

Liu Yuedi and Curtis L. Carter (eds.). *Aesthetics of Everyday Life: East and West*. Cambridge Scholars Publishing 2014. 203 pp. £47.99 (Hardcover ISBN 9781443860291).

Ten years or so from its earliest iterations, it is timely to find a new volume dedicated to everyday aesthetics, one that demonstrates both the confidence of a movement moving into maturity, and a certain reflexivity about how far it has since come. This is also the first collection on the everyday with a ‘global perspective,’ claiming that scholars both East and West can now proceed as ‘equal partners’ (viii) in this endeavour. The papers offered here stem from a conference held in 2012 in China on the topic of ‘Aesthetics Towards Everyday Life: East and West’; as such, they are generally short, sometimes uneven, and now and then more promissory notes for what could (or may) become fuller treatments of their topics. Nevertheless, a number of contributions stand out as very good on their own.

Let me begin with the confidence. The aesthetics of everyday life is presented as one of three established trends in the discipline, (along with the philosophy of art, and the aesthetics of nature and the environment (xii)). Arnold Berleant notes that everyday aesthetics is part of a ‘broadening scope of aesthetic inquiry’ in general (10), one that ‘demonstrates the obsolescence’ (11) of traditional concepts such as disinterest, contemplation, and a quest for universality in aesthetic judgements (which he largely identifies with the work of Kant). The Eastern scholars represented claim that everyday aesthetics is a ‘two-way, pan-aesthetic movement sweeping the world’ (Yuedi, 33) on the one hand, or a tradition long grounded in the notion of a ‘living aesthetics’ from ancient scholars that is resurgent today (Pan Fan and Wang Que). Whether disruptive and reactionary, or ancient and (until recently) overlooked, the tone of these papers can be contrasted with earlier works in the field that seemed to call for an aesthetics of the everyday more than deliver it. And, while the jury is out as to whether a revolution is striking the discipline (and whether Kantian aesthetics is indeed obsolete) this collection represents its vanguard, and its most contemporary expression.

Accompanying this confidence is a certain amount of reflection. As the editors note, the developments in everyday aesthetics need to be subjected to ‘critical examination’ (vii) and they mention two challenges this area faces: to adequately define the scope of the everyday; and to articulate what precisely is *aesthetic* about our experiences of it (xiii). Some of the most interesting papers in this collection take up these challenges directly, to greater or lesser effect. Allen Carlson’s offering, ‘The Dilemma of Everyday Aesthetics’, provides an excellent conceptual mapping of previous work done in the field. The dilemma he refers to is a tension between the notions of aesthetic experience and the typical experience of the everyday, which pull in the different directions of the extraordinary (abstract and disinterested attention) and the mundane (largely instrumental engagement). This is reflected in the subject-matter of the field: the everyday life of *whom?* (not symphony conductors and circus performers (49)); and *which* objects and activities? For Sherri Irvin (not represented in this volume), this could be as simple an activity as scratching an itch; for Tom Leddy, the drinking of lemonade (35); for Mary Wiseman, the pain of a dentist’s drill, given the right kind of attention (141). Carlson considers options for resolving this dilemma, and the weaknesses of various attempts to do so. Attending to the ordinariness of the everyday makes it difficult to see how it can be genuinely aesthetic (as with Irvin, and Saito); to ‘aestheticize’ or ‘ritualize’ (53-4) certain aspects of the mundane is to thereby transcend it and make it extraordinary (as with Leddy). Carlson proposes a cognitivist approach as a solution, where knowledge of the history, traditions, and functions of everyday objects and activities are relevant to—in fact can motivate and sustain—our aesthetic appreciation of them (63).

Arnold Berleant provides a good historical overview of stages in the emergence of everyday aesthetics and calls for a new ‘unifying concept’ or conceptual framework that can encompass the field, one that he finds in the notion of ‘aesthetic engagement’ (12). However, as Carlson notes, immersion in the everyday, while it reduces the distance between subject and object, leaves open the question of what would motivate our particularly *aesthetic* appreciation, if the items with which we are engaged remain mundane, banal, and even ‘downright uninteresting’ (60). This is the problem of trying to create an aesthetics of the ordinary as it is ordinarily experienced: no matter how much I am engaged in doing the laundry, I am still, and only, doing the laundry. Tom Leddy approaches these challenges with an unhelpful political metaphor of the aesthetic ‘right’ and ‘left’ (26), where the right conservatively seeks to ensure that everyday aesthetics be ‘submitted to strict standards of evaluation’ (26) lest it descend into relativism and a disintegration of the distinction between aesthetic pleasure and the more ordinary, garden-variety kind. (Perhaps I should admit that I am named as an aesthetic “right-winger”). When Leddy (a “leftist”) identifies everyday aesthetics with ‘entire *styles* of life, with entire ways of being’ and indeed with individual happiness (31), we see Carlson’s dilemma at work: is this movement purporting to be a new existential philosophy that encompasses *all* human activities and their objects? If so, what, precisely, is aesthetic about it, and when?

Two other papers in this reflexive vein, from the collection’s section on ‘Eastern Wisdom’, are worthy of note. Mary Wiseman asks three questions of everyday aesthetics: (1) what is the difference between the aesthetic appreciation of a work of art and of an ordinary thing? (2) How much does the difference between works of art and ‘mere real things’ matter to our aesthetic experience of each? And (3) ‘what reasons do we have for attending to the aesthetic qualities of everyday things?’ (134). Her responses (limited to the first two questions) are, in brief, that we can impart an aesthetic tenor to any part of our lives, if we pay it the right kind of attention (she makes original use of the Cartesian notions of clarity and distinctness to bring this out). The difference between art and the everyday is that with the former we know that we are expected to attend to its aesthetic character, whereas with the latter we have to make a deliberate and conscious effort (138). But once we make that effort, the difference between the kinds of objects disappears, and thus no longer matters to our appropriately aesthetic experience of them (144) (*vis* laundry, above: Wiseman would say that I am just not doing it with the appropriate aesthetic attention, but were I to, the activity would take on aesthetic qualities). The problem remains, though, that this aesthetic attention seems to lift the object or activity out of the everyday and render it extraordinary, or no longer ordinary, through the process of aestheticization.

Yuriko Saito takes up the third question and argues that ‘cultivating an aesthetic sensibility helps improve the quality of life and the state of the world’ (145). She canvases views suggesting that aesthetic experience is generally (or always) positive and pleasurable (as with Leddy and Irvin), and suggests that the cultivation of this sensibility encourages ‘mindful living’ (151). But she finds these views incomplete. In an original and provocative turn, Saito argues that we should also pay attention to negative aesthetic experiences and values, ‘*taken as negativity*’ (151), rather than as sources for pleasurable contemplation. The negatively aesthetic in objects and activities—the ugly, banal, obscene, and so on—‘compromise[s] the quality of life’ (154) but is useful because it can spur us to change our behaviour and our lived environment for the better. To improve the quality of life, then, requires attention to what impoverishes or harms it, not as an aesthetic oddity that can nevertheless give us gratification of a kind, but as an obstacle to our well-being that, through appropriate attention, we can overcome. Everyday aesthetics, she claims, ‘will be derelict’ if it does not recognize and accept the negative as an important part of our lived experience (154). The aesthetic for Saito,

then becomes a 'tool' (145) to be used for ethical ends, rather than a form of pleasurable (or displeasurable) experience in its own right, and for its own sake.

The conceptual problems that the movement faces have not been resolved in this volume, but they have been addressed more explicitly, and this is one of the collection's strengths. The movement remains challenged by how to circumscribe the notion of the everyday, and how to conceptualize its aesthetic character. The relation of aesthetics to ethics is not new, but is given an original approach here, as connected to a more general notion of human well-being, and an instinct that the aesthetic is a larger part of that well-being than has been previously considered. The responses offered to these challenges may be partial and incomplete, but they demonstrate a sophistication of thought over previous works in this area. For those with an interest in the everyday, this collection will serve as a good measure of the state of the movement.

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