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RHYTHM 'N' DEWEY: AN ADVERBIALIST ONTOLOGY OF ART

Abstract

The aim of this paper is to present a process-based ontology of art following John Dewey's concepts of experience and rhythm. I will adopt a pragmatist and embodied point of view within an adverbialist framework. I will defend the idea of an artistic way of experiencing – a subtype of aesthetic experience – as something which allows us to assign the ontological category of art to an object or event. The adverbial features of this artistic way of experiencing will be characterized as being rhythmic in nature. This goal will be achieved in three steps. First, I will explain and elaborate on the concept of adverbialism. Second, the importance of rhythm in experience will be taken into account through a close reading of Dewey's philosophy and by incorporating the nuances of the Pre-Socratic idea of *rhythmos*, as well as some recent findings about brain and bodily oscillations from cognitive science. Third, to conclude I will propose four necessary but not sufficient features of the rhythmic engagement enacted while an artistic way of experiencing takes place: a necessary degree of object or event awareness, a positive feedback dynamic, a loosening of the sense of agency, and being attentionally demanding.

Countless potential questions stem from the field of the ontology of art; however, one central question remains to be: what type of entities are works of art? When dealing with this long-debated issue, depending on the methodologies and theories favored, the emphasis will be directed mainly toward object, agent or the in-between. In the present essay, my focus is on the experience, following the cue of John Dewey's philosophy. In other words, I will contend that what gives an object or event its ontological nature as artwork is a particular way of experiencing. I intend to draw upon Dewey's insights, in order to cast new light on old questions. The chance of exploring new ontologies of art is an unmissable opportunity to extend Dewey's intuitions, and to apply them to current philosophical and cognitive science theories.

The framework of the following paper will be pragmatist and strongly embodied. By pragmatist, on the one hand, I mean a non-dualistic conception of art and its experience coherent with a continuity thesis, which implies a «continuity between the refined and intensified forms of experience that are works of art and the everyday events, doings, and sufferings that are universally recognized to constitute experience»;¹ on the other hand, this pragmatist approach entails that the experience of artworks will be always considered as a process of entangled doing and undergoing.² By strongly embodied I mean that I will be coherent with the idea of experiencing art as a cognitive process³ in which the extraneural body is of fundamental importance.

This paper relies on Dewey's concept of artwork as a particular type of experience⁴ afforded by an art product. For him, artworks are refined and intensified forms of experience, born «out of the interaction of organic and environmental conditions and energies»,⁵ in which they mutually «work together to bring about a substance that develops cumulatively and surely (but not too steadily) toward a fulfilling of impulsions and tensions».⁶ This working together, this consummative fulfillment of impulsions and tensions, according to Dewey, only takes place if experience presents the form on aesthetic rhythm.⁷ Thus, the type of

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Dewey 1980: 2.

² See the third chapter of *Art as Experience* (Dewey 1980).

³ We are referring here to the concept of cognition as understood from an enactive point of view, i.e. as a skillful time-extended non-representational set of activities that involve interactional sensorimotor loops between agent and environment. I am aware of the tensions arising from using at the same time an enactive concept of cognition and Dewey's idea of experience. According to Dewey, cognition is an internal and intermediate phase of experience, being just one among other stages of interaction between human organisms and their environment. Rather, from an enactivist point of view, cognition is the broader framework, and an experience would be a particular and temporary arrangement of one or more cognitive processes. For a more in depth-examination of this problematic topic see Dreon (2019).

⁴ It is essential when referring to Dewey, to establish the difference between experience and *an* experience. The former refers to the unstructured and disconnected kind of experience that occurs continuously, out of the inevitable interaction between an agent and his environment; the latter takes place «when the material experienced runs its course to fulfillment. Then and then only is it integrated within and demarcated in the general stream of experience from other experiences» (Dewey 1980: 36-37).

⁵ Dewey 1980: 67.

⁶ *Ibidem*: 168-169.

⁷ *Ibidem*: 169.

experience discussed – the artistic way of experiencing – springs from Dewey’s concept of artworks as necessarily enacting an aesthetic rhythm. It would be fair to ask why prefer the expression “artistic way of experiencing” to the much more frequent one of “aesthetic experience”. The answer is that I follow Dewey in maintaining that aesthetic experiences also occur in non-artistic settings. Nature, the urban landscape, everyday objects, and social practices or interactions have the potential to trigger aesthetic experiences as well. In other words, the perspective of this paper is that an artistic way of experiencing is always an aesthetic experience, but an aesthetic experience does not necessarily have to be an artistic way of experiencing. The two are not coextensive.

Up until now, the role of rhythm in Dewey’s philosophy has not received much attention.⁸ Particularly if we consider Dewey’s understanding of rhythm as «a universal scheme of existence, underlying all realization of order in change».⁹ I will draw, as well, on a renewed articulation of the pre-socratic concept of rhythm and some recent output on brain and body oscillations from cognitive science.

1. An artistic way of experiencing

In this paper, in keeping with a pragmatist point of view, I am assuming that the experience of something is prior to its conceptualization. This idea, with respect to the ontology of art, could be rephrased as follows: the ontological category of being an artwork is retroactively assigned to an object or an event, as a consequence of its having been previously capable of affording a particular kind of experience, namely, a subtype of aesthetic experience that I will refer to as an ‘artistic way of experiencing’. Therefore, there could be two processes leading someone to consider an entity as an artwork:

- (1) Having experienced it previously in an artistic way.
- (2) Assuming a pre-existent opinion that considers it able to afford an artistic way of experiencing.

Option (2) relies on the belief of another person having fulfilled premise (1). Although the potential mechanisms and consequences behind this process are no doubt interesting, they would lead us toward an altogether different discussion, which clearly exceeds the scope of this article, namely: a discussion of experiential features as a means to reach an ontology of art based on rhythm.

⁸ See Puolakka (2015) for a thorough and specific paper on Dewey’s rhythm and its relation to everyday aesthetics. The relation between John Dewey’s aesthetic thinking and the field of everyday aesthetics has been explored in depth, among others, by Thomas Leddy (2012) and Yuriko Saito (2007).

⁹ Dewey 1980: 156.

For this reason, I will focus on case (1), particularly on what I mean by ‘artistic way of experiencing’.

Dewey establishes experience at the very core of his philosophy of art. He goes as far as to suggest that «had not the term ‘pure’ been so often abused in philosophic literature, [...] we might say that esthetic experience is pure experience».¹⁰ He gives ontological prevalence to the process of ‘cooperation’ between the human being and art products, for he considers it as the event through which the work of art takes place.¹¹ His whole philosophical system is process-oriented; that is, according to Mark Johnson, «[Dewey] always regards experience and thinking as ongoing processes of organism-environment interaction. He never hypostatizes cognitive functions into discrete faculties and never turns dynamic cognitive processes into fixed structures».¹² This emphasis on cognitive processes as something evolving and dynamic lies at the root of Dewey’s adverbialism.¹³

Dewey defends and practices an adverbial conception of mental phenomena,¹⁴ since for him «the adverb “truly” is more fundamental than either the adjective, true, or the noun, truth. An adverb expresses a way, a mode of acting».¹⁵ I hypothesize that an artistic way of experiencing entails a particular sensorimotor engagement with the world, concurrent with certain adverbial modes of cognition. Therefore, I intend to pursue some symptoms¹⁶ of this artistic way of experiencing and characterize them through an adverbial ontology of art. An adverbial ontology thus has to focus on the process. It does not consider alleged properties of an object to be stable, but rather to be enacted features born out of an evolving time-extended interaction between environment and agent.

¹⁰ *Ibidem*: 285.

¹¹ «The *product* of art – temple, painting, statue, poem – is not the *work* of art. The work takes place when a human being cooperates with the product so that the outcome is an experience that is enjoyed because of its liberating and ordered properties» (*ibidem*: 222).

¹² Johnson 2017: 38.

¹³ Some adverbial theories on the epistemology of perception – see Ducasse (1942) and Sellars (1975) – envisage experiences as events in which the proper act of experiencing is qualitatively modified in a way expressed by an adverb. However, they take these events to be entirely mental processes, restricted to the brain. According to these adverbial theories of perception, we do not see something red and round; rather, we see ‘redly’ and ‘roundly’. That is, these theories establish a gap between object and experience, something diametrically opposed to Dewey’s adverbialism.

¹⁴ For a thorough analysis on the subject see Steiner (2017).

¹⁵ Dewey 2008: 169.

¹⁶ I resort to Goodman’s suggestive idea of the symptoms of the aesthetic, as that which “is neither necessary nor a sufficient condition for, but merely tends in conjunction with other such symptoms to be present in, aesthetic experience” (Goodman 1976:252).

Adverbialism requires accepting Dewey's main claim in *Art as Experience*:¹⁷ the continuity between the experiences of artworks and ordinary, everyday processes. The artistic way of experiencing at the same time presents a particular adverbial quality that arises *in* the experience and a degree of continuity with each everyday process. We should experience artworks as continuous and connected with our whole life, for the same reason that art products are made of the same materials as the tools and objects we use in our daily lives. Dewey's investigation on art and aesthetics does not set things apart but connects them. It encourages us to appreciate and discuss nuances, not to barricade ontological categories one from another. Dewey was aware of the implications of using adjectives and adverbs to qualify an activity denoted by a verb. He observed that we often resort to adjectives and adverbs in order to convey the specific quality of a particular interaction between the environment and ourselves.¹⁸ This suggests that we can think of verbs as that which denote what remains constant between different connected poles – that is, as undifferentiated actions – whereas adverbs portray the qualitative differences in the process – that is, as context-dependent ways of acting. An artistic way of experiencing, therefore, ought to be characterized by an adverbial quality denoting the particular organization of the activities that take place and evolve while engaging with what will be considered as an artwork.

One could question the benefits, even the possibility, of pursuing an ontology of art based on Dewey.¹⁹ However, I believe that his intention to outline an adverbialist ontology helps overcome all disadvantages. While we have to acknowledge adverbial characterizations as being potentially vague and unclear, I think they offer enough flexibility to potentially encompass things such as controversial experiences of artworks or the social consequences of art experience. If we assume just a qualitative difference between the artistic way of experiencing and everyday life, we must look for an adverbial characterization capable of reflecting the seamless nature of experience and, at the same time, of potentially accommodating further adverbial modifications to convey the nuances and differences between specific artworks.

I consider rhythmicity to be the feature of experience, at least partially, responsible of this adverbial flexibility. There are several reasons for this. First, I follow Dewey in considering rhythm «an operation through which material effects its own culmination in experience»²⁰ – that is, a feature common to every experience. Second, I also agree with Dewey that an aesthetic experience – and, consequently, an artistic way of experiencing – presents a qualitatively different

¹⁷ See Shusterman (1997) and Dreon (2013).

¹⁸ Dreon 2013: 80.

¹⁹ See Dreon (2013) and Carrol (2001).

²⁰ Dewey 1980: 153.

rhythm, namely, an aesthetic rhythm.²¹ Third, there is the ubiquitous presence of oscillatory activity in the brain, the body and nature, and all the empirical research suggesting the capacity for this oscillatory activity to self-organize and constrain cognition.²²

2. *What are we talking about when we talk about rhythm?*

The term rhythm comes from Greek *rhuthmos* [ῥυθμός], an abstract noun that, in turn, derives from *rhéō* [ῥέω], which means ‘to flow’. Émile Benveniste is the author of an influential work on the notion of rhythm²³ that highlights the mistake of taking it to primarily indicate a regular recurrence – e.g. the waves crashing on the shore. Benveniste refers to lyric poets such as Archilocus, tragedians like Aeschilus, writers in Ionian prose such as Herodotus, and atomist philosophers Leucippus and Democritus to conclude that *rhuthmos* was a term related to *skhêma* [σχῆμα]. While the latter implied a fixed ‘form’, realized and viewed in some way as an object, according to Benveniste, *rhuthmos* designates the form in the instant that it is assumed by what is moving, mobile and fluid, the form of that which does not have organic consistency; it fits the pattern of a fluid element, of a letter arbitrarily shaped, of a robe which one arranges at one’s will, of a particular state of character or mood. It is the form as improvised, momentary, changeable [...] We can now understand how ῥυθμός, meaning literally ‘the particular manner of flowing’, could have been the most proper term for describing ‘dispositions’ or ‘configurations’ without fixity or natural necessity and arising from an arrangement which is always subject to change.²⁴

Nowadays, rhythm is far more commonly understood to mean a repeated pattern. According to Benveniste’s analysis, this is a platonic inheritance. Plato associated rhythm, measure and number when speaking of dance and music. From then on, rhythm came to be used to speak of everything that can be broken into repeated intervals.

I would like to underline two aspects from Benveniste’s analysis of pre-socratic rhythm. First, rhythm’s radical spatiotemporal nature. Rhythm takes place in physical space, it is not an abstraction; on the other hand, any rhythm has

²¹ Dewey 1980: 169.

²² See Mather and Thayer (2018) for an example of the influence of heart rate variability in emotion regulation, Azzalini, Rebollo, Tallon-Baudry (2019) for a review of the rhythmic gating and modulation of visceral oscillations upon brain dynamics, Klimesch (2018) for a thorough a theory on the potential organization and reciprocal effects of brain and body oscillations, and Fries (2015) for a hypothesis regarding the role of neuronal oscillatory activity in relation to general cognition.

²³ See the chapter “The Notion of ‘Rhythm’ in its Linguistic Expression” in Benveniste (1971).

²⁴ Benveniste 1971: 285-286.

a temporary, dynamic and changeable existence. Rhythm, at least originally, was not a fixed temporal arrangement, but an evolving spatio-temporal form. Second, and even more importantly for the purposes of this paper, Benveniste defends that «the formation in -(ῥ)μῶς deserves attention for the special sense it confers upon ‘abstract’ words. It indicates, not the accomplishment of the notion, but the particular modality of its accomplishment as it is presented to the eyes».²⁵ Rhythm, therefore, denotes the way something without fixed consistency evolves in the phenomenal world. Rhythm is neither an objective property nor something belonging to the ideal. Rhythm, in this acceptance, is an event’s form, an adverbial feature of its flowing. It can refer to something achieved through a ‘doing’ – i.e. letter’s shape, robe’s arrangement – or to an emerging form in nature – i.e. the pattern of a fluid element; however, it always entails a transient and unstable modality of experience.

This notion of rhythm as a particular way of flowing has been largely ignored by many philosophical traditions,²⁶ and the meaning of rhythm as a temporal pattern remains deeply rooted. Nowadays, within aesthetics and philosophy of art, rhythm is still mainly regarded as a feature restricted to artistic manifestations that either present a temporal organization of events involving recurring patterns – e.g. music, poetry – or time extended action – e.g. dancing. Within the analytic tradition, rhythm is often considered to be a subject’s experience consequence of a mental projection onto a regular pattern.²⁷ One great example of this approach is Jason Gaiger’s recent paper on visual arts and rhythm. He declares himself open to regarding rhythm as a formal feature in visual arts, although he ultimately concludes that «the dynamic of pictorial viewing [...] seems to be inhospitable to rhythmic organization».²⁸ It is important to note that Gaiger conceives rhythm as a stable formal feature. According to him, for rhythm to exist in paintings, formal features such colors and shapes should be organized as communicable spatial patterns, analogously to the temporal patterns of sound in music.²⁹ This seems to be an idea of rhythm closer to the Greek notion of *skhêma* than to that of *rhuthmos*. While this could be considered a conceptual difference, the problem arises when Gaiger claims to be focusing his paper «on the viewer’s experience rather than analyzing immanent properties

²⁵Benveniste 1971: 285.

²⁶ The phenomenological tradition is one of the few that has developed an analysis of rhythm as a processual aspect of subjectivity, something of particular importance in the case of aesthetic experiences. See Levin, Roald and Funch (2019) for a study on the differences and points of agreement between Erwin Straus’, Edmund Husserl’s, and Henri Maldiney’s approach to rhythm and aesthetic experience.

²⁷ See Hamilton (2011) and Scruton (2017).

²⁸ Gaiger 2018: 383.

²⁹ Ibidem: 366.

of the work». I concur with Levin, Roald, and Funch, who argue that Gaiger does not properly speak of subjective visual experience, but of «objective visual behavior based on physiological measures (eye tracking)». ³⁰ Gaiger's argument is that, given the immobile nature of paintings and that the only movement afforded is that of saccadic movements, we do not gain anything from applying rhythm to visual arts. According to him, «[t]here are fascinating but still insufficiently explored connections here to the current interest in 'what rhythm *does*' – that is to say, the perceptual experience of rhythm and the way in which this manifests itself in embodied cognition and action». ³¹ This affirmation is nothing but true: we do not know all of what rhythm *does*; however, what Gaiger does not consider is the possibility that we already *are* within rhythm and, therefore, that every perception is necessarily rhythmic. A growing number of theories and studies suggest this to be the case. ³² As Levin, Roald, and Funch contend, following the phenomenological tradition, «rhythm can be considered a central phenomenon in aesthetic experience [...] [R]hythm as immanent to sensation is not a mode of visual knowing or recognition, it is a preconceptual mode or responsivity in the communication between the different senses encountering the world». ³³ If I am right, Gaiger considers rhythm to be a feature of an entity that, if present, is able to regulate the dynamics of its observation: he envisages rhythm as a constraint on our experience. ³⁴ This idea is not consistent with the deweyan perspective of rhythm as a constant feature of our engagement with the world, which is qualitatively different when an aesthetic experience occurs. While Gaiger is interested in a quantifiable aspect of rhythm, my focus is on Dewey's account of rhythm as formal aspect of experience.

John Dewey, in his philosophy of art, grants a position of privilege to rhythm; ³⁵ nonetheless, he is adamant not to identify rhythm with literal recurrence (what he calls the tick-tock theory); rather, he considers rhythm to be an «ordered variation of changes. When there is a uniformly even flow, with no variations of intensity or speed, there is no rhythm». ³⁶ I would argue that Dewey comes close to Benveniste's interpretation of *rhuthmos* when he offers some examples of

³⁰ Levin, Roald and Funch 2019: 284.

³¹ Gaiger 2018: 364.

³² See Fries (2015), Klimesch (2018), Fiebelkorn and Kastner (2018).

³³ Levin, Roald and Funch 2019: 291-292.

³⁴ I have argued that without the aid of extra-pictorial guidance works of graphic art do not provide sufficient resources for determining the temporal structure of pictorial experience. Sensitivity to spatial or configurational patterns, including those that link the parts of the painting together in a specific order, does not regulate the dynamic of pictorial viewing» (Gaiger 2018: 382-383).

³⁵ «The first characteristic of the enviroing world that makes possible the existence of artistic form is rhythm» (Dewey 1980: 153).

³⁶ Dewey 1980: 160.

natural rhythms: the ripples in a pond, a forked lightning, waving of branches in the wind or the changing shadows of clouds on a meadow.³⁷ For Dewey, what ties these rhythms together is their building up of energy through an internal tension that leads to its eventual release. With regard to rhythm and experience, he argues that «whenever each step forwards is at the same time a summing up and fulfillment of what precedes, and every consummation carries expectation tensely forward, there is rhythm in experience».³⁸ The bigger the tension a rhythmic event is able to endure without losing its structural cohesion, the more engaging it becomes and the more aesthetic it is.³⁹ Dewey is categorical about all arts partaking in this rhythmicity, which is nothing but a concentrated and intensified version of the one we find in nature:

[R]hythm is a universal scheme of existence, underlying all realization of order in change, it pervades all the arts, literary, musical, plastic and architectural, as well as the dance. [...] Underneath the rhythm of every art and of every work of art there lies, as a substratum in the depths of the subconsciousness, the basic pattern of the relations of the live creature to his environment.⁴⁰

Widespread physical phenomenon of entrainment can help us to understand this capacity of rhythms to affect other rhythms. Entrainment, first observed by Christian Huygens in 1666, is defined as the pervasive capacity of an oscillatory system to influence another oscillatory system so that their oscillation frequencies become dependent. While this effect was initially observed between pendulum clocks, it has been ubiquitously found both in physical and biological systems – including human beings.⁴¹ This suggests that entrainment is one of the ways through which rhythms propagate their effect. Rhythms, therefore, are not to be thought of as isolated entities, but as a continuum.⁴²

Following this train of thought and the aforementioned research on oscillatory activity and cognition, from both philosophical and scientific points of view, I hold cognition to be formally rhythmic in itself, i.e. able to rhythmically affect

³⁷ *Ibidem*: 161.

³⁸ *Ibidem*: 179.

³⁹ *Ibidem*: 170.

⁴⁰ *Ibidem*: 156.

⁴¹ In the last years, entrainment has been held responsible of communication between different subsystems within the body, between the body and the environment in social interaction, and of the engagement when attending to specific activities as listening to music, or looking at a dance performance. See Merker, Madison, Eckerdal (2009), Knoblich and Sebanz (2008), Nozaradan, Peretz, Mouraux (2012), Bachrach *et al.* (2015).

⁴² Dewey is incisive on this subject, for him «each rhythm, major or minor, interacts with all the others to engage different systems of organic energy» (Dewey 1980: 181).

and be affected by oscillatory activity from the environment through processes such as entrainment. To sum up, I defend a relational concept of rhythm as *an evolving pattern of oscillations able to entrain other oscillations*.⁴³ This concise definition is intended to remain faithful to aspects of the original notion of *rhuthmos*, as well as to Dewey's most representative ideas. At the same time, it is open enough to work as a general framework of experience upon which adverbial features of specific types of experience – such as the artistic way of experiencing – can be enacted. Rhythm, thus, is considered not a fixed property, but an emergent temporary alignment of oscillatory nature⁴⁴ – an alignment that, crucially, is born from the social and returns to it as well in an endless loop. Our experience of rhythms is conditioned by the social component of the environment. For instance, emotions and actions are known to converge in dyadic or group interactions. There are well-studied cases such as the dynamics of a choir, where respiratory and cardiac subsystems tend toward synchronization among the members and with vocalizing patterns and the hand movement of the conductor.⁴⁵ Another example is the joint rhythmicity enacted while performing coordinated tasks with another person.⁴⁶ These and other related phenomena speak of the importance of rhythm in interactions with other human beings and with the environment. The artistic way of experiencing would thus present a particular mode of rhythmicity afforded and constrained by the enactment of dynamic interactions between environment and the oscillatory activity of the agent(s).

The agent's oscillatory activity is nothing but the pervasive plethora of different brainwaves, respiration, cardiac and visceral activity, hormonal release or involuntary movements that, together, enact a general rhythm. We have long known that the body and the brain do have an oscillatory nature;

⁴³ By oscillation I mean a spatiotemporal variation between two or more states. Oscillations integrate themselves into a generic rhythm. An example of this would be the initial oscillation of a single note of a violin, which, in turn, becomes part of a chord, which interacts rhythmically with other notes played by the violin, and, subsequently, this violin, when playing with other instruments, creates an overall rhythm in a musical phrase. A rhythm can be composed of a single oscillation or a potentially infinite number of them. For analytical purposes, we could group these oscillations as sub-rhythms of a rhythmical phenomenon that is always capable of entrainment.

⁴⁴ This idea, in some aspects, can be traced back to Sonnenschein's definition of rhythm as «that property of a sequence of events which produces in the observer the impression of proportion between the durations of the events or groups of which the sequence is composed» (1925: 16). More recently, Cummins states: «Rhythm [...] is not a property of a signal. It cannot be found simply by looking at an acoustic wave, a visual stimulus, or a set of numbers. Rather, rhythm will be viewed as an affordance for movement, allowing the coordination of action with a stimulus» (2009: 16).

⁴⁵ See Muller *et al.* (2018).

⁴⁶ See Nalepka *et al.* (2019).

however, only now are we beginning to understand how different oscillations influence each other through different phenomena and how a rhythmic architecture might serve as the scaffolding of cognition.⁴⁷ According to the previous definition of rhythm, there will be always a rhythm enacted between body and brain oscillations. This rhythm will vary, depending on where and when we register it. All the components will, directly or indirectly, interact with one another within the brain and the body, as well as with the body and the brain. There are not isolated oscillations within us either. However, different oscillations will prevail in different moments and parts of the brain and the body, depending on various aspects. Some of them escape voluntary control,⁴⁸ but others, such as respiration frequency and volume,⁴⁹ can be controlled actively. Nonetheless, what interests me the most is the well-documented reciprocal effect between our rhythmic activity and the task one is involved in. On the one hand, the type of activity we are performing – visual, motor, acoustic, attention demanding, routine... – will enhance or diminish specific oscillations, subsequently affecting our rhythmicity; on the other hand, the sheer periodicity of our cognition affects how and what we perceive.⁵⁰ If we take account of the effect of the inputs that comes to us through our senses and through other physical processes, we arrive at a point where we can establish that we are rhythmically connected to our environment through many concurrent mechanisms.

One consequence of this is the fact that our rhythmicity never stays fixed. In fact, brain death – i.e. the cessation and irreversibility of all brain and brain-stem functions – is confirmed in clinical practice after at least two observations yielding 30 minutes of a stable lack of oscillating activity in the brain.⁵¹ But the rhythmical feature of life is not periodical either. Even when at rest, brain oscillations present short-lived transient bursts of activity.⁵² Our rhythm is far closer to the image of a pond where a myriad of different-sized stones, rocks and pebbles keep falling, generating a rhythmically unstable patterns of oscillations, than to a metronome. We do not fully understand the dynamics of rhythm in cognition, but we are able to recognize some rhythmic patterns as hints to

⁴⁷ Klimesch 2018.

⁴⁸ Attentional top down and bottom up processes, along with autonomous bodily processes are among the factors affecting brain-body rhythmicity. See Fries (2015) and Klimesch (2018).

⁴⁹ See Varga and Detlef (2017).

⁵⁰ It is known, for example, how the phase of certain oscillations – e.g. cardiac cycle, theta brain wave – affect our capacity for conscious detection. See Garfinkel *et al.* (2014).

⁵¹ Szurhaj *et al.* 2015.

⁵² Vidaurre *et al.* 2018.

certain specific activities; that is, certain transient changes in brain-body oscillations seem to indicate the prevalence of certain ways of perceiving and acting.⁵³

Rhythm, therefore, can be regarded as an adverbial feature of experience enacted through the engagement of environment and brain-body oscillations; nonetheless, rhythm is neither the cause nor the consequence of experiencing, rather, is the way it spatiotemporally evolves. And this evolving pattern of oscillations able to entrain and be entrained by other oscillations, can reach temporary levels of structuration that afford particular ways of experiencing, one of them being the artistic way of experiencing.

3. Adverbial rhythmicity of experiencing an artwork

Once we have established the potential advantages of an adverbial ontology of art and the appropriateness of considering rhythm as scaffolding cognition we must identify some rhythmic tendencies and characteristics of the artistic way of experiencing. First, if we follow Dewey, an art experience is to be understood as a particularly concentrated modality of experience. An experience that takes time, that evolves through the enactment of a progressive entanglement of environmental and agent rhythms; an accumulation or an intensification out of a less differentiated rhythmicity. As the experience intensifies around a growing rhythmic aggregate, the focus on the environment can become increasingly fixed on specific feature of the event or the object triggering the experience, but the agent's rhythmic counterpart can oscillate between many instances of sensorimotor reactions.

On the possibility of actually perceiving aspects of rhythmic variations in itself—e.g. modified respiration, heart frequency, wave-like feelings and thinking, rhythmic solicitations for movement—I remain neutral; however, I will contend that we become aware of some of the effects derived from reaching a rhythmic threshold. Indeed, I think that one of the main features of the artistic way of experiencing is the attainment of an organizational rhythmic threshold that affords a particular awareness of the experience. I do not identify this threshold with a particular response located in a specific part of the body or with a specific process, but I do not consider this threshold to be a metaphorical concept either. The growing cohesion between environment and agent resonates as an increasing mobilization of sensorimotor pathways, systems, and circuits through different self-organizing phenomena, including resonance or entrainment. Embodied rhythms move us from within to their way of flowing. Depending

⁵³ «Aesthetically pleasing interactions with visual artworks dynamically engage perceptual, reward and DMN networks, resulting in both transient and sustained changes in network activation» (Belfi *et al.* 2019: 593). On the rhythmic contrast between memory and orientation tasks, see Miller *et al.* (2018).

on the context, and according to the aforementioned definition, our enacted rhythm is necessarily receptive to environmental, brain, and body oscillations to varying degrees and with different consequences.

Nonetheless, even if we assume the possibility for different artistic mediums to reach us by appealing to different oscillating components, the question remains the same: what, if anything, qualitatively separates the artistic way of experiencing from the general way of experiencing? Below, I will go over some necessary but not sufficient features constitutive of an artistic way of experiencing.

- (1) In order for an experience to be considered as afforded by an artwork and, subsequently, to be able to grant the category of artwork to an element from the environment, this necessarily has to reach a level of presence on the subject's conscious experience. It has to be perceived in order for him to acknowledge it as relevant. In other words, a rhythmical enactment of an artistic way of experiencing requires, at least, one element from the environment engaged by cognition to be held as a general responsible for this particular experiencing. Maybe we cannot precisely identify what specific formal feature triggered the experience; nonetheless, we have to be able to relate the qualitatively unitary experience to an object or event. There is thus an awareness of our experience being mediated by an element from the environment.
- (2) Whether it ends in some kind of consummatory phase that gives the experience a sense of completion,⁵⁴ or whether it is truncated by an internal or external distraction, the rhythm of an artistic way of experiencing enacts a sense of development. For as long as it lasts, it presents a constant and growing rearrangement of brain and body mediated by the environment. The dynamic instability inherent to aesthetic rhythmicity does not allow one to reach an equilibrium point and remain there, for this would imply a disruption of the enacted rhythm. Nonetheless, I do not believe that this growing entrainment necessarily means a positive experience, or even a progressive understanding. The opposite may be the case as well. Some experiences of an artwork can provoke an increasing uneasiness, physical discomfort or negative emotions that may endure while the experience lasts. Nonetheless, in either case, the experience can be considered a positive feedback loop, a natural process in which the product of a reaction provokes an increase in the process that led to this result – something coherent with our definition of rhythm as a phenomenon always able to entrain other oscillations. The rhythm of an artistic way of experiencing presents a positive feedback dynamic.

⁵⁴ For an analysis on the consummatory experience on Dewey's aesthetics, that is «those experiences we can consciously appreciate for their completeness and capacity to enhance our lives», see Dreon (2013).

- (3) While an artistic way of experiencing takes place, our sense of agency is loosened or displaced. While it lasts, our rhythmicity is partially yoked by the object or event that triggered this experience. We are not aware of being completely free to decide what to do or what to think. Up to a point, we 'wander' within the experience. By this, I do not mean to suggest that it is a passive of experience; rather an experience, as suggested by Dewey, of concurrence of doing and undergoing. Both aspects are constitutive of this particular rhythmicity. The ideas, emotions or actions triggered are felt as being, at least partially, afforded by the artwork we are engaged with. The progressive rhythmic enactment of our experience affords us different and more or less inviting sensorimotor paths. This rhythm, therefore, is experienced as agency altering.
- (4) The rhythmic nature of an artistic way of experiencing provokes a growing sense of continuous coherence that tends to encompass everything. During artistic way of experiencing, our attention is rhythmically centered in the environment-agent engagement. Whatever comes to attention will either be subdued into the general experience or will disrupt it. It could be said that this experiencing is attentionally demanding and that does not allow cognitive parallel processing. While the experience lasts, everything will increasingly orbit around the enacted engagement.

Conclusion

The aim of this essay was to discuss certain aspects of the ontology of art in order to creatively explore the continuity between general experience and the experience of an artwork, connecting them through the rhythmic features of cognition. The main points presented in the paper are the following: (1) the possibility of anchoring an ontology of art in an adverbial approach to experience, (2) a suitable concept of rhythm to discuss embodied and pragmatist approaches to cognitive processes, and (3) a notion of the artistic way of experiencing as a subtype of aesthetic experience with a qualitatively different rhythmicity, characterized by a necessary degree of object or event awareness, a positive feedback dynamic, a loosening of the sense of agency, and by being attentionally demanding .

I realize that the arguments presented in this paper presuppose several assumptions – most notably, a pragmatist and embodied point of view. For this and other reasons, I do not intend to present my argument as a conclusive one, but only as a starting point. On the one hand, this paper intends to provide a framework for further exploring the role of rhythms and oscillations in human experience; on the other hand, I have sought to characterize art experience from a point or view coherent with John Dewey's ideas. Both rhythm and Dewey share the fate of having been philosophically belittled, and, nowadays, their tide seems to be rising again.

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