

Aesthetic Investigations

Published on behalf of the Dutch Association of Aesthetics

Special Issue

Special Issue – The aesthetic significance of the everyday

Introduction to the special issue

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In 2001, Julita Wójcik, a Polish visual artist, peeled 50 kilos of potatoes in one of the rooms of Zachęta – National Gallery of Art, a renowned institution specialising in contemporary art. The artist, dressed in her everyday garments, was assisted in this activity by, among others, visitors. After her performance ended, all that was left was the stool, the peeler, and the potato peels. Wójcik declared that she intended to make a reference to the tradition of genre art, that is, art that conveys everyday life; to demonstrate its role in the history of national art, as well as to show how everyday chores performed by a female artist debunk the sublime figure of the artist. She wanted to ‘stage a coup, a personal revolution out of the kitchen’.¹

Wójcik’s work is a good example of what is involved in an artistic ‘transfiguration of the commonplace’, including the controversies it can provoke. Arthur C. Danto’s famous expression refers to, among other things, Andy Warhol’s *Brillo Boxes*.² There is a conspicuous difference between Wójcik’s performance consisting of actually peeling potatoes and Warhol’s artefact, which looked like a ‘mere real thing’ (Danto’s words) alluding to tidying up. Wójcik’s did not create a look-alike of an everyday activity, but she literally performed it. At the same time, however, she did transfigure it, turning potato peeling into something eventually characterised by ‘aboutness’, to use another Dantoeseque term, namely that peeling potatoes can be about peeling potatoes.

The performance was not the only work by an artist consisting of and about everyday activities, but it was quite controversial. On the one hand, the artworld appreciated it as a critique of a social reality in which women's work is invisible and considered worthless, especially in comparison to men's professions. Even worse, women's work must be experienced in an extraordinary context in order to be seen at all. On the other hand, the non-artworld criticised it for not being art and therefore not worthy of being exhibited in a national art gallery. Despite their profound differences, these two perspectives have one thing in common: they treat art and the everyday as opposites, such that the former is something extraordinary. Art critics interpreted Wójcik's performance in light of the assumption that art is particularly capable of revealing those aspects of everyday life that would otherwise go unnoticed, while the general public assumed that art, by definition, cannot appear banal or down-to-earth.³ The two approaches overlook two things that are in fact two sides of the same coin: interpreting Wójcik's performance as an example of art's revelatory power undervalues the potential of the everyday to become self-aware, while dismissing her performance at Zachęta gallery as lacking artistic value amounts to not noticing that the everyday itself can be artistic in a way.



Figure 1: Julita Wójcik. 2001. *Peeling Potatoes*. Zachęta - National Gallery of Art, Warsaw (Poland). Courtesy of the artist.

However one reads Wójcik's *Peeling Potatoes*, there is no denying her performance is art that addresses the everyday. It is even possible to see it as an artistic attempt to show that women's chores should not only be valued as they deserve to be, but that they can also have "artistic" qualities, i.e.

that they can offer particularly positive aesthetic experiences, as famously theorised by John Dewey in *Art as Experience*.⁴ Seen in this light, Wójcik's 'artifying' of a down-to-earth activity can be seen not only in terms of the tradition of genre art that beautified the everyday, but we can also interpret her action as raising the question: is turning a banal activity into a work of art, i.e something which is above banality, the only way to show that it might be worthy of our attention in all its banality?

Although everyday actions (i.e. all that is banal, commonplace, down-to-earth, familiar, ordinary, and routine) are omnipresent, as they are the basic dimensions of our lives, and consequently they have appeared as popular art motifs, yet they remain outside the scope of philosophical aesthetics. Aesthetics, famously defined as the philosophy of fine arts by G.W.F. Hegel or as the philosophy of art criticism by M. Beardsley, did not consider the everyday itself to be aesthetically interesting. It seemed that the only way for the everyday to have aesthetic values was to be represented in art, as in genre art, since aesthetic values were sought in art and nowhere else.

Everyday aesthetics, a fairly recent field of philosophical inquiry, is based on the claim that this kind of art-centred approach is reductive because it is based on the unwarranted assumption that aesthetic values or qualities are to be identified with those that can be found in the arts, and that it is only in the arts that one should look for them.⁵ The main aim of everyday aesthetics, then, is to discuss the idea that aesthetic experience, understood as the experience of aesthetic values or qualities, is available not only when one experiences a work of art, e.g. an artistic performance consisting of peeling potatoes in an art gallery, but also when one experiences an everyday practice, object, space, etc., e.g. peeling potatoes in one's kitchen. This perspective raises many questions: what does it mean to experience (or appreciate) something aesthetically, especially if aesthetic experience has traditionally been identified with a disinterested or detached approach, whereas the everyday is the sphere of our interest and engagement? Does the aesthetic experience of the everyday involve a certain knowledge or sensibility? Does the aesthetic experience of the everyday have a particular structure that distinguishes it from other kinds of experience? Are there criteria that guarantee that an aesthetic experience of the everyday is adequate or authentic? What aesthetic values or qualities can the everyday have? Is there an everyday aesthetic taste? All the above questions sound ordinary to anyone familiar with philosophical aesthetics. In fact, they are usually asked in relation to 'paradigmatic arts'.

This brings up one of the two key problems of everyday aesthetics. On the one hand, there is no consensus among the proponents of everyday aesthetics as to whether the goal of moving beyond 'art-centredness' can be effectively achieved. The question is whether it is possible to avoid artification. In other words, can we experience (appreciate) the everyday aesthetically in a way that has nothing to do with how we experience works of art? Or is it only possible for us to have this kind of experience if we experience the everyday as if it were

art, i.e. inevitably using the framework we apply whenever we experience art? On the other hand, and in relation to the question of artification, the following problem arises. If the everyday is defined as the banal, the commonplace, the ordinary, etc., then its main characteristic is its transparency. The everyday, which is the sphere of our daily interests and engagements, mostly practical in nature, passes unnoticed as ordinary and therefore not worthy of special attention. If this is the case, a paradox arises: the aesthetic experience of the everyday as an experience of everyday aesthetic values or qualities causes the everyday to lose its character. What is experienced in such a case, namely the everyday, is defined by the fact that it is not the focus of attention, and if it is experienced, then it is experienced at best as a background. In other words, is it possible to have an aesthetic experience of the everyday without turning it into something that is not everyday?

Regardless of how we judge the agenda of everyday aesthetics (as an aside, I think it is worth pursuing), it is definitely a philosophical attempt to keep up with contemporary humanities and social sciences that have long paid attention to the everyday and analysed it in terms of meanings and values that define people's ordinary lives and their ordinary worlds as the worlds they experience on a daily basis. It should come as no surprise, then, that the everyday is also aesthetically significant (perhaps even more so than the arts, given its ubiquity).

Although the everyday is all that is real, material, and tangible, we should not forget that, as experienced, it is also imbued with beliefs, expectations, fantasies, fears, memories, etc. that are not real in the sense of being 'out there'. These subjective elements of the everyday are as important for its aesthetic significance as are its objective ones. We have access to both the former and the latter through our own experience, but we can also access them in other ways. One is art, the other is philosophy. An example of how art can fulfil this task is Wójcik's performance, which can be interpreted as everyday aesthetics practised in an artistic way. An example of how philosophy can do the same can be found, among others, in the articles included in this volume.

One of the issues that distinguishes everyday aesthetics from other disciplines that focus on the everyday and its aesthetic qualities is the debate about the normative aspect of everyday aesthetic experience: are there norms that determine how one should aesthetically experience (appreciate) everyday objects, practices, spaces, etc.? As far as art is concerned, there seem to be such rules, e.g. Wójcik's peeling of potatoes is, after all, an artistic performance staged in an art institution and belonging to a certain artistic tradition, and all that should be taken into account. But what about the 'mere real' peeling of potatoes by any of us? Is there anything we should take into account in our aesthetic experience of it?

The above questions are raised by both Julia de Boer and Angela Black. In her article, de Boer offers an analysis of ontological theories of the everyday that attempt to overcome the subjective/objective dichotomy and show that

'humans interact aesthetically with their environment and other people non-optionally, all the time'.⁶ Interestingly, de Boer shows that it is possible to fruitfully interpret the key issues for everyday aesthetics using philosophical positions belonging to a very different tradition. Black's paper offers, instead, a detailed analysis of the current debate on the normative aspects of everyday aesthetic experience. She argues that although everyday aesthetic experience is not normative, the question of the normativity of aesthetic experience is crucial because we should be able to 'reconcile and simultaneously hold valid a disparate and even conflicting variety of aesthetic paradigms, allowing us to find common aesthetic ground as well as celebrate our aesthetic differences'.⁷ Torres Gutiérrez's article can also be read as an artistic commentary on how the everyday should be experienced aesthetically. Through the presentation of selected artworks, he discusses Hito Steyerl's concept of 'poor images' and proves that, contrary to traditional art-centred aesthetics that privilege the spectacular, the everyday can also be experienced in all its unspectacularity. He argues that all that is usually overlooked as insignificant, aesthetically or otherwise, can in fact be full of meaning.⁸

Finally, we should remember that the famous Latin proverb *tempora mutantur et nos mutamus in illis* applies more to everyday life than to anything else. Our everyday life is constantly changing and we are constantly changing in it. One of the ways in which this constant change can be observed is in the way we imagine our everyday identities and lives. Traditionally, we have been inspired by stories and legends, by literature, high or popular, by theatre, by A-class or B-class films, by operas, songs, etc. Today, this spectrum is growing, one example being the series we can watch every day on television or on streaming platforms, another being games. Contemporary everyday life is very often subject to gamification: it can be designed or managed as if it were a game, and it can be experienced as a game. The game has thus become a serious philosophical problem with far-reaching aesthetic implications, as Benjamin Micallef shows in his book review.⁹

The present volume is meant to encourage readers to consider what it means to experience the everyday as the everyday, and that the everyday may have its own aesthetic significance that does not necessarily have to be revealed by art, even if art, like philosophy, can be helpful in discovering it on a daily basis.

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ENDNOTES

1. Wójcik 2024.

2. Danto 1981, 1997.

3. Sienkiewicz 2011.

4. Dewey (1934) 2005.

5. Saito 2024.

6. De Boer 2024, 22–23.
7. Black 2024, 42.

8. Torres Gutiérrez 2024.
9. Micallef 2024.

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