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“Painting and Sculpture are Gymnastics of the Eye”: Emerson’s Search for a Democratic Concept of Art as Experience

Our America has a bad name for superficialness.

Emerson, “Fate”

In Emerson’s thinking the eye, corporeal as well as mental, is the most powerful human organ. It is, as James M. Cox argues, “in its way everything for Emerson” (57). As a physical organ it scans material surfaces and perceives the contours of objects, while the mental eye is capable of transcending the superficial; it sees beneath the surfaces and opens deeper dimensions in the world of objects. Sights and insights are, thus, intimately connected. Since his first publication *Nature*, a rhapsody of man’s visionary power, Emerson’s oeuvre has abounded with direct and indirect references to the eye. Eyes are retrospective or prospective, build on “the sepulchers of the fathers” or behold “God and nature face to face,” are either timid or bold. “To speak truly,” he says in *Nature*, “few adult persons can see nature. Most persons do not see the sun. At least they have a very superficial seeing. The sun illuminates only the eye of the man, but shines into the eye and the heart of the child.” The child’s innocent eye sees deeper; it enjoys, as it were, “an original relation” to things (EL 7, 10),¹ since it is still “unconquered” and unconditioned. As “infancy conforms to nobody” (EL 260), a child’s eye is a truly nonconformist eye.

On his third journey to Europe in the autumn of 1872, Emerson visited the Louvre and the Vatican Museum, a visit which Henry James, his traveling companion, remembers as follows:

[H]is perception of the objects contained in these collections was of the most general order. I was struck with the anomaly of a man so refined and intelligent being so little

¹ Unless indicated otherwise, Emerson’s *Essays and Lectures* will be abbreviated as EL, *The Journals and Miscellaneous Notebooks of Ralph Waldo Emerson* as JMN, *The Letters of Ralph Waldo Emerson* as L, and *Emerson’s Complete Works* as W.

spoken to by works of art. It would be more exact to say that certain chords were wholly absent... Emerson's eyes were thickly bandaged. (James 74f.)

A man whose thinking had so much been centered on seeing should suddenly walk around with thickly bandaged eyes? For Henry James, a passionate art aficionado, it seemed an anomaly that needs to be explained. Had Emerson's youthful eye-worship waned in his later years? Or was he perhaps just in an autumnal mood, since, as he noted in his journal, little "depends on the object, much on the mood, in art" (JMN 7: 46)?² Almost forty years separated *Nature* from his European journey of 1872, four decades in which an "endless seeker" like Emerson (EL 412) must have experienced many a change. Since "the soul is progressive," as he argued in his essay "Art," "it never quite repeats itself, but in every act attempts the production of a new and fairer whole" (EL 431). Why should not his conceptualization of art be subject to the same laws that he claimed for the production of art? Why should he not continuously seek a newer, fairer concept of art?

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For the young Emerson, who had grown up in the richly verbal culture of New England, "visual art was a purely Old World phenomenon" (Hostetler 121). Reflections on art were extremely rare in his early journals. His initiation into the world of the fine arts he experienced during his Grand Tour of 1833 that led him to Italy, France and England. Italy for every artist was practically synonymous with art. "The public gardens and private galleries," argues Paul R. Baker, "had a wealth of the greatest works of sculpture and painting from the past. Here he could study what those before him had succeeded in creating, perhaps deriving general principles of beauty from what he saw around him" (125). For someone like Emerson who, as so many fellow Americans, had been brought up on poor copies in portfolios or second-rate paintings in small municipal galleries where he saw works "done by I know not who" (JMN 7: 23), Italy's master-works of art kindled his enthusiasm. "O the marbles! & oh the pictures & oh the noble proportions," he rejoiced. Their sublimity literally overwhelmed him; he felt "so little & so elated" that he could only exclaim with great exhilaration: "O che bella veduta!" (JMN 4: 131, 133). In Rome and Florence he finally saw original Raphaels and Guidos, Michelangelos and Titians, Claude Lorrains and Salvatore Rosas, the Dying Gladiator and the statue of

² How important the mood, the "equipoise of mind" was to him for the appreciation of a work of art, the following journal note makes unmistakably clear: "I have enjoyed more from mediocre pictures," he writes, "casually seen when the mind was in equilibrium, & have reaped a true benefit of the art of painting... than from many masterpieces" (JMN 7: 46).

Moses, artists and art-works that would remain life-long points of reference in his writings. In the Sistine Chapel, during Holy Week, he heard “the monks chaunt the *Miserere*” (L 1: 368), a musical experience of the first order that could not be repeated anywhere else.³ When he visited St. Peter’s Cathedral, the overall experience was that of a *Gesamtkunstwerk*:

The music that is heard in it is always good & the eye is always charmed. It is an ornament of the earth. It is not grand, it is so rich & pleasing; it should rather be called the sublime of the beautiful... how faery beautiful! An Arabian night’s tale... (JMN 4: 156 f.)

His initial enthusiasm, however, began to wear off the longer his Italian sojourn lasted. A defensive attitude gained ground. He felt tempted “to refuse to admire. [But admire] you must in spite of yourself. It is magnificent,” he noted. Increasingly the museums “dazzled & glutted” his eyes (JMN 4: 150). What he regretted most was that he could not concentrate on one single painting; “the gallery will not permit this,” he would note in his journal. “The eye glances from picture to picture. Each interferes with the other” (JMN 7: 196). The unhappy traveler, he complained in a letter to his brother William, “revolves ever in a little eddy of an orbit through Museums & caffés & the society of his countrymen and the inner Italy he never sees” (L 1: 381). His eyes, it seems, were mostly gliding along surfaces while the deeper insights were missing. Only a few paintings, it seems, had a lasting impact on him: Andrea Sacchi’s *Vision of San Romualdo*, Guido Reni’s *Aurora*,⁴ two *Assumptions* by Titian and “the first picture in the world,” Raphael’s *Transfiguration* (JMN 4:150), paintings with a visionary quality and wholly in keeping with Emerson’s aesthetic ideal of a spiraling form that lead and lifted the viewer’s eye forever upward, as Vivian C. Hopkins has shown. What most of his favorite works of art had also in common was their strong emphasis of facial expression. “The sweet and sublime face of Jesus” in *The Transfiguration*, a “simple, home-speaking countenance,” he noted, “was painted for you, for such as had eyes capable of being touched by simplicity and lofty emotions” (EL 437). Faces are so important to him because they can speak; their eyes meet the viewer’s eyes and provoke, as it were, an

³ In his journal Emerson notes: “The famous Miserere was sung this afternoon in the Sistine Chapel. The saying at Rome, is, that it cannot be imitated not only by any other choir but in any other chapel in the world. The Emperor of Austria sent Mozart to Rome on purpose to have it sung at Vienna with like effect, but it failed.” It even failed, as Emerson remarks, in St. Peter’s where it was sung “with less effect” than on the previous day in the Sistine Chapel (JMN 4: 154 f.).

⁴ A copy of Guido Reni’s *Aurora* was given to Emerson by his friend Thomas Carlyle and is still hanging in the Emerson House in Concord.

original relation, a very individual response. Such paintings, he notes, not only “please they eye,” they first and foremost “reach the soul” (JMN 4: 154).⁵

Emerson’s art enthusiasm seems to have reached an absolute saturation point once he arrives in Paris. His visit to the Louvre is mentioned only in passing and his response to Leonardo da Vinci’s paintings is brief and unenthusiastic. Due to their “identity of the features” Leonardo’s pictures for him lack an individual expression (JMN 4: 197). Their eyes, it seems, do not speak nor do they reach his soul. The Cabinet of Natural History in the Jardin des Plantes, however, finds his undivided attention. There he is, all of a sudden, able to concentrate on individual objects. One parrot in particular, he says, “called *Psittacus erythropterus* from New Holland, deserves as special mention as a picture of Raphael in a Gallery.” The Ornithological Chambers are, as it were, Nature’s picture gallery; their richness of colors is inexhaustible and “the upheaving principle of life” (JMN 4: 199) to be felt everywhere. Nature now takes the role of the artist; her work by far exceeds man’s artistry. Homeward bound to a “Land without history.... Land of the forest” (JMN 4: 441f.), after the disappointing encounters with Wordsworth, Coleridge, and Carlyle, the idols of his youth, he summarizes his European experiences as largely “deficient – in different degrees but all deficient – in insight and religious truth” (JMN IV: 79). Thus, the Grand Tour for Emerson ended as it had for many young Americans traveling to Germany “to find the German genius,” who mournfully realized that “America possessed more of that expansive inquisitive spirit” (“The Anglo-American” 201f.). The dazzled and glutted physical eye asked for wider circles to be drawn, for an expansion of the view.

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Back home after the many *travails* of traveling, in his eyes merely “a fool’s paradise” (EL 278), Emerson could seriously devote his time to deeper inquiries. In his Concord study he could recollect his thoughts in tranquility and reflect upon a more expansive concept of art. Three essays and lectures resulted from this effort. In February 1835 he delivered a lecture titled “Michel Angelo Buonaroti [*sic*]” to be followed by an essay “Art,” completed in 1840, and “Thoughts on Art” published in *The Dial* in 1841. While he traveled his views on the arts of painting, sculpture, architecture and literature were still largely Eurocentric. Rome was “the metropolis of the arts” and in Italy, where major and minor American artists studied, art was of “greater interest than any where else” (JMN 4: 159). He went even as far as to say that art was “born in Europe & will not

⁵ How important the face is for Emerson, is expressed in the following journal note: “I noticed in fine pictures that the head subordinated the limbs & gave them all the expression of the face. In poor pictures the limbs & the trunk degrade the face” (JMN 7: 50).

cross the ocean” (JMN 4: 139). American artists therefore played only a marginal role in his thinking. While he referred favorably to Claude Lorrain’s and Salvatore Rosa’s landscapes, there was no mention at all of Thomas Cole or Asher B. Durand, the two major Hudson River landscape painters. Horatio Greenough and Washington Allston were the two American artists mentioned most frequently, yet not so much for their artistic achievements as for their thoughts on art. Greenough’s “colossal” sculpture of Achilles that Emerson saw in Florence seemed to him “a poor subject” (Hopkins 94), whereas his essay “Remarks on American Art,” in which he advocated a functional theory of art, was much more to Emerson’s taste. Washington Allston, in his eyes, was a better writer than painter. In his journal he remarked that he had read “some lines [of Allston], very good and entirely self-taught, original not conventional (JMN 5: 377) while his work as a painter seemed to him “too picturesque,” (JMN 7: 223), too “*feminine* or receptive & not masculine or creative” (JMN 5: 195). Allston and Greenough’s works, he noted, should be seen in line with writers like William Cullen Bryant and Washington Irving whose literary achievements exhibited a “puny love of beauty” and an “imitative love of grace” (JMN 7: 24). American art, in his opinion, still lacked strength and boldness; it was still too timid, tame, and reliant on “the courtly muses of Europe,” as he phrased it in “The American Scholar” (EL 70). A true artist, he argued in “Art,” “must employ the symbols in use in his day and nation, he cannot wipe out of his work every trace of the thoughts amidst which it grew” (EL 431f). Though politically independent, America had still not reached its artistic maturity. His journey to Europe, though at first undertaken reluctantly, would nonetheless serve an important function for him; he went to Europe, he would say years later, “to be Americanized [and] to import what we can” (JMN 10: 161). What he imported, among other things, was a deeper conviction of the cultural importance of art, an awareness of the necessity of a new, more expansive American concept of art conforming with a new, expanding country, “a country of beginnings, of projects, of designs, and expectations,” as he would later characterize it in “The Young American” (EL 217).

Emerson began his thinking about art with art’s central organ, the eye, that was “the best of artists,” as he said in *Nature* (EL 14). He diagnosed an “important defect” in America: “the absence of a general education of the eye” (JMN 13: 437). The American eye, both physical and mental, was untrained to see deeper; it was blinded by work and the pursuit of wealth rather than beauty; it was unable to see the splendor, color, and opulence of things. It looked either timidly backward or restlessly forward, but it was not accustomed to *see* the beauty of the here and now. Painting and sculpture, Emerson argued, were the ideal training, the “gymnastics of the eye,” so that it could learn “the niceties and curiosities of its function” (EL 434). Great works of art can arrest the eye,

they can concentrate the view “around a single form,” a form of “an all-excluding fullness.” Art, in short, has “the power to fix the momentary eminency of an object” (EL 433). The eye is only “the first circle; the horizon which it forms is the second; and throughout nature this primary figure is repeated without end” (EL 403). The eye tolerates no standstill; it draws circle after circle to see beyond and beneath the confines of the superficial. It has a truly transcending power. The eye “that never passes beyond outline and color,” he says in his lecture on Michelangelo, slights the object (104); it misses its deeper dimensions. The “animal eye” (EL 33), as it were, never learns to see fully. As “all works of the highest art” are of an all-excluding fullness and send out rays of “an aboriginal Power” (EL 434), the currents of this power begin to circulate through the viewer’s soul as Michelangelo in his paintings and sculptures “sought through the eye to reach the soul” (110). The art object gradually dissolves, it seems; it gives way to the viewer’s experience.

As early as 1832 in “The Lord’s Supper,” his valedictory sermon preached at Boston’s Second Church, in which he had articulated a severe critique of the encrusted forms of an institutionalized religion, Emerson envisaged forms that should be “as essential as bodies,” organic forms, that is, ceaselessly growing and outgrowing themselves. The adherence “to one form,” he argued, was not only “alien to the spirit of Christ” (W 11: 25), it was, above all, alien to Nature whose forms were fluid, fluxional, metamorphic. Nature had its etymological roots, he later said in “Works and Days,” in “our fine Latin word... *natura*, *about to be born*, or what German philosophy denotes as a *becoming*” (W 7: 164 f.). An organic form is always becoming, it always flows and transits from one form into another. “Any fixedness,” he notes in the essay “Beauty,” “is the reverse of the flowing, and therefore deformed” (EL 1105). The organic form derives its power from its ceaseless flow. “Power,” he says in “Self-Reliance,” is basically metamorphic, it “resides in the moment of transition from a past to a new state” (EL 271). Since art is first and foremost form and since forms are conceived as organic, a true work of art should always be a work in progress, never fixed or finished, always fluxional, “vehicular and transitive” (EL 463). It should be able to carry the viewer’s eye beyond the merely colorful contours into other dimensions as the Christ figure in Raphael’s *Transfiguration* leads the viewer’s eye literally behind and beyond the limitations of canvas and frame into a space of infinite splendor. As transitive and vehicular forms artworks are, as he says in “The Poet,” ideal means of “conveyance” (EL 463). Their function is “merely initial” (EL 433) in the sense that they are mere carriers, that they merely initiate a viewing process and set the viewer’s eyes in motion. His eyes are opened not only to see the colorful opulence on the pictorial surface, but what is even more important, “the eternal picture which nature paints in the street with moving men

and children, beggars, and fine ladies, draped in red, and green, and blue, and grey” (EL 434). Again the art object begins to dissolve; its function is merely temporary and provisional. It merely functions as an eye-opener making the viewer aware of Nature that paints the truer, eternal picture. What is left behind, once a painting has done its work, is nothing less than a heap of “hypocritical rubbish.” “Away with your nonsense of oil and easels, of marble and chisels,” Emerson concludes, “except to open your eyes to the masteries of eternal art” (EL 434). In his essay “Experience” he writes how strongly he had once felt of paintings and that he “had good lessons from pictures which [he has] since seen without emotion or remark” (EL 474). The experience of art once again becomes more important than the art object. Tony Tanner in *The Reign of Wonder* interprets Emerson’s shift from work to spectator as the most significant break with the European concept of art:

[I]n emphasizing the responsibilities and creative powers of ‘the eye of the beholder’ he had a motive which the European romantics could not have had. For, as long as the interest of the locale was considered to be inherent in the place rather than the viewer, then Americans would be forever looking to Europe. (27)

The shift from the art object to the spectator would mean that America was finally able to declare its artistic independence; it would emancipate the individual viewer as a creative agent. Everybody was now, as it were, empowered to become an artist, since art’s “highest effect is to make new artists” (EL 437) – a truly democratic creed.

The first lecture on art that Emerson delivered after his return from Europe was devoted to Michelangelo, sculptor, painter, poet, architect and engineer who presented “the perfect image of the Artist” (100). He was Emerson’s representative artist figure who showed equal competence both as a manual and mental worker; he made “with his own hand not only the wimbles, the files, and the steps but also the [rasps] and the chisels and all other irons and instruments which he needed in sculpture; and in painting he not only mixed but ground colors himself trusting no one” (107). He was no idler, as artists were pejoratively characterized at the time,⁷ but a toiler, a man dedicated to manual work, who ceaselessly tinkered and never tired to perfect himself “step by step to the height of Art” (102). To a single figure he used to make “nine, ten, or twelve heads before he could satisfy himself” (107). People said, “the marble turned flexible in his hands” (110), the solid turned fluid and fluxional. Under his hands, art lost its artificial character and began to look like a perfect work of Nature. He was the true master of *ars celare*

⁷ Hawthorne’s narrator in “The Custom-House” hears his forefathers critiquing him as “an idler” (9) who is entirely oblivious of the Puritans’ work ethic. Yet, “one idle and rainy day” (23), he makes a crucial discovery that will lead to an idler’s work: *The Scarlet Letter*.

artem. Michelangelo, in Emerson's eyes, was no Romantic who worked "intuitively," but an assiduous experimenter, a technician working with great "dexterity in practical... contrivances," one who "learned by action and practice" (106f). Though "incessant in his creative labors," he knew well that perfection was never to be achieved in the here and now. His motto therefore was a more modest one, "not to utter but to suggest the unutterable" (116).

There are two more aspects that make Michelangelo such an exemplary artist figure. First, he was so assured of his work that not even a papal authority could get him off his course. As an artist he acknowledged no institutional authority above him. The people rather than the pope were the true patrons whom he wanted to serve with his art. His place was amidst rather than above the common man. And second, art for Michelangelo was a part of everyday life. As for the ancient Greeks art for him meant primarily *techne*; the term implied that art and labor were not mutually exclusive, that the fine and useful arts should no longer be treated separately. "Beauty must come back to the useful arts, and the distinction between the fine and the useful arts be forgotten," he said in "Art" (EL 439).⁸ Art, as Emerson understood it, was always more than just fine arts; it was mind objectified in matter, thought materialized in color, tone, stone, steel or language. It was, as he said in "Thoughts on Art," the "conscious utterance of thought, by speech or action, to any end" (*Dial* 367). Art's first and foremost end was that it would matter and make a difference, that it would intervene in the practices of everyday life as in ancient Greece a sculpture could make a difference and the *polis* of Athens could be "divided into political factions upon the merits of Phidias." Artworks should not be made for museums. The arts "languish" now, Emerson remarked, "because their purpose is merely exhibition.... They are mere flourish to please the eye" (*Dial* 378). Let not "the laborer, the accountant, the manufacturer, the mechanic, the farmer" turn away from the arts with indifference, he admonished his fellow Americans. Artworks should make a difference in all the people's lives; they should be more than "pretty subjects for an idle hour" (Michelangelo 100).

Since art should make a difference in the everyday life of a people and a country, famous for its "superficialness" (EL 944), it does not come as a surprise that Emerson embraces subjects and objects that, at first glance, seem superficial and common rather than uncommon such as "the railroad, the insurance office, the joint-stock company, our law, our primary assemblies, our commerce, the galvanic battery, the electric jar, the

⁸ George Ripley had invited Emerson to join Brook Farm, an institution that tried to combine manual and mental labor. Emerson declined Ripley's invitation, but in "Man the Reformer" he supported the idea "which the times give to the doctrine, that the manual labor of society ought to be shared among all the members" (EL 139).

prism, and the chemist’s retort.” As long as “only an economical use” (EL 440) is sought in these subjects and objects, America’s state of the arts will remain “but initial” (EL 437). The American artist will have to learn that banks, tariffs, newspapers, and caucuses are symbols of his day and nation and “rest on the same foundations of wonder as the town of Troy, and the temple of Delphos.” Such objects are merely “flat and dull to dull people” (EL 465). Once again Emerson appeals to the eye of the beholder that makes all the difference. As long as he remains unaware of his country’s “proper glory,” it will remain “shrouded & unknown” (JMN 10: 161); as long as the American artist does not learn to appreciate the common things of the common man “in the field and road-side, in the shop and mill” (EL 440), he will not be able to let his country’s glory shine. A decade and a half later Walt Whitman would appear on the literary scene and realize in his poetry for the first time what Emerson had envisaged in his early essays and lectures. He dared to make “our logrolling, our stumps and their politics, our fisheries, our Negroes, and Indians” (EL 465) the symbols of his day and nation.

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Emerson’s concept of the American artist and his art had not only appealed to Whitman. It initiated a distinct artistic practice in America that favored a representation of “the near, the low, the common,” as it had been envisaged in “The American Scholar” (EL 68). Though no direct influence can be traced, the *trompe l’oeil* still-life painters such as William Harnett, John Peto or John Haberle, portraitists of the quotidian, seem to have followed Emerson’s advice and “explored and poeticized” (EL 68) what was near, low and common. The demotic rather than the exotic object, which had been a characteristic feature of European still life painting, was what they privileged. Nails and hammers, Bowie knives and horseshoes, greenbacks, stamps, letters or photographs of historical figures like Lincoln were only a few of their American objects. The paintings bear traits of a truly democratic art not only because of the common things that they depict but also because of their mode of depiction. On a flat surface the objects are arranged in a non-hierarchical order that makes one object appear as important and unique as the other. In their austere simplicity they resist, as it were, the ostentatious show-off of their time commonly known as the Gilded Age. With their objects preferably chosen from their recent past they stand, as David M. Lubin has argued, “heroically separate from the world of mass production and consumption, the so-called commodity realm” which gives them a somewhat “nostalgic” touch (281). Their *trompe l’oeil* technique literally “tricks the eye” and generates the illusion of an actual presence. The objects assume, as it were, an almost haptic quality not unlike the painted grapes of Zeuxis in the ancient myth. On the one hand, the trickery deceives the eye while, on the other

hand, the eye sees through the trick and concentrates its full attention on the objects, for a long time “negligently trodden under foot,” as Emerson says, by those in search of a “sublime and beautiful” exoticism (EL 68). Beauty lies not in the object, but in the eye of the beholder, is the Emersonian lesson to be learned from the *trompe l’oeil* painters.

The near, the low, and the common in its American specificity also characterizes the work of a group of painters in the 1920s like Stuart Davis, Charles Demuth and Charles Sheeler or poets like William Carlos Williams for whom Odol spray bottles, the figure 5 on a New York fire-truck, red Pennsylvania barns, automobile plants in Michigan were among the favored objects that they depicted or described with an utmost precision. So much depended, as Williams said in his poem “The Red Wheelbarrow,” upon such common objects as “a red wheel barrow glazed with rain water beside the white chickens” (277). Much more, however, depended on the typographical arrangement of these objects which activates the reader’s eye and teaches him/her to see their unspectacular commonness as uniquely beautiful.

Nineteenth-century *trompe l’oeil* painters had their twentieth-century counterparts, as it were, in the Pop Artists of the 1960s with whom they not only shared a predilection for mundane objects but also the impersonal, almost machine-like mode of production that extinguished practically every subjective brushstroke. While the *trompe l’oeil* painters favored objects of a recent past, Pop Artists like Warhol, Lichtenstein or Rauschenberg embrace objects of their immediate present. They find their material primarily on billboards and the cans, bottles and boxes of consumer goods such as Campbell’s, Coca Cola and Brillo rather than in antique shops. The signs and signatures on these products seem to lose their consumerist function once they are transferred from the can to the canvas, from the store shelf to the museum to be exhibited before the viewer’s eyes. The consumer signs, however, are, as Lawrence Alloway argues, only “recontextualized by the artist” (9); both the consumer and the art contexts remain active. The artwork therefore takes on an ambivalent quality; it acts, as Robert Rauschenberg once said, “in the gap between” the two contexts. The viewer’s eye is thus perplexed. “The resulting ambiguity leaves [him] in an indeterminate state, confronted with an unanswerable question” (Wissmann 514, 516). Is it a can, a bottle, a box that he sees? Is it a painting? What is it really? Thus the Pop Artist like a *trompe l’oeil* still-life activates the viewer’s eyes; they are, as it were, “gymnastics of the eye” (EL 434).

In other art movements of the 1960s and 1970s such as Conceptual and Fluxus Art one may again detect Emerson’s handwriting, as George J. Leonard has convincingly argued. Both movements represent a radical position in the sense that they declare objects as irrelevant to art. “All art is,” says concept artist Joseph Kosuth, “finally conceptual;” all art objects are nothing more than a mere “physical residue” (Leonard 297).

Emerson had argued that “true art is never fixed, but always flowing;” it is, as he said, “but extempore performance” (EL 438). The function of the art object for both Emerson and the Concept artist is merely “initial” (EL 433). The viewer is initiated into a process of seeing, that is, “the perception of beauty” (EL 432). Once this process is set in motion, once the viewer’s eyes are activated and trained to see beyond or beneath the merely superficial, the art object will have done its work; it becomes, as it were, superfluous: Away then “with your nonsense of oil and easels, of marble and chisels: except to open your eyes to the mysteries of eternal art” (EL 434 f.).

John Dewey, with his theory of art as experience, may be seen as the one who thinks onward into the twentieth century what Emerson had initiated in the nineteenth. In his centennial essay (1903), Dewey declares Emerson the philosopher of democracy who “stands for the restoring to the common man that which in the name of religion, of philosophy, of art and of morality, has been embezzled from the common store and appropriated to sectarian and class use” (190). Dewey wants to make art accessible to the common man again by restoring “the continuity between... works of art and the everyday events,” as he says in *Art as Experience* (3). The “compartmental conception of fine arts... apart from the common life” (8), in his eyes, not only generates an elitist class of art specialists and connoisseurs, it also prevents art from intervening in the “normal processes of living” (10). Art kept in a state of repose, shut away in museums, loses its power. “Power,” says Emerson, “ceases in the instant of repose; it resides in the moment of transition” (EL 271) when art transits into life, when it merges with life in a continuous process. Though Emerson is mentioned only briefly in *Art as Experience*, the book is, as Richard Shusterman has convincingly demonstrated, greatly indebted to Emerson’s thinking. Both reject the notion of art as mere commodity; both believe in the transformative power of art. For both “not things, but the ways of things” are of primary interest, as Dewey says in his centennial essay (185 f.). Not the art object but the way it works and initiates processes of experience is of crucial importance to both, or as Dewey puts it in *Art as Experience*: “The *product* of art – temple, painting, statue, poem – is not the work of art. The work takes place when a human being cooperates with the product so that the outcome is an experience that is enjoyed because of its liberating and ordered properties” (214). The actual work of art is what the art product does with the recipient. The work of art, strictly speaking, needs rephrasing. We should from now on speak of the *working* of art. “The work of art in its actuality,” that is, when it is in action, “is *perception*” (162). Art can therefore serve a vital function in America with its “bad name for superficialness” (EL 944) whose “important defect” was, as Emerson noted in his journal “the absence of a general education of the eye” (JMN 13: 437). Art works help educate the eye, they are true “gymnastics of the eye.”

Henry James's remark that Emerson's eyes seemed "thickly bandaged" when they both walked through the halls of the Louvre and the Vatican museum in 1872 now resonates with an additional meaning. We have to bear in mind, that these visits were, strictly speaking, revisits. The "good lessons from pictures," as he says in "Experience," he had learned way back in 1833; now he saw these pictures "without emotion or remark" (EL 476). For him they had done their work long ago when they had initiated a process of thinking that had eventually led him from the domains of art into philosophy and, above all, into life. The chord of art, one could therefore say with Henry James, had snapped, but "the tune was played, the tune of life and literature... on those [chords] that remained" (74).

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