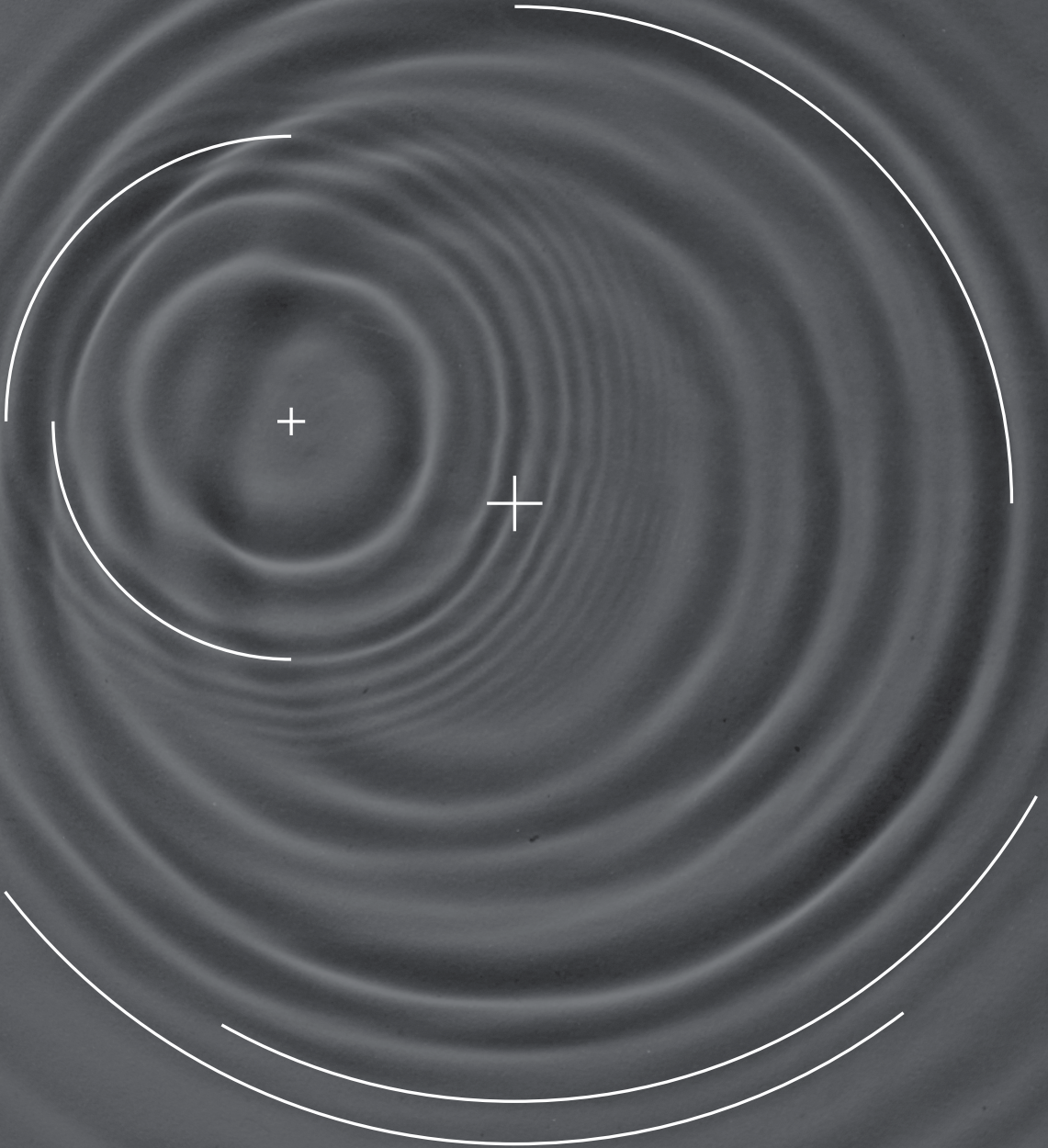


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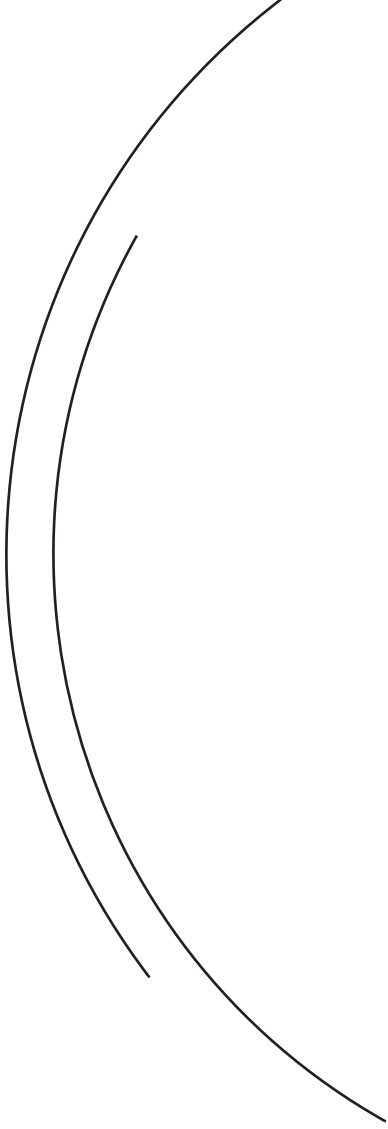
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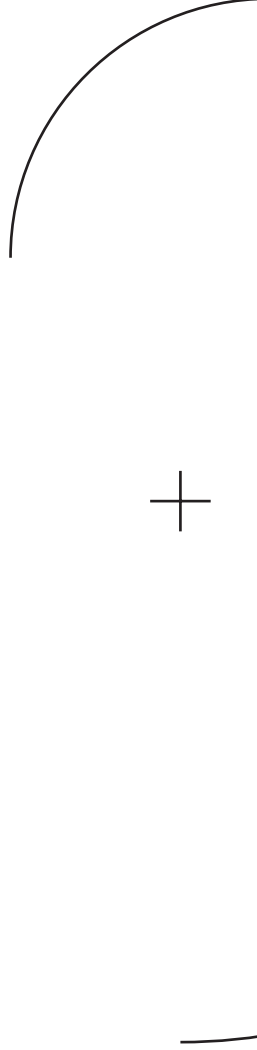
Aesthetic Histories of Design Culture



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Disegno

JOURNAL OF DESIGN CULTURE

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INTRODUCTION BY THE GUEST EDITOR

SOME DRAWDOWNS FROM THE WELL OF DESIGN CULTURE

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*Very deep is the well of the past. Should we not call it bottomless?
[...] For the deeper we sound, the further down into the lower world of the
past we probe and press, the more we do find that the earliest foundations of
humanity, its history and culture, reveal themselves unfathomable.
No matter to what hazardous lengths we let out our line they still withdraw
again, and further, into the depths.
—Thomas Mann, *Joseph and His Brothers**

Ten years ago, *Disegno—Journal of Design Culture* began its journey with a founding volume in Hungarian that featured translations and original writings with the aim of helping readers get a picture of how to delineate the realm of design culture. The editorial introduction of that first volume rightly emphasised that design culture includes the totality of a multifaceted complexity of the designed environment—in its varied materialities, scales and technicities—and also the associated social practices and discourses (Szentpéteri 2014). Furthermore, it also includes an experiential spectrum—we can add, in line with the present volume. Having said that, we should contend, however, that the experiential dynamics of the all-overwhelming transmutation of regional cultures into a global design culture, and the concrete way in which design permeates our life and immerses us by providing us spheres of action, perception and reflection, has so far resisted any consistent clarification. Understanding the historical evolution of contemporary design culture and the behavioural and mental history behind it makes this task even more complex, so much so that we are reminded of the famous Thomas Mann quote about the bottomless past and its receding contours.

Not surprisingly, five years after the founding of *Disegno*, and halfway through the journal's past decade, another editorial introduction—again in Hungarian—provided readers, via a humorous saying from rural Tran-

sylvania, with a characterisation of design culture as “either something or going somewhere.” (Horváth 2019) The ontological inconsequence of this saying and the source of its humorous nature are rooted in a traditional joke in which an old sage of the community is forced to explain an exotic creature, a tortoise, which is an unprecedented entity that none of the community members knows or is able to identify (including the wise man). Only through awareness of the various (cultural) perspectives, might one make the riddle in the joke transparent and understandable. For the intended audience of the joke, the tortoise does not pose a challenge, while the community depicted in it lacks the means to rightly recognise the tiny and quite resistant creature.

The situation we find ourselves in when we try to identify contemporary design culture seems to be quite similar, but a less cheerful one compared to the encounter of the guessing wise man with the tortoise. It happens to be like this at least in the Global North, where every social stratum is thoroughly embedded in the meshwork of design capitalism and captive to its gigantic bubble, its hyperobject to be more precise (Szentpéteri 2020; Thackara 2006; Morton 2013). One feels only a total outsider, such as a visitor from Mars, would be able to discern all of the crucial specificities and unique features of our reigning life form fuelled by financialisation, efficiency, rationalisation, calculation, anticipation, and coordination (Julier 2023).

In this regard, neither can the present volume hold the ambition to be a game changer, nor it can promise any substantial turnaround for the insights the academic community possesses on the conditions of our Capitalocene settings (Malm and Hornborg 2014). What it does offer are some insightful contributions to the pre-history and latent dynamics of our contemporary environmental, social, communicational, and living conditions, with particular regard to those aspects that are hard to recognise, for being mental habits, longstanding evaluations, and deeply entrenched sensibilities and tastes. Due to the complexity of its objects and themes, the scholarly study of design culture cannot help but embrace as many disciplinary resources as it can. Amongst them, aesthetics proves to be a highly eligible, indeed, eminent means. Although aesthetics developed in the humanities as a field of expertise about the arts, both its origins, and also its current evolution make it an ideal candidate for producing substantial outcomes in inquiries into everyday life, its objects, places and behaviours.¹

This conviction was the starting point when the Doctoral School at Moholy-Nagy University of Art & Design, Budapest in cooperation with the Everyday Aesthetics Network, organised an international conference in 2023 under the title *Designing Everyday Experience*.² If things, environments, and processes are either goals, materials, means, or elements of design, then it is the experience that stands on the flip side, together with the appreciation, evaluation, interpretation, and sharing of it.

¹ For an introduction, see Saito 2019.

² <https://dee.mome.hu/>

The organisers of the conference addressed the academic community with the following questions: How can objects of design help us shape our everyday habits and routines by corralling our behavioural patterns? How do power relations define the standards of everydayness through designed objects and tools? What is the specific contribution of art objects in shaping and defining our everydayness? How can we design environments (cityscapes, soundscapes, parks, places for sightseeing, skywalks) with the aim of triggering a specific aesthetic experience (sublimity, the picturesque, etc.)? How to conceptualise the natural and artificial component of atmospheres felt in designed environments on various scales? What is the contribution of routines in building our experience of the world? What role do habits play in supporting, regulating and enabling our aesthetic life? Where is the fine line between the ordinary and the extraordinary in a design culture?

Most of the texts in the present volume were born from the thought experiments by which the conference contributors sought to answer to some of the above questions. In his writing on the roots of aesthetic sensibility and its discourse, which unfolded from mostly natural or attitudinal phenomena, Endre Szécsényi convincingly argues that the discipline of aesthetics emerged in the essays of London daily journals of the early eighteenth century and originally “was not art-centred at all”. So decidedly so that the aesthetic stance expressed in the relevant texts written by Richard Steele, Joseph Addison, George Berkeley, and Henry Grove must be seen as the historical antecedent of what we nowadays call “everyday aesthetics” (Mandoki 2007; Saito 2008). A substantial difference, though, is what was then experienced and understood through aesthetic sensibility as a consequence of some higher, divine design and a model for a potentially more dignified human life has, since then, lost most of its metaphysical resonance but retained its sense of “the extraordinary in the ordinary.” (Leddy 2012)

Artists and designers who developed and followed the idea, the dream (or even mirage) of the *Gesamtkunstwerk* would have never agreed with a culture that keeps the objective-factual and the experiential side, aspects of ordinariness and extraordinariness, apart. After the “methodological” historiography by Szécsényi, the volume proceeds by investigating their ideas. In his “Total Design of Everyday Life: Historical Ideals and Dilemmas of the *Gesamtkunstwerk*,” Anders V. Munch provides a historical survey of the novelty which lies in tracing “the design of everyday life” in the broadest sense, a veritable total design that stems from the idea of union between arts and other creative disciplines and aims at a social and political impact tied to upending social hierarchies. One might be tempted to conclude that while art and design have ever been threatened with becoming sheer means of beautification of the exploitative conditions, *Gesamtkunstwerk* as total design dismisses the idea of beautification altogether as it resists to keep a dichotomy between

the aesthetically heightened and the ordinary (Leddy 2012). However, if it loses its aim, it becomes responsible for the aesthetic vulnerability of the total lifeworld by the power of capital.

The subsequent study written by Ben Highmore, one of the initiators of design culture studies, evokes and analyses the liberating aspirations that have arisen in the aftermath of a cataclysm that included both the collapse of a totalising (and also aesthetically totalising) military power and the layers of war trauma. The latter resulted in a wounded urban fabric of post-WWII Europe and also a social hesitancy regarding the upbringing of the next generation. Highmore's article fills a gap in broadening the historical knowledge of design culture as it collects and revisits the discourse that emerged from the so-called experimental playground movement after 1945. He claims the activity of imaginative place-making by makeshift playing structures erected by a socially unsupervised youth on abandoned bombing sites and other junk spaces should be seen as a fundamental and everyday aesthetic activity that has importance not only through its influence on later design pedagogues like Simon Nicholson, but also by its relevance today in seeking alternatives to what David Harvey calls the spatial fix (Harvey 2001). Highmore convincingly shows how the experimental playground could be taken both as a crucial element of design culture and a laboratory of gestures for a richer aesthetic life.³

Urban perspectives, "junk space" (Koolhaas 2002), a pondering over the possibility of play, and disclosure of the hidden elements of recent social history are also present in Barborá Kundračiková's "Black Holes' Exploitation: A Central European City between Monument, Document, and Mockument," which is a complex research report that relies equally on methodological grounding, and discursive and visual sources. Her interest is not so much in how historical Central European cities are built along the defining socio-historical developments but rather in how certain under-defined parts of those cities condense alternatives for their reigning urban structures and provoke the social imagination. The theoretical insights of the study are illustrated in one case study—the example of the city of Olomouc in the Czech Republic.

An essay article written by Anna Keszeg on the art of Marion Baruch follows the four research papers. Although its theme and scope might suggest a substantial shift from the previous contributions, this is not the case. Keszeg presents the Romanian-born Italian artist Baruch as a creator of "negative space" providing visitors with a temporary void that people can try to fill with feelings, desires, and dreams. In this respect, her artistic approach is not so alien to the experimental playgrounds that Highmore analyses and the urban black holes that Kundračiková discusses. Another significant feature of Baruch is that her art can be defined as something that transcends design. One might take this literally since it develops by starting from outworn fashion and textile remnants.

³ Cf. Laboratoire du Geste, <http://www.laboratoiredugeste.com/>

Baruch herself calls her work superart, referring also to consumer society. However, she tries not to rise above the milieu of design capitalism but to submerge in its depths while highlighting textile remnants as monuments to everyday people and everyday experiences. As Keszeg concludes, “Baruch’s concept of negative space serves as a metaphor for almost every gap in contemporary human experience, making it a universal methodology.”

The arc that unites the research writings of the present volume can be summarised with the view that design culture simultaneously provides an ever-growing totalisation of human agency and intervention but also creates endless chiasms and ruptures that are pregnant with aesthetic wealth, experiential freedom, and social, even political imagination. Everydayness and art are both potent associates of those anti-structures. If design is understood as world-making, settling humans down, social engineering, and facade-like representation, it also creates its own shady, messy, and anomalous backyard as an unavoidable side-effect. The recognition and awareness of this “hinterland” requires from us a lively and refined aesthetic sensitivity, a key component of any historical understanding (Gadamer 2000).

Personal and universal aspects of the above-mentioned aesthetic maturity and awareness regarding to the ways one can experience present-day design culture are deliberated in the interview this volume includes. During the three days of the 2023 conference, *Designing Everyday Experience*, Jessica Hemmings approached Yuriko Saito, the Japanese-American philosopher who played a central part in the recent revival of interest in everyday practices and human-environment relations as aesthetic phenomena (Saito 2017, 2022).

Design culture—when understood as the totally aestheticised form of neoliberal capitalism—takes its lead from consumer society: the willingness of passive immersion and self-surrendering. In contrast, contemporary fine art practices seek a different possibility of immersion that is offered to the visitor as an activated presence. The closing article, an exhibition and catalogue review by Martha Kicsiny, considers the opportunities and capacities of such immersive aspirations.

The well of the past regarding the aesthetic experience and design culture is indeed deep. No immersion can reach its bottom. However, drawdowns are not about overcoming distance. Those are for having some thirst-quenching juice from the well. And sometimes the past proves to be less stale than any highs of the present. I hope the reader will appreciate its freshness!

Bálint Veres

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“AN HABITUAL DISPOSITION OF MIND”: ON THE ROOTS OF EVERYDAY AESTHETICS IN THE EARLY EIGHTEENTH CENTURY

Endre Szécsényi

ABSTRACT

This paper discusses some essays from London daily journals at the time of the emergence of modern aesthetics and attempts to demonstrate that what we nowadays call “everyday aesthetics” was not simply present in the relevant texts of the early eighteenth century, but, in a sense, it was the mainstream of the rising modern aesthetic. The aesthetic basically meant paying closer attention to our everyday reality including our natural and human made environments and also various quotidian activities. Contemporary everyday aesthetics should therefore be seen not so much as an extension of the mostly “art-centred” post-Kantian philosophical aesthetics, but rather as one of the original, pre-Kantian, sources of modern aesthetics to be restored or regained.

#early modern aesthetics, #Joseph Addison, #Richard Steele, #George Berkeley,
#disposition of mind

https://doi.org/10.21096/diseagno_2024_1esz

In my paper I would like to discuss the earliest stage—as it were, the birth—of modern aesthetics, and to argue that what we nowadays call “everyday aesthetics” was not simply present in the relevant texts of the early eighteenth century, but, in a sense, it was the mainstream of the emerging modern aesthetic in the period already before the appearance of systematic theories. The aesthetic basically meant paying closer attention to our everyday reality including our natural and human made environments and also various quotidian activities. Thus, contemporary everyday aesthetics should therefore be seen not so much as an extension of the mostly “art-centred” post-Kantian philosophical aesthetics, but rather as one of the original, pre-Kantian, sources of modern aesthetics to be restored or regained.

In the scholarship of the history of modern aesthetics, there are alternative narratives of the genealogy of the discipline. Here I offer an interpretation according to which the modern sense of the word aesthetic was first invented and elaborated in texts which fell outside the scope of academic philosophy. The earliest modern philosophical aesthetics was the first part of F. Hutcheson’s *Inquiry* published in 1725 (Hutcheson 2004), however, this was primarily a moral philosophical treatise, and although Hutcheson’s insights concerning the sense of beauty in the first part were interesting and had far-reaching influence, they nevertheless reduced the potential of aesthetics compared to examples from the previous decade such the essays of London daily journals and Lord Shaftesbury’s conversational philosophical writings. I will here concentrate on two authors of the journal essays: Joseph Addison and Sir Richard Steele, who were famous for their articles in the early-eighteenth century journals *The Tatler* (1709–1711) and *The Spectator* (1711–1712, 1714), and later Steele continued with the short-lived *The Guardian* (1713). Addison and Steele authored the majority of the essays for these journals, with occasional contributions from others, for example, Henry Grove, the nonconformist minister (who belonged to dissenting circles embracing Isaac Watts or Elisabeth Singer Rowe) who wrote four essays in the last issues of *The Spectator*; and George Berkeley, who was one of the most intriguing philosophers of the century, and who was already a well-known figure by 1713 when he joined the London circle of Addison, Steele, Alexander Pope, Jonathan Swift and others, and wrote some essays for *The Guardian* a few years after publishing his controversial and ground-breaking

Essay towards a New Theory of Vision (1709) and his *Treatise Concerning the Principles of Human Knowledge* (1710). So, these four are the protagonists of the present paper, and I shall comment on some of their essays which came to light in these three journals.

The Tatler, *The Spectator* and *The Guardian* were aimed at a broad readership, mostly to city-dwellers who lived everyday lives, and who had spare time to read at least a few pages every day, that is, who had some idle time. Addison clearly formulates his Ciceronian project (or *ars poetica*) in *The Spectator* 10: “I shall be ambitious to have it said of me, that I have brought Philosophy out of Closets and Libraries, Schools and Colleges, to dwell in Clubs and Assemblies, at Tea-Tables, and in Coffee-Houses.” (Addison et al. 1965, 1:44) Let us take “philosophy” here in a very broad sense: Addison probably meant any kind of meditation, reflection, and their enjoyment, and, with this, he claimed new cultural spaces for them, actually everyday places at tea-tables and in coffee-houses. And he also wanted to foster and to entertain his readers, to help them become spectators of the modern world, as it were, aesthetic beholders of the ordinary. For our purposes, suffice it to say these London journals and their essays were popular, and testament to their cultural significance and profound impact is the fact that they were published and re-published many times throughout the century, with the French translations being widely read across in Europe. Moreover, these journal enterprises were themselves imitated in several European countries, to mention only a few examples: Marivaux’s *Le Cabinet du philosophe*, Wieland’s *Teutscher Merkur*, or the Hungarian József Kármán’s *Urania* at the end of the eighteenth century.

The didactic and pedagogic (and also the political) aims of these essays were *to reform manners and morals*, to elaborate, to exemplify and to propagate a new ideal of the citizen who should be self-conscious, self-reflective, and critical yet moderate in political, religious, moral, and cultural issues—including, of course, aesthetic ones. As Steele writes in *The Spectator*: “He that is moderate in his Wishes from Reason and Choice, and not resigned from Sowness, Distaste, or Disappointment, doubles all the Pleasures of his Life. The Air, the Season, a Sun-shine Day, or a fair Prospect, are Instances of Happiness; and that which he enjoys in common with all the World [...] are to him uncommon Benefits and new Acquisitions” (Addison et al. 1965, 2:308–9) This moderate state of the human mind is intensely sensitive to the potential happiness in every quotidian thing. Although we are only concerned with the aesthetic here, it is worth keeping in mind that the mentioned further aspects were considered inseparable. So when we discern some new features of an aesthetic experience, the same experience always has or can simultaneously give rise to religious-devotional, moral, social-political, and even medical significances. It should however be noted that in these essays, the eminent occasions for the modern aesthete to use or exercise their fine taste or polite imagination were mostly everyday and/or non-artistic

situations or objects in nature or in urban environment. Certainly, the encounters with classical or esteemed modern artworks in theatres and opera houses, or in libraries and private book-collections were part of this portfolio since they too were recommended to the readers of these journals, however, they were by no means paradigmatic examples for “innocent diversions” (Addison et al. 1965, 1:397) Put simply, the emerging aesthetic project was not at all art-centred.

In *The Tatler*, Steele published a “Pastoral Letter” under the name of a “country correspondent.” This letter praises the capability of “enjoying the World in the Simplicity of its natural Beauties.” Sir Richard calls it a continuous “strong and serious Delight which flows from a well taught and liberal Mind.” (Addison et al. 1987, 2:59–60) There is nothing new in this classical commonplace. However, he then adds:

*What we take for Diversion, which is a kind of forgetting our selves, is but a mean Way of Entertainment, in Comparison of that which is considering, knowing and enjoying our selves. The Pleasures of ordinary People are in their Passions; but the Seat of this Delight is in the Reason and Understanding. Such a Frame of Mind raises that sweet Enthusiasm which warms the Imagination at the Sight of every Work of Nature, and turns all around you into Picture and Landskip.*¹ (Addison et al. 1987, 2:60)

Beside the Stoic overtones and the distinction between vulgar passions and fine delights, the special active, self-reflective “frame of mind” and the excited “imagination” are worth our attention. Even a little earlier, in the seventeenth century and without any direct mention of “imagination” or a special “frame of mind,” we can find textual examples in which the natural prospect or landscape inspired by the classical tradition of the pastoral and the georgic was considered an enjoyable experience beneficial to our health in general, or as a good occasion for spiritual meditation.² By contrast, for Steele, the very transformative power of the beholder is the point. With this power we are able to transform a neutral natural prospect into an enjoyable landscape. And this “frame of mind,” which we can retrospectively call a *proto-aesthetic disposition of mind*, can work in other fields, too, not only in that of the natural prospect but within our human-made, urban environments. And it can make us capable of seeing and enjoying differently—that is, aesthetically—in our everyday lives. I shall briefly discuss Steele’s essay on *flânerie* from *The Spectator* at the end this paper. For now, it is also worth noting that when we speak about the everyday reality of the people who lived at the turn of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, walks in nature or the experience of fair natural prospects still belonged to their everyday lives: nature, so to speak, was still nearby. Of course, the distinction between “city” and “country,” as we have seen above, was alive and oft-discussed, still a morning walk in the countryside was not considered a rare or

¹ *Although it is in the context of vulgar passions vs. the fine delight of understanding, the imagination with the help of “sweet enthusiasm” plays a role in the transformation of the sight all around into picture and landscape, that is, into a kind of artwork; Addison will change the function of this faculty in “The Pleasures of the Imagination” series (The Spectator 411–21): the “aesthetic” imagination will not be connected or subordinated to the intellect. Here, in Steele’s essay, though the vocabulary may seem proto-aesthetic, no new realm opens for enjoying the pleasures of the imagination; Steele’s observations belong instead to the discourse of “country” and “city” which will disappear in Addison’s Imagination series; on the other hand, with the claim of “considering, knowing and enjoying our selves” as the right way of diversion, it belongs to the tradition of the spiritual exercises in their Socratic-Stoic form.*

² *For example, in his essay “Of Regiment of Health”—to which Addison will also refer to in his Imagination papers in The Spectator—Sir Francis Bacon recommends a variety of delights to preserve our mental balance and well-being, amongst them the “studies that fill the mind with splendid and illustrious objects, as histories, fables, and contemplations of nature.” (1908, 148) He claims: “As for the passions, and studies of the mind; avoid envy, anxious fears; anger fretting inwards; subtle and knotty inquiries; joys and exhilarations in excess; sadness not communicated. Entertain hopes; mirth rather than joy; variety of delights, rather*

than surfeit of them; wonder and admiration, and therefore novelties; studies that fill the mind with splendid and illustrious objects, as histories, fables, and contemplations of nature.” (Bacon 1908, 147–48) Or in the fundamental work of Protestant devotional literature, Joseph Hall’s *Occasional Meditations* (1630) a “Fair Prospect” is suggested as an excellent occasions for meditation: “What a pleasing variety is here of towns, rivers, hills, dales, woods, meadows; each of them striving to set forth the other, and all of them to delight the eye! So as this is no other, than a natural and real landscape, drawn by that almighty and skilful hand, in this table of the earth, for the pleasure of our view. No other creature, besides man, is capable to apprehend this beauty: I shall do wrong to him, that brought me hither; if I do not feed my eyes, and praise my Maker. It is the intermixture, and change, of these objects, that yields this contentment both to the sense and mind.” (Hall 1851, 10) However, neither Bacon’s, nor Hall’s vocabularies contain “imagination” or any hint at the necessity of a special “frame of mind.”

extraordinary activity. Addison, for example, was an enthusiastic walker, a nature-goer, and his favourite path (posthumously named after him) starts right from the building of Magdalen College in Oxford where he studied and subsequently held a fellowship for many years.

As for this aesthetic frame of mind, it is important to highlight that it is not a natural gift in us, at least in its full-fledged form, rather it is to be acquired as a kind of “habitual” frame of mind. Addison writes an essay-series on cheerfulness in *The Spectator*: he calls cheerfulness “an Habit of Mind” which is, unlike the always transient mirth, “fixt and permanent,” and “keeps up a kind of Day-light in the Mind, and fills it with a steady and perpetual Serenity.” (Addison et al. 1965, 3:429) In the closing passage of the last piece of this three-essay series on cheerfulness, Addison recommends we especially take walks in nature in spring, because the “Beauties of the Creation” stimulates our “pleasing Instinct,” and we can feel “secret Satisfaction and Complacency.” (Addison et al. 1965, 3:475–76). These “entertainments of Sense” must be associated with a reflection upon the benevolent divine Hand that “fills the World with Good.” Addison explicitly relates this quasi-aesthetic activity to “religious Exercise” (like prayer and psalm singing): the “Chearfulness of Heart [...] in us [which comes] from the Survey of Nature’s Works” is a preparation for something more: this “secret Gladness” and the “grateful reflection on the Supreme Cause who produces it” together, after a sufficient amount of exercise, constitute an active and productive inner state of mind that we would call aesthetic: “Such an habitual Disposition of Mind consecrates every Field and Wood, turns an ordinary Walk into a Morning or Evening Sacrifice, and will improve those transient Gleams of Joy [...] into an inviolable and perpetual State of Bliss and Happiness.” (Addison et al. 1965, 3:476) Not only the transition from the sensual joy to the eternal heavenly bliss is interesting here, but the claim that an “habitual disposition of mind” is to be developed, because only through the transformative, self-reflective and everyday activity of the cheerful mind we can feel the fullness of the experience of natural beauties, only through this activity we can find the tight links between the terrestrial and the celestial. Moreover, it is not simply a transformation of a natural view into a landscape (into an artwork), rather, it is the augmentation of an enjoyable everyday activity in order to reach a higher level: in spiritual and in temporal sense—due to these features we can call this state of mind aesthetic. I will return to this point soon.

Earlier, in *The Tatler*, Addison published a pastoral essay on the occasion of a summertime morning “walk into the country,” in which he described the vivid beauties of nature, and it was actually not simply a fair prospect but a multisensory experience: “Things about me, with the cool Breath of the Morning, which inspired the Birds with so many delightful Instincts, created in me the same Kind of animal Pleasure, and made my Heart overflow with such secret Emotions of Joy and Satisfaction as are not to be described or accounted for.” (Addison et al 1987, 2:140)

This inexplicable, *je-ne-says-quoi*-like pleasure seems identical with—or at least a close relative of—“the secret satisfaction” of the cheerful mind. In the concluding passage of the same essay, Addison writes: “I look upon the whole country in spring-time as a spacious garden, and make as many visits to a spot of daisies, or a bank of violets, as a florist does to his borders or parterres. There is not a bush of blossoms within a mile of me which I am not acquainted with, nor scarce of daffodil or cowslip that withers away in my neighbourhood without my missing it.” He felt “unspeakable Pleasure” when he walked home in “this temper of mind through several fields and meadows,” while he reflected simultaneously “on the Bounty of Providence, which has made the most pleasing and most beautiful Objects the most ordinary and most common.” (Addison et al. 1987, 2:143) So the benevolent God rendered the most enjoyable the most ordinary—that is, he made the highest pleasures the most quotidian and generally available to anybody. By means of our “habitual disposition of mind” or our cheerful mind we can eventually take this path back to the transcendent source of every beauty in creation without having eliminate the sensual elements of the experience.

I claim that the “unspeakable Pleasure” of a morning walk does not lead us to the discovery of the extraordinary in the ordinary, even less to the discovery of the aesthetic in the everydayness (in the attentive turn to quotidian activities or even to household chores),³ rather it demonstrates a potential in the everyday for feeling a fuller reality, for regaining an aboriginal (innocent) attention to the world, or, in other words, for living in an extended life which embraces a broader timescale. As for the aesthetic quality of *this* everyday experience, amongst the three Addisonian ones, that is, the great, the beautiful and the uncommon or novel (as it was elaborated in the Imagination papers), the third one, *novelty* as aesthetic category seems the most relevant to us here: what is novel and attracts our attention “fills the Soul with an agreeable Surprise, gratifies its Curiosity” (Addison et al. 1965, 3:541). Nevertheless it is not necessarily extraordinary: a monster must be uncommon *and* extraordinary at the same time, but natural objects “in the opening of the Spring” (Addison et al. 1965, 3:542) are very familiar to us, we have already seen them several times, still they can strike us with their new and fresh look again and again—with their ever-renewing novelty. We never cease enjoying the wake of spring or summer in full bloom, etc. As Addison observes in the same essay, we are rarely tired of looking at natural objects or views which are in permanent motion, especially in comparison with the static prospects be they great and beautiful.

So far, I have tried very briefly to show some characteristics of the everyday aesthetics of the early eighteenth century focusing mostly on the experience of natural environment. In what follows, I shall highlight two features of it: the temporal character of the experience and its spiritual-devotional or existential dimension, and I will also widen the scope of the aesthetic.

³ As Yuriko Saito formulates it (2017, 2–3): “The narrative currently dominating the discourse on everyday aesthetics requires defamiliarisation of the familiar to render the ordinary in our life extraordinary. [...] I offer another possibility. I argue that we can capture the aesthetic texture of ordinariness experienced as such, as long as we pay attention to what we are experiencing rather than acting on autopilot. Being attentive is a prerequisite for any kind of aesthetic experience and it does not necessarily compromise the ordinariness of ordinary life.”

In his *Spectator* essay on the pleasures of the wise man, Addison already discusses time. Via Seneca, he reminds us of an inconsistency in our attitude to time: we usually complain of the shortness of our lifetime, still we “have much more [time] than we know what to do with [...] we are wishing every Period of [our life] at an end” in order to reach a certain state or achieve a desired result as soon as possible (Addison et al. 1965, 1:394). Addison recommends some methods of how to *wisely design* our life, or at least those periods of time “which are neither filled with Pleasure nor Business.” Many of us have plenty of idle time, because we “are not always engaged in Scenes of Action” (Addison et al. 1965, 1:395). The first method is the “Exercise of Virtue,” the third—with which the next essay (no. 94) will deal—the pursuit of knowledge. The second method “to fill up our time” is a series of “useful and innocent Diversions”; which means that the “amusements of Life” for a *homo aestheticus* are amongst the wise man’s pleasures. These activities of the everyday vary from playing cards, going to the theatre to conversing with a virtuous friend or with some eminent person. Moreover: “A Man that has a Taste of Musick, Painting, or Architecture, is like one that has another Sense, when compared with such as have no Relish of those Arts. The [skill, the knowledge, or the industry of the] Florist, the Planter, the Gard’ner, the Husbandman, when they are only as Accomplishments to the Man of Fortune, are great Reliefs to a Country Life, and many ways useful to those who are possessed of them.” (Addison et al. 1965, 1:397) So there are many “useful Amusements of Life” to be multiplied, with this one can avoid being idle, that is, having empty time, and their mind can resist to (dangerous, harmful) passions in everyday life. This cheerful time spending is not empty, but free—in many senses, for example, it is free from reigning passions. Later, in the Imagination papers, Addison puts the modern aesthetic experience (as “the pleasures of the Imagination”) into the same context when he writes that there are “very few who know how to be idle and innocent, or have a Relish of any Pleasures that are not Criminal [...]. A Man should endeavour [...] to make the Sphere of his innocent Pleasures as wide as possible [...], and find in them such a Satisfaction a wise Man would not blush to take.” (Addison et al. 1965, 3:538–9) The comparison of the aesthetic spectator to the “wise Man” is an allusion to essay 93.

Time is crucial to these journal essays in another sense, too, as Youngren (1982, 274) writes in his seminal paper: “Right from the first of the *Spectator* papers it is clear that time, and especially the ways in which the mind works through time, are primary concerns of the persona Addison and Steele are creating. Mr. Spectator is, in fact, as much a spectator of mental activity (his own and other people’s) as of the external world of London and the Club. ‘The working of my own Mind,’ Steele has him say (No. 4), ‘is the general Entertainment of my Life!’” As Steele writes in *The Spectator*:

There is no real Life, but cheerful Life... [...] Whatever we do we should keep up the Cheerfulness of our Spirits, and never let them sink below an Inclination at least to be well pleased: The Way to this is to keep our Bodies in Exercise, our Minds at Ease. That insipid State, wherein neither are in Vigour, is not to be accounted any part of our Portion of Being. When we are in the Satisfaction of some Innocent Pleasure, or pursuit of some laudable Design, we are in the Possession of Life, of Human Life. (Addison et al 1965, 2:65)

This ease and innocent satisfaction, being the outcome of the mind's working through time, do not mean, however, tranquillity in the sense of some kind of suspension of our mental activities.

In his historical survey on the consciousness of time from medieval times onwards, Georges Poulet, although relying mainly on French authors—he cites J-P. de Crousaz's *Traité du beau* (1715) and one of Marquis de Vauvenargues' letters (1740)—claims that even in the eighteenth century, “human existence appears [...] as a kind of continuous creation, insofar as it is the perpetual recovery of existence by a being who is slipping every moment into nothingness.” This nothingness is “pure insensibility” (“insipid State,” as Steele would call it), to escape it “means to be aware of one's own sensations. The more intense they are the more one will feel [their] present existence; and the more numerous [the sensations] are the more one will sense a duration in [their] existence.” So “intensity of sensation” maintains the existence and significance of the moment, while “the multiplicity of sensation ensures duration.” To Poulet, it marks a new historical epoch (which, we might add, is interwoven with the emergence of modern aesthetic experience, to which the citation from Crousaz's treatise on beauty may implicitly refer) because European “man suddenly feels for the first time in the Christian era that the instant of [their] existence is an instant free of all dependence, liberated from all duration, equal to all its own potentialities, the very *causa sui* [...] moment in which the soul suffices itself, since it finds itself in the fullness it experiences. It loves itself. It knows itself to be faultless. The lived sensation is the consciousness of being.” (Poulet 1956, 20–21) The London essays of the early eighteenth century on the topic of “everyday aesthetic” also contribute to discovering this intensity and multiplicity of sensations and feelings as the fundamental experience of human—as “cheerful Life.”

Specifically, the aesthetic experience, in the form of “innocent diversions” or “innocent pleasures of the imagination,” is always a temporally evolving experience, it is associated with or conceived in the framework of some movement or motion in time, as we have already seen in Addison's walks through fields and meadows, in the recommended bodily and mental or spiritual exercises of everyday life, and, as we shall see, in Steele's walks in the streets of London. It is never *only* a static and/or timeless contemplation. The aesthetic category of novelty in itself

⁴ *It was already a characteristic feature of Addison's aesthetic essays and his Spectator enterprise in general that he treated afterlife as an extension, or “as a continuation of a trajectory begun on earth, an extension to its logical conclusion of a regimen of habits created in daily life.” (Jost 2011, 606).*

represents the dynamism in time, the incessant interplay between the accustomed and the new. And, finally, we can discern a further temporal aspect of the emerging aesthetic of the everyday: we encounter something with a larger time-scale. Our particular aesthetic emotions, sentiments and thoughts open up a broader perspective: either we can remember and regain the prelapsarian innocence and its joy, or we can fore-taste the heavenly bliss of the afterlife.

In his “Essay on the Pleasures Natural and Fantastical” published in *The Guardian* 49, Berkeley, who was conspicuously inspired by some of Addison's aesthetic essays of *The Spectator*, especially the Imagination papers and their prefiguration by Steele's essay 206 in *The Spectator* (Ketcham 1985, 65–8), wants to show his readership the right way of human life in which the greatest pleasures can be gained. Instead of the “fantastical pleasures” of property, money, luxury, social rank, curiosity and the like, he warmly recommends “natural pleasures,” which are somehow instinctive, and do not depend on taste or fashion: “we are prompted to natural pleasures by an instinct impressed on our minds by the Author of our nature.” (Berkeley 1948–57, 7:194) These pleasures are “suited as well to the rational as the sensual part of our nature,” but the sensual ones are to be under the control of “the rules of reason” (Berkeley 1948–57, 7:194) so that the “natural” seems a beautiful harmony between the sensuous and the rational. If we succeed in keeping alive our inclination to these natural pleasures, it will result in “tranquillity and cheerfulness”. According to Berkeley, this advice must be taken as a fundamental principle which should shape both our everyday life and our afterlife.⁴ While in his Imagination series, Addison mostly took examples from the fields of natural scenes and prospects, architecture and belles-lettres, Berkeley extends the scope of the aesthetic to urban scenes (like streets with gilt chariots and well-dressed people inside, beautiful ladies, elegant galleries and libraries, etc.), to home interiors, and to fair weather: “I regard [all of these] as amusement designed to delight my eyes...”—it seems a pure everyday aesthetic position, especially given he adds:

Every day, numberless innocent and natural gratifications occur to me, while I behold my fellow creatures labouring in a toilsome and absurd pursuit of trifles [...]. Fair weather is the joy of my soul; about noon I behold a blue sky with rapture, and receive great consolation from the rosie dashes of light which adorn the clouds of the morning and evening. When I am lost among green trees, I do not envy a great man with a great crowd at his levée. And I often lay aside thoughts of going to an opera that I may enjoy the silent pleasure of walking by moonlight, or viewing the stars sparkle in their azure ground; which I look upon as part of my possession, not without a secret indignation at the tastelessness of mortal men who, in their race thro' life, overlook the real enjoyments of it. (Berkeley 1948–57, 7:196)

The series of “innocent and natural gratifications” over quotidian objects and situations can be without doubt considered an everyday aesthetic experience.

Berkeley also suggests that the series of these natural pleasures inevitably ends in the experience of the presence of the divine being as their utmost perfection, when we eventually realise and feel that pleasure “which naturally affects a human mind with the most lively and transporting touches”: “we act in the eye of infinite wisdom, power, and goodness, that will crown our virtuous endeavours here with a happiness hereafter, large as our desires, and lasting as our immortal souls. This is a perpetual spring of gladness in the mind. This lessens our calamities, and doubles our joys. Without this the highest state of life is insipid, and with it the lowest is a paradise.” (Berkeley 1948–57, 7:196) The actual aesthetic experience of the presence of deity, without which everything would be tasteless or joyless, can be reached in the form of the everyday natural pleasures. Contemplation and action, natural pleasures and Christian morality (with the direct references to the mysteries of afterlife and immortal soul) seem to be inseparable in the type of aesthetic exercise Berkeley recommends. In Addison’s essay 93 of *The Spectator* about the treatment of time, this type of experience still belonged to the “Exercise of Virtue” which may be either the practice of social virtues or a solitary communion with “the great Author of Being”: “The Man who lives under an habitual Sense of the Divine Presence keeps up a perpetual Cheerfulness of Temper, and enjoys every Moment the Satisfaction of thinking himself in Company with his dearest and best of Friends. The Time never lies heavy upon him: It is impossible for him to be alone.” (Addison et al. 1965, 1:396) It seems that in Berkeley’s essay this Addisonian “habitual Sense of the Divine Presence” is already the utmost form or consummation of the other ordinary useful amusements of life, and not a separated method.

In one of the last and most beautiful essays of *The Spectator*, Henry Grove, inspired by Addison’s Imagination papers, writes about the “Force of Novelty,” saying that this love in human beings has been adapted to our present (metaphysical) state as a kind of insatiable appetite (Addison et al. 1965, 5:139). Its prefiguration, however, is that perpetual employment with which “the Blessed” search into nature, and they “to Eternity advance into the fathomless Depths of the Divine Perfections. [...] After an Acquaintance of many thousand Years with the Works of God, the Beauty and Magnificence of the Creation fills them with the same pleasing Wonder and profound Awe, which Adam felt himself seized with as he first opened his Eyes upon this glorious Scene...” (Addison et al 1965, 5:140) Grove seems to suggest that only from this spiritual-devotional level can we understand and rightly evaluate the “force of novelty”; only from this angle can we comprehend the mysterious charm of its wonder and the metaphysical

embeddedness of its everyday aesthetic quality. In other words, the ancient, prelapsarian time of paradise and the future state of the blessed represent the temporal dimension which opens wide in the aesthetic experience of the everyday. Similarly, Addison writes earlier:

It is very reasonable to believe, that part of the Pleasure which happy Minds shall enjoy in a future State, will arise from an enlarged Contemplation of the Divine Wisdom in the Government of the World, and a Discovery of the secret and amazing Steps of Providence, from the Beginning to the End of Time. Nothing seems to be an Entertainment more adapted to the Nature of Man, if we consider that Curiosity is one of the strongest and most lasting Appetites implanted in us, and that Admiration is one of our most pleasing Passions; and what a perpetual Succession of Enjoyments will be afforded to both these, in a Scene so large and various as shall then be laid open to our View in the Society of superior Spirits, who perhaps will joyn with us in so delightful a Prospect. (Addison et al. 1965, 2:420)

Tuveson rightly remarks that this essay contains “the germ” of the Imagination papers (Tuveson 1972, 128): curiosity as the fundamental human appetite and admiration as one of the most pleasing passions can be easily associated with the aesthetic experiences of the novelty and the sublime (great)—as the most appropriate entertainments to human nature. These insights may also suggest that the everyday aesthetic experience of things and events can always open up a larger time-scale and, simultaneously, make a more intense and sensual-spiritual profundity available to us.

Finally, I turn to Steele’s remarkable essay on *flânerie* in *The Spectator*. Mr. Spectator decides to take a twenty-four-hour tour from Richmond to the city of London by boat, coach, and on foot “till the many different Objects I must needs meet with should tire my Imagination” (Addison et al. 1965, 4:98). We can read this detailed report as if it was a screenplay for a video clip: we are, with Mr Spectator, moving through different urban spaces, encountering with several people of different social classes, entering various social acts in urban environments, seeing other people’s amusements—and *enjoying ourselves throughout*. At the end of the busy day, Mr. Spectator is reflecting upon the meaning of his aesthetic enterprise:

When I came to my Chamber I writ down these Minutes; but was at a Loss what Instruction I should propose to my Reader from the Enumeration of so many insignificant Matters and Occurrences; and I thought it of great Use, if they could learn with me to keep their Minds open to Gratification, and ready to receive it from any thing it meets with. This one Circumstance will make every Face you see give you the Satisfaction you now take in beholding that of a Friend; will make every Object a pleasing one; will make all the Good which arrives to any Man, an Encrease of Happiness to your self. (Addison et al. 1965, 4:103)

Steele does not emphasise the religious-devotional dimension of the aesthetic experience of the everyday, as Addison, Berkeley, and Grove do, instead he propagates an “existentialist” version. In one of his insightful papers, Brian Michael Norton (2015, 129–130) correctly formulates it: for Steele the “value of the aesthetic attitude [...] lies in its potential to intensify ordinary experience, attaching us to the living present and awakening us to life. Through this ‘Disposition’ to ‘Delight in all we hear and see,’ Steele argues, we can live in such a way that ‘there are no Moments lost’ and the ‘heaviest of Loads (when it is a Load) that of Time, is never felt by us.’” Norton quotes here from the essay 100 of *The Spectator*, in which Steele adds that “when a well corrected lively Imagination and good Breeding are added to a sweet Disposition [i.e. the innate Goodness of Temper], they qualify it to be one of the greatest Blessings, as well as Pleasures of Life.” (Addison et al. 1965, 1:421) Thus, in Steele’s everyday aesthetics time is not extended to transcendental dimensions, instead, the idle or indolent periods of life-time were meant to transform into lived life, into a life worth living.

This early eighteenth century project of the aesthetic in London daily journals was primarily interested neither in criticism, nor generally in the philosophy of sensory perception (aesthesis); instead, it could be connected to the “way of life” tradition of philosophy and to meditational exercises. Our authors discussed the manners or ways of human life, even including transcendental perspectives from Adamic origins to afterlife, and happiness in general. This project was not about composing human life as a work of art, rather, it was about enriching or augmenting it: opening new realms of delightful activities—pleasures which can make links between the terrestrial and the celestial, between the temporal and the eternal. They were convinced, in harmony with the contemporary design argument, that the benevolent and wise Creator designed these amusements to delight us in everyday life, at the same time, they also taught their readership to design their own lives: there is not a given pathway to choose in the case of the aesthetic, it is an individual route that has to be designed, paved, and then walked; the designing activity of *homo aestheticus* had nothing to do with some material object or product, but with “an active environment of design,” as Highmore (2008, 18) formulates it. It was:

the active sense of design as patterning and shaping the world in complex ways. [...] Here design can rather be considered] as a series of negotiations, as an orchestration (of sense, of perception, and so on), as an orientation (something that encourages and generates propensities), as an assemblage (and as an assembling activity, where it is always possible that combinations themselves combine), as an arrangement (a temporary coming together), and so on. (2008, 18)

It is also important to note that these recommended and achievable diversions were introduced as “innocent” ones, they were neither identical

with hedonistic or sensual delights, nor with the joys of the intellect. In Steele's essays these everyday aesthetic activities were rather involvements or participations in the everyday life while Addison offered instead a kind of spectatorship in which the aesthetic beholders always kept a certain distance from their objects or spectacles. So, from the outset, there were different ways and strategies to transform everyday realities into an enjoyable and profounder realm of human life.

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THE TOTAL DESIGN OF EVERYDAY LIFE

HISTORICAL IDEALS AND DILEMMAS OF THE GESAMTKUNSTWERK

Anders V. Munch

ABSTRACT

The idea of designing for everyday life on every scale, through objects, spaces, and systems, is central to modern design and architecture. The Italian architect Ernesto Nathan Rogers is often quoted for urging his fellow architects to design everything “from the spoon to the city” (Rogers 1946, 2).

For designers and architects of the high modernism of the 1950s and 1960s this motto stood for the pursuit of “total design,” in which every detail should be taken care of and aligned according to an overall scheme, from small living units to grand urban plans. The ideal is still very much alive today but is accompanied by the general criticism of modernism: that totalizing schemes confine everyday life in rigid frames and conformity. The idea of total design belongs, however, to a long tradition of thinking in art, design, and architecture. I will discuss key statements from high modernism on total design and total architecture, and revisit earlier expressions of the idea of the Gesamtkunstwerk as a comparable concept in art nouveau and the avant-garde. This broad notion, also called the Total Work of Art, was very productive and widespread, and has been widely discussed. I will discuss some of the dilemmas of this ambition to make comprehensive designs framing the experience of everyday life. This ideal contains some of the most valuable ideas in the history of design and architecture, which we should strive to keep alive whilst remaining aware that they have also been a continuous source of troubles and fierce discussions.

#everyday life, #total design, #Gesamtkunstwerk, #participation, #aestheticisation

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In my book, *The Gesamtkunstwerk in Design and Architecture*, I trace how German composer Richard Wagner's initial ideas developed into ideals in design and architecture through art nouveau and the Bauhaus School as part of the avant-garde. Despite earlier ideas from Gottfried Semper (Munch 2021, 70–71) and similar thoughts by William Morris (Munch 2021, 96–108), Wagner's concept of the Gesamtkunstwerk had little to do with everyday design and architecture. It was the idea to gather all art forms and artistic means to create an "artwork of the future," which could gather the people and merge art and life in the total experience of a new scenic art. Wagner only thought of architecture as a worthy and functional frame of the performance, but his ideas merged with ideas of Semper and Morris and inspired art nouveau artists and architects to combine high arts with the "lesser," decorative arts to make interiors and whole buildings into total works of art. By dissolving the former hierarchy of arts, art nouveau could both distil and condense artistic means into an enclosed space and distribute them in public space, to every corner of everyday life. Both dimensions were important to the following avant-garde artists and modernist architects making experiments across art, design and architecture to shape modern society through spatial organisation and visual communication.

The total design of high modernism inherits this tradition but is to be understood in a slightly different context, as practices became more institutionalised and technocratic than experimental (Tafuri 1976; Munch 2005). In this sense, the concept of Gesamtkunstwerk is more than total design, but some of the utopian and artistic dreams remain and are worth discussing. The moral, societal goal of merging art and life to enrich and improve everyone's everyday life continued but with less explicit understanding of the comprehensive aesthetic organisation of all aspects of life. In the worst cases, the life of users or inhabitants is reduced and confined as an artistic means, as part of the work of art. My focus here is on the dilemmas between the moral goals and the artistic reduction of the plural lifeforms, rather than any full historical explanation. I introduce cases and thoughts of designers and architects as well as artists like Kurt Schwitters and Constant who struggled with these dilemmas in their spatial experiments as labs for societal change.



FIGURE 1. Nanna Ditzel, exhibition of the Vilette-series, Belgium 1965. Photo by Louis Schnakenburg, permission by Nanna Ditzel Design.

The photo of an exhibition of the Vilette-series furniture modules, made in 1965 by the Danish designer, Nanna Ditzel (fig. 1), provides a first illustration of the dilemma, and one that is closer to our time than art nouveau interiors or avant-garde installations. Ditzel wanted to emancipate people from fixed, bourgeois interior and its conventional ways of social behaviour as well as empower them to build their own, individual environments. The photo shows versatile modules on podiums of different heights showing how they can be used to build your own 3D-living landscape and colour composition. In this entertaining scene, the visitors have arranged themselves for the photographer, but how they might struggle to get to their feet again. After one of Ditzel's first experiments, a joint exhibition at the Museum of Decorative Arts in Copenhagen in 1952, a fellow fashion designer developed a new kind of jump suit that would be more appropriate for such gymnastics (Staunsager and Larsen 2023). When we need to dress differently, however, to suit the new total design, it is not just "emancipation," but a dictate of changing dress code and behaviour. The Danish architect, Arne Karlsen was critical of the trend of low furniture, pillows on the floor or hanging shells, as they "[...] are not just incompatible with the difference in age of generations and gymnastic abilities, but they act violently against everything else we express ourselves through. Not just against our ordinary, social interactions, but also against their material manifestations. Dress for example" (Karlsen 1965, 82). Of course, you can

read this as just a bourgeois defence of conventional manners and dressing, which Ditzel and others wanted to challenge and promote a more playful style. But their emancipatory experiments did create new bodily and social demands. The ambitions might be sound, but the actual framing threatened to reduce the inhabitants to the mere means or material for the full staging of the idea. The desire to design new forms of use might in radical attempts implicate designing people as new users.

Another challenge to this discussion is that the term “Gesamtkunstwerk” has been used rather loosely in the historical literature to refer to many kinds and aspects of synthesis and comprehensiveness. The concept itself invites rather sweeping outlines of mergers of any kind of art forms or creative practice. The exhibition *Der Hang zum Gesamtkunstwerk* (Szeemann 1983) showed a stunning historical array of hybrid forms including examples ranging from poetry, dance, theatre, decoration, installation, and happenings to monumental buildings, and even included idealistic organisations as the Olympic Games and Red Cross. The catalogue contained a philosophical and political critique of the theories of Richard Wagner and his followers but included no specific discussions of design and architecture. The same goes for a later wave of volumes on the Gesamtkunstwerk around 2010, which came mostly from studies of literature, music, and art history. Of course, design and architecture were part of the cases, but the critique was mostly theoretical (Finger and Follett 2011; Roberts 2011). Only Juliett Koss’ *Modernism After Wagner* took a closer look at architecture around 1900, and with the main focus on theatre buildings, her critical reading traced a Wagnerian heritage in architecture (2010). Mark Wigley (1998a) published a short, interesting discussion of “Whatever Happened to Total Design?,” covering art nouveau, avant-garde, and more recent architecture, but without engaging in the Wagnerian heritage or using the term Gesamtkunstwerk. My book on *The Gesamtkunstwerk in Design and Architecture* (Munch 2021) presents the history of the Wagnerian idea and how it merges into the prehistory of modern design and architecture, from Bayreuth to Bauhaus.

The fear of totalitarianism lurks in the criticism of total design and total architecture. The German art theoretician Bazon Brock tried to distinguish the concepts of the total work of art, total art, and totalitarian art in the 1983 catalogue, but did not distinguish them fully (Szeemann 1983). It is certainly important to see the comprehensive use of art and design by totalitarian regimes as part of this history and remember the lessons of *The Dialectic of Enlightenment* about how human reason inverts and becomes inhuman (Horkheimer and Adorno 2002). But if we demonise all attempts to embrace the total scope of modern life by design as totalitarian, we miss the positive contributions to modern culture from this tradition, and fail to build on the intentions, logics, and critical experiences of the Gesamtkunstwerk. I hope to strike a balance between acknowledging the good intentions and valuable solutions on

the one hand and the pitfalls and unseen consequences on the other. Central to the discussion that follow is the question of how people are seen as part of the total scope, as both aims and means.

THE TOTAL SCOPE OF HIGH MODERNISM

Setting off from the period in which modernist architecture realised some of its most ambitious projects, we find a motto parallel to Ernesto Nathan Rogers's from the Finnish-American architect, Eero Saarinen (1962, 5), who wanted to design everything from "ashtray to city plan" and explained furthermore:

Perhaps the most important thing I learned from my father was that in any design problem one should seek the solution in terms of the next largest thing. If the problem is an ashtray, then the way it relates to a table will influence its design. If the problem is a chair, then its solution must be found in the way it relates to the room cube. If it is a building, the townscape will affect the solution. (Saarinen 1962, 11)

This seems like very basic knowledge in modern design and found its full expression in the TWA-terminal, its sculptural, concrete volumes and nice ashtrays (Munch 2012). Interestingly, however, he related this advice to his father, the Finnish art nouveau architect, Eliel Saarinen, who made spectacular, decorative designs for buildings and homes as clear examples of the art nouveau ideal of the Gesamtkunstwerk.

In the 1950s Walter Gropius expressed the same idea with the concept of "total architecture," mentioned in the title of his book from 1955: "The realisation of the stated goal of a 'total' architecture that encompasses the entire visible world, from simple utensils to the complex city, still requires new experiments and the search for new truths in collaboration with artistically like-minded people" (Gropius 1988, 192). While Saarinen stood as sole maestro or *souverain* sculptor of his monumental buildings, especially the TWA Terminal, Gropius invites other kinds of artistic collaborators to work on the whole "visible world". Together with his work as school director and professor, this was preparing designers and architects for joint assignments. In *Vision in Motion* (1947), László Moholy-Nagy already stated how these Bauhaus ideas not only concerned the physical structures on any scale, but also forms of living: "There is design in organisation of emotional experiences, in family life, in labour relations, in city planning, in working together as civilised human beings. Ultimately all problems of design merge into one great problem: 'design for life'" (Moholy-Nagy 1965, 42). In line with this understanding of design as covering all shaping, framing, and organizing of public and private life, Moholy-Nagy urged all people to act as designers. These thoughts of Gropius and Moholy-Nagy are clearly the legacy of the Bauhaus:

During the all too few years of its existence, the Bauhaus embraced the whole range of visual art: architecture, planning, painting, sculpture, industrial design and stage work. The aim of the Bauhaus was to find a new and powerful working correlation of all the processes of artistic creation to culminate in a new equilibrium with our visual environment. (Gropius 1965, 87)

FROM INTERIORS TO SOCIETY

Despite Gropius ignoring any predecessors and maintaining a strong influence over the writing of the history of the Bauhaus as pioneering, it is clear to us today that not all their ideas and experiments started there, as *Before Bauhaus* (Maciuka 2005) and other recent research has shown (Alexander 2017). In 1911 the spokesman of the German Werkbund, Hermann Muthesius, resumed the initial development of this preceding organisation in the lecture “Where Do We Stand?”:

What was originally a movement within the decorative arts became a general movement aimed at reforming our entire culture of expression. [...] “From sofa-cushion to city building”—this is how one might describe the trajectory followed by the applied art-architectural movement over the past fifteen years. (Posener 1964, 188)

Here we see the earliest version of a motto in line with Rogers and Saarinen, mentioning neither spoons nor ashtrays but cushions as the point of departure. This statement, however, is slightly different because Muthesius also indicates a development towards city planning. But the Werkbund still embraced design of everyday items and interiors, so it expresses the same basic idea.

The Belgian designer and Werkbund member Henry Van de Velde is a perfect illustration of this broad spectrum of design for everyday experience, both because of his early artistic work with embroidery and his later work with industrial design, interiors for shops, and architecture. The complete design (including furniture and fittings) of his own *Villa Bloemenwerf* (1895), outside Brussels, was inspired by William Morris. The creative impulse of music is also visible in a photo of the interior through a score by Wagner on the grand piano (fig. 2). The total design is complete with his design of the dress of his wife Maria. Her “tea gown” was designed according

FIGURE 2. *Photo of Maria Sèthe, wife of Henry van de Velde, dressed in a “tea gown” designed by Van de Velde before the grand piano in Villa Bloemenwerf, 1895, Uccles/Brussels, designed by Van de Velde.*



to the life and gender reform ideas of the period, liberating women from the tight, torturous corsets. We can hope Maria was also involved in the concept for and the sewing of the dress. If not, her role is somewhat reduced to the wearer of this part of the total design, a mute extra on the stage.

The German designer Peter Behrens made a more far-reaching example of the total design for everyday experience in the Werkbund. Like Van de Velde, he was trained in painting, but took the task of designing his own villa in the Darmstadt artists' colony, Mathildehöhe, which opened in 1901. Here artists and industrialists would try to merge art and life, preparing the collaboration of Werkbund, which was established in 1907. As chief architect of AEG, he later expanded the design scope to cover everything from the logo and ads to products and buildings. In this role, he both designed condensed brand spaces for AEG in shops, shows, and factories and distributed the designed objects to many homes and public spaces. He created a corporate identity for the workers and other employees through buildings and graphic design of letters and posters, where they could perform in line with the brand. This remains today as one of the most widespread types of total design in everyday life, not only for corporate employees, but also for consumers "living the brand." And it might be difficult to distinguish whether consumers use the brands as means to fulfil their lifestyle needs, or if the brands use the consumers as means of branding. Their employees are at least paid to perform.

The most elaborated and comprehensive case of total design of everyday life conceived by Werkbund-members, however, is the garden city of Hellerau, planned and built from 1906 for the workers of Deutsche Werkstätten furniture factory, just north of Dresden. The city plan and the houses were designed by a board of artists and architects, who also designed the furniture made at the factory. It is a very strong example of how industrial leaders tried to use art and architecture to improve and enrich living conditions for their employees. It followed paternalistic ideals of social responsibility, was also beneficial for cultural education and encouraging loyalty. Even the cultural entertainment of the citizens was designed and staged at the festival house, where the inhabitants trained rhythmic exercises and took part in music, dance, and stage works. The Swiss choreographer Emile Jacques-Dalcroze, who was in charge of the Festspiel-Haus, stated his overall goal for scenic art in his seminal book from 1907 on rhythm and bodily movement: "Our entire life becomes a work of art, one that is quite simple despite all of its diversity. The purpose of life cannot only be to produce works of art, it must also be to appropriate it in all particulars and relationships, in short to elevate life itself to a work of art" (Jacques-Dalcroze 1907, 152). This expresses the ideal of removing any borders between art and life that we also meet in other radical experiments of the total work of art. But it does not investigate how to live in art or as art. In the pedagogy of his rhythmic gymnastics, you must be trained, not only to perform, but

also to optimally appreciate scenic and musical art. Is this then for the sake of life or for the sake of art? In the best cases it might be for both but few of us can claim to “elevate” our life to a work of art.

COLLABORATING ON THE ARTWORK OF THE FUTURE

It might be hard to imagine the heavy institution of the Bayreuth Festival and its conservative tradition linked up with this more progressive line of modern design and architecture. But Richard Wagner’s ideas sprang out of utopian socialism. He envisioned *The Artwork of the Future* in 1849 as a fully collaborative effort, across all branches of art, made collectively with all kinds of artist and with the emotional participation of the audience. The mutual experience should give birth to a new culture, a new life. The ideas of the Gesamtkunstwerk were written down during the failed revolution in Dresden in 1848 and under Wagner’s later political exile in Zurich. Here he also expressed his own scenic vision in a letter to his friend from the revolution, Theodor Uhlig, in 1850:

Here [...] I would, in some beautiful meadow outside the city, erect a primitive theatre made of boards and beams according to my designs and equip it only with the scenery and machinery necessary to be able to perform Siegfried. [...] all who announce their arrival and travel to Zurich for that purpose will be sure to be admitted, and, like all other admissions, it will of course be free! Once everything was arranged satisfactorily, I would, under these circumstances, enact three performances of Siegfried in a week: After the third performance, the theatre is to be torn down and my score burned. (Habel 1985, 13)

This radical experience should only live on through the impact on the participants and their memories. In the end, however, the score was not burned and was expanded to the four operas of *The Nibelungen Ring*.

Radical ideas of participation in total design can be mirrored in these ambitions of shaping a new community through collective artistic experience. The most holistic ideas today of the user as co-designer and part of the total experience echo Bauhaus thoughts on total design. And they go further back to ideas of the Gesamtkunstwerk from Morris, Wagner and art nouveau artists. The “audience” was part of the artistic material for the total experience, a collective work of art. Going further than Wagner, the legacy of Bauhaus has influenced not only artists, but according to Moholy-Nagy, taught every user and viewer to “think in relationships,” to connect thinking, feeling, and acting (1965). This is also part of modern pedagogy, such as Montessori and Fröbel approaches, as the means to shape and creatively engage responsible citizens. But to what extent did participants need to have received prior training or even aesthetic literacy to be able to participate in such a collective artistic experience, to be formed as part of the artistic “material”?

The participation of citizens was an explicit part of the *Scope of Total Architecture* for Gropius in 1955: “Because what we need is not only the creative artist, but a responsive audience and how are we going to get it?” He continues suggesting a way to develop and educate a responsive audience of engaged citizens: “It means, in short, that we must start at the kindergarten to make children playfully reshape their immediate environment. For participation is the key word in planning. Participation sharpens individual responsibility, the prime factor in making a community coherent, in developing group vision and pride in the self-created environment.” (Gropius 1955, 177) Again, this is a very admirable ambition which has also been part of the public education agendas of various welfare states. But we need to be cautious about children and other citizens being aligned to the aesthetics of the planners and turned into material or tools for processes (Munch 2016).

DESIGNING LIFE OR PEOPLE?

There has been general criticism of many of the utopian ideas of the Gesamtkunstwerk and especially the shortcomings of the singular experiments. This criticism was also part of the tradition itself, as the ideas were often sharpened by critique, as exemplified by Moholy-Nagy (1925, 15):

What we need is not the “Gesamtkunstwerk,” alongside and separated from which life flows by, but a synthesis of all the vital impulses spontaneously forming itself into the all-embracing Gesamtkunstwerk (life) which abolishes all isolation, in which all individual accomplishments proceed from a biological necessity and culminate in a universal necessity.

Here, Moholy-Nagy not only highlights but even strengthens of the original ideal. He deconstructs the heavy term, Gesamtkunstwerk, which seems to burden him, rather than the artistic synthesis or the utopian vision itself (Botar 2010). Wagner himself would also speak of a union of art and life building on human needs and reaching for universal necessity. In fact, the word “necessity” is central to Wagner’s rhetoric, as he wanted the merger of art forms to happen out of “necessary” artistic and historical developments to “redeem” both art and society (Kunze 1983; Munch 2021, 62). And he critiqued the singular art forms for having developed arbitrarily and therefore falling into empty virtuosity and decay. Moholy-Nagy emphasises a turn from material manifestations towards a merger in the dynamics of life. This is, however, also how Éva Forgács interprets the general development of the basic ideas in Bauhaus, from the initial merger of art and craft in objects and interiors towards a merger of skills and understandings in the education of the individual designer as full human being (Forgács 1997, 142).

We find a more disturbing critique of the dilemmas in the ideas of the Gesamtkunstwerk in the writings and projects of the German artist and graphic designer Kurt Schwitters. He appropriated the idea of the Gesamtkunstwerk through his own avantgarde concept of “Merz.” His writings on Merz in poetry, design, and city planning are among the most elaborate and determined inquiries into the ideals and dilemmas of the Gesamtkunstwerk as an attempt to frame everyday experience. His autobiographical statement in *Sturm-Bilderbuch IV* states the central role of the Wagnerian tradition very clearly:

I developed Merz, initially as the sum of individual artistic genres, Merz-painting, Merz-poetry. The Merz-theatre pushes further, past different artistic genres to their fusion into the Gesamtkunstwerk. My last aspiration is to unite art and non-art in the Merz-Total World Image [Merz-Gesamtweltbild]. (Schwitters 2021, 66—67)

Schwitters began his Merzbau as a Dadaist assemblage of everyday objects, waste, and newspaper cuttings that mirrored life comprehensively. As they grew over the walls of his studio, he began to encapsulate them in more constructivist, white surfaces to shape the whole room—and neighbouring rooms as well (Elger 1999). Schwitters, however, was very cautious to include the dynamics and heterogeneities in his experiments on Merz, always building on existing parts and words, aspects and views of the world.

His continuous, critical thoughts and explorations point toward, what I would call a “critical Gesamtkunstwerk.” In his journal *Merz 1* (1923) he recognises the immense task: “But if we want to shape the entire world as an art-work one day, we will have to reckon with the possibility that there are massive complexes in the world that are unknown to us or that we cannot control because they are beyond our command” (Schwitters 2021, 136). Earlier, in *Ararat*, 1921, he even stated the impossibility of creating the total design as a work of art: “Perhaps one day, we will have an opportunity to witness the creation of a Merz-Gesamtkunstwerk too. We cannot create it ourselves for we too would be mere parts, indeed no more than material” (Schwitters 2021, 76). To me Schwitters is a very important reminder of both the importance of transgressing the borders of art and design to grasp the totality of the space and the full situation of life, but also of recalling that with our fellow citizens we are all part of and the medium of the life we want to design (Munch 2021, 319–333).

WHAT HAPPENED TO THE GESAMTKUNSTWERK?

You could say that the Wagnerian visions of the Gesamtkunstwerk were so criticised and diluted during the first half of the twentieth century that they faded away and in the end lost their original sense. Although this was the case, it is surprising to see ideas, references or just fragments

keep popping up from this tradition as a kind of underground current. For example, the Dutch situationist artist Constant placed in this tradition his grand project about a new kind of playful life, which was performed in a superstructure hovering above automatised factories, and which he discussed in *Unitary Urbanism* (1960):

I have excluded everything that prevents a city from becoming a work of art. Nonetheless, New Babylon is just as real as any work of art. In essence it is the realisation of an old dream, a dream that figures in all tendencies, all movements, all endeavours in the history of art this century, and which, in its simplest form, one could refer to by its Wagnerian name: Das Gesamtkunstwerk, the total work of art. (Wigley 1998b, 135)

What then was his vision for this new life in the megacity as an open playground structure? Which kinds of life forms and activities should it frame? “Obviously, it will be a creative activity that replaces work. The fulfilment of life lies in creativity” (Wigley 1998b, 133). This is no doubt the ultimate emancipation or even redemption: to leave the hard work to the machines and have all the time in the world to play. This new frame would be a playful urban structure in which we would have to be creative to fit in. We would have to be artists and designers of our own life and share the understanding of art, design and play as fulfilment of the wish to live and flourish in the nomadic universe of New Babylon.

This brings us back to *Vision in Motion* by Moholy-Nagy. “In fact one could say that all creative work today is part of a gigantic, indirect training program to remodel through vision in motion the modes of perception and feeling and to prepare for new qualities of living” (Moholy-Nagy 1965, 58). This was his goal of his “design for life” that was quoted above. I think, this is a better way to articulate the reason of aesthetic education of the public. The teaching at his Institute of Design in Chicago trained, according to his book, designers to educate ordinary people to become designers themselves and form their own life (Mansbach 1980). But again, is there no exemption from the prescription to be creative or even a designer, and thereby participate in the design of everyday experience?

György Kepes, who was one of Moholy-Nagy’s followers at the Institute of Design in Chicago, edited more volumes on new perceptions of the environment and vision in motion. In *The Man-Made Object*, modern media society was interpreted by Marshal McLuhan in quite similar terms: art is transformed through participation and turned toward the perception of environments.

The art object is replaced by participation in the art process. This is the essential meaning of electric circuitry and responsive environments. The artist leaves the Ivory Tower for the Control Tower, and abandons the shaping of art

objects in order to programme the environment itself as work of art. It is human consciousness itself that is the great artifice of man. The making and shaping of consciousness from moment to moment is the supreme artistic task of all individuals. (McLuhan 1966, 94)

Here he links media art and digital design on the heritage of the Gesamtkunstwerk and the dilemmas of total design for everyday life. Human consciousness itself is here designed and shaped through participation in responsive media environments, either physical or digital (Busbea 2020; Munch and Jensen in Fallan et al. 2023). The concept of “responsive environment” grasps the dilemma Schwitters identified: not only do we shape objects and spaces, we are shaped ourselves as part of the artistic material or medium. But where is the critical agency, when “all individuals” are “making and shaping” consciousness in this media loop? Is it with the artist in the Control Tower?

McLuhan might help us to see how the dilemmas of total design for everyday life have migrated into media technology and the contemporary image economy, and how the issues of educating citizens for participation or shaping consciousness now follow branding and lifestyle media rather than artistic ideals and designer visions. In his critique of the development and role of design and architecture, the American art historian Hal Foster in 2003 made the historical verdict: “the old project to reconnect Art and Life, endorsed in different ways by Art Nouveau, the Bauhaus, and many other movements, was eventually accomplished, but according to the spectacular dictates of the culture industry, not the liberatory ambitions of the avant-garde. And a primary form of this perverse reconciliation in our time is design” (Foster 2003, 19). We must carefully consider where the game is changing, and how the ideal of educating people to take part in the total design of everyday experience turns into the moulding of them as receptive consumers of the creative industry.

The many quotations I have covered articulate and exemplify some basic dilemmas regarding the good intentions and admirable ideals of all-embracing design of everyday life that sadly sometimes turn into the opposite, the neglect of individuals and the multiplicity of life. I hope to have shown that the Gesamtkunstwerk-tradition contains important cases and texts to take into critical consideration on this. The initial ideal was to embrace all perceptions of the real world and suggest unity in its diversity, not to reduce diversity into a uniform image of society. I propose the concept of the “pluriverse,” as outlined by Arturo Escobar, as a productive reminder of this challenge: “Today, difference is embodied for me most powerfully in the concept of the pluriverse, *a world where many worlds fit*, as the Zapatista put it with stunning clarity” (Escobar 2017, xvi). Part of the initial ideal was also to invite people to engage and participate, but the dilemma is:

how to empower them for this collaboration without moulding them as a prerequisite for a planned result. How can we strengthen the aesthetical perception and creative skills of citizens without just shaping their taste and attention as part of the aestheticisation of market, media and politics? How to save critical agency, dissensus, as part of collaboration on the commons, keeping in mind the many perceptions of the sensible? (Rancière 2004)



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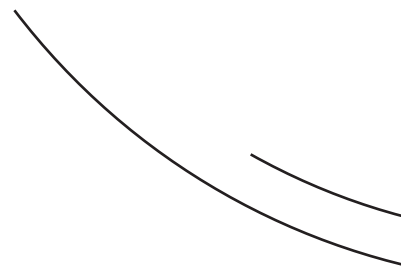
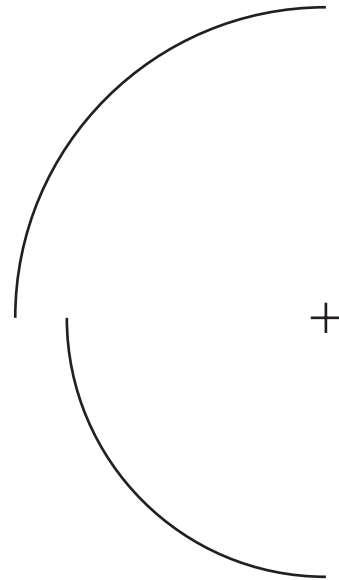
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EXPERIMENTAL PLAY- GROUNDS, LOOSE PARTS, AND THE EVERYDAY AESTHETICS OF PLAY

Ben Highmore

ABSTRACT

This article draws together discourses around children's playgrounds in Northern Europe and North America from the early twentieth century onwards, and the work of the British design pedagogue Simon Nicholson, whose theory of "loose parts" from the 1970s, was influenced by the experimental playground movement that emerged after 1945. These experimental playgrounds, often referred to as junk-playgrounds and adventure playgrounds, encouraged city children to build their own shacks and dens on areas of rough ground, just as children living in rural areas might build dens. This activity of imaginative place making should be seen as a fundamental and everyday aesthetic activity that children take part in whether within a playground or outside one. Whether play is an imitative or an intuitive activity such placemaking would constitute a basic orientation towards design. As such the experimental playground could be treated as a crucial element of design culture.

#Simon Nicholson, #experimental playgrounds, #loose parts, #play, #democracy

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INTRODUCTION

This article argues that the experimental playgrounds that emerged in the 1940s in towns and cities primarily across Northern Europe and North America, could be central to how we think about design education.¹ These were playgrounds that encouraged the building of rudimentary dwellings by providing children with tools and building materials. Because these playgrounds were sited on rough ground and because of the handmade nature of the den buildings they had a shambolic appearance, quite distinct from the ordered nature of the conventional playground of swings, slides and seesaws set in asphalt or rubber matting. Less immediately, the experimental playground also facilitated physical forms of world building, in the shape of developing collective and autonomous forms of social organisation. The art and design pedagogue Simon Nicholson argued that “we can discern a natural evolution from creative play and participation with wood, hammers, rope, nails and fire, to creative play and participation with the total process of design and planning of regions in cities” (Nicholson 1971, 33). His argument, which he entitled a “theory of loose parts,” treated children’s play as the basis for how we shape our total environment. Providing children with the conditions for deep, constructive, destructive, and convivial play would be the foundation for good design and planning; rob children (and adults) of these conditions and you will end up with authoritarian design and poor urban planning.

In what follows I set out to do several things. First, I will explain how play is best thought of as an everyday aesthetic activity that we are all engaged in. Second, I want to provide a quick sketch of what post-1945 experimental playgrounds were like (and, in some instances, are still like). Third, I will draw out some of the underpinning ethos of the playgrounds by looking at both their intentions as well as their reception. Fourth, I will look at Simon Nicholson’s arguments about “loose parts” and show how experimental playgrounds were foundational to his argument. Fifth, and finally, I will briefly make the case for the cultural importance of experimental playgrounds now and as we head into a precarious and troubling future.

The reasons behind this article are twofold. The phrase “loose parts” is now well-known amongst playworkers who have a strong sense of

¹ For various reasons (to do with access and language) my research has been limited to English language archives in the UK, Canada and the US. Some of the ideas around experimental playgrounds have also been important in Japan and India and in Latin American Countries. I haven’t looked at this playground culture nor have I looked at playgrounds in Central and Eastern Europe during the Soviet period or since.

² *The literature here is extensive so I will just give a couple of representative examples. Perry Else, a course leader for a degree in Children and Playwork uses the term “loose parts” in his book The Value of Play (2009) without connecting it to design. On the design side, countless design theorists advocate “play” as a methodological value, for instance, Bayliss et al. (2009), without any reference to playground culture.*

³ *In my forthcoming book (Highmore 2024) I identify some other playground types (for instance, the traffic playground which mimicked networks of road at half the size of actual road networks) but the three I discuss here have definitely been the major types.*

what the term means within children’s play environments but don’t know that it is connected to design theory. Design theorists, on the other hand, often advocate play but rarely have a strong sense of the importance of experimental playgrounds and the way that they were taken up by design pedagogues such as Nicholson.² It is therefore worth reacquainting these different areas and showing that Nicholson was not an originator of a theory, but an intermediary and a conceptual shaper. The other reason is more important. By insisting on the generative nature of the experimental playground movement, I want to insist that “play”—as encouraged by these experiments—was never simply about the physical manipulation of materials like wood and bricks but was always concerned with the activity of world-building and that this world-building was deeply social. Experimental playgrounds were in the business of design as a *social* activity of creating different possible worlds.

PLAY AS AN EVERYDAY AESTHETIC

For children, play is a mainstay of their everyday world; it is their sensual and imaginative interaction with the world, their aesthetic activity. The word “play” is exceptionally capacious and can refer to wildly different states of mind, intentions, practices, and values. Play can be relaxing but it can also be intense, even anxious. It can be frivolous and suspend our usual ideas about intention (“don’t get upset, I was only playing”), and it can also be deeply felt and intended. It can be collective or competitive, or in the case of team sports, both. Its antonym is uncertain. To claim it as the opposite of “work” quickly comes unstuck, not just when we think of all those activities where play is a profession (the sportsperson, the musician, the actor), but when we look at the intense concentration of a child drawing or constructing something.

Looking at children’s playgrounds and the discourses that surround them can help clarify some of the major issues at stake in thinking about play as a form of everyday creativity. Within Northern Europe and North America, playgrounds across the last 150 years fall into roughly three major categories.³ The most dominant playground has been the orthodox playground which is usually a flat parcel of land with fixed devices such as swings, slides, a jungle-gym, and see-saws. In the United Kingdom it started appearing in municipal parks in the late nineteenth century and today constitutes about four out of five playgrounds. This is the playground type that the artist Peter Friedl documented between 1995 and 2008 as he travelled around the world from Ramallah in Palestine to the townships of South Africa. His book of 236 alphabetically ordered photographs of playgrounds show us a world of desperately uneven wealth in children’s play facilities, but also a surprising standardisation in devices (Friedl 2008). The second type of playground was

dominant in the USA during the early decades of the twentieth century and are associated with the early Playground Movement. These were often large playgrounds with some fixed devices but also larger areas for playing sport and buildings for indoor pursuits. They were always managed by adult supervisors who would organise games and other activities such as dancing or needlework lessons. The third type is the experimental playground that emerged primarily in Northern Europe in the 1940s. These rarely had fixed devices and were characterised by a permissiveness that meant children were encouraged to follow their own inclinations. Here the adults were called playworkers rather than leaders or supervisors. These three types of playgrounds very loosely and unevenly connect to discourses around children's play.

The idea of children's play as an exuberant yet frivolous activity that comes from a surfeit of undirected energy in children was a popular idea up until the mid-nineteenth century when writers such as the German pedagogue Friedrich Froebel and the philosopher and psychologist Karl Groos challenged such beliefs, and in their different ways argued that play was a crucial developmental activity (Froebel 1885; Groos 1901). You can still see the idea of play as excessive energy in the way that orthodox playgrounds of slides, swings, and seesaws (the three s's) are designed to exhaust children without offering them anything that might encourage concentrated and imaginative play. For Froebel and educators such as Maria Montessori, Rudolf Steiner, Margaret McMillan, and others (who are often referred to collectively as "early years pioneers") play was a serious business. Play, for these theorists, was the urgent work of children and young people as they grapple with a complex world (Jarvis, Swinarski, and Holland 2016). Paediatric psychoanalysts such as Melanie Klein and D. W. Winnicott employed play techniques to observe children "working-through" family dynamics and traumatic memories in concentrated play (Winnicott 1971, 1977).

You can see the seriousness of play echoing through the early Playground Movement of America and their accompanying playgrounds. This is Joseph Lee, who set up the first children's playground in Boston in 1898:

In truth the play of children is in the main not play at all in the sense in which grown people use the word. It is play in the sense of being spontaneous, agreeable, undertaken for its own sake and not for an ulterior object. It is not play in the sense of being mere relaxation or diversion, or a thing of secondary importance. Of course children like to play; all good workmen like their work; but it is none the less serious on that account. (Lee 1915, 2)

Lee, and others associated with the early playground movement, saw play and playgrounds as ethical laboratories where children could develop an ethos of playing that wasn't simply about the discipline of the parade ground or the competitiveness of the sports field, which

they saw being instilled by playgrounds that used outdoor gymnastic equipment (ropes, jungle-gyms, ladders, and so on).

One of the unresolved issues that animated these early discussions concerned how far play was an innate human capacity (a sort of genetic coding) and how far it was an imitative activity. Take for example this reminiscence by Luther Gulick, who was the first president of the Playground Association of America (formed in 1906): “At the age of four I was given an umbrella, which I set up on my bed. I found a shawl and some pins and draped the shawl over the umbrella so as to make a little house to sit in. I said to myself, ‘This is *my* house.’” (Gulick 1920, 33) It is a common enough experience. A child using materials to build a rudimentary dwelling, a place of their own. On the one hand it can be thought of as a child imitating the world around them and remaking it. But it can also be thought of as a rudimentary and generative design activity. Making some form of shelter, enclosure, or intimate space—and having some control over it—is an ordinary, everyday aesthetic activity that you can witness the world over. For many philosophers of play it is elemental, natural, a characteristic of human capacities for invention.

The question of whether play was mainly imitative or intuitive had extensive implications. If it was imitative then it might benefit from being taught; if it was intuitive then perhaps it was best to leave it to the children to organise it themselves. Of course, the middle position might be to say that it is a bit of both. But the cultural politics around these two polarities of play had serious repercussions, and one way of looking at the history of playground movements is to suggest that the early playground movement (from the late-nineteenth century to the 1930s) tended to treat play as something that required instruction, while the experimental playground movement’s position (mainly from the 1940s to the 1980s, but continuing into the present) radically refused the notion of instruction. In these experimental playgrounds—sometimes called junk playgrounds and adventure playgrounds—play was treated as an autonomous and intuitive activity that didn’t require instruction so much as careful nurturing, particularly when it came to making safe structures.

The shift in emphasis was connected to changing theories of childhood and also with a larger cultural politics and the changing reality of the world. One shorthand explanation of this shift would be to see the early playground movement as trying to hold on to (and inculcate within children) an idea of Christian civility against the emergent dog-eat-dog world of entrepreneurial capitalism. The philanthropists who put their time and money into championing playgrounds, saw themselves as “child savers,” and were fully immersed in a form of muscular Christianity. The experimental playground movement that emerged in the wake of World War II were facing a different reality. There is overlap too: the activists and philanthropists in the postwar

period often saw themselves as child savers and were often connected to religious movements such as the Quakers. But there was also, in the postwar period, a much stronger emphasis on progressive and permissive education, on community-based politics emerging out of anarchism, and by 1968 a fairly firm resistance to the new reality of rampant consumerism. In this context to think of children simply imitating the adult world was to see them reproduce the world as it was in all its malignancy—obsessed with profit and murderous international politics. In this context perhaps children and children’s intuitive play could be seen as the antidote to a world of commodities, aggression, and individualised competitiveness. It is, admittedly, an impressionistic historical sketch, but it might just do.

THE EXPERIMENTAL PLAYGROUND MOVEMENT.

To talk about “*the experimental playground movement*” probably suggests something more coherent and cohesive than was actually the case. The reality was that a number of experiments in playgrounds started appearing in the wake of World War II. Many of these took their inspiration from a junk-playground that was established in Emdrup on the outskirts of Copenhagen in 1943. The experiments that followed differed in scale and in practice and this was partly due to different national contexts. But there was enough shared ethos between the various playgrounds and nations that when the International Playground Association (IPA) was set up in Copenhagen in May 1961 it brought together playground experts from Denmark, Sweden, Norway, the United Kingdom, Belgium, Yugoslavia, Finland, and Switzerland.⁴ What the different people involved all shared was a general antipathy towards the orthodox playground—the playground that consists of static devices (slides, swings, roundabouts, and sand pits) all set in a flat patch of asphalt and that were mainly aimed at children between the ages of five and eight. The criticism was that such playgrounds had a limited attraction for young children and that they clearly didn’t satisfy older children and young people. Such playgrounds also had a very limited understanding of play, and privileged vertiginous excitement and calisthenic exercise. Imaginative and creative play and the sort of play that demanded sustained concentration was simply absent.⁵

The experimental playgrounds were the antithesis of the orthodox playground. Instead of amusing small children for an hour or so they were usually more like youth centres where children and young people would go after school or spend most days at during the weekend and during school holidays. A central feature was often the availability of a large amount of “waste” building materials (wooden planks, bricks, nails, and tools) that were donated by local building merchants. The playgrounds usually included a large area of rough ground for building shacks, having

⁴ Since 1961 the IPA has expanded beyond Europe. The IPA’s triennial conferences have been based in Canada (Ottawa 1978), Japan (Tokyo 1990), Australia (Melbourne 1993), Brazil (Sao Paulo 2002), and China (Hong Kong 2008). The IPA also held an Afro-Asian conference on Play in India which wasn’t part of the triennial circuit (New Delhi 1983). The 2020 IPA triennial conference was meant to be held in India but was called off due to the Covid-19 global pandemic.

⁵ As far as this went the experimental playground movement was in accord with the early playground movement who were also hugely critical of the orthodox and unsupervised playground of static devices set in asphalt.

bonfires, and digging. In London, the playgrounds were often located on bombsites from World War II. Alongside shack building, children and young people were supported in starting magazines, putting on theatrical shows, repairing bicycles, and so on. What was important was that these activities were self-directed, and where adults were involved, it was through invitation only.

You can get a sense of the ambitions of these playgrounds when Katherine Markham, who was involved in the first bombsite junk-playground in London (St Luke's Junk Playground 1948–1951), writes: “The natural environment for a child’s development is, of course, the countryside, and it is only the Industrial Revolution that has deprived them in such numbers of their birthright, and robbed them of the raw material for their activity” (Markham 1948, 183). Cities and their hostility towards children were seen as the problem that playgrounds needed to respond to. St Luke’s was established in a particularly deprived area of South-East London and was set up to provide an area for children’s play away from the dangers of traffic and the possibilities that children playing in the street would lead to criminal charges. But the ambition is larger than simply providing a safe haven for children’s play: “The recent war, however, tore holes in the fabric of our so-called ‘civilisation,’ and it is the aim of our Committee to claim some of these ‘holes’ as oases in the urban desert, where natural life can re-assert itself and children play in congenial conditions” (Markham 1948, 183). The experimental playground was established to restore past conditions for children’s play and to go some way to repairing the social and psychological damage inflicted by the war.

Another bombsite playground was set up in the working-class neighbourhood of Lambeth in South London (Lollard Adventure Playground 1955–1960). Such a neighbourhood was typical of the places where experimental playgrounds were established: the housing was overcrowded, with nothing in the way of private gardens or public parks in the vicinity. There was also a constant fear of juvenile delinquency. An experimental playground sought to answer the creative needs of children (particularly those children who abhorred the authoritarianism of organised activities by churches and groups like the Scouts and Guides) and to stop them getting into trouble with the police:

The Lollard Adventure Playground is an experimental project supported by the London County Council, the National Playing Fields Association and others. It will open in the spring as a playground where children will find scope for a great variety of activities—excavating, building, camp-fire cooking and so on. Experiments elsewhere have shown that playgrounds of this sort attract children off the streets and offer a constructive outlet for the energy and enterprise which in other circumstances often leads children into trouble. (“Announcement of Lollard Adventure Playground” 1955, unpaginated)

Such playgrounds often only had a short lifespan because the agreement with the local authority was that they could use the land while it was awaiting rebuilding. (The site of Lollard was a bombed school that was rebuilt in 1961.)

The playgrounds were often run democratically with the children taking the lead in what activities took place. This meant that the adult “supervisors” had to learn how to step-back from any inclination towards leading the children, though how far this ethos was consistently adhered to is hard to fully ascertain. My sense is that it differed from playground to playground and depended on a number of factors, including the temperament of the adults involved. The words of Agnete Vestereg, a playworker at the Danish Emdrup playground, give some sense of the ideal (and idealised) permissiveness that underlay the experimental playground:

In order to approach most nearly to the ideal children's playground, everything which may serve to remind the children of authority is excluded. They are not subject to direct education, there is no compulsion, and they talk to me as they talk to their playmates, freely and easily, about defeats and victories, about plans and aims. They are free to criticise the playground and suggest improvements. If the criticism is justified, we talk about what can be done to remedy the defect. We lay plans and try to realise them. Gradually the children have come to feel that I respect their opinions: this gives them a feeling of assurance and ease and they can give themselves up fully to their play. (Vestereg 1953, 9)

This sense of an adult’s role within the playground as someone who communicates with children on an equal footing, was a way of the playgrounds refusing contamination by what it saw as the two institutions that were central to childhood and which the playground movement believed were orchestrated by obedience: the family and the school.

THE ETHOS OF THE EXPERIMENTAL PLAYGROUND MOVEMENT

We have already seen something of the ethos underpinning these playgrounds—the belief in equality and self-reliance. These experimental playgrounds were often propelled by a sense of social activism, targeting the needs of the most deprived and vulnerable enclaves of children within the city. They were part of a child-saving movement, attempting to stave off the worst dangers of the city, which in their minds were the ways that cities criminalised poorer children (and, in the UK context, this was particularly true for the children of parents from former colonised countries) as well as the increasing danger from traffic. The sense of reparation, of somehow repairing a damaged world, was particularly strong amongst playground practitioners in the years immediately

following 1945, and along with that a sense that these new playgrounds could somehow protect children from the lure of fascism.

This sense of reparation of a recent traumatic past and inoculation against the attraction to fascism in the future was the experimental playground movement's most speculative ambition. You can see it in many of the early playground statements. In one sense it was simply a warning about deprivation: fascism, according to playworkers like Marie Paneth, recruited from the "desperate youths" (Paneth 1948, 120) who populated deprived areas where there was little or no play provision for children and young people. But in another sense, it was a strong belief that if a playground could equip a child with confidence in their own capacities and a sense of an autonomous self, then these were the essential ingredients for developing an anti-authoritarian personality. Aligned with this was a commitment to grassroots democracy. This was a democracy based around both radical equality and an understanding of differential needs. There was no simple recipe for establishing such an ethos, but this should be seen as the fundamental problematic facing the playgrounds. We could pose the problem like this: if the experimental playground is committed to the free play of all, then how can this be maintained when some of the young people were teenagers while others were tiny children? It could be seen as the central problematic facing any society: how to you allow everyone to flourish when there is such a disparity of needs and capacities? This is hardly solved through the usual protocols of representative democracy, which might suggest that a playground should allow the majority (who are often simply the largest and loudest minority—often teenage boys in the case of playgrounds) to hold sway. Freedom, then was a central feature, but only if it didn't interfere with the freedoms of anyone else.

It was the way that playgrounds addressed these issues and offered experimental solutions to inequality that alerted the British anarchist movement to the importance of experimental playgrounds. In the 1961 issue of *Anarchy*, the Lollard Adventure Playground was treated as a "parable of anarchy." For Colin Ward, the editor of the magazine, playgrounds like Lollard, were not so much a revelation as simply a testimony to the capabilities of children when they weren't under control:

That there should be anything novel in simply providing facilities for the spontaneous, unorganised activities of childhood is an indication of how deeply rooted in our social behaviour is the urge to control, direct and limit the flow of life. But when they get the chance, in the country, or where there are large gardens, woods or bits of waste land, what are children doing? Enclosing space, making caves, tents, dens, from old bricks, bits of wood and corrugated iron. Finding some corner which the adult world has passed over and making it their own. (Ward 1961, 194)

“Spontaneous” and “unorganised activities” are the key terms here. It is because an activity occurs without prompting, without direction that makes it important.

Perhaps the strongest aspect of the parable occurs in an example from Minneapolis. The Yard was a junk playground set up in Minneapolis in 1950 with money from the women’s magazine *McCall’s Magazine*. In a story retold countless times (and referred to in the 1961 issue of *Anarchy*) we see what happens when children are left to their own devices:

When THEYARD first opened, it was every child for himself. The initial stockpile of second-hand lumber disappeared like ice off a hot stove. Children helped themselves to all they could carry, sawed off long boards when short pieces would have done. Some hoarded tools and supplies in secret caches. Everybody wanted to build the biggest shack in the shortest time. Glen [an adult supervisor] watched the dwindling stockpile and said nothing. Then came the bust. There wasn’t a stick of lumber left. Highjacking raids were staged on half-finished shacks. Grumbling and bickering broke out. A few children packed up and left. But on the second day of the great depression most of the youngsters banded together spontaneously for a salvage drive. Tools and nails came out of hiding. For over a week the youngsters made do with what they had. Rugged individualists who had insisted on building alone invited others to join in—and bring their supplies along. A dozen groups tore down their first attempts and started over with fresh recruits. New ideas popped up for joint projects. By the time a fresh supply of lumber arrived a community had been born. (Lagemann 1953, 13)

It is the fact that this collective and community action happens spontaneously, while Glen says nothing, that is the crucial lesson of the parable. No doubt this is an overly romanticised version of the playground ethos with all the bickering and occasional punch-ups left out. But the romanticism was crucial and drove the discursive framing of the adventure playground. It was a movement that was trying to be utopian.

Children might live in a world where competition and individualism are celebrated but left to work out how to use finite resources on their own, an intuitive sense of sharing and collectivism emerges. Such a parable suggests that it is not so much that children need to learn to share, but that they need to unlearn the lessons that they see all around them in advancing capitalist society. They needed to leave behind the competitiveness that is often at the heart of the way physical education is taught in schools and always at the heart of entrepreneurial capitalism. Unlearning would happen spontaneously, partly because competitiveness was an inefficient use of resources, and partly because left to their own devices the intuitive play practices of children would emerge unfettered.

LOOSE PARTS

In 1971 Simon Nicholson, the son of artists Barbara Hepworth and Ben Nicholson, published an article in *Landscape Architecture* titled “How Not to Cheat Children: The Theory of Loose Parts” Nicholson was the product of a progressive co-educational boarding school (Dartington Hall School), famous for its liberal attitudes and its refusal of competitiveness. He went on to study art and then archaeology and anthropology and developed an influential approach to creative and democratic pedagogy. The article was aimed primarily at children’s play but was also addressed to adults, and against those elites who decide what kind of a world we live in, and whose creativity gets valued. A world of loose parts is the antithesis of a world of fixed elements. A world of fixed elements and devices is a world where children “cannot play with building and making things, or play with fluids, water, fire or living objects, and all the things that satisfy one’s curiosity and give us pleasure that results from discovery and invention” (Nicholson 1971, 30). You can imagine such a place easily enough: a museum where everything is in a cabinet or else fixed to the wall; an airport terminal with its fixed seating and endless signage telling you where to go; a static playground with devices fixed into the asphalt. Such places are symptoms of a world that has failed to share the potential for invention, a world where a very few have hoarded creativity, and where the rest of us are simply cheated and left depleted:

What has happened is that adults in the form of professional artists, architects, landscape architects, and planners have had all the fun playing with their own materials, concepts and planning-alternatives, and then builders have had all the fun building the environments out of real materials; and thus has all the fun and creativity been stolen: children and adults and the community have been grossly cheated and the educational-cultural system makes sure that they hold the belief that this is right. How many schools have there been with a chain-link and black-top playground where there has been a spontaneous revolution by students to dig it up and produce a human environment instead of a prison? (Nicholson 1971, 30)

The fact that we answer Nicholson’s rhetorical question with “not any that I know of” is testimony to how deep the problem goes. The very fact that the orthodox playground is the image that pops into our head when we hear the word “playground” is proof of how our imaginations have been colonised by a specific fixed cultural form.

Nicholson’s essay was a clarion call to the design community to learn from the experimental adventure playgrounds of the recent past as well as from such radical experiments as the “People’s Park” in Berkeley, California (Mitchell 2003). Nicholson taught at the University of California,

Berkeley between 1966 and 1971, where he offered a course on design where the students' work was assessed by local children (Stott 2019). In 1971 he returned to England where he joined The Open University as chair of the radically interdisciplinary course "Art and Environment"—a course where the adult students, with no previous training, were asked to do things such as compose a piece of music using household implements. It was the very essence of the theory of loose parts. Nicholson's theory was simple: "in any environment, both the degree of inventiveness and creativity, and the possibility of discovery, are directly proportional to the number and kind of variables in it" (Nicholson 1971, 30). Produce an environment where there are no variables—nothing to combine, tamper with, pull apart, destroy, remake, and remodel—and you have an environment destined to stifle creativity and invention.

While Nicholson's essay took experimental playgrounds (as seen through Ward's special issue of *Anarchy* on adventure playgrounds) as one of its key examples he was wary that these playgrounds could also become fixed, conventional and lose their inventiveness. He was also concerned that they were mere consolatory appendages to a broken system. His real aim was the complete refashioning of the educational system:

It is hard to talk about environmental education without mentioning that the whole educational system, from pre-school through university, is on the verge of changing. Who needs these institutions in their present form? The prototype for education systems of the future are [sic] almost certainly those facilities that take children and adults out into the community and, conversely, allow all members of the community access to the facility. (Nicholson 1971, 32)

It wouldn't be enough to have experimental playgrounds, the whole educational system should be part of a social world of experimentation, of testing by the community. That was in 1971. Seen as an ecosystem, the educational system is now (at least in the countries I'm familiar with) even more cut off from the community, even less inclined to the radical experimentation that Nicholson envisaged as being the bedrock for good social design. Experimental playgrounds might well be just a small consolatory enclave, but if that is all there is, how much more important it is to protect them.

EXPERIMENTAL PLAYGROUNDS: A CASE FOR SUPPORT

If we follow both the examples of experimental playgrounds and the idea of loose parts, then we could envisage the beginnings of another reality. This would be a reality where design, rather than being a specialised activity, would be part of the everyday aesthetics of play. To follow Nicholson at his most ambitious you could imagine an infrastructure of spaces that were like laboratories of play. They might include experimental

playgrounds, but they could also include allotments, places of repair, and a whole host of other places where invention could take place for adults and children alike. Who knows, they may even supplant some of the space we dedicate to more formal forms of education.

I want to end with a simple proposition: historically the more professional design that goes into children's play, the less often inventive design results from the playing. Given that there is a massive, multi-billion-dollar global industry aimed at finessing toys and games for children, my proposition is also perhaps a provocation. A global industry involved in producing commodities for children (or rather, aimed at their parents' and carers' disposable income) might well try and sell us "creativity," yet another more generative form of creativity might be a good deal cheaper and might result from salvaged and scavenged materials accessible to all. In a world of finite resources, that have been squandered in the name of commodity culture, such a future reality may well need to become a reality sooner than we think. If the children creating a community in the Yard are anything to go by, it might be our best hope for a realisable future in a precarious world.

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“BLACK HOLES” EXPLOITATION: A CENTRAL EUROPEAN CITY BETWEEN MONUMENT, DOCUMENT, AND MOCKUMENT

Barbora Kundračiková

ABSTRACT

The article focuses on the lively urbanism of Central European historical centres in the second half of the twentieth century and, based on a private photo album, reflects on the processes of shaping local socio-cultural customs and practices. If the common features of these centres are the careful preservation of the historic core and the more or less systematic re-construction of residential districts or industrial complexes, it is the selective blindness to the gaps and spaces “in between,” escaping any coherent or consistent urban planning, where these processes manifest themselves most “naturally” and almost without any imposed control. Indeed, these imaginary “black holes” are where everyday experience unfolds. To this end, the current approaches of Central European Studies are connected with the history of art and visual culture. A specific triadic model of monument-document-mockument and the concept of the “living monument” are used to develop a crucial link between them all and contemporary urban studies. The theoretical insights are illustrated by the case study of the city of Olomouc in the Czech Republic, using the private photographic documentation of local artist and graphic designer Oldřich Šembera.

#private photography, #Olomouc, # Oldřich Šembera, #mockument, #urban studies

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Borrowed from astronomy, the term “black hole” is used in the international socio-political arena to refer to zones of collapsing state power. “Black holes” are structureless areas where a civilised, objectified order has not been established—or has been but not successfully. As stated in a 2011 report by The Hague Centre for Strategic Studies, “(b)lack holes are usually thought of as rather remote areas, geographically far removed from national seats of power. Notorious examples are the Pakistani region of Waziristan and the tri-border area of Paraguay, Argentina, and Brazil. However, as urbanisation continues to increase, the security threats posed by urban black holes are growing as well.” (Qasem, van Dongen, and de Ridder 2011) To be a “black hole” is to be “out of place” or “out of the norm”—not ordinary.¹

Nevertheless, as recent research led by the Urban Theory Lab has shown, in urbanisation today, *ordinary* cities are themselves not only producers of values but also “entropic black holes that consume the surplus produced elsewhere.” The so-called non-urban spaces in cities are the “metabolic bases of planetary urbanization.”² I would like to take advantage of this new usage of the term “black hole,” and examine the importance of these “reverse” spaces, whose potential for examining and shaping social conventions should not be underestimated. The question I will address here is whether spaces outside the framework of modernist “normality” are sites for emerging social systems. My answer to this in what follows is based on the analysis of a particular cultural material—the socio-cultural analysis of Olomouc as a historical site and long-term photo-project of Oldřich Šembera.

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The notion of urban black holes in the world’s megapolises will serve here as an imaginary springboard for the study of “small town” agglomeration and the practices that are taking place at its borders. My real interest is in exploring the limits of theoretical frameworks concerning urbanisation processes and their supposed “externalities” in a non-global context, and thus trying to develop and apply alternative systems to decipher their conditions and the significant transformations that are taking place in the current Central European environment. To this end, I will discuss a series of related areas: (1) the area of personal, private, or family photography; (2) specific Central and Eastern European cultural histories based on the

¹ *It is this element that will be key for us later on.*

² *As was presented, for example, at the Urban Theory Lab: Data-Spheres of Planetary Urbanization, as part of the Venice Architecture Biennale. (Urban Theory Lab 2021)*

relationship of art and memory, time and history (i.e. the local tradition of monument conservation and the concept of “living monument,” and the triadic model of the document–monument–mockument); (3) and local “traditions” of architectural structuring as a formative socio-cultural and psychological element, termed as “outside architecture” or “in-between architecture.” As a result, we should be able to reflect the local socio-cultural reality and the concept of “everyday experience,” which is the final frontier of this study. As J. R. Short writes, “[g]lobalisation is an uneven process. Places are connected in different ways at varying rates.” (Short 2004.) Let us take one of these paths, but keep in mind the larger context.

PRIVATE PHOTOGRAPHY IN THE EPICENTRE OF INTERESTS

Historians have been very hesitant in the past to put photographs, especially private ones, at the centre of their research. Their reluctance was based on the view that handwritten and printed documents filed in state-run archives are more reliable than over materials. Only more recently, a “visual turn” has encouraged the exploration of how images worked in the past and how they can be used in interdisciplinary research. For our purposes, the most suitable material seems to be the *photo album*—personal, complex, and indicative of a narrative. However, we need remain aware of its status and nature, i.e. approach it with due caution.

A photo album can be loosely understood as a series of photographs collected by an individual or group of individuals to create a specific visual narrative. It includes forms of memoirs, scrapbooks, and digital albums, using photographs but also illustrations, postcards, digital and manipulated images, captions, notes, the accompanying commentaries, embedded letters, etc. It might take the form of a book, but also can be just a “box with photos.” It is therefore essential to grasp it from the start as a complex entity of aesthetic, informational, and communicative nature from the start.

The photographic process itself is similarly complex, involving many stages and actors. In the case of the photo album, it is not so much the production phase as the selection phase that appears to be essential, with images selected at several stages and by different actors—photographers, technicians, curators, or publishers (Mifflin 2012). Although it may seem absurd, it was on the basis of the photo album that all the major socio-cultural turns of modern times were shaped. The establishment of relations, hierarchies, conflicts of individual social classes, groups, or strata were formed on its pages as well as more general frameworks, such as the construction of individual society. What can be understood and perceived as a subjective game on the one hand, is an expression of a collective mindset on the other (Anderson 2006,

6–7). Thus, if we want to grasp and reflect on the specific nature of small-town “black holes,” i.e., the “in-between” spaces in an agglomeration, an elaborate urban plan, or their importance in shaping local everyday practices, private visual documentation offers a wealth of information that has not yet been sufficiently exploited. Let us therefore turn our attention to a specific situation—a long-standing and still unfinished photo album from the environment of Olomouc.

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The painter and draughtsman Oldřich Šembera was born in the city of Rýmařov, one of the small centres of former Sudetenland. He has lived in Olomouc since 1951, and from 1963 to 1967 he studied at the Secondary School of Arts and Crafts in Brno. In 1975, he graduated from the Department of Art Theory and Education at the Palacký University in Olomouc, where he met with the painter Miroslav Štolfa (1930–2018) and the theoretician Václav Zykmond (1914–1984) (Daněk 2010). In the late 1970s Šembera moved with his family to Hodolany in the outskirts of Olomouc, where he had spent his childhood. The return to the place where he clearly perceived the transition of the city to the wilderness, caused him to turn his interest to the landscape, or rather to capturing the special tension between the “romantic” landscape and “cold” civilization, between the city and its outskirts. Among the most frequent subjects of his paintings, drawings, and photographs, were motifs of motorways, underpasses, greenhouses, reconstructed landscapes, landscapes with counter lights and rays, both natural and imaginary (Fig. 1).

FIGURE 1. Oldřich Šembera, *Walk II*, 1978, oil, pencil, hardboard, 90 × 80 cm, private collection; *Walk*, 1978, oil, hardboard, 65 × 68 cm, private collection; *Black Interior*, 1981, oil, hardboard, 95 × 106 cm, private collection



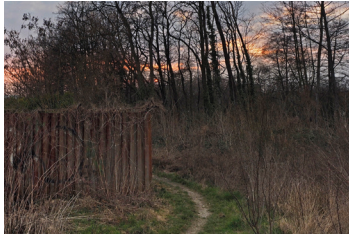
³ Roland Barthes (1981) for example believed that cameras are “clocks for seeing,” and that they can prove the passage of time. Also, Thierry de Duve (1978) was intrigued by photographic time, pointing to some inherent paradoxes, for example, that the photograph can be seen as the “witness [...] of a vanished past” as well as a “deadening artifact” or “suspension of time.” André Bazin (1960) added that the photography “is the object itself [...] freed from the conditions of time and space that govern it,” analogous to a “fingerprint,” an impression that captures and preserves a form of reality, a pictorial record made by the thing depicted.

The visually and emotionally striking contrast between classical oil painting and contemporary subject matter is perceived by critics as one of the distinctive manifestations of so-called ecological art (Valoch 1981). Around 1991 Šembera resigned almost completely from his work, only to return to it in the late-1990s, when he began working with photography, and produced digital prints (Figs. 2–3).

At first glance, Šembera’s images, paintings, and photographs of familiar surroundings are casual. However, the artist has good reasons for choosing each shot. Or rather, why he follows this and not some other situation. Šembera has been observing and documenting this one locality for a long time. Specifically, he was and is interested in the area on the edge of the populated areas between the Hodolany and Bělidla districts, through which one of the branches of the River Morava flows. It is a relatively large space interwoven with a tangle of paths and trails which people use for recreation, but also as shortcuts. It is not organised and dominated by suburban nature, which characterizes its liminality (compare with Thomassen 2018).

Liminality is perhaps the best descriptor of the character of an anywhere place—on the one hand highly “real,” almost physical, and specific, and on the other easily generalised. In the end, it is not only about the insignificance of the place but also about the social habits, activities, or processes that are developed there. Liminality describes the psychological process of transitioning across boundaries and borders. The term “limen” itself comes from the Latin expression for threshold. In the context of contemporary philosophy, but perhaps even more so in social studies and artistic production developing at the interface of the two, liminality evokes performativity. And performativity is of course also a crucial element in the case of forming social norms and conventions that are materialised in the urban structure of the modern city (Fig. 4).

Returning to the photo album as an individual’s means of expression, Martha Langford explains that “[f]or an art historian, the performative model is extremely instructive, even if the principal actors can no longer be assembled,” or if we do not know them personally (2001, 21). Although we can understand this approach quite well in general terms, she adds: “The album is what remains [...]. Our mimetic photographic memories need a mnemonic framework to keep them accessible and alive. The album reflects that need and preserves its evanescent conditions. To speak the photographic album is to hear and see its roots in orality.” (Langford 2001, 21) Performativity is a matter of continuity of existence “in time.” And photography is often perceived as a medium of “time.”³ It has its own social life and adopts something like a “social biography” (Appadurai 1986), since the ways in which people live their lives are entangled with the ways in which their lives are represented (Snyder 2006, 26). The gestation, evolution, and meaning(s) of albums are as complex as those of social lives. “As I turn the pages [of a pho-



FIGURES 2-3. Oldřich Šembera, *From the series Bynda River Peoples, 2020*, digital photography, private collection; *From the series Bynda River Peoples, 2006a*, digital photography, private collection

FIGURE 4. Oldřich Šembera, From the series Bynda River Peoples, 2006b, digital photography, private collection



FIGURE 5. Oldřich Šembera, From the series Bynda River Peoples, 2007, digital photography, private collection



tograph album],” says Barbara Levine, “I am activating a story. The pages [...] show the progression of time; they are not just about a single moment but rather are about the accumulation of time. A narrative is building, faces are aging” (Snyder, Levin and Stadler 2006, 17).” We can also discern narratives that speak to political power, economic ties, scientific networks, social conventions, cultural traditions, and personal relationships.⁴ Thus, cultural heritage experts, like folklorists and anthropologists, do not ultimately “discover” heritage themselves, but “constitute” it (Bartolotto 2006) using examples of private practices collected through carriers such as albums and diaries, and re-invoking them (Fig. 5).

BETWEEN REAL AND FICTIONAL/ ESTABLISHING THE EVERYDAY

The connection between visual aesthetics and everyday practices is, according to Yuriko Saito (2020), tight and direct: “(W)e are all implicated in the world-making project and aesthetics plays a surprisingly important role in this collective and cumulative endeavour.” This is also extremely important for us since, after Šembera’s work, we understand urbanistic “black holes” as places of “naturally evolving” everyday experience, which transcend the limits of aesthetic evaluation in favour of ordinary experience, suggesting that our habits and practices also have aesthetic dimensions and are often co-created with that in mind. This aspect is easily noticed if we focus on Šembera’s visual albums in more detail. Even within its segmented framework, the turns, gestures, and situations are repeated, taking on the features of collective ritual. This is even more the case because they take place with an awareness of the surrounding environment. Consider the highly sophisticated structure of the Baroque city, in which this liminal terrain suddenly presents a natural challenge to the concept of the “living monument.” What is it? What makes it significant for us? And how can we work with it in contemporary realities? These are just some of the questions that naturally come to mind, if we think about the situation, specifics, and real life behind a historical monument, a protected historical agglomeration, whereby the first condition is to stress the importance of social practice in commemoration.

During our lives, we establish, develop, and use imaginative or fictional worlds, such as, works of art, popular literature, or computer games. However, we also deliberately create situations or places that have a strong evocative potential and lead us to a similar type of “inter-play.” These can certainly be specifically equipped locations, but they can also be places without any filling or equipment. We can hypothesise that the attraction to imaginary worlds is inherently linked to the desire to explore new environments—but based on

⁴ We might also ask what happens to these narratives when archival holdings disperse, albums are broken up, and individual photographs are removed from their original presentation forms and documentary contexts to be sold, become art, or digitised.

familiar principles and under the influence of the same basic factors. It is noteworthy that interindividual and cross-cultural variation in the preference for imaginary worlds should follow the interindividual and cross-cultural variation in exploratory preferences. This at least, is the result of findings of an international team of researchers (Dubourg et al. 2023), who remind us that “(t)he cultural importance of imaginary worlds in contemporary societies cannot be overstated.” It is possible to say that imaginary worlds activate our exploratory preferences, help us navigate the real world, and find new relevant information.

Along with this, we should not downplay the importance of urban “black holes” either. Behind the field of entertainment, the success of imaginary worlds in modern societies reveals important changes in individual preferences and personality traits. Why might people now start to enjoy stories with imaginary worlds and not before? Dubourg et al. (2023) suggest that the appeal relies on growing exploratory preferences: “Humans universally become more curious and explorative as they live in more affluent ecologies, notably because the evolutionary costs of curiosity decrease in such environments.” From there, we can understand “black holes”—as they are understood and presented in Šembera’s documentation—as localities on the borders of clearly defined worlds that seem to have no identity or purpose of their own, but in fact represent a stimulating resource for their surroundings.

If the hypothesis that Dubourg et al. (2023) present is true, the economic growth of modern societies has “fuelled a bigger and bigger audience for stories set in imaginary worlds, and producers of fiction could therefore invest more and more in the creation and refinement of such worlds.” If the perspective of time and the depiction of moral issues so effectively draw us into a fictional world, it is often because narratives and plays choose memorable themes and events rather than predictable ones. Becoming immersed in a fictional world means getting close to the characters represented within its temporal perspective, acknowledging their destiny, passions and motives. We vicariously participate in their surrounding world; we fleetingly but vividly belong to their Umwelt. Once we arrive at this insight, we realise that it could apply to our own real world, to the everyday life we lead. This turn of phrase “applies,” however, is not quite the right. It is rather an approximate verbal translation of the awe-inspiring sense that, above the multitude of maxims for action and the hyper-goodness that directs them, there is a supreme level that opens, giving the whole space of human action not only shape and boundaries but also a more fundamental impetus. At this level the fictional and the real world become one, while the place of their clash is real space, defined by urbanism, by specific architecture (Pavel 2010) (Fig. 6).



FIGURE 6. Oldřich Šembera, From the series Bynda River Peoples, 2008a, digital photography, private collection

URBAN BLACK HOLES

As an urban as well as imaginative concept, architecture is ultimately a formative element in the shaping of socio-cultural relations. According to Reed (2017, 4) it helps us to understand not only socio-political or economical specifics of the given “terrain,” be they popular or forbidden, wealthy or deprived parts of cities etc., but also their inner structures. Reed’s (2017, 8) development of the term “black hole” is of particular interest to us: “Buildings are like black holes within the urban fabric, channelling us through to alternate built realities, helping to create a universe experienced as multiple viewpoints or ‘worlds.’” These worlds or realities are formed by a combination of our perception of the physical environment and how architects shape it through their interventions. Reed (2017, 8) continues:

Architects do not build representations of reality. Through the act of designing and building, architects disrupt and change the surface of physical reality. These multiple scattered objects are manifestations of the real, and form nodal points which can, on occasion, reveal aspects of reality. By changing the surface of reality, these architectural objects can shift our relation to, and awareness of, the real.

Aside from its astronomical use, the term “black hole” is also commonly used—for logical reasons—also in film or in the creation of fictional worlds. The reason for this is its immersive, liminal dimension, which can be easily traced in the “reality” of historical cities of medium size and specific aesthetic order, such as Olomouc, which are linked to the symbolic and aesthetic order of the Habsburg monarchy and to modern principles of monument conservation. This approach could help us to explore new ways of understanding the relations of semiotics, simulation, perception, and the relationship to reality itself in terms of architecture and urbanism.

Understanding “black hole” and related concepts figuratively is productive for other disciplines. For example, “event horizon” or “supernova” can be used to describe the surface layer between the outside field of reality and the internal experience of the object. The “vortex” is then an interior that plunges us from normal reality to a reality experienced as one type or another, usually an experience that provokes a contemplation of the nature of reality itself.

If we think about the universal aspect of our problem, we cannot leave out the effort of modern architects and urbanists to get rid of “black holes,” get rid of the debris. For example, Rem Koolhaas’s famous *Junkspace* describes the “proliferating debris of modernization” which fills our environment like expanding foam, polluting the world (2002, 17). The term also refers metaphorically to places that have lost their



FIGURE 7. Oldřich Šembera, *From the series Bynda River Peoples*, 2008b, digital photography, private collection

meaning and characteristics in the man-made environment and resist classification. Koolhaas' reflection is thus related to that of Marc Augé (2009) who calls this homogenised, ungraspable environment a “non-place” – describing it as an opposition to the traditionally perceived space, taking on all the ills and accompanies the super-modernity we live in. Non-places are airports, supermarkets, motorways, or global hotel chains. In the contrast to Michel Foucault's (1986) “heterotopias,” they are places of circulation, communication, and consumption that need no history, and even identity. Their main quality is their globalism, i.e. inner (habitual, emotional) emptiness (Fig. 7).

The power of Koolhaas's concept of junkspace also lies in its critique of architects who have resigned to becoming complicit in the large global project. Architecture is thus “in retrospect” driven back to its responsibility, as Monika Mitášová (2017, 10) explains:

Architecture is political, it enters and takes place in the political world, it provokes political incidents, it is politically evaluated, criticized and interpreted. Architecture as the cognition of the arché through the shaping of things and models of the world is political only in the fact that it affirms the architectonics of the world, society and culture. Architecture is the ordering of all that is permanent and changing: elements and force fields, the animate and inanimate based on boundaries (peras) and horizons, the peratic and the operatic on different levels: natural, social and cultural.

Hence the importance of the urban planning on a cluster basis, in which one segment complements the surrounding ones in its aesthetics, function and operation. The question is whether the correction of a spatial ballast can come through a more critical approach of architects. Is there a more effective means of rediscovering a place’s identity and meaning than an artistic expression that can give non-places a distinctiveness and the possibility of transformation?

As is well known, Koolhaas has focused on the ever-expanding connectivity of junkspace, and the need for cities that flow and transform in another book, titled *Whatever Happened to Urbanism* (1995). Exploring the metaphor of space junk allows us to understand how we can counter its proliferation on the scale of the city which expands with seemingly no rational logic outside political or economic gain. Junkspace appears disconnected—but it is all about connection, whereas space junk is about disconnection and dis-rupture—but can help redefine connection. It is precisely this device of space junk that allows us to suggest strategies for inserting nodes of consciousness within the mess of the post-cinematic urban environment (Willis 2019), allowing for an architectural confrontation with and investigation of reality.

As Guy Debord’s *The Society of the Spectacle* (1992) suggests, politics is substantially incorporated into the reality of the media-saturated world we live in. In particular for architecture, this brings up the issue of “buildings as image and spectacle” or rather—to what degree a building reinforces the dominant ideology through its relation to image and spectacle. How a building or object manifests as an image, as a spectacle, and how it can internally disrupt the spectacle are important design issues for our time (Steele 2010).

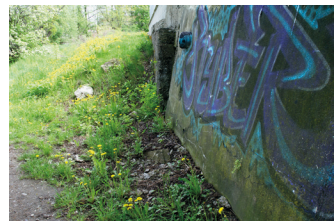
LIVING DOCUMENT–MONUMENT–MOCKUMENT

The historic central European city is a specific socio-cultural concept, which can be defined as a conglomeration of medium size with a population of one hundred to one hundred and fifty thousand with a historic centre, often including a secular or ecclesiastical seat of government and university, surrounded by residential districts massively built during the totalitarian era, as well as industrial areas dating back to the first wild years of the transition period (Sidorová and Lammelová 2018). Although attention is usually focused on two in many ways contradictory “zones” of urbanistic planning, centre and periphery, what in my opinion truly deserves attention is the “non-urban space” between them. This “empty” space not only connects those two better-defined domains but also the two modes of social existence. Moreover, as Oldřich Šembera’s work shows, it reveals the temporal aspect of their performative establishment and development.

The most important aspect of his work for us here is the ability to observe, document and present latent aspects of everyday life and aesthetics of our habitual practices, its so-called aesthetic regimes. One way to think about this “basic” (and paradoxically complex) experience is its relation to memory, time, and history. This relation is crucial, especially with the emergence, proliferation, and current spectacularising of modern institutions of cultural memory. In this context, the duality of monument and document emerges, with the latter parametrically describing the former (Le Goff 1978). Monument and document are distinct historical categories involving specific research material. Documents elicit historical narratives and the construction of arguments. It serves as evidence, presents the true, and establishes itself on the traces of history. The monument is a real, physical remnant of these events endowed with highly symbolic content. In many cases—not to mention only Olomouc, but also Polish Cracow, Slovakian Košice, or Hungarian Debrecen—it turns out that the historical centre is understood simply as a monument, while residential areas are a document of the social practices of a life lived in their background.

While the monument is the primary material or the extended embodiment of the socio-cultural values, the document is its informational background. Following crises of language, representation, and signification they both become problematic. Consequently, monuments and documents are no longer trusted. And thus, mockuments emerge as the new dominant (counter-)instruments—as a construction that “combines the free play of imagination with mnemonic elements from empirical reality” (Eşanu 2021). Unlike the previous categories, which concerned themselves with history “as it happened,” a mockument ignores traces or even the referent, emphasizing instead what might (have) happened or what could have been an alternative to the social status quo. A mockument plays with the features of both (permanence, information saturation, symbolic meaning, etc.), but tries to construct an alternative meaning based on lived experience. Among many other things, a mockument signals a refusal to engage in cognitive mapping—that is, the mapping of the acute social contradictions and inconsistencies of not just totalitarian practices (unification, conformity, self-observation) but also of market democracies (inequality, poverty, unemployment, exploitation), favouring instead detached witticism, sarcasm, and the free play of imagination. A mockument is a reaction to shared rules but does not conform to them—similar to the movement of black holes.

As Eşanu (2021) further explains, the rise of the mockument could be easily understood as part of a process of erosion of credibility of both the document and monument, and also of society—a sort of “cynical, ironic, and satirical corruption of these other two instruments of time.” It is thus very close to what Fredric Jameson (1992) famously called *pastiche* in the context of postmodernism (i.e. an empty parody, a statue



with blind eyes), but unlike pastiche, “which ridicules the modernist phantasms of artistic autonomy and essence and the bourgeois belief in a ‘unique self,’ what the mockument mistrusts and finds impossible is memory and ultimately modernist Truth.” (Eşanu 2021) A mockument is thus understood as “a sort of counter-instrument of time,” which for us means a void, a fabrication, a fiction that is often claimed to be lie—a sort of make-believe adjustment (Walton 1990), a role play for the real world. However, and here I refer to Rosalind Krauss’s (1985) critique of postmodernism, even this newly emerging category has precursors. It is not a direct opposition to them, but rather a revision, still working with previous experience and knowledge. Without them, the mockument, however intuitive, would have no meaning.

If we put the triad that Eşanu applies to Central-Eastern European art of the second half of the twentieth century in the context of the local tradition of monument conservation, further reinforced by the destructive experience of the two world wars and uncontrolled post-war industrialisation, a more complex picture emerges—one that is, among other things, saturated by Reed’s reflection on the modern architecture of the “post-cinematic world” (Melková 2022). Everything that happens in this newly established non-urban cinematic space is logically in the sphere of make-believe, a matter of process and permanent negotiation. It does not follow the rules, it has no precise goal, it does not produce profit or knowledge. In this discursive context, the credibility of all the activities, including ritual practices and everyday business, is based on their habitual unfolding within a space that can indeed be spoken of as outside or in-between—since this is what proves their significance and produces a new (aesthetic) regime. Furthermore, if a black hole is not a specific architecture feature, but the absence of one. Negative spaces tend to develop best in the realm of social practices. Via social practices negative spaces are also embodied and as such become autonomous entities. We can connect that with our need to give negative spaces names, personalise them and thus put them in a mode of relational aesthetics—physically as well as mentally and imaginatively (Fig. 8).

CONCLUSION

If we understand modern urbanism as an attempt to come to terms with the situation established by past periods, with belief in the monument and the document finally disappearing during the transformation period and being replaced by the “mockument” in the sense of a meta-mutation of both endowed with an internal critical position, the existence of black holes can be seen as a potentially positive aspect of the development of medium-sized historic centres. They are places the rational organisation of public space does not quite reach, yet it is nevertheless present there, and can be treated as the pragmatic basis for the formation of imaginative

FIGURE 8. *Oldřich Šembera, From the series Bynda River Peoples, 2008–2015, digital photography, private collection*

or fictional worlds. It is through these games that are played there that we test, develop, and adapt the practices with which we subsequently return to the central or peripheral sites. The rise of the mockument may therefore enrich the monument and the document, the traditional and stable components of Western civilisation. In addition to Oldřich Šembera, or Olomouc, other examples of local "black holes" can be studied. Moreover, they are also repeatedly reflected in contemporary artistic practices, for example, in the work of another Czech artist, Eva Kořátková, the daughter of a philosopher Tomáš Kořátko, who often works with the theory of fictional worlds in which the diverse games of adults are played out in the world of children, and vice versa. Its boundaries almost merge with ours, yet they are clearly visible in the liminal experience with which active participation in the game is associated. Although the parameters have changed, this cannot be overestimated. A game, after all, as Johan Huizinga ([1938] 2016) writes, "is a voluntary activity that is performed within fixed temporal and spatial boundaries, according to voluntarily accepted but unconditionally binding rules, that has an end in itself and is accompanied by a sense of tension and joy and an awareness of an existence other than everyday life."

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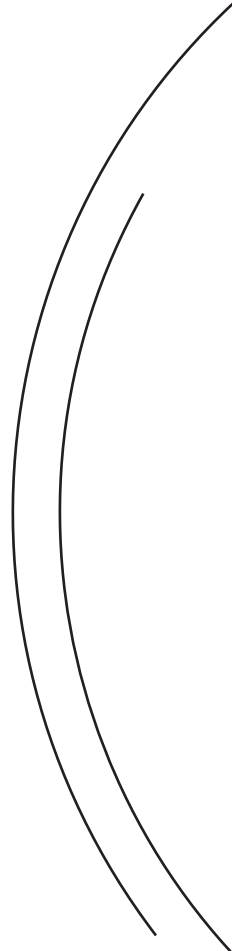
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RESIDING IN NEGATIVE SPACE: THE ART AND LIFE STRATEGIES OF MARION BARUCH

Anna Keszeg

ABSTRACT

The short essay presents the main issues surrounding the works and professional career of Marion Baruch. It investigates the concept of negative space and its significance in the artist's creations. The central argument is that negative space serves as both a life strategy and an artistic research method in Baruch's body of work. Baruch's career follows a quintessentially atypical path for a woman artist from Eastern Europe in the second half of the twentieth century. Her artworks revolve around a dual exploration of negative space. On one hand, they engage with negative space as a way of perceiving the world from the perspective of the thin line that delineates the boundaries between space and bodies. On the other hand, negative space represents a conceptual negation or the definition by negation of all living phenomena. This focus provides an opportunity to reflect on the aestheticisation of capitalist markets in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries.

#Marion Baruch, #negative space, #remnant textiles, #sculptures, #commercialism

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In this era where the metaverse has become a reality and the renegotiation between physical and digital is ongoing, there is a newfound freedom in how we think about time and space. While geopolitical and economic crises demand our attention, the emergence of this additional layer to our existence offers reassurance. The technology-enabled dimension is akin to the tide, allowing the materiality of our lives—our emotions, dreams, ambitions, and fears—to seek new places to overflow and overwhelm.

Marion Baruch, now in her nineties, has always been fascinated by what she terms the “void.” Rather than focusing on the materiality of emotions, she is intrigued by the emptiness waiting to be filled by them. A quote from her accompanying press material captures the ambiguity of her approach: “It’s the void and there’s possibility in the void: it contains everything, it contains every surprise, lie and emotion, which is what I need.” (Baruch n.d.) In this statement, we can discern the essence of her negative methodology, which I refer to as “residing in negative space.” For Baruch, the challenge lies in the content of the negative space, yet she chooses to focus on the void, eager to understand what will eventually populate it.

In the field of the social sciences, the past few decades have seen significant shifts, two of which are closely linked to Marion Baruch’s work: the spatial turn, which emerged in the late 1970s, and the affective turn, which gained momentum in the early 2000s. Marion Baruch’s work represents an early recognition of the inseparability of these two turns due to a dialectical relationship. She explores the point where affect populates the void, thereby creating the possibility of space.

The first time I encountered one of her works, constructed from fabric remnants sourced from the textile industry, I immediately grasped their significance to her and their function as a universal working method. Her life experiences have provided her with a unique perspective on negative space. It is akin to the conscious choice of a textile artist working with remnants rather than an entire roll of fabric. The whole roll, she seems to suggest, carries a sense of spoilage, danger, and threat, primarily because it contains both the possibility of a textile form and its remnants. This duality imbues the roll with a complex tension, evoking notions of both creation and destruction. The entire roll is definitive, intact, and tyrannical, much like a name—carrying a weighty significance that cannot be ignored.

What struck me most about understanding her approach was how effortlessly she made this choice. While Baruch's work often revolves around the everyday, her conception of the ordinary is anything but. It's custom-made, reflecting her distinctive vision and perspective.

Marion Baruch was born in Romania in 1929. She began her art education at the Académie des Beaux-Arts in Bucharest in 1949, but only a year later, she left the country for Israel. There, she enrolled at the Bezalel Academy of Arts and Design in Jerusalem. After three years, she moved to Rome, where she studied at the Accademia di Belle Arti from 1954 to 1957.

This trajectory reflects an exercise in inhabiting negative space, finding continuities in the scarcity of opportunities. The belated recognition of her work, which only emerged towards the end of the 1990s, mirrors this process. It is as if the lack of interest was eventually flooded by the presence of recognition at a certain point in time.

There are various institutional and social reasons behind this delayed canonisation—interest in women artists, in Eastern Europe, and in issues of marginality, to name a few. Yet, it seems almost as if Baruch anticipated this, much like the remnants of textiles she uses, which were almost destined for oblivion until they found their way into her work.

In 2020, a retrospective of her work was held at the Kunstmuseum in Luzern. The exhibition later travelled to Grenoble in the autumn of 2020, and subsequently to Toulouse, Norway, Bucharest, Italy, and finally Israel.

As someone with a keen interest in fashion and the evolving role of textiles in our society, I was immediately drawn to Marion Baruch's conceptual textile works and their potential to reshape our sartorial culture. What Baruch made me realize is the idea of textiles and clothing as elements used to fill the void, as thin lines where space intersects with its negative. The body occupies the centre of this process, serving

FIGURE 1. *Marion Baruch, Contre les élites végétales, 2019, 335 × 136 cm, artwork on the left, courtesy of Galérie Anne-Sarah Bénichou, Paris.*



as something that both defines space and enables negative space, while its form is reshaped by textile armour. In contemporary fashion theory since Joanne Entwistle's *The Fashioned Body* (2015) it is common knowledge that dress positions the body in space and time and our garments are "situated body practices."

Baruch employs a dual method of de-situation. On the one hand, she demonstrates that the situation is just a situation, the frame is just a frame, and the Emperor's new clothes are just new clothes. According to her, a dress has no inherent consequence beyond the context in which it is worn. In the 1960s, Baruch collaborated with A. G. Fronzoni, a designer and architect, to create the *Abito-Contentitore*, a series of oversized garments that challenged the boundaries of the body, creating an abstract cartography of the human form. Since the *Abito-Contentitore* is a silhouette, the textile piece is not about understanding body practice or situatedness; rather, it's about the thin line that enables both of these criteria to come to life.

Furthermore, for Baruch, textiles represent an ongoing challenge. As she seeks to renegotiate societal norms regarding gender differences, the de-domestication of textiles has become a subtle battleground between the sexes. Many of her projects explore lost-and-found pieces of garments, as well as the forgotten and improvised elements of our wardrobes.

The use of remnant textiles has long been an inspiration for many fashion creators and is closely linked to the heritage of deconstruction in fashion. However, for Baruch, these textile remnants are not simply materials to be incorporated into something new; they are realities in themselves, each with an independent voice and volition. She enables this negative space to be inhabited by the emotions and affects waiting to be expressed.



FIGURE 2. Marion Baruch, *Le paysage n'est nulle part*, 2019, 51 × 87 cm, courtesy of Galerie Anne-Sarah Bénichou, Paris.

Baruch's approach to exhibiting space mirrors her approach to negative space; she directs the flow of affects into the space. These discarded textile pieces reference the incompleteness of the ready-made and mirror the imperfection of something we consider complete. From these textile remnants, dresses come to life, shedding their former confines. The titles Baruch gives to these pieces reflect abstract entities (such as *La Vitesse des fleurs*, *Contre les élites végétales*, fig. 1, *Le paysage n'est nulle part*, fig. 2), thought processes (*Il gioco delle contraddizioni*, *Vie et mort des hypothèses*, fig. 3), stories (*Invitation*, *L'arresto del pensiero che è dinamico*, fig. 4), or simple similarities with well-known visual structures (*Ponte-Cattedrale*).

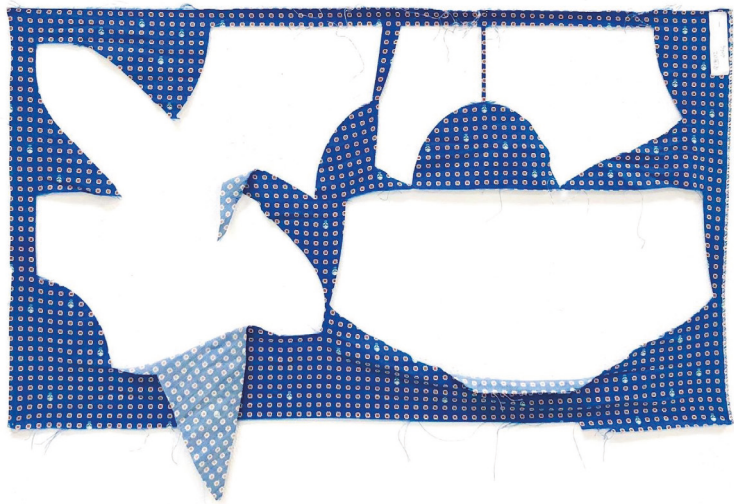


FIGURE 3. Marion Baruch, *Vie et mort des hypothèses*, 2019, 51 × 87 cm, courtesy of *Galérie Anne-Sarah Bénichou*, Paris.

On the other hand, negative space is concerned with the classical analytical question of naming. In late capitalist society, names are often associated with labelling and control, serving as simulacra of aestheticised markets. A radical artistic act should always transcend mere names.

Baruch refers to her works as “sculptures” because, as she explained, “they are certainly not paintings” (Ştefan 2021). The process of labelling her works using mainstream art mediums leads to a definition by negation. This casual approach to labelling is another argument for the importance of negative space. If one concept is not accurate enough, its nearest semantic association should be used. Although Baruch is deeply concerned with the accuracy of our everyday artistic actions, she cannot contend with such exactitude. She cannot contend with such exactitude. The title of her exhibition in Bucharest in 2022, *Endless Going Trying to Say*, reflects this constant need for enabling, for keeping structures undefined, and for maintaining the amorphous nature of negative space (fig. 4).



FIGURE 4. Marion Baruch, *L'arresto del pensiero che è dinamico*, 2019, 165 × 155 cm, ©Margot Montigny, courtesy of Galérie Anne-Sarah Bénichou, Paris.

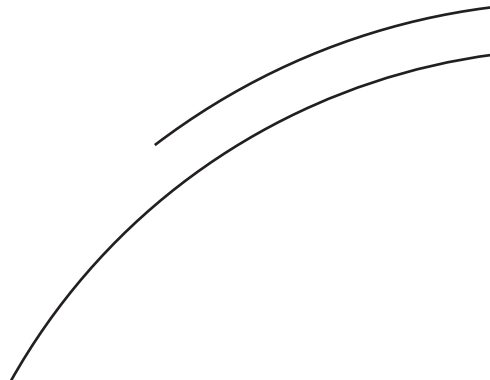
Baruch's exploration of the textile industry also addresses the issue of commercialism, which she views as a form of relational art. In 1989, she began a collaboration with Milanese gallerist Luciano Inga-Pin, marking a period of ambition to understand the relationship between art and business. This collaboration led to the creation of a prototype company called Name Diffusion (initially, she wanted to call it NAME, but was persuaded that this did not describe her intentions clearly enough).

Name Diffusion represented a pure idea of a corporation responsible for creating branded entities—conveyor-belt compatible objects labelled with Name Diffusion logos. Baruch aimed to introduce the concept of the branded ready-made into the art world, referring to herself as a business

artist. While the *Abito-Contentitore* created a negative space around the body, Name Diffusion designed the cartography of a business practice enveloped in art.

During this period, she also created an art-object titled *Superart* (1988–1990): a regular metallic shopping cart filled with a metal piece in the geometric form of a shopping cart, scaled to the size of a human body and inclined towards the person pushing it. The title *Superart* invites multiple interpretations: “super” could refer to the size of the metallic object, alluding to a form of art compatible with supermarkets, or to an exceptionally captivating art form. However, Baruch’s primary concern is how to fill the empty spaces created by consumerist society—the carts, endless shopping bags, and boxes. She believes we need a meticulously calculated number of objects to ergonomically fill the void that consumerist capitalism has created.

Baruch’s approach to negative space is applicable to almost every gap in contemporary human experience, potentially making it a universal methodology. It represents the discrepancy between fortuitous destinies, the incongruities between languages, the asymmetry of social systems, and the gaps between human and non-human bodies. The lost-and-found textile pieces embody her analytical ambition to address, in a casual manner, all the roughness that the world produces.



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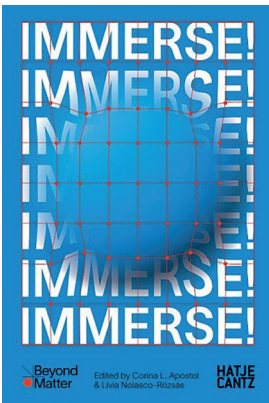


Art Hall Immersion

Corina L. Apostol and Lívia Nolasco-Rózsás, eds:
Immerse!

Martha Kicsiny

https://doi.org/10.21096/diseegno_2024_1mk



Corina L. Apostol and
Lívia Nolasco-Rózsás, eds.
Immerse! Berlin: Hatje
Cantz, 2023, 184 pages.
ISBN-13: 978-3-7757-5473-6

The catalogue entitled *Immerse!* was published to accompany the exhibition of the same name that took place at the Tallinn Art Hall Lasnäme Pavilion in Estonia. The focus of the exhibitions was immersion. Immersive technology is only gradually being embraced as a medium of contemporary art, and, due to its high-tech nature, is mostly present in countries with strong Western economies, which Eastern European countries struggle to keep pace with. The show, and thus the catalogue, was the result of a long-term collaboration between two curators, twenty Eastern European visual artists, and three institutions: the Tirana Art Lab, the Tallinn Art Hall, and the ZKM Centre for Art and Media in Karlsruhe.

The critical standpoint I adopt in this review is informed by my practice. My experience as a visual artist working with, and researching media art, has led me to question the consensus of framing immersive media solely as cutting-edge, high-tech art, that lacks a significant historical past. Discourses of immersive media, and new media art in general, are rarely placed in historical, sociological, and technological contexts. Similarly, issues of accessibility and the environmental impact of the required complex technology are rarely discussed. My aim is not to argue against immersive media but rather to promote a more layered conversation by addressing these issues with the help of media archaeology and new materialist studies. I hope this can assist in the acknowledgement of immersive media as a form of art that has centuries-old roots while keeping in mind the large ecological footprint it can leave behind. This could, in turn, encourage a more critical attitude and create an appetite for a “variantology” (Zielinski 2006) of immersion offering less carbon-heavy alternatives. A recurring strand of criticism of the texts reviewed below concerns their environmental reflection, highlighting friction between two highly prevalent strands of contemporary thought: tech-positive utopias and non-human-centric ecological movements, epitomised by Lukáš Likavčan’s (2023) essay.

Published in 2023, *Immerse!* opens with four introductions by the curators of the exhibition (Aguraijua, Nolasco-Rózsás, Lehtovuori, and Stern), followed by further introductions from additional editors of the publication. It continues with visual essays by the exhibiting artists, then concludes with four essays on the topic, which are partly inspired by the artworks.



FIGURE 1. Reddit post featuring a homeless person using a virtual reality headset in San Francisco. (elishalewisusaf 2021).

Nolasco-Rózsás's introduction presents immersion as a novel phenomenon in art and technology, overlooking its cultural, political, and historical contexts. Although this text is full of insights, the reader's attention is too easily distracted by the accompanying image from a Reddit thread of a homeless person using a virtual reality (VR) headset on the streets of San Francisco (fig. 1). Although this image understandably caught her attention, it is unfortunate that her analysis of the scene is superficial, without consideration of how unusual it is. This could be regarded as a distorted parody of first-world problems, rather than a fitting example of the escapism offered by VR. The parodic aspect of this image is partially due to it being an extreme example of the presumed motivation for a person desiring to escape into a digital dream world. Could VR be considered even momentarily satisfactory even though it can never provide true solutions for a homeless person's hardship, such as a lack of safety, food, heat, and hygiene? And might it not be dangerous for someone in that situation to cover their eyes, making them even more vulnerable to the external world? Without fitting contextualisation and insight, this anomalous scene is, in my view, a too extreme example.

Her text goes on to focus on immersive media as technology-assisted immersion and escapism, and how this poses the threat of addiction

to users. Her standpoint seems to lack cultural reflection by which she could position this topic within the field of fine art. Instead, she focuses on its digital technology aspect, without unpacking its complex underlying layers, such as its method of mediation, technological development, and ecological impact. For the production and distribution of VR projects, the requirement of costly technology, specialised knowledge, and resources excludes large regions from access. Thus, countless individuals and even institutions are unable to develop and experience VR projects. Acknowledging this global inequality is the first step, the second would be action to democratise the use of VR, as well as to develop immersive projects that have less of an economic and environmental toll. The exhibited artworks are diverse in their application of technology; however, the catalogue unfortunately does not provide insight into their creative processes or their use of technology. Publications featuring artists' choices and processes of applying immersive technology could provide valuable insights for those not fully aware of the technological ins and outs that define immersive media.

The catalogue does not aim to conventionally document the exhibition and the exhibited artworks, but rather offers tasters of each project in the form of visual essay spreads designed by each artist, consisting of a combination of images, screenshots, collages, texts and QR codes. The mediation of mostly digital and virtual artworks onto the centuries-old medium of the printed press is undoubtedly a challenge. While this approach could provide a relevant alternative to the commonplace photographic documentation of the physical view of an exhibition, the result is unconvincing. Since only hints are offered of complex and innovative artworks, we will not become properly acquainted with them via the publication alone if we have not previously encountered them in the gallery space. Especially as some QR code links are not live anymore, within a year of the catalogue's publication.

The featured essays are reflective and critical in a variety of ways; however, as a collection of essays, they are fragmented and without a concise overview of immersion, which is lacking in the introduction. Helen Kaplinsky theoretical text "Mystical Virtualities" provides the only historical viewpoint and the most cultural context regarding the medium, content and technology of the artworks she focuses on, which range from painting to VR projects. This grounding encourages the reader to consider the roots of these projects and their complex significance in our times.

A beautiful and unexpected parallel debated by Kaplinsky is the similarity between contemporary virtual reality and mediaeval Christian religion, which could be considered as that age's governing technology, functioning as a portal to "a "mediaeval virtual" imagination of salvation and purgatory" (Kaplinsky 2023). She goes further to

state that this parallel implies that current-day VR “operates through a spiritual belief in the transformative potential of digital technology,” raising the question of whether our contemporary belief in the significance of everything virtual and digital could be seen as abstract and transcendental as the life-defining religiousness of the Middle Ages. Kaplinsky combines historical reflection and feminist discourse, aiming to understand the current cultural significance of mediaeval female visionaries by focusing on the story of Emerentia and its influence on the practices of contemporary feminist artists today.

In contrast, the first essay titled “Immersion, Saturation, Ingestion” by Matthew Fuller merely focuses on the theoretical aspect of immersion driven by an artwork of somewhat dubious quality, namely *Net-surfer* by Gianluca Lerici a.k.a. Professor Bad Trip. Both the artwork and the theory constructed based on this image is a crude explanation of the connection between “surfing the internet,” virtual reality, and the ocean. VR still battles for equal recognition as a form of art, equal to other more canonised forms of art, however, such simple explanations driven by banal imagery, without rich cultural and historical insights only intensify the audience’s scepticism.

Later in his text, Fuller draws connections between Christina Sharpe’s *The Wake*, as Sharpe also uses the sea as a central motif. Sharpe (2016) unravels the historical trauma of the transatlantic slave trade still present in both the bodies of the descendants of its victims and in the ocean itself. This topic could provide a potent opportunity to pitch how VR and AR (Augmented Reality) are apt media to convey the omnipresence of history, especially in seascapes. In her book, Sharpe defines the expression “residence time” as covering the long-term presence of salt in ocean water that originates from the bodies of thousands of slaves thrown overboard dead or alive. To consider the connection, even on a molecular level, between the past and the present, the individual and the environment, and the historical and the biological is a task so complex that the utilisation of simultaneously spatial and temporal media, such as VR or AR, could be a perfectly suited.

Furthermore and since we have mentioned the slave trade and colonialism of the past, it is important to highlight the comparable exploitation that is present throughout the manufacturing of our contemporary technology. The equipment of immersive media is also strongly tied to modern slavery and neo-colonialism. Besides its toll on exploited and underrepresented millions of people, the materials and energy required for XR production also has a considerable negative impact on our natural environment. While of course this technology and its ecological impact are no different to that of other technology we use daily, it is nevertheless important to voice these concerns to ensure we do not believe the purported “weightlessness” of digital technology. For example, although the internet is allegedly immaterial and

weightless, in reality it too has a physical presence and impact, as server farms and internet cables are hidden in the depths of oceans and far lands (Parikka 2015). I believe it is key to raise awareness of this issue among creators, theoreticians, and the wider public, to encourage a more reflective use of technology in the age of climate crisis, climate consciousness, and climate anxiety.

The last issue I would like to raise regarding Fuller's text is his inclusion of the lesser-known Brazilian movement of anthropophagy in the debate. What drives this connection is the image of the Net-surfer, with a somewhat forced symbolism. The ties with the topic of the text and this movement remain vague, and further explanation is needed for a newcomer to understand the significance of this theory in this context.

Lukáš Likavčan's (2023) essay "A Planet of the Selfless: Immersion as an Aquatic Metaphor in a Post-Digital Context" takes the project *Collectivize Facebook* as its starting point and delves deep into a utopian vision of a planetary polis. As a political community it would go beyond nations, states, and private property to offer democratic ownership of all physical and virtual assets, which are currently owned by a few tech billionaires who exploit our data. His dream of a transnational public cooperative is however merely wishful thinking that remains unfounded and superficial since he does not address all the aspects that would make this vision unachievable. With the acknowledgement of the complexity of our contemporary situation, a practically, or at least theoretically realistic alternative to the systems and power structures of the neoliberalist late capitalism dominant today cannot be outlined.

Likavčan states that this transnational public cooperation would not only offer an equal place to the human residents of the globe but also robots, online bots, and autonomous vehicles. However, this would inflate this alleged democracy, with humans losing the assurance of their voices and interests getting heard. For example, to date, we live in a world where there are already far more microchips than humans (Das 2008), so, technological entities could easily suppress the human population in the not-so-distant future. Therefore, if in the future we wish to live in a "democracy" that equally represents the interests of technology, we might as well acknowledge our submission to artificial intelligence. If the author is so concerned with decreasing the dominance of the human species, why is he not instead arguing for a multi-species community? The unrelenting climate crisis would probably be better tackled when taking into consideration all living organisms on Earth, instead of industrial products whose creation and functioning is based on the exploitation of the planet's resources. With the focus on the interests of technology, the pressure placed on our environment will surely only grow exponentially.

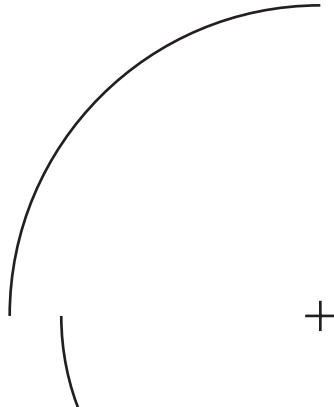
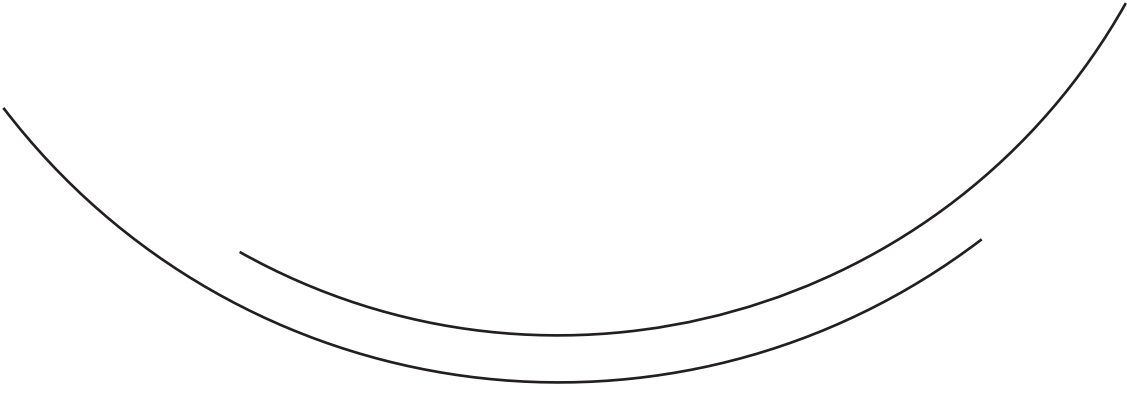
Later the author goes on to analyse various theories of interconnectedness between humans and their environment, mostly regarding the extrapolation of the human economy to the planetary economy. He does not draw parallels and conclusions between this topic and the one discussed above, which could have created a more grounded and richer context for his proposals. Nonetheless, he continues to focus on questions of freedom, immunisation, and the ideal synthesis between our civilisation and the metabolism of the planet. In conclusion, Likavčan states that the key to equal cohabitation is self-limitation—which should not be confused with Christian self-denial—to achieve the “planet of the selfless” (Likavčan 2023).

The essay by Zsolt Miklósvölgyi and Márió Z. Nemes (2023) closes the catalogue, offering a somewhat positive interpretation of immersion as more a kind of “digital swimming” than “drowning.” They state that as we live increasingly digitally, we use our understanding of our natural environment to decode the digital as pseudo-nature, a digital ecology naturalised by metaphors. They go further to point out how the dichotomy of analogue and digital has now been surpassed by the post-digital technosphere in which we do not experience disembodiment but rather a reinterpretation of the boundaries between the body, the environment, and the virtual. Submersion in water transforms human perception, offering an alternative to our current form of interpretation, which the authors reflect on via various theoretical and literary examples. Yet, visual art projects seem to be absent throughout the development of their concepts of aquatic states. Instead of influencing their theory, artworks are only later brought in to illustrate their point. At least these examples are analysed in depth, focusing especially on the ocean as a site of remembrance of and reflection on the transatlantic slave trade.

All in all, this catalogue is rich in complex theoretical essays regarding various aspects of immersion, branching out to connect with a variety of fields, such as medieval studies, posthumanism, techno-futurism, and literary studies. It is an ideal starting point for those interested in contemporary theories regarding immersion and virtual reality, however, there is unfortunately a lack of fundamental reflection on the history and culture of immersion that would help readers to contextualise and fully understand this complex topic. However, alongside a publication of the rich essays, the catalogue fails to function effectively as an archive and remediation of the exhibited artworks for those who have not visited the exhibition and consequently renders the attempt to create a less schematic format for documenting a media exhibition ineffective.

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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 stand-out 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.

About the authors

Endre Szécsényi is Professor of Aesthetics at the ELTE Eötvös Loránd University of Budapest. His recent books include *Aesthetics, Nature and Religion: Ronald Hepburn and his Legacy* (edited and co-authored, Aberdeen University Press, Aberdeen, 2020) and *Inventing Modern Aesthetics: Remarks on the Early Modern History of British Aesthetics* (in Hungarian, Gondolat, Budapest, 2024, e-book). In 2020, he launched the Research Centre for Aesthetics, Nature and Environment (RCANE) at ELTE. He is the Principal Investigator of the three-year research project “Perspectives in Environmental Aesthetics” (2022–2025) supported by the National Research, Development and Innovation Office (Hungary), Project number: OTKA K-14329

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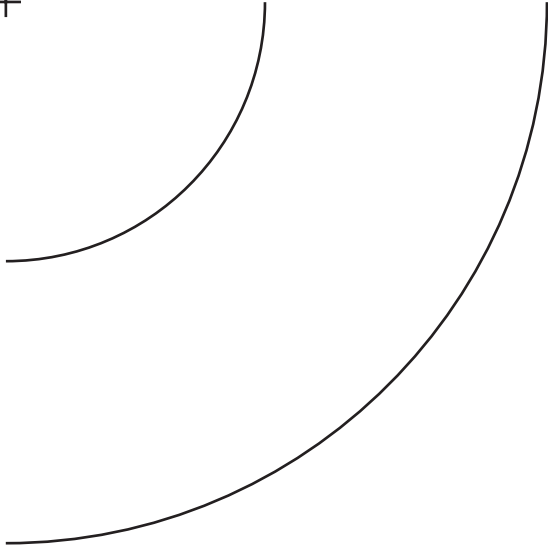
Department of Art History at the Palacký University in Olomouc. Her areas of interest include 20th and 21st-century European visual art, photography, art history methodology, and analytical approaches to aesthetics. As a curator, her projects include *Fascination with Reality. Hyperrealism in Czech Painting* (2017), *Post.Print. Collection of Modern and Contemporary Prints of the Olomouc Museum of Art* (2019), or *Triennial of Central European Contemporary Art SEFO 2021/2024*. As a theoretician, she has contributed to several publications, including *New Realisms: Modern Realist Approaches on the Czechoslovak Scene (1918-1945)* and on László Lakner, Zdeněk Beran, Bedřich Dlouhý and others. She was a co-editor of *Art magazine's* 2022/3 issue, focused on the relationship between photography and science.

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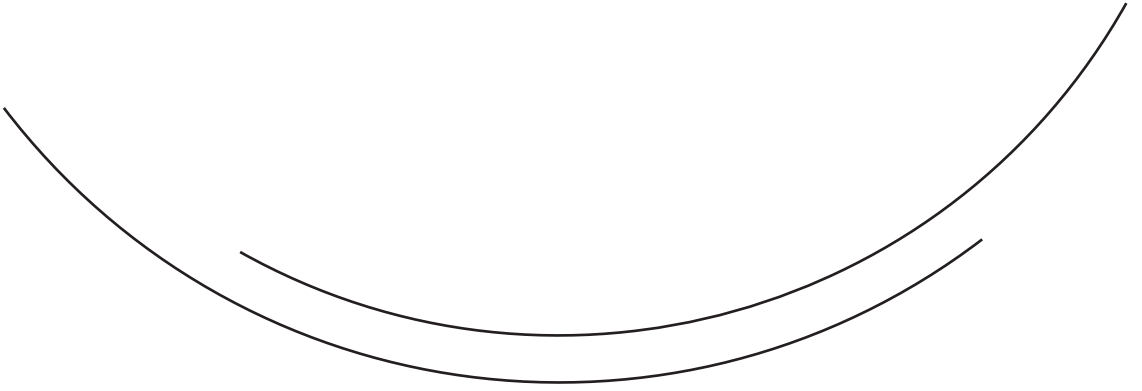
Martha Kicsiny is a British-Hungarian visual artist and a Multimedia Art DLA fellow at the Doctorate School of the Moholy-Nagy University of Art and Design. Informed by Media Archaeology and as part of her Contemporary Art practice, she experiments with rematerializing digital screens and virtual simulations, in search of their cultural roots. Her research mostly focuses on lithophanes and stereograph photographs, as proto-digital-analogue hybrids. She aims to create a more historically reflective and diverse discourse surrounding Contemporary Art, especially Immersive Media. Her practice includes drawing and 3D printing, video art and 3D rendered site-specific installations, which she started to develop at the Hungarian University of Fine Art, graduating in 2020.

Jessica Hemmings writes about textiles. Some of these words form academic research; others are read as journalism. Research interests span material culture and literature to include the often marginalised voices of postcolonial literature and contemporary craft; lifewriting and embodied knowledge; Zimbabwe and Indonesia; storytelling in the archive. Translations of writing have been published in French, Hungarian, Icelandic, Norwegian, Portuguese, Russian and Swedish. She is Professor of Craft and Editor-in-Chief of PARSE at HDK-Valand, University of Gothenburg, Professor II at the Oslo School of Architecture and Design, Visiting Professor at Moholy-Nagy University of Art & Design, Budapest and was the Rita Bolland Fellow at the Research Centre for Material Culture, the Netherlands (2020–2023). Current research is funded by Vetenskapsrådet (2025–2027) under the title “Carceral Craft: the material of oppression or expression?”

Yuriko Saito was born and raised in Japan. She taught philosophy at the Rhode Island School of Design from 1981 to 2018. In addition to introductory philosophy courses, she taught classes on ecological responsibility in art and design, Japanese aesthetics, everyday aesthetics and philosophy of nature. Her *Everyday Aesthetics* was published by Oxford University Press (2008), followed by *Aesthetics of the Familiar: Everyday Life and World-Making* (Oxford University Press, 2017; winner of the Outstanding Monograph Prize by the American Society for Aesthetics). Her most recent book is *Aesthetics of Care: Practice in Everyday Life* (Bloomsbury, 2022). She has lectured widely in the US, as well as internationally, including in Austria, China, Finland, France, Hong Kong, Hungary, Japan, the Netherlands and the United Kingdom. She serves as editor of *Contemporary Aesthetics*, the first online, open-access and peer-reviewed journal in aesthetics, and editorial consultant for *The British Journal of Aesthetics*.



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