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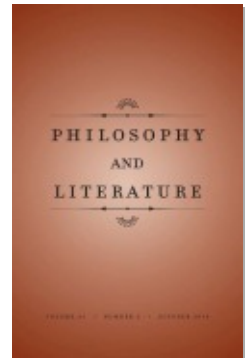
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Everyday Aesthetics

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EVERYDAY AESTHETICS

IT IS GENERALLY AGREED that aesthetic objects do not constitute a set of special objects, but rather are determined by our attitudes and experiences. A consequence of this view is that, as Jerome Stolnitz claims, “anything at all, whether sensed or perceived, whether it is the product of imagination or conceptual thought, can become the object of aesthetic attention.”¹ The same point is made by Paul Ziff, who contends that “anything that can be viewed is a fit object for aesthetic attention,” including “a gator basking in a mound of dried dung.”²

In light of this consensus, it is both curious and noteworthy that today’s aesthetics is mostly concerned with art. As Thomas Leddy observes, “although many aestheticians insist that aesthetic qualities are not limited to the arts, even *those* thinkers generally take the arts as the primary focus of their discussion.”³ Indeed, the subject matter of aesthetics is dominated by the definition of art, expression in art, artist’s intention, art and reality, art and ethics, as well as the issues specific to each artistic medium. As a result, the aesthetics of non-art is marginalized, attended to only when we discuss beauty and aesthetic experience.

But even discussions of non-art objects and activities often focus on their likeness to art, conflating art and aesthetics. For example, discussing the aesthetic in sport, one author questions whether “any sport can justifiably be regarded as an art form.”⁴ Another contrasts most artists who “do not equate art with cooking . . . nor . . . hold cooking in such high theoretical esteem” with “chefs through the centuries who have seen themselves as artists.”⁵

It is understandable that the aesthetics of non-art objects and activities are explained through comparison to art, simply because, for better or worse, aesthetics of art is our familiar frame of reference.

However, there is also a risk in such comparisons. Non-art objects tend to be regarded as “wannabe” art, which often turn out to fall short of those features characterizing art, such as formal coherence, expressive power, embodiment of an idea, and creativity and originality. Consequently, non-art objects are regarded, at best, as something “like art” or as second-rate art. I find this implicitly hierarchical procedure to be problematic. Particularly with respect to aesthetic matters, pursuing and celebrating diversity is more rewarding and constructive than limiting what counts as worthy aesthetic objects. Just as Paul Ziff reminds us about the different “aspections” required for various works of art,⁶ I believe that diversity of aesthetic objects in general requires diversity of analyses and approaches.

Ignoring the rich diversity of aesthetic objects impoverishes the scope of aesthetics in two respects. First, it represents a rather parochial viewpoint unique to modern Western aesthetic theories, which presupposes the institutionalized artworld and certain cultural and economic conditions.⁷ Second, it unduly limits the range of aesthetic issues by implying that only those related to art are worthwhile for theoretical analysis. I intend to address these limitations in what follows.

The first limitation is simply based upon observation. Most non-art objects and activities concern our everyday experiences of eating, clothing, dwelling, cleaning, and dealing with natural elements. Unlike the institutionalized artworld, these *are* shared universally. In a culture like ours with a distinct artworld, the experience of art is usually limited to special occasions set aside for that purpose, although not all of us have access to or knowledge of the artworld. In contrast, all of us engage in everyday activities and handle non-art objects. Arnold Berleant thus remarks: “the custom of selecting an art object and isolating it from its surroundings . . . has been . . . most pronounced since the eighteenth century, with its aesthetic of disinterestedness. Yet it is at variance with the ubiquity of the aesthetic recognized at other times in the West and commonly in non-Western cultures.”⁸ Other writers also point out that Balinese and Inuit culture lack the Western notions of art and artist because they embrace the aesthetic concerns in everything they do and make.⁹ Likewise, traditional Japanese culture aestheticizes everyday objects, phenomena, and activities, providing a fertile ground for examining those issues neglected by art-centered aesthetics.

In our experience of paradigmatic art, the ingredients of aesthetic experience are determined primarily by conventional agreement and by the artist’s control of the material. Painting, for example, is viewed

when standing straight, and confined to the visual elements of one side of the canvas circumscribed by the frame. Its smell of fresh paint and relationship to the surrounding wall paper or to the back of the canvas, no matter how intriguing, are intentionally bracketed. Similarly, experience of a symphony consists of sounds conforming to a score created by the musicians on stage. The outside traffic noise, the cough of the audience, the feel of air-conditioning breeze blowing on our face, and the texture of the seat, are again consciously ignored, though they are part of our experience. Despite controversies regarding what is and is not a part of a work of art, in general, an art object presents itself to us more or less with a determinate frame.

In contrast, the absence of equivalent conventions renders a non-art object “frameless,” making us a creator of its aesthetic object. As Ronald Hepburn points out, the aesthetic price we pay for the frameless character of non-art objects, such as the lack of unified design, can be compensated for by exercising our imagination and creativity in constituting the aesthetic object as we see fit.¹⁰ For example, the appreciation of a baseball game may include the noisy cheers of the fans, the hot sun beating down our necks, and the smell of hot dogs, in addition to the quasi-artistic elements such as the players’ body movements, the thrill of stiff competition, and the drama of the record-breaking home run. By the same token, New York City’s “sense of place” cannot be separated from the smell of burnt pretzels and chestnuts, the feel of vibration and steam coming from below, the chaotic honking of the cabs—though we *can* choose to ignore all of these and concentrate exclusively on its architecture. We also create non-art objects and experiences on a much smaller scale. In appreciating the smell and taste of green tea, I may incorporate the visual and tactile sensation of the tea bowl, as well as the sound of slurping.

Our everyday aesthetic experience does not come to us in a neatly packaged bundle, consisting exclusively of qualities we receive through the “higher senses” of vision and hearing as an uninvolved spectator.¹¹ We sit still and quiet during a classical concert or a theater performance, and we look at a painting or sculpture without touching, moving, or holding it. But what may be aesthetically most appropriate and rewarding when viewing a painting or listening to a symphony is neither suitable nor rewarding when we are engaged in everyday activities. Our current art- and spectator-centered aesthetics cannot adequately account for our equally important aesthetic experience of everyday objects and activities, which almost always engage us bodily.

In this respect, traditional Japanese culture offers rich examples of aesthetic experience facilitated by body and mind. They include refined sensibility regarding seasonal change and weather conditions felt by the body; the physical and spiritual discipline involved in martial arts; and “a sensual feeling of well-being, of harmony with one’s environment and with one’s self” when taking a Japanese bath, which “go(es) beyond efficiency and transcend(s) physical cleanliness.”¹²

Furthermore, although established as an artistic medium, the tea ceremony is an aesthetic experience of frameless character, which both encourages and challenges the participant to create an aesthetic experience out of many disparate elements. These include some pre-determined ingredients, such as the tea hut, utensils, flower arrangement, and snack, but other features are beyond anyone’s control, such as the weather, the sound of birds or of rain hitting the roof, and the spontaneous conversation between the host and guests. This art medium also requires the bodily activities of the participants—going through the tea garden, cleansing the hands and mouths, entering the tea hut, holding the tea bowl, drinking tea by slurping, and eating a snack.

Another feature unique to the tea ceremony suggests the second point of difference between Western paradigmatic art and everyday objects and activities. The aesthetics of the tea ceremony emphasize the singularity of each occasion, expressed by the term *ichigo ichie* (one chance, one meeting). That is, the object of aesthetic appreciation is impermanent, which is often characteristic of the objects of our everyday aesthetic experience. Food is literally gone in a few minutes, weather alters constantly, clothes are changed almost everyday, bodies age steadily (despite our desperate efforts to arrest the process), and the rooms are cleaned and straightened regularly. As Kevin Melchionne points out in his discussion of domestic aesthetics, “unlike paradigmatic art forms like painting or poetry, interiors do not just sit around after their completion unaltered for the centuries. They are lived in, worked in, and worked on and so they are also transformed, if only by being worn upon daily.”¹³ Indeed, there are very few objects in our everyday life that we “freeze” and “keep the way they are” as if they were works of art, except for items which *are* very much like domestic works of art, such as antique furniture, crystal vases, and expensive jewelry.

In contrast, art stays relatively permanent. Interpretations and evaluations may change with time, but the identity of the object itself is supposed to remain the same. So Beethoven’s fifth symphony stays constant, although its performance varies from time to time, conductor

to conductor. Physical objects such as paintings and sculptures age and weather, but in general we try our best to keep them in their “original” condition through climate-controlled preservation, conservation, and restoration.

I suspect that the obsession with permanence in art stems from the dominant Western metaphysical legacy, starting with Plato, which privileges permanence, stability, and being as salient characteristics of reality, over change, transience, impermanence, and becoming. However, the identification of reality with permanence is not accepted universally. Many non-Western traditions instead embrace the opposite view: that reality consists of constant flux, transience, movement, and impermanence. Buddhism and Taoism are prime examples of such a view.

Accordingly, transience and impermanence are specifically appreciated in some aesthetic traditions. Again, the Japanese aesthetic sensibility is perhaps most prominent in this respect. According to it, the beauty of something is cherished precisely because of its evanescence. Hence, the favorite symbols for beauty convey the transience of existence, such as falling cherry blossoms, mist, rain, snow and wind; autumn leaves and other materials especially signify the effects of aging. The change and impermanence of many of our everyday objects and activities, therefore, does not necessarily detract from their aesthetic value; they can instead heighten our awareness and enhance the experience.

Art objects also differ from everyday objects and activities in this respect: although they often serve utilitarian purposes, they are primarily created and appreciated for their aesthetic significance. But except for pure spectator sports and other forms of entertainment and amusement, most of our everyday objects and activities are created, used, or performed first and foremost for nonaesthetic purposes. We clean our kitchen and bathroom for hygiene, cook and eat food for nutrition, and select our clothes for protection and comfort. Utensils and furniture are created, used, and appreciated for their respective functional use.

At this point, those who advocate an art-based aesthetic theory may remind us that if we distance ourselves from everyday practical concerns, if we adopt a disinterested attitude, we can attend to the aesthetic values of everyday objects and activities. I have no doubt we can and sometimes do just that. I can, for example, contemplate on my knife as if it were a piece of sculpture. However, doing so would compromise its

aesthetic value by unduly limiting various sensory inputs which are all integrated into our everyday experience of this object. The aesthetic value of a knife consists not only of its visual qualities and its feel in my hand, determined by its surface texture, weight, and balance but, most importantly, by how smoothly and effortlessly I can cut an object with it. Or consider, likewise, the aesthetic experience of opening a Japanese package. The several steps involved in opening it thoroughly integrate the functional purpose of protecting and hiding its contents and the aesthetic allure of gradually exposing the object inside. Its aesthetic appeal can only be revealed by opening it.¹⁴

As these examples demonstrate, the aesthetic and the practical cannot be neatly separated. Thus, although it is true that various practical and utilitarian purposes are intimately bound up with our everyday experience, such integration does not necessarily detract from aesthetic value. I believe that it is misleading to recognize the aesthetic value of everyday objects and activities only insofar as they are momentarily isolated from their everyday context and treated as art objects created specifically and exclusively for aesthetic purposes.

Now, the primarily utilitarian purpose of everyday objects and activities has other implications. Because they are created or performed principally for practical purposes, they do not communicate or express a view, idea, worldview, or the like, as most artworks do. Despite persistent debates regarding artistic intentionality, there is no denying that an art object is a vehicle by which an artist tries to communicate or express a certain vision, view, attitude, or idea.

However, on a closer examination, we realize that some important communications and expressions do take place through everyday objects and activities. Indeed, it is remarkable how much our seemingly nonaesthetic daily concerns are dominated by the aesthetic dimension. For example, various rituals and ceremonies, such as weddings and funerals, express religious commitments, attitudes toward life, and human relationships through the choice of color scheme, music, costume, setting, organization of the ceremonies, and so on. Whether or not we find an emphasis on aesthetics in these rituals excessive and superficial, aesthetics nonetheless plays a crucial role in various cultural practices.

Consider also how often our moral judgment of a person relies on aesthetic concerns. Whether desirable or undesirable, wise or unwise, correct or incorrect, we do tend to make moral judgments on someone's character by evaluating his/her appearance. We make a judgment,

sometimes perhaps unwarranted and hasty, upon seeing a person with an unshaven face, disheveled hair, and soiled, tattered, and wrinkled clothes, particularly if we have reason to believe that he can afford to look otherwise, or if he shows up that way at a job interview. In a different context, however, we may judge him to be making a certain “statement” through his appearance. Don’t we likewise make an unfavorable judgment on a homeowner if her yard is unkempt and her house disorganized and messy? Or, sometimes our judgment of a person’s character depends not so much upon what she says or does but *the way in which* she acts, such as the tone of voice and the facial expression, and the manner in which she performs various physical tasks, such as opening and closing doors. True, the extent to which our assessment of a person relies upon the aesthetic surface is not as thorough as the way in which a person’s moral worth was judged *exclusively* by his/her aesthetic capacity and sensibility during the ancient Japanese court period.¹⁵ However, I find it quite remarkable how entrenched our practice is of assessing other people’s character, moral virtue, capability, and attitude through their aesthetic manifestations.

By the same token, a certain moral virtue can be conveyed through objects. Consider the way in which Japanese food is served, most of its design principle derived from the aesthetics of the tea ceremony. Its taste, texture, and arrangement embody both respect for nature by maximizing the ingredient’s native characteristics and of consideration by inviting the guest to have fun deciding the order of picking each item with chopsticks. Similarly, Japanese packaging pays respect to the indigenous qualities of the material and amuses the receiver by requiring several steps for opening it.

In interpreting art, we are careful to distinguish our judgment of the artwork from our judgment of the artist, although many aspects of the artist’s life are relevant and necessary for understanding the object. The kind of communication and expression I cited concerning everyday objects and activities, however, *are* taken as embodiment of personal character, and it would be unreasonable to require that we bracket our interest in the other person in our aesthetic experience of these things. In other words, everyday objects and activities provide another way in which the aesthetic surface acts as a vehicle of communication and expression, different from the way in which art functions as such a vehicle.

I want to conclude my discussion by calling attention to a special

urgency for exploring everyday aesthetics. The aesthetic sensibility we cultivate and the resultant judgments we make regarding everyday aesthetics and objects often have serious consequences that affect everybody's lives. One such consequence is their effect on the human body, as explored in the recently published *Beauty Matters*.¹⁶

Another consequence is the ecological impact of our *aesthetic* preference regarding nature and environment. Many scientists concerned about ecological issues often lament the fact that the general public tends to protect aspects of nature that are *aesthetically* appealing, such as pandas, whales, seals, and redwoods, but *not* cod, insects, prairies, and wetlands, which may be in more dire need of protection. At a recent landscape ecology conference, one group of landscape planners presented an empirical study which, to their surprise, indicated that the midwestern farmers' land use decision was primarily motivated by *aesthetic*, not economic or pragmatic, considerations.¹⁷ Finally, at another recent sustainable design symposium, a designer for major industries like Nike and Interface Carpet illustrated how the primary obstacle to the public acceptance of ecologically sustainable design is aesthetics.¹⁸ These examples indicate to me that our everyday aesthetic preferences and decisions have serious, far-reaching consequences and certainly deserve aestheticians' long-overdue attention.

RHODE ISLAND SCHOOL OF DESIGN

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2. Paul Ziff, "Anything Viewed," reprinted in *Oxford Readers: Aesthetics*, ed. Susan L. Feagin and Patrick Maynard (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), p. 29, 23.
3. Thomas Leddy, "Everyday Surface Aesthetic Qualities: 'Neat,' 'Messy,' 'Clean,' 'Dirty,'" *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 53 (1995): 259.
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12. Peter Grilli, *Pleasures of the Japanese Bath* (New York: Weatherhill, 1992), p. 22.
13. Melchionne, *op. cit.*, p. 199.
14. See my "The Japanese Aesthetics of Packaging," *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 57 (Spring, 1999): 257–65.
15. For the ancient Japanese court sensibility, the best original source is *The Pillow Book* by Sei Shonagon (965?–c. 1020), trans. Ivan Morris (Hammondsworth: Penguin Books, 1982). For secondary sources, see Ivan Morris's *The World of the Shining Prince: Court Life in Ancient Japan* (New York: Kodansha International, 1994); Donald Keene's "Feminine Sensibility in the Heian Era," in *Japanese Aesthetics and Culture*, ed. Nancy Hume (Albany: SUNY Press, 1995); and Barbara Sandriss's "On Elegance in Japan," in Higgins's *Aesthetics in Perspective*.
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18. The Rhode Island School of Design Colloquium on Ecology and Design, October 1999.