

# Aesthetics of Everyday Life



Aesthetics of Everyday Life:  
East and West

Edited by

Liu Yuedi and Curtis L. Carter

**CAMBRIDGE**  
**SCHOLARS**  

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**P U B L I S H I N G**

Aesthetics of Everyday Life: East and West  
Edited by Liu Yuedi and Curtis L. Carter

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# INTRODUCTION

LIU YUEDI AND CURTIS L. CARTER

As a recent trend of aesthetics worldwide, the aesthetics of everyday life rejects a narrow, art-centred methodology for aesthetics, and points to the continuities between aesthetic/artistic experience and everyday experience. Following this development, the subject matter of aesthetics and aesthetic engagements ceases to be merely about artworks or nature with a focus on a narrowly construed canonical set of aesthetic properties. The notion of aesthetic experience has also been expanded to accommodate a wider range of human experiences. Under the influences of the aesthetics of everyday life, aesthetic analysis has extended to all areas of living world, significantly broadening the range of studies in aesthetics. Given these developments, it is not difficult to see that the aesthetics of everyday life is beginning to prosper in both western and eastern aesthetics.

## **The Rise of Aesthetics of Everyday Life: West and East**

Since its inception, the aesthetics of everyday life has become a stream of thought with a global ambition. This interest has led to numerous systematic and in-depth works on this topic, some of which were conducted by the authors represented in this volume.<sup>1</sup> However, these developments still need to be sorted out and subjected to critical examination. This is one reason for the appearance of this anthology, focused on this new development of aesthetics, with essays by nine Western philosophers and another four from the East. In their discussion of the aesthetics of everyday life, these scholars offer concepts and theories necessary to the understanding of this approach to contemporary studies. The subtitle “West and East” signals an interest in the global scope of the

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<sup>1</sup> Andrew Light & Jonathan M. Smith eds., *The Aesthetics of Everyday Life* (Columbia University Press, 2005); Yuriko Saito, *Everyday Aesthetics* (Oxford University Press, 2007); Katya Mandolin, *Everyday Aesthetics: Prosaic, The Play of Culture and Social Identities* (Ashgate, 2007); Thomas Leddy, *The Extraordinary in the Ordinary: The Aesthetics of Everyday Life* (Broadview Press, 2012).

views to be considered here. A salient feature of this book is that it not only represents the recent developments of the aesthetics of everyday life in the West, but also highlights the interaction between scholars in the West and the East on this topic. Thus, the project is intended as a contribution toward mutual progress in the collaboration between Western and Eastern aesthetics. What distinguishes this book from other anthologies and monographs on this topic is that it attempts to reconstruct the aesthetics of everyday life through cultural dialogue between the West and the East, with a view to building a new form of aesthetics of everyday life, as seen from a global perspective.

In September 2012, an international conference on the “Aesthetics Towards Everyday Life: East and West” was held in China, the first ever-international conference on the subject matter. During the conference, over eighty scholars from across the world discussed a range of topics including “the relation between aesthetics and everyday life,” “the boundaries of art and life,” “Eastern wisdom and everyday life aesthetics,” “the relation of modern and contemporary arts to everyday life aesthetics,” “environmental aesthetics and new media and everyday life aesthetics.” The conference also provided opportunities for discussions on “urban life aesthetics” and the “contributions of Chinese history to everyday life aesthetics.” This book comprises a collection of the papers presented at the conference, with invited essays by four additional scholars whose work is important to the subject.

Unlike previous developments in aesthetics focused on the arts or on nature and contemporary environmental aesthetics, which mainly had their origins in the West followed by their introduction to aestheticians in the East, the aesthetics of everyday life appeared concurrently in both the West and the East. As a result, their common interest in this topic offers the basis for scholars in the West and East to proceed as equal partners in forging new territory for investigating the theoretical and practical dimensions of the aesthetics of everyday life.

Since Eastern aesthetics is traditionally concerned with the art of living, Eastern philosophers may prefer to use the term “living Aesthetics” or “Aesthetics of Living.”<sup>2</sup> “Everyday life” tends to designate only an aspect of human existence, while “the Art of Living” acknowledges the presence of the aesthetic throughout human experiences. This amounts to saying that there is a deep-rooted tradition of living aesthetics in the East.

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<sup>2</sup> Liu Yuedi, *Living Aesthetics: Critique of Modernity and Re-construction of Aesthetic Spirit* (Hefei: Anhui Education Press, 2005); Liu Yuedi, *Living Aesthetics and Art Experience: Aesthetic as Life, Art as Experience* (Nanjing: Nanjing Publishing House, 2007).

Whether it is Chinese literati art or folk art, Japanese chado or gardening, or Korean porcelain or folk painting, all are part of the artistic expression of living aesthetics. For that matter, aesthetic traditions as such in many cultures have been passed on, without discontinuity, since ancient times, and today these traditions have undergone a creative transformation with heightened attention to living aesthetics in everyday life experiences.

More importantly, Chinese Confucian/Taoist aesthetics and Indian Zen aesthetics, among others, are essential sources of living aesthetics in East Asian cultures. The same can be said of aestheticians from the East, who believe that Chinese, Japanese and Korean traditional aesthetics offer a “prototype” of living aesthetics. For example, it is important to note that, living aesthetics, or the idea of artful life, constitutes the fundamental paradigm of Chinese classical aesthetics, whose primary sources are Confucian aesthetics and Taoist aesthetics, with Zen aesthetics as a later addition. However, building on these roots of Chinese classical aesthetics since Lao Zi (circa 604-531 BC) and Confucius (551-497 BC), Chinese aesthetics has been on the path toward living aesthetics. Here, the point is that Chinese aesthetics is, at the outset, oriented towards everyday life, a most profound difference from European classical aesthetics.

Some Western scholars agree that the “art of living” centres on a “spiritual tradition” such as Zen, and in its construction has the human experience of the ordinary as its core.<sup>3</sup> Hence, the idea of “artful life” also exists in Western aesthetics, to a lesser degree, traceable to the aesthetics of Nietzsche, and finds expression in Foucault’s postmodern notion of “aestheticization of existence,” even it is a Socratic reflection from Plato to Foucault.<sup>4</sup> In his recently published *Life as Art: Aesthetics and the Creation of Self* (2012), Zachary Simpson defines “life as art” as follows:

[it] is the persistent attempt to actualize the aesthetic in and through one’s living, seeing and thinking. This means integrating the essence of the work of art into how one shapes the contours and dimensions of one’s being ... what emerges in the artful life, just like in all successful works of art, is an autonomous creation, which bears within it the traces of its production ...<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Crispin Sartwell, *The Art of Living: Aesthetics of the Ordinary in World Spiritual Tradition* (State University of New York, 1995), 1.

<sup>4</sup> Alexander Nehamas, *The Art of Living*, Berkley: University of California Press, 1998.

<sup>5</sup> Zachary Simpson, *Life as Art: Aesthetics and the Creation of Self* (New York: Lexington Books / Roman and Littlefield, 2012), 284. See also Bruce Fleming, *The*

Simpson's account of life as art carries aesthetics forward into everyday life aesthetics. However, his view assumes that aesthetics, as it functions in respect to art, remains the prototype for how aesthetics might relate to other aspects of everyday life.

## **Social Background: the Aestheticization of Everyday Life**

Why is the aesthetics of everyday life becoming popular today? The answer lies in part with recent developments in global society.<sup>6</sup> "The aesthetics of everyday life" has become a common concern for aestheticians across the world in that it represents a reaction to the profound worldwide changes in contemporary culture and art. In the context of globalization, there exists a two-way pan-aesthetic movement across the world, including a movement of "life as art" (drawing elements of everyday life into art) with an expansion of aesthetics into everyday life relatively. The corresponding element consists of a movement of "art as life" (dissolving art within everyday life), in which art loses its "aura" in Walter Benjamin's meaning and is identified with everyday life. This latter development also includes the efforts of contemporary artists to escape the confinement of the aesthetic and create works on the borders of art and non-art.

However, it is also noteworthy that in terms of its interior structure the aestheticization of everyday life is complex. It occurs on at least two levels: one is on the surface, and the other at depth. While the former refers to the superficial aesthetic transformation of material living, the latter goes deeper into the aesthetic experience of inner worlds. Respectively, these processes bring about exterior cultural change and alter individual features from consciousness to unconsciousness.

The expectation is that the aesthetics of everyday life will unseat two fundamental hypotheses of traditional aesthetics, namely: the concepts of "aesthetic disinterestedness" and the "autonomy of art," which represent core notions in classical aesthetics. Classical aesthetics in the European tradition had assumed that it was necessary to differentiate art and aesthetic experience from the everyday world of the senses. Hence, it was necessary to construct a theory of disinterested aesthetics to separate the aesthetic from ordinary life. With the possibility of a clear-cut dividing line between fine arts and popular arts, and the former being limited to

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*Aesthetic Sense of Life: A Philosophy of the Everyday* (University Press of America, 2007).

<sup>6</sup> Mike Featherstone, *Consumer Culture and Postmodernism* (London: Sage Publications, 1991), 65–72.

only a few select members of society, art and aesthetic were essentially separated from everyday life. In the contemporary Western and Eastern aesthetics, new conceptions that bring the aesthetics of everyday life to the forefront have challenged the hegemony of traditional aesthetics. A focus on discovering the aesthetics of everyday life replaces aesthetic disinterest, and there is no longer an insistence on sharp distinctions between art and the other, as found in everyday experience. Thus, continuity replaces isolation in these domains. At times, aesthetics in its contemporary forms takes on the character of anti-aesthetics, as with the followers of Marcel Duchamp. At the same time, the distinctions between high and low taste that relied upon separating art from ordinary experience are now questioned.

### **Philosophical Sources: Heidegger, Wittgenstein and Dewey**

Martin Heidegger, Ludwig Wittgenstein and John Dewey argue against the dichotomy between the subjective and the objective in western philosophy. In their discussions of aesthetics, these philosophers reflect an interest in its application to everyday life.

In his writings of the early 1920s, Heidegger advocated the idea of “*diefaktische Lebenserfahrung*” (“real living experience”). Later, this theme reappears in the concept of “*Dasein*” as in his *Being and Time*, published in 1927. Wittgenstein’s *Philosophical Investigations* contains the term “*Leben Form*,” where art is seen as a “form of life.” Again, Wittgenstein in his 1848 note refers to music as an expression of human life.<sup>7</sup> John Dewey’s aesthetics is also concerned with the connection between art and other life experiences. He aims to “restore 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.”<sup>8</sup> As Dewey uses the term experience in *Experience and Nature*, he allows for no sharp division of the subjective and the objective, or between action and substance, and as such there is no clear gap between art and everyday life in Dewey’s aesthetics. Experience, in its consummation in everyday life, becomes art.

Although Heidegger, Wittgenstein and Dewey have influenced the twentieth-century development of aesthetics, including analytic, continental, and pragmatic aesthetics, not all of which would necessarily

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<sup>7</sup> Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Culture and Value*, ed. Anthony Kenny (London: Blackwell, 1984), 80.

<sup>8</sup> John Dewey, *Art as Experience* (New York: The Berkley Publishing Group, 1934), 3.

support our concern with the aesthetics of everyday life, these philosophers' contributions to this newer development remain substantial. For example, all three philosophers reject the subject-object dichotomy in philosophy, thus clearing the way for considering everyday activities of persons as art.

Of course, they differ in their understanding of how this might occur. Heidegger distinguishes between authenticity and non-authenticity in art in his calling for a return to everyday life, and while Dewey seeks to find art in the stream of experience, the followers of Wittgenstein prefer to understand art in terms of social institutions, such as the art world. Apart from their differences, it seems that Heidegger's phenomenology, Wittgenstein's analytic philosophy and Dewey's pragmatism are in some respects sympathetic to everyday life aesthetics. Dewey's theory of consummate experience is especially useful for its relevance to everyday aesthetics, as his ideas are cited in recent research by aestheticians as offering a model for the idea of promoting "artful life."

Although Pragmatic aesthetics and the aesthetics of everyday life differ in some ways, they share certain common interests—pragmatic aesthetics advocates "Art as Experience," while the latter is concerned with "Experience as Art." The reversal of this phrase, though seemingly simple, underscores an important difference in direction. The idea of "Art as Experience" aims at restoring the continuity of art and everyday life, its focus being on how art is integrated into everyday experience. However, the idea of "Experience as Art" has its footing in experience, emphasizing that art is merely a part of human experience, and that human experience itself possesses "aesthetic" qualities. The latter points in the direction of building a new form of living aesthetics based on everyday life.

## **The Aesthetics of Everyday Life: Issues and Challenges**

Three prevailing trends can be found in international aesthetics today: aesthetics as a philosophy of art, natural aesthetics (i.e. Anglo-American environmental aesthetics), and aesthetics of everyday life. These trends suggest that art, environment and everyday life represent the major concerns for aesthetic investigation today.

Based on the analysis offered in this introduction and the research in the essays of this volume, it seems clear that the aesthetics of everyday life holds a promising future in both Western and Eastern aesthetics. Given the rapidly growing interest and its potential for attracting new audiences extending beyond the more narrowly focused traditions of twentieth-

century analytic and environmental aesthetics, it stands to command its own share of attention in the future of aesthetic studies.

As a new trend in aesthetics appearing concurrently in the West and the East in the last ten years, the aesthetics of everyday life points to a growing diversification among existing methodologies for pursuing aesthetics, alongside the shift from art-based aesthetics. The cultural diversity manifest in global aesthetics offers common ground for the collaborative efforts of aesthetics in both the West and the East.

Already, there are signs of productive outcomes from the collaboration of Western and Eastern scholarly traditions on the subject of everyday aesthetics. One area where this collaboration is especially beneficial is in finding ways to connect aesthetics with a wider range of life experiences. Aesthetics in the West is generally based on the notion that aesthetics relates almost entirely to art, or to an idealized nature. Moving aesthetics beyond the limited sphere of life (the arts) that traditional Western aesthetics addresses remains a challenge. It seems that aesthetics in the East is already more closely engaged with the concrete rhythms of life than aesthetics in the West. Hence, Western aesthetics can benefit from this tradition as it seeks to develop effective approaches to bringing aesthetics into the concrete realms of everyday life. Whereas aesthetics in the West tends to focus on the extraordinary, Eastern aesthetics already understands that the aesthetic may populate both the extraordinary and the ordinary forms of experience.

At present, the aesthetics of everyday life as a newly emergent approach to aesthetics may encounter skepticism among aestheticians accustomed to the rigors of analytic philosophers who prefer to discuss aesthetics at the level of abstract concepts and argument, and who tolerate the particulars of experience mainly as illustrations.

For example, it may be argued that the concept of the “aesthetics of everyday life” itself is too broad for meaningful philosophical discourse. It is true of course that “everyday life” does not have clear-cut borders, but this can hardly be a significant objection given the seemingly endless debate over the concept of art itself that has taken place in aesthetics since the mid-twentieth century. The parameters of the other main target in Western, environmental aesthetics are also subject for debate in contemporary circle of aesthetics. Even if “everyday life” further opens the reference field, this is not in itself a reason to dismiss the current efforts to pursue this investigation.

A related objection might be that everyday aesthetics renders problematic any efforts to identify or differentiate particular aesthetic qualities. Against this form of objection one need only recall the endless

arguments posed as to whether it is possible to identify a discrete category of aesthetic qualities. If there were agreement on a particular set of aesthetic properties, there would be no reason to assume that their application is limited to works of art or nature. Indeed many of the aesthetic properties identified in Western philosophy, such as beautiful, pleasurable, harmonious, attractive, elegant and graceful, all seem applicable as aesthetic properties to a wide range of everyday life experiences and objects.

Hence, there is no reason to abandon the pursuit of the aesthetics of everyday life in the face of such objections. On the contrary, there are many benefits to gain in bringing aesthetics to bear on a wider sphere of human life, made possible through efforts to show the relevance of aesthetics to a broader range of human actions.

### **Dialogue and Consensus: between East and West**

The essays in this book approach these questions from a variety of perspectives in Western and Eastern aesthetics.

Arnold Berleant discusses the dramatic broadening of the scope of aesthetic inquiry today as extending beyond the arts and natural beauty to include environmental aesthetics in recent decades, not only of the natural but also of the social. Along with environmental ethics, aesthetics has become part of the broader scope of environmental studies and the environment includes the social as well as the natural. Aesthetics has been applied to social relations and political uses, and now most recently to the objects and situations of everyday life. Berleant views the dramatic shift from classical aesthetics as formulated by Baumgarten's *Aesthetics* in 1750 as offering greater inclusiveness and also a fundamental alteration in aesthetic inquiry. This changes the nature of scholarly inquiry in aesthetics from an inquiry into aesthetics of objects to aesthetics of experience and sensibility.

Liu Yuedi traces the shift in contemporary aesthetics from its recent grounding in post-analytic philosophy, with an emphasis on examining aesthetics in the context of an art world, to a renewed interest in exploring everyday life aesthetics as seen from a Chinese perspective (he called it *Living Aesthetics*). In their embracing of the aesthetics of everyday life including environmental aesthetics, contemporary scholars find new interest in the impact of globalization and the "natural aesthetics" of particular environments, such as the search for a new understanding of being Chinese in the contemporary arts and culture as seen by Chinese and global aesthetics.

Thomas Leddy argues that understanding the relation of ethics to aesthetics is a necessary component for a theory of everyday aesthetics. With references to Aristotle's theory of happiness and Confucius's understanding of the conditions necessary to a well formed life, Leddy offers the thesis that "everyday aesthetics is important because our lives have a fundamental aesthetic dimension in so far as they are happy or not, and this dimension is one on which aesthetics overlaps with ethics."

His analysis divides contemporary theories of everyday aesthetics into two categories. The first (right) includes those (Alen Arvid Carlson, Parsons, Downey and others) who argue that aesthetics in everyday life should be treated similarly to how aesthetics is considered in reference to art. The (left) theorists (Leddy, Uriko Saito, Richard Shusterman, Arto Haapala and others) break down important distinctions between aesthetics in art and everyday life. Happiness in Leddy's theory extends to virtually all aspects of life including nature, bodily and social experiences, as well as the activities of the mind.

Allen Arvid Carlson finds a dilemma of everyday aesthetics originating in "an inherent tension between the traditional Western notion of aesthetic experience and the typical experience of everyday life." This tension opposes the traditional aesthetic experience as "abstracted and disinterested" against the "engaging and active" features of mundane ordinary experience. Carlson examines six strategies aimed at easing the tension between the aesthetic and the everyday, only one of which he finds plausible (a cognitive approach focusing on the "interesting details, complex workings, and subtle functionings" of everyday life).

Heinz Paetzold examines the relationship between aesthetics and ethics in the formation of human individuality and sociability by juxtaposing Michel Foucault's aesthetics of existence and Charles Taylor's ethics of authenticity. Paetzold argues that aesthetics, which focuses on the individual, helps to prevent them from being subordinated to the universal. Aesthetics discloses new perspectives on the world and stimulates us to experience the world in new ways. The experience provided by aesthetics thus draws attention to aspects of life ignored in everyday life.

According to Paetzold's understanding, Foucault posits an aesthetics of existence as a solution to the shortcomings of modern society. This new understanding of the contemporary world calls for an updated societal model replacing the Greek polis, and based on Foucault's contemporary aesthetics of existence. Foucault identifies the key elements of attention to the details of the world around us, viewing the world from different perspectives, and the acknowledgment of aesthetics as a form of knowledge. Individuals should thus dedicate their lives to the art of living,

which entails connecting aesthetic existence and the ethics of authenticity while overcoming the separation of art and everyday living.

Curtis L. Carter examines the aesthetics of everyday actions and objects as experienced through various stages in the evolution of art photography with examples from the beginning of the twentieth century to the present including “pure photography,” staged, altered, and appropriated photographs. With philosophical references grounded in the writings of Walter Benjamin and Roland Barthes, the essay traces changes in the understanding of everyday life aesthetics as seen from the eye of the camera. With the aid of the camera, photographers, from Edward Weston and Man Ray at the beginning of the twentieth century to Ed Ruscha and Jeff Walls at present, continue to show new possibilities for understanding aesthetics in human experience. Photography thus offers a window into the connections between aesthetics and everyday life.

Susan Feagin approaches the aesthetics of everyday life from the perspective of theatre arts where ordinary actions may constitute portions of a theatrical performance as well as appreciation of a theatre performance. Using Allan Kaprow’s “happenings” and Antonin Artaud’s theory of audience participation as examples, Feagin demonstrates how the actions of everyday life become the materials of theatre art. Emotional responses common in everyday life thus constitute both the materials of theatre and represent an important element in audience engagement.

Adile Jale Erzen finds the street objects of Istanbul as similar to those of avant-garde or *arte povera*, which she labels “found avant-garde.” Such objects from different areas of Turkey were not meant as art but nevertheless were produced with a sense of aesthetics that generates experiences close to the experiences afforded by the avant-garde art object. Her strategy in the search for aesthetics in everyday life is to transform street objects into art, or objects that generate aesthetic interest comparable to the experiences afforded by other recognized forms of art.

Stephen John Davies examines the origins of human adornment and ornamentation, such as jewellery, in reference to the aesthetics of everyday life. His analysis suggests that personal adornments are neither trivial nor meaningless with respect to their social functions. Davies explores the connections between the aesthetic character of such adornments and their functional purposes.

Mary Bittner Goldstein explores the transitions from Kantian aesthetics, in which the emphasis is on the aesthetic experiences of nature and art, and analytic aesthetics to the study of the aesthetic qualities found in everyday life. How, for example, does the aesthetic experience attained from attending to the formal and expressive qualities of a work of fine art

differ from the appreciation of the decoration of a living room or the agreeable aroma of freshly brewed coffee?

Yuriko Saito offers an account of everyday aesthetics with reference to traditional Japanese texts, in which the aesthetic, in both its positive and negative states, is found to be pervasive throughout all aspects of the everyday, including the quality of sounds, bodily movements and ritual ceremonies such as the tea ceremony, domestic chores, food, the work environment, responses to changes in seasons, and personal and social interactions. Awareness of the aesthetic in Japanese culture is grounded in a heightened sensibility, and Saito's essay contrasts the importance of the negative aesthetics found in Japanese aesthetics with its relative absence in Western aesthetics. Negative aesthetics is considered important because it participates in shaping our worlds as well as in forming individual experiences.

Pan Fan sets forth the everyday life of the traditional literati extending from the scholar's study to outdoor poetry gatherings. This view of the aesthetics in the everyday life of the Chinese traditional scholar is set in contrast to the aesthetic features of everyday life in contemporary China. The solution of transforming aesthetics in the direction of everyday aesthetics is to return to the broad perspective found in traditional Chinese classical aesthetics.

Wang Que's methodology for aesthetics embraces both art and all levels of everyday life, including the lives of every social class. His view dispenses with aesthetics as an independent system of modern knowledge or a certain aesthetic theory, replacing them with aesthetic explorations concerning the quality of worldly life. Body, desire, consumption and pleasure replace transcendental concerns in his view of everyday aesthetics.



# **PART I**

## **AESTHETICS AND EVERYDAY LIFE**

# CHAPTER ONE

## TRANSFORMATIONS IN ART AND AESTHETICS

ARNOLD BERLEANT

### **Introduction**

Recent decades have witnessed a dramatic broadening in the scope of aesthetic inquiry. No longer focused exclusively on the arts and natural beauty, the mainstream of aesthetics has entered a delta in which its flow has spread into many channels before entering the oceanic expanse that is Western civilization. Several decades ago, environmental aesthetics began to attract interest and has grown to be an important focus of present-day inquiry. Along with environmental ethics, it has become part of the broader range of environmental studies and the environmental movement in general. This expansion has continued, interpreting environment not only as natural but also as social. Aesthetics has been applied to social relations and political uses, and now, most recently, to the objects and situations of everyday life. The course of the arts has displayed a similar succession of changes over the past century and a half, increasingly rejecting traditional paradigms of representation and incorporating into their subject matter and practices the everyday world, along with active participation by their audience. It would seem that art has overstepped all boundaries—between art and non-art, between artist and perceiver, and between art and life. Some might say that it has lost its identity entirely.

Scholars committed to the study of the fine arts and traditional forms of natural beauty may consider this enlargement of the arts and extension of aesthetics a corruption of the traditional standards of those endeavours. This, of course, ignores the fact that, as an area of scholarship, aesthetics is of comparatively recent origin, only beginning with Baumgarten's *Aesthetica* in 1750. Less dogmatic scholars may take these changes as worthy of inquiry in their own right, perhaps signifying a change in the condition of aesthetics. I should like to follow the second course here, for I think that these developments reflect not only greater inclusiveness but a fundamental alteration in the nature of aesthetic inquiry. Put most directly

and succinctly, this expansion changes the field of aesthetics from an aesthetics of objects to an aesthetics of experience and sensibility. This essay proposes an account of how this has come about and what it signifies.

## **The Transformations of Art**

Developments in the visual arts since the late nineteenth century display a fascinating succession of movements and styles. Among the most notable movements are Impressionism, Post-Impressionism, Fauvism, Expressionism, Cubism, Futurism, Surrealism, Dada, Abstract Art, Pop Art, Op Art and Conceptual Art. These have provided a surprising array of treasures for the museum-goer and rich material for the art historian. The changes seem to puzzle the mind much as they dazzle the eye, posing seemingly bizarre innovations that present insoluble obstacles to efforts at understanding the meaning of modern art and frustrating attempts at determining its boundaries. This history is, however, more than a series of changes in style, and these changes display more than degrees and variations in representation and abstraction. Let us look more closely at this succession of movements to see if there is some underlying logic to their sequence.

Impressionism, to begin with, is usually explained as an attempt at capturing the fleeting effects of light, especially sunlight, on objects and landscapes. Things seem to lose their solidity and appear to vibrate with solar energy, dissolving into vaguely-defined, multi-coloured hues as the atmosphere is charged by sunlight. With Post-Impressionism, objects regained solidity and radiated a strong presence, while Fauvism flourished with untamed brushwork and intense hues. In Expressionism objects were coloured in the rich tones of powerful emotion, but this was then replaced by the dissolution of solidity into the geometrical structures of Cubism, sometimes broken up into their parts, rendered as if from multiple perspectives, or made transparent by displaying their inner structure. Futurism, in contrast, transmuted the solidity of objects into the disconcerting dynamism of frenetic motion. The iconoclasm of Dada cast ridicule at the once noble objects of artistic idealization and bourgeois contentment by introducing the prosaic and irreverent into the sanctorum of art, while Surrealism transformed the world of ordinary objects into the bizarre distortions and irrational juxtapositions of dreams.

As the visual arts became emancipated from the constraints of representation, the figurative centre of art was increasingly abandoned. Its representational subject-matter became unimportant and the purely

pictorial elements of hue, texture, form and composition became the source of rich originality. Artists forsook any attempt at capturing the world of objects, and used colour and form for their visual effect alone. One could consider Pop Art the antithesis of abstraction, where common objects and commercialized forms take centre stage, larger than life, or it could be the apotheosis of abstraction, presenting stylized illustrations as pure pictorialism. Abstraction reappeared in the subtle variation of repeated simple forms for their pulsating effect on the eye, ingeniously exploited by Op Art, while in Conceptual Art the object disappeared from space and became only an imaginative construction.

This kaleidoscopic survey of the modern course of the visual arts verges on caricature, but it nonetheless reveals a fascinating process of transfiguration. In this succession of movements one may see imaginative transmutations of the art object under the influence of light, of the eye, of emotion, and of dreams, along with varying degrees of manipulation of the object's structure, its solidity, and its variability under the influence of thought and imagination. This is often seen as a history of the iconoclasm of the modern artist, constantly defying conventional expectations and traditional modes, turning it into an account of art movements that increasingly reject traditional paradigms and incorporate the everyday world and the participation of the viewer. This history could then be read as an account of the vagaries of artistic imagination coupled with the unbridled irreverence of the artist. To be sure, one can often find such expressions in the manifestations of the artistic temperament and its inclination to notoriety.

However, I should like to suggest another, very different reading, which is considering the course of modern art as a narrative of transformation, not of objects, but of experiences. Indeed, these developments signify a shift from object-based art to experience-based art. The account displays not so much a sequence of distorted or abandoned objects as a progressive sequence of ways of seeing. The object becomes less important as the visual effect increases in significance until, in abstract and conceptual art, the object disappears entirely. From its dissolution into light and colour in Impressionism, the tactile sense of its pure physicality and weight in Post-Impressionism, its transformation into a stimulus for evoking an emotional response in Expressionism, its structural dissolution in Cubism, its physical dissolution into movement in Futurism, its transition into parody in Dada, its oneiric transmutation in Surrealism and into an ocular stimulus in Op Art, its disappearance in abstract art in favour of the sensibility of pictorial qualities, the lampooning effect of its parody in Pop Art—all these have made the object

less important or not important at all. In its place is art's effect on the spectator.

But to put it this way is actually misleading because it masks a crucial difference—the audience in art is no longer a spectator but has become a participant and co-creator, absorbing the visual or textual materials, responding physically at times to its stimulation, and intellectually as well as emotionally to its social critique, as in Futurism's glorification of war and Dada's critique of bourgeois society, and by its participation in the creative process, activating the art object. It is essential to understand that this transformation in the arts did not turn appreciation into pure subjectivity, into psychological effects disconnected from the body, the art work, and the situation. Rather, these arts demanded sharpened awareness and acute perceptual attention to their sensible qualities. They required recognizing the effects of art as conscious body experience—physical as well as mental. Often this was required by the perceptual demands of the art work for active participation in an appreciative process that collaborates with the artistic one. Indeed, these traditionally separate functions were fused in experiencing art. We have, in short, the transformation of an art of objects into an art of experiences. What does all this signify? To respond to this question, let me turn to the scholarly analogue of the artistic process.

## **The Transformations of Aesthetic Inquiry**

While art has undergone a series of transformative changes, aesthetic theory has largely remained mired in the framework and concepts of the eighteenth century, grounded mainly in Kant's aesthetics. I have written at length about the persistence of obsolescent concepts such as aesthetic disinterestedness, contemplation, purposiveness without purpose, the quest for universality, and the subjectivity of aesthetic judgments, as well as questioning distinctions such as pure and adherent beauty, the sensible and the supersensible, and aesthetics and morality.<sup>1</sup> Important as these ideas may have been two centuries ago in establishing aesthetics within the framework of a systematic philosophy and giving legitimacy and independence to the arts, these concepts have become increasingly irrelevant to the actual practices of artists and the appreciative experiences of the art public.

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<sup>1</sup> Most of these ideas, characteristic of traditional "modern" aesthetics, find their support in Immanuel Kant's *Critique of Judgment* (1790, 1793).

Despite being constrained by outmoded and irrelevant aesthetic concepts, aesthetic inquiry has, in recent decades, pursued a number of directions that reflect the expanded scope of the arts and aesthetic appreciation. Alongside this, the art public has been increasingly willing to accept the use of innovative art materials and the widening range of art experiences that extend beyond the museum or concert hall and into the home, the workplace, the street, and the field. More significant still is the complete alteration of aesthetic appreciation from the receptive contemplation of objects to an active aesthetic engagement with the materials and conditions of art works. Nor is it any longer clear or even possible to separate aesthetic value from moral value, as the social significance and uses of art and the aesthetic have come into greater prominence. Further, the increasingly political applications of the arts belie their traditional exclusivity.

Along with the innovative approaches of the arts has come an enlargement of the scope of aesthetic experiences, and new scholarly interests have emerged over recent decades. Among these are environmental aesthetics, the aesthetics of politics, social aesthetics, including relational aesthetics, and everyday aesthetics. The progressive broadening in the scope of aesthetic inquiry and away from the conventional venues of art began, I think, largely by focusing attention on the aesthetics of environment.<sup>2</sup> It started with a return of attention to nature and an exploration of modes and conditions of appreciation that differ greatly from the disinterested contemplation of distant scenes. Walking in the woods, paddling in a stream, hiking in a wilderness, driving down a highway or along a rural road in an agricultural landscape and sailing a boat became recognized as occasions for aesthetic pleasure, where an intrinsic part of the enjoyment lay in entering into some activity

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<sup>2</sup> The literature here has become extensive. Some of the influential works include R. W. Hepburn, "Contemporary Aesthetics and the Neglect of Natural Beauty," in *Wonder and other Essays* (Edinburgh: The University Press, 1984); R. W. Hepburn, *The Reach of the Aesthetic* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2001); Arnold Berleant, *The Aesthetics of Environment* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1992); Arnold Berleant, *Living in the Landscape: Toward an Aesthetics of Environment* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1997); Arnold Berleant, *Aesthetics and Environment, Theme and Variations* (Aldershot: Ashgate Publishing Ltd, 2005); Allen Carlson, *Aesthetics and the Environment* (New York: Routledge), 2000; Allen Carlson, *Nature and Landscape: An Introduction to Environmental Aesthetics* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009); Yrjö Sepänmaa, *The Beauty of Environment: A General Model for Environmental Aesthetics* (Environmental Ethics Books, Denton, TX, 1993); Emily Brady, *Aesthetics of the Natural Environment* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2003).

in the landscape. At the same time, recognition grew that aesthetic engagement in environment embraces more than the appreciation of nature, for a large part of environmental experience in the developed world takes place in cities. Urban aesthetics began to enter into environmental discourse, and including the built environment expanded the conditions and possibilities of appreciation. Even outer space became a subject for aesthetic awareness.<sup>3</sup>

Recognizing an aesthetic interest in the environment has had powerful implications for aesthetic inquiry more generally, for aesthetics has become concerned not only with art objects but with aesthetic situations. And this shift was not only a conceptual one but a material one—the focus of appreciation was no longer on a discrete object but on a situation, and the traditional dualistic assumption of Western philosophy that considered appreciation a subjective response to an external object became increasingly inappropriate and challenged. I have proposed replacing this model with the concept of aesthetic engagement to reflect the embeddedness of the appreciator in every environmental context. A related development is the formulation of ecological aesthetics or eco-aesthetics, primarily by Chinese environmental aestheticians.<sup>4</sup>

Once the environment gained aesthetic legitimacy, it led to other enlargements of the venues of aesthetic appreciation. One of these lies in discerning aesthetic values in social contexts, where the aesthetic is found in situations involving different forms of human relationships, such as friendship, family and love. Aesthetic values are present in other associations as well, but often in negative forms. Indeed, negative aesthetic values are common in commercial situations, voluntary associations and, indeed, even forms of social relations. Such contexts have led to recognizing perceptual experiences that are common in social situations as negative in character. Identifying such forms of aesthetic negativity as aesthetic affront, aesthetic pain and aesthetic depravity has led to broadening the scope of aesthetics to include negative values. Because these values identify harmful practices, aesthetics merges with ethics to form a basis for social criticism.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> See “Designing Outer Space” in Berleant, *The Aesthetics of Environment*, 99–113.

<sup>4</sup> Zang Fan-ren, *An Introduction to Ecological Aesthetics, A Review of the Relationship between Eco-aesthetics and Environmental Aesthetics* (Beijing: The Commercial Press, 2010), in Chinese. “Eco-aesthetics” is the term Zeng and his followers use as a shortened form of “ecological aesthetics.”

<sup>5</sup> The literature here is small but growing. See Arnold Berleant, *Sensibility and Sense: The Aesthetic Transformation of the Human World* (Exeter, UK: Imprint

A similar development is the idea of relational aesthetics developed by the French critic Nicolas Bourriaud.<sup>6</sup> Applied to the work of a number of contemporary artists, relational aesthetics recognizes that their art creates a social space, a context for human relationships. The art work then becomes an occasion for human interactions and the audience is turned into a community.<sup>7</sup> This is a development in the understanding of aesthetic experience, but under the influence of traditional aesthetics, the art world has co-opted the insight of relational aesthetics through the practice of replacing the term “relational aesthetics” with “relational *art*,” thus turning a situation into an object and entirely missing the point. Despite this, the insight of relational aesthetics remains valid.

Political aesthetics is yet another broadening of inquiry closely allied with social aesthetics. Jacques Rancière has called attention to the political implications of sensibility: its distribution, its control, and its uses, and he has developed this in the service of an argument for radical democracy.<sup>8</sup> Going about this from another approach, Crispin Sartwell has interpreted the force of political ideology from the fact that it is actually an aesthetic system, and he sees politics promoting its goals by creating an aesthetic environment.<sup>9</sup> Employing similar materials, Davide Panagia has related the force of an idea to the bodily sensations that accompany it. He finds sensation at the source of political thought and the aesthetic as the source of political action.<sup>10</sup> My own recent work has joined both the social and the political implications of the aesthetic. Recognizing that the heart of the aesthetic lies in sensibility, I have claimed that developing the awareness and capacity of aesthetic sensibility leads to immensely broader and richer social experience. At the same time, through an awareness of negative aesthetics and the negative sublime, aesthetic sensibility provides a

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Academic, 2010); Arnold Berleant, *Aesthetics Beyond the Arts* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2012); Miyahara Kojiro & Fujisaka Shingo, *Invitation to Social Aesthetics; Exploration of Society through Sensibility* (Kyoto: Minerva Shobō, 2012), in Japanese. An extended discussion of negative aesthetics occurs in Berleant, *Sensibility and Sense*, 155–192.

<sup>6</sup> Originated by the art critic Nicolas Bourriaud in his 1998 book, *Esthétique relationnelle* (*Relational Aesthetics*). Bourriaud later associated this idea with the effects of the internet on mental space.

<sup>7</sup> See *Ibid.*, 113, 13.

<sup>8</sup> See Jacques Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics: The Distribution of the Sensible*, trans. Gabriel Rockhill (Continuum International, 2004).

<sup>9</sup> Crispin Sartwell, *Political Aesthetics* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2010).

<sup>10</sup> Davide Panagia, *The Political Life of Sensation* (Duke University Press, 2009).

powerful tool for criticism by recognizing the human consequences of exploitative commercial and political practices.<sup>11</sup>

Perhaps the most recent direction to emerge from the liberation and expansion of aesthetic experience is what is known as the aesthetics of everyday life. Although there is presently a flowering of work on everyday aesthetics, prevalent philosophical theory has long known the possibility of aesthetic gratification in ordinary objects and events, although it has degraded it. Widely valued by poets, especially Romantic poets and those in Asian traditions, the aesthetic in everyday situations has also been recognized by novelists.<sup>12</sup> It may be most convenient, though, to locate its contemporary intellectual origins in John Dewey's *Art as Experience*.<sup>13</sup> In that book, Dewey argued against the separation of art from life by basing aesthetic experience on the biological and cultural conditions of human life. He located the aesthetic not in an internalized awareness of sensation and feeling, but in "a complete interpenetration of self and the world of objects and events."<sup>14</sup> Further, Dewey maintained that "the esthetic... is the clarified and intensified development of traits that belong to every normally complete experience."<sup>15</sup>

I shall not attempt a chronology of the development of the present interest in the aesthetics of everyday life. Instead, let me mention some significant stages in its emergence. An important source came from the innovations occurring in the arts in the mid-twentieth century. A prime influence was the work of the American composer and theorist John Cage.

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<sup>11</sup> Arnold Berleant, *Sensibility and Sense: The Aesthetic Transformation of the Human World* (Exeter, UK: Imprint Academic, 2010), Arnold Berleant, *Aesthetics beyond the Arts* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2012).

<sup>12</sup> Consider, for example, this passage from *Daniel Deronda* (1876): "[U]nder his calm and somewhat self-repressed exterior there was a fervor which made him easily find poetry and romance among the events of everyday life. And perhaps poetry and romance are as plentiful as ever in the world except for those phlegmatic natures who I suspect would in any age have regarded them as a dull form of erroneous thinking. They exist very easily in the same room with the microscope and even in railway carriages: what banishes them is the vacuum in gentlemen and lady passengers. How should all the apparatus of heaven and earth, from the farthest firmament to the tender bosom of the mother who nourished us, make poetry for a mind that has no movements of awe and tenderness, no sense of fellowship which thrills from the near to the distant, and back again from the distant to the near?" George Eliot, *Daniel Deronda* (1876) (New York: Knopf, 2000), 221.

<sup>13</sup> John Dewey, *Art as Experience* (1934) (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1958).

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 19.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 46.

Experimental and innovative, Cage's interest in aleatoric (chance) music became widely known through his piano work of 1952, *4'33"*, which consists entirely in the chance occurrence of audible sounds that occurred during that interval of time. Happenings, a predecessor of present-day performance art that originated in the 1950s, eliminated the separation between the art work and the viewer, who became a participant in the work, which often comprised the unscripted, chance events of an ordinary situation.

Such innovative developments in the arts had a profound effect on concurrent work in aesthetics. Beginning in the 1990s, a series of steps in the expansion of aesthetic appreciation were taken that resolutely rejected the traditional separation of art from life activities, in the conviction that the scope of the arts has no limits. Two books published in 1992 made an extended case for a broader and more inclusive understanding of the aesthetic that incorporated all activities within the purview of art. David Novitz's *The Boundaries of Art*<sup>16</sup> abjured all limits to art and extended the aesthetic to personal and social relationships, and from these to politics. My book, *Art and Engagement*,<sup>17</sup> extended an argument I had first made in 1970 for reconstructing aesthetics under the influence of innovative developments in the contemporary arts.<sup>18</sup> The argument explored the philosophical implications of considering aesthetic appreciation in both traditional and contemporary arts as active perceptual engagement. Two decades later, my book elaborated a theoretical position for the enlargement of aesthetic experience that would include the objects and events of daily life based on the practices and experience of the arts themselves.

Since these publications there has been a proliferation of work developing and detailing the unbridled extension of the aesthetic. The aesthetics of everyday life is the most recent stage of this progressive broadening in the scope of aesthetic inquiry which began with environmental aesthetics, and important work has already appeared. *The Aesthetics of Everyday Life*, a collection published in 1995, includes

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<sup>16</sup> David Novitz, *The Boundaries of Art* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1992).

<sup>17</sup> Arnold Berleant, *Art and Engagement* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1992).

<sup>18</sup> Arnold Berleant, "Aesthetics and the Contemporary Arts," *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* XXIX (2) (Winter 1970): 155–168. Reprinted in *The Philosophy of the Visual Arts*, ed. Philip Alperson (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), and in part in *Esthetics Contemporary*, ed. Richard Kostelanetz, 1978.

essays on such topics as social aesthetics, the aesthetics of place, unplanned building, landscape, sport, weather, smells and tastes, and food.<sup>19</sup> Katya Mandoki's *Everyday Aesthetics* of 2007 was the first extended treatment of the subject.<sup>20</sup> An English-language version of a book that had originally been published in Spanish in 1994, Mandoki's *Everyday Aesthetics* is a far-reaching study of aesthetic theory of unusual scope and originality, centring around the crucial role of aesthetics in the contemporary, highly technological and complex societies in which we now live. This was soon followed by another volume with the same title and an equally distinctive and original focus, Yuriko Saito's *Everyday Aesthetics*.<sup>21</sup> Richly informed by the author's native Japanese culture and her long experience teaching at a school of art and design, this book details the pervasive presence and influence of the aesthetic over the many facets of everyday life, remarkable and unremarkable alike. The most recent addition to these extended treatments is Thomas Leddy's *The Extraordinary in the Ordinary: The Aesthetics of Everyday Life*.<sup>22</sup> Leddy develops an extensive critical review of much of the literature, as well as the current scholarly debates, leading to his own contribution in the form of a phenomenologically-oriented approach to aesthetics. He proposes the concept of "aura" to identify the quality an object can have when experienced as aesthetic, a quality not confined to art objects but to the culturally-conditioned experiences of daily life.

## **Conclusion: The Transformations of Aesthetic Theory**

I have depicted a broad landscape on these pages, rather like one of Constable's wall-sized canvases, and I hope it shares their realism in its theoretical and historical perspective on developments in art and aesthetics. For besides the greater range of interests and applications in aesthetics, these developments have demonstrated the obsolescence of traditional concepts. Let me suggest some implications that seem to emerge from the trends in aesthetic experience and theory I have been detailing here. Although the authors I have mentioned may not subscribe

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<sup>19</sup> Andrew Light & Jonathan M. Smith eds., *Aesthetics of Everyday Life* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005).

<sup>20</sup> Katya Mandoki, *Everyday Aesthetics: Prosaics, the Play of Culture and Social Identities* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2007).

<sup>21</sup> Yuriko Saito, *Everyday Aesthetics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007).

<sup>22</sup> Thomas Leddy, *The Extraordinary in the Ordinary: The Aesthetics of Everyday Life* (Peterborough, Ont: Broadview, 2012).

to all of the ideas I offer in my conclusion, I think that the developments to which they have contributed support this transformation of aesthetics.

To begin, it is clear that there is a sharp dislocation between the practices of many contemporary artists, their art works, and the experience and behaviour of the art public, and also with modern aesthetic theory, especially as it has been formulated under the influence of Kant. That theory is grounded in a separation between the subjectivity of aesthetic experience and the objectivity of the art object, in a separation between beauty and utility, and in the sequestering of the arts and natural beauty in museums and privileged views and away from the ordinary course of human life activities. While such a theory may be thought to honour the special aesthetic forcefulness of the noblest artistic creations, it does so at the expense of severely constricting the scope of aesthetic appreciation, and that belies the prevalence of aesthetic value in human cultures. Is it possible to have a theoretical frame that retains the validity of the sacred experience of great art and awesome natural scenes while, at the same time, recognizing and accounting for the fact that aesthetic interests pervade every domain of human experience?

I believe that it *is* possible and that we need concepts that can accommodate both in proper proportion which can be developed by enlarging the scope and understanding of aesthetics. First, we need to overcome the fragmentation that results from the many divisions drawn by traditional theory, such as between the appreciator of art and the art object, between beauty and utility, and between cognitive and non-cognitive experience. We need, in fact, a unifying concept that can admit connections, mutual influences, and reciprocity without losing the aesthetic altogether. Such a concept may be found in the notion of an “aesthetic field,” an idea that embodies the understanding that the presence and functioning of aesthetic values occur in a context that encompasses the principal factors in the experience of aesthetic value. The aesthetic field can accommodate artistic innovation and expanded occasions for appreciation along with traditional arts, for it enfolds the four functional constituents present in all: the objective, the appreciative, the creative, and the performative, none of which can be taken independently of the others.<sup>23</sup>

The central idea in appreciation now becomes “aesthetic engagement,” which recognizes the participation that active appreciation requires and that the contemporary arts increasingly demand. We also need to recognize

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<sup>23</sup> A further sign of the extension of the aesthetic may be seen in the annual French observance in Marseilles of a *Semaine de la Pop Philosophie*. See [www.lesrencontresplacepublique.fr](http://www.lesrencontresplacepublique.fr) (accessed August 14, 2012).