Where the World Is Not

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Individuals will always be the center and consummation of experience, but
what the individual actually *is* in his life experience depends upon the nature
and movement of associated life.

— John Dewey

“Independence” . . . middle-class blasphemy. We are all dependent on one an-
other, every soul of us on earth.

— George Bernard Shaw (*Pygmalion*, Act V)

**SPEAKING BROADLY,** to be “where the world is not” seems impos-
sible, though we might like to believe—on the political Right or Left—
that there is such a pure, functionless place. In this place, we would not
be connected too much, we might have no duty to others or to any cause
outside ourselves; we could judge art and all things objectively, thrive
autonomously, upholding, ad infinitum, aesthetic disinterestedness and
the romantic ideals of self-reliance and independence. Throughout this
book I have delved into the many implications of believing in or arguing
for the “where the world is not” view, showing that for decades, a heated
battle was waged over the preservation of this autonomous realm: argu-
ments flared about how it signals disinterest, refinement, truth, individu-
ality, and beauty, and how it influences and interacts with democratic
possibility. To be sure, the protection of the abstract realm as such is still
being debated; yet, to a great extent, pragmatism helped to establish
that far from there being a place where the world is not, everything and
everyone are always of the world; its politics, machinery, meanings, and
history cannot disappear, even for the sacred work of art. Yet where does
this leave us? As writers, artists, citizens? As a world community? Within
a world that we cannot escape? Yes, to some extent—but not wholly. This
kind of confined understanding would be too deterministic, too discour-
aging, and not really accurate. Even if we cannot “lift” ourselves up into
Willa Cather’s “clear firmament” because it does not exist, we are none-
theless able to engage in a reshaping of our world.

Without recuperating aesthetic disinterestedness, I would finally pro-
pose that there is a progressive role for abstraction—one that promotes
democratic engagement. After all, isn’t hope—as a form of utopianism—
about that which is above or beyond the world, but that which is pos-
sible? Hope, as pragmatism notes, is a necessary, practical imagining,
having everything to do with agency, politics, and social struggle. We
do not cede the capacity or will to imagine a different, better world just
because we think that detachment or disinterestedness is a fantasy. Nor
do we fail to see that utopian thought can be used for practical purposes
and does not necessarily deny the world. Anson Rabinach argues that at
best, utopian thinking “points beyond the given [world] while remaining
within it.”2 Our ideal world is something we can thus continue to imagine
with a democratic desire that outlasts and outperforms the concrete
world built around us, so that the world evolves to reflect this desire. We
can, as David Harvey has urged, vigorously take up the imagined pos-
sibility in hopeful action, jumping on Ellison’s raft, if you will, to chal-
lenge undemocratic realities. “There is a time and a place in the ceaseless
human endeavor to change the world,” Harvey writes, “when alternative
visions, no matter how fantastic, provide the grist for shaping powerful
political forces for change. I believe we are precisely at such a moment.”3
If, as Harvey advocates, we try to make the world something other than
what it is, something that serves the life-interests of all individuals and
the planet, we are engaging in the project of active hope, which is a prag-
matist project, a democratic project, and a humanly possible one at that. I
would sum up at this point by returning to William James, who pragmati-
cally admits “the presence of resisting facts in every actual experience,”
but who also insists, in a formulation steeped in democratic desire, that
“the world stands really malleable waiting to receive its final touches by
our hands.”4