AESTHETIC EXPERIENCE AND THE (QUEER) SELF

A thesis submitted
to Kent State University in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Degree of Master of Arts

by

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May, 2012
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This project has been a definitive aesthetic experience for me, not always harmonious, but reliably fruitful and formative. Throughout this process, I fully acknowledge my dependence on an audience that has been continuously affirming and encouraging, but also challenging. To each of you who played a supporting role in this performance, I want to again and again express how much such support means to me.

Thank you to each of the members of my committee: Dr. Kim Garchar, Dr. Jung-Yeup Kim, and Dr. Tiffany Taylor. I appreciate the enthusiasm that each of you have maintained with me throughout this process. A special thanks to Dr. Frank Ryan for staying encouraging and upbeat and periodically reminding me that this project was doable, on track, and intelligent/intelligible. My appreciation for matching my determination at those junctures that required our mutual adjustment to once again find harmony in the various tensions we encountered.

Also, thank you to my family and friends who have never made me question that being queer is normal. Thank you for letting thesis-speak infiltrate many social gatherings this year. In particular, I want to thank Jim Marunich, Don Swekoski, Zac Purdue, Andrew Magrath, and Mary Riley. To each of you, thank you for being my not-so-generalized other throughout this process, offering encouragement and suggestions, but most importantly recognizing this project even at times when it threatened to come undone.
INTRODUCTION

In constructing a written work, the introduction comes last for me. It is that vantage point through which the audience seeks foreshadowing for what is to come, to gain orientation for what the author intends to impart; it is the same place where the author looks back over what has already come and seeks to organize an introduction for the reader. Yet this vantage point is most tangibly available to the author, the artist, only after she constructs the framework herself. This is the meeting of the author with her audience in which each stands at a different stage in the processing of the work: I at its culmination and you at its inception, its going-forth. It is here that we begin for you, though the we has already been implicit, underway for me as I have constructed the forthcoming chapters. It is with this double vantage that we first encounter the aesthetic, the intimate intermingling of author and audience.

This is also the vantage point where we begin and continue considering the self. It is both a first encounter and already underway. Here is the closest that I have to a starting point: my notion of self is constructed rather than essentialist. The self is not determined, pre-given, fixed, or ever achieved once and for all. Rather, the self continues to develop and (re)form as it interacts with, interprets, and reconsiders its surroundings, including those transactions with other selves engaged in similar processes. This leads to my other point of orientation: the self is interdependent with the society -- the social
milieu and institutions -- which foster its construction. That is, the self answers to those social institutions and expectations that enable its intelligibility and agency.

Allow me to explain my title: “Aesthetic Experience and the (Queer) Self.” The primary study of this thesis is to account for the dynamic construction and understanding of self; this entails considering the queer. Generally, queer terms that which is odd, unusual, or that which deviates from the norm. Often queer is used as an insult, bearing negative connotation and derision, a way of identifying that which is not normal with the following implication that it is not acceptable. Within this project, I want to liberate the queer from any negative connotation. Rather, I intend queer to designate that which is peculiar and unique. Hence, when we consider what defines the self, the queer is parenthetical, implicit, not always recognized, but always operable in who and what the self is. My project is to consider how we best understand the self or subjectivity in such a way that accounts for its particularity, peculiarity, and diversity; this is a project of accounting for the queer.

In what follows, I consider how we account for queer subjects -- in the sense that all selves are somehow deviant, non-normative, or peculiar -- that nonetheless appeal to some general framework of shared, identifiable meaning. To do this, I adopt Judith Butler’s notion of the performative self and synthesize this framework with pragmatic conceptions of the interdependence between self and society, specifically as present in the writings of John Dewey and George Herbert Mead. These two frameworks of selfhood represent both tenets that I have already affirmed: the self as (i) cohesive and nascent, underway and developing, and (ii) reciprocally reliant on its surrounding society.
These frameworks then allow me a further step, to appropriate Dewey’s aesthetics and recognize the pervasive influence of the aesthetic in experiencing and interpreting our world and ourselves. Using these frameworks -- Butler’s performative self and Dewey’s aesthetics -- I propose a new conceptualization of the self. In order to fully account for the diversity, complexity, and peculiarity of the self -- in order to account for the queer -- we best understand the self in and through aesthetic experience, through understanding the self as a work of art.

Further, in accounting for the particularity and diversity of the self, I follow Butler in emphasizing an aspect of selfhood that is too commonly conspicuously absent in its theorization: gender. The self is always gendered and a comprehensive understanding of the self must account for those ways in which gender interacts with and complicates other aspects of selfhood (race, class, religion, politics, and so on). As Butler notes, “It would be wrong to think that the discussion of ‘identity’ ought to proceed prior to a discussion of gender identity for the simple reason that ‘persons’ only become intelligible through becoming gendered in conformity with recognizable standards of gender intelligibility.”¹ Constructing and understanding the self are irrevocably caught up with its embodiment, its gendered existence in the world. Hence, through our preliminary discussions of selfhood and re-conceptualizing the self as a work of art, bear in mind that these discussions lead to a culmination in reconsidering the gendered self.

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I begin in the first chapter by outlining what it means to be a self and how its construction and understanding is irrevocably interrelated with the notion of the social and the Other. In particular, I adopt Butler’s framework of the performative self and supplement its explication with pragmatic notions of mind, as presented by Dewey and elaborated by Mead. Here I define the self as a continuing project of construction, emphasizing those performances (performative acts) that simultaneously express and construct a self in terms of an audience who receives and corroborates or sanctions these performances. This discussion will involve three aspects of selfhood: (i) its reliance on shared, socially-affirmed systems of meaning, (ii) its negotiation between the queer and the normative, and (iii) its interdependence with other selves and the significance of recognition in this continuing process of self-formation and self-understanding.

In the second chapter, I momentarily set aside considerations of the self to explicate the other major framework of this thesis: Dewey’s aesthetics, primarily as found in *Art as Experience*. The purpose of this chapter is to elucidate (1) what constitutes art, (2) what it means to have an aesthetic experience, and (3) the active role that both artist and audience play in the construction, interpretation, and reception of a work of art. In particular, I explain how art is both a process and a product, never finished, static, or final; its creation depends not solely upon the artist, but also its social reception and the transaction(s) between artist, art, and audience. Further, I discuss the nature of expression, how it presents an orchestration of various tensions and relationships, plays upon both the familiar and the novel, and simultaneously resonates with the personal and unique while appealing to social and shared meanings. Finally, I
discuss those ways in which art expresses social critique. Art plays upon that which is recognizable and familiar in order to draw attention to the new and innovative, thus revealing uncertainty and possibility.

The third chapter then draws together these discussions of the performative self and Dewey’s aesthetics into the fulcrum of my argument: that we best understand the self -- in all of its peculiarity, uniqueness, *queerness* -- as a work of art. Here I synthesize Butler and Dewey, yet move beyond both. Using Dewey’s understanding of the reciprocal relationship between the artistic and aesthetic attitudes -- as developed in chapter 2 -- I will consider how we adopt each of these attitudes in constructing and understanding the self. Within this chapter, I will also consider those ways in which we do injustice to the self by *not* experiencing it aesthetically. Here I will expand the discussion of the queer, particularly in differentiation from Butler’s notion of the abject: that which is unlivable, untenable, or unintelligible. Further, I will consider those circumstances in which we *ineptly* understand the self, again through failure to understand it as a work of art.

Given this artistic reconceptualization of the self, I then return in the final chapter to a consideration of the *gendered* self in particular. Within this chapter, I begin with an overview of current conceptions of sex, gender, and sexuality. I outline several problems in our tendency to understand sex as binary -- male and female -- and gender as its correlate, expressed in degrees of masculinity and femininity. In particular, I discuss those ways in which current gender frameworks fail to account for the diversity and fluidity of gender expressions and relations and hence how we do violence or injustice to
those who do not fit into these (inadequate) gender norms. I then *reimagine* gender as one of the evolving components of self in relation to the work of art as a coherent whole. That is, my final move within this project will be to show how understanding the self as a work of art not only allows and accounts for greater diversity and fluidity in constructions of selfhood, but it also finds accord and harmony in the various tensions that compose gender in particular and the self as a whole.
CHAPTER 1

THE PERFORMATIVE SELF: INTERDEPENDENCE OF SELF AND OTHER, SELF AND SOCIETY

We begin with a general account of the self as performative, at once performing and constructing itself through various transactions with others. This is focally an explication of Judith Butler’s account of the self, though I supplement this explanation with the pragmatic self, particularly as discussed by John Dewey and George Herbert Mead.

Insofar as Butler’s notion of the performative self is interrelated with her account of gender, I likewise will consider gender in order to offer a comprehensive notion of self. However, I want to avoid conflating (i) a general theory of self with (ii) an account of gender. Though the two are intimately related, I want to begin with a sketch of what it means to be a self as such before adding the complication of gender. Gender is necessarily and intimately connected to this notion of performativity and any comprehensive theory of self insofar as it mediates how we experience and know the world. However, the complications of defining gender and the complexities in explaining its effects on the construction of self deserve their own due attention, which can be achieved only after setting out these preliminary arguments. Thus, within this chapter, I will forestall the notion of gender as much as possible in order to lay the general schema.
of self. I will then return to the notion of gender in chapter four, after properly introducing those schematic tools necessary for understanding it.

**Performativity: An Overview**

…[Acts], gestures, and desire produce the effect of an internal core or substance, but produce this on the surface of the body, through the play of signifying absences that suggest, but never reveal, the organizing principle of identity as a cause. Such acts, gestures, enactments, generally construed, are *performatives* in the sense that the essence or identity that they otherwise purport to express are *fabrications* manufactured and sustained through corporeal signs and other discursive means.¹

According to Butler, the self is not pre-existent, pre-formed, or prior to its interaction with the world. Rather, identity or subjectivity is *performatives* in that it is continuously constructed through the repetition of actions (and non-actions) against the backdrop of socially-affirmed norms.² In other words, the self emerges through and is constituted by its various performances. This implies not only (i) the agent stylizing herself to variously conform to or deviate from some socially agreed-upon framework, but also (ii) the social group which affirms or authenticates this system of meaning. The performative self implicates both performer and spectator or audience, respectively. There exists the social climate of norms and expectations which we interact with and respond to in order to construct our identities. Yet we remain the creative arbiter of our performances. We remain the interpretive agency that chooses those performances, chooses how to personalize those social meanings, and chooses what to identify with and what to disregard, what emphases and meanings to attribute to different experiences.

² Cf. Ibid., 34.
Butler describes the performative self as both revealed and constituted by various performances and their motivation, i.e. the acts, gestures and desire\(^3\) that can be attributed to the subject. However, Butler then notes that self is not prior to these very actions and provocations. There is no “internal core” or self that precedes its emergence in and through its performances: “there is no ‘I’ that precedes the [identity or self] that it is said to perform…”\(^4\) In other words, there is not an already-formed subject that merely directs, dictates, or determines its performances and is merely disclosed through them.

Rather, the self is performative in the same sense as a linguistic performative. In language, a performative is a statement which itself performs the content of the statement, such as “I promise” or “I apologize.” The utterance itself performs the promise or the apology. Likewise, the performances of the self themselves construct, reinforce, reinterpret, and (re)create the conception of self that we presume at the onset. Like the linguistic performative, the self “constitutes as an effect the very subject it appears to express.”\(^5\) We perform our identities while simultaneously learning how to perform them. As Mead explains, “We are finding out what we are going to say, what we are going to do, by saying and doing, and in the process we are continually controlling the process itself.”\(^6\) We assume and perform a persona in order to meaningfully interact with the world, yet this assumed identity necessarily lends itself to continued subsequent revision. It requires repeated performance and enacting amidst an ever-evolving public

\(^3\) Desire will be handled more fully later in this chapter.
\(^5\) Ibid., 130.
of spectators. Thus, this process of creating and constructing oneself is never absolute or finalized. Performance suggests the notion of a self that guides the performance, yet the performance guides the notion of the self as well. One is not anterior to the other, but both develop and evolve and reveal one another as mutual process and product.

The performative self also relies on the stylization of the body. The body is configured, molded, instructed, and carried in such a way as to be capable of certain performances. For example, an athlete performs certain activities to build muscle and thus stylizes the body to be capable for stamina and greater strength in her chosen sport. A musician trains her fingers by practicing scales repeatedly, to build motor memory to afford her greater mastery and dexterity in performing any given piece. Such performances are expressive of the respective self and rely on the body to successfully convey these expressions. That is, the body must be stylized to signify that which the subject wishes to express about herself.

Conversely, the body also imposes certain restrictions on those performances that we may successfully enact. For example, someone who cannot lift heavy loads may not excel at working in construction; someone who has arthritic knees may not be able to run a marathon. In other words, the body necessarily affects how we experience and respond to the world. However, though the body is integral to the construction of self, it is not solely determinant of that self. Rather, the body is one of the evolving elements of the self rather than the precursor or the determinant of any particular kind or type of self. This stylizing is as much of a continuous and ongoing process as the project of self writ large.
I will leave consideration of the *gendered* body for later consideration. At this point in the project, it should suffice to say simply that the body is integral in the construction and stylization of the self and that it provides material, visible, corporeal means by which others may begin to get a sense of who we are and how they may approach or regard us. The subject takes clues from her body -- how she can use it to interact with her surroundings -- and this influences the types of performances that she can affect successfully. Yet this does not mean that the body wholly determines those performances, much less what self we construct. Rather, the body receives clues or guidance from the developing construction of the self as well. The self stylizes the body, has power over its carriage, movements, comportment, adornment and certain changes to its physique. Thus, although the body is integral to the continuing construction of self, it is not constitutive or determinant of any particular type of self.

Insofar as the self is defined in terms of performative acts, the question is then what counts as a constructive, expressive, performance. First, note that *performance* is a multivalent categorization, or a blanket term, that denotes all those ways -- from the mundane to the spectacular -- in which we interact with others and with ourselves. That is, there is no *one* way in which we perform, but rather it is in the very multiplicity and diversity of those performances that the self emerges in its particularity. The self is the agential gathering and organization of these discrete performances. As Mead explains, “There are all sorts of different selves answering to all sorts of different social

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7 For example, as I will explain below, there are certain performances that do not rely on mediation through the body per se.
For example, I am a student, sister, daughter, teacher, writer, friend, and so on. Each of these roles demands corresponding actions or performances and insofar as I inhabit these roles, these performances express those aspects of me. Yet I am not reducible to any one of these roles or performances; rather, I am all of these things. Each of these sets of performances expresses some mode of my self, wherein my self is the fulcrum of these various performances. That is, I am the fluid, ever-evolving cohesion and ordering of these various performances and how I choose to perform them.

Although *performance* encompasses all of those ways in which we can perform in relation to those things and others around us, we still need criteria for determining what qualifies as intelligibly human or what classifies meaningful personhood. We may say that things other than persons are capable of performing in some capacity, such as a plant or a sophisticated piece of machinery. Yet in the former case, we do not want to say that the plant is performative even though we classify it as a living thing. On the other hand, we want to allow that the machine successfully performs its function, yet we still do not want to attribute life to it or allow that this exhibits selfhood in any communicative, human sense of personhood. Thus, although performance must remain a broad categorization, it also must identify those acts that convey and construct the *human self* in particular.

As such, I offer several criteria to narrow the definition of performativity, though Butler herself does not explicitly specify performativity according to formulae or a rubric. First, expressive performances have as a reference some shared, socially-affirmed

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system of meaning. That is, the performance has some available cultural framework for its intelligible interpretation. Second, since performance implicates all of those ways in which we interact within social structures, with ourselves, and with others, it denotes not only those performances that are physical, but also verbal utterances and mental acts. Third, performativity implies a repetition of acts in the sense of mimicry or imitation, but never in the sense of replication. Butler explains: “This repetition is at once a reenactment and re-experiencing of a set of meaning already socially established; and it is the mundane and ritualized form of their legitimization.”\(^9\) In other words, the acts embody some norm, yet they are a particularization or personalization of that norm. Finally, any performative act relies on other selves, an audience, a spectator, interpreter, corroborator, or critic of the performance. I will develop each of these more fully in turn, starting with the notion of a shared system of meaning.

**The Pragmatic Mind**

We have already noted that the performative self implicates both (i) the performer and (ii) the social group that receives these performances. We may better understand the interdependent relationship between these two aspects of performativity with reference to the pragmatic conception of mind, as explicated by John Dewey and G.H. Mead.

Dewey accounts for the self by distinguishing between mind and consciousness. On the one hand, mind denotes the broad, underlying system of thought -- including previous experiences and interactions as well as social norms, expectations, and so on -- that individuals employ as a general orienting and operative framework of interpretation.

Dewey explains: “Mind denotes the whole system of meanings as they are embodied in the workings of organic life… Mind is, so to speak, structural, substantial; a constant background and foreground…”¹⁰ In other words, mind is that corpus of tacit knowledge that allows us to operate within our world by using certain rules of interaction to perform in relation to certain social institutions.

What this implies is that the mind is constituted by habits, or “working adaptations of personal capacities with environing forces.”¹¹ Habits are acquired dispositions for how to respond to given situations knowing what the likely response will be if we act in such and such a way. Dewey further describes a habit as

a predisposition formed by a number of specific acts [that is] an immensely more intimate and fundamental part of ourselves than are vague, general, conscious choices. All habits are demands for certain kinds of activity; and they constitute the self. They form our effective desires and they furnish us with our working capacities.¹²

In other words, Dewian habits are those repeated performances which Butler notes constitute the self. Both are, in a sense, repeated action that becomes familiar, somewhat automatic in response to stimuli that provide us with a general orientation toward interacting with our world. When a performance becomes habituated, it becomes part of ourselves as part of that orienting background that provides reference for future experience. That is, habituated performances constitute mind.

On the other hand, consciousness denotes the focusing or application of the mind to suit a particular performance, task, or problem at hand. Whereas mind is the

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¹² Ibid., 21.
underlying system of meanings, consciousness is the focusing and application of those meanings to meet particular ends. Dewey explains this relationship: “Mind is contextual and persistent; consciousness is focal and transitive… Mind is a constant luminosity… Consciousness is, as it were, the occasional interception of messages continually transmitted.”

Mind denotes that underlying stock of experiences and habituated performances that constitute an individual’s interpretive framework; consciousness is the instrumentation that focuses this interpretive lens.

Further, what prompts the appropriation of past performances -- or the conscious focusing of mind -- is that a situation is somehow problematic, or requires the application of habit(s) to a new end. Dewey explains:

A habit impeded in overt operation continues nonetheless to operate. It manifests itself in desireful thought, that is in an ideal or imagined object which embodies within itself the force of a frustrated habit. There is therefore demand for a changed environment, a demand which can be achieved only by some modification and rearrangement of old habits.

We encounter something in our interaction with the world that is problematic, that interrupts or stymies habit. This enacts consciousness, or “that phase of a system of meanings which at a given time is undergoing re-direction, transitive transformation.”

When a problem or challenge interrupts habit, consciousness responds as the transitive focusing of mind to meet a particular objective, to overcome that which is problematic, that which impedes our interaction within the world.

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Hence, habitual action is performative insofar as it relies on a socially constructed and maintained mind. For example, when I leave the office at night, I may walk to my car -- crossing several parking lots and one road of heavy traffic -- and drive home without consciously doing so. However, this is still performative insofar as I can do this on auto-pilot because I have done it with much thought previously. I know what road signs signify, I know the etiquette for crosswalks, and so on. I previously learned all of these things and incorporated them into my general system of meaning that is shared by my surrounding community. Thus, when I drive home in this particular instance, I act out of habit in a mundane and mechanical way, but it is still performative in the sense that it relies on this background of social meanings, expectations, mores, and so on that are in part constitutive of self, how I interpret the world, and how I perform in relation to it.

Mead explains the pragmatic conception of mind slightly differently as the development of the conversation of gestures between/among individuals. The gesture is “that phase of the individual act to which adjustment takes place on the part of other individuals in the social process of behavior.” The gesture signifies insofar as it embodies some shared meaning, social institution, or norm between the performer and her audience. That is, “it calls out in the individual making it the same attitude toward it… that it calls out in the other individuals participating with him.” In other words, the gesture is a performance, an action intended to enact and reinstate some meaning previously socially established. My action or performance is meaningful to others only

16 Mead, Mind, Self, & Society, 46.
17 Ibid.
insofar as they take an analogous attitude toward it and imagine, project, or expect a mutually agreeable outcome. My gesture anticipates and intends a particular attitude and response from the other; my gesture requests a return gesture. Thus, Mead concludes that “in the social act, the adjustive response of one organism to the gesture of another is the interpretation of that gesture by that organism.”

It is through this conversation of gestures that we first learn how to treat the nascent self by how others treat the self. That is, we learn what gestures will signify by first observing others conveying meaning through gestures. We perform while simultaneously learning how to perform.

Through such observation, we may then generalize these patterns of response and internalize the social schema of meaning such that we can anticipate others’ (re)actions. The individual notes general patterns in the attitudes and actions of others in response to her particular performances. I gain a sense for if I act in such and such a way, then the person with whom I am having this conversation or exchanging this pattern of gestures will subsequently react or behave in such and such a way. Thus, I gain a sense of the generalized other, or those general social attitudes and expectations in relation to which I consider and interpret potential performances. This becomes an internal rehearsal of proposed actions and imagined responses, which allows us to think through possible courses of action and decide what to perform and how to do so in relation to our expectations of what will occur if/when we do so.

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18 Mead, Mind, Self, & Society, 78.
19 Ibid., 90.
Following Dewey, Mead also retains the notion that mind responds to that which is problematic: “Mind is nothing but the importation of this external process into the conduct of the individual so as to meet the problems that arise.”

In other words, both Mead and Dewey conceive of mind as that which provides us with certain capacities of interpretation and response; it enables us to interact with those circumstances and other selves around us.

Not only is interaction between selves social, but this further entails that thought itself is social. Mead explains:

One inevitably seeks an audience, has to pour himself out to somebody… The very process of thinking is, of course, simply an inner conversation that goes on, but it is a conversation of gestures which in its completion implies the expression of that which one thinks to an audience.

Simply put, thought is the internalized conversation of gestures. It is the interaction of the self with itself, as both subject and object, using the internalized attitudes of the other as the interlocutor for projecting or anticipating the results of certain actions before actually performing them. This suggests then that self-consciousness is itself performative insofar as it is a performance for the self. That is, in self-consciousness we simultaneously act as both performer and audience.

Thus, we may use the pragmatic conceptualization of mind as the necessary societal component of the performative self. Mind is constituted by both its external expression between selves and in its internalized manifestation as the consideration and internal rehearsal of performances within the self. Dewey and Mead both conclude that

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20 Mead, *Mind, Self, & Society*, 188.
21 Ibid., 143.
mind is “essentially a social phenomenon.” Both define the mind as the capacity to interpret gestures and the attitude(s) of the other in order to be able to control or prompt certain responses in interaction with the world. Hence, mind effectively delineates expressive types of performance that constitute a self from the more basic types of performance of which other things -- such as a plant or a machine -- are capable. That is, the pragmatic, social mind explains how we can classify various performances -- physical, cognitive, or verbal, mundane or spectacular -- as performative.

Further, the pragmatic mind elucidates the relation between the performer and the social context of the performance, or the double aspect of performativity. That is, mind is necessary for the agent to negotiate performances against or in relation to this social body of meanings and interpretations that corroborate or challenge those performances. In a sense, mind is that which enables the performer to anticipate the social reception of his/her performances. In another sense, mind is that which sanctions -- positively or negatively -- those performances such that the performer knows how to meaningfully arrange their performances to convey the self they wish to perform.

**Conformity and Deviation**

…[The] “I” that I am finds itself at once constituted by norms and dependent on them but also endeavors to live in ways that maintain a critical and transformative relation to them. This is not easy, because the “I” becomes, to a certain extent unknowable, threatened with unviability, with becoming undone altogether, when it no longer incorporates the norm in such a way that makes this “I” fully recognizable.  

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We risk unintelligibility when we construct ourselves. In addition to embodying some social system of meaning, we are individual selves to the extent that there is also something unknowable, something that is beyond these norms. It is unknowable insofar as it is personal, particular, our own mode of expression, our particular organization of multiple and varied inputs from our surrounding environment. For example, the environment and background of any two individuals is not identical. No two individuals encounter identical circumstances, people, situations, and so on. Nor do these individuals have identical capacities for interpretation, incorporation, and appropriation of these various inputs. Hence there is something that is not shared from individual to individual, even if it is the product of social construction. Even if we talk in terms of a social self, there is something that defies this socialness, something that cannot be reduced to social communicative meaning. It is necessarily both a product of and deviation from the shared system of meaning. In other words, the self is both (a) the embodiment or imbrication of norms and (b) the queering, particularization and deviation of these norms. To the extent that constructing the self entails the latter, we risk unintelligibility in order to gain our particular, unique sense of self.

First, the normative and the queer are mutually implicative terms. That is, we define the normative and the queer in terms of one another. The normative denotes the norms of society as that which is presumed as essential or the very basic criteria for intelligibility. As a result, the normative operates in two senses:

On the one hand, [normativity] refers to the aims and aspirations that guide us, the precepts by which we are compelled to act or speak to one another, the commonly held presuppositions by which we are oriented, and which give direction to our actions. On the other hand, normativity refers to the process of normalization, the
way that certain norms, ideas and ideals hold sway over embodied life, provide coercive criteria for normal “men” and “real” women. On the one hand, normativity acts as that interpretive lens that in part constructs our mind, as previously outlined, and thus enables action and meaningful performance. On the other hand, normativity can also entail prescription and restriction, demanding that individuals conform to some degree to maintain intelligibility between/among selves.

However, this dual notion of normativity still allows, even demands, the queering of those very norms that enable intelligibility. Most generally, *queer* denotes that which deviates from the norm; that which is odd or different. Further, to *queer* something means to undo the notion that it is fixed or uncompromising, thus revealing it to be more fluid and subject to multiple (re)interpretation. These definitions of *queer* are my own, though they follow Butler’s notion that our performances have the potential to critique those very norms which we intend to perform. For example, Butler explains this critique as “an interrogation of the terms by which life is constrained in order to open up the possibility of different modes of living; in other words, not to celebrate difference as such but to establish more inclusive conditions for sheltering and maintaining life that resists models of assimilation.”

Though norms form the shared system of interpretation for performances, Butler notes the possibility of innovation within these constraints: “In a sense, all signification takes place within the orbit of the compulsion to repeat; ‘agency,’ then, is to be located

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25 Ibid., 4.
within the possibility of a variation on that repetition.”26 To say that the performative self is constructed through a repetition of acts does not implicate an absolute replication of the same act or the same norm. Though we may say we perform the same action -- for example, getting dressed in the morning -- we never perform this action in precisely the same way, with the same emotion, under the same conditions. Even if we attempt to reproduce norms and amalgamate them into who we are, we do so within our particular interpretation of these norms, according to our particular capacities -- physical, mental, or otherwise -- for reifying them. Thus, to describe performativity as constituted by repeated action does not intend a mechanical replication, but an appropriation of the gesture to enact similar meaning.

Hence, the self must queer norms in its particular embodiment of them. As Butler explains, “The task is not whether to repeat, but how to repeat...”27 Insofar as we want to construct meaningful, intelligibly human constructions of self, we need to repeat or reproduce these shared systems of meaning. However, this compulsion to act, to perform, to reproduce these norms in whatever fragmentation, means that we maintain agency in how we repeat, how we perform. Again, the body influences how we relate to our world, as do our mental capacities and prior background and experiences; all of these circumstances and factors provide us with varying tools for how we choose to perform repeated action.

The personal mediation between the normative and the queer is the site for self-expression and thus the very place where we are in danger of crossing from the

26 Butler, Gender Trouble, 198.
intelligible or the meaningful to the unintelligible. Intelligibility is “that which is produced as a consequence of recognition according to prevailing social norms.” In other words, meaningful identity relies on recognizably embodying the social norm in some varying permutation. This mediation is not different from the interaction between the two aspects of performativity: (i) the agential performer or the appearance of performances and (ii) the background milieu of social expectation and norms. Again, it is these two aspects that define performativity and it is through their interaction and mediation by the social performer -- insofar as she is a performer in relation to the social context and reception of her performance -- that she constructs herself. This negotiation between the individual performance and its reception/interpretation is where the self emerges. Further, this very negotiation is simultaneously the negotiation between the normative and its particular instantiation -- which cannot fully realize that norm and is thus queered in some way -- that occurs in any performative construction of self.

Thus, although there necessarily exists a social network of norms that provides the shared rubric of meaning, there still exists the possibility for innovation, for the unexpected, or for change, for queering the general norm within its particular performance. That is, it is possible to be creative or novel, to do what diverges from the normative social construction.

Mead accounts for this possibility of innovation amid that which is expected with his account of the relationship between the “I” and the “me” that constitutes the self.

According to Mead, the self is both subject and object, both “I” and “me.” Mead describes the “me” as “that group of attitudes which stands for others in the community...” The “me” is that amalgamation of social mores and attitudes which the self understands and can draw upon to rehearse particular reactions to situations. The “I” is then that part of the self which reacts to social situations and it is that part of the self that surpasses or eludes mere social construction. Mead describes the distinction between the two: “The ‘I’ is the response of the organism to the attitudes of the others; the ‘me’ is the organized set of attitudes of others which one himself assumes.” Hence, the self is not equal to communicative interaction, or external, social relationships, though these relationships are an unavoidable part of the self. The self includes something distinct from and evaluative of societal influence -- the “I” -- but it also includes that internalized sense of various attitudes -- the “me” -- which any particular individual from the society could have in response to some action of the self. Thus, the “me” is that which is wholly socially constructed and thus that which is expected, whereas the “I” is that agential, creative force within the individual that interprets and responds to those inputs from the “me”.

In terms of Butler’s performative self, the “me” is in a sense that social milieu or background against which performances occur. The “me” is that which is taken as object by others; it is that which is in relation to other things and selves. The “me” is the performer, or that which is performed. The “I” is then the agent that styles itself, interprets the attitudes of others, incorporates the various performances of the “me” into a

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30 Ibid., 175.
coherent notion of self, and so on. It is that which is *not* wholly dependent upon constructed norms, that which is “never entirely calculable,”\(^{31}\) though it does receive input from the socialization insofar as it is intimately and dialectically related with the “me”. Mead explains:

> The “me” and the “I” lie in the process of thinking and they indicate the give-and-take which characterizes it. There would not be an “I” in the sense in which we use that term if there were not a “me”; there would not be a “me” without a response in the form of the “I”.\(^{32}\)

In a sense, the “me” is the performative self insofar as it is that sense of self that is brought into relationship with other things through its various performances. However, the “I” is also necessary for the performative self insofar as the self aims for a coherent amalgamation of its various performances and expressions of the “me” and this agential gathering and organizing is constitutive of the self as well. The Median “I” and “me” do *not* map onto the dual aspects of performativity, yet both are necessarily implicated within the performative self. That is, though we may separate the aspects of self into “me” and “I” or the performer and the surrounding expectations of performance, such bifurcations often and necessarily collapse insofar as these aspects of the performative self inextricably implicate one another.

Further, Mead accounts for innovation insofar as the particular relationship between the “I” and the “me” produces varying expressions of those social structures that construct the self. Mead explains:

> ...each individual self-structure reflects, and is constituted by, a different aspect or perspective of this relational pattern, because each reflects this relational pattern 


\(^{32}\) Ibid., 182.
from its own unique standpoint; so that the common social origin and constitution of individual selves and their structures does not preclude wide individual differences and variations among them, or contradict the peculiar and more or less distinctive individuality which each of them in fact possesses.\(^{33}\)

Again, this compliments Butler’s performative self insofar as it recognizes that although the self is in some sense the embodiment of those social norms and expectations that construct it, how these norms are interpreted and amalgamated in their particular embodiment varies depending on the individual.

Dewey as well handles this negotiation -- between the normative and the queer, the expected and the innovative -- in terms of the outer and the inner. That is, the self is the double movement between: (i) the self formed by and as the personification of norms and social background and (ii) the imaginative self, the possibility for change, innovation.\(^{34}\)

On the one hand, we have this notion that the self is largely what it is because the mind is the internalized compilation of social norms, expectations, and institutions or modes of meaning. Dewey describes this mode of performance as “the individual that belongs in a continuous system of connected events which reinforce its activities and which form a world in which it is at home, consistently at one with its own preferences, satisfying its requirements.”\(^{35}\) Again, this mode of performance is dominated by habits and operates with ease and familiarity without necessitating further focusing of the consciousness.

\(^{34}\) Dewey, *Experience and Nature*, 245.
\(^{35}\) Ibid.
On the other hand, the performative self is imaginative insofar as it projects possible solutions to problems or challenges that interrupt the ready-application of habits. Dewey explains: “Then there is the individual that finds a gap between its distinctive bias and the operations of the things through which alone its need can be satisfied; it is broken off, discrete, because it is at odds with its surroundings.” The imaginative self emerges in response to a challenge, problem, or dissonance between routine performance and what a situation calls for. This mode of performance relies on mind insofar as that background of knowledge and experience that enables us to interpret these new circumstances in order to find a solution to the problem, a way to behave or perform to achieve a particular aim or objective. However, it further entails the focusing of the consciousness to project possibilities of reorienting the self. We must diverge from our formed habit and imagine a new way of performing, a new way of directing the tools and experiences that we have previously encountered and developed such as to meet this new challenge.

Hence, Dewey describes the self as the “oscillation between surrender to the external and assertion of the inner.” External circumstances often present us with problems that interrupt habitual action and demand the conscious refocusing of mind through new application or new performances. The external interrupts our equilibrium and forces us to consult our inner background, stock of experiences, and trial and error to reconsider these past experiences and appropriate them to new ends. The external demands a reconfiguration or reconstruction of the inner to produce a new performance.

37 Ibid., 244.
Returning to Butler’s dual sense of normative, we may interpret this demand of the external and response of the inner in two significant ways. On the one hand, normative denotes that which guides us, provides us with a framework of reference such that we know what to do, we know how to respond to a situation. In this sense, external circumstances and situations call for certain types of performances to meaningfully respond to these circumstances. This may be done more or less habitually depending on whether we are already well-versed or habituated to that type of performance. Alternatively, external circumstances may be more problematic or challenging, demanding a newly imagined performance or a restructuring of habits.

On the other hand, normativity also can imply that which is coercive or imposing of certain expectations. That is, the negotiation of the self can be the assertion of the inner against the surrender to the external in the sense that our imaginative self often realizes oppressive inadequacies in prevailing norms of society. A norm may stifle expression of who we are or who we imagine ourselves to be. As Butler notes, “although we need norms in order to live, and to live well, and to know in what direction to transform our social world, we are also constrained by norms in ways that sometimes do violence to us and which, for reasons of social justice, we must oppose.”

True, assertion of the inner can be as benign as considering how I can best express myself in small ways, such as what clothes to wear on a particular day. However, assertion of the inner can also be more fraught or troubled in the sense of imaging ways to perform in

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38 Butler, *Undoing Gender*, 206.
reaction to a norm that needs alteration or reimagining.\textsuperscript{39} Thus, assertion of the inner against the external may signify the re-envisioning and re-structuring of those very norms and expectations that contribute to the continuing construction and emergence of the self.

The self is a referential embodiment of the societal standards of meaningful personhood, yet it necessarily represents some deviation or personalization of that standard. In other words, selfhood requires/implicates both (i) shared meaning and (ii) personal innovations. Butler explains: “The culturally enmired subject negotiates its constructions, even when those constructions are the very predicates [or constituents] of its own identity.”\textsuperscript{40} The self appeals to some general framework of shared, identifiable meaning, yet it emerges in the queerness or peculiarity of its individuated performances. In other words, the self appears via those ways in which the agent personalizes, queers, or makes peculiar the shared structures of meaning.

\textit{Recognition and the Role of the Other}

Thus far I have indicated how a discussion of self necessarily entails accounting for its socialness, or its necessary relation and accountability to a community of other selves. Again, each of the proposed criteria of performativity incorporates this notion of the interdependence of self and society. A shared system of meaning provides a referential framework of meaning to compare the actions of the individual to a consensus that provides interpretation for those actions. That is, the notion of mind -- whether

\textsuperscript{39} I will treat this possibility more fully in Chapter 4, particularly in relation to gender.

\textsuperscript{40} Butler, \textit{Gender Trouble}, 195.
directed outward in interaction with others or inward toward the interaction with oneself - typifies this irrevocable interdependence of self and society.

The final criterion or element of the performative self I want to propose is its constitutive desire for recognition. Butler explains: “…our very sense of personhood is linked to the desire for recognition… [Desire] places us outside ourselves, in a realm of social norms that we do not fully choose, but that provides the horizon and the resource for any sense of choice that we have.”\textsuperscript{41} This desire is what continuously drives the self toward interaction with the other and relentlessly propels the continuation of the construction of self. Further, each of the preceding criteria implicitly invokes the desire for recognition. The shared systems of meaning or norms provide the basic rubric for recognition; the appropriation and repetition of performances reinforces or corroborates recognition; most importantly, recognition affirms the self’s successful negotiation of the norm and its particularization, the expected and the innovative. That is, recognition confers meaningful personhood.

To reiterate and elaborate, recognition requires the social context of norms. Butler explains: “…I cannot persist without norms of recognition that support my persistence: the sense of possibility pertaining to me must first be imagined from somewhere else before I can begin to imagine myself.”\textsuperscript{42} Again, we need recognition insofar as it corroborates our performances, pronounces them meaningful, and precedes the possibility of interaction or discourse with others. Our surrounding community of selves affirms that what we perform is intelligibly human and does express what we want

\textsuperscript{41} Butler, \textit{Undoing Gender}, 33.

\textsuperscript{42} Ibid., 32.
it to express. We do not *choose* those social norms, yet we must adhere to them to some degree in order to be intelligible to others; we must embody something recognizable in order for others to have some basis for interpreting and recognizing our actions.

We construct ourselves in varying degrees of reference to norms to garner recognition. As argued above, this necessarily leads to failures to fully embody the norm and thus norms are queered or altered while maintaining as reference that which is queered. Thus, it is the shared frame of norms -- though fluid and malleable and always being revised just as much as the individual expressions and instantiations of them -- that enables individuals to express themselves in their queerness and particularity. Insofar as we instantiate norms, we reify them while simultaneously constructing ourselves according to them. Thus, the desire for recognition not only continues to construct the self, but this construction in turn (re)instantiates these norms or queers them just enough so as to undo them and revise them.

The question is then how to define recognition. Hence, I offer one more articulation of the desire for recognition, particularly as elucidated by Butler in her discussion of Hegel and corroborated once again by the pragmatic self. For Butler, following Hegel, *recognition* generally entails the double movement of finding oneself in the Other, in alterity, or outside oneself and yet experiencing an irreducible or inalienable otherness, distinctness, or difference between the self and the Other. As Dewey notes, “We are carried out beyond ourselves to find ourselves.”43 That is, recognition entails simultaneously finding the self *in* and *in contradistinction to* the Other. We resonate with

the Other, yet we experience and acknowledge conflict in this resonance. Given this account of recognition, I will illuminate two additional aspects of the self: (i) that the Other is obstinately problematic for the self and that this tenacious tension is constitutive of the self and (ii) that any understanding of the self is provisional.

First, the Other is obstinately and necessarily problematic insofar as the self cannot wholly subsume the Other into the former’s own notion of self. We recognize the Other insofar as we experience ourselves in and in relationship to the Other. That is, we recognize similarities between ourselves and others such that “the first experience of the Other’s similarity is that of self-loss.” We identify with the Other to the extent that we recognize part of our very self in the Other and experience it as external, or wholly other from ourselves; we experience ourselves in alterity, outside ourselves, in the Other. The confusion or obstruction is that we see ourselves in this Other, yet we encounter the self in such a radically new amalgamation that we are confounded by our ability to resonate so deeply with it.45 We identify with it, acknowledge some affiliation and likeness with it, yet we also acknowledge some fundamental difference, or divergence.

In this sense, I experience the Other as obstinately and necessarily problematic insofar as I recognize the Other as like me, yet I cannot wholly comprehend this other self in terms of myself. We cannot reduce the Other into the same or subsume it under our own notion of self. This then forces us to reconceive our notion of self, our notion of the Other, and our relationship to the Other. We seek to understand how this alternate

45 On this subject Butler quotes Hegel: “Self-consciousness is faced by another self-consciousness; it has come out of itself… it has lost itself, for it finds itself as an other being… but in the other [it] sees its own self.” Ibid., 74.
construction of self exists meaningfully in a way that diverges from our own. In understanding this alterity, we additionally gain a better understanding of our own construction of self in order to identify and understand what is different and why we identify with it despite its difference. Hence, we do not merely recognize ourselves in the other; the Other is not coextensive with the self, but necessarily presents a divergence, a challenge, a problem to our totalized notion of self. That is, we necessarily recognize the Other in contradistinction to ourselves.

Second, this account of recognition reveals any understanding or conceptualization of the self as provisional, requiring constant readjustment and reconstruction as prompted by its evolving interrelationship with its surrounding world. Butler explains the progressive construction of the self as a continuous back and forth between assuming a total identity and revising it upon subsequent recognition of some deficiency in this totalization. For example, each progressive stage of self-understanding in Hegel’s *Phenomenology of Spirit* develops in response to recognition of deficiency in the previous stage. “These scenes are thus consistently undermined by that which they unwittingly exclude, and are forced to reassemble as more complicated arrangements, now including that which brought the previous scene to dissolution.”  

Each construction reveals itself as insufficient, prompting a reconstruction of self that answers the problem that undid the previous conception. We presume that we have a cogent, totalized identity and it is this very presumption that allows us to begin interacting with others. That is, we presume a totality in order to begin to know it. Yet through transactions with and

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recognition of the Other, we encounter some challenge to our notion of self, which prompts reconsideration and alteration of this totality that we presumed as the onset.

Since any construction of the subject’s self-understanding is incomplete or provisional, this propelling desire for recognition is itself never complete or satiated. Again, we rely on our relation to and interaction with various individuals and circumstances and those modes of performance that arise from these varying situations. Insofar as I am constructed through the various ways in which I perform for others and myself, no singular relationship can fully disclose myself to me. I cannot fully recognize myself in relationship to an Other, but rather in my synthesized and ordered notion of my myriad relationships to others. Each transaction between selves yields some recognition or affirmation of part of the self, yet no single relationship affirms the self in its entirety. Hence, the provisional nature of self-disclosure or self-recognition reflects the necessary interdependence of our relationships, roles, performances, or capacities of interacting in relation to others. Further, Butler notes: “What becomes clear… is that the self never returns to itself free of the Other, that its ‘relationality’ becomes constitutive of who the self is.”

Thus, we return to the notion that the desire for recognition not only motivates the relentless revision of the self, but also intimately implicates other selves in this continuing (re)construction.

Dewey on Recognition and Perception

Dewey explains recognition most simply as acquaintance or the ability to realize the general type or idea of a thing. Recognition means “to have the kind of expectancy of

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its consequences which constitutes an immediate readiness to act, an adequate preparatory adjustment to whatever the thing in question may do.” 48 That is, to recognize something is to know how to generally behave toward it, how to regard it, and what to respect from it in turn if/when you do behave as such. Again, this incorporates the notion of acknowledging the other as intelligibly human and treating him/her as such. It is the non-cognitive awareness that the other is that type of being that provokes certain performances from us.

Put another way, Dewey defines recognition as “re-instatement of a meaning vouched for in some other situation, plus a sense of familiarity, of immediate greeting of welcome or aversion.” 49 We recognize that which resembles the stock of experiences and images that we have collected, gathered, and negotiated into a more or less coherent web of ideas in our mind. That is, we recognize something it its analogy to some other experience that we have previously had and incorporated into our background of experience. We recognize that which is similar or familiar and this provides the point of departure for interpreting that which is not familiar or readily recognizable about that thing or other self. Thus, we return to the notion that there must be this fundamental recognition of the other as Other, as the type of thing that I interact with and perform for in various ways and from which I can expect certain responses.

Dewey additionally introduces the notion of perception to account for a more intimate, penetrating, or comprehensive understanding of other selves beyond brute recognition or acquaintance. Perception is both the instrumentation of and the

49 Ibid., 328.
improvement upon recognition. Dewey describes this as “the double relationship of continuation, promotion, carrying forward, and of arrest, deviation, need of supplementation, which defines that focalization of meanings which is consciousness, awareness, perception.”\(^{50}\) As the instrumentation of recognition, perception operates as that illuminative tool by which we focus our attention to settle recognition. Perception is the problem-solving tool for consciously focusing mind toward resolving dissonance, unfamiliarity, and reorienting toward recognition, again so that we know how to behave in regards to whatever we are attempting to recognize.

On the other hand, perception additionally entails the apprehension of something beyond recognition, or beyond what is readily understood through its analogy to ourselves. That is, perception is that which acknowledges other selves as incommensurable with or distinct from ourselves. In terms of the continuous dialectical reconstruction of the self, perception is that which arrests habit, prompts us to reconsider our current construction of self, and encourages readjustment, reorientation, or reconstruction.

Dewey most clearly explains this distinction in *Art as Experience*:

Recognition is perception arrested before it has a chance to develop freely. In recognition there is a beginning of an act of perception. But this beginning is not allowed to serve the development of a full perception of the thing recognized. It is arrested at the point where it will serve some other purpose, as we recognize a man on the street in order to greet or to avoid him, not so as to see him for the sake of seeing what is there.\(^{51}\)

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\(^{50}\) Dewey, *Experience and Nature*, 306.

\(^{51}\) Dewey, *Art as Experience*, 54.
Again, Dewey describes recognition as acquaintance, understanding what type of thing an object is, or recognition of something in terms of its analogy to past experiences. Yet he describes perception as something additional, something more detailed and involved that surpasses brute recognition to understand the particularity or peculiarity of that which we are experiencing at this moment. This notion presupposes and incorporates basic recognition, but it reaches beyond recognizing that which is similar to that which is not readily understood, that which transcends what we have experienced before to apprehend what makes this object or this self an individual. We move past merely recognizing what norms it adheres to and what modes of performance it generally calls for and we move toward recognizing its queerness or peculiarity. Hence, Dewey’s account of recognition incorporates this accompanying notion of perception. We perceive that which is different in addition to and because of recognizing that which is similar.

In summation, selfhood requires mutual recognition between selves. The performative self requires recognition from the other in order to validate itself as meaningful, expressive, and intelligible. This further implies that the self recognizes others as selves, both in their similarity to the self and in their irreducible otherness. Butler stipulates that the self needs recognition and corroboration from other selves to affirm it as a self, as expressive and intelligible human. Mead supports this insofar as he argues that what I am is meaningful only insofar as it bears some reference to a shared system of meaning, which means it must be corroborated in and through another. I
recognize myself in others, which means I recognize humanity or selfhood in that other as well. Finally, Dewey amends this notion to emphasize the reciprocity between recognition and perception; we recognize in others that which is analogous to ourselves, perceive that which is divergent or unexpected -- that which demands (re)consideration or (re)construction -- and gain greater (mutual) recognition between selves.

This notion of recognition further implies the importance of corroboration, or the affirmation that one’s performances are intelligible and are constitutive of what is intelligibly human. For each of Butler, Dewey, and Mead, recognition implies not only acknowledgement of the other, but the corresponding ability to interact with and regard that other accordingly. I recognize, acknowledge, or know the other only insofar as I know how to arrange myself and regard myself in relation to that other. This recognition prompts and encourages patterns of behavior or indicates which performances will be meaningful, even fruitful, toward that other. Recognition is always the recognition that the Other is a self and so am I. Additionally, it is the recognition that I can perform in certain ways; I recognize how I can regard myself in addition to how I can regard that other thing or that other self. Thus, recognition yields some corroboration about whether my idea of that thing allows me to interact meaningfully with it, thus prompting me to reconsider my own performances -- such as in relation to this object or this self -- and thus reconsider my construction of self.

The centrality of recognition thus returns us to the notion that the self is essentially performative and thus irrevocably interrelated with its community of selves. Recognition implies that there is something to be recognized; this again implicates the
double strata of (i) performer and (ii) audience of the performance, or both prongs of performativity. I am a self only insofar as I recognize myself in others, others recognize me as a self, and thus most generally, there exists a community of selves.
CHAPTER 2

DEWEY ON AESTHETIC EXPERIENCE

For the moment, we leave behind the consideration of self as such to investigate the other central prong of this thesis: aesthetic experience. Throughout this discussion, we will retain the pragmatic notions of mind and consciousness and consider them particularly in relation to how they function in and contribute to Dewey’s explication of aesthetics. Additionally, we will retain both Mead and Butler in the background, particularly with the understanding that any discussion of the individual -- as artist, spectator, audience, critic, and so on -- intends the performative self. Yet, the emphasis of this chapter will focus on the meaning and significance of aesthetic experience and the work of art for Dewey in particular. This exposition will then develop the understanding that discussion of the aesthetic unavoidably implicates transactional socialness. That is, I will show how focusing on the aesthetic returns us to a (re)consideration and elaboration of the performative self.

Experience

In its most common mode, Dewey defines experience as that undifferentiated background of experiencing, or interacting with our environment, in which we operate until some problem interrupts our flow of habit. This is the field in which mind operates. It requires no problem-solving, no focusing of consciousness to meet new ends. In the event that some problem interrupts habit, the subject focuses her consciousness to resolve
the disharmony and return to a state of equilibrium in which she can once again operate unproblematically through habit. Thus, experience is generally the mode of familiarity in which we react to our environment and circumstances according to our previously established modes of behavior, habits, or mind.

Following William James, Dewey describes experience as “double-barreled,” designating both what is experienced and how it is experienced. Dewey explains that experience includes “what men do and suffer, what they strive for, love, believe and endure, and also how men act and are acted upon… in short, processes of experiencing.”¹ This implicates the intimate transaction involving the subject and her environment. That is, the environment does not exist separately from how it is experienced, merely waiting to be disclosed to the individual who receives it. Rather, the capacity of the individual to have that experience influences how it is experienced and also what is experienced. For example, if I have a head cold, it impairs my hearing, thus altering what I hear my friend say over the telephone. What I hear and how I hear it are integrally related in my experience of the phone call. Hence, experience is “double-barreled” in that “it recognizes in its primary integrity no division between act and material, subject and object, but contains them both in an unanalyzed totality.”²

Out of this genera of experience, Dewey then distinguishes an experience in particular. An experience can follow the familiar progression of the onset of a problem, considered through the focusing of consciousness, and brought to a satisfactory close through the re-cognition and return to harmony or equilibrium. Yet what characterizes

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² Ibid.
the experience as an experience is that the entire progression of experiencing hangs in harmonious unity. Further, this experience indicates an adjustment of both the self and the environment in relation to one another. Dewey explains:

The process continues until a mutual adaptation of the self and the object emerges and that particular experience comes to a close… But interaction of the two [a thinker and the environment] constitutes the total experience that is had, and the close which completes it is the institution of a felt harmony.⁴

Unlike experience in general, an experience is characterized by the move from disharmony to harmony, the re-solution of equilibrium between subject and environment. This involves adaptation not only of the individual, but also the environment insofar as the individual again recognizes how to relate to and regard her world.

Dewey further specifies such unique experiences as aesthetic. Dewey explains:

“That which distinguishes an experience as esthetic is conversion of resistance and tensions, of excitations that in themselves are temptations to diversion, into a movement toward an inclusive and fulfilling close.”⁴ That is, aesthetic experience has several characteristic differences from mundane or routine experience. First, it is characterized by an erasure of the distinction between self and object, or spectator and art. Second, the experience entails the harmonious unity of ends and means -- the what and how of experience -- such that the aesthetic is the purpose, process, and product of the experience. Third, the aesthetic experience is characterized as a whole by some pervasive, ineffable quality that is nonetheless immanently felt. Finally, aesthetic experience is characterized by expression. I will now turn to a more full discussion of

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⁴ Ibid., 58.
each of these characteristics, beginning with a discussion of the relationship between the aesthetic object and its experience.

Aesthetic Experience, the Aesthetic Object, and Art

Dewey acknowledges that the artistic and the aesthetic are not coextensive terms. Art is that which is produced, inaugurated for subsequent experience and interpretation. The aesthetic is that which is received, perceived, and enjoyed by the spectator or audience who continue to develop the work of art. The artist is that person who forms the aesthetic object, externalizes some idea that then prompts further interpretation and interaction. That which makes it aesthetic is the unity that the spectator perceives and enjoys: unity between the spectator and the object, unity of the experience, unity of the various elements of what is experienced. When the aesthetic experience/object has an author, it is aesthetic insofar as the spectator has the ability to recreate and re-experience the movement of the artist in the object’s creation. Hence, in their most robust instantiations, the artistic and the aesthetic are two intimately related aspects of the same process, the creation of a shared object, a shared experience.

True, it is possible for something to be artistic even though it is not experienced aesthetically. I may lack the appropriate acumen for aesthetically experiencing Helen Klebesadel’s watercolors or Jackson Pollock’s paint splatters. Likewise, it is possible for something that is not art in a technical, classical sense to be experienced aesthetically. I may aesthetically experience lazily basking in the sun and enjoying a warm breeze,

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5 Dewey, Art as Experience, 48.
insofar as I experience it as an enjoyable, unified experience. However, Dewey argues that genuine art incorporates the aesthetic and conversely, the most apposite aesthetic experience is that which re-experiences the attitude of the artist.\(^6\) That is, an experience is neither fully artistic nor fully aesthetic unless it is symbiotically both.

Insofar as the artistic and the aesthetic mutually implicate one another, the artist and the spectator also become entwined. The spectator appropriates that which is present in the material object and apprehends it according to her own experiences and existing frameworks of interpretation. Dewey explains this as a recreation insofar as the spectator attempts to grasp the attitude and intent of the artist: “For to perceive, a beholder must create his own experience… Without an act of recreation, the object is not perceived as a work of art…”\(^7\) That is, the perception and experience of an aesthetic object is itself creative and constructive insofar as the one spectates from her own perspective, in terms of her own background and modes of interpretation. The spectator attempts to grasp the intent of the artist, yet she does so “according to [her] point of view and interest.”\(^8\)

Hence, aesthetic experience is not merely a literal re-experiencing or replication of the artist’s process of creation, but rather a reimagining. The spectator re-experiences that process by which the artist produced the work of art and adds to its creation in the sense that she brings herself to bear on or with the object of/in aesthetic experience.

On the other hand, the artist anticipates this re-creation and evolution of the object’s meaning beyond the immediate control of the artist:

\(^{6}\) Dewey, *Art as Experience*, 49.
\(^{7}\) Ibid., 56.
\(^{8}\) Ibid.
The doing or making is artistic when the perceived result is of such a nature that its qualities as perceived have controlled the question of production… The artist embodies in himself the attitude of the perceiver while he works.⁹

The role of the artist is to structure and organize the object, to formalize and externalize her own experience of the aesthetic in such a way that preserves it and then guides the spectator toward likewise experiencing (and reimagining) that attitude or idea. Thus, the aesthetic plays within the artistic and vice versa. In genuine art, the artist in a sense acts as spectator and the spectator also acts as artist. Each player simultaneously adopts both the artistic and the aesthetic attitudes in order to maintain the harmonious unity of ends and means, process and product. In genuine art, the artistic anticipates and facilitates the aesthetic, while the aesthetic (re)cognizes and thus (re)creates the artistic.

Further, there is no separation between aesthetic experience and the accompanying work of art. Dewey explains:

We speak of perception and its object. But perception and its object are built up and completed in one and the same continuing operation… [The] object of—or better in—perception is not one of a kind in general, a sample of a cloud or river, but is this individual thing existing here and now with all the unrepeatable particularities that accompany and mark such existences.¹⁰

What is experienced is the aesthetic object, but the development and progression of the experience itself constitutes the aesthetic object. In other words, aesthetic experience and the work of art are co-originative; they are distinguishable for purposes of cognitive consideration, yet they are fully integrated in the aesthetic experiencing. Dewey defines the work of art as “what the product does with and in experience…”¹¹ Insofar as an

⁹ Dewey, Art as Experience, 50.
¹⁰ Ibid., 184.
¹¹ Ibid., 1.
experience is the mutual adaptation of the environment and the subject, a particularly aesthetic experience is the emergence and development of that relationship between spectator and aesthetic object. This relationship constitutes both the object and how the spectator regards, receives, and responds to the object. That is, the relationship between spectator and object develops and evolves in the aesthetic experience, but it also constitutes the dynamic work of art itself.

Hence, the work of art is not the same as the physical product of art. Any artistic production has material elements, such as the paint and canvas, the clay of the statue, the bodies of the performers, and so on. Granted, these are integral elements to the work of art and they mediate what is expressed in the piece when taken as a whole. Yet, the physicality of the piece is not itself the work of art. Rather, the aesthetic object requires the spectators’ experience and involvement in it. For example, we may catalogue the various brush strokes of Van Gogh’s “The Poet’s Garden”; we may measure its canvas and note its particular framing. All of these elements are part of the physical painting that mediates the ensuing and developing work of art that melds both aesthetic object and experience. Yet these physical elements themselves do not yield the purpose or meaning of the piece. Rather, the work of art is that which develops in the experiencing of these various elements, not only in concert with one another, but also in dynamic relation to those who encounter and interpret these elements as a whole. The brush strokes are an integral part to how the spectator receives the piece as a whole, but they themselves do not constitute or fully disclose the aesthetic nature of the piece.
Further, insofar as aesthetic experience and the aesthetic object are intimately related, they signal a complete unification of self and object. Dewey explains:

…at its height [aesthetic experience] signifies complete interpenetration of self and the world of objects and events. Instead of signifying surrender to caprice and disorder, it affords our sole demonstration of a stability that is not stagnation but is rhythmic and developing.\(^\text{12}\)

The experience is aesthetic insofar as the spectator feels intimately involved in and connected to her environment and what is coming to be. The spectator becomes part of the movement of the piece. She resonates with the aesthetic object and the work of art develops out of the intimate integration, mutual reorientation, and interdependent development of the understanding of self and object alike. At the height of aesthetic experience, they constitute one another. I feel the rhythms, the quickening of the tempo and the forcefulness of the notes played. I experience the music as a development of my own self, my own thoughts, insofar as I do not recognize a separation between the two. Thus the work of art emerges in my experience of it, in my involvement with it.

Since the work of art is the unity of aesthetic object and the aesthetic experience, it is both a process and product. That is, art designates both what is experienced and the very process of experiencing; the two develop with one another. Dewey explains: “It is no linguistic accident that ‘building,’ ‘construction,’ ‘work,’ designate both a process and its finished product. Without the meaning of the verb that of the noun remains blank.”\(^\text{13}\)

What something is reflects how it came to be; the product is a reflection of how it was produced; what something means incorporates the emergence and evolution of its


\(^{13}\) Ibid., 53.
meaning. For example, the voice of the cello reflects the disparate techniques that the musician employs to effect various phrasing. Sharp, accentuated notes reflect the quick, heavy attack of the bow; light, fluid legato suggests the bow glides gently across the string; tremolo reflects the controlled tremor of the wrist. Each technique produces a different effect; each approach yields a different product.

Insofar as the work of art is process and product, its creation is never static, complete, or given once and for all. Rather, the work of art is a dynamic, flexible, cohesive construction that emerges not only with the originative artist, but also with subsequent spectators’ reception and involvement. What emerges is the form or organization of the aesthetic object: “In every integral experience there is form because there is dynamic organization… [The aesthetic] takes time to complete it, because it is a growth. There is inception, development, fulfillment.”14 There is a structure to the piece that emerges through experience. Again, this structure is not the physicality of the piece, such as a sculpture’s shape or size. Rather, it is the organization of its various constitutive elements to enact a particular end, which simultaneously is its very development and unfolding. The piece of art guides the spectator through the experience of it. Aesthetic experience is not free from restrictions or guidelines of perception. Rather, the artist sets the stage for the spectator, gives him clues for how to approach and interact with the piece. The constitutive elements of the piece restrict the spectator’s perception of it, yet the spectator brings the ingenuity of her own mind to bear on the piece as well.

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Hence, Dewey explains: “The real work of an artist is to build up an experience that is coherent in perception while moving with constant change in its development.”\(^\text{15}\)

This development is both a fulfillment and a promise, a consummation of what has come before, but also the projection of possibilities based on the current grasp and understanding of the aesthetic object. Here Dewey follows William James in describing this interwoven duality as “an instance of ‘ever, not quite.’”\(^\text{16}\) Art is the culmination of what has come before, experienced in terms of what is present, with the consideration of what it might mean for future circumstances and experiences. It is complete in the sense that it is unified and whole, yet it is never complete in the sense that its movement, progression, and development is perpetuated by the constant (re)visiting and (re)experiencing of its continuously evolving audience.

**Emotion and Expression**

Aesthetic experience -- both the what and the how, the aesthetic and the artistic -- rely on and are constituted and mediated by both the emotion and the expression that occur within experience. Again, these characteristics are *within* experience; they do not occur separately from the aesthetic object or the spectator, but they are intimately involved in their interpenetration.

Emotion characterizes the disruption and transition that occurs in the initiation and focusing of consciousness. “Emotion is the conscious sign of a break, actual or

\(^{15}\text{Dewey, Art as Experience, 53.}\)

\(^{16}\text{Ibid., 175.}\)
impending. The discord is the occasion that induces reflection.”\textsuperscript{17} An aesthetic object prompts a certain emotional response in us insofar as it presents us with something problematic, an interruption of habit or the mundane. Art presents us with something new, a divergence from habituated performance and interaction. It suggests a new interpretation, a new world view. Emotion is our first response to such an interruption; it is what first gives us the sense of whether this interruption is welcome or not. Emotion prompts and guides the re-direction of consciousness: “that phase of a system of meanings which at a given time is undergoing re-direction, transitive transformation…”\textsuperscript{18} While consciousness signifies “a continuum of meaning in process of formation,”\textsuperscript{19} emotion is that quality of experience that determines how to focus consciousness. It is what suggests meaning(s) to be tested and corroborated or corrected through the ensuing experience.

Further, emotion not only focuses consciousness, but it also organizes what is expressed. It signals and guides reconstruction. It is the catalyst for re-experiencing and appropriating the artistic attitude into the aesthetic experience. It is the means by which the spectator recreates the attitude of the artist and reconstructs it according to the spectator’s own experiences, interpretation, or mind. Dewey explains: “Emotion is the moving and cementing force. It selects what is congruous and dyes what is selected with its color, thereby giving qualitative unity to materials externally disparate and dissimilar.

\textsuperscript{17} Dewey, \textit{Art as Experience}, 14.
\textsuperscript{18} Dewey, \textit{Experience and Nature}, 308.
\textsuperscript{19} Ibid.
It thus provides unity in and through the varied parts of an experience. Emotion brings things into significance, identifies and resolves tension. It is that which guides us towards acknowledging a harmony or resolution to the dissolution of our previously settled state. It represents the guideposts of both interruption and resolution. It qualifies the arc of the experience, identifies its onset and its close. It gives us a sense of congruence. It provides us with a sense of delight or pleasure in what fits together and dissatisfaction or displeasure with what does not quite fit, satisfy, or answer the interruption or the problem.

However, emotion is not the same as what is expressed. Emotion is not that pervasive quality that presents expression as a unity or a whole. Dewey explains:

Yes, emotion must operate. But it works to effect continuity of movement, singleness of effect amid variety. It is selective of material and directive of its order and arrangement. But it is not what is expressed. Without emotion, there may be craftsmanship, but not art; it may be present and be intense, but if it is directly manifested the result is also not art. Expression is not the unbridled surge of emotion; it is directed and organized. This suggests that emotion guides expression, but that expression is also an ordering of emotion. Transformative emotion is a product of what is expressed and it helps the spectator grasp what is expressed. It transforms and colors what is expressed in our absorption and transaction with the aesthetic. Yet the emotion is not itself the expression or the product of the expression. It is a filter, a lens, an interpretive lexicon which prompts our understanding of what is expressed. Emotion is created within the individual in response to interaction with the aesthetic object whereas what is expressed originates

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20 Dewey, *Art as Experience*, 44.
21 Ibid., 72.
from the artist, manifests in the aesthetic object, and develops in its reception by its spectator.

Thus, expression itself denotes both a performance and what is performed. Dewey explains: “Expression, like construction, signifies both an action and its result.”

On the one hand, expression denotes how the aesthetic object expresses. This is its mode of performance -- musical, pictorial, theatrical, and so on -- its form and delivery, but also how it is received and interpreted by the spectator or audience. In this sense, expression involves both its inception in the artist and its consummation in the spectator.

On the other hand, expression denotes what is expressed. In this sense, what is expressed is the work of art in its wholeness and coherence. “The undefined pervasive quality of an experience is that which binds together all the defined elements, the objects of which we are focally aware, making them a whole.” In this sense, what is expressed characterizes the piece as a whole and coheres its various elements and modes into a unified experience of variety. It is the unity, the culmination and the projection of possibilities. It is an immanently experienced truth of the aesthetic object, the integral fullness of the work of art and the world view it presents, the reflection of the spectator herself in this new amalgamation of materials and ideas that presents the old in a new way.

Thus, the expression of the aesthetic object can only be “felt” or intuited. Dewey explains: “Not only must this quality be in all ‘parts,’ but it can only be felt, that is, immediately experienced… the penetrating quality that runs through all the parts of a

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23 Ibid., 202.
work of art and binds them into an individualized whole can only be emotionally ‘intuited.’”
Though the quality must be immediately experienced, this does not intend that the expressive object is immediately understood. That is, we have an experience and further an aesthetic experience insofar as we first encounter and experience the object as problematic. That is, we must first move out of our undifferentiated mode of habituation and approach the object intentionally and inquisitively. We encounter the object as problematic or challenging in some sense for it to hold any aesthetic interest for us at all.

Yet this active, discursive problem-solving does not itself yield the aesthetic appropriation or intuition of the object. That is, we cannot comprehend the aesthetic object through this discursive mode. We must linger in the problematic of the aesthetic; we must allow it to be un-(re)cognizable for a while. We may employ habituated modes of understanding to break down the aesthetic object, to analyze its constitutive elements and consider them in relation to the whole. Yet, what ultimately reassembles and re-cognizes the object is intuition, which is informed by cognitive inquisition, yet not reducible to it.

“Intuition” is that meeting of the old and new in which the readjustment involved in every form of consciousness is effected suddenly by means of a quick and unexpected harmony which in its bright abruptness is like a flash of revelation; although in fact it is prepared for by long and slow incubation.”

Intuition can be prefaced by the habituated background of mind, yet it is not arrived at through the intentional focusing of the consciousness to the task at hand. It is the alethic

25 Ibid., 277.
settling of harmony among the various elements of the object as well as the spectator’s penetration and grasp of those elements in her experience.

Aesthetic expression is unique because its experience melds together the cognitive and the non-cognitive, the means and the ends, the process and product.

It is not possible to divide in a vital experience the practical, emotional, and intellectual from one another and to set the properties of one over against the characteristics of the others. The emotional phase binds parts together into a single whole; “intellectual” simply names the fact that the experience has meaning; “practical” indicates that the organism is interacting with events and objects which surround it.  

What is expressed unifies the experience of the various elements and constituents of the work of art such that it becomes aesthetic and moves beyond the attempt to dissect, to compartmentalize, to render wholly in terms of past experiences. Aesthetic expression defies the spectator, presents a challenge that prompts her to consider the object in its uniqueness, to perceive its difference and how it may express something different from previously encountered. Yet, all of this dissonance must eventually return the spectator to a fulfilling whole which unites the various aspects of the aesthetic object, but also presents the spectator with a renewed and recreated understanding of themselves and their relation to the world.

Thus aesthetic expression is characterized by three aspects: (i) unity in variety; (ii) the harmony of the old and new, past and present; and (iii) the reliance on both what is common and what is novel.

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First, expression is characterized by unity in variety. What is expressed is conveyed as a collection of parts, ideas, elements all in various tensions with one another and yet concert with one another. Dewey explains:

There is no fullness, no many parts, without distinctive differentiations. But they have esthetic quality, as in the richness of a musical phrase, only when distinctions depend upon reciprocal resistances. There is unity only when the resistances create a suspense that is resolved through cooperative interaction of the opposed energies.\(^{27}\)

The dissonance of a chord anticipates and craves a resolution; yet there is resolution only insofar as we previously entertain this tension. There must be parts in relation to and in play with one another; meaning emerges from this play between tensions and resolutions. There is interest and satisfaction insofar as there is a movement from questioning and uncertainty to contentment and fulfillment. We can grasp the aesthetic object as a unique, cohesive hole insofar as we do first experience it in some sort of disorder, interruption, challenge, dissonance. We cannot immediately understand its organization, its expression, and this very dissonance promulgates the rewarding aesthetic experience.

Again, here is where emotion is important in maintaining the cohesion of the whole. Emotion “works to effect continuity of movement, singleness of effect amid variety.”\(^{28}\) Emotion identifies that pervasive quality that characterizes the whole. Again, it is not that quality, it is not that which is expressed, but it is identifying of it and thus intimately related to it. But because expression is indelibly entwined with emotion, what is expressed is not entirely effable. What is expressed is not describable insofar as it does not equate to what we have known or experienced previously. We are limited in our

\(^{27}\) Dewey, *Art as Experience*, 167.
\(^{28}\) Ibid., 72.
ability to describe it beyond metaphorically, analogously, attempting to equate the experience with other more tactile previous experiences that we have had. Yet this practice must always occur with the preeminent understanding that there is something that is not fully captured in these discursive descriptions.

Second, what is expressed must call forth past experiences and find some resonance within the mind, which projects possibilities of appropriating past experiences and dispositions of habit to satisfy present conditions. Expression is identifiable to some extent, enjoys some familiarity, in order for the work of art to be intelligible whatsoever to the spectator. Expression relies on the past experiences of the spectator and their current capacity for receiving and interpreting the aesthetic object. It relies on old forms of meaning, harkening to that shared system that provides markers of recognition that can help the spectator maneuver through that which does diverge, that which does challenge and redirect. The familiar must provide a platform and invitation toward the unfamiliar.

Hence, the harmony of the old and the new implies both the creation of the artist, but also a recreation on the part of the spectator or audience. Dewey explains: “A work of art no matter how old and classic is actually, not just potentially, a work of art only when it lives in some individualized experience… [As] a work of art, it is recreated every time it is esthetically experienced.”

The work of art is (re)born through the particular spectator’s experience and transaction with it. Again, this is not a freeform creation; it is not the mere projection of the spectator onto the aesthetic object, or the transparent reflection of the desires of the spectator. These inform the experience of the aesthetic

object, but they do not wholly determine that object. Rather, it is the *harmony* or intermingling of these attitudes and desires with the presentation and expression of the artist that consummates the expression of the aesthetic object. Expression discloses, conveys, and constructs the aesthetic object insofar as it performs the “double change” of the past with the present and vice versa:

The junction of the new and old is not a mere composition of forces, but is a re-creation in which the present impulsion gets form and solidity while the old, the “stored,” material is literally revived, given new life and soul through having to meet a new situation.  

Hence, aesthetic experience is not only the mutual adjustment of subject and environment, but also the adaptation of past and present bearing upon one another. Both -- subject/environment and past/present -- symbiotically and dialectically recreate one another.

Finally, expression relies on both what is common in the arts -- or common for intersubjective systems of meaning generally -- and what is novel, imaginative, and unique. Dewey identifies “both the community and the unlikeness… of an experience, in its pregnant sense, and esthetic experience.” Expression relies on some common, identifiable form and crafts it to express something divergent and new. Dewey notes, “The artist is compelled to be an experimenter because he has to express an intensely individualized experience through means and materials that belong to the common and public world.” The role and purpose of the artist is to express something unique, self-expressive and thus deeply personal, yet in a way that will appeal to and resonate with a

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31 Ibid., 56.
32 Ibid., 150.
more generalized audience. The expressive object is “so formed that it can enter into the experiences of others and enable them to have more intense and more fully rounded out experiences of their own.”\textsuperscript{33} That is, the object is aesthetic for the spectator insofar as she can resonate with it -- can identify part of her own self and experiences within that object -- and can then reimagine both the object and herself in response to their developing relationship and transaction. Each spectator must resonate intimately and personally with the common object even though it is common and can be appropriated according to various individualized perspectives. The aesthetic object must at once be subjective \textit{and} intersubjective.

This notion is problematic only if we disregard the notion of subjectivity that we have already outlined, as intimately interdependent with other subjectivities. Dewey explains: “For art is the fusion in one experience of the pressure upon the self of necessary conditions and the spontaneity and novelty of individuality.”\textsuperscript{34} The aesthetic object can perform this double movement of appealing to the individual, the personal, the unique \textit{and} the common, the shared, the social, in a sense the universal, insofar as subjectivity is itself interpersonal and must itself appeal to both the norm and the individualized.

\textit{Art as Necessarily Social}

In its inauguration, creation, development, reception, consummation, fulfillment, and continuation, art is necessarily social. The artistic and the aesthetic implicate one

\textsuperscript{33} Dewey, \textit{Art as Experience}, 113.
\textsuperscript{34} Ibid., 293.
another; that is, the artist anticipates her audience and the spectator reimagines the notion of the artist. The artist expresses insofar as the spectator receives and consummates what is expressed; the spectator perceives and experiences insofar as the artist elicits emotion. Thus, the aesthetic creator, object, and spectator are all intimately interdependent and mutually formative. The creation and development of each implicates the others.

Yet art is also social on a grander scale insofar as all art is “an attempt to find new modes of language.”35 Again, the artist seeks new modes of expression through old mediums. The work of art is some extension of the artist herself, some mode of self-expression. However, the aesthetic object appeals to others insofar as it also expresses something common in other selves and others’ experiences. This is possible insofar as what is expressed is “some aspect of the relation of man and his environment…”36 Though the aesthetic piece relies on some established form of expression, it reorganizes these norms of communication to suggest new possibilities of interpretation, experience, and transaction with the surrounding world.

Hence, art has the unique capacity to transcend social differences and create unity among its audience(s). The spectator individually resonates with the piece of art, yet this draws her into a community of spectators with disparate backgrounds and modes of interpretation. Spectators find themselves personally and intimately attuned to the aesthetic object, which then creates a shared experience among individuals who are otherwise unable to communicate with one another. Hence, Dewey concludes that art is “the only media of complete and unhindered communication between man and man that

36 Ibid., 157.
can occur in a world full of gulfs and walls that limit community of experience."\textsuperscript{37} In other words, art is the medium(s) of shared humanity.

Such expansion of communication further indicates that art can critique current institutions or norms. Dewey explains: “It is by a sense of possibilities opening before us that we become aware of constrictions that hem us in and of burdens that oppress.”\textsuperscript{38} For example, Diane Arbus often focused on spectacular images of gender in her photography in order to emphasize and critique those ways in which individuals perform and construct marginal identities. Through this double movement of alluding to social expectations while subtly defying them, artists can critique those very social norms which enable their expression.

Thus, insofar as art allows communication amid diversity and projects possibilities to afford greater social harmony, it not only reflects humanity, but art is also the development of humanity. Dewey explains:

Works of art that are not remote from common life, that are widely enjoyed in a community, are signs of a unified collective life. But they are also marvelous aids in the creation of such a life… In the degree in which art exercises its office, it is also a remaking of the experience of the community in the direction of greater order and unity.\textsuperscript{39}

Insofar as the work of art includes the spectator, her background of experiences, and her capacity for interacting with the object, the aesthetic progression is never completely present, finished, or total, although we do experience it as a unity. The artist and the audience create and recreate the work of art, but so too the aesthetic experience has the

\textsuperscript{37} Dewey, \textit{Art as Experience}, 109.
\textsuperscript{38} Ibid., 360.
\textsuperscript{39} Ibid., 84.
power to alter its audience. Again, the experience yields a mutual adaptation of both spectator and environment. Art has the power to critique society insofar as it reflects our humanity to ourselves such that we can inspect ourselves in alterity. Thus, aesthetic experience signifies not only the spectator knowing and recreating herself through the aesthetic object, but art also signifies the *community* knowing and recreating itself.
CHAPTER 3

THE PERFORMATIVE SELF AS THE WORK OF ART

“The real work of an artist is to build up an experience that is coherent in perception while moving with constant change in its development.”*

Now we have come to the juncture where we can appropriate and synthesize Butler’s performative self and Dewey’s aesthetics to further illuminate how we construct and understand the self. Here I move beyond both authors -- while remaining faithful to their respective frameworks as already established -- in order to develop an epistemology of the self that acknowledges and accounts for its diverse performativity through the lens of its pervasive aesthetic quality.

Recall that most simply, performativity of the self denotes the interdependence of (i) the agent stylizing and finding herself through various performances and (ii) the social group and backdrop of meanings. Also recall that (i) anticipates and relies on (ii) for its authentication, but also reifies the norm or institution that it seeks to express. That is, each aspect of performativity necessarily authenticates and corroborates the other, and hence each also has the power to challenge, revise, and shape the other. Thus, creation occurs not on one or the other prong of performativity, but rather in the dialogical relationship between the two.

* John Dewey, Art as Experience (New York: Perigree, 1934), 53.
This relationship now can be recast and explicated further in terms of Dewey’s aesthetics. The relationship between the self and the other that in turn defines both selves is an expression of the intimate interrelationship between the artist and her audience. Insofar as experiencing, constructing, and understanding are all aspects of the same process and product of selfhood, the self emerges as the work of art. The self emerges in its transactions with and experiences of other selves; it constructs a coherent notion of itself bearing all of these transactions and relationships; and it organizes all of these experiences into a coherent notion of itself that renders an operative, livable interpretive framework -- or mind -- for subsequently experiencing the world. The self is a work of art, continuously constructed in part by both the audience’s perception of and participation in that evolution of construction. As both artistic process and product, the queer self -- as it is queer in order to be identified as self -- is most fully recognized and realized in and through aesthetic experience.

**Constructing a Coherent Self: The Artistic Attitude**

But just as it is the office of art to be unifying, to break through conventional distinctions to the underlying common elements of the experienced world, while developing individuality as the manner of seeing and expressing these elements, so it is the office of art in the individual person, to compose differences, to do away with isolations and conflicts among the elements of our being, to utilize oppositions among them to build a richer personality. 2

In our first chapter, I identified the self as the agential gathering of myriad compulsions to perform, those factors and demands -- physical, social, psychological --

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that coalesce into a coherent notion of self. We construct and understand ourselves through many roles, multiple selves inhabiting various performances. What coheres these aspects of the self, leads us toward negotiating them, and paints them as hanging together, is the desire to understand oneself as cohesive, as a totality, as a unified *self*. We have a coherent notion of self insofar as we perform this artistic move\(^3\) of witnessing, acknowledging, experiencing these various movements, roles, performances of the self in their relationship and tension with one another and ordering them into an intelligible selfhood through which we can continue to understand and interact with our world. It is an artistic move to hold these disparate performances in tension with one another, realize the multiplicity and diversity of our performances, yet to find some unity of expression which we call the self. We artistically construct our self to realize unity in the variety of its expressions.\(^4\)

This is the complex negotiation that Dewey describes as the dialectical relationship between the inner and outer, or the private and the shared.\(^5\) The self is some amalgamation of the demands of the environment and the desires or forces from within the individual, both the self’s doings and undergoings. Dewey explains:

> Experience is a matter of the interaction of organism with its environment, an environment that is human as well as physical, that includes the materials of tradition and institutions as well as local surroundings. The organism brings with it through its own structure, native and acquired, forces that play a part in the interaction. The self acts as well as undergoes, and its undergoings are not

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3 Throughout the remainder of this essay I will refer to either the artist or the spectator, artistic or aesthetic attitudes, with the Dewian understanding that one always implicates the other, even if not explicitly expressed.

4 Such unity in variety is particularly characteristic of artistic expression, as described in Chapter 2.

5 Dewey, *Experience and Nature*, 244.
impressions stamped upon an inert wax but depend upon the way the organism reacts and responds… The organism is a force, not a transparency.\(^6\)

The self emerges in the dialectic between the push for novelty or uniqueness on the one hand and consideration for maintaining some relation to the normative in order to ensure intelligibility. It is the negotiation between the individual as she is at home in her surroundings and the individual as she is at odds with her surroundings; as she is a product of the social milieu and as she is challenging those social norms in order to find individuality in expression. The subjective mind emerges, but always in relation to the intersubjective mind that confers meaning upon this individual expression of shared norms.

Deft negotiation between the inner and outer, between all of those various demands upon the individual, requires \textit{artistic} synthesis by the individual. As artist, the subject seeks to construct a more or less coherent notion of self through the various roles and performances that she inhabits. Again, particular performances range from the mundane to the spectacular, the habituated to the problem-solving. These performances \textit{in concert with one another} reveal and construct some operable notion of the agent who performs them. The subject finds self-expression through unity in the variety of its performances -- a harmonious balance between all that is in its background of experiences -- in order to make sense of them in terms of one another, accord them with one another, to render a cohesive interpretive lens with which we can approach the world.

\(^6\) Dewey, \textit{Art as Experience}, 256.
As Butler explains, the purpose of unifying these disparate performances is to find meaningful personhood, or to “persevere in a livable life.”

If, as I propose, the self is the *work of art*, then its body is the *product of art*, the vehicle or medium that the artist stylizes for the self’s expression. Like other artistic media, the body is stylized in order to invite certain interpretations and experiences. As artist, the agent stylizes the body with significations or discursive clues that set up rules and guidelines for experiencing, interacting with, and understanding the self in certain ways. The self expresses through its performances and requests to be received and understood in certain ways by invoking those cultural norms that render it intelligible.

Mead explains:

> Definite rules were accepted as essential to the expression. And yet the artist introduced an originality into it which distinguishes one artist from another. In the case of the artist the emphasis upon that which is unconventional, that which is not in the structure of the “me,” is carried as far, perhaps, as it can be carried.

The significations of the body express the self insofar as they appeal to existing rules or norms of communication to some degree. Yet such significations also allude to deviation, performing the double task of signifying likeness and difference, intelligibility and queerness.

As in the continuing development of any work of art, this signification of the self implicates re-imagination on the part of the spectator, insofar as the latter experiences the piece (the self) through her own interpretive lens. Yet this interpretation occurs within the confines that the artist constructs. Butler describes the self’s construction as “a

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practice of improvisation within a scene of constraint.” That is, the self embodies certain preexisting norms of the surrounding culture and stylizes the body to reflect that appropriation. But this improvisation within constraint also describes the attitude in which the other must then approach the self. The spectator experiences the self through this re-imagination, guided by the stylistic constraints set by the artist. These embodied significations are a medium through which we begin to experience the self, just as the material aspects of a product of art are the invitation and vehicle for the spectator reimagining the work of art.

Thus, although the body is integral to the expression of the self, it is not itself the work of art qua self. Those performances that construct the self are expressions of the same body inhabiting various spaces and roles. However, the work of art is never reducible to the product of art, since the former requires the experience, interaction, and imagination of the spectator. Likewise, the self is not reduced to its body insofar as it is always also the site for social inscription, always bears social stylization and norms, always a self in relation. In other words, the body is both the vehicle and site of convergence for those various norms and deviations and that stylize it. As Butler explains, “the body is not merely the source from which projection issues, but is also always a phenomenon in the world, an estrangement from the very ‘I’ who claims it.”

The body is both the site of the self’s signification of social norms and the nexus of its experiences and experiencing.

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What renders individuality, then, is the ability to negotiate these many factors -- desires, the social milieu, the body, and so on -- and find a harmonious balance. As Dewey explains about the work of art, “[its] medium is expressive because it is used to individualize and define, and this not just in the sense of physical outline but in the sense of expressing that quality which is one with the character of an object; it renders character distinct by emphasis.”11 Our selfhood is unique in that it is the evolving product of our particular perspective, the way in which we bring our various experiences into relation with one another, and emphasize them variously in how we bring them to bear upon interpreting subsequent interactions.

The defining relations and emphases of experiences within the self are akin to the varying components of a symphony: each element signifies in relation to its surroundings, yet also in relation to the whole. Dewey explains the play of relationships in aesthetic experience:

Esthetic recurrence is that of *relationships* that sum up and carry forward… Recurring relationships serve to define and delimit parts, giving them individuality of their own. But they also connect; the individual entities they mark off demand, *because* of the relations, association and interaction with other individuals. Thus the parts vitally serve in the construction of an expanded whole.12

Various aspects of the self have meaning insofar as they refer to the greater whole just as a single rest within a symphony is given meaning only insofar as it stands in relation to the notes around it and in relation to the piece as a whole. “Every art has individualized, defined members. Every art so uses its substantial medium as to give complexity of parts

12 Ibid., 172.
to the unity of its creations.”

The self -- as a work of art -- is both the complexity and unity of its parts; it is the complexity of influences and demands upon the self as they are brought into relation with one another in a cohesive, unified selfhood.

The self is both a summation of all the experiences and influences that cohere in the self as it is now, but it is also a means toward subsequent interaction and thus carries forward the individual in the possibility of new interactions and new understandings of the self. Hence the search for understanding the self is a union of ends and means, what we seek to understand and how we go about seeking it. It is this very search to understand the self that yields and defines the shape and expression of the self as a work of art.

Meaningful Personhood and the Abject: An Interlude

Justice is not only or exclusively a matter of how persons are treated or how societies are constituted. It also concerns consequential decisions about what a person is, and what social norms must be honored and expressed for “personhood” to become allocated, how we do or do not recognize animate others as persons depending on whether or not we recognize a certain norm manifested in and by the body of that other.

Recall that the self is constituted and continuously (re)constructed by the desire for recognition. This is the desire for confirmation that our self-expression is meaningful, that it conveys something shared between selves within a community, or conveys our unique selfhood in a way that remains accessible in some fragmentation to the other which we continuously encounter. It is what moves and motivates us toward

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15 See Chapter 1, “Recognition and the Role of the Other,” 23.
constructing our identities in relation to those existing norms that confer meaning. Our desire for recognition prompts us to construct identities that are intelligible for others. Yet this desire for recognition is also the desire to retain something for ourselves, to keep something unique, something identifiably our own. We desire to be recognizable, to embody some norm; yet we also desire to inhabit this norm in our own peculiarity, our own uniqueness.

Dewey defines meaning as “rules for using and interpreting things; interpretation being always an imputation of potentiality for some consequence.”\(^\text{16}\) In our attempt to construct our personhood, we attempt to embody rules for interpreting the self. We stylize the body with certain significations to guide the other toward understanding ourselves, or what we attempt to express. We want the other to be able to interpret us with the imminent understanding that they are not constructing us themselves, but rather that we are expressing something of our own personhood, while appealing to their own personhood, through a shared humanity. The consequence of this is then how that other views us and regards us as viable for certain interactions. We want to convey certain competencies, certain dispositions, what we enjoy doing, where we feel most at home, what actions we consider to be most expressive of our most intimate selves. Hence, meaningful personhood entails inhabiting certain roles, producing certain performances, in order to embody some norm(s) in an intelligible way.

In her consideration of meaningful personhood, Butler considers the notion of the inner and outer and the self’s mediation of the two in its construction:

\(^{16}\) Dewey, *Experience and Nature*, 188.
“Inner” and “outer” make sense only with reference to a mediating boundary that strives for stability. And this stability, coherence, is determined in large part by cultural orders that sanction the subject and compel its differentiation from the abject. Hence, “inner” and “outer” constitute a binary distinction that stabilizes and consolidates the coherent subject. When that subject is challenged, the meaning and necessity of the terms are subject to displacement. If the “inner world” no longer designates a topos, then the internal fixity of the self… [becomes] similarly suspect.\(^{17}\)

The self embodies meaningful personhood by attempting to construct this “mediating boundary that strives for stability.” We construct a coherent selfhood insofar as we are able to maintain some boundary between the “I” and “not-I,” the self and other, or that with which I identify myself and that which I do not. Part of this is in maintaining differentiation from those selves around us, but this also entails keeping at bay that which would collapse these notions of the inner and outer and render us unintelligible, that which would undo us: the abject.

Butler appropriates the notion of the abject from Julia Kristeva\(^ {18}\) and affirms that abjection is a condition for the intelligible formation of personhood or selfhood. As Butler explains, “the subject is constituted through the force of exclusion and abjection, one which produces a constitutive outside to the subject, an abjected outside, which is, after all, ‘inside’ the subject as its own founding repudiation.”\(^ {19}\) The subject casts off the abject -- the unacceptable or unlivable -- in order to signify itself as self. Ridding ourselves of the abject is not possible insofar as this rejection affirms our personhood.


\(^{18}\) In particular, Butler discusses the notion as explicated in Kristeva’s own *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, translated by Leon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982).

\(^{19}\) Butler, introduction to *Bodies that Matter*, 3.
Kristeva explains the inchoate way in which we identify the abject: “Not me. Not that. But not nothing, either. A ‘something’ that I do not recognize as a thing. A weight of meaninglessness, about which there is nothing insignificant, and which crushes me.” The abject is this un-nameable and un-cognizable threat of unintelligibility that keeps identity in check. In a sense, the abject becomes normative solely in terms of its very negation that constitutes the self. Kristeva explains: “The abject has only one quality of the object—that of being opposed to I.” Norms of intelligibility demand the subject to be not that, where that is not (always) nameable. The abject threatens to render the self unrecognizable and its repugnance -- the denial of recognition and, hence, of personhood -- motivates us to maintain embodying those norms that we anticipate others expect from us in order to recognize us, to affirm that we are intelligible.

Thus, the abject and the subject appear co-originative. As Butler explains, the abject “appears as an expulsion of alien elements, but the alien is effectively established through this expulsion. The construction of the ‘not-me’ as the abject establishes the boundaries of the body which are also the first contours of the subject.” Hence, the abject is formed through this performative casting-off; the very act of abjecting renders it abject, just as the act of performing (re)designates and shapes the performer. Thus, the abject and the subject become dual notions of the same process of creating and moulding the subject (and non-subject).

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21 Ibid., 1.
22 Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 181.
The danger of the abject is in its spurious conflation with the queer. Recall in chapter 1, I identified two interdependent definitions of queer. The first designates that which deviates from the norm; this is the sense of queer that is often and wrongly equated with the abject. Merely because something deviates from the norm does not render it unintelligible, unthinkable, or unlivable. Rather, I have already indicated those ways in which we frequently -- even lackadaisically -- reimagine norms through embodying them in our own amalgamated perspective which constitutes mind. Further, to queer something entails an undoing and thus risks abjection. Yet what is being undone is the notion that the norm is fixed, uncompromising, or immutable. To queer something means to embody a norm in a divergent, queer, or odd way, thus striking the artistic balance that Dewey suggests is “the revelation of meaning in the old effected by its presentation through the new.”

Though the queer is by definition not normative, neither must it be abject. The abject threatens our selfhood insofar as it threatens those norms that compose the self or threatens our instantiation of those norms. On the other hand, the queer invites reinterpretation of the self. In contrast to encountering the threat of the abject, encountering the queer invites what Dewey describes as mutual adaptation between subject and environment wherein the environment is another subject/self/identity.

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23 See Chapter 1, p. 15 for a fuller discussion of these two notions of queer.
24 Butler notes this conflation particularly in relation to the abjection of GLBT (gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender) identities which intends the standard or naturalness of heterosexuality. I will return to Butler’s discussion of particular abject identities in the next and final chapter.
26 Dewey, Art as Experience, 45.
The queer cannot escape the abject in the same sense that the I or self maintains tension with the abject -- that threat of being undone -- in order to maintain intelligibility, in order to maintain status as an I, as a self. The abject symbolizes that risk of unintelligibility that precedes the queer self. Yet, in another sense, the queer must escape the abject, establish distancing tension with the abject, to maintain that oppositional relationship that identifies intelligibility from the incomprehensible. Butler explains:

…the “I” becomes, to a certain extent unknowable, threatened with unviability, with becoming undone altogether, when it no longer incorporates the norm in such a way that makes this ‘I’ fully recognizable. There is a certain departure from the human that takes place in order to start the process of remaking the human.27

The I becomes queer, peculiar in embodying a norm within its own particular perspective; it remakes this norm of humanity by artistically integrating it into the system of mind that comprises that self. In so doing, the I risks abjection -- becoming undone -- in order to become an I. The I symbolizes both a departure from the norm and an evasion of the abject, harmony of the old and the new, past and present.

The significance of this distinction is twofold. First, queer is not synonymous with abject, though both denote at once a process and the product of that process. Second, the constructive product of queering is the return from the confrontation with undoing the norm -- having risked and escaped from abjection -- and yielding a mutual adaptation of (queered) norm and (queer) self. That is, the queer risks becoming the abject, but returns from this confrontation having achieved subjectivity, personhood,

27 Butler, Undoing Gender, 3-4. Emphasis is my own. See also Chapter 1, p. 18 for a discussion of this passage in terms of balancing conformity and deviance. Note that we retain this same theme, recasting it here in terms of normativity and the abject.
through this queering process. To be a self is to be queer, to be “positioned somewhere between the norm and its failure.”

On a sociological scale, the danger of abjection lies in subjugating identities that do not meet some norm and subsequently denying them some status or privilege. Butler explains:

The abject designates here precisely those “unlivable” and “uninhabitable” zones of social life which are nevertheless densely populated by those who do not enjoy the status of the subject, but whose living under the sign of the “unlivable” is required to circumscribe the domain of subject.

Here the abject denotes that which is socially untenable, unviable. It designates those identities that threaten the standards of established social institutions. Social institutions abject these identities in an attempt to fix rigid norms and deny recognition to identities that are livable and intelligible, yet do not meet some narrowly conceived standard.

Hence, the danger of social abjection is that it may result in homogenizing standards and denying the interdependence or permeability of the normative and the queer. That is, abjecting identities denies the reciprocity of the self and other that enables the recognition of performative selves.

Hence, the abject dually operates in the construction and maintenance of subjectivity. On the one hand, it functions on the personal or psychological level to maintain a boundary for meaningful selfhood. On the other hand, abjection functions interpersonally or socially to establish that system of shared meaning that exists

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28 Butler, Undoing Gender, 74.
29 Butler, Bodies that Matter, 3.
30 For example, Butler notes that GLBT identities dwell in the abject position of “normative” heterosexuality.
interdependently with the subjects it affirms. Further, insofar as we have already established the interdependence of self and society, this reveals permeability between the inner and the outer that Butler suggests repudiation of the abject forecloses, forfeits, or denies. It is through this repeated refusal of the abject that we affirm the boundary of who we are. Yet the continuous need to reenact this repudiation reveals its tenuousness, its instability, its need for continuous reification. Thus, although the abject defines this binary of inner and outer, to acknowledge the abject actually articulates its fragility. Further, this fragility defines the aspect of the abject that in part constitutes the coherent subject. It is this constant threat of unintelligibility, of being undone, that motivates us to maintain ties to the norms that render us intelligible, signify those shared systems of meaning that ensure we are understandable to others, and thus ensure recognition of our personhood.

Meaningful personhood is the convergence and negotiation of the artistic and aesthetic attitudes within the self as it is in relation to its surroundings. This project of constructing the self and desiring recognition occurs in its relation to and repudiation of the abject. Insofar as the self implicates the other yet yearns for unique recognition in its own right, it is a work of art, incorporating both the artistic and aesthetic attitudes. We have considered the artistic attitude and foreshadowed the aesthetic attitude insofar as one is most fully realized in the other. Now we return to this notion of recognition in order to explicate the aesthetic attitude and thus reimagine the artistic attitude.
Recognition: The Aesthetic Attitude

Recognition that best does justice to someone is rather aesthetic perception. Dewey describes the power of the aesthetic: “The conception that objects have fixed and unalterable values is precisely the prejudice from which art emancipates us. The intrinsic qualities of things come out with startling vigor and freshness just because conventional associations are removed.”31 This very emancipation is why it is important to view others as works of art, to realize that their identities evolve and develop over time and elude consumption into our understanding of them merely in terms of ourselves. Ultimately, it is the recognition that the self cannot be fully grasped, systematized, habituated, conceptualized. Again, this is not to say that the self is unknowable or cannot be understood. Rather, it is recognition that requires the non-cognitive, intuitive grasp of a unity despite or perhaps because of dissonant experiences. It is aesthetic experience that allows us to experience both variety and unity, meaningful relationships between elements or aspects of a unified whole.

The performative self is constituted by and continually reified through continuous implication of the other. It is the return to the self through the other; the need for recognition to corroborate our self-expression. The artist attempts to anticipate the attitude of the spectator, but the spectator as well attempts to recreate and reimagine the attitude of the artist. In the framework of the self, the performing agent constructs herself by anticipating those norms that confer personhood. She negotiates and collates all of

31 Dewey, Art as Experience, 99.
those demands on her personhood into an intelligible and cohesive identity. This involves anticipating those we want to be recognized by.

Like Dewey, Butler notes this anticipation: “The act of self-reporting and the act of self-observation takes place in relation to a certain audience, with a certain audience as the imagined recipient, before a certain audience for whom a verbal and visual picture of selfhood is being produced.”32 In other words, we are always performing our identity for another. “One is always ‘doing’ with or for another, even if the other is only imaginary.”33 We perform for another, even if it is the generalized other that we have incorporated within ourselves. As we noted before in Mead: “One inevitably seeks an audience, has to pour himself out to somebody…”34 In determining and coordinating our performances, we anticipate the other, our audience; this indicates that experiences of the self have aesthetic quality.

We approach understanding the self as a unique totality; we seek a coherent, unified picture of who we are or who that other individual is. We try to capture the attitude of that individual, reimagine those attitudes and dispositions that prompted that performance. We do this through comparing them to our own selves, our own corpus of experiences, insofar as this is the only interpretive lens we are equipped with. Dewey explains: “…every individual brings with him, when he exercises his individuality, a way of seeing and feeling that in its interaction with old material creates something new,

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33 Ibid., 1.
something previously not existing in experience." This background of experiences constitutes our own mind, but it is also constructed by the intersubjective mind. It is both personal and shared, relying on common systems of meaning, but also particularized in some way because it is our unique amalgamation of those experiences and perspectives that constitute our own mind in distinction from other minds, though they are interconnected. We experience the other through this lens of ourselves such that in a sense we reimagine that other individual, adapting both our understanding of them and ourselves. That is, we *aesthetically experience* the other.

This experience of the other is aesthetic insofar as it is not our freeform or arbitrary creation of that individual. We do not create others in our own image or reduce them to our conceptualization of them. This is because there is something in them that is resiliently problematic, that forces not only the reimagining of *them*, but also a reimagining and reconstruction of *our own self*. There is *mutual adjustment* between subject and what is being experienced, i.e. the other self. Aesthetically experiencing the other as a work of art draws us away from our current conceptions of self by suggesting an alternate interpretation and manifestation of self. On the other hand, the other has the power to invoke this change only insofar as it also appeals to something in our current construction of the self. Their notion of selfhood diverges from our own, yet it incorporates and appeals to something recognizable by which we can identify its difference instead of leaving the other wholly incomprehensible to us.

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36 Ibid., 45.
This synthesizes both Dewey’s idea of a mutual adjustment, being carried outside oneself to find oneself, and Butler’s notion that when we return to ourselves, we are never rid of the other. This aesthetic encounter is a transaction between selves which results in a harmony that constitutes a change in both selves. We return from this encounter having incorporated it into our corpus of experiences, such that the experience is formative of our background of mind and reconstructs how we understand ourselves. We better understand ourselves by melding our construction of self with that of the other, experiencing ourselves through that individual, and collating this experience with what experience we already have of ourselves.

When we experience the other aesthetically, we cannot consume him within our notion of self and thus we experience him in his uniqueness. Dewey explains: “Participation is so thoroughgoing that the work of art is detached or cut off from the kind of specialized desire that operates when we are moved to consume or appropriate a thing physically.” This specialized desire is what happens when we attempt to use something instrumentally; we have an end in mind, a use to which we want to put this item. Aesthetic experience thwarts this specialized channeling of desire. It defies our wish to use that thing -- or to construct that other -- for our own purposes, merely instrumentally, mechanically, to approach it in a mundane way, or approach it habitually. We cannot consume the aesthetic, the expressive object, because what we experience in it is problematic, we cannot subsume it into our own identity, what is already habituated in

our background of experiences. It is new, unique, requires an adaptation in our experience in order for us to appropriate its meaning.

It is when we lose this problematic-ness of the other that we lose the notion of them as a unique or queer self. Rather, we reduce them to those identifications that we attribute to them, the relationship(s) that they have to us, and the various performances that we understand them to inhabit. We no longer experience them as an artistic whole; we are not recognizing their unique self-expression. They become our artistic construction, an expression of us rather than them. We attempt to construct that other person and ignore those ways in which that person defies how we paint them, how they continue to push back against how we understand them. We totalize some aspect of that individual and suggest that that is all they are rather that allowing for the multiplicity of their performances just as we yearn for others to recognize the same in us.

Rather, when we approach the other as an aesthetician, we acknowledge that they have the power to continuously push back against and challenge our conceptualization of them. As Butler emphasizes, recognition is power: “…recognition becomes a site of power by which the human is differentially produced. This means that to the extent that desire is implicated in social norms, it is bound up with the question of power and with the problem of who qualifies as the recognizably human and who does not.”\(^{40}\) We have the power to confer/authenticate or deny agency to someone else, to accept or deny their gesture as meaningful, but also accept or deny that they have the capacity or competency

\(^{40}\) Butler, * Undoing Gender, 2. *
for action, to suggest that they are somehow less of a person because they are unintelligible or abject in some way.

Aesthetically experiencing the self acknowledges that there is something queer about that self, something that cannot be fully accounted for by norms and normativity. Self is always both a culmination and forthcoming, both product and process, both self as we currently understand it and what we still yearn to know about it. It is this that we desire, that which is always forthcoming, “an instance of ‘ever, not quite,’”41 never fully realizable, but that which prompts us towards continually reconstructing ourselves.

Butler explains:

There is always a dimension of ourselves and our relation to others that we cannot know, and this not-knowing persists with us as a condition of existence and, indeed, of survivability. We are, to an extent, driven by what we do not know, and cannot know, and this “drive” (Trieb) is precisely what is neither exclusively biological nor cultural, but always the site of their dense convergence.42

We desire to know the unknowable, but this desire can be realized only through the recognition of its unknowability. We understand the other best -- both in comparison with ourselves, but also in opposition to ourselves, as that self -- when we recognize that which makes, keeps, or renders them unknowable in terms of ourselves. Such unknowability can only be intuited, can only be experienced aesthetically. Further, it is this very recognition in other selves that reflects to us that there is this queerness or uniqueness in ourselves as well. It affirms that we are not reducible to norms and social construction, but rather allows for that innovative agency that seeks creative expression.

41 Dewey, Art as Experience, 175.
42 Butler, Undoing Gender, 15.
As aesthetician then, the agent’s role is in experiencing the harmony and disharmony created through its performances. The aesthetician realizes the unity intended by the artist; she experiences the whole and how its constitutive parts signify in relation to it. In a sense, the aesthetician is the generalized other, the receptive attitude, the reactionary agent that reimagines the artist’s intention in light of her own background or mind. If the artist sets up the experience and organizes it, then the aesthetician enters this experience and enjoys the unity of the orchestration of tensions and relationships.

_Aesthetic Experience_

True, not _all_ experiences of the self -- ours or another -- are aesthetic. I may interact with others without aesthetically experiencing them. I may gain a sense for how to regard them and how to act in relation to them and hence I may understand them in some functional sense. Yet this is not recognition of that individual self. I do not intimately know the person who makes my coffee at Starbucks. In fact, this performance is enacted interchangeably by various individuals at various locations of the same corporation. I know the routine etiquette for stopping at a toll booth, the required exchange of gestures, yet this does not entail that I aesthetically understand the toll booth worker in any robust sense. However, to understand the self in its uniqueness -- in its queerness, as _that_ self -- is to understand it aesthetically. That is, to consider all of those experiences which take _this_ self as their fulcrum, when taken in concert with one another, when considered in meaningful implication with one another, and to consider what self all of these produce with one another: _this_ requires aesthetically experiencing the self.
Dewey defines the extremes of anesthetic experience: “At one pole is the loose succession that does not begin at any particular place and that ends - in the sense of ceasing - at no particular place. At the other pole is arrest, constriction, proceeding from parts having only mechanical connection with one another.”

On the one extreme is the loose succession characterized by chaos, undirected, lacking orientation or approach to the surrounding situation. On the other extreme is the mundane, that which is completely habituated and mechanical.

This relates back to Dewey’s discussion of the interplay between the imaginative self and the habitual self. The first extreme presents nothing to guide the imaginative self toward intelligible expression. There is no self expressed in the sense that expression requires consummation in a spectator; nothing can be consummated because nothing hangs together. Actions or elements within the situation do not relate to one another. On the other hand, the latter extreme precludes the possibility of expressing the imaginative self insofar as it represents complete habituation and stagnation. Neither is characteristic of perceiving or understanding the self. It is possible to experience the self anesthetically, but this is not understanding of the self as such, not experiencing the full expression of self as a unique, unified totality.

Further, it is possible to maladroitly/ineptly experience art as a novice or neophyte, but this does not qualify as anesthetically experiencing the piece. We approach a piece in the ways in which we are prepared for it. Dewey explains that how we

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44 Dewey, *Experience and Nature*, 245. See Chapter 1 (pp. 20-21) for a further discussion on the imaginative and habitual self.
experience something is dependent upon those dispositions for experiencing that compose our interpretive lens of that situation: “…their occurrence as experienced things is ascertained to be dependent upon attitudes and dispositions; the manner of their happening is found to be affected by the habits of an organic individual.”\(^{45}\) Again, the mode of experiencing -- the *how* of experience -- affects the *what* of experience. We can only know a work of art insofar as we have the materials and background to resonate with it. We experience a piece only insofar as we know how, insofar as we have the background of experiences with which to compare it and comprehend it. This interpretive lens is how we approach a piece and we may be more or less prepared for experiencing what it attempts to express to us.

For example, I began watching Wagner’s Ring Cycle, *Der Ring des Niebelungen*, with my father when I was five years old. I now own copies of the entire cycle on DVD - - the same production at the Metropolitan Opera as I viewed when younger -- and I still enjoy watching it. My five-year-old self and my twenty-four-year-old self undoubtedly experience(d) the opera in different ways. When I was five, my sister and I needed our dad to read the subtitles for us and there were Wagnerian themes that we did not understand; our dad had a particularly hard time explaining the incestuous relationship between Siegmund and Sieglinde. I was able to pick out common musical motifs, such as the repeated phrase that trumpeted Siegfried or the all too familiar horns that built the crescendo for “The Ride of the Valkyries” and announced Brunhilde. Even at five, I aesthetically experienced this operatic quartet in some capacity.

\(^{45}\) Dewey, *Art as Experience*, 236.
Yet, my experiencing of the opera is now enhanced, bearing new understanding of music, dramatic motifs, and other elements that allow me to understand various elements of the operatic art form. I now have experience playing several musical instruments, which lends greater appreciation for various elements of the musicality that accompanies the action onstage. My undergraduate theater courses allow me to better appreciate lighting and staging techniques. I now understand that different characters have specific motifs as a vehicle for the character inhabiting the music, of connecting the music with the action onstage, and of lending further dimension to that character. All of these experiences have built up my interpretive lens such that my approach to Wagner’s opera quartet is very different from my younger self. Both experiences of the opera are aesthetic, yet the latter is more developed, informed, or attuned to the nuances of the piece, for more fully realizing the expressive object.

Our understanding of other selves relies on our preparedness in much the same way. This is part of why relationships evolve. Our ability to recognize another individual is built upon our ability or preparedness for such recognition. Hence, it is possible to anesthetically experience the other if we do not have the dispositions cultivated for resonating with them. There are those individuals with whom we cannot identify, since our backgrounds are incommensurable.

Alternatively, there are times when we cannot coordinate our actions into a unified whole. Some performances appear recalcitrantly and irresolvably dissident in conjunction with others. These actions appear at least uncharacteristic or at most hypocritical or contradictory. Further, we are not always intentional about our
performances or how we construct ourselves; not all of our actions are carefully planned to express something. Rather, we are often capricious or passive in our constructions. Presuming that the self is a work of art, this seemingly contests the unity that is supposed to underlie these performances. Even if the self is an evolving totality, this suggests that there may be warring or willfully contradictory aspects of the self.

However, such dissidence does not irrevocably undermine the overall artistic coherence of the self. The occasional anesthetic experience of the self does not refute or preclude the possibility of experiencing the self as an evolving artistic totality. Not all performances are equally expressive of those people we want to construct as ourselves. There may be uncharacteristic performances that we realize do not signify the selfhood that we want to construct. For example, Dewey distinguishes between self-expression and actions that merely represent a “spewing forth.” These are performances that we are not likely to repeat. These actions feel dissident, anomalous, harmful to our wellbeing, or untenable in accordance with other performances which we take to be more intimately expressive of ourselves. Finally, even apparently capricious acts rely on the background of experience and habit -- that is, mind -- for their provocation. In other words, spontaneity is also the product of much thought and planning, even if not consciously so. Dewey explains: “The act of expression that constitutes a work of art is a construction in time, not an instantaneous emission.”

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46 Dewey, *Art as Experience*, 64.
47 Ibid., 75.
48 Ibid., 67.
are only part of the expressive whole rather than subversions or obstructions of coherence.

True, there are various ways of experiencing other individuals -- interacting with others, performing in relation to others, exchanging meaningful gestures -- besides aesthetically. But in order to understand this self in its particularity, in its queerness, uniqueness, as a meaningful, coherent, totality: this type of understanding is aesthetic. And it is this understanding, this recognition, as this self -- unique, particular, as an expressive work of art -- for which we yearn, for which we perform, for which we construct that selfhood. We best understand the self, most fully recognize its meaningfulness as this peculiar, unique, queer self when we experience it as simultaneous artist and aesthetician. Only through such aesthetic experience can we most fully realize and account for the queerness of the self.

Considering the multiplicity and diversity of performances that constitute the self, Butler concludes that the self is not cohesive. Rather, she argues that the subject is “never coherent and never self-identical precisely because it is founded and, indeed, continually refounded, through a set of defining foreclosures and repressions that constitute the discontinuity and incompletion of the subject.”

49 In other words, the self cannot be understood as a totality, but rather must be refounded continuously through these repeated significations that vary in their repetition. The self appears through performances that seek to repeat some norm, yet can never fully encompass that norm, can never replicate it, and thus the performances are never self-identical. Butler explains:

49 Butler, Bodies that Matter, 190.
“the impossibility of a full recognition, that is, of ever fully inhabiting the name by which one’s social identity is inaugurated and mobilized, implies the instability and incompleteness of subject-formation.”\textsuperscript{50} Hence, Butler concludes that the perpetual compulsion to perform and the inability to replicate the performance(s) results in their irreconcilable dissonance and precludes any cohesion of self.

This is where I have proposed a divergence from Butler, an alternate epistemology of the self as a work of art. That the self is “incomplete” does not entail that it is unthinkable in some continuity, continuation, or totality. Ineffability or incompleteness does not imply discontinuity; instability does not imply incoherence. Rather, Dewey explains that the work of art is “a stability that is not stagnation but is rhythmic and developing.”\textsuperscript{51} That is, this proposed incoherence of self is only a problem insofar as we misunderstand the work of art (the self) as a finished, final totality, removed from the experience and transaction of the spectator and its public. Rather than rendering it incomprehensible, recognition of its incompleteness enables us to best understand self in its evolving totality. The self is both a culmination and a continuation, established and uncertain, whole and provisional.\textsuperscript{52} The self is best understood aesthetically, as a work of art.

\textsuperscript{50} Butler, \textit{Bodies that Matter}, 226.
\textsuperscript{51} Dewey, \textit{Art as Experience}, 18.
\textsuperscript{52} I adopt these paired descriptions of the artistic/aesthetic from Dewey himself. \textit{Cf. Experience and Nature}, 359; \textit{Art as Experience}, 143.
CHAPTER 4

AESTHETICALLY RE-IMAGINING GENDER

To this point, I have forestalled the notion of gender for the purposes of establishing a general methodology or approach for understanding the self. I have argued that the performative self is queer -- that it entails something odd or unique that is not exhausted by the various norms that converge into that particular selfhood -- and thus it is best understood aesthetically. Yet now we must address more focally the ways in which we embody those norms to signify personhood.

Recall from chapter one the general features of the performative self: (i) reliance on a shared system of meaning; (ii) a balance between conformity and deviation; (iii) and reliance on the Other. Each of these constrains and enables expression of selfhood in general and I have indicated how each of these operates without reference to gender. However, note that none of these is separated from gender. As Dewey notes, what is performed is always in relation to how it is performed. This includes instantiation and embodiment of these norms within the individual, embodiment which is always sexed and gendered. I have attempted to account for the construction and understanding of self without recourse to gender differences. Yet the how of performance is always gendered such that any notion of self cannot be divorced from its presentation through the lens of
That is, gender is necessarily implicit in experiencing, constructing, and understanding the self.

Thus, by way of a concluding -- but never final -- consideration of the self, I now turn to considering gender through the framework of aesthetic experience. In particular, we now can adequately address those complexities and nuances of gender that are ignored or stigmatized under current conceptions. That is, we may positively re-theorize gender to ameliorate some of the classical problems of gender categorization and the violence done therein. This is not to suggest that I am attempting to get rid of gender altogether, that it would be desirable or even possible.\(^1\) Rather, my proposal is to queer gender norms to acknowledge them as socially constructed and therefore more fluid and flexible than currently accepted. Through aesthetically experiencing the self, we reveal gender identities to be individually and socially more fluid and dependent on one another than historically and currently acknowledged.

**Current Frameworks: Sex, Gender, and Sexuality**

Before reconceptualizing gender, I first want to distinguish between (i) sex, (ii) gender, and (iii) sexuality insofar as they all designate different aspects of the self, though they are all integrally interrelated.

The *sex/gender distinction* allies biology with sex and designates gender as its socially constructed correlate.\(^2\) That is, sex is seen as antecedent to a corresponding

\(^1\) I note that this is not my aim insofar as some gender theorists do propose moving beyond gender norms entirely. Cf. Barbara Risman, “Gender as a Social Structure: Theory Wrestling with Activism,” in *Gender and Society* v. 18 no. 4 (Aug. 2004), 429-450.

expression in gender. Sex is the raw materiality, the biological and physiological component that comprises the individual as male or female. This includes both primary sex characteristics -- sex organs, i.e. testes and/or ovaries -- and secondary sex characteristics such as outward physical indicators (breasts, predominance of body hair, etc.). Sex denotes the physical composition of the body, including not only genital appearance, but also chromosomal and hormonal differentiations. In other words, sex generally designates those biological contributors that presumably underlie gender. Sex is assumed to be more primordial, foundational, or as Butler notes, “‘prediscursive,’ prior to culture, a politically neutral surface on which culture acts.”

On the other hand, gender denotes any associations with particular bodies that are produced and reified by social institutions, discourse, and cultural norms. Predominantly, our categorizations of gender refer to men and women, masculinity and femininity. Each of these categorizations can break down further, such as macho and effeminate, butch and fem, androgynous, and so on. Indicators of gender include clothing choices, hairstyles, carriage and comportment of the body, tone of voice, as well as specific social roles and attributes. For example, women are typically stereotyped as nurturers, emotional, and soft; men are seen more typically as protectors, rational, and firm. Note that each of these characterizations serves to reinforce gender as oppositional and mirroring binary sex categorizations. Even androgyny relies on a dissonance, confusion, or denial of dichotomous gender with the maintained presumption that there is an underlying sex that would decide a binary gender classification.

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Finally, sexuality designates three general components: (i) desires, (ii) orientation, and (iii) erotic and/or sensual practices. First, sexuality includes that matrix of desires vis-à-vis other embodied (sexed, gendered, sexual) selves. This matrix is in relation to the other two constituents of sexuality, orientation and practices. Here I intend orientation to designate one’s general approach toward and positioning in relation to those whom he/she is attracted. Note: just as other components of the self vary over time, orientation as well may fluctuate and evolve; it is not determined or static. Third, sexuality entails those practices that enact the desires and orientation of the individual. This includes any practice that enacts erotic and sensual desires; sexuality is not limited to intercourse, penetration, stimulation, or involving the genitals. Typically, recognition of sexuality is constrained to heterosexual and homosexual identities, though classifications of sexuality may also include bisexuality, queer sexuality, monogamy, polyamory, polyandry, and so on.

To be clear, the determinants of sexuality are not the focus of this study. That is, it is not my purpose to argue whether sexuality is genetically determined, wholly constructed, or some combination therein. Rather, my intention is to discuss sexuality insofar as it has reciprocal bearing on and from gender. Insofar as we refer to desires, orientation, and sensual/erotic practices, we implicate the polymorphic realm of sexuality. Yet how we enact these desires, embody an orientation, or perform these practices implicates considerations of gender.

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Queering Binaries

Now let us unpack this relationship between sex, gender, and sexuality. Our dichotomized notion of gender presumes an underlying binary notion of sex and interrelated notions of sexuality based on oppositional sexes. However, there are two problems with this reasoning: (i) sex is not binary or at least there is a gradient between male and female and (ii) our binary notions of sex are determined and informed by our notions of gender and sexuality.

First, in assuming that sex is naturally binary, we disregard those cases in which individuals are born with ambiguous genitals. Anne Fausto-Sterling notes that the same fetal structures develop into the penis or clitoris, ovaries or testes: “Only the internal sex organs—uteri, fallopian tubes, prostates, sperm transport ducts—arise during embryonic development from separate sets of structures.” There are instances when these structures do not develop to one of the socially dominant extremes, but adopt characteristics of both sexes. An individual may be born with both an ovary and a testis, testes and female genitalia, ovaries and an enlarged clitoris/phallus, or chromosomes that do not match the genitalia. An individual may have both an enlarged clitoris and a vaginal opening or a penis and ovaries as well. Alternatively, there are circumstances in which secondary characteristics do not match the primary sex characteristics. For example, an individual may have a sizeable phallus that, despite an accompanying vaginal opening, classifies the

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5 Fausto-Sterling provides a rough estimate of how common intersex births are. Under her researched estimation, 1.7 percent of all births are to intersexed individuals. For comparison, she notes that this percentage is higher than for albino births. Sexing the Body, 52-53.

child as male. Yet this individual may have a hormonal balance such that upon puberty, he may begin to menstruate and/or develop breasts.

In such cases, physiological characteristics do not neatly classify the individual under a binary notion of sex, much less suggest a correlative gender classification. This disrupts our classification system of male/female and further obstructs ready gendering according to genital presentation. Yet we recalcitrantly maintain our binary classification system by dismissing such cases as physiological anomalies. Fausto-Sterling notes that when these ambiguities occur, we fall back on narrow conceptions of sexuality in order to reinforce our notions of binary gender. She explains the determinants of genital reconstruction: “By and large, physicians use the standard of reproductive potential for making females and phallus size for making males…”7 In the next section, I will more fully treat this misconceived notion of compulsory heterosexuality. For our current purposes, what this indicates is that sex is not ultimately determined by biology but rather social constructions such as the compulsion to reinforce the sex binary to protect the presumed correlative of gender. That is, we abject intersexuality -- identify these cases as untenable, unlivable, unintelligible -- in order to reify and naturalize our binary systems of sex and gender; but these identities become abject in our very denial of their legitimacy.

Note that being intersexed or having an ambiguous sex categorization does not medically threaten the health of the individual. As Fausto-Sterling notes, “We protest the

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7 Fausto-Sterling, “How to Build a Man,” 344. She also notes this tendency in Sexing the Body, cf. 57.
practices of genital mutilation in other cultures, but tolerate them at home.”\(^8\)

Normalizing intersexed bodies merely in order to maintain a sex binary does violence to these bodies through unnecessary surgeries, often at the expense of psychological strain and reduced sexual pleasure. Again, Fausto-Sterling explains:

…[Infant] genital surgery is cosmetic surgery performed to achieve a social result—reshaping a sexually ambiguous body so that it conforms to our two-sex system. This social imperative is so strong that doctors have come to accept it as a medical imperative, despite strong evidence that early genital surgery doesn’t work: it causes extensive scarring, requires multiple surgeries, and often obliterates the possibility of orgasm.\(^9\)

We classify intersex births as physiological anomalies that must be normalized, even though such surgeries present more health risks than allowing the individual to develop and determine their own gender at a more informed age.

Further, surgical alteration does not guarantee that the individual later identifies with the gender generally prescribed to the constructed genitals. For example, in “Doing Justice to Someone,” Butler notes the case of David/Brenda in which the individual was raised as female, yet held no identification with the classification as a woman. Butler describes this as “some deep-seated sense of gender” that did not match the socialization prescribed to his constructed female genitalia.\(^10\) In cases such as this, we do injustice to individuals by denying intersexuality as a tenable identity in order to naturalize binary conceptions of sex and correlative dichotomizations of gender. We abject intersexuality in order to protect binary notions of sex and gender; instead, we should recognize these instances in which our binaries themselves become unintelligible. That is, I reaffirm the

\(^8\) Fausto-Sterling, Sexing the Body, 79.
\(^9\) Ibid., 80.
attempt “to imagine a world in which individuals with mixed genital attributes might be accepted and loved without having to transform them into a more socially coherent or normative version of gender.”

Thus, cases of intersexuality illuminate several inadequacies with our current notions of sex and gender. First, binary notions of sex are inadequate in accounting for the physiological diversity of the body. Minimally, there is a gradient of sex, a sliding scale of primary and secondary characteristics that do not always manifest as identifiably male or female. Second, our binary notions of sex are determined and informed by our notions of gender and sexuality. We identify sex based on our gendered notions of the penis as an instrument for penetration and the vagina as a conduit for birth. This contradicts or at least questions our tendency to privilege sex as the determinant of a correlative gender. Further, it undermines the stark distinction between sex and gender. Although these terms are not reducible to one another, it indicates that they are interdependent and reciprocal notions; each informs and shapes the conceptualization of the other. As Fausto-Sterling articulates, the body is not an essence, but rather “a bare scaffolding on which discourse and performance build a completely acculturated being.”

The body is one of the variables that compose gender, yet the body itself is always already gendered.

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12 Fausto-Sterling, Sexing the Body, 6.
Gender as Stratification: Abjeting Identities

Beyond privileging the body as the determining factor of gender, one of the other central problems in current constructions of gender is that they rely on stratification and inegalitarian power relations between the binary sexes/genders. Here again, we create these differential and oppositional relations by relegating certain positions to the abject. In particular, I want to highlight two such stratifying practices: (1) hegemonic masculinity and (2) compulsory heterosexuality.

First, hegemonic masculinity designates those practices that construct masculinity predicated on subjugating others. C.J. Pascoe explains hegemonic masculinity as not a single masculine “role,” but rather the idea that masculinity is understandable only in a model of “multiple masculinities” (Connell 1995). Instead of focusing on masculinity as the male role, this model asserts that there are a variety of masculinities, which make sense only in hierarchical and contested relations with one another.

That is, masculinity is understood and performed as assertions of power, mastery, and domination. Pascoe describes masculine performances as predicated on “imposing one’s will and demonstrating dominance…” Individuals become masculine by “proving their capacity to exercise control on the world around them…” Note that this gender

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13 For example, Risman identifies gender as “a socially constructed stratification system” in “Gender as a Social Structure”, 430.
15 Ibid., 86.
16 Ibid., 104.
construction does acknowledge that there are multiple ways of doing masculinity. It also
allows that female-bodied individuals may adopt masculine performances.\textsuperscript{17}

However, hegemonic masculinity further entails that there is not only a \textit{normative}
way of doing masculinity, but a \textit{correct} way of doing masculinity. Thus, stratification
occurs not only in men systematically assuming dominance over women, but also among
men to the degree that some men are better able or socially situated than others to assume
control. For example, Pascoe identifies \textit{marginalized masculinity} as performed by “men
who may be positioned powerfully in terms of gender but not in terms of class or race.”\textsuperscript{18}
Alternatively, individuals may be subjugated for behaving effeminately or failing to
properly repudiate presumed feminine characteristics such as passivity or weakness.
Such individuals reside in the abject position of masculinity.\textsuperscript{19}

It is not my intention here to present a polemic against men or to suggest that
masculinity is the only problematic gender construction. Rather, we have feminine ideals
that likewise sanction gender performances and denigrate those individuals who fail to
sufficiently or properly embody feminine norms. Just as there is a stratification of power
among men based on how well they embody masculinity, there are analogous
stratifications according to degrees of femininity. Yet this stratification of femininity
occurs \textit{within} the dominant structure of hegemonic masculinity in which femininity is

\textsuperscript{17} For example, Pascoe identifies and discusses cases of female masculinity in high school groups. “Look
at My Masculinity!” in \textit{Dude, You’re a Fag}, 115-155.
\textsuperscript{18} Ibid., 7.
\textsuperscript{19} Pascoe discusses the term \textit{fag} as the abject position of masculinity, not to be conflated with the term
‘gay’ or ‘homosexual.’ She explains that “becoming a fag has as much to do with failing at the masculine
tasks of competence, heterosexual prowess, and strength or in any way revealing weakness or femininity as
it does with a sexual identity.” \textit{Dude, You’re a Fag}, 54.
defined in terms of masculinity, as its opposite, its complimentary and submissive position.

Second, social stratification also occurs in relation to compulsory heterosexuality, which entails the naturalization or standardization of heterosexuality by abjecting alternate sexualities. Our cultural notions of sexuality are built around the presumption that heterosexuality is the default, the dominant orientation, the standard from which other sexualities are perversions or at best deviations. However, part of what normalizes heterosexuality and reifies it as the normative expression of sexuality is the rendering of other sexualities as abject, at least lesser permutations, deviant and perverse, and at most illegitimate. Further, compulsory heterosexuality and dichotomous notions of gender implicate one another. We identify sexuality based on whether the partnership is between oppositional genders or not; conversely, the notion of oppositional genders is reinforced by the idea that proper sexuality lies in the union of opposites.20 As Butler explains, masculinity and femininity historically are “not dispositions… but indeed accomplishments, ones which emerge in tandem with the achievement of heterosexuality.”21

Further, compulsory heterosexuality presumes a narrow conception of sexuality that focuses merely on genital contact. More specifically, it emphasizes vaginal penetration by the penis. This disregards alternate expressions of erotic and sensual desire that focus on other erogenous zones and physical excitations. Rather, privileging

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penile penetration ignores the fact that women are generally more easily aroused by clitoral stimulation. As already noted, the clitoris is the anatomic analogue to the penis. Further, the former actually has more concentrated nerve endings than the latter. In other words, privileging penile penetration privileges male pleasure in sexual acts. Nonetheless, penile penetration is often used as the standard for successful or healthy sexuality. Returning to those cases of intersex individuals, one of the standards for successful normalization surgery is whether the individual can subsequently engage in being penetrated or being the penetrator. Again, this reinforces compulsory heterosexuality not only as a standard for sexuality, but also in defining sex.

Thus, both hegemonic masculinity and compulsory heterosexuality are systems constructed on social inequality. In both (often overlapping) systems, identities are differentially constructed in terms of dominance and subjugation. That is, current gender relations build on naturalizing certain identities by abjecting others. Further, both practices mutually rely on and reinforce our inadequate binary notions of sex and gender.

**A Queer(ing) Alternative**

I propose a re-imagination of gender based on the aesthetic framework that we have built in previous chapters. I have already established that we best understand the self aesthetically, as a work of art that implicates both artist and spectator, the body or product of art and its use or performance in experience and interaction. Within this aesthetic schematic, gender is one of the artistic components that contributes to the

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coherence and cohesion of the self as work of art. Specifically, gender is the *stylization*, organization, and use of the body -- the product of art -- to convey the self as a work of art. As Butler describes, “Gender is the repeated stylization of the body, a set of repeated acts within a highly rigid regulatory frame that congeal over time to produce the appearance of substance, of a natural sort of being.”\(^{24}\) That is, gender is both a set of norms and their particular instantiation and queering within particular embodiments.

Gender is all of those aspects of selfhood that implicate embodiment in its capacity for performing and for implicating desire(s).

This reconceptualization retains the notion of current markers -- such as clothing, comportment, and all those other modes of stylization -- that we currently recognize as indicative of gender. Yet it allows for greater plasticity in how those markers may be arranged in order to signify varying emphases and indications of the artistic self as a whole. Recognizing gender as an artistic construct and performance undoes the notion that certain attributes, characteristics, roles, and performances naturally align with particularly sexed bodies. I may excel at philosophy, a discipline that champions rationality, without it being a performance of masculinity; I can wear a necktie without it contradicting my feminine haircut and wear makeup; I can smoke cigars and learn how to use a shotgun without compromising the coherence of my predominantly feminine identity. This is because none of these performances are in isolation from my selfhood as a unique, stylized, dynamic totality. Each of these components and performances are best

understood in aesthetic relation to one another and in relation to myself as a unified work of art.

As with any artistic media -- painting, music, theater, and so on -- we understand the self through its stylization or mode of presentation. In any other media, it is incoherent to suggest that there are only two classifications. We cannot reduce music to bluegrass or classical; paintings are not merely impressionistic or surrealist; theater is not reducible to operatic or theater of the absurd. Here I have arbitrarily chosen two classifications of each art form, though there are various other classifications for each medium. Further, different genera can and do draw influence and inspiration from one another. In music, Americana draws influence from rock, bluegrass, country, and so on. An artist evolves in her styling by experimenting and improvising with different styles and techniques to produce new sounds within a new medium. As Dewey notes, an artist continuously attempts to create new modes of communication by appropriating and incorporating old elements into new configurations.25 Analogously, individuals may experiment with gender performances and evolve in their gendered presentation. One may cross contemporary gender boundaries without becoming unintelligible or abject.

A potential objection here is that whereas other art forms admit greater diversity, gender itself does tend toward two extremes. However, consider that films generally are in either color or black and white. Note that this is one choice of stylization among many. However, within this choice alone there remain myriad possibilities: the film could be sepia or the film artist may play with resolution, contrast, or saturation. A scene

\[25\] For example, Dewey notes in poetry “the revelation of meaning in the old effected by its presentation through the new.” *Experience and Nature* (New York: Dover Publications, 1958), 360.
may be predominantly black and white, yet the editing technician may isolate one object within the shot to saturate with color, to draw attention to it or to signify various other choices within the scene. Consider *The Wizard of Oz* (1939), in which the film contrasts the mundane everyday black and white with the vivid color of Oz. Even if we accept that there are these two stylistic extremes in film -- black and white or color -- there remain many ways in which this dichotomy breaks down and in which the artist may queer the stylization of both/either. Returning then to the notion of gender, even if individuals’ expression of gender tends toward socially dominant extremes of masculine and feminine, this does *not* entail that these exhaust the intelligible expressions of gender.

Hence, in reconceptualizing gender as the stylization of the self as work of art, we deny that gender is a fixed attribute of the body. As Butler explains, gender is “not exactly what one ‘is’ nor is it precisely what one ‘has.’ Gender is the apparatus by which the production and normalization of masculine and feminine take place...” In other words, gender is not a nature, essential, fixed, or given. It is *not* the predetermined correlate of the sexed body.

Rather, gender is a norm that we achieve, (re)construct, and reify through its performance, but also a norm which we may critique and undo through those same means. Butler explains:

To conflate the definition of gender with its normative expression is inadvertently to reconsolidate the power of the norm to constrain the definition of gender. Gender is the mechanism by which notions of masculine and feminine are produced and naturalized, but gender might very well be the apparatus by which such terms are deconstructed and denaturalized. Indeed, it may be that the very

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26 Butler, *Undoing Gender*, 42.
apparatus that seeks to install the norm also works to undermine that very installation, that the installation is, as it were, definitionally incomplete.\textsuperscript{27}

Gender is not limited to or exhausted by its normative expressions, just as a work of art is not identical with its genera or form. Rather, one’s gender is a manifestation, enactment, and personalization of gender norms \textit{in relation to} the various other aspects of self. The norms of gender confer intelligibility to its expressions and performances in particular individuals. Yet individuals are unique products of their background and circumstances, a unique matrix of the various norms that they embody all in concert with one another. Thus, norms of gender may manifest in relation to this corpus of experiences such that the individual embodying the norms queers them, suggests their undoing, evolution or alteration. That gender is definitionally incomplete -- it requires continuous reenactment and corroboration through repeat performances -- suggests the capacity to “find new modes of language” that Dewey identifies in art.\textsuperscript{28} In queering a gender norm, we may find new intelligible expressions of gender.

Granted, there are individuals who seemingly present paradigmatic cases of gender, who do not challenge the norms of gender, and do not attempt to queer these norms in their particular instantiation. Again we can draw analogy to other art forms. Some art is mass-produced, duplicated, forged, or produced merely to gain currency (financial or in status); some art is more mimetic than others. Some artists are more edgy and bold in their deviance, while others rely on more subtle nuances. Likewise, difference in gender may be more outlandish or theatrical, more mainstream or

\textsuperscript{27} Butler, \textit{Undoing Gender}, 42.
\textsuperscript{28} Dewey, \textit{Art as Experience} (New York: Perigree, 1934), 363.
conformist. This does not nullify my claim that these individuals are likely queer in some way. Remember that we never embody a norm in isolation. Rather, this norm always interacts with the various other norms and compulsions of our outer environment with the inner forces of our desires, interests, and backgrounds. Perhaps our own construction of self does not prepare us for resonating with the queerness of another. Yet we should not presume that just because we cannot experience the queerness of the individual that there is no queerness.

**Undoing Problems and Reimagining Gender**

Given this re-imagination of gender, now we can undo those problems already considered: (1) the sex/gender distinction and its correlative binaries and (2) the tendency to construct gender identities based on inequality and stratification. Understanding gender as an artistic stylization addresses these problems and ameliorates some of the ways in which our current constrictive categorizations fail to account for the particularities of our queer selfhood.

First, gender is the representation and *interpretation* of sex and thus one which does not have a singular or deterministic expression. As Butler notes, “If gender is the cultural meanings that the sexed body assumes, then a gender cannot be said to follow from a sex in any one way.” Gender includes biological components, but these physiological contributors collate with other factors that contribute to the performance of gender. Again, the self is an artistic balance and incorporation of *various* compulsions

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and forces that one undergoes, as well as internal desires and existing interpretive frameworks that require constant readjustment. The sexed body is merely one of those components that influence gender, how one stylizes themselves, comports themselves, and interacts with others. I have to figure out how to use my body, how to implement it with regards to my desires, interests, mental capacities, and so on, such that my mere physicality is never the sole determinant of my actions or how I live in the world. Sexed embodiment does not find a singular expression, presentation, gender.

Hence, sex, gender, and sexuality are all components that work in concert with one another in the larger construction of selfhood as a work of art. In deconstructing the relationship between sex, gender, and sexuality, I indicated that there is not a neat correlation between the three; there is no causal relationship, nor is there one that precedes the other(s). Rather, they all motivate one another as well as implicate one another. Gender is an expression, performance, and indication of sex and sexuality. Gender is the way that we embody our sexuality and indicate it toward and for others. It is the embodiment of desires and attractions as played out on the surface of the body. Yet, although gender is an indicator of sex and sexuality, it also shapes both; there is always a reciprocal interrelationship between all three.

Understanding gender as an artistic construct allows for multiple shifting variables of and contributors to gender and recognizes greater diversity in gender identities. It acknowledges that sex is not the sole determinant of gender, but also acknowledges other influences including psychological, sociocultural, linguistic, political, theoretical and conceptual, and so on. All of these aspects, factors, contributors
in relation to one another aesthetically convey cohesive gender. Acknowledging this complexity of determinants yields greater appreciation for the multiplicity and dynamism in gender’s particular expressions and performances. Sex and sexuality interact with nationality, race, class, religion, and other affiliations. In aesthetically experiencing gender, we acknowledge greater diversity in how gender norms are orchestrated relative to other identifications and compulsions in a particular instantiation, in queer selfhood.

This then further leads to undoing the problem of constructing gender based on stratification. Part of the purpose of this thesis has been to legitimate identities that often have been marginalized and to show that their queerness need not be stigmatized or negatively connoted. My aim is to recognize multiplicity and diversity in such a way that does not also entail stratification.

If we allow that self is a work of art -- performed and received in terms of an audience -- then we may allow greater play in its performances and grant mutuality between artist and spectator rather than a rivalry for power or dominance. Aesthetically experiencing the self entails recognition of the reliance that we have on others. Understanding gender as an evolving artistic construction acknowledges reciprocity, permeability, and fluidity among identities both personally and intersubjectively. On the one hand, it acknowledges fluidity in how an individual performs her gender under different circumstances and in different interactions. On the other hand, it recognizes interpersonal fluidity; our identities are always in play with others, relying on corroboration by and interaction with other identities that have varying degrees of
similarity and distinction with our own. Acknowledging this fluidity among identities prevents the stark oppositions that allow stratification.

Further, when we attempt to account for all of those variables that contribute to one’s gender performances, we are more likely to allow that those variables differ from our own and suggest embodiment, instantiation, or stylization in a way that diverges from our own. We are better able to identify that artistic process through which the individual composes her gender identity, what elements she composes and orchestrates in order to produce her gender. Finally, such recognition reminds both artist and spectator of the possibility and inevitability of the continuation, evolution, and growth of the work of art instead of fixing it into rigid categorizations that we merely must reenact. Recognizing gender as artistic constructs acknowledges the possibility of the continued development of those norms that confer intelligibility, enable interaction, and prompt further reimagining.

**To Sum Up and Carry Forward**

I have argued that aesthetically reimagining gender can better account for those nuances and complexities in gender that current conceptions disregard. That is, we do better justice to gender identities -- and thus better justice to selves -- by understanding gender as a continuing aesthetic construction.

From here, we may now consider other aspects of selfhood -- race, class, nationality -- that interact with gender. Although I have constricted my considerations to gender, accounting for the full particularity and situatedness of queer selves cannot be
separated from these other factors of identity. That is, we need to account for the intersection not only of sex, gender, and sexuality, but of race, class, nationality, and so on all in conversation with one another. Yet, this very project is already underway by proposing that the self is a work of art, an orchestration and intersection of all these identifications. Here I have focused on gender, but my proposed reconstruction of the self as a work of art can incorporate these other complexities as well.

Finally, I do not presume to have proposed a definitive account of new gender norms. Though I have suggested an alternate epistemology and approach toward gender, I leave ambiguous where this re-theorizing leads. That is, I have not proposed a clear picture of whether we need to: (1) re-categorize gender norms altogether such that we abandon ‘woman’ and ‘man’ for alternate categorizations; (2) supplement these categorizations with more designations (a third, fourth, fifth gender); or (3) maintain a gradient of gender with masculine and feminine at its extremes or a multi-dimensional grid of gender with masculine and feminine as one of its axes. I have not provided such a clear re-categorization of gender norms. However, I have indicated that our categorizations should allow for multiplicity and fluidity of expression in ways that might varyingly show them to be separate notions and notions that collapse/bleed into one another. That is, these categorizations must recognize queerness.

In drawing together all of those frameworks -- the performative self, aesthetics, and gender -- I offer this artistic reimagining of the queer self as both a culmination and a continuation, an indication of the self as the “union of the generic, recurrent, ordered,
established… [with the] incomplete, going on, and hence still uncertain, contingent, novel, particular…”

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------. "Imitation and Gender Insubordination." In Salih, 119-137.

------. “Melancholy Gender/Refused Identification.” In Salih, 243-257.


