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LISA GIOMBINI, ADRIAN KVOKAČKA (EDS.), *EVERYDAYNESS:
CONTEMPORARY AESTHETIC APPROACHES*

Rome: RomaTrE-Press, 2021, 287 p.

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BOOK REVIEW

The collection of essays, edited by Lisa Giombini and Adrián Kvokačka, is another example of the ongoing interest in the subdiscipline of everyday aesthetics, which established itself in the first decade of our millennium and is namely connected with scholars such as Yuriko Saito, Thomas Leddy or Katya Mandoki. The present collection of twenty essays, organised around four main topics of environment, body, art, methodology, and their relations to everyday aesthetics, enriches the existing debate by opening it to the context of continental thought as well as by bringing attention to various contemporary issues.

The group of essays dealing with environmental topics opens with a text by Sanna Lehtinen, concerning sustainable solutions in urban architecture. Using the example of wooden high-rise buildings, she shows how we can reinterpret both the function and our everyday appreciation of traditional materials. Lehtinen links her research with the notion of intergenerational aesthetics, an approach that seeks to take into account the tastes and preferences of future generations and promote sustainable design. Yet, her text also demonstrates the difficulties of such a vocation. As much as we may agree that wooden skyscrapers are ecological and that they also successfully express sustainability, it still does not seem to follow that “the aesthetic scope of the future generations is not limited unnecessarily” by the ways they are built (38). Petra Baďová also takes up the topic of the interpretation of materials by applying the theory of archetypes to domestic environments. We can see Baďová’s approach as an alternative to the science-based models of environmental aesthetic appreciation. Her turn to the archetypes provides an especially suitable framework concerning the practice of dwelling, which might be understood in terms of individual coping with preconscious and culturally imposed values and meanings. Zoltán Somhegyi’s essay then deals with the question of the sublimity of derelict natural and human environments by comparing our willingness to explore abandoned industrial or urban sites with a general reluctance to visit places of environmental degradation. For Somhegyi, the problem seems to lie in the non-human scale and in the understanding of the possibly life-threatening global consequences that, in the latter case, preclude us from having an aesthetic experience.

The part of the collection dedicated to the topic of the body predominantly discusses fashion. Ian W. King, with reference to Merleau-Ponty, portrays the problem of dressing as an ongoing everyday negotiation between our bodily experience, self-image and the meaning we want to convey with our clothes both to others and to ourselves. Elena Abate elaborates further on the question of our ability to acquire and cultivate our fashion taste, turning in her essay to Wittgenstein’s concepts of forms

of life and language games. She likens the “rules of fashion” to the rules of grammar and holds that by our acquiring and utilization of such rules in our practice in different contexts, we are finding our ways amongst various horizons of shared taste, while accordingly ascribing meanings and values to our choices. Fashion thus can be understood as a “constellation of language games” and shared horizons that provide space for mutual understanding (119). Michaela Malíčková delves into the topic of significance that clothes can have for the wearer. She examines fashion as an assertion of individual subjectivity and group identity in the form of subcultural costume, which aims for increased expressiveness on the “axis of binary oppositions: I-he, we-you, inside-outside, own-other” (127). With reference to Lotman and Bakhtin, Malíčková also uncovers the dialogical mechanisms in a culture that allow for constant reinterpretation and intertextual readings of such costumes. What is left unquestioned in the essay, however, are the actual possibilities and limits of the expression of the self through fashion and trends or the assessment of its potential positive and negative effects. Andrej Démuth and Slávka Démuthová venture closer to such topics in their examination of the relation between beauty and suffering. They discuss the phenomenon of self-harm, which can often be strongly aestheticized and promoted as a trend. The authors show how from this point of view the practice can be understood in terms of the Japanese concept of “kintsugi” which stresses power in vulnerability and beauty in successive healing.

Essays that are centered on the relation of art and culture to everyday aesthetics invite us to think about the ways in which different arts shape our encounters with the ordinary. We can ask which art forms can be thought of as paradigmatic to our aesthetic experience of the everyday. Can it be the realistic writing of Georges Perec? Or the concept of deep listening asserted by Pauline Oliveros? David Ewing and Malgorzata A. Szyszkowska help us to explore such topics. In a number of impressive case studies, the collection also deals with various forms of both artistic and non-artistic interventions in public or private spaces and with modifications of ordinary routines and habits¹. The scope of these essays spans from the artification of domestic routines during pandemics, through artistic interventions in malls, to the struggles of everyday living in Palestinian refugee camps. Although these topics are a very welcome contribution to the diversity of everyday aesthetics, let us look more closely now at the methodologically oriented essays, which aim to deal with some of its main issues.

A useful introduction to the history and main problems of everyday aesthetics is provided by the editors, other authors contextualize them within the scope of European theories, e.g., the tradition of phenomenological aesthetics, as is the case of Elisabetta di Stefano, who utilizes Gernot Böhme’s concept of aesthetics of atmospheres, or Malgorzata A. Szyszkowska, who draws on Husserl and Ingarden in an attempt to elucidate the nature of everyday aesthetic experience. Similarly, Filip Šenk modifies the Deleuzian notion of fold to describe the complexities of experiencing the spatial, temporal and semantic aspects of places in the city. Present are also polemics, namely in the case of Lukáš Makky, who refutes Richard Shusterman’s somaesthetic approach to the experience of a city, criticizing it mainly for its insufficient attention to the cognitive aspect of city experience. The most interesting attempts to grasp the nature of everyday aesthetics however seem to be present in the essays by Ancuta Mortu and Swantje Martach. Mortu regards the concepts of aesthetic distance and aesthetic engagement as two opposite ends of the continuum of aesthetic acts and shows how contemporary aesthetic theories, including everyday aesthetics, tend towards the latter. Instead of being preoccupied with art appreciation and its individual, occasional, non-practical and detached character, these theories rather focus on the continuity of aesthetic experience, its active, multisensory nature and its social dimensions; thus, ultimately re-linking the aesthetic with the good in a humanist approach. The main motivation of Martach’s essay is to resolve one of the key methodological problems of everyday aesthetics, as she seeks to find a way of capturing “the beauty of the ordinary while preserving it in its ordinary character” (259). This should be seen as a valuable contribution

¹ I am speaking here of the essays by Tordis Berstrand, Yevheniia Butsykina, Corine van Emmerik, Michaela Paštěková, Elisabetta di Stefano, and Polona Tratnik.

since a number of the authors (e.g., Berstrand, Paštéková or Szyszkowska) seemed to evade this question and to conflate everyday aesthetics too hastily with its approaches that seek to uncover the extraordinary in the everyday. Martach holds that speculative philosophy is able to provide suitable tools for tackling this problem. Her description of speculative aesthetic attitude then involves taking a stance in which the subject lets the objects, surroundings, and activities determine its actions, without trying to intervene or seize control over them, thus partly resembling the non-dualist approach of aesthetic engagement. Although it would require more space to better analyze and adequately compare these approaches, it is worth noting that both of them set as their goal to link the aesthetic experience of the everyday with the task of deepening our understanding and appreciation of the world, while leading us to more ethical behaviour.

Overall, it is possible to say that the collection successfully arouses careful attention to the ordinary world around us and also shows that everyday aesthetics can be a worthy guide to the necessary transformations and inevitable adaptations we are to promote and undergo in the face of the challenges of our age.

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