

The Bridge

In the dream, I am driving over the Charleston Bay Bridge in South Carolina. As I reach the crest of the bridge, my car veers, lifts, and suddenly, without the car, I am flying high over the bridge and the bay. It is snowing, and I am very cold, high in the dark blue night above an even darker blue sea. I realize I am numb. I am dead, I think. It is not an unhappy thought. Thinking I am dead brings a wonderfully exhilarating and freeing sensation. I am at peace.

An overwhelming feeling of panic washes over me, and I wake myself up with a jolt.

My relationship with bridges has never been quite the same since that dream in December of 1975. For many nights and mornings, as I drove myself back and forth to my waking, working life at the Charleston County Hospital, I wrestled with the meaning of the dream. I also struggled with a developing fear of crossing any bridge, a fear that is with me to this day. In the intervening years, I have had to cross no small amount of bridges, and so have come to understand in detail my fear and how to overcome it.

There are two crucial moments in crossing a bridge: the approach and just before the crest. Negotiating the approach relies heavily on rational forms of perception. Here I have found that a kind of mental, dispassionate argument works best. Before hitting the bridge itself, there are usually opportunities to pull off. One simply sits on the last bit of solid land and perceives arguments for crossing: a stream of cars *appears* to be crossing safely to the other shore; the bridge itself *appears* to be structurally sound. If these arguments fail, one has the option of turning the car around and heading off in search of another route, preferably one without a bridge, and failing that, a low, short one.

If the approach is conquered, however, one faces the site of the most severe panic, just before the downside of the span is visible. After all these years, I have come to realize that what I fear most about bridge crossing is not being able to see over the crest of the span. Before I can see over the crest, the vivid catastrophic images first sparked by the dream and then actively developed in my imagination cause my heart to pound, my hands and face to sweat, and my body to shake uncontrollably. Fear is spurred on by my imagination. At the same time, that same fear restrains me from imagining what else I can not see but need to imaginatively sense: the existence of what lies beyond the crest of the span. Though considered reason can get me on to the bridge, only a felt sense of the possibilities beyond the crest of the bridge will get me over it.

The goal of this short essay is two-fold: to advocate the fundamental necessity of collaborations between art and technology for social change, and to investigate, although briefly, obstacles to the powerful role imagination plays in the development of those collaborations. Overcoming a debilitating phobia, one whose demoralizing repercussions have, at times, threatened to limit many areas of my life, may not at first appear to be an appropriate example of the creative process. It has, however, highlighted for me, in extreme contrasting tones, the essential and extensive nature of imagination. Imagination need not be defined as a gift belonging to a special few, or a human propensity for fancy, but as an integral and guiding force in much of human activity and accomplishment.

This definition of imagination opens up previously obscured opportunities for those of us actively and consciously engaged in understanding and developing the values that exist in this culture's present and increasingly intense involvement with computer technology across numerous disciplines and areas of activity.

Imagination plays an enormous and pivotal role in these involvements. The historic reasons for the obfuscation of collaborative opportunities between art and technology despite constant philosophical, aesthetic, pedagogical, and scientific attempts to cross those boundaries since the early part of this century have been outlined in depth elsewhere⁸. My belief is that the kind of intense experiential understanding of imagination that I have described above must inform the two stated goals of this essay. Additionally, however, I would like to explore another individual's investigations of the significance of imagination. John Dewey's definition of imagination and the role it plays in bridging thought, action, and that area of human understanding so little mentioned, so often ignored in contemporary life, wisdom, is pertinent to the goals of this essay.

Situating this particular investigation in the SIGGRAPH 96 Visual Proceedings animates its theoretical form. A first time SIGGRAPH visitor might ask: "What is an art exhibit doing in a computer graphics conference?" The quick and dirty answer to that question lies within the history of SIGGRAPH. It is particularly telling that this essay appears in the *Visual Proceedings: The Art and Interdisciplinary Programs of SIGGRAPH 96*. Though a number of projects have managed to slip across the boundaries over the years, art, as a specific discipline, is still cordoned off from other areas of interdisciplinary activity, such as education, for example, or the building of social communities on the Internet, or health care, or film, or, for that matter, issues of computer interface design.

I quote John Dewey's ideas at length here for several reasons. The first is that much of contemporary American cultural criticism refers to themes first articulated, in the United States, at least, throughout Dewey's writings. Far from being simply a philosopher of the arts, Dewey is seen by contemporary philosophers, such as Cornell West, as "the towering force in American philosophy."⁹ According to West, Dewey's contribution enables us

to view clashing conceptions of philosophy as struggles over cultural ways of life, as attempts to define the role and function of intellectual authorities in culture and society.⁹

The second reason for a rereading of Dewey is that he is the earliest American proponent of a participatory aesthetic, as well as an advocate of the importance of understanding the participatory nature of scientific investigation. Berleant, in his seminal book on contemporary aesthetics, *Art as Engagement*, lists Dewey with Bergson² and Merleau-Ponty⁷ as early proponents of an aesthetic stressing "the active nature of aesthetic experience and its essential participatory quality."¹ Though as Berleant points out, this aesthetic has its origins in subversive alternatives to any number of traditions from classical times through the Enlightenment to the present, the emergence of this aesthetic may be historically and politically located in the United States by Dewey's articulation of it in 1934, in *Art as Experience*.³

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This brings me to my third and primary reason for singling out Dewey. Dewey's writings and career are instructive in their questions of value similar to those with which we continue to struggle. For Dewey, simultaneously understanding and reconstructing the methods of inquiry through which these questions are mediated, are instigated first and foremost by a desire to nurture and support a world in which human beings are able to create their own conditions and their own identities.

Obstacles to creating these individual and communal identities, needs, and desires, exist, though often surreptitiously, in the particular and expedient bargains made between knowledge, authority, and power. Art itself is not the answer to breaking down those barriers, for art exists within particular cultures and is just as vulnerable to the integration of those obstacles. Within the aesthetic experience, however, Dewey finds methodologies, if you will, of thought and feeling attuned most closely with his project of participatory and creative democracy. Watching him contend with his thoughts on the aesthetic experience compels an understanding of these ideas within the larger context of his work. His work concerns itself with the understanding of intellectual activity as it relates to the particulars of social, economic and political life. As West declares:

John Dewey is the culmination of the tradition of American pragmatism. After him, to be a pragmatist is to be a social critic, literary critic, or a poet - in short, a participant in cultural criticism and cultural creation.⁹

Dewey, in describing imagination in artmaking, says: "Possibilities are embodied in works of art that are not elsewhere actualized; this embodiment is the best evidence that can be found of the true nature of imagination."⁴ Dewey is careful to point out that his definition of art includes, "...philosophic, scientific, technological and esthetic"⁵ involvements. For Dewey, these arts:

all have finally the same material; that which is constituted by the interaction of the live creature with its surroundings. They differ in the media by which they convey and express this material, not in the material itself.⁴

He is careful to distinguish these possibilities from the fanciful or the imaginary, in which he finds that "mind and material do not squarely meet and interpenetrate."⁵ For Dewey, products of the fanciful or imaginary lack a strong sense of material quality, emotion or meaning, and so, cannot truly be considered essential art.

He also disagrees with those who might describe imagination as "a special and self-contained faculty, differing from others in possession of mysterious potencies."⁴ Instead, he sees it as a "quality that animates and pervades all processes of making and observation."⁴ Imagination, rather than being seen as a quality set against reason, may be understood as that quality which encompasses reason. Crucial to his descriptions of what constitutes imagination is a generosity of interests and a blending of internal and external experience.

In describing these embodied possibilities as "the means of keeping alive the sense of purposes that outrun evidence and of meanings that transcend indurated habit,"⁶ Dewey is attempting to articulate the way in which the aesthetic experience provides an understanding of the world that goes beyond the particular necessities of cultural, political, and economic situatedness. At the same time, same experience acknowledges those necessities and the choices we must constantly make to meet their demands as essential to affording that experience. Agreeing with Shelley, he says:

Imagination is the chief instrument of the good. ...But the primacy of imagination extends far beyond the scope of direct personal relationships.⁶

The following quote from the last few pages of Dewey's *Art as Experience* is as applicable in understanding the values of connection between art and technology today as it was when he wrote it:

Morals are assigned a special compartment in theory and practice because they reflect the divisions embodied in economic and political institutions. Whenever social divisions and barriers exist, practices and ideas that correspond to them fix metes and bounds, so that liberal action is placed under restraint. Creative intelligence is looked upon with distrust; the innovations that are the essence of individuality are feared, and the generous impulse is put under bounds not to disturb the peace. Were art an acknowledged power in human association and not treated as the pleasuring of an idle moment or as a means of ostentatious display, and were morals understood to be identical with every aspect of value that is shared in experience, the "problem" of the relation of art and morals would not exist.⁶

In our involvement with computer technology, imagination, as it is described by Dewey, is, more than in any area of human activity right now, more at work and at the same time, more at risk. If we extrapolate to the rest of the world the kind of divisions and barriers that still exist in a conference exemplified by its crossing of boundaries, we may visualize the enormous obstacles still existing. The artworks included in this exhibit, and many that are not, are examples of the power of imagination to bridge various areas of human endeavor, as well as to construct those bridges with goals of "generous impulse".

Misunderstanding both the depth and breadth that a felt sense of tangible possibilities plays in nurturing the kinds of art that make a difference in the world is common enough across disciplines. Neither scientists, artists, educators, nor philosophers need to bear the burden of blame alone. We all share it equally. The kind of raw physically felt sense of potential that encourages me to continue across the bridge despite the oppression of a 20-year-old dream also allows me to sense the incredible wisdom I might gain from that dream about the bridge, if only I permit myself to imagine it.

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CAROL GIGLIOTTI
Department of Art Education and
Advanced Computing Center for the
Arts and Design

The Ohio State University
340 Hopkins Hall
Columbus, Ohio 43212 USA
+1.614.292.0235
+1.614.688.4483
carol@cgrg.ohio-state.edu