DISEÑO

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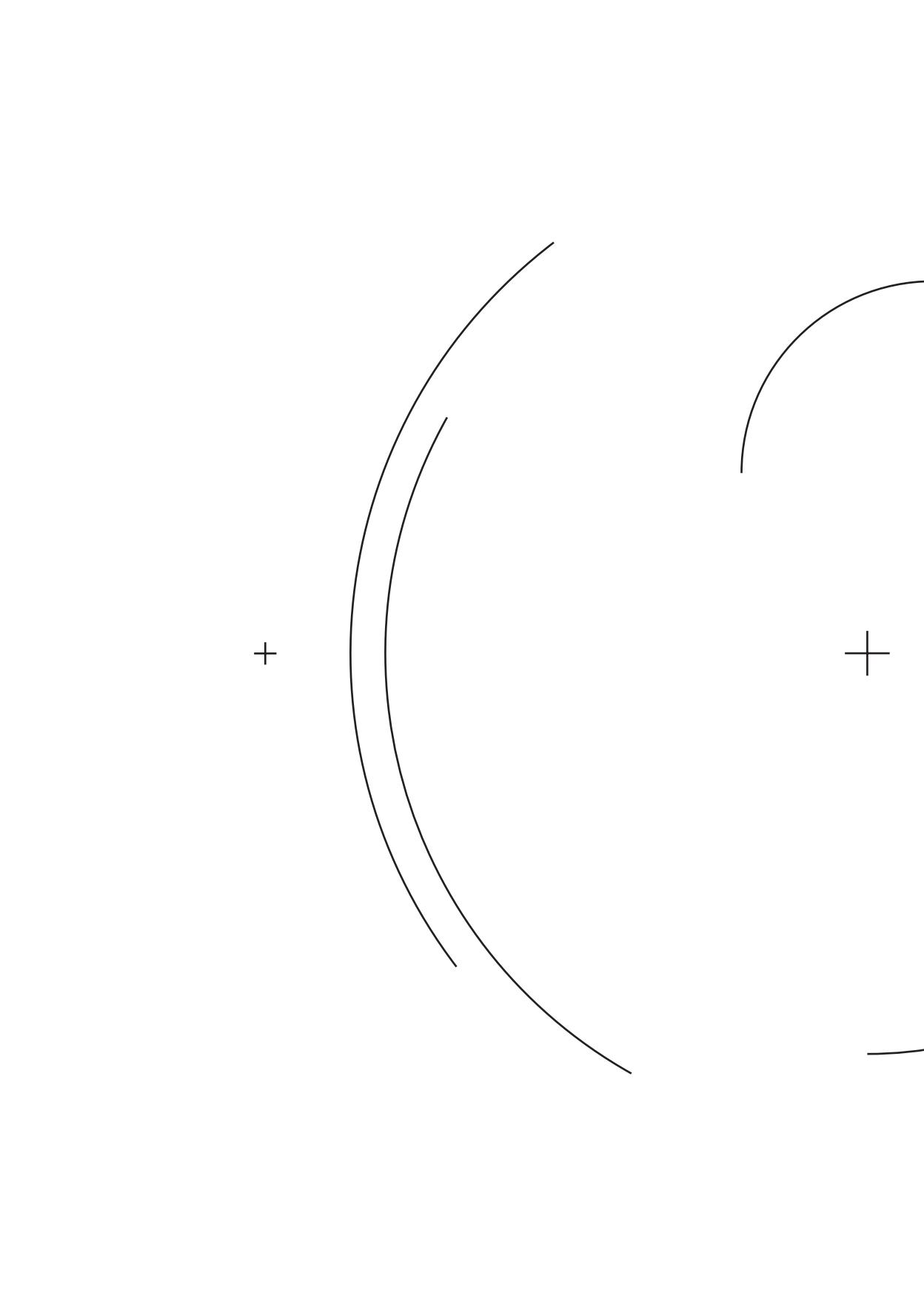
journal of design culture
_Aesthetic Histories of Design Culture



Disegno

Journal of Design Culture
Double-blind peer-reviewed, open access scholarly journal

Aims and Scope

Disegno publishes original research papers, essays, and reviews on all aspects of design cultures. We understand the notion of design culture as resolutely broad: our aim is to freely discuss the designed environment as mutually intertwined strands of sociocultural products, practices, and discourses. This attitude traverses the disciplinary boundaries between art, design, and visual culture and is therefore open to all themes related to sociocultural creativity and innovation. Our post-disciplinary endeavour welcomes intellectual contributions from all members of different design cultures. Besides providing a lively platform for debating issues of design culture, our specific aim is to consolidate and enhance the emerging field of design culture studies in the Central European academia by providing criticism of fundamental biases and misleading cultural imprinting with respect to the field of design.

All research papers published in Disegno undergo a rigorous double-blind peer review process.
This journal does not charge APCs or submission charges.

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Contents

introduction by the guest editor

004 *Bálint Veres: Some Drawdowns from the Well of Design Culture*

research papers

010 *Endre Szécsényi: "An Habitual Disposition of Mind": On The Roots of Everyday Aesthetics in the Early Eighteenth Century*

024 *Anders V. Munch: The Total Design of Everyday Life: Historical Ideals and Dilemmas of the Gesamtkunstwerk*

040 *Ben Highmore: Experimental Playgrounds, Loose Parts, and The Everyday Aesthetics of Play*

054 *Barbora Kundračíková: "Black Holes" Exploitation: A Central European City Between Monument, Document, and Mockument*

essays

074 *Anna Keszeg: Residing in Negative Space: The Art and Life Strategies of Marion Baruch*

review

082 *Martha Kicsiny: Art Hall Immersion. Corina L. Apostol and Lívia Nolasco-Rózsás, eds:* Immerse!

interview

090 *Cross Pollination. An Interview Between Jessica Hemmings and Yuriko Saito*

096 ***about the authors***

Cross Pollination

An Interview Between Jessica Hemmings and Yuriko Saito

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Jessica Hemmings: Yuriko Saito, welcome to MOME and thank you for joining us for the conference* Designing Everyday Experience. *In 2007 you published the influential book* Everyday Aesthetics. *We are now in Budapest for a three-day conference devoted to this topic. But I wanted to step back and first ask you what aesthetics means in your research?

Yuriko Saito: The definition of aesthetics is always a controversial issue in and of itself in the twentieth century. Western aesthetics discourse, particularly the American version, used to be identified with the philosophy of art and philosophy of beauty. But when you go back to the root meaning of aesthetics it is the study of sensibility and perception. It is not limited to art, and it is not limited to beauty.

Everyday aesthetics is one of the projects to get out of the confinement of identifying aesthetics simply as the philosophy of art and beauty. Anything to do with our experience of perception and sensibility has to do with aesthetics, which means that aesthetic concerns are everywhere—not confined to the museum or concert hall. Both are important venues, no question, but teaching at RISD (Rhode Island School of Design) and dealing with design students' projects, and their interests and concerns, I realised that aesthetics really has to do with our lived environment in general. The participants in this conference are addressing the larger issues of aesthetics from various viewpoints, which is very exciting.

JH: I'm curious about how your background and how your education supported, or perhaps led to, your interest in expanding the discourse in this way. I understand that your BA studies were at the International Christian University in Tokyo, and you then wrote a PhD at the University of Wisconsin, Madison. Your childhood, am I correct, was in Japan?

YS: Yes.

JH: In your writing, alongside many other things, you often use Japanese examples. If Japanese culture had not been your experience and influence, do you think you would still have arrived at this expanded interest in the everyday?

YS: That is a good question. I think that if I grew up in the US with no Japanese background I probably would have gotten into the same sort of track because of my experience teaching at RISD. I definitely think that my upbringing in Japan and the time until I graduated from college instilled in me the idea that the aesthetic permeates every aspect of society, life, and culture.

Japan is really known as an aesthetic nation, for better or worse. I have seen the dark side of that as well. But my training in graduate school was strictly Western aesthetics. I studied Plato, and so on. Gradually I began to realise that this is one way of looking at the world and analysing the world. Then I looked back on my Japanese experience and began to tease out some of the relevant experiences and compared them with what I was learning in graduate school.

I think that the Japanese upbringing for me, in retrospect, did have a huge influence. Although it is part of what I do, I don't want to simply introduce Japanese aesthetics. My overall vision or goal of what I want to do is cross pollination: looking at Western aesthetics from a Japanese point of view and vice versa. I think that is where exciting things happen.

JH: I'd like to read a brief quote from the laundry section of* Aesthetics and the Familiar *(2017, 122):

the almost exclusive focus on extraordinary experiences in traditional aesthetics discourse severely limits the scope of our aesthetic lives. If those standout experiences dominate the aesthetics discourse because of their intensity and profundity, more mundane aesthetic experiences should equally garner our attention because of their prevalence.

For a textile person like me, this is particularly exciting to read because my ongoing fascination with textiles is largely driven by their ubiquity. Textiles are an academic discourse and you can get into all sorts of technical or philosophical discussions. But on one level you can look to every single person and point out that you put on a textile this morning, to different degrees of attention and knowledge. My question is how do we continue to make the familiar interesting?

YS: Actually that is one of the main paradoxes that everybody is trying to address that was apparent in many talks yesterday and will probably continue to be so. And that is one of my main concerns. I haven't really

got a good solution. How do you attend to the ordinary without making it special or extraordinary? I think it may have to be a dialectical process. Ordinary things or experiences tend to go below the radar. We don't pay attention and they become invisible. When something is invisible, then we don't attend to it, so can't have an aesthetic experience. Once in a while we have to excavate what is hidden. But how do you make it not stand out as if you are looking at a work of art?

Some of my colleagues in everyday aesthetics advocate making the ordinary extraordinary. I don't have anything against it, but I think we have to go one step further and appreciate the specialness, the extraordinariness in the context of ordinary life because we live with it. A textile is a good example. There has to be a difference between looking at a textile piece in a museum (which is extraordinary) and dealing with washing and ironing—the stuff of everyday life. Maybe we don't need to solve it one way or the other. Maybe we have to keep both alive and go back and forth.

I think that is the core of the problem everyone is grappling with in everyday aesthetics. At the same time I don't want to sacrifice the fact that dealing with textiles or other things in everyday life is part of a lived experience. Maybe we have to make it stand out more, but I don't want to sacrifice that everydayness.

JH: I was trying to test myself with an example that is very close to home, at least where I work, which is Sweden: the painfully ubiquitous IKEA store. IKEA is celebrated for creating objects of a certain style that adhere to a very particular Scandinavian image, but also available because of their relatively low price. IKEA makes things that can be visually pleasing, but materially usually very disappointing. Often it looks better than it feels.

The first question I have is about the IKEA-type of conundrum. The everyday is not remotely elite. It is wonderful that it is accessible, but this can also mean wasteful, not remotely sustainable, which seems like a difficult trade-off.

The second part of my question is whose everyday is everyday aesthetics talking about? IKEA presents a particular version of taste maybe not dissimilar to Japan in the sense that both Scandinavia and Japan are internationally respected for a certain style and taste that is broadly admired—but not everybody's everyday.

YS: The first question, IKEA looks great, and I happen to be attracted to that simplicity and elegant design. But it is not going to last. I don't want to just take IKEA as an object of criticism, but it could be similar to fast fashion. You know it is great and you use a table for three years and then you throw it away because it is not able to stand anymore. I think that everyday aesthetics—just like art education—looks at the

surface of the painting but then we learn its history, technique, and the artist's background, and so on. Then you start putting a much richer layer over what meets the eye. In the meantime, our first reaction to the painting may change, transform according to what we put into it.

I would advocate an aesthetic education where we go beyond and behind the surface. We can go further and ask how was it made. Fast fashion is notorious for all kinds of environmental problems and human rights violations. When we gather all this knowledge—the fact that this is going to break down in three years—can we then look at the object in the same way? Of course there is economic enticement. But I think that everyday aesthetics should really be tied to some kind of education. I don't necessarily mean formal education, but I think that as consumers it behoves us to be more educated, to know more about what is behind the nice façade. So that is the first part.

And the second part was whose everyday? Yes, that is another big-ticket item in everyday aesthetics. I am writing as a Japanese person living in the States, middle-class, and educated. But the world is made up of so many different people, with different backgrounds and their everyday is nothing like my everyday. There is no sense in imposing one's everyday or taste as a normative claim. Yesterday there was a wonderful and really poignant presentation by a person from the University of Kiev.

JH: Oof.

YS: Oof, yes. How do you deal with everyday aesthetics in the midst of a war-torn area? Or natural disasters as we head into climate change and whatever that will bring us. I feel I have a sort of complacency with my particular everyday—but I shouldn't be complacent. I have to at least be aware and open to other people's everyday. This goes back to textiles. My everyday clothing experience is very different from other people's and so we tend, in a society, to create a norm of respectability. But again whose respectability? If somebody does not conform to norms of respectable clothing, hair dos, or makeup, or whatever, then we say waahh, and we look down on them. What are we doing?

There are all these kinds of issues which are not simply aesthetic concerns. It is a knot of political, social, and moral concerns. I think what I advocate is aesthetic education/aesthetic literacy. What is behind it, and whose everyday is it? What should my reaction be to somebody else's everyday which is very different from mine?

JH: You have written about this tying of aesthetics to ethics—a call to take more responsibility for the things that are occurring around us. I was interested in the attention you draw to process as opposed to outcomes. In* Artificial Hells *(2012) Claire Bishop usefully writes

about the enormous difficulty in capturing practices such as community workshops that occur over a long duration of time. She refers to the resource-poor critic and the time-poor academic—those of us who do want to be able to spend time observing and understanding often don't have the time professionally. Photographs of a shared meal or workshop are a very limited way of capturing that type of experience. It strikes me that Bishop's concerns are applicable here. If we are to attend more to the everyday, to somehow remain more mindful even in the face of enormous familiarity then it is also more about the process rather than the finished painting on the wall. How does that get captured and recorded, when we are all basically rushing through this existence?

YS: That is true. Slow down: slow food movement, slow fashion movement, but how do we do that? I think one part is raising awareness and creating a community of people who are mindful to share experiences. But of course that is preaching to the choir. Let's go back to education. I think that it can be part of the formal education, but also part of the community education of children, to encourage children to be more mindful and attentive.

For example, ask children to create an idea of a classroom. I don't mean literally but with the imagination. What would it involve? How should the chairs be arranged so that people would feel on an equal footing? If you arrange chairs and tables in a certain way then maybe some kids will feel alienated. Children grow up thinking that what seems to be fun games or a superficial experience has significant consequences. Some kids do feel alienated or more powerful if they are placed in certain way. How do you put kids' paintings on the wall—in what way?

Very small gestures have consequences that they may not have thought about. Maybe this is a utopian view but I think this goes a long way towards people becoming much more mindful. I mean, in ordinary situations like when you buy clothes, or when you get vegetables from the supermarket, etc.

Of course we are adults and talking about this is really late. But that would be my ideal society: kids are having fun but also becoming aware of the consequences of their choices.

JH: My final question is about the journal that you edit,* Contemporary Aesthetics. *In addition to your extensive influential writing, you have, since 2018 I believe, been the journal's editor. The publication is online and open source, so it is a wonderful tool for education. In the years that you have been editor, what have you seen shifting or emerging in this discourse? Do you pick up on any particular new interests, for instance, that weren't talked about a decade ago?

YS: I don't know if what I see shifting is in aesthetics discourse in general, or whether it is a shift I see because of our track record of publishing. This is the journal's twenty-first year. My mentor Arnold Berleant was the founding editor and his vision was to provide a venue for people engaging in aesthetic discourse, from whatever disciplines, who were exploring important issues which may not fit the sort of the mainstream, what we call analytic aesthetics.

I see less of what we used to get—heavily analytic intramural debates about a philosopher criticising another philosopher's viewpoint. We are completely open and articles are based upon external reviews. But not unrelated to the kind of things that have been defining us in the landscape of aesthetic journals, I see more and more submissions dealing with topics away from traditional art and beauty, and analytic approaches are much more open, innovative, and creative. We are getting less and less submissions of the type which used to be the bulk when Arnold started the journal, that intramural debate.

I get the statistics and the only continent that doesn't have any readers is Antarctica. The readership is really wide geographically, linguistically, and culturally. Not all the readers have a background in philosophy, or particularly in aesthetics debates. It is much more about addressing the more pressing issues which concern everyone. Not what other philosophers said, but the much more pressing issues which really matter in everybody's lives, like climate change and things of that sort. I do see that happening in other more established mainstream journals as well. I think that people are realising that aesthetics is not a confined discipline. It really has a lot of things to offer to our lives.

JH: Yuriko Saito, thank you very much.

YS: Thank you, for the questions.