

AESTHETIC EXPERIENCES OF OUR EVERYDAY LIFE

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Abstract

The everyday aesthetics represents a relatively new branch in the field of philosophy which brings into question the way some of our mundane habits, ordinary experiences and objects can be incorporated into the aesthetic area or can become a part of an aesthetic experience.

While Yuriko Saito, author of "Everyday Aesthetics", speaks about the Japanese tea ceremony as an aesthetic experience, while Paulina Rautio suggests hanging laundry as an aesthetic experience too.

This paper attempts to make a quick review of the controversies related to the above mentioned subject matter and to bring forward some criteria upon which some of our everyday ordinary experiences, events or even objects can or cannot be translated as aesthetic. On what level can the acknowledgment of an ordinary experience be perceived as aesthetic and, thus, lead to the improvement of the quality of our life, is another aspect presented in this paper.

Keywords: *everyday aesthetics, aesthetic experience, ordinary experience.*

1. Introduction

"(...) I began to think more carefully about the works' sensuous qualities like size, shape, colour, texture, sound, sometimes smell, and the arrangement of parts. After all, it is these sensuous qualities with which we interact and our daily basis that, along with the natural elements, make up the world in which we live."¹

The aesthetics of everyday life, a relatively recent new branch in the field of philosophy, has been approached from multiple perspectives; on the one hand, one of the main approaches regards the affinity degree that one has for art, which is seen as a criterion confirming or discrediting the aesthetic nature of an object/an experience; on the other hand, there is a latter approach which opposes the former one in the sense that it refuses to see art as a model of everyday life aesthetic objects and experiences; when concluding his article², Dan Eugen Rățiu suggests reconsidering everyday aesthetic as a practical philosophy - its "object is also practice, praxis, i.e. the human behaviour and the ways in which human beings organize their lives in common."³

Kevin Melchione - in *The Definition of Everyday Aesthetics* - states the importance of clarifying the concept of *everyday aesthetics*; since there is no definition, says this author, one cannot establish a criterion according to which an activity acquires aesthetic value and we doubt whether it has sense to talk about *everyday aesthetics* on its own terms. Thus, Melchione suggests a few defining features for the usually aesthetic object or for the aesthetic of everyday experience. In consequence, the key words that Melchione suggests are: *ongoing, common, activity*. The term *ongoing* refers to the aesthetic elements that are specific to everyday life activities and not to certain particular, episodic events; "everyday life is marked

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¹ Yuriko Saito, *Everyday Aesthetics*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007, p.8.

² Dan Eugen Rățiu, "Remapping the Realm of Aesthetics: On Recent Controversies about the Aesthetic and the Aesthetic Experience in Everyday Life", in *Proceedings of the European Society for Aesthetics*, vol. 4, 2012.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 408-409.

by an economy of effort, a minimum of planning, and the easy integration of the aesthetic into routines with amendments and variations along the way.”⁴ By *common* Melchione meant that an everyday activity lacks an exotic and esoteric nature, it is accessible and general (and not necessarily practised universally). In this respect, the author brings a counterexample, i.e. the ceremony of tea, which is not an aesthetical daily activity thanks to the fact that it is different from everyday patterns; however, this ceremony may illustrate the aesthetical dimension of mundane life since it makes participants in the ceremony appreciate and become aware of the implements used for this ritual, of the manner in which water is boiled or poured into the pot. When using the term *activity*, Melchione meant, in this context, that *everyday aesthetics* rather refers to the accomplishment of a thing and not to the output itself. What matters is the role of the object in everyday life and not its form or design. The example offered by the author is that of a window that looks out on a scenery; in the absence of a human being or if the shades are pulled down, the window no longer has an aesthetic value. “However, if the light, the view, and the bench beside it contribute to the aesthetic character of some daily moment, then we may speak of the window in terms of everyday aesthetics. It is the regular morning coffee, the acknowledgement of the evening sunset, or the mere raising of a blind after waking that imparts everyday aesthetic value to the window.”⁵ In other words, Melchione emphasises the manner in which we interact with an object, with an element included in our everyday life and the effect of this interaction, which may generate an aesthetic appreciation of a moment from everyday life.

2. Content

One of the possible ways of sharing a different perspective over an ordinary object, which we frequently use in our daily/current activities, could be approaching that object in a detached manner with regard to its usefulness. Yuriko Saito approaches this topic in her book “Everyday Aesthetics” in relation to the theory of Immanuel Kant, according to whom the appreciation of the free beauty of a useful object is more legitimate/sensible or purer than the appreciation of its beauty in relation to the usefulness that it has been designed for. Yuriko Saito considers that such a perspective is, however, “unusual, odd and artificially induced”⁶ for the experience we undergo in relation to the useful object combines its practical and aesthetic dimensions; moreover, according to Saito, we risk losing a part of the aesthetic dimension of the object “if we surgically remove its functional value”.⁷ Saito, similarly to Melchione, stresses the active dimension of life; besides the contemplating attitude that a person may have in relation to an object, Saito points out those aesthetic reactions which urge us to act and which may include – cleaning, discarding, shopping etc.

As we previously mentioned, one of the perspectives adopted by some theoreticians of Everyday Aesthetics (like Yuriko Saito) is to reject the idea that art is a pattern for establishing the aesthetic value of daily used objects or of mundane experiences. These theoreticians do not consider that the aesthetic status of artistic things is due to the degree of affinity which they have with art. “As long as art is conceived as something different from our daily affairs, even if it is meant to illuminate or emulate some aspects of our everyday life, art has already acquired a special status, not shared by our everyday life itself.”⁸ However, the ordinary, daily life, the domestic, routine are subjects that are frequently dealt with by contemporary art. The representation of daily life, of the ordinary, of repetitiveness, of

⁴ Kevin Melchione, “The Definition of Everyday Aesthetics”, in *Contemporary Aesthetics Journal*, 2013.

⁵ Kevin Melchione, “The Definition of Everyday Aesthetics”, *Contemporary Aesthetics Journal*, 2013.

⁶ Yuriko Saito, *Everyday Aesthetics*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007, p.38.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Yuriko Saito, *Everyday Aesthetics*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007, p.35.

insignificant facts may, in fact, reflect the essential for a person's nature or for a family or even for an entire community. "Although daily life starts by being individual, it is basically social because most people live within a community in which relationships between people are to be found in all social life activities (work, family, relaxation)."⁹ The article entitled "Structures of interior design" by Jean Baudrillard reveals instances of inter-dependence between modifications incurred at individual level or in the family / society, as well as the preference for a certain style adopted when decorating a space. "Things are bent / folded up, hidden and they appear only when they are necessary."¹⁰ These innovations do not represent the effect of a free experiment: to most people, mobility, flexibility and comfort are ways of adapting to a small dwelling space.¹¹

The essay entitled "Plastic" by Roland Barthes may be regarded as a real source of inspiration as to the significance it identifies and the approach it suggests in relation to the material used for producing objects; the material is regarded – thanks to its versatility – as being subject to an on-going transformation and, thus, as being "not exactly a thing" but rather "the track of a movement".¹² Another observation made by Barthes in this article refers to the relation between plastic and artificial materials. This reference may be used for understanding the social context in which the object is perceived: artificial materials "used to belong to a world interested in form simulation", "they were meant to cheaply imitate certain rare materials, such as diamonds, silk, feathers, furs, silver, all the sumptuous/luxurious brightness of the world".¹³

In her book – *Everyday Aesthetics: Prosaic, the Play of Culture and Social identities* – Katya Mandoki underlines the link existing between art and society, while comparing the manner in which the modifications incurred in the sphere of social life generate modification in other spheres, such as: art, according to the butterfly effect rule.¹⁴ In the same book, the author considers that the idealization of aesthetics (art above reality) is a position adopted by romantics, idealist and Marxist philosophy and that the distinction between life and art, art and society, aesthetics and everyday life pertains to the category of myths - *Art, however, no matter how elitist it may be, is and always has been a social product and is linked to society. (...) art and reality, like aesthetics and the everyday, are totally entwined, not thanks to the explicit will of the artist, but because there is nothing further, beneath or beyond reality.*¹⁵

Moreover, in her study "Everyday Aesthetics", Yuriko Saito upholds Paul Duncum's idea, according to which an artistic education based on everyday life experiences would be a useful one. Saito considers that the creation of personal identity and the perspective that a person has over the world are determined to a larger extent by aesthetic experiences of everyday life rather than the high art experiences.

I have finally chosen to enumerate a few artists who deal with the topic of the everyday object or the concept of ordinariness in their works. The usual object is, thus, transformed into an artistic object or into an object that becomes part of an artistic work.

⁹ Gabriela Farias, "Everyday Aesthetics in Contemporary Art", in *Rupkatha Journal on Interdisciplinary Studies in Humanities*, Vol. 3, No. 3, 2011, p. 440 (my translation); the original text is: „Deși viața cotidiană începe prin a fi individuală, este la bază socială deoarece cei mai mulți oameni trăiesc în interiorul unei comunități unde relațiile dintre oameni se desfășoară în toate aspectele sociale (muncă, familie, recreație).”

¹⁰ Jean Baudrillard, "Structures of interior design"(1968), in *The Everyday Life Reader*, Ben Highmore, 2002, p.310 (my translation); the original text is: „Lucrurile se rabatează/pliază, sunt ascunse, apar numai atunci când sunt necesare.”

¹¹ Ibidem.

¹² Roland Barthes, "Plastic" (1957), in *The Everyday Life Reader*, Ben Highmore, 2002, p. 306.

¹³ Roland Barthes, "Plastic" (1957), in *The Everyday Life Reader*, Ben Highmore, 2002, p.307 (my translation); the original text is: „aparțineau unei lumi a aparențelor”, „vizau reproducerea ieftină a unor materiale rare precum diamante, mătase, pene, blănuri, argint, toată strălucirea somptuoasă/luxurious a lumii.”

¹⁴ Katya Mandoki, *Everyday Aesthetics: Prosaics, the Play of Culture and Social identities*, Ashgate Publishing Limited, 2007, pp. 16-17.

¹⁵ Ibidem, p. 15.

Felix Gonzales – Torres uses in his photos objects from domestic life, which are re-contextualized. The photo of a bed that is not made is displayed on a hoarding. The bed as an expression of an intimate space, in which the sheets preserve the impressions left by a couple, whose former presence is self-understood, is placed into a completely different context, i.e. the public space.¹⁶

In his photographs, *Nigel Shafran* transforms objects and the forms he meets in everyday life into observations as to the manner in which we spend our lives through the unconscious way in which we order, place and arrange things that surround us.¹⁷

Manfred Willmann, in his project “Das Land”, depicts aspects characteristic of rural life as still nature, landscapes and portraits. His photos become a diary of that community without entering the sphere of ultimately subjective “intimate” photography.

A recurrent topic in *Wolfgang Tillmans'* photography is represented by washed clothes which are hung for drying or by hung clothes or by clothes that are cast negligently. Clothes preserve the body form of the person who wore them like the barked animal skin while also adding an intimate and sensual dimension to the image thanks to the self-understood meaning of stripping.

Jeff Wall discusses about the formal strictness that lies behind the transformation of useful objects into a subject which gains conceptual substances and visual intrigue.

An example from the area of photography in which ordinary daily situations are incorporated into the work of art is the one of the performance accomplished by Rirkrit Tiravanija in 1992, in a gallery from New York. In his performance he invites spectators to take part in a cooking session within the gallery.¹⁸

Artists who make use of functional daily objects in their works invest them with a different meaning and re-contextualize them; an older but famous example is the paper written by Marcel Duchamp „Fântâna” [The Well] (1959, Paris, Musée National d'Art Moderne, Centre Georges Pompidou)¹⁹. “The object exists on one’s own and the artist behaves as if he were on the beach walking, discovering conches or pebbles that are abraded by the sea waves and that he takes home and puts on the table regarding them as artistic objects that reveal an unexpected Beauty. This is the manner in which a rack used for drying bottles, a bike wheel, a bismuth crystal, a geometric body used for teaching, a glass that was bent by heat, a mannequin and even a urinal were *chosen* as sculptures. [...] Ever since they were identified and isolated, *labelled* and subjected to our examination, these objects have acquired an aesthetic significance as if they had been the creation of an author.”²⁰

Apart from Umberto Eco, who stresses the author’s option and authority, which he regards as key factors for the aesthetics that the object acquires, Yuriko Saito states that once artistic objects are separated from the conditions, origin and their usage, they start being surrounded by a wall and their general significance becomes obscure, a fact which is necessary in the aesthetic theory. Another idea presented in the work of M. Duchamp is that by converting mundane life into the new territory of artistic investigation, the idea of transcendental beauty has acquired a relative significance.²¹

¹⁶ Charlotte Cotton, *The Photograph as Contemporary Art*, 2004, Thames & Hudson world of art, p. 118.

¹⁷ Charlotte Cotton, *The Photograph as Contemporary Art*, 2004, Thames & Hudson world of art, p. 121.

¹⁸ Gabriela Farias, „Everyday Aesthetics in Contemporary Art”, *Rupkatha Journal on Interdisciplinary Studies in Humanities*, Vol. 3, No. 3, 2011, p. 441.

¹⁹ Umberto Eco, *Istoria Frumuseții*, Bucharest: Enciclopedia Rao Publishing House, 2006, p. 406.

²⁰ *Ibidem* (my translation); original text: “Obiectul există pe cont propriu, iar artistul se comportă ca unul care, plimbându-se pe plajă, descoperă cochilii sau pietre șlefuite de valul mării, pe care le aduce acasă și le pune pe o măsuță ca pe niște obiecte de artă ce își dezvăluie o neașteptată Frumusețe. În acest fel au fost *alese* ca sculpturi un stativ pentru scurgerea sticlelor, o roată de bicicletă, un cristal de bismut, un corp geometric de uz didactic, un pahar deformat de căldură, un manechin și chiar un pisoar. [...] Din clipa în care au fost identificate și izolate, *încadrate* și oferite examinării noastre, aceste obiecte se încarcă de o semnificație estetică, întocmai ca și cum ar fi fost prelucrate de mâna unui autor.”

²¹ Élisabeth Couturier, *L'art contemporain, mode d'emploi*, Filipacchi Publishing House: 2004, p. 28.

Finally, I am going to present a personal project that I created in 2012 and that was a video work entitled “Déjeuner du matin”, in whose accomplishment I had as a starting point the idea that objects may be perceived as the memory of a past action. The object bears the impression of the one that used it and cannot exist outside a subject that perceives and understand it as the object which has a specific function and shape. From this perspective I have made use of all the objects enumerated in Jacques Prevert’s poem “Déjeuner du matin” with a view to creating a “still nature” that represents the mark of a past action, as it was recorded by the poem. The coffee cup, the ash tray, the tea spoon and the sugar placed on the table in the front of a fixed framework suggest a subject that is self-understood. The passing of time is suggested by placing “still nature” into a garden; the movement of leaves, trees, insects and the on-going change of the light intensity become witnesses of time passage.

3. Conclusion

The present text does not aim at suggesting rigid, immutable criteria but it rather merely comes up with a set of perspectives whereby the usual objects or moments of mundane life could acquire an aesthetic value. Similarly, the present text underlines the role and influence which this new branch of philosophy might have in the interwoven spheres of society and art.

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