

DEWEY DECIMAL DOWSING PROJECT: MEANING INSIDE THE EVENT

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INTRODUCTION

Upon being encouraged to fully reveal the workings of the Dewey Decimal Dowsing project, by colleagues intrigued by its overt strangeness, an idea of the question why did you start this came to mind? The project began as a way to make the library more engaging and accessible to new art students and also bring practice and research closer. It draws upon a kind of ritual audience participation used in my performance art, before doctoral research had led me to frame this within affect theory and a performative mode of understanding. In retrospect I was trying to facilitate an idea of learning as personally specific and contingent. The idea to use numerology and dowsing in the library chimes with my sense as an artist and musician, of meaning-making as something extra-embodied and relational. The project is a temporary experiment in what Whitehead describes, in *Adventures in Ideas*¹, as the *percipient* perceiving the *region* with themselves as part of it. The accidental² has become a rich means of understanding the methodology of my identity in an art-pop performance group. A feel for exploring art history and theory in a collective of fellow students, learned from sitting in my father's lectures at sixth-form college, is also enfolded into the project's wilfully outré methodology (as is his fascination with extra-sensory perception). My point in speculative digression, is decisions in research and learning are experiential and relational in their dynamic. This project doesn't reject finer modes of understanding but repositions them in an animated tapestry of a transformative emerging encounter.

The processional dowsing technique:

- Students change their name into a numerological value.
- The first 6 numbers are used as a Dewey Decimal library code
- Students stand before the shelf housing this code and acclimatize
- Using a self-created dowser chose three books
- Each book is tapped three times on the spine, opened and read
- A clay effigy is created to process the encountered knowledge
- A simple scientific report (Title, Apparatus, Method, results, Conclusion) is written.

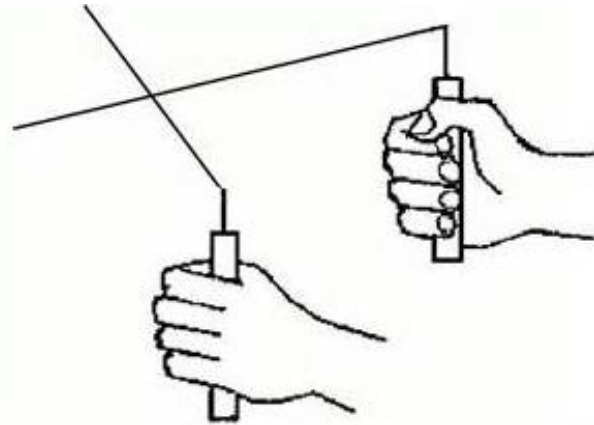


Figure 1. Trance ritual dowsing in research

Attunement

My keynote speeches and meditations delivered as the made-up Konfessor Kimey Peckpo, are an experiment in transmitting affect within a temporary region of ritual as an intra-relational *part of*. Research with vibrant matter by Jane Bennet³ and agential realism by Karen Barad⁴ have contextualised an intuitive desire to help students expand personal agency via an experiential encounter using apparatus (books, dowsers and most recently photographic enlargers) and specific region (library, studio and the dark room). The above whimsically processional method of interacting in the library suggests that an attunement to non-linguistic frequencies of vibrant matter is fundamental to intuitive agency. I have borrowed this phrase *attunement* from Jane Bennet but there is added traction in the un-academic flavour of a phrase being aligned to alternative medicine and spiritual energy. The aim is not to promote spirituality specifically but that the ritual becomes an entanglement in research as a form of what Karen Barad calls “Onto-epistem-ology” in meeting the Universe Halfway.⁵ Bennet and Barad have helped to define my idea that dowsing and methods of divination can be a practical method for augmenting intuition and a student’s feeling of imaginative agency.

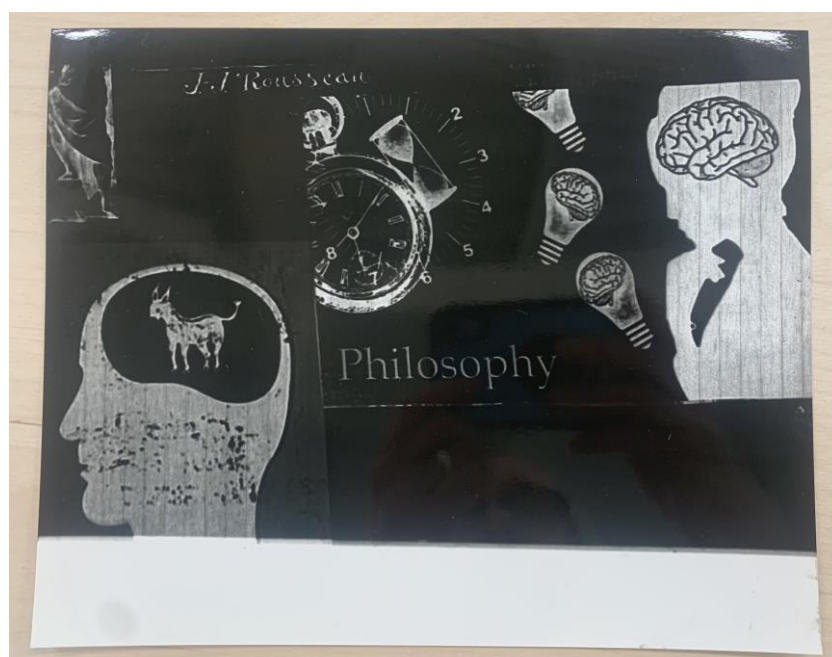


Figure 2. Student photogram assembling three books encountered 2022

The project is framed as a neutral exercise and before dowsing the process is foregrounded with a video of Guy Hudson,⁶ who has academic background in physics and engineering, talking about his work as a professional water dowser. Hudson encourages the dowser feel the atmosphere of the area being investigated. The Dewey Decimal project was perhaps about making this atmospheric experience of the library a *part of*. Inside the ritual we find an intuitive pleasure in becoming a *part of*. A position that some may find impossible to entertain within the archival structure of the library itself is that the cosmos knows itself through its expressions. The experimental framework of the project as art research allows us to try-out, with conviction, Deleuze and Guattari's⁷ shift from communication to expressivity in processual meaning making,

*We—Gilles Deleuze and I—did our utmost, over hundreds of pages, to underline that we refuse the primacy of signifying semiology [la sémiologie signifiante], but considered the traits of matters of expression of other components significant: plastic, spatial or musical materials have their own lines of composition.*⁸

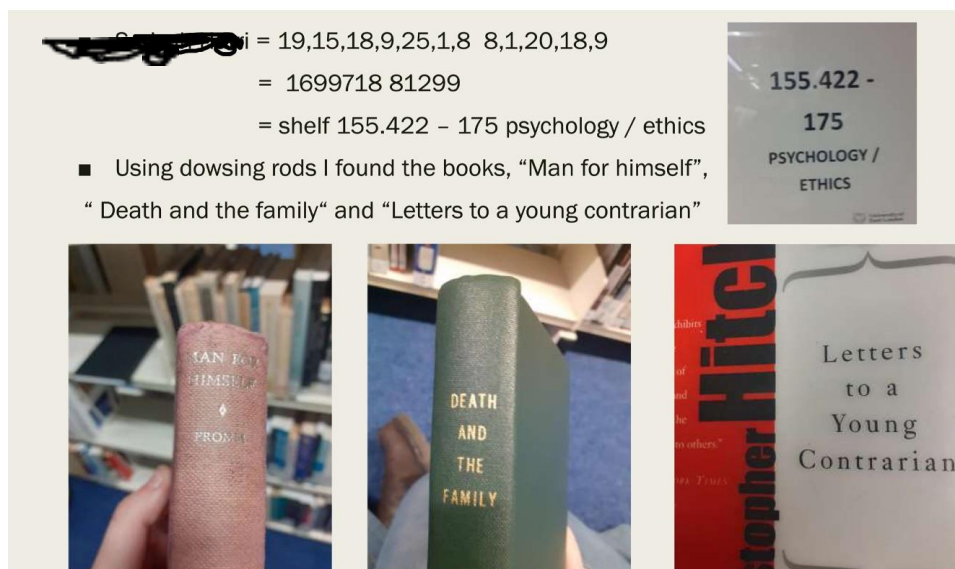


Figure 3. Student presentation of numerological process and books encountered in dowsing 2022

Matter for Expression

The project posits that a library is a ritual experience of temporal substance. Part of its matter for expression is an idea that libraries are potential subversion, asking that we forget knowing what we are looking for and venture into McLuhan's *forest of symbols*.⁹ In a digital age beyond the realm McLuhan was addressing, a process of numerological library dowsing for paper books seems anachronistic but it opens into the backwards causality of the lyric voice. In my experience song-writing works by folding temporal substance through embodied meaning rather than a linear causality of linguistic intention. The time-obsessed artist John Latham famously sent students of St Martins to the library to chew pages of Greenberg's revered book *Art and Culture* and place vestiges in glass phials – at UEL students dowse for numerological encounters with precognitive understanding. This act contains an absurd humour when seen from the realm of classical epistemology but in what Affect theorist Greg Seigworth,¹⁰ referred to as my *derangements*, is a desire to facilitate a feeling of being a part of research as an encounter with meaning. The humour of the project's process of disrupting

gridded thought habits via extra-sensory perception, cannot be denied but as Claire Colebrook suggests in Deleuze and Irony,

humour is not always the reversal of cause and effect but the abandonment of the ‘before and after’ relations—the very line of time—that allow us to think in terms of causes and intentions, of grounds and consequents.¹¹

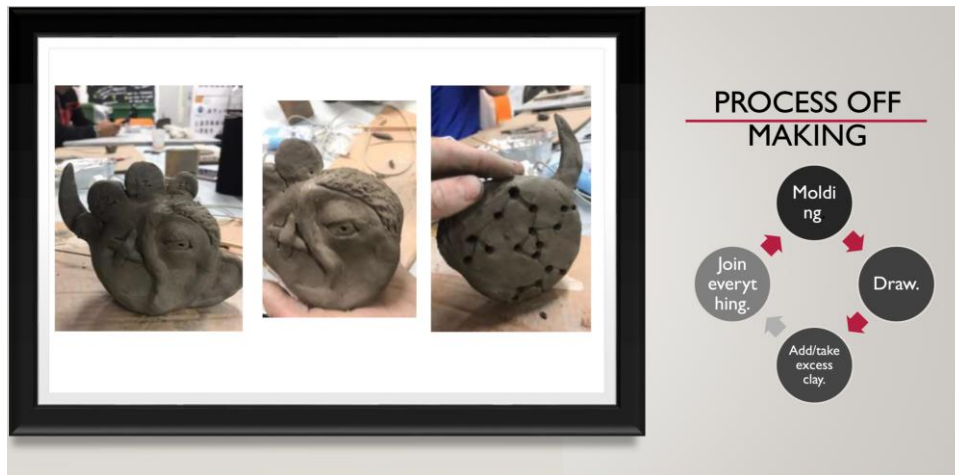


Figure 4. Student presentation of clay effigy making process 2017

INCLUDING EXCESS

Since the introducing of the project to the Art and Design Foundation at UEL, student presentations have made me aware of how the process allows the expression of ideas in excess of research in a secular institution, allowing students to express something being left out. This left out-ness or excess is the percepts and affect of felt understanding. Personal subjective experience is not always a good fit with the universalising forces of information delivery. Perhaps the unacknowledged ritual of the university lecture room, with its acrylic carpets and veneer desks, can allow us to securely encounter collective learning inside the project’s ritual space. Sometimes this approach creates unexpectedly resonant experiences. In a break from Lockdown my extended family gathered in a hospital to guide my father in his passing after a short and tragic battle with interstitial lung disease. That same week during the Dewey Decimal Dowsing presentations, a student whose painful shyness gave me concern for their ability to feel *part of*, spoke confidently to the group about The Puritan Way of Death by Davide Stannard. I took profound comfort not only in the student’s growth in confidence through an emancipated learning but also the relevance of his research to my life as he explained,

The dying institution changed drastically, where the process leaves with feelings of loneliness, irrelevance and absence of awareness, the dying process is more non-social, often avoided by family and friends.¹²

The student has not become a theorist but their sense of personal agency strengthened and they continue to use ambitious 3d making in their illustration practice. I remain skeptical about the relationship between these moving synchronicities and what might be my cognitive bias discounting numerous examples when students present prosaic results. As a professional lecturer, I value the stability of structure and yet creative agency needs a personal experience in order to emerge. The staple of academic critical theory, Walter Benjamin, called for a philosophy that includes the reading of coffee grounds, which is not far from William Blake’s powerful sense that creative potential needs a way of allowing otherness to find its way in,

*If it were not for the Poetic or Prophetic character the Philosophic & Experimental would soon be at the ratio of all things, & stand still unable to do other than repeat the same dull round over again.*¹³

Like the universe of William Blake’s practice, the sheer volume of student research and the ideas it opens onto would take a life time to unpack. It remains beyond my powers of systematic analysis and in order to express how the process functions via honouring derangements, I shall continue with a narrative detour:

DETOUR:

Driving an aqua-blue Skoda Fabia to university, he feels a need for the security of academic frameworks based on pre-given goals of imparting concepts. This year, he tells himself, there need not be synchronicities, only a practical exercise in intuitive research and an acquaintance with the idea of experience as learning. Driving past the undulating hills of the country’s largest landfill, fooling the eye into a sense of bucolic serenity, he hopes that he is not late. Arriving on time he will later leap in surprise as there on the screen, in two student presentations, is Process Realty and the face of Alfred North Whitehead. This book has helped maintain what he fears is a fanaticism for an *Aesthetic Ontology*,¹⁴ or a cosmos with feeling as its most fundamental characteristic. He would not have brought this book into the foundation studio because it is baffling even to many doctoral students despite it exploring a simple of thing – the felt understanding of the percipient perceiving the region with themselves as part of it. After acknowledging the intensity of his surprise, he will take his cue to explain how Whitehead wrote this book because a model of the cosmos based on logic, Principia Mathematica, had omitted the contingent experience of *things*.

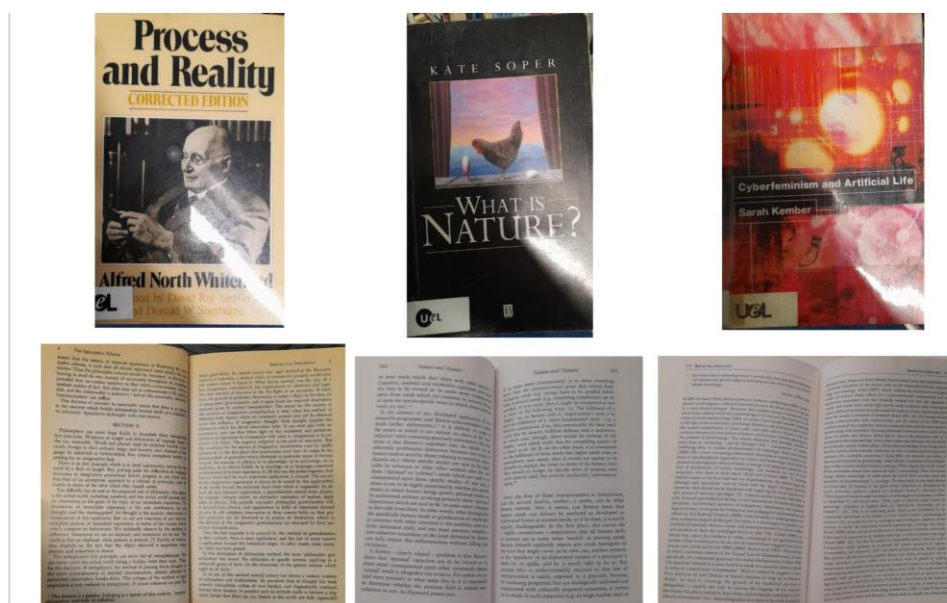


Figure 4. Student presentation of books encountered in dowsing ritual 2022

The *projectecy*, as he secretly calls academic divining, has always sought to bring the familiarity of structural documentation to the freeform encounters suggested by the ritual methodology. Quite early in its emergence a particularly self-motivated student reduced the research into an aphoristic distillation of three words. In his desire to give the next year’s students a strong example of how to approach the project or in other words demonstrate that it had validity from previous iterations, he shared the student’s presentation called The Brazilian Lemonade Script. When the projectecy is adhered to with a systematic neutrality the emergence of potential new insights presents itself and he,

just as he hopes the students will, must have the patience to value how these resonances can vibrate through a continuum of learning to learn. Looking back at the Brazilian Lemonade Script the previous evening, he finds that the three books discovered through the numerological dowsing ritual, related to Latin American literature and he is struck by the concern with bringing the lyric voice into research or meaning making. Had he in his desire to create a target learning process trusted simplicity too much? Indeed, he thinks Whitehead himself pithily remarked “seek simplicity but do not trust it”. The aesthetic lure of the title, Brazilian Lemonade Script, alone had convinced him that this simple synthesis of three words would help other students access the felt intensities of an intuitive or extra-embodied and performative passage through the library. Thanks to the digital archival structures of academia, he was able to return to the document and there he found that the word Lemonade (a word so redolent of an innocent and direct pleasure) is taken from a book about Helene Cixous and makes specific reference to her *Ecriture Feminine*. There is a pleasurable irony that the word *Script* derives from the next book *Heretical Empiricism* concerning Pier Paolo Pasolini’s semiotics of cinema. How could he have missed the personal resonance of the South American voice to a female student of South American heritage, seeking her own means of expression? Cixous’s concerns chime with those of Blake, deeply concerned with liberating the feminine aspect in *Ololon*. This requires that we acknowledge the relational feeling of experience as part of meaning itself rather than insisting that knowledge can be conveniently extracted and distributed out of context. Finding himself drawn in by the opening in learning before him on the University laptop, Cixous’s *Ecriture Feminine* speaks of all his hopes for the trance ritual encounter of the projectecy,

*Believed to originate from the mother in the stage of the mother-child relation before the child acquires the male-centred verbal language, this pre-linguistic and unconscious potentiality manifests itself in those literary texts which, abolishing all repressions, undermine and subvert all significations, the logic and the closure of the phallogentric language, and opens into a joyous freeplay of meanings.*¹⁵

BRAZILIAN LEMONADE SCRIPT.



Figure 5. The Brazilian Lemonade Script student research, clay effigy 2014

Stuck in traffic as the A13 passes Eastbury Manor, he thinks how a demand to grade and quantify within a grided interface might have acted as an enteric coating preventing the knowledge from dissolving in his gut so that he feels its intensities now, over five years later. Edging towards the exit, he considers how the slow movement of learning through a personal and experiential coming to

understand is something that he, as an academic, feels as a of longing or even potential madness as was the case of Pirsig's Phaedrus. The students delivering their findings often seem somehow newly wise to him and the entanglement of learning akin to ideas proposed by Rancière, whereby the learner is emancipated from the enforced stultification of an explicator who,

*having thrown a veil of ignorance over everything that is to be learned, appoints himself to the task of lifting it. Only by concealing knowledge from the student is the explicator able to teach it.*¹⁶

Considering his possibly misguided choice to deliver the paper in a dislocated fictional voice he considers how Rancière himself wrote the Ignorant School Master as a story, a methodology Kristen Ross explains the very act of storytelling is, “an act that presumes in its interlocutor an equality of intelligence rather than an inequality of knowledge, posits equality, just as the act of explication posits inequality”¹⁷

The senior lecturer must arrive on time. Dual delivery is receding in the rear-view mirror and having experienced the intensity of the virtual learning experience, he briefly ponders the irony of how emphasis on making objects endangered the processual understanding because students, coming from school were inclined to focus on designing a cohesive outcome? His intention had been to illicit something from the clay that they themselves needed to encounter with other learners in order to experience a collective sense of understanding. The use of processual making as part of research had been given momentum by his reading of Making is Connecting¹⁸ by David Gauntlet but often students would make objects of a pre-given symbolic value. Over time he has taken the position that symbolic and nature are woven together in the experience of the nonbifurcated¹⁹ ritual process. His concern that an overtly symbolic making can occlude transformative learning is tempered by Whitehead's reconciliation of symbol and experience,

*We all know Aesop's fable of the dog who dropped a piece of meat to grasp at its reflection in the water. We must not, however, judge too severely of error. In the initial stages of mental progress, error in symbolic reference is the discipline which promotes imaginative freedom. Aesop's dog lost his meat, but he gained a step on the road towards a free imagination.*²⁰

The challenge, he thinks, is to somehow allow the delivery of the projectecy to flex and adapt to the specific event of the region students find themselves in and to retain the sense of emergence that drove its inception. This was a desire to create a framework or more accurately a ritual that opens the library into a space for an intuitive experiential encounter. As adult artist-researchers we embody the pleasure of expressing in order to create a machine for collective understanding by rediscovering a tool kit we had perhaps forgotten we had access to. Does it matter that so many of the students' discoveries interweave with the aims of the projectecy to make precognitive awareness a part of collective learning? He should perhaps not be surprised at all that precognitive intuition is demonstrably a real thing. He had always been keen to make feeling a fundamental characteristic of the experiment and yet resist a convenient shorthand of synchronicity and coincidence because this might maintain the idea that the radical experience of the extra-textual is a supernatural phenomenon and not, as Aldous Huxley explained in a recorded interview, entirely natural.

CONCLUSION

Considering research as *trance-ritual*, even for a self-contained project is becoming a harder sell. The senior lecturer may have abandoned seeking a performative mode of understanding in an academic experience, were it not for their recent encounter with the ideas of Karen Barad. She posits an ethico-onto-epistemology, placing understanding back inside a lived experience and this is how he has once again found congruence in the process of facilitating a specific personal encounter inside the event of research. After all this, coincidentally, is exactly what John Dewey, the principal champion of the

radical experience, sought to bring to collective learning. Even Dewey's framing of the speculative methodology as something temporary chimes with the experimental and contingent nature of the projectecy's aims to enfold the digressionary and accidental parts of ordinary life into research. The senior lecturer often reminds students of the speculative nature of their endeavours in order to open up an enclosed nomadic freedom. What strikes him clearly as he turns into the University carpark (he must renew his permit) is the safety of experimenting within a contained, temporary ceremonial realm. Much later, when he gathers his thoughts in a report of the projectecy and being *part of*, he will quote John Dewey, a theorist he only vaguely knew at the time of designing the procedure of numerological library dowsing,

*If one is willing to grant this position, even if only by way of temporary experiment, he will see that there follows a conclusion at first sight surprising. In order to understand the meaning of artistic products, we have to forget them for a time, to turn aside from them and have recourse to the ordinary forces and conditions of experience that we do not usually regard as aesthetic. We must arrive at the theory of art by means of a detour.*²¹

NOTES

- ¹ Alfred North Whitehead, *Adventures in Ideas* (1948).
- ² "The percipient may be an occasion within the region and may yet grasp the region as one including the percipient itself as a member, of it."
- ³ Catherine Malabou, "Jane Bennett. Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things. Durham: Duke University Press, 2010." (2012)
- ⁴ Karen Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway*. Duke University Press 2007
- ⁵ Barad, p.185
- ⁶ Guy Hudson, "How to Dowse for Water (Woodlands TV 2014)". Accessed online: <https://youtu.be/042N05bmlL4>
- ⁷ Eric Alliez, and Andrew Goffey, eds. *The Guattari Effect*. Continuum, 2011
- ⁸ Eric Alliez et al., p.47
- ⁹ Marshall McLuhan, "Media Cold and Hot." *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man*, Routledge (2001)
- ¹⁰ Melissa Gregg, Gregory J. Seigworth eds, *The Affect Theory Reader*. Duke University Press 2010
- ¹¹ Claire Colebrook. "Introduction: Deleuze and history." *Deleuze and History* (2009): 24.
- ¹² David E Stannard. *The Puritan Way of Death, A Study in Religion, Culture and Social Change*, Galaxy 1979, p.87
- ¹³ John Sampson. Ed, *The Poetical Works of William Blake*, Oxford University Press 1925, p.94
- ¹⁴ Alfred North Whitehead. *Process and Reality*, Free Press 1979
- ¹⁵ Susan Sellers, Ed, *The Hélène Cixous Reader*, Routledge, 1994, p. 108.
- ¹⁶ Jacques Rancière, *The Ignorant Schoolmaster: Five Lessons in Intellectual Emancipation*, Stanford University, 1991, p.48
- ¹⁷ Kristin Ross, *Phil Watts, Reader of Rancière!* Romanic Review, 2014, p. 27.
- ¹⁸ David Gauntlet, *Making is Connecting, the Social Meaning of Making*. Polity Books, 2011.
- ¹⁹ Alfred North Whitehead. *Symbolism: Its Meaning and Effect*, Fordham University Press 1985.
- ²⁰ Alfred North Whitehead, p. 47.
- ²¹ Dewey, John. *The Later Works of John Dewey, 1925 - 1953: Art as Experience*, Southern Illinois University, 2010, p. 134.

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