the social bond, or the cohesion within groups, is significantly influenced by how these sticky objects circulate among individuals. Groups form and are held together by a shared orientation towards particular objects that they collectively perceive as sources of happiness or goodness. The shared orientation is not just about liking the same things; it's about investing in the same things as potential causes of happiness, which aligns with the group members' directions or purposes.

The implication here is that social cohesion is rooted in shared values and emotional investments in the same things, which steer the group's collective emotions and actions. When individuals align around the same desired things, believing that these things will bring them happiness, they are unified toward a common goal or sentiment. The alignment aids in maintaining and reinforcing social bonds as the group collectively moves toward what is considered good and steers clear of what is not, building a shared sense of identity and purpose based on these joint emotional investments.

Thus, regarding experiences and meaning making, it suggests that the things individuals and groups are drawn to play a crucial role in shaping their experiences and the meanings they derive from their environment. Meaning making, then, is not merely an individual endeavor but a collective process where shared emotions and values about certain things can result in a unified experience within a group. As individuals and groups emotionally invest in specific things, these items become symbols of shared values and aspirations, influencing the narrative and identity of the community. Consequently, the circulation and perception of things as good or bad not only mirror existing social bonds but also actively shape them, creating a feedback loop where things reinforce or reshape communal ties and identities based on the collective meanings assigned to them.

Further, Dewey (1934) critiques the practice of placing fine art on an unattainable pedestal, thus detaching it from everyday experiences. He notes that when art becomes overly remote, it incites an "esthetic hunger," leading people towards more accessible, albeit possibly less sophisticated, forms of engagement (p.4). The notion of esthetic hunger is essential as it highlights the innate human longing for aesthetic experiences and meaning making in everyday life. By treating fine art as an exclusive space, cultural institutions unintentionally create a void. Thus, the cycle of esthetic hunger not only propels people towards alternative cultural experiences but also challenges the very notions of accessibility and inclusivity in the arts. Dewey's observations imply that when art becomes elusive, it forfeits its capacity to influence the daily lives of people. The cycle of esthetic hunger reveals a lost opportunity for art to act as a medium for education, reflection, and both personal and communal meaning-making. Instead, it

transforms into a symbol of privilege, distancing itself from those who could benefit from it the most.

Bakhtin's (1990) aesthetic theory resonates with Dewey's concerns as he contends that historical debates about art's "purity" and its connection to life—purportedly aimed at preserving art's integrity—serve to diminish the responsibilities of both art and everyday life, making them less accountable to each other (p.2). Bakhtin suggests that isolating art from daily life oversimplifies both spaces: art is confined to a sterile bubble, detached from the complexities of everyday life, while life proceeds devoid of the enriching challenges posed by aesthetic engagement. The separation leads to significant consequences, shaping a cultural landscape where inaccessible art drives people towards what Dewey (1934) labels "the cheap and the vulgar" (p.4). In other words, the division not only undermines the depth of public cultural engagement but also limits the transformative potential of works of art within society.

By severing works of art from everyday contexts, it becomes an esoteric commodity rather than a vital, transactional element of daily life. Bakhtin's critique suggests that art should immerse itself in the nuances and movements of the living world, engaging directly with the issues and experiences of the people who engage with it. The engagement would prevent works of art from being merely a thing of distant admiration and turn it into a force for societal reflection and change. Both Bakhtin and Dewey theorize for an aesthetic that transcends traditional boundaries, incorporating the lived experiences and struggles of individuals to cultivate a more inclusive and resonant cultural dialogue. The idea positions works of art not just as a reflection of life but as

participatory agents in shaping and responding to the cultural dynamics and happenings of the times.

### ***Challenges and Hurdles to Aesthetic Experiences***

Dewey (1934) theorizes that the main obstacles to aesthetic encounters and experiences are not intellectual or practical challenges but rather a mundane adherence to routine and unexamined traditions. He specifically points out the most significant barriers as "the humdrum," which he describes as everyday monotony, "slackness of loose ends," indicating a neglect of detail, and "submission to convention" in both thinking and behavior (p.42). Essentially, it's the monotonous, the overlooked, and the automated habits that diminish the aesthetic spirit.

As I understand it, "The humdrum" of daily life leads to a numbing of the senses, "slackness of loose ends" causes a failure to capture intricate details, and "submission to convention" stifles the necessary questioning, curiosity, and innovative perspective necessary for aesthetic transactions and experiences (p.42). As I understand it, "the humdrum" of daily life leads to a numbing of the senses, "slackness of loose ends" causes a failure to capture intricate details, and "submission to convention" stifles the necessary questioning, curiosity, and innovative perspective needed for aesthetic transactions and experiences (p.42). I always picture a black-and-white character, maybe a middle-aged office worker who follows the same routine every day. She wakes up, goes to work, completes her tasks mechanically, and returns home without ever noticing the world around her. Her life is a cycle of repetition, devoid of the spark that comes from engaging meaningfully with his surroundings.



Dewey (1934) also discusses the notion of balance in aesthetic experiences, referencing Aristotle's concept of the "mean proportional" as essential for both virtue or values and aesthetics (p.42). He interprets "mean" and "proportion" not in a strict mathematical sense but as qualities of an experience that organically progresses toward its fulfillment. The progression is characterized by a "developing movement toward its own consummation," suggesting that an aesthetic experience evolves naturally toward a satisfying conclusion (p.42). Dewey explains that an aesthetic experience, much like the development of virtue, should neither be forced nor static but should unfold harmoniously as it allows for an equilibrium between all elements of the experience. I bring this up because a hindrance to aesthetic experiences is excessive or limited engagement. Excessive engagement can lead to overworking and loss of spontaneity, while limited engagement can result in a lack of depth and nuance. Balancing the elements of an aesthetic experience requires mindfulness and a willingness to let the experience unfold at its own pace.

In this respect, Dewey (1934) delves deeper into the mechanisms that drive experiences toward their conclusion, addressing the challenges they present along the way. He notes, "Every integral experience moves toward a close, an ending," suggesting that an experience naturally concludes when the forces driving it have effectively accomplished their objective. He describes this endpoint as the "closure of a circuit of energy," characterizing it as a robust and active completion of processes rather than simply coming to a halt (p.42). Dewey clarifies that such closure is not just an endpoint but an essential phase where all prior elements of the experience converge and resonate collectively. The amalgamation allows the experience, whether it involves

mindful, emotional, or physical aspects, to form a complete cycle, returning to a state of balance where each action and its corresponding response have been fully realized and settled.

I would argue that it resembles the seamless fitting together of pieces in a complex puzzle. The convergence brings about a sense of completeness and harmony, illustrating how each component—cognitive, emotional, and physical—plays a crucial role in shaping the outcome. As these elements integrate, they enhance the overall quality and depth of the experience, making it more meaningful and impactful. Dewey's (1934) idea also emphasizes that the closure of an experience isn't a cessation but a moment of synthesis or, in Bakhtin's terms, consummation, where the accumulated energies find their purpose and expression. The synthesis not only resolves the individual components but also elevates the experience to a level of aesthetic fulfillment, providing participants with a profound sense of insight and completion.

As mentioned before, the most significant theoretical assumption I made was that aesthetic experiences generally meant feeling awesome, but the essential elements are synthesis and consummation. Dewey differentiates between "maturation" and "fixation," emphasizing that actual development within an aesthetic experience involves transformation and growth rather than stagnation (p.42). He posits that struggle and conflict, often integral to experiences, can be sources of enjoyment if perceived as essential to the evolution of the experience, propelling it forward rather than acting as barriers. Dewey suggests that such challenging aspects, when accepted, can turn potential setbacks into opportunities for aesthetic experience.

Therefore, Dewey (1934) discusses the concept of "undergoing" or enduring challenges within experiences (p.42). He explains that suffering, broadly defined, is an essential element of all experiences because it enables the assimilation and integration of new knowledge. The integration is not merely the accumulation of new information atop existing knowledge but involves a reconfiguration of understanding and meaning making, which can be an arduous process. Then, the nature of such suffering, whether ultimately pleasurable or painful, depends on specific circumstances, but it is vital for the aesthetic quality of the experience. Dewey also notes that intense aesthetic experiences frequently incorporate elements of suffering, which colors the depth and appreciation of the experience.

So, what is the biggest obstacle to aesthetic experiences? I propose that it's closed-mindedness. Judgment or contempt prior to investigation, or an outright refusal to explore and engage with other possibilities and perspectives, can lead to a fragmented view of life and the humdrum of complacency, where routine and predictability overshadow creativity and innovation. More significantly, such closed-mindedness dulls the senses and stifles the capacity for wonder. The idea transitions into Bakhtin's concept of answerability, which emphasizes the necessity for open-mindedness and active engagement in shaping our perceptions and experiences. Ultimately, without aesthetic transactions and experiences, answerability, as interpreted by Bakhtin, is unfathomable. In this respect, they are mutually interdependent.

### Chapter Three: Answerability as a *Thing* of Art + Life, Utterance, and the Super Ethical Superaddressee

These days, I find myself haunted by the mantra: *just write for yourself*. You see, I used to dispense this advice to countless aspiring writers as if nothing else mattered in producing good work. I was epically wrong, and the more I spiral into it, the more I find new implications that make me *cringe*. Chapter three explains the cringe.

Straight off the bat, the notion that writers write from themselves implies that personal expression and self-fulfillment are the number one goals when writing for publication. In extreme cases, some even assume that those values are more critical and should be sought after at the expense of considering external expectations or the needs of a reader. Don't get me wrong. I agree that such a *laissez-faire* attitude of writing for yourself is part of any good writing practice, but it's definitely not all of it. I also know from experience that there are a set of lessons that writers internalize as a result of getting burned by a piece that fails to resonate with readers. Take it from me: editors are not hired to be your hype person – just the opposite.

I've come to understand that writing that doesn't resonate with others often suffers from being too predictable or mundane, sounding preachy by dictating to readers, or being overly self-centered without considering the reader's interests. This realization prompts a few critical questions: What are a writer's responsibilities? How accountable should writers be for the words they craft and disseminate? What role do writers have in influencing their readers? Perhaps the most pressing question is: How are aesthetic experiences interconnected with answerability, and what is the purpose of writing and existing as a writer?

In this chapter, I explore Bakhtin's (1990) theories on answerability, starting with his early essay "Art and Answerability," from his first published collection. The foundational essay sets the stage for understanding Bakhtin's views on the responsibilities of the artist and the ethical dimensions of artistic expression. I then trace the development of the concept of answerability to Bakhtin's (1986) later formulation of the "superaddressee" in his final work, *Speech Genres and Other Late Essays*. Examining the development is essential for grasping how Bakhtin entangles aesthetics and ethics, themes that engaged him in his youth and which he revisited and expanded upon in his later works. The goal of this chapter is to delve into the complex relationship between aesthetics and ethics in Bakhtin's theory, illuminating how aesthetic experiences are intertwined with the concept of answerability and what it entails to be a responsible writer, artist, and participant in the broader cultural discourse of life.

### ***Answerability as a Thing of Art + Life***

Bakhtin (1990) introduces the theory of "answerability" as an essential framework for integrating art into daily experiences, expressing strong criticism of views that separate art from life. According to Bakhtin, such division leads to art that is indulgent and disconnected from the moral intricacies and challenges inherent in daily living. He proposes a model of artistic inspiration and expression deeply with life, suggesting that art divorced from daily experiences devolves into a mere "state of possession" rather than an energetic force of genuine creativity (p.2). Also, the detachment not only deprives art of its authenticity but also reduces and diminishes its capacity to effect cultural transformation.

Bakhtin (1990) theorizes that the historical discussions about the "interrelationship of art and life" and the "purity of art" often mask a deeper issue: both art and life trying to avoid their inherent "answerability" (p.2). These debates are, in essence, attempts to simplify their responsibilities by keeping art and life separate, thereby dodging the intricate challenges associated with their integration. Consequently, both spaces need to meet their duty and responsibility to integrate and contribute meaningfully to the broader cultural and social context.

As discussed in Chapter One, Bakhtin's discourse was especially relevant to early 20th-century Russia, a period characterized by rapid social changes and deep ideological strife that influenced his thoughts on the social role of art. During this time, as the Soviet Union navigated the aftermath of the Russian Revolution and the early phases of communist governance, intellectuals and artists were torn between conforming to state-enforced ideologies and preserving personal artistic integrity. In this charged atmosphere, Bakhtin introduced his concept of "answerability," challenging the notion of art as just a tool for ideological propagation or an escape from real-world issues. In this social environment, Bakhtin broadens his exploration of art and aesthetics to include philosophical questions about knowledge, ethics, and the essence of existence. The expanded perspective redefines aesthetics as a method for exploring fundamental aspects of human life.

In this introduction of *Art and Answerability*, Holquist (1990) notes a significant statement by Bakhtin: "Life is not art, and art is not life, but the two cannot be separated from each other" (p. xxx). The line emphasizes the intrinsic connection between art and life. While distinct, they are interconnected; the varied experiences of life inspire art,

which in turn shapes how individuals perceive and engage with their surroundings. In this regard, Bakhtin highlights the symbiotic relationship between art and life, demonstrating how each continuously enriches and transforms the other. Thus, the connection between art and life is not merely complementary but deeply symbiotic, with each constantly influencing and redefining the other in a dynamic exchange.

If the interconnection between art and life sounds familiar, it's because it is. Dewey explored a similar theme in his discourse on the relationship between experience and the environment. Dewey (1934) posits that "the process of living is continuous," driven by a cycle of action and reaction within our environment (p.108). He suggests that actions initiated by individuals and responses from the environment contribute to a perpetual state of adaptation. These transactions mutually shape both the environment and its inhabitants, facilitating ongoing adaptation and redefinition. In this regard, both Bakhtin and Dewey articulate a similar philosophical viewpoint that emphasizes the continuous and mutual influence and reciprocity between people and their contexts, whether through art or daily life. Thus, the ideas of Bakhtin and Dewey converge on the understanding that art and life, as well as action and environment, are interconnected, each continuously influencing the other in ways that deepen and complicate the comprehension of both.

In this section, I explore Bakhtin's (1990) essay "Art and Answerability," organizing the analysis around two essential themes. The first theme examines the concept of answerability as it pertains to artists, focusing on Bakhtin's views regarding the responsibility of artists to engage meaningfully with their audience through their work. The second theme investigates the role of answerability as a bridge between art

and everyday life, emphasizing Bakhtin's belief that art should not just reflect but actively engage with the cultural dynamic of the world around it. The analysis aims to provide a deeper understanding of Bakhtin's perspectives on the complex intersectionality between art, artists, and the broader cultural context under the umbrella of answerability.

### **3.1 The Artist and Answerability**

In the opening lines of his essay "Art and Answerability," Bakhtin (1990) delves into the intricate relationship among "the three domains of human culture—science, art, and life" (p.1). He argues that an authentic understanding of their roles can only be achieved when they are integrated into a person's life. Bakhtin emphasizes that these domains "gain unity only in the individual person who integrates them into his own unity," suggesting that the synthesis of these elements is essential to personal development and perspective (p.1). He outlines how each domain contributes uniquely: science provides empirical and rational knowledge; art offers creative expression and reimagines human experiences; and life encompasses all human activities and experiences. Bakhtin also cautions that isolating these domains can result in a fragmented understanding of both the world and oneself, underlining the need for their integration to cultivate a more complete worldview.

Here, it's important to note that Bakhtin's categorization of human culture into distinct domains, while providing clear analytical categories, might oversimplify the intricate realities of these fields. The division suggests that these aspects operate independently, except when merged by individuals, which only partially captures their frequent intersections and mutual dependencies. For instance, scientific inquiry often



requires the type of creative thinking typically associated with the arts, and both art and science profoundly influence and reflect the nuances of daily life. By depicting these domains as distinctly separate entities that only intersect through human integration, Bakhtin's framework may not fully acknowledge the continuous interactions and overlaps that naturally occur among them.

Nevertheless, Bakhtin (1990) appears to be describing a personal journey of integration and meaning making. The process involves more than intellectual assimilation as it requires individuals to actively live out and embody the convergence of science, art, and life. In doing so, the person becomes a nexus where these diverse strands of human culture intersect, each informing and enriching the other. In this sense, Bakhtin's ideas transcend theoretical knowledge and venture into a philosophy of lived experience. He suggests that by living at the intersection of these areas, a person can not only appreciate their worth but also understand how, when connected, they enhance comprehension of the human experience. Bakhtin also emphasizes the importance of active engagement in the world, viewing this as crucial for both personal and cultural growth. Thus, the role of individuals extends beyond unifying these domains to embracing the lived, experiential nature of their synthesis.

Moreover, Bakhtin (1990) criticized the compartmentalization of knowledge and creativity, where the essential connections between intellectual discovery, artistic endeavors, and everyday life are often overlooked or undervalued. He argued that this fragmentation not only impoverishes each domain but also reduces their depth, rendering their disconnection "mechanical" (p.1). He depicted this separation as superficial or perfunctory rather than a profound, meaningful, and internalized

interpenetration. The use of "mechanical" suggests actions that are automatic or thoughtless performed without depth or genuine engagement. It implies a habitual merging of roles, such as an artist's identity with their daily self, which lacks the deliberate, creative involvement Bakhtin sees as essential. It reminds me of Dewey's (1934) notion that the enemy of aesthetic experiences is the "humdrum; slackness of loose ends; submission to convention in practice and intellectual procedure" (p.42).

Furthermore, Bakhtin (1990) noted that when artists set aside the "fretful cares of everyday life," their capacity to create art that resonates with the realities of daily existence diminishes (p.1). The disconnection not only limits the depth and relevance of the art produced but also restricts the artist's ability to draw upon a full spectrum of experiences and emotions that resonate with both themselves and their audience. Consequently, their art may need more vibrancy and authenticity, which arise from weaving life's complexities into creative expression. The detachment can prevent artists from fully engaging with their environment and their community, resulting in works that might be technically proficient but lack emotional and contextual richness. Ultimately, by failing to allow the artistic self and the everyday self to inform and interpenetrate each other meaningfully, the potential for art to inspire, provoke, and connect on a deeper level is significantly reduced.

Bakhtin (1990) also remarked that "Art is too self-confident, audaciously self-confident, and too high-flown, for it is in no way bound to answer for life" (p. 1). The comment critiques the tendency for art to venture into realms of abstraction or self-indulgence, becoming estranged from everyday realities. When artists detach themselves from the everyday elements—such as the joys, sorrows, and struggles of

life—their work risks becoming insulated and fails to connect with a broader audience. The danger lies in art becoming isolated within its aesthetic bubble, impressive yet inaccessible and irrelevant to the people it seeks to engage. Therefore, Bakhtin champions art that wrestles with the complexities and paradoxes of life employing the raw materials of everyday challenges to craft works that are not only visually or conceptually engaging but also resonate meaningfully and impactfully with viewers.

Thus, Bakhtin (1990) observed, "The poet must remember that it is his poetry which bears the guilt for the vulgar prose of life" (p. 1). The assertion suggests that poets, and all artists for that matter, significantly influence the texture of everyday life through their creative expressions. By transforming everyday experiences into art, they elevate the mundane to the remarkable, thus bearing the responsibility—and "the guilt for the vulgar prose"—which underlines their significant role in influencing the more uninspired aspects of life. If life is perceived as dull or lacking meaning, it may reflect the artist's failure to inspire or transform perceptions through their work. The use of "guilt" underlines the profound impact art has on shaping societal views and experiences. When art fails to challenge or enrich the mundane, it perpetuates a cultural environment that remains predictable and stagnant. Thus, artists are tasked not only with creating but also with actively enhancing the cultural and aesthetic standards of everyday life through their artistic endeavors.

Bakhtin (1990) also critiques the role of the audience in the reception of art. He argues that the general public's lack of demanding standards and superficial concerns contribute to the proliferation of unremarkable art. He states, "Everyday life ought to know that the fruitlessness of art is due to his willingness to be unexact and to the

unseriousness of the concerns in his life” (p.1). Bakhtin asserts that the audience significantly influences the quality of works of art that are prevalent in the culture. When the broader culture is complacent and preoccupied with trivial matters, artists may not feel compelled to strive for depth or innovation in their work. Bakhtin contends that much of the mediocrity in art stems from audiences who are satisfied with the mundane and do not challenge artists to delve into deeper themes or more complex expressions. Therefore, for art to transcend the ordinary and achieve meaningful impact, it requires a culture that is engaged, discerning, and willing to grapple with more substantial and critical issues.

Therefore, the responsibility or answerability of the audience is to actively elevate their expectations and deepen their engagement with works of art. By demanding more from artistic expressions and rejecting superficial content, the audience can foster an environment where artists are encouraged and even compelled to explore deeper themes and employ more intricate techniques. Active participation not only enriches the cultural environment but also holds artists accountable to higher standards of creativity and thoughtfulness. In this way, both artists and audiences share the responsibility for cultivating an aesthetic world that thrives on innovation, depth, and meaningful transaction, thereby ensuring that art remains a vital, impactful part of societal discourse and development.

***Art + Life = Answerability***

Bakhtin (1990) explores the complex relationship between art and life, scrutinizing how these two things intersect or remain separate. He identifies a perceived separation where engagement in either art or life could isolate an individual from the other. The view suggests a fundamental disconnect, with no shared influence or overlap in a person's experience—they do not merge or transform one another. Facing this perceived rift, Bakhtin asks a pivotal question: "But what guarantees the inner connection of the constituent elements of a person?" (p.1). He responds with the concept of "only the unity of answerability" (p.1). Bakhtin argues that answerability is crucial for bridging the gap between art and life, proposing that a profound and responsible engagement with both can blend and harmonize these elements within an individual's experience and general sense of identity.

For Bakhtin (1990), answerability is essential for people to create a coherent self by genuinely engaging with both artistic expressions and life experiences. Embracing answerability means committing to actively reflecting on and responding to the ethical demands of both spaces. Active engagement fosters a more integrated identity, transforming art from an abstract, isolated concept into an energetic, interactive force that both influences and is influenced by one's actions and decisions - the things we do. Thus, Bakhtin's notion of answerability emphasizes an individual's responsibility to merge the distinct spaces of art and life, requiring a conscious effort to reconcile these aspects into a unified self. The unity of art and life is not automatic or externally imposed. Still, it is a personal duty that must be actively embraced as it is the "only" way to achieve this integration (p.1).

Bakhtin (1990) emphasizes that integrating art and life into a unified personal experience requires effort. The fusion is needed to allow art to enrich life and vice versa, enhancing artistic expression with life experiences. He elaborates on this notion by writing:

"I have to answer with my own life for what I have experienced and understood in art, so that everything I have experienced and understood would not remain ineffectual in my life" (p.1).

Here, Bakhtin theorizes the responsibility of incorporating artistic experiences into personal life by arguing that engagement with works of art must involve an individual response that manifests in one's daily actions. Using one's life to demonstrate the impact of art means actively applying the insights and emotions derived from art to one's decisions, behaviors, and relationships. The process turns the engagement with art from a passive experience into an active force that shapes one's worldview and everyday life. It's about making art a vibrant, influential part of day-to-day experiences, ensuring that the lessons and inspirations from works of art extend beyond the walls of galleries or pages of books and into real-life situations. Thus, Bakhtin encourages not just a deeper appreciation of art but a committed effort to weave its values and aesthetics into the fabric of daily life, allowing works of art to enrich both personal and communal experiences.

Bakhtin (1990) also writes that "everything I have experienced and understood would not remain ineffectual in my life," emphasizing the importance of art having a tangible impact (p.1). He advocates that the emotional and intellectual insights gained from art should actively shape one's life, ensuring they contribute to personal growth

and deeper understanding. This reflects Bakhtin's view of art's influence not merely as a source of aesthetic pleasure but as a catalyst for personal development and change. He argues that these emotional and intellectual revelations provided by art should be harnessed to enhance and guide everyday life, transforming aesthetic experiences into practical tools for self-improvement. Thus, works of art become more than an isolated experience as they integrate into how we see ourselves and our relationships with others.

Additionally, Bakhtin (1990) introduces a dimension to his discussion by incorporating concepts of "guilt" or "liability to blame" in relation to answerability (p.1). He suggests that responsibility goes beyond fulfilling obligations but involves the potential for guilt or blame if these obligations are not met. Bakhtin emphasizes that works of art should be woven into one's ethical framework. Therefore, failing to integrate art in this way isn't just a lost opportunity—it constitutes ethical negligence, with associated implications of guilt or blame for not fulfilling a crucial human duty: actively engaging with works of art for transformative purposes.

Bakhtin (1990) elaborates further, stating, "It is not only mutual answerability that art and life must assume, but also mutual liability to blame" (p.1). The notion expands the concept of answerability into a reciprocal relationship, emphasizing that art and life are deeply intertwined and interdependent. The mutual responsibility implies that people should reflect on how art influences their lives and how their life experiences shape their understanding and creation of art. A failure to integrate these aspects exposes both spaces to potential criticism and blame for any shortcomings. In this respect, there is a two-way relationship between art and life, highlighting their influence on one another.

Neglecting or mismanaging this relationship can result in dissatisfaction in both areas. Therefore, both art and life are accountable for this integration, and failing to handle it effectively can lead to blame.

Bakhtin (1990) also investigates why people might hesitate to connect art with life, explicitly critiquing the everyday use of "inspiration" as an excuse for avoiding responsibility in artistic pursuits. He points out a significant ethical dilemma at the intersection of art and life (p.2). His critique delves into the misunderstood notion of artistic inspiration and its impact on ethical responsibilities, challenging the idea that artistic creation is separate from everyday moral duties. Bakhtin dismisses the notion that "inspiration" can be a valid excuse for dodging responsibilities, stating, "Nor will it do to invoke inspiration in order to justify want of answerability" (p.2). It emphasizes the insufficiency of citing inspiration to sidestep the broader implications of one's art on society and culture. The term "want of answerability" criticizes artists who isolate their creative process from their obligation to consider how their works of art affect and transact with life (p.2).

Bakhtin (1990) elaborates on the concept of inspiration, arguing, "Inspiration that ignores life and is itself ignored by life is not inspiration but a state of possession" (p.2). He claims that genuine inspiration should engage with real-life experiences rather than existing in a detached, ethereal state. By referring to disengaged inspiration as a "state of possession," Bakhtin highlights the loss of agency and detachment from reality that can occur when artists disconnect their creative impulses from life's ethical and practical realms (p.2).



Additionally, Bakhtin (1990) revisits historical debates about the so-called purity of art, noting that such discussions often miss the underlying issues. He writes:

The true sense, and not the self-proclaimed sense, of all the old arguments about the interrelationship of art and life, about the purity of art, is nothing more than the mutual striving of both art and life to make their own tasks easier to 'relieve themselves of their own answerability'" (p.2).

In the passage, Bakhtin (1990) tackles the longstanding debate about the separation between art and everyday life, particularly the notion that art should remain "pure" and unaffected by the mundane. He suggests that the essence of these debates is not about maintaining separation but rather about art and life trying to ease their respective challenges. The term "to 'relieve themselves of their own answerability'" implies that both domains are attempting to evade the responsibility of being accountable for their actions or outcomes (p.2). Bakhtin uses "answerability" to mean that every action or expression is ethically accountable and should address the needs and contexts of others. Therefore, he criticizes the idea of art's purity, arguing that such claims are essentially attempts by both art and life to avoid their ethical obligations to respond and be accountable to each other and the broader cultural context.

Bakhtin's (1990) criticism of "artistic purity" and the shirking of answerability reminds me of Dewey's critique of the barriers that hinder authentic aesthetic experience as he also argues that segregating works of art from everyday life—treating it as sacred or overly refined—limits the depth and immersion of art. He believes this separation is harmful as it disconnects art from the daily experiences and emotions that inspire and mold it, thereby diminishing its impact and relevance. Dewey also asserts

that aesthetic experiences should naturally emerge from everyday interactions and not be confined to what is traditionally labeled as art. Thus, it aligns with Bakhtin's concept of answerability, which envisions art and life in continuous dialogue, each accountable and responsive to the other. Bakhtin's view that art tries to "relieve itself of its own answerability" echoes Dewey's concern: art that distances itself from the practical, ethical, and social realms of life loses its significance and its capacity to foster genuine aesthetic experiences. Therefore, both philosophers argue against isolating art from everyday life, suggesting that such a division reduces art's ability to engage and respond to the human experience meaningfully.

Bakhtin (1990) concludes his essay with the line: "Art and life are not one, but they must become united in myself—in the unity of my answerability" (p.2). Simply put, while art and life are distinct, they must be integrated within an individual through a deep sense of personal responsibility. The implication is that people should not treat their engagement with works of art as separate from their daily lives and ethical decisions. Instead, the insights and experiences gained from works of art should influence their actions and shape their moral framework. And if I translate this notion into my life, it becomes the *art* of all the things I do, including writing and teaching young artists how to be better writers. Thus, every aspect of my life and work is entangled with the principles and values derived from my aesthetic experiences. This creates a unified approach to living and teaching that emphasizes ethical engagement, personal growth, and the transformative power of the art of things.

### 3.2 Answerability as a *Thing of Utterance*

An utterance, according to Bakhtin (1986), is a unit of speech communication that is characterized by its “internal social nature” and dialogic function (p.136). It encompasses any expression conveyed through speech, writing, or other forms of expression, and it is not just a string of words or sentences but a complete turn of speech that is imbued with intent and context. In other words, an utterance is more than just a simple transmission of words but a complex social act that involves a speaker, a listener, and the particular circumstances of their exchange. It also answers prior statements and sets the stage for future dialogue. Therefore, each act of speech is both influenced by and influences its social environment, making every utterance a continuation of an ongoing conversation.

The transactional quality also defines an utterance’s boundaries, which are not strictly linguistic but are shaped by the social and situational context in which it occurs. This means that the limits of an utterance—or an artistic expression—are not determined solely by grammar, vocabulary, aesthetic elements, or formal characteristics but by the transaction and circumstances that envelop their use. The transactional nature of utterance involves exchanges influenced by the social roles, relationships, and specific cultural moments of the speakers, listeners, creators, and audiences. Consequently, to fully understand either an utterance or a work of art, one must look beyond the immediate words or sensory components to the broader context of their delivery and reception. The idea is the acknowledgment of the interconnectedness of language and art with their social environments, highlighting how meanings are co-constructed in real-time by those who create and those who perceive them.

Bakhtin (1986) also points out that every utterance is a link in the chain of communication, influenced by previous utterances and shaping future ones, as “any concrete utterance is a link in the chain of speech communication of a particular sphere” (p. 92). It exists in a field of other utterances from which it draws meaning and to which it contributes new meaning. Thus, an utterance is not an isolated piece of communication but is part of a more extensive, ongoing dialogue that extends beyond the immediate transaction. This means that an utterance carries the weight of its history and influences its future. It is embedded in a web of social relationships and is meaningful only in relation to other utterances within that network. Every time someone speaks, writes, or creates, they are not producing something new but are also responding to and modifying what has been said or done before. Consequently, understanding an utterance then requires an appreciation of the broader discourse it engages with—how it answers past communications and sets the stage for future exchanges.

Therefore, each utterance naturally invites a response and has the potential to steer the conversation, directly connecting to the notion of answerability. The expectation ensures that everyone involved in the dialogue is not a passive receiver but an active participant who helps shape the discourse. As a result, answerability becomes an essential aspect of communication because it highlights the responsibility of both speakers and listeners to consider how their contributions impact the ongoing discussion. Shared responsibility is crucial for meaningful communication, as each utterance builds on previous ones and influences future exchanges, engaging all participants in an energetic and accountable conversation.

Because utterances are crafted to reach someone and anticipate their reaction, they create a context where answerability is both possible and essential. In this scenario, communication goes beyond just delivering an expression because it becomes a call for responses that align with the ethical, social, and communicative norms shared by the participants. Again, an utterance does more than convey information—it also negotiates and reaffirms the community's values and norms. This makes communication via utterance a deeply ethical activity, requiring participants to adhere to these shared standards as they craft their responses.

Consequently, the dialogic nature of utterances encourages participants to consider not only the content but also the broader implications of their responses—how they contribute to shaping social reality. It highlights that answerability is not just an aspect of communication but a fundamental element that upholds and shapes the moral framework of any discourse community.

Therefore, the potential for answerability is rooted in the dialogic nature of utterances. Without the inherent expectation of encounter and engagement in every utterance, the fundamental principle of being answerable—responsible for one's words and their effects and for maintaining dialogue—would be compromised. The transaction between utterance and answerability ensures that communication remains a reciprocal, responsible, and evolving process, with each person actively influencing and being influenced by the dialogue.

In this respect, Bakhtin's theorization of the utterance effectively illustrates aesthetic transaction and answerability in movement by showing that each communicative act is both a response to a prior expression and a precursor to future

dialogue, highlighting the ongoing flow and evolution of ideas. This cycle of response and initiation, where each utterance contributes to a broader dialogue, exemplifies aesthetic transaction—a dynamic exchange in which meanings are not static but continuously shaped and reshaped through transactional dialogue. Answerability, fundamental to this process, underlines the responsibility of each participant to engage thoughtfully, considering both the immediate and broader implications of their responses. Bakhtin's framework reveals that communication extends beyond mere information exchange to actively involve participants in shaping social realities and relationships. Therefore, the notion that utterance is an aesthetic transaction and answerability in movement stands as it highlights the active, ethical, and transformative nature of dialogue, positioning each participant not just as a contributor but as a co-creator of shared meanings and understanding.

### ***The Addressee in Answerability***

Bakhtin's (1986) concept of the "addressee" in an utterance highlights its connection to answerability, as directing an utterance toward someone inherently carries a responsibility for the speaker (p.95). Essentially, Bakhtin's analysis of "addressivity" in communication reveals that every utterance is purposefully aimed at an addressee (p.95). The addressee, as noted by Bakhtin, could be a direct participant in the conversation, a broader audience like cultural experts, or even more abstract entities in emotionally charged, monological contexts, such as historical figures, societal ideals, or the imagined judgment of future generations. The nature of the addressee significantly shapes the style and content of the utterance based on the speaker's perception of who is receiving the message. Again, the addressee highlights the ethical

dimension of communication, emphasizing that speakers must consider the impact and implications of their expressions, thus reinforcing the inherent responsibility in every act of communication.

Speakers adjust their messages, either consciously or subconsciously, to meet what they believe are the addressee's expectations, knowledge, and cultural background. The adaptation is more than clarity as it is to forge a deeper, more personal connection. Thus, addressing someone directly adds a layer of responsibility to communication, urging the speaker to reflect on how their words or expression will impact the addressee.

Bakhtin also points out that the addressee might be the person the speaker is directly responding to, a scenario typical in everyday conversations. In such transactions, the dynamics between the speaker and the addressee are crucial. While the initial comment from the other party is already in place, the speaker crafts their response expecting further dialogue. The expectation shapes their reply, as they might predict potential objections or adjust their message to suit the addressee's understanding level.

Bakhtin also notes (1986) that when communicating, the speaker considers the addressee's "apperceptive background"—their knowledge of the subject, specific expertise, and even personal biases and preferences (p.95). These elements influence the speaker's choice of words, structure, and style. Bakhtin emphasizes that this complex interaction between the speaker, the addressee, and the context is vital to both creating and understanding every utterance, rendering communication an energetic and transactional process. In this context, the concept of the addressee in an utterance is

intrinsically linked to answerability, highlighting the responsibility each speaker holds towards the recipient of their communication.

Furthermore, Bakhtin (1986) observed, "Utterances are not indifferent to one another, and are not self-sufficient; they are aware of and mutually reflect one another" (p.95). It indicates that utterances are not isolated or independent but are responsive and reflective, actively interacting with each other to shape the dialogue.

Communication is essentially a collaborative effort where each statement, question, or response adds to a network of influence and adaptation. The concept is central to Bakhtin's idea of answerability, which highlights the responsibility inherent in every act of communication.

### **3.3 Answerability as a *Thing* of the Superaddressee**

In the preface to *Speech Genres and Other Late Essays*, Holquist (1986) clarifies Bakhtin's notion of the "superaddressee" (p.xviii). He notes that when speakers craft an utterance, they consider not just the people in front of them but also an abstract, idealized *thing* known as the superaddressee. Holquist explains that Bakhtin defines this super thing as one "whose absolutely just and responsive understanding is presumed" and which exists in either a metaphysical or historical context (p.xvii). To clarify, the superaddressee is an imagined audience that represents the highest ethical and intellectual standards, assumed to understand and respond justly to the speaker's intentions fully. The concept of the superaddressee serves as a moral and ethical benchmark for communication, providing a framework within which speakers aim to formulate their messages. Holquist suggests that for Bakhtin, the superaddressee is not merely a hypothetical construct but an essential element of dialogue that transcends the



immediate, tangible audience. It encapsulates the broader societal, cultural, and even historical audiences, embodying the ideal listener who transcends time and place.

The figure could take various forms, such as God, absolute truth, an impartial human conscience, the populace, historical perception, or scientific understanding. Therefore, the superaddressee acts as the ultimate listener, perfectly understanding and ethically evaluating the speaker's words.

As Holquist (1990) noted, the superaddressee and their ideally proper responsive understanding take on various ideological forms, such as "the court of dispassionate human conscience, the people, the court of history, science, and so forth" (p.xviii). The superaddressee acts as a sort of ultimate arbiter and interpreter of discourse, embodying an ethical and intellectual ideal that goes beyond the limitations of immediate and physical audiences. The idealized figure influences how speakers craft their messages, encouraging them to address not only immediate concerns but also broader, universal truths and values. Holquist emphasizes that this notion is essential to Bakhtin's view of dialogue, which he sees as inherently social, ethical, and connected to the pursuit of collective meaning-making. The role of the superaddressee elevates every act of communication from a simple exchange to a moral and philosophical engagement.

Holquist (1986) also highlights that for Bakhtin, the concept of the superaddressee is essential to all speech, proposing that without the belief in the superaddressee, communication could falter: "for without faith that we will be understood somehow, sometime, by somebody, we would not speak at all" (p..xvii) This trust in a higher level of understanding distinguishes meaningful speech from mere

"babbling," as illustrated in Dostoevsky's "Bobok," where the lack of such belief results in speech that mirrors the language of the dead (p..xvii). The superaddressee is thus vital for sustaining both hope and ethical standards in communication. In essence, the superaddressee acts as an anchor for people's moral and ethical expectations during dialogues. This ideal, transcendent listener gives assurance that our expressions will eventually be understood fully and judged fairly. Without such assurance, people's discourse could deteriorate into aimless and empty exchanges, reminiscent of the insignificant chatter described in "Bobok." Thus, the notion of the superaddressee not only deepens communication by infusing it with significance and responsibility but also inspires people to pursue ethically sound dialogues.

Bakhtin (1986) elaborates that each utterance inherently strives for an understanding that surpasses that of the immediate audience, aiming for an ideal, just, and responsive comprehension. He introduces the concept of a higher superaddressee—an ultimate and flawless listener who exists either in a metaphysical dimension or a distant historical context and whose understanding is impeccably just. According to Bakhtin, speech is directed not only at those physically present but also at this idealized figure. The notion shifts the nature of communication from a simple exchange to a more complex transactional process aimed at resonating with broader, timeless values and truths. The idea encourages a more aspirational form of dialogue, where speakers extend their reach beyond the immediate context to connect with a deeper level of understanding that aligns with the highest ethical and intellectual ideals.

Bakhtin (1986) explores the theorization of the superaddressee further, emphasizing that speakers must look beyond their immediate audience, who may

misinterpret or misunderstand their words. The uncertainty motivates speakers to seek a "higher instance of responsive understanding" that provides a more comprehensive and discerning perspective (p.126). Consequently, he portrays each dialogue as occurring against the backdrop of an unseen, authoritative presence that ensures communication is interpreted in its most ethical and intellectually rigorous form. The notion suggests that speakers are addressing not only the visible listeners in front of them but also the ideal listener who epitomizes the pinnacle of understanding and judgment. The unseen influence compels speakers to enhance the clarity and depth of their discourse, striving to meet this elevated standard of evaluation. The superaddressee thus introduces a layer of moral and intellectual accountability into every conversation, encouraging speakers to consider the broader implications and possible misinterpretations of their words. In this way, the superaddressee acts as both a guide and a guardian of dialogue, promoting communication that transcends the immediate and aspires to universal significance.

To clarify, Bakhtin (1986) does not depict the superaddressee as a mystical thing that pops in and out of conversations but as an essential element of communication, integral to the essence of speech. He describes speech as inherently desiring to be heard, always seeking responsive understanding, and pushing beyond immediate comprehension to reach deeper levels of engagement (p.126)—the drive for connection that transcends acknowledgment and encourages a continuous dialogue. The ongoing pursuit of a comprehensive understanding by the other underlines the essential role of the superaddressee in every conversation. When speaking, the goal is not just to be recognized momentarily but to aim toward an ideal understanding that may remain

perpetually out of reach. Such a pursuit enriches each transaction, prompting both speakers and listeners to extend their considerations beyond the immediate to broader contexts and deeper implications. Therefore, communication is not merely a finite exchange but an evolving process where meanings are continuously developed and reshaped as they encounter new perspectives. The superaddressee serves as a vital component in a dialogic transaction, consistently driving communication towards deeper and more ethically sound understandings.

I regard the superaddressee as an extension of Bakhtin's notion of answerability, embodying the wider, ethical dimension of communication. The superaddressee compels speakers to rise above immediate, personal exchanges and reflect on the broader implications and universal ideals within their discourse. The notion highlights the responsibility of every utterance or expression not only to the immediate audience but also to an idealized ethical standard. In this context, the superaddressee enriches Bakhtin's concept of answerability, linking individual expression with collective moral and intellectual values.

I also find fascination in the development of answerability in Bakhtin's early years and its later culmination into the superaddressee concept towards the end of his life because it illustrates Bakhtin's enduring commitment to exploring ethical and communicative dynamics. The evolution from the foundational idea of answerability to the refined concept of the superaddressee indicates a progressive deepening of his understanding of the moral elements of dialogue. The journey also reflects a growth in thought, with Bakhtin revisiting and elaborating his initial ideas to tackle more sophisticated and nuanced aspects of communication. The development highlights his

belief in ongoing dialogue, not only among individuals but across different stages of intellectual exploration, reflecting the expansive dialogic process he envisioned. Therefore, studying these ideas provides insight into both the continuity and evolution of Bakhtin's philosophical explorations, revealing the persistent impact of ethical considerations in human experience and relationships.

### **3.4 A Features Writer in Aesthetic Activity with the Hero (Herself)**

In his essay "Author and Hero in Aesthetic Activity," Bakhtin explores the relationship between the author and the hero, asserting that "the hero's consciousness, his feeling, and his desire of the world... are enclosed on all sides, as if within a band, by the author's consummating consciousness of the hero and his world" (p.13). Bakhtin suggests that the author's comprehensive vision profoundly shapes the hero's perspective, filtering every facet of the hero's experience through the author's interpretive framework. The dynamic allows the author not only to depict but also to sculpt the hero's existence, crafting a narrative in which the hero's identity emerges as both a construct and a reflection of the author's more profound ideological and existential musings. Through this process, the author constructs and delves into the hero's reality, infusing the narrative with intricate layers of meaning and exploration.

For me, as someone who writes about personal experiences across various genres, Bakhtin's (1990) theories provide intriguing insights into how I craft and understand my narratives. In this framework, I take on dual roles: both as the author and the hero (though I use the term "hero" exceptionally loosely) of my stories. Bakhtin suggests that my narrative consciousness—my interpretations and understandings of events—influences how the "hero" (myself) perceives and transacts with the world. The

dual capacity enables me to analyze my past actions, emotions and desires from a somewhat detached viewpoint. As the author-self, I possess the agency to determine how my experiences are framed and interpreted, not just recounting events but also infusing them with meanings and insights. The process may involve reevaluating my past, encasing my experiences "within a band" of my current understanding, which can alter my perspective on these events (p.13).

In some respects, writing about my own experiences acts as a method of existential and ideological inquiry. I create narratives that mirror my changing thoughts and values, and through this introspective process, I often uncover new insights about myself and my role in the world. The process is similar to the dynamic between the author and the hero in Bakhtin's framework, where the constructed narrative does more than recount events—it enhances my understanding of myself. Essentially, when I write about my experiences, I am actively participating in shaping and reshaping my identity—my own hero's journey.

Bakhtin (1990) distinguishes between "aesthetic objectivity" and "cognitive and ethical objectivity" (p.13). He defines cognitive and ethical objectivity as a detached, rational assessment of individuals or events anchored in universally accepted norms. In contrast, aesthetic objectivity moves beyond these dimensions, focusing instead on a nuanced portrayal of the hero's life. The approach emphasizes artistic expression rather than neutral analysis, resulting in vibrant and engaging character portrayals. Such a methodology enables authors to explore the human experience more deeply, transcending factual recounting and ethical assessments to craft narratives that capture

the complexities of life. These stories, therefore, resonate more with readers, providing a richer understanding of the characters' worlds.

Bakhtin (1990) highlights that this distinction becomes particularly crucial in stories where the hero's journey is autobiographical due to the inherent challenge of maintaining an external viewpoint that is needed for a fair and unbiased portrayal of characters whose experiences are deeply intertwined with the author's own. He notes the difficulty involved, stating, "For sometimes it is difficult to take up a stand outside one's partner as well as outside one's antagonist in the event of life" (p.13). The challenge underlines the complex relationship between personal involvement and the need for objective portrayal in autobiographical narratives.

I mention all this because the balance is achieved through the concept of the superaddressee, which offers a higher, almost transcendent perspective that assists the author in navigating the delicate balance between personal narrative and broader, universal themes. The idealized super reader acts as a vital checkpoint, ensuring that the narrative is not only personally cathartic but also resonates on a universal level, pushing the narrative towards a degree of objectivity that might otherwise be clouded by personal bias. Thus, the superaddressee serves both as a guide and a benchmark, elevating personal stories into works of art that speak to and mirror the broader human experience. I assure you, it's no easy task. I have published essays that I now deeply regret, as I often masked mean comments with humor about other people and their idiosyncrasies. As you can imagine, my superaddressee wasn't consulted on those narratives.

Bakhtin (1990) also introduces the concept of "transgredient" moments—instances in a hero's life and thoughts that surpass their understanding and visibility (p.14). These moments are necessary as they reveal aspects of the hero unknown even to themselves, thereby deepening the character's portrayal. For an author, capturing these transgredient moments entails stepping beyond the hero's immediate experiences. By adopting this external viewpoint, the author can delve into and uncover dimensions of the hero's life that are obscured from the hero, adding substantial depth and insight to the narrative. Essentially, Bakhtin's discussion on transgredient moments emphasizes the significance of these hidden parts of the hero's life and thoughts—they uncover latent facets of the character, enriching the narrative's complexity and depth. For an author, this means assuming an external perspective that facilitates the exploration and revelation of these concealed elements, rendering the story more nuanced and insightful.

For me, the transgredient moments Bakhtin discusses—those instances that go beyond my immediate understanding—are parts of my life that I may not fully grasp or even recognize while experiencing them. By recognizing and exploring these moments in my writing, I uncover aspects of myself that were previously obscured or unnoticed, enriching my narratives. The creative process compels me to step outside my immediate experiences and view them from an external perspective. It's like being both the protagonist and the observer in my narrative, which is a total head trip. However, the dual perspective is essential for a deeper exploration of my thoughts and actions, revealing complexities and subtleties that may have eluded me at the moment. It



prompts me to engage with parts of my life that are uncomfortable or challenging to understand, which can be both enlightening and transformative.

In this respect, transgredient moments are about the consummation or unification of my experiences, as theorized by Bakhtin and Dewey, because they allow for a synthesis of my experiences through a reflective perspective, blending the immediate and the introspective into a fuller meaning. Bakhtin's concept of transgredient moments, alongside Dewey's emphasis on experience as a continuous process, provides a framework for viewing my life's events not just as isolated incidents but as interconnected pieces of a larger and very much alive narrative.

Furthermore, Bakhtin argues that the hero's expressions and life experiences are intricately shaped by the author's overarching narrative and artistic goals. The comprehensive influence extends into the hero's "vital (cognitive-ethical) interestedness in the event of his own lived life," suggesting that the hero's engagement with their experiences is filtered through the author's "artistic interestedness" (p.14). Consequently, the hero's internal world and external behaviors are intertwined with and molded by the author's creative intentions and artistic expressions. The author not only constructs the hero's external circumstances but also shapes and interprets the hero's internal thoughts and emotional responses, deeply embedding their artistic vision into the character's essence.

Now, let's revisit the advice: "Just write for yourself." It's utterly cringeworthy because it disregards the myriads of aesthetic transactions, experiences, actions, and answerable reflections required to write for others. Therefore, these days, when young

writers ask me how they can become writers, too, I start by saying, "Why don't you have a seat?"

### ***Teaching Answerability as the Effective Artist***

For several years, I taught a course called "The Effective Artist" at a college focusing on film, media, and performance. The course, aimed at budding filmmakers and screenwriters, sparked numerous intriguing questions right from its title. What sets an effective artist apart from an ineffective one? Within this framework, should we value effectiveness more than affectiveness? How do these ideas integrate with the practices of writing and filmmaking?

From the outset, my students and I delved into these themes, establishing a foundation for a semester filled with deep exploration and meaningful discussions about the nature of artistry, its audience, and its influence on writing and filmmaking. By addressing these essential questions early on, we also fostered a classroom environment that promoted critical thinking and imaginative exploration, both within and outside the entertainment industry. The method allowed us to explore the complex relationships between personal artistic expression, its impact on storytelling techniques in various disciplines, and its broader cultural and societal effects. Throughout the semester, such focus enabled students to not only grasp the nuances of artistic methods but also to integrate these insights into their own creative and analytical endeavors.

The course was anchored in the principles of conscious creation, focusing on self-awareness and an understanding of the social milieu, drawing inspiration from Bakhtin's notions of the artist-audience symbiosis in "Art and Answerability." Our class

discussions frequently challenged conventional filmmaking standards, such as critiquing romantic comedies from a feminist perspective and questioning the tendency to value entertainment and profit over depth. We scrutinized projects where a filmmaker's dominant vision overlooked broader societal impacts. Contributions from theorists like John Dewey, Jean-Paul Sartre, and bell hooks deepened our dialogues, enhancing our analytical and reflective practices. Imagine a scenario where bell hooks and John Dewey discuss with Barbie in a room filled with young filmmakers and screenwriters—that was the dynamic and stimulating environment I strived to create. While sometimes we hit the mark, other times we fell short, but the intention was clear.

Moreover, given the rapid pace of the film industry, with new releases appearing almost weekly, our course content was designed to be highly flexible and continuously updated to reflect the most current events and trends in cinema. The adaptability made our discussions both relevant and timely, resonating with the ongoing transformations in the film landscape. The goal was to bring every scene, context, and dialogue vividly to life, employing Bakhtin's concept of dialogue and Dewey's experiential learning, making each conversation meaningful and interconnected with the broader cultural discourse in real time. Thus, the course reflected the ever-evolving nature of the film industry, integrating current films and trends into our curriculum to explore the real-world intricacies and shifts in filmmaking practices.

The course encouraged students to ponder their roles and responsibilities in contemporary filmmaking, highlighting Bakhtin's concept of answerability. Throughout the semester, students reflected on how their filmmaking practices might affect broader cultural and social contexts. By exploring how films respond to and shape cultural

narratives, students learned to view their work as a dialogue, deepening their connection to the material and fostering a sense of ethical and creative responsibility. This shift from an individual-centric perspective to embracing a collective voice in their art significantly enriched their understanding and approach.

Despite the variability in course content, each term consistently began with an in-depth analysis of iconic supervillains such as the Joker, Freddy Krueger, and Vecna. Rather than simply categorizing them as antagonists, the analysis delved into their origins and motivations by examining the underlying causes of their actions. For instance, exploring the tragic backstory of Freddy Krueger's mother—a nun who suffered a brutal past—unveiled new dimensions to his character. This approach encouraged students to develop a nuanced empathy for Freddy, transforming him from a figure of pure evil to one with a complex history. This reevaluation of the character set the foundational tone for the course, framing our discussions and analyses for the term.

The analysis encourages students to delve into character development, narrative structure, and the societal forces that shape behavior, while also prompting them to consider their roles as artists. What motivates you as an artist? Why do you create in the way that you do? Such reflection is crucial to the course and ties in with Bakhtin's concept of answerability, urging students to examine their motivations, influences, and intentions behind their creative decisions. The objective is for students to not only refine their storytelling abilities by understanding complex characters and their backgrounds but also to cultivate an appreciation for the human elements of narrative creation. For instance, examining the psychological depth of characters like Freddy Krueger moves students beyond the simple dichotomy of good versus evil, prompting a more

comprehensive exploration of what drives a character to become a supervillain. This approach equips students with the tools to develop more nuanced and impactful characters in their own work and enhances their sense of answerability as artists.

## Chapter Four: The Carnavalesque Aesthetic Transaction and Answerability

Recently, I was rummaging through my old writing portfolios, and I noticed a funny thing. Most of my published features explore some pretty dark and grim themes – depression, the ugliness of hating my body, alcoholism, and the inevitable fate that I will die (and so will you). But these weighty, melancholic, and downright morbid narratives were cushioned with humor and fun, punchy language that mixed the bleak and amusing to create a thing called a feature.

Adding to the irony, my pieces always landed in the *Style Section*. So, nestled amidst glitzy celebrity interviews and the latest fashion trends, my stories struck out like an old used band aid on a white couture dress. And I loved it. I would even argue that my weirdly dark comedic things were acts of cultural defiance as their stark contrast to the prevailing idealism made them stand out simply by existing in its glamorous context. It might also explain why Bakhtin's carnival and the grotesque body utterly and desperately enchant me.

In this chapter, I analyze Bakhtin's interpretation of Rabelais's work as a definitive example of aesthetic transaction and answerability. Bakhtin's study of Rabelais showcases how humor, satire, and the grotesque body serve as powerful critiques of societal norms and authoritarian structures. Rabelais's literature invites readers into a dialogic process that is both intellectually stimulating and entertaining, exemplifying aesthetic transactions through active participation, the creation of meaning, and reflective response. The engagement also embodies Bakhtin's concept of answerability, which demands accountability from both the author and audience for the meanings they co-create. Moreover, I examine the grotesque body, emphasizing its role

as both a symbol and a site where degradation acts as a catalyst for reconstruction and renewal, highlighting the body's inherent thingness.

#### **4.1 The Aesthetic Transaction and Answerability of Rabelais**

Bakhtin (1984) explores the carnival themes in Rabelais's works, highlighting Rabelais as a pivotal yet complex figure whose impact is both underrated and deeply respected. Bakhtin contends that Rabelais's use of folk humor as a means to confront authoritarian structures showcases his writings as an influential medium for social commentary. Through entertainment, Rabelais adeptly undermines established norms, accentuating the corporeal facets of human life to contest the spiritual doctrines endorsed by the medieval church and feudal hierarchies of his time. A contemporary parallel can be drawn with satirical television programs such as Comedy Central's "The Daily Show" or HBO's "Last Week Tonight," which similarly utilize humor to critique political and societal issues, challenging entrenched narratives and highlighting the absurdities within current power and social dynamics.

Bakhtin (1984) contends that appreciating Rabelais's contributions demands a radical shift in the perception of art, literature, and the ideologies they embody. Rabelais's narratives urge readers to abandon conventional literary standards and reevaluate entrenched frameworks of art and expression, necessitating "an essential reconstruction of our entire artistic and ideological perception" (p. 3). Bakhtin suggests that this reconstruction requires an intense and thoughtful overhaul of how meaning is understood, interpreted, and created rather than superficial adjustments—a profound reevaluation of the assumptions and frameworks underlying cultural dialogues. In this respect, Bakhtin (1984) calls for "the renunciation of many deeply rooted demands of

literary taste," arguing that works like those by Rabelais necessitate a receptiveness to new forms of expression that diverge from traditional artistic standards. Specifically, Bakhtin proposes that readers must adopt a flexible and open-minded approach to fully appreciate the creativity and nonconformity present in Rabelais's narratives. The flexibility involves a willingness to question and potentially abandon preconceived notions about what constitutes good or bad literature.

Dewey's (1934) argument resonates here, as he identifies "submission to convention in practice and intellectual procedure" as a significant barrier to aesthetic transactions and experiences (p. 42). Both Bakhtin and Dewey advocate for a more liberated perspective when engaging with art and literature, emphasizing that rigid adherence to conventional standards can stifle full appreciation and transformative potential. Dewey notably delineates two harmful extremes in aesthetic experiences: "rigid abstinence" and "aimless indulgence" (p. 42). He describes the former as "coerced submission, tightness," which restricts the freedom necessary for a rewarding aesthetic experience (p. 42). In the context of Rabelais, the idea means that readers who strictly adhere to conventional literary standards and resist his unconventional style may miss the richness and depth of his work, failing to engage with the humor, satire, and grotesque imagery that challenge societal norms and provoke critical thought.

Bakhtin (1984) characterizes the imagery in Rabelais' work as inherently subversive, noting its "undestroyable nonofficial nature" that challenges formal authority and conventional norms (p. 3). He asserts that "no dogma, no authoritarianism, no narrow-minded seriousness can coexist with Rabelaisian images," underscoring the significance for both readers and artists as it fosters continuous reinterpretation and



engagement (p. 3). The openness ensures Rabelais's work remains relevant, constantly welcoming new perspectives, experiences, and opportunities for reflection. Dewey's (1934) exploration of "experience" in art and literature echoes this sentiment, illustrating the dynamic and fluid nature of aesthetic engagement where each element or phase flows seamlessly into the next, thereby enhancing the overall coherence and distinctness of the experience.

Dewey (1934) theorized that an "experience" is characterized by a continual flow "from something to something," where each part not only leads into another but also carries forward what preceded it, enhancing the distinctiveness of each component (p. 34). He wrote that "the enduring whole is diversified by successive phases that are emphases of its varied colors," meaning that no single moment stands alone; instead, all moments are interconnected, contributing to the overall depth and diversity of the experience. Dewey noted that because of this "continuous merging," experiences lack "holes, mechanical junctions, and dead centers" (p. 34). Within experiences, pauses and places of rest occur, but these are not full stops. They "punctuate and define the quality of movement," encapsulating what has been experienced and preventing its idle loss (p. 34). Dewey emphasized that experiences are ongoing, like Bakhtin's distinction between the novel and the epic.

Bakhtin (1981) studied the novel for its rich portrayal of everyday life, utilizing the genre to explore dialogism and the coexistence of multiple perspectives. He observed that the novel remains flexible in interpretation, with its "generic skeleton" still forming, making it nearly impossible to "foresee all its possibilities" and allowing for ongoing reinterpretation (pp. 662-663, Kindle Edition). Unlike the epic, which presents a singular

perspective and an absolute past, the novel emphasizes a dialogic nature, depicting characters as individuals with unique thoughts, beliefs, and languages (pp. 662-663, Kindle Edition). The mixture of perspectives and voices, often showcasing the clash and intersection of diverse social, cultural, and ideological forces, destabilizes any notion of a dominant voice.

According to Bakhtin (1981), the primary differences between the novel and the epic revolve around their treatment of time, space, and narrative structure. He notes, "Prophecy is characteristic for the epic, prediction for the novel" (pp. 662-663, Kindle Edition). The epic conveys a single authoritative voice that dominates the narrative, akin to an ineffectual artist creating a work of art that lacks inclusivity and disconnects from the culture encountering it. The hero of the epic is closed and unambiguous, presenting a clear and singular interpretation or worldview. Similar to the artist who produces work that is "too self-confident, audaciously self-confident, and too high-flown for it is in no way bound to answer for life," the epic focuses solely on the self and the singular perspective of the hero's journey (Bakhtin, 1990, p.1).

Bakhtin contrasted the dialogic nature of the novel with the monologic nature of the epic, akin to the difference between an answerable and an ineffectual artist. The novel, as an answerable work of art, is multi-voiced and invites engagement and various interpretations. In contrast, the epic, as an ineffectual work of art, is mono-voiced, dominating the plot with its absoluteness and leaving no room for diverse meaning-making. The epic's single, authoritative voice presents the plot as final and resolved, with a clear and distinct end, and portrays culture, like the hero, with an absolute and idealized past. In contrast, the novel is situated in the present, engaging with the

complexities of contemporary society and celebrating the richness of mundane aspects of human existence, including successes, struggles, conflicts, and interactions of ordinary people. It presents everyday life as the source of art. One could argue that Bakhtin began his exploration of the novel and epic with the notion of the answerability of artists in the interplay between art and life. As it relates to Rabelais, his work exemplifies this dialogic engagement, pushing against the boundaries of traditional narrative forms and embracing a multitude of voices that reflect the vibrancy and complexity of life itself. The ideas not only redefine how narratives are constructed but also how they resonate with readers, engaging them in a participatory and evolving dialogue rather than presenting a closed and didactic message.

Bakhtin (1984) further expands the perspective by noting that certain imagery "opposes all that is finished and polished, all pomposity, and every ready-made solution in the sphere of thought and world outlook," suggesting that Rabelais's work actively challenges complacent thinking and the acceptance of definitive, immutable truths or solutions (p. 3). Rabelais' texts encourage ongoing reevaluation and questioning of ideas and norms, aligning with Bakhtin's distinction between the novel and the epic. It reaffirms the dialogic nature of aesthetic and answerable engagement, emphasizing a continuous interplay of perspectives and the evolving interpretation and meaning making of texts.

#### **4.2 The Grotesque Body as a *Thing with Thingness***

Bakhtin (1984) depicts the earth as both a consuming force ("devours, swallows up") and a life-giving source ("element of birth, of renascence") (p.21). I love this imagery because it captures the dual nature of the earth vividly and poignantly. It

reflects the cyclic processes of nature—how life emerges from decay and growth springs from destruction. The portrayal also reflects the connection between destruction and creation, a theme that is fundamental in understanding not only ecological systems but also human experiences and cultural narratives. In Bakhtin's perspective, the earth represents the ultimate paradox: it both destroys and sustains life. This balance of consumption and regeneration is not only a topic of broad philosophical discussion about how endings lead to new beginnings, but it also resonates with the theme of degradation as renewal. I now realize that this theme was central to my darkly humorous features, even though I wasn't consciously aware of it at the time.

The dualism aligns with Bakhtin's (1984) depiction of the grotesque body as a site of both decay and renewal, symbolized by "the grave, the womb," and "the maternal breasts" (p.21). Although some might disagree, I associate the grotesque body with femininity because it vividly captures the cycles of birth and death, nourishment and decay, central to both biological functions and cultural roles ascribed to women. Depicting the grotesque body as female not only highlights the capacity for life-giving and nourishment but also reflects societal expectations for women to absorb, transform, and rejuvenate—mirroring the earth's potent, nurturing, yet devouring nature. In this respect, the body as a thing and all the energetic happenings around the body as thingness resonate as it highlights the transformation and the constant state of flux in both becoming and unbecoming, where the tangible and the intangible, the physical and the symbolic, are seamlessly entangled. Thus, the body is not just a thing but an ongoing story of regeneration and decline, mirroring broader existential and cultural patterns.

For Bakhtin, the grotesque body—and, by extension, the earth itself—is not about degradation or destruction but is equally a site of possibility and transformation, always teetering between creation and dissolution, which is indicative of life's inherent duality. The concept emphasizes that each ending or breakdown paves the way for new beginnings and growth, suggesting a continuous cycle of rebirth inherent to both the human condition and the natural world. It reveals a dynamic interplay where each phase of decay is simultaneously a step towards renewal, highlighting the transformative potential embedded within all forms of existence.

Bakhtin (1984) also articulates the notion of time as cyclical, not linear, emphasizing regeneration and abundance in the new and the future, in contrast to traditional linear perspectives that often highlight decay or inevitability. He connects the ideas of "upward" and "downward" to this bodily-cosmic duality (p.21). The upper body, such as the face or head, symbolizes elevated aspects like intellect and spirituality, while the lower body, including the genital organs, belly, and buttocks, represents the primal, instinctual dimensions of existence—birth, sustenance, and basic desires. The alignment of the cosmic with the bodily underlines the link between the human condition and the broader cosmos, illustrating a seamless integration of the physical and metaphysical spaces.

### ***The Thing and Thingness of the Grotesque Body***

In his analysis, Bakhtin (1984) highlights that the "material bodily principle" is central in Rabelais' work, featuring vivid depictions of eating, drinking, defecation, and sexual activity. These aspects are presented in an exaggerated manner. Victor Hugo lauded Rabelais as the greatest poet of the "flesh" and "belly," although some critics

labeled his work as "gross physiologism," "biologism," or "naturalism" (p.18). The celebration of the corporeal is also evident in the works of other Renaissance writers like Boccaccio, Shakespeare, and Cervantes, seen as a "rehabilitation of the flesh" in response to the asceticism of the Middle Ages (p.18). Bakhtin notes that some critics interpret these elements as reflecting the Renaissance bourgeois outlook, focusing on material and "economic man" (p.18). These ideas are significant as they underline a cultural shift that embraces human physicality, marking a move away from medieval spiritual restraint to a robust, uninhibited recognition of human nature and its instincts. The transition not only reflects a broader societal acceptance of the human body and its functions but also a philosophical appreciation of human nature in its entirety.

Bakhtin interprets the exaggerated bodily imagery in Rabelais and other Renaissance writers as a purposeful and profound shift away from the spiritual austerity of the Middle Ages. By focusing on the body's physical functions and desires, these writers seek to reclaim and celebrate the material facets of human experience, challenging the prevailing religious and moralistic ideologies of their time. According to Bakhtin, critics who disparage this emphasis on the body are often influenced by contemporary ideologies that overlook the rich cultural and historical contexts of these works. Rather than dismissing them as crude or vulgar, Bakhtin encourages a reading of these texts as complex and holistic celebrations of life's physical and material dimensions, asserting their vital role in human experience and culture. He suggests that the depiction of the body in art can serve as a unifying element because it reflects universal human experiences, transcending time, culture, and social constructs to connect audiences with the fundamental realities of human existence.

In this respect, I often reflect on the work of feminist artist Judy Chicago, especially her installation "The Dinner Party." The work of art celebrates the physical and material aspects of women's lives through a large, triangular table adorned with intricate place settings for thirty-nine historical and mythical women. By incorporating imagery related to food, drink, and the female body, Chicago's work highlights women's contributions to history and culture, reclaiming and celebrating aspects of femininity that have often been overlooked or disparaged. Much like Rabelais uses the grotesque body to challenge societal norms and celebrate the material body, Chicago employs exaggerated and bold representations of the female form and its functions to critique patriarchal structures and stress the significance of women's experiences in shaping culture and history. Her work resonates with Bakhtin's notion of the material bodily principle as a site for both critique and celebration.

Additionally, according to Bakhtin (1984), the images of the material bodily principle found in Rabelais' work and those of other Renaissance writers are derived from the culture of folk humor. The lineage is characterized by a unique aesthetic known as "grotesque realism," which stands in stark contrast to the aesthetic norms of later periods (p.18). Defined by exaggerated, earthy, and bodily depictions, grotesque realism is rooted in folk culture and its distinctive views on the body and materiality. Bakhtin explains that this principle in grotesque realism embodies a festive and utopian spirit, presenting cosmic, social, and bodily elements as an indivisible, joyful, and gracious whole (p.19). He specifically points out that the bodily aspect is universally "deeply positive," representing the collective rather than being restricted to individual, private forms (p.19).

Bakhtin (1984) suggests that the depictions of the body in grotesque realism are not about individual identity or personal ego but about the collective human experience. The exaggerated and grandiose portrayals of the body highlight its significance as a communal and regenerative force, emphasizing the shared human condition and the potential for joy and renewal within it. In this respect, Bakhtin challenges the often-sanitized views of art and culture, emphasizing the importance of the bodily and material aspects of human expression that are frequently overlooked or undervalued in what is considered appropriate art. Unlike interpretations where the body is often tied to individual identity or the "bourgeois ego," grotesque realism celebrates the body as part of the ever-renewing collective. This universality leads to portrayals that are "grandiose, exaggerated, immeasurable" (p.19), emphasizing the communal and regenerative aspects of the human body.

Bakhtin (1984) also explains that such exaggerated portrayals of the body possess a "positive, assertive character," celebrating themes of "fertility, growth, and a brimming-over abundance" by referencing the "collective ancestral body" rather than the isolated individual, thus highlighting a communal and abundant life (p.19). The sense of abundance and universality contributes to the "gay and festive character" of bodily images, sharply contrasting with the "drabness of everyday existence." Consequently, the material bodily principle becomes a "triumphant, festive principle," akin to a "banquet for all the world," a characteristic most fully preserved in the works of Rabelais (p.19).

Bakhtin illustrates how grotesque realism not only critiques but joyously subverts the solemnity of conventional aesthetics and societal norms. Through vivid and



communal representation, it asserts a more vibrant life experience that celebrates collective human vitality and creativity, standing as a counterpoint to the often mundane and solitary human conditions portrayed by more traditional forms of art. The perspective is significant as it underscores the importance of understanding art and culture through a framework that appreciates the collective and celebratory aspects of human existence. By emphasizing the communal and regenerative qualities of the body, Bakhtin's grotesque realism offers a richer, more inclusive perspective on life and art. It counters the often-isolating narratives of individualism and austerity, promoting instead a vision of shared humanity that thrives on joy, abundance, and continuous renewal.

Bakhtin's material bodily principle in grotesque realism presents a compelling argument for viewing the body as embodying both individuality and universality. The body is depicted in its most palpable forms, emphasizing everyday functions such as eating, drinking, defecation, and sexual activity. These functions are universally shared across the human condition, yet each person experiences them uniquely, shaped by their own biology and subjective perspectives. The body's role as a distinct thing is integrated into each person's material existence - thingness. Simultaneously, such bodily aspects that define individual experience are also universal—they are shared across humanity. Thus, the duality transforms the body into a common symbol for all people, connecting individuals to the broader human experience—the thingness of the body as a shared human condition.

### ***Answerability in Degradation***

Bakhtin (1984) theorizes that the core principle of grotesque realism is "degradation," which involves lowering "all that is high, spiritual, ideal, abstract" to the

material level, bringing lofty concepts down to the "sphere of earth and body in their indissoluble unity" (pp. 19-20). In essence, grotesque realism takes what is traditionally considered elevated or sublime and grounds it in the tangible, physical reality of human experience. The principle emphasizes the connectedness of the spiritual and material worlds, showing that abstract ideals are inseparable from the physical experiences of the body and the earth.

Specifically, as it relates to thing and thingness, it means that everything, regardless of its initial perceived status or sanctity, is rooted in the material world. This perspective challenges the separation often perceived between higher philosophical or spiritual realms and the physical, everyday existence. By insisting that even the most sacred and elevated concepts have a tangible, material basis, grotesque realism democratizes the elements of existence, suggesting a universal materiality that encompasses all aspects of life and thought. This blurring of distinctions between the spiritual and the material invites a reevaluation of values, emphasizing the importance of the physical and often overlooked aspects of life.

In this respect, grotesque realism serves as a potent critique that destabilizes traditional hierarchies of values and meanings. By embedding the abstract in the concrete, it challenges the frequent separation between the mind and the body, the spiritual and the physical, insisting that intellectual, artistic, and spiritual pursuits cannot be divorced from the material conditions of life. This insistence speaks directly to Bakhtin's concept of answerability.

Bakhtin (1990) critiques the division often perceived between art and life, highlighting how certain forms of art can become so detached and "high-flown" that they

no longer connect with the everyday experiences of living (p.1). He characterizes such art as "too self-confident, audaciously self-confident," suggesting that it exists in a space far removed from the mundane realities of life. The detachment means that art does not "answer for life" or reflect the lived experiences of individuals, rendering it inaccessible and irrelevant to ordinary life (p.1). As Bakhtin puts it, life itself remarks that such art is "too exalted" and belongs to a different sphere, separate from "the humble prose of living" (p.1). Bakhtin also delineates a dichotomy between being in art and being in life, asserting, "When a human being is in art, he is not in life, and conversely " (p.1). The distinction highlights a lack of unity and interpenetration between the realms of artistic expression and daily existence, which, in his view, art that elevates itself excessively fails to integrate with the personal and collective experiences of individuals, remaining isolated in its aesthetic superiority.

The perspective is in line with Bakhtin's discussions on degradation, where he consistently highlights the need to bring lofty, isolated concepts back down to earth to reconnect them with the physical and material aspects of human life. By doing so, art becomes more relatable and meaningful, infused with the realities of everyday existence rather than remaining aloof. This grounding of art in the tangible world aims to dissolve the barriers between the high realm of artistic creation and the low of daily life, fostering a richer, more inclusive understanding of human experience. As such, degradation and answerability are united in their call for a re-engagement with the immediate, sensory world and a responsibility towards it. This unity encourages individuals to ensure that their aesthetic expressions and ideas not only reflect but also respond to the material conditions and lived realities of their audiences. It promotes a

form of artistry and scholarship that is not only accessible but also accountable, making it an active participant in the world it seeks to depict and transform.

## Chapter Five: Burning the Sweaty Happy Sticky Wedding Dress

There were many reasons why I felt an irresistible urge to create a visual representation of *Art of Thing; Thing of Art*. In some respects, that is the whole point of this work: creating aesthetic expressions and making the artistic choice to share them. There was also the thrilling and somewhat daunting prospect of transforming theoretical and narrative ideas into multimedia and multimodal dimensions. What would such a creation even feel like? Where would I start? And there was that secret vintage wedding dress in my closet I bought a few months *after* my partner died. Yes, after. Thus began my aesthetic journey into visual arts.

From the outset, Bakhtin's concepts of carnival and the grotesque body captivated me, providing a robust framework for delving into the complexity and fluidity of experience. The grotesque body, with its emphasis on the physical, visceral, and transformative processes of degradation, laid a foundational understanding of the cycles of life, death, and renewal that are central to this project. By weaving these Bakhtinian theories into my approach, the goal was to create an aesthetic work that was both visually striking and emotionally resonant, one that captures the essence of the female experience in all its messy, beautiful, and surreal dimensions. This exploration led me to the work of Deborah Turbeville, a fashion and art photographer whose radical departure from conventional beauty and glamor has long inspired me since my magazine days.

In her introduction to *Deborah Turbeville Photocollage*, Nathalie Herschdorfer (1990) noted that "although she did not belong to any movement or school, her style was recognizable from her earliest works: female figures, usually seen wandering in abandoned places; cloudy skies; the natural world in wintry mood" (p.7). For me,

Turbeville's depiction strongly resonates with Bakhtin's (1984) description of the earth as both a consuming force and a birthplace of life ("devours, swallows up" and "element of birth, of renascence") (p.21). The connection stresses the cyclical nature of existence—how life springs from decay and growth follows a hazy destruction, highlighting the inherent duality and resilience found in both nature and human experiences. Turbeville's photography, with its haunting backdrops and mysterious female figures, visually amplifies these themes and illustrates the delicate balance between loss and rejuvenation, reflecting a Bakhtinian synthesis of degradation and renewal.

In her own words, as noted by Herschdorfer (1990), Turbeville expressed, "I try to make the soft focus and the grains and the texture work in a kind of perverse, strange, eerie way, not in a romantic way" (p.8). Turbeville's photography, known for its otherworldly quality, stands in stark contrast to the glossy, idealized images typically seen in fashion photography. She presents models in dark and almost grim settings, typically appearing disheveled, questioning traditional beauty norms and encouraging a reconsideration of beauty's essence. For me, Turbeville's photography resonates with grotesque realism by embracing degradation—transforming the refined and majestic into the raw and tangible. Her work boldly showcases life's grit, merging beauty with the grotesque, compelling viewers to face imperfections and vulnerabilities that are often hidden. Both Bakhtin and Turbeville articulate the intersectionality between upward and downward movements of life, connecting the bodily-cosmic duality that reveals a profound link between the material and the metaphysical, the temporal and the eternal.

To complete the aesthetic framework for the visual element, I incorporate Sara Ahmed's feminist theories, specifically her ideas on sweaty bodies and happy objects. Ahmed's concept of "sweaty concepts" illustrates how emotions manifest physically and influence our transactions and experiences within the world, highlighting the tangible aspects of emotional encounters and the inherent discomfort and effort involved in feminist endeavors. Sweat concepts and responses to them exemplify aesthetic transactions and answerability in real-life scenarios because they prompt individuals to endure, assess, and possibly reassess their responses to challenging situations. Ahmed (2017) explains that "sweaty concepts" arise from engaging with difficult experiences, demonstrating that theoretical work cannot be disentangled from descriptive effort. She references Lauren Berlant's idea of a "situation" as "a state of things in which something that will perhaps matter is unfolding amidst the usual activity of life," underlining the interconnectedness of theory, experience, and environment "(p.12). Essentially, I want to demonstrate aesthetic transactions and answerability in real-life scenarios, illustrating how these concepts are not just abstract theories but are actively lived and experienced, shaping and being shaped by the continuous interplay of personal encounters and societal dynamics.

Ahmed's theorization of happy objects highlights how certain things, like wedding dresses, are culturally identified as sources of happiness, emphasizing normative societal roles and identities. Ahmed sheds some light on why I initially purchased the dress, why I kept it for years, and why I burned it.

In this chapter, I continue to explore Ahmed's (2017) perspective on everyday feminism through the framework of aesthetic transaction and answerability. Ahmed

contends that feminist theory extends beyond abstract ideas, manifesting as lived, tangible realities. Her concept of "sweaty" in "sweaty concepts" highlights the body's crucial role in shaping experiences, vividly illustrating how bodily sensations, in all their complexity and intensity, are essential for taking-in, meaning-making, and responding to those sweaty experiences (p.13).

The second part of this chapter delves into how emotions and contexts shape our interactions with objects. Ahmed (2010) suggests, "We are moved by things. And in being moved, we make things," highlighting that the significance and emotional impact of objects does not originate from the objects themselves but from the contexts in which they are encountered and the emotions they elicit (p.33). Additionally, I introduce Jane Bennett's concept of assemblage to explore further the essence of what makes objects meaningful. Bennett's theory of assemblage focuses on the agency of non-human elements, demonstrating how objects, emotions, and contexts converge to form a complex network that influences human actions and perceptions.

### **5.1 Aesthetic Transaction and Answerability of Ahmed's Sweaty Concepts**

Ahmed (2017) contends that "to live a feminist life is to make everything into something questionable," emphasizing the need for women to critically examine nearly every aspect of life (p.2). For me, as a female writer of color, this perspective drives me to probe the ingrained layers of gender and racial assumptions that saturate our culture and compels me to critically assess and address the narratives that often delineate and restrain me. However, such an effort involves not just challenging external systems of oppression but also scrutinizing how these systems are internalized in my thoughts and actions. As a writer and teacher of writing, I know that the process demands a



conscientious engagement with language and storytelling. It is about re-evaluating the words and narratives used to describe experiences and the world around us. The task is essential as language not only reflects but also shapes reality, perpetuating specific values and social norms. Thus, in both my writing and teaching, I emphasize the importance of using language thoughtfully and deliberately.

Keeping this in mind, I want to revisit the concept of home introduced earlier in this work, now enriched by Ahmed's perspective. Dewey (1934) discussed the significance of habitual transactions and relationships with the world in cultivating an individual's sense of belonging and comfort. He proposed that through continuous engagement, individuals "in-habit" the world—it becomes as familiar and comforting (p. 108). The idea implies that daily experiences and the habits that emerge from them are essential to belongingness. They are not just routine actions but integral for integrating oneself within their environment.

Bakhtin (1990) deepens Dewey's idea by arguing that truly integrating oneself into the world involves embracing its inherent otherness, which in turn enhances the feeling of being "at home." He suggests that feeling "at home in the world of other people" means becoming comfortable with and taking-in the perspectives, experiences, and contexts of others (p.111). Bakhtin highlights the significance of welcoming diverse viewpoints and perspectives that enrich the collective cultural and social landscape. Now, from here, Ahmed expands on this aspect by addressing situations where these external perspectives clash with one's own, and aesthetic engagement often involves wrestling with the discomfort that can arise from confronting otherness within an environment.

Ahmed's (2017) concept of "sweaty concepts" in feminism explores the intensive personal involvement required to address disparities and the conflicts that surface when individual perspectives clash with prevailing narratives (p.8). She describes these ideas as originating from the strenuous efforts needed to navigate and actively engage with tensions in an environment where one's identity conflicts with established norms. Consequently, Ahmed redefines the notion of home, expanding it from a place of comfort and familiarity to a vibrant and energetic space where belongingness is actively and continuously renegotiated. The notion aligns with Dewey's (1934) interpretation of experience and meaning making as "an everlastingly renewed process of acting upon the environment and being acted upon by it," illustrating that the sense of belonging and the concept of home are shaped through ongoing and active aesthetic engagement (p.108).

Ahmed (2017) emphasizes the substantial, conscious efforts required in "description as angle or point of view," arguing that the way individuals articulate and interpret their experiences is deeply influenced by feelings of discomfort or alienation (p.8). Ahmed suggests that their emotional responses and societal positions shape the narratives individuals create and the perspectives they adopt. The discomfort or alienation one feels can significantly alter the lens through which one views the world, affecting not only the content but also the tone of their descriptions. The process of narrative shaping is an active construction of reality informed by personal experiences and the broader socio-cultural context. Ahmed's insights reveal that reflecting on feelings of not fitting in or feeling out of place can enhance a nuanced and critically engaged understanding of one's surroundings and role within them. The perspective

challenges viewing discomfort merely as an obstacle to understanding. Instead, it suggests that discomfort catalyzes deeper insight and more meaningful connections with the world, enriching aesthetic engagement and experience.

In this regard, Ahmed's concepts resonate with Bakhtin's (1990) idea of an "excess of seeing," which argues that individual interpretations are influenced by one's background, historical context, and personal experiences, leading people to "aestheticize" their narratives (p. 148). Both theorists highlight the subjective nature of perception and the active construction of meaning, as opposed to passive absorption. The construction or reconstruction is a dynamic transactional relationship between personal history and societal norms, where feelings of discomfort often drive deeper engagement with and critique of these narratives, enriching the interpretation of events and conditions.

Ahmed (2017) also notes the significance of perseverance, advising that "the task is to stay with the difficulty, to keep exploring and exposing this difficulty," which I interpret as engaging with and responding to challenges (p.8). This means continuously confronting and analyzing the complexities of a situation rather than retreating from it. Through persistent engagement with these challenges, people not only comprehend and make-meaning from them but also find ways to articulate and address them effectively. As Dewey (1934) points out, "submission to convention in practice and intellectual procedure" significantly hampers the aesthetic experience, suggesting that rigid adherence to established norms can stifle the creative and interpretive processes crucial for engaging aesthetically (p.42). Thus, both scholars discuss the need for answerability as essential for aesthetic engagement. In this case, answerability is

articulated as an obligation to challenge and scrutinize established norms and complexities rather than accepting them.

Ahmed (2017) notes the hesitation to fully engage with uncomfortable feelings, pointing out that this can be "too demanding" (p. 27). Confronting these emotions and their physical effects may require giving up comforts or certainties, such as "relationships, dreams; an idea of who it is that you are; an idea of who it is that you can be" (p. 27). The notion implies that facing such feelings can lead to significant personal disruption, altering one's relationship with the world and even one's sense of self. Ahmed observes a tendency to deliberately "not to notice certain things" because acknowledging them would "change your relation to the world" (p. 27). Her insight aligns with Bakhtin's critique of the separation between art and life, highlighting how both often avoid responsibility or answerability.

In "Art and Answerability, Bakhtin" (1990) argues that art seeks to simplify its creation by avoiding accountability to the realities of life, while life, in turn, tries to ease its burdens by overlooking the challenges and insights that art can offer. However, Bakhtin argues that true unity arises when individuals take responsibility for integrating both art and life. He identifies "the real aspiration behind all such arguments" as the desire to separate art from life to "make their own tasks easier, to relieve themselves of their own answerability" (p. 2). The separation reflects an attempt by both art and life to evade the accountability inherent in their intersection. Similarly, Ahmed (2017) notes the reluctance to fully engage with uncomfortable feelings, describing it as "too demanding," which echoes this avoidance of accountability (p. 27).

Bakhtin (1990) further asserts that "art and life are not one, but they must become united in myself—in the unity of my answerability" (p. 2). While acknowledging the distinction between art and life, he insists that they should be united within the individual through a sense of personal responsibility. The unity of answerability means that individuals should create art with an awareness of its impact on life and live life with an appreciation for the insights and challenges presented by art.

Ahmed's theoretical perspective aligns with the idea of unity in answerability—actively engaging with sweaty concepts, which can be challenging to confront. These notions push individuals to tackle the complexities of personal and social identities, urging reflection on how their actions and beliefs connect with broader societal frameworks. Similar to Bakhtin's call for merging art with life, Ahmed stresses the integration of personal experiences with feminist critique, advocating for personal accountability that leads to transformative insights into an individual's societal role and influence. Both theorists emphasize the necessity of engaging with the complex and difficult aspects of experiences, suggesting that understanding, meaning-making, and significant change emerge from continuous scrutiny and redefinition of the lines between personal expression and the external world—a process that mirrors the intricate links and cycle of aesthetic transactions and answerability.

## **5.2 Architectonics and Assemblage of Things**

As I mentioned in the introduction, for nearly seven years, I kept a vintage wedding dress tucked away in my closet. At first, the dress brought me great excitement and happiness. My original plan was to cut it and transform it into a party dress. But despite many planned alterations, the floor-length, cupcake-shaped, multi-tiered,

delicately polka-dotted chiffon dress stubbornly retained its wedding dress essence. So, I left it as is and wore it around the apartment when I was alone. Because, well, why not? I can't quite explain it, but every time I wore it, even in secret, I felt a surprising sense of comfort and, dare I say, prettiness.

As time went on, the dress transformed from a source of joy into something darker. What once symbolized escapism and fantasy began to feel like a burden, something to be ashamed of. It's hard to put into words, but the image of Miss Havisham from *Great Expectations* often came to mind—a reminder of the absurdity of holding onto a wedding dress in the context of my life at that time, an artifact of my perceived madness and insanity. Yet, despite these feelings, I found myself unable to let it go. I simply couldn't part with it. And so, it continued to occupy space in my cramped Manhattan closet for six more years.

In her essay "Happy Objects," Ahmed (2010) explores the concept of happiness as a pivotal motivator within society, describing it as a "promise" that directs people towards specific "objects"—be they material possessions, relationships, or lifestyles viewed as desirable (p. 28). These objects "circulate as social goods" within communities, gaining "positive objective value" as they are embraced and shared among individuals (p. 28). Ahmed posits that happiness acts like social currency, with the value of certain objects or conditions deriving not just from their inherent qualities but from their communal recognition as sources of happiness. She illustrates this with homeownership, often heralded as a symbol of success and stability, thus becoming a significant "happy object." As people invest in homes, this object circulates within the community, embodying and reinforcing values of security and personal achievement.

This circulation then shapes societal norms around success and fulfillment, shedding light on how happiness and its associated objects influence collective ideals and behaviors. This framework might also explain my emotional attachment to the wedding dress.

Ahmed posits that societal norms and behaviors are driven by a collective belief in what constitutes happiness, with individuals and communities pursuing these "happy objects" in anticipation of achieving happiness. As these objects circulate, their perceived value grows, enhancing their desirability and reinforcing the social practices that support them. Ahmed highlights how this relationship initiates a cycle where the pursuit of happiness molds social structures and personal choices, perpetuating certain values while potentially sidelining those who do not conform to prevailing notions of joy. The dynamic shapes people's aspirations and goals while influencing cultural and societal expectations, highlighting the significant role happiness plays in forming social and cultural frameworks.

Interestingly, Bakhtin (1986), later in his life, explored similar themes, theorizing about the types of relationships people navigate in their engagements with the world (p. 138-139). He identified three categories: the first involves impersonal, mechanical, and often quantifiable transactions among physical objects, natural phenomena, or abstract concepts, including causal and logical relationships and linguistic interactions viewed in an abstract, depersonalized context—essentially, it's about things relating to other things. The second category describes interactions between a conscious, perceiving subject and an object, whether a physical item, concept, or phenomenon, influenced by the subject's perception, interpretation, and understanding. The third type encompasses

a wide array of human transactions, such as dialogues, ethical relations, and emotional connections, including love, hate, friendship, respect, and trust.

Although Bakhtin was unable to fully develop his theories on the various relationships outlined in his notes, acknowledging his interest is important as it suggests that Bakhtin viewed objects and things as integral to experiences and to the ways people derive meaning. Essentially, Bakhtin recognized the significant role that both animate and inanimate entities play in human social and emotional life – blurring the boundaries between subjects and objects and making the relationship less rigid and more permeable. In this respect, Bakhtin and Ahmed converge on the idea that things are not mere passive elements in experiences but active participants in the construction of meaning. This leads to an integration of Jane Bennett's (2010) discussion on the concept of "thing-power," where objects are seen not as passive items but as entities possessing "the curious ability of inanimate things to animate, to act, to produce effects dramatic and subtle" (p. 6).

Bennett challenges the traditional distinctions between the animate and inanimate, suggesting that even objects considered inanimate can exert influence and produce effects in the world around them. These effects can vary from dramatic to subtle, illustrating that objects interact with life based on their context, agency, and relationships. In this framework, Bennett's discussion leads to things and thingness as agents of influence, redefining objects as active participants in the network of life that contribute to and shape transactions and experiences. The conceptualization blurs the lines between objects and subjects, pointing to a more complex, interconnected reality where *all things*, regardless of traditional categorization, play significant roles.



Bennett (2010) argues that non-human entities can interfere with or even disrupt human intentions and plans, challenging the traditional view that humans have complete control over their environments and the objects within them. She noted, “The capacity of things—edibles, commodities, storms, metals—not only to impede or block the will and designs of humans but also to act as quasi-agents or forces with trajectories, propensities, or tendencies of their own” (p. 6). The passage suggests that non-human entities exhibit a form of agency capable of initiating actions or causing effects in ways that go beyond being merely passive or reactive to human actions. A simple example would be how a river might shape a community’s development patterns. Its flow, flood cycles, and navigability can dictate where settlements are established, influence economic activities, and even alter migration routes, effectively participating in human social and economic systems without any human direction or intent.

In this respect, Bennett (2010) uses the notion of assemblages to describe how agency can be seen as a “confederation of human and nonhuman elements” (p. 24). She depicts assemblages as spontaneous groupings that encompass both human and nonhuman elements, each contributing to the overall collective. These formations, composed of vibrant materials that range from physical objects to ideas, forces, and organisms, are described by Bennett as “living, throbbing confederations that function despite the presence of internal energies that confound them” (p. 24). Assemblages are dynamic, maintaining coherence even amidst internal contradictions or conflicting forces, which underlines the complexity and sometimes chaotic nature of these groupings. The outcomes generated by an assemblage are termed “emergent properties,” which arise from the collective interactions of the components and cannot

be anticipated from the properties of the individual elements alone (p. 24). Thus, assemblage possesses a “distinctive history of formation and a finite lifespan,” indicating that assemblages are ephemeral; they form, evolve, and eventually dissolve or transform (p. 24).

If all this seems a bit head-trippy, consider Bennett’s use of a power grid and a resulting blackout to illustrate the concept of an assemblage and its implications for understanding thing-agency. The power grid is a complex network that includes various human and nonhuman elements—not just the physical components like cables, transformers, and power stations but also the human operators, environmental factors, and regulatory frameworks. Bennett examines a blackout triggered by a complex interplay of events and circumstances, highlighting that assemblages function within a network of relationships where no single element or agent can be pinpointed as the sole determinant of an outcome.

Bennett’s (2010) essential argument is that in the case of the blackout, there was no single cause or agent to blame. Instead, the blackout was the result of the collective operation—and failure—of the entire assemblage that makes up the power grid. She asserts, “I have been suggesting that there is not so much a doer (an agent) behind the deed (the blackout) as there is a doing and an effecting by a human-nonhuman assemblage” (p. 28). By describing the grid as possessing a life made up of many lives, Bennett posits that the assemblage operates as an entity with its own dynamics and tendencies, shaped by the interplay of numerous components, both human and non-human.

The perspective prompts a shift in thinking about cause and effect, action and result. Rather than seeking a doer behind the deed, Bennett encourages viewing events as outcomes of the workings of an assemblage. She also addresses the issue of moral responsibility and blame. In the context of an assemblage like a power grid, pinpointing blame or responsibility becomes challenging. The traditional concept of moral responsibility, which presupposes a clear agent behind an action, only loosely applies because the action—the blackout, in this instance—is not the result of a single agent but the outcome of complex interactions within the assemblage. The nuanced view complicates the assignment of blame or responsibility, reflecting the interconnected nature of modern systems.

In this sense, the happenings and movement within the assemblage resemble Bakhtin's architectonics of aesthetics because both concepts reinterpret conventional understandings of causality and individual agency. Bakhtin's framework suggests that the creation of meaning in art and life involves a dialogic process where multiple voices and perspectives interact within a dynamic whole. Similarly, Bennett's assemblage theory illustrates how diverse elements coalesce, interact, and sometimes clash within a system, each influencing the outcome in ways that defy simple linear attribution. The comparison emphasizes the complexity of systems—whether in aesthetics, ethics, or technology—highlighting that understanding and navigating such environments requires consideration of a multitude of factors and agents, all contributing to a collective dynamic and outcome.

Bennett's assemblage theory reevaluates the traditional view of objects or agents acting independently. She posits that "things" are vibrant, active components of an

assemblage where human and non-human elements intertwine in intricate ways to shape outcomes collectively. The theory moves away from the idea of individual autonomy and straightforward causality, embracing a denser framework of influence, transactions, and relationships. This perspective offers a fresh way to understand the world. As discussed in the introduction, here, the term "thing" relates to expressions like "doing their thing," which usually signifies a form of personal expression or activity uniquely linked to an individual, highlighting agency and the capacity for action, typically tied to specific intentions and actions. Bennett's notion of "things" both expands and intersects with this usage. Although "doing their thing" suggests some autonomy, Bennett's theory unveils that these actions are, in fact, manifestations of complex transactions within a network that encompasses both human and non-human elements, all shaped by diverse external influences.

Thus, while the everyday concept of "doing their thing" highlights individual choice and personal expression, it is not entirely separate from the broader network of influences that Bennett describes. Both views acknowledge the role of external factors in shaping outcomes, whether through personal or professional actions or within larger systems. Bennett's theory does not diminish the importance of personal agency; rather, it recontextualizes it within a network of dynamic, intersecting forces. The reconceptualization leads to a more nuanced understanding of autonomy, suggesting that it is not about isolation from external influences but about how one engages with and navigates these influences. The perspective offers a more grounded and holistic view of agency, recognizing the complex factors that influence every action and decision. In doing so, Bennett's assemblage theory enriches our understanding of

agency, providing a detailed framework that captures the extensive range of forces at play in any activity or action.

### ***Explaining Sticky Things and Why It's Time to Burn It***

It's accurate to describe my secret wedding dress as a sticky thing. But why? Ahmed (2010) elaborates on the "stickiness" of things as the emotional responses or feelings that tether to other people, places, and things (p.35). Here, according to Ahmed, affect serves as the adhesive that keeps the connection between these elements strong, causing certain things or ideas to remain perceived as valuable or desirable due to the emotional and social significance they hold. The "stickiness" of affect sustains the perceived value and desirability of these objects over time, influencing how individuals and societies seek happiness (p.35). Thus, the quest for happiness relates to the emotional ties formed with specific objects or ideas, which endure because of their affective importance. The sticky quality of affect ensures that these connections are not easily severed, upholding societal norms and personal behaviors directed at acquiring these "happy objects" (p.35). As a result, the social and cultural frameworks surrounding happiness are maintained through these lasting emotional connections, shaping both individual goals and shared values.

A simple example of this would be the wedding dress tucked away in my closet. Initially a symbol of joy and future promises, it became imbued with complex emotions after unforeseen changes in my life. Its continued presence, despite altered circumstances, reflects its "sticky" nature—holding emotional value and memories that make it difficult to part with, continuously influencing my feelings and decisions around it.

Ahmed (2010) also explores how the attributes assigned to things shape social relationships and emotions, particularly focusing on happiness. She points out, "Objects are sticky because they are already attributed as being good or bad, as being the cause of happiness or unhappiness" (p.35). The stickiness highlights how things carry emotional values that influence how people transact with these things and with each other. Ahmed investigates how such perceived qualities affect social cohesion, noting that groups often form around the shared belief that certain items are inherently good, adopting some objects as sources of joy while dismissing others. This shared understanding of what is considered good or desirable strengthens and maintains social bonds, aligning individuals within a group based on their preferences and attitudes, thereby reinforcing group identity and solidarity. In other words, things are surrounded by a halo of emotional and social value that dictates relationships and reinforces collective ideals and behaviors.

Ahmed (2010) ties this observation to the concept of "promise" (p.35). She elaborates that the term "promise" originates from the Latin *promissum*, meaning "to send forth." The idea of the "promise of happiness" linked to certain objects or actions suggests that happiness is projected outward within social contexts. This projection not only affects the individuals it reaches but also enhances collective emotions and strengthens social connections. The point Ahmed makes is significant as it illustrates how objects and ideas are not just passive elements but active participants in the emotional and social dynamics of communities. This concept of promise shows that happiness and the pursuit of it can have ripple effects, influencing not just personal joy but also reinforcing and shaping the social fabric.

Additionally, Ahmed (2010) discusses "happy objects" and suggests that proximity to such objects can impart happiness to nearby items through association (p.28). The observation underlines the interconnectedness of emotional responses with external environments and the things within them, highlighting how relationships and contexts contribute to affective value. Ahmed notes that emotional perspectives are intertwined with physical and social environments, where things, people, and places blend to form a complex network of affective meanings. She posits that emotions are reflections of experiences and relationships, suggesting that emotions can spread or transfer from one object to another, influencing perceptions of our surroundings based on these associations.

Essentially, Ahmed's analysis reveals that affective value is dynamic, continuously influenced by and influencing the networks of social and physical spaces that individuals navigate, weaving a dense and intricate web of emotional significance and frameworks for meaning making. This interplay implies that transactions with happy objects are not personal or isolated phenomena but are embedded in a social fabric that assigns value and meaning. The presence and influence of happy objects can trigger a cascade of responses that extend beyond the person, affecting and reshaping community norms and expectations, which, in my case, is precisely the reason to burn it.

By burning my sticky thing, I am not trying to sever my emotional ties to the dress, as the halo or thingness around it runs too deep—perhaps even across time and space. However, by changing the material aspects of the sticky thing with fire, I am transforming its impact, reshaping how it influences my emotional interior. This act

doesn't erase the past associations or the deep-seated feelings but allows me to redefine them, offering a new narrative for my aesthetic transactions and experiences with the memory it holds. In altering its physical state, I'm not simply discarding the thing—far from it—but rather engaging in a ritual of renewal and transition, marking a shift in how I relate to its history and my own.



## Chapter Six: Aesthetic Transaction and Answerability in the Yet-to-be

There is still so much to say! I have barely scratched the surface of aesthetics, transactions, experience, and answerability, which is a testament to the depth and thingness surrounding this thing. For me, I suspect that the next frontier of this journey will be affect and the impact it has on engagement and experiences with expressions and others. Affect theory invites a deeper exploration into how emotions and sensations intersect with the ways people encounter and respond to artistic expressions. As I venture into this territory, I anticipate uncovering new layers of meaning and understanding ripe with potential for further inquiry and discussion.

In *The Autonomy of Affect*, Brian Massumi (1995) explores the intricate dynamics between the conventional socio-linguistic meaning of an image and the intensity of its emotional impact. He identifies a significant gap between the image's content and its affect, noting that the strength or duration of an image's impact does not directly correlate with its content. The insight is crucial for understanding affect, as Massumi points out that while the content of an image is tied to shared social meanings, the intensity of its effect operates independently of traditional semantic or semiotic rules.

Simply put, the affective response to an image (or a thing) can be immediate and visceral, transcending the limitations of language and predefined interpretations. The distinction highlights the unique power of affect to influence individual experiences in ways that are personal and often unpredictable. Massumi's analysis opens a tremendous amount of space for recognizing how things can evoke feelings and reactions that are not solely dependent on their visible or textual elements but also on the sensations they provoke, which can defy easy categorization or explanation. The

perspective enriches understanding of things and their impact, stressing the profound and sometimes enigmatic ways it communicates with viewers.

Massumi (1995) also describes the process of image reception as "multi-leveled," encompassing at least two distinct layers: content and intensity (p.85). The intensity layer is where paradoxical affects, like finding sadness pleasant, manifest. This layer operates according to a logic that eschews conventional distinctions and merges elements usually considered separate. The disconnect between content and intensity fosters a "different connectivity," which allows for new types of connections based on affective resonance rather than logical coherence (p.85). In other words, as it relates to experience and meaning making, affect initiates unconventional linkages that transcend traditional categorizations and enable a more fluid interplay between feelings and interpretations. The dynamic allows individuals to form unique, often unexpected associations that can deeply enrich the experience of an image or artwork. The different connectivity that Massumi discusses not only challenges the norms of perception but again, opens space where meaning is not fixed but continually shaped by the emotional responses it provokes.

Going just a bit deeper, Massumi (1995) distinguishes between two levels of embodied experience: qualification (content) and intensity. He explains that intensity is evident in "purely autonomic reactions" apparent at the body's surface, particularly the skin (p.85). These reactions are immediate and disconnected from conscious thought or narrative. In contrast, "depth reactions" related to the qualification level involve autonomic functions like heartbeat and breathing, which are tied to conscious processes such as expectation due to their link to narrative continuity (p.85). That's to say,

intensity operates in the space of the immediate and non-conscious, affecting individuals in ways that often bypass rational analysis and narrative structure. The distinction demonstrates how visceral reactions to stimuli can exist independently of one's understanding or interpretation of them. Such responses can evoke an emotional impact that doesn't necessarily align with the cognitive assessment of the situation. Massumi's exploration of these two levels of response emphasizes the complexity of human experience, where the physical and the cognitive intertwine but also operate distinctly, allowing for a depth of reaction and engagement with the world that is rich and multifaceted.

The implication here, as it relates to answerability, is that the affective dimension of experiences challenges the typical boundaries of answerability. Since responses at the level of intensity are primarily autonomic and non-conscious, they provoke a form of answerability that is not mediated by direct awareness or deliberate thought. The notion suggests a type of responsiveness to the world that precedes and even bypasses the more considered forms of ethical or moral accountability typically discussed in philosophical contexts. In this light, answerability extends into this space of the pre-conscious, where individuals respond to their environments in ways that are not always accessible to or governed by conscious intention. This broadens the scope of what it means to be answerable in transactions and experience, acknowledging that much of human response and connectivity operates beyond the conventional narratives of agency and awareness, thereby enriching the dialogue between affect and answerability in ongoing transactions with things and each other.

Additionally, Massumi (1995) describes intensity as being associated with "nonlinear processes: resonance and feedback" that disrupt the linear progression of narrative from past to future. He characterizes intensity as a "static-temporal and narrative noise," an emotional and temporal disruption that creates a "hole in time." This state is filled with vibratory motion—indicating activity and energy—but this motion isn't directed towards any practical ends within the conventional narrative or social contexts. Thus, intensity exists in a unique state that is neither passive nor fully active, filled with motion yet not directed toward conventional goals. While in other contexts, the qualification of emotion might propel a narrative forward within socially recognized frameworks, in the context described by Massumi, it serves to highlight the gap between raw emotional intensity and the narrative structures we use to make sense of our experiences.

These disruptions in linear narrative progression profoundly affect aesthetic transactions and answerability. Massumi's insight suggests that aesthetic transactions don't just convey or communicate in the traditional sense—through apparent, linear stories or recognized symbols—but also through the sensations and disruptions they provoke, which might not align neatly with existing narrative frameworks. Such transactions challenge participants to engage with art and communication on a more visceral, immediate level, prompting a form of answerability that is responsive to these non-linear, affective experiences.

The implications are profound for both creators and consumers of aesthetic entities, prompting a reconsideration of how these entities affect their audiences and challenging traditional limits of interpretation. In this perspective, things are transformed

from mere vehicles of expression, storytelling, or idea transmission using familiar symbols to agents that ignite emotional and sensory experiences, often eluding conventional narrative responses. Such non-linear experiences disrupt usual interpretive frameworks, requiring individuals to craft their responses unguided by predetermined stories or expected emotions. Instead, they must chart their courses through the emotional and sensory realms provoked by these things. This shift also affects how aesthetics is taught, critiqued, and valued. Educators and critics might find it necessary to devise new methods for engaging with and discussing aesthetics that give precedence to affective experiences rather than straightforward, linear narratives.

In environments shaped by such potent, undirected energies, individuals are summoned to respond not merely with cognitive or narrative comprehension but with their entire embodied selves. This form of answerability entails a willingness to be influenced and to react in ways that may defy clear explanations within traditional narrative or logical frameworks. It calls for a reimagining of transactions, shifting the emphasis from attaining predetermined narrative or social outcomes to fostering environments where emotional and temporal resonances can emerge and exert their influence freely.

### ***Endings and Beginnings***

I often wonder where and when I became a writer. Perhaps it was during those quiet hours spent with books as a kid, the endless mornings jotting thoughts and stories into my diaries (a habit that still defines my mornings), or those lengthy three-way phone conversations with friends back in the day when phones were still attached to walls. But it likely wasn't a singular moment that set me on this twisty path, but rather a series of

incremental realizations—each experience layering upon the next—where I discovered the transformative power of words to shape, reveal, and, when needed, to heal. And importantly, it was fun, which, in some respects, might be the most essential element of all.

But, at some point, writing for fun turned into a profession, which meant I had to graduate from private writing to writing for others - a different space altogether. The shift marked a transition from personal exploration to public communication, extending the focus from personal catharsis and enjoyment to include the impact my words might have on readers. Thus, the writing journey evolved into a multifaceted experience of perspectives and transactions—there is me, there is you, and there is us, all interconnected by words—*my aesthetic thing* or what Dewey calls the habits formed in intercourse with the world, we also in-habit the world" (p.108). I am so taken with this line, which is why I bring it up here again, as it suggests our regular daily engagement with the world is the path towards finding and cultivating our aesthetic or, in this case, the art of things.

According to Dewey, the things we do more than happen within the world; they are the golden ticket that allows us to meaningfully inhabit it. Here, "in-habit" refers to embedding oneself within the environment in such a way that it becomes a part of us, mirroring our habits and molding our future experiences. The process is not passive, but it evolves through deliberate engagement and transactions, turning the space around us into what Dewey calls home—a familiar terrain shaped by our consistent actions and creative expressions – the art of the thing. Thus, when Dewey notes that "home is part of our every experience," it suggests that this sense of home infuses every aspect of our

lives, coloring our experiences and influencing our perspectives continuously - the thing of art.

I also associate aesthetic transaction and answerability with Dewey's (1934) theorizations of what it means to be "fully alive," which he articulates as: "the future is not ominous but a promise; it surrounds the present as a halo" (p.17). In other words, being fully alive means perceiving the future not as a threat but as a bright promise that encircles the present. The present, from this perspective, is a space brimming with possibility and agency – the thingness of all things. Each moment holds potential, acting as the essence for shaping one's future through choices and actions, or as Dewey puts it, "possibilities are felt as a possession of what is now and here" – intersectionality between the present and the potential which accurately describes my meat counter moment with my reader (p. 17).

Bakhtin (1990) articulated a similar concept, observing that the "present-on-hand, given, determined," is continually molded by expectations of the future—"what is yet-to-be, what is still in the future" (p. 44). Essentially, actions are not just reactions to immediate circumstances but are influenced by projections of future possibilities. To clarify this idea, Bakhtin offers an illustrative example of a person walking on the street. When the person steps to the right to avoid an oncoming car, the action is not merely a response, but it is primarily driven by the desire to avoid a potential collision ("the possible jolt I was anticipating") (p.44). The idea is significant as people often base their present choices and actions on anticipated future outcomes in various aspects of life—be it in relationships, career decisions, or our daily choices. Therefore, the intersection of the present and the future impacts decision-making and behavior across all facets of

life. I mention this because the entire concept of aesthetic transaction and answerability revolves around *connections*—connections that are far more complex and extensive than we could ever envision. It's about a dense network of relationships and experiences that collectively and individually shape what is perceived to be our realities.

Furthermore, Bakhtin (1990) explores the complex interplay between past experiences and future possibilities in shaping personal identity and frameworks for meaning making. He contends that no aspect of one's lived experience should be consigned to a "past of meaning" that is isolated and finalized without consideration of future consequences (p.177). Bakhtin highlights that as long as a person perceives an experience as integral to their identity—"insofar as I find myself precisely in a given lived experience"—it remains active and connected to the "future of meaning" (p.177). Thus, experiences are never fully detached or isolated but always at play, and by preserving such experiences, their relevance and impact continue, always with an awareness of future implications and interpretations.

In this context, Bakhtin (1990) suggests that experiences are never "justified and consummated independently of the future" but are constantly subject to reevaluation and recontextualization in light of forthcoming developments (p.177). The dynamic process of linking past experiences with potential future scenarios ensures that experiences are only partially resolved or concluded. They remain open-ended, "unindifferent to this future," with their ultimate significance or resolution perpetually "transposed into what-is-yet-to-be" (p.177). The ongoing cycle of aesthetic transactions and the pursuit of answerability is the art of thing, thing of art.



If you see me hanging around at the meat counter, picking out a New York strip steak, come and say hello. You may be just the person I've been looking for to start something new.

### **CODA: Makings of Art of Thing; Thing of Art**

To create the visual element for this work, my artist collaborator Stephanie Bordas, a professional photographer specializing in female bodies, and I met in her Brooklyn studio with just my body, a vintage wedding dress, and her camera. Our process followed an organic flow—no concrete concept or boundaries, nothing forced or pre-structured. We both felt compelled to let the moment and the thingness of things guide our creativity and expression.

In this respect, we allowed the dress to dictate its narrative, exploring the textures, layers, and emotional weight of its life. The dress guided our movements and poses, capturing the raw, unfiltered transactional relationship between body and a thing. Stephanie's lens captured not just the material aspect but the transformation of the dress from a commodified joy to a haunting relic, reflecting my journey and the shifting meanings the dress embodied over time. Through spontaneous movement and unspoken understanding, we created a series of six large video installations that were exhibited at the Digital Futures Institute, Teachers College, Columbia University and a series of still images that convey the complex intersection of the physical and material entangled with memory, loss, and the reclamation of one's narrative.

The resulting work mirrors the themes of transience and transformation central to this work, emphasizing the fluidity and connectedness of our experiences. It stands as a testament to the spontaneous, energetic exchange between subject, object, and artist, revealing layers of meaning that emerged naturally through our collaborative process.

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