

Everyday Aesthetics in Contemporary Art

Gabriela Farías

University of Guanajuato, Mexico

Abstract

This article examines the relatively new field of everyday aesthetics and its use in artistic works. I argue anyone can have an aesthetic experience regardless of the source, in the sense that it can happen during daily activities and from the appreciation of banal objects. In addition, contemporary art explores the significance of the prosaic and how people react to a new approach that often requires the active participation of the audience. It also examines the connection established between the beholder and the artwork that uses an aesthetic seen in the everyday but that is usually taken from granted.

[Keywords: everyday aesthetics, contemporary art, relational esthetics, interactive art, snapshot photography]

The everyday

The study of the everyday has been present as subject matter in art and as the focus of attention in Sociology and Anthropology. Everyday life is the one that combines activities, common sense, social relations, customs, objects, and other instruments that are useful for humans daily. They are generally private actions and, as Bourdin states, they can be also a result of certain rituals (81), meaning, they have a repetitive and important element to accomplish the everyday. The ordinary life even though starts individually, it is primarily social because most people live within a community where relationships between people take place in any of their social aspects (work, family, recreation).

According to Heller, every society produces an everyday life and it is expressed in the extent that people communicate their experiences of the world according to the function and activities they have in society (24). Therefore, what is meaningful is the experience that comes from objects and everyday activities, such as the prosaic that Mandoki understands as "... what assumes the importance of the everyday, the commonplace, the prosaic, it is not the everyday in itself or the commonplace as such that would constitute the objects of prosaic but its aesthetic dimension" (Mandoki, 76). Therefore, the prosaic focuses on the experiences that occur from everyday. According to the previous considerations, this aesthetics can be found in artworks but also in other than art. It expands the horizon to daily life; meaning that anyone can have an aesthetic experience, no matter how distant is the person from the artistic sphere. People have aesthetic experiences every day, not necessarily pleasant or beautiful, nevertheless such events influence daily life in greater or lesser extent.

First, it is necessary to define the aesthetic experience. Dewey says in that matter, the quality of the experience is unity. It must pursue the fulfillment or completion of an object or event, so that the experience is presented in an integral way. However, in contemporary art not all the works have the unity mentioned by Dewey and in response some theorist, including Irvin, say that it is in the fragmented nature where aesthetic qualities can be found.

What theorists of the everyday aesthetics take from Dewey are the little distinctions he does between art and other aspects of life, inasmuch as “real” experiences are preserved as a lasting memory. Likewise, Dewey introduces two concepts; “mere experience” and “An experience”, being the latter the one he suggests has a real aesthetic quality. The mere experience is discontinuous and involves dispersion since it does not have a unifying element which leads to closure. On the contrary, an experience is the one that a person pays more attention and arouses interest even in the case of banal situations; the aim is to observe the consummation, not the end of the experience. Nevertheless, in spite of focusing all the attention to an object, there are other elements of which we are not completely aware, but which also influence the aesthetic experience. Although they are not important by themselves, they are part of the atmosphere and they are perceived through the senses thus contributing to the total experience.

The everyday or prosaic is often overlooked because of its familiar quality in opposition to the concept of ignorance or strangeness proposed by Haapala when he says this is the basis of an aesthetic appreciation (40). Usually, an element of surprise is not presented before daily use objects since they are regularly seen, however Saito says that they can become “extraordinary” experiences (39) when we realize the way to perceive them through the senses as well as knowing the impact they have on us and recognize the context in which they are. In this way, design has become an important discipline to build objects because it studies functionality in addition to the response and reception by the user as he interacts with the product. Yuriko Saito emphasizes in her work that in non-western cultures art and the design of banal objects are created to enhance the everyday, that is to say, they are part of the mundane as elements of aesthetic purposes. This can be seen in advertising strategies to attract the attention of the consumers through the construction of an image for a particular object.

The everyday life aesthetics is the way in which the prosaic is experienced and presented to an individual, including the artistic representations. Then, we can speak of an “aestheticization” as Lipovetsky does it (105) when the values of the artistic sphere go beyond the limits towards the everyday by dissolving borders.

Likewise, Saito reflections bring to mind a continuity between the individual and the environment (either the nature or the social sphere) and therefore in artistic productions. In a similar way, Mandoki states that the social relation subject-object leads the individual to present himself in an active or passive role. Consequently, the subject is who creates his own aesthetic experience from a previous intention of appreciation, such as the one that comes when we are in front of a work of art.

The everyday in art

The everyday aesthetics is incorporated in art through pieces in which activities, situations or banal images are brought up. In 1992, Rirkrit Tiravanija cooked for the audience in a gallery in New York; the visitors could participate in the performance, but certainly, the importance of the piece was to take an everyday situation to the artistic realm. In his work he always refers to the space where everyday activities occur, for example, in a further exhibition he set up a space with furniture and coffee for visitors to sit down after seeing other works; at other times, he has filmed his path from the airport to the museum or he has recreated places where he has been, as the duplicate he did of his apartment in Rehearsal studio No. 6 (1996). In his work, the presence of someone else is essential

inasmuch as the beholder is part of the art piece by consummating it either eating, sitting down, interacting with objects or walking around it.



Rirkrit Tiravanija, Kassel, 2009

In 2007, at Documenta XII in Kassel, Chef Ferran Adrià was invited for the very first time to present his work in a pavilion; the importance of the artwork, if it can be called like this, is the experience of going to the place where he prepares the food. The Chef considers the dishes served as the culmination of a whole process; first, making a reservation, then, waiting all day long, going to the restaurant and finally, the food, all these previous sensations are part of the work according to Ferran.

The everyday within art is represented in different ways, as in the previous examples in Contemporary art the interaction is getting more popular. All senses and different means are included in order to establish a relation between the spectator and the work.

Moreover, there are other mediums that are becoming more prosaic; such as photography due to its character of a mark, the "...impression of reality, the effects which try to provoke an identification between audiovisual representation and reality" (Marzal, 61).



Ferran Adrià, Kassel, 2007

According to Benjamin, "... no work of art is admired nowadays with as much attention as self portraits, of close relatives and friends, and of the beloved" (48). It is then, when the popularity of images appears, of family, travels and the most important moments in life that are saved in family albums.

Even when those photographs taken by amateurs have no artistic intentions, several exhibitions have been organized as in 1998 "*Snapshots: Photography of Everyday life, 1888 to the present*" at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, in which a decontextualization of images appears, because they are taken from private collections, flea markets, sales or family albums.

In this way, the exhibition collected sixty-eight images from different sources. They went through a selection process done by the curator of photography Douglas R. Nickel, who gave importance to images that represented "... neglect, 'a let it pass', where the desire of 'making a photo' of the things we see is free from conventions imposed by the super ego of practicing photo" (Frizot, 287).

The aesthetics of the snapshots is part of a vast and rich popular visual culture, so its influence on art is present by retaking the spontaneous of the shoot.

Nowadays, photographic images proliferate due to the easy diffusion in the mass media. Amateurs want to capture a moment or act obeying a typical impulse of the modern 'homo photographicus'. Although subjects are diverse, the trivial prevails: self-portraits, families, birthdays, parties, travels, etc; in short, everything that produces a pleasant memory and wants to be preserved for the future.

Then, the amateur uses a small digital camera, which he can take everywhere to produce an almost unlimited number of snapshots that are due to the photographer's spontaneity or improvisation. The result can be a candid image which is authentic, relaxed and without too much technical knowledge causing an image that sometimes is out of focus, with an irregular framing, blurred, etc.

The purpose of these images is to remember certain life situations of the person who makes the pictures; they are usually family situations, intimate and private photos that stay in the personal album. The photographic act becomes a ritual that captures moments in life for

posterity. However, with the advent of digital technology there is a considerable increase in the production of images whose main destination is not an album, but a computer and the web.



Pictures from Google used by Fontcuberta

In the last ten years, there has been an increasing interest in making public these captured moments with the aim of showing who we are through fragments of personal life. De Certeau speaks of protecting the intimate from prying eyes (147), but nowadays we found people who like to be seen and also look at others. Perhaps they don't do it through a window but they use electronic media to find out who is on the other side of the screen, what he does and how he lives. In that sense, in the exhibition "Through the looking glass", the Spanish artist Fontcuberta has worked with images from the network, self-portraits taken with digital cameras and cell phones, which represent an increasing social phenomenon. The function of these images, as the artist mentioned it, is to propagate them in a means which an unlimited number of people have access, so the aesthetic quality of the pictures varies considerably because it is not the most important to the person who takes them, neither is significant to the observer.

In brief, the topic of photographs is the personal memories according to a story of the own life. In the past, these images were stored in an album to be seen in private, now the phenomenon is to share these memories with almost anyone as a way of social recognition and construction of identity.

In the field of art, the everyday aesthetics is observed since the sixties at the work of American photographers such as Nan Goldin, Nobuyoshi Akari, or Wolfgang Tillmans. According to Cotton, for some of these artists the use of a photograph lacking of technique is intentional, since the interest is oriented towards the concept of the picture, which represents the intimacy, the relation between the photographer and the subject (137). In this way, the everyday aesthetic is represented through the connection made of the prosaic and the beholder's experience. The observer is confronted with images that are easy to relate to and that open a path of dialogue with the artwork.

It is also necessary to remember how pictures are produced; the amateur generally uses a small format camera that automatically makes light reading and framing. However, due to the conditions of the place, lighting and sometimes not knowing how to use the device, the amateur fails to make a photograph, that is to say, he produces images that are

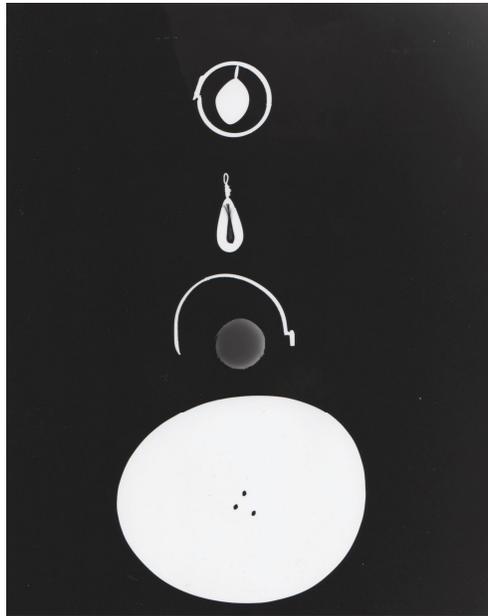
not sharp, the snaps are blurred or dark, colors are changed, the subject is cut off, there are red eyes, etc.

These mistakes can be taken up by artists so that they transform them into something creative.

“A single image can seem failed to an amateur, unrecoverable to a professional, but be interesting to an artist” (Chéroux, 47).

This brings to mind that often the mistakes give rise to discoveries, solutions or new ways of seeing, not only in the field of art but in any aspect of life and discipline.

That is why movements such as Dada and Surrealism praised the random. André Breton considered the accident, the surprise and the chance of encounter as a basis for artistic creation. Serendipityⁱⁱ becomes a way to appreciate the value of mistakes since they can show a fortunate result. It is to find without seeking or to make a discovery when something different was wanted.



Photogram

In this direction, Man Ray produced his work by exploring accidents, declaring himself as a *fautographe*ⁱⁱⁱ. He did not follow the rules in order to take advantage of the mistakes he made, such as turning on the light of the darkroom which causing a solarisation^{iv} or by placing objects on sensitive photographic paper producing photograms.^v

The aesthetics of the surprise or imperfection has been taken up by other photographers, including the French Bernard Plossu and Terry Richardson, who make use of a cheap camera with poor quality in order to cause imprecisions, which they think can provide interesting elements and improve their vision as creators.

One of the differences between amateur and professional photography is that the artist goes beyond the story (and indeed of the technique) and pushes the limits when shooting. They photograph good memories but also those that are not pleasant and we face everyday. In addition, there may be a previous conceptualization of the image, in other

words, that the picture is not always pursued spontaneously, certain elements are planned to ensure some control and direction at the final frame. This means, if the artist decides to make use of a digital or disposable camera is because he already knows the possibilities and limitations of the medium. The photographer plans the images in such way they will be useful to express his visual discourse.

However, not all artists like to work with the random or serendipity. Instead, they take its characteristics to reproduce them in a controlled environment by constructing a scene. While the snapshot takes a value of “truth” since the image is taken as it is found, some artists appeal to the everyday aesthetics by creating an image that seems like a snapshot. The outcome is a picture that seems to be the result of imperfection but actually it is totally planned and conceptualized.

The photographs of Tina Barney, Jeff Wall and Phillip-Lorca diCorcia, to name a few, are an example of this conceptual process. These artists make a visual representation from a deep introspection of certain issues. In that regard, Jeff Wall gives his opinion concerning the difference between straight photography and constructing the image. The first one, according to him, has three drawbacks: it privileges the spontaneity of the gaze upon critical analysis and thus, it favors the renewal of automatism in relation with aesthetic appropriation of the world. (Chévrier). This means, straight photography is the collection of images while Wall proposes a *tableau vivant* where actors play a scene previously studied and conceived by the photographer.



Disorder on the court. Tableau vivant

In conclusion, the everyday aesthetics works in two parallel directions to create images that evoke the prosaic. The first one is found in the subject matter, the private and domestic life, which often is seen from the cherished memories or even voyeurism. The second one comes from the random or mistakes caused in the process in order to show images that are closer to casual encounters. Moreover, the everyday can be put on scene, be posed, but with the same purpose of approximation to reality.

The justification of the everyday aesthetics is that it seems natural and closer to what the beholder does daily. He is probably an amateur photographer, he cooks, he cleans, he

sleeps, and he looks at others. At last, he finds in art something familiar, he relates with what he sees and may be he finds value in the prosaic.

Notes

ⁱ Fontcuberta uses the term to refer to those who want to have the world through images

ⁱⁱ It is a word that comes from the Arabic legend of Serendip.

ⁱⁱⁱ French, it is pronounced like photographer, but in this case *faute* means error so it refers to a photographer who makes mistakes instead of pictures.

^{iv} It is a phenomenon in photography in which the image recorded on a negative or on a photographic print is wholly or partially reversed in tone. Dark areas appear light or light areas appear dark.

^v A photogram is a photographic image made without a camera by placing objects directly onto the surface of a photo-sensitive material and then exposing it to light.

Bibliography

Benjamin, Walter. *Sobre la fotografía*. Valencia, Spain: PRE-TEXTOS, 2005.

Bourdin, Alain. *La metrópoli de los individuos*. Mexico: Universidad Iberoamericana Puebla, 2007.

Bourriaud, Nicolás. *Estética relacional*. Buenos Aires: Adriana Hidalgo editora, 2006.

-----*Postproduction*. New York: Kukas & Sternberg, 2007.

Certeau, Michel D. *La invención de lo cotidiano*. Mexico: Universidad Iberoamericana, 1999.

Chéroux, Clément. *Breve historia del error fotográfico*. Mexico: Serieve, 2009.

-----“Les discours de l’origine”. *Études photographiques*, 2004. Web. 25 July, 2011.

Chevrier, Jean-François. *La fotografía entre las bellas artes y los medios de comunicación*. Barcelona: Gustavo Gili, 2007.

Cotton, Charlotte. *The photograph as contemporary art*. London: Thames & Hudson, 2004.

Dewey, John. *El arte como experiencia*. Barcelona: Paidós, 2008.

Dezeuze, A. “Everyday life, ‘relational aesthetics’ and the ‘transfiguration of the commonplace’”. *Journal of Visual Art Practice* 5.3 (2006): 143–152. Web. May 2011.

Frizot, Michel. *El imaginario fotográfico*. México: Serieve, 2009

Haapala, Arto. “On the Aesthetics of the Everyday: Familiarity, Strangeness, and the meaning of place”. *The Aesthetics of Everyday life*. Ed. A. Light and J.M. Smith. Nueva York: Columbia University Press, 2005. 39-55.

Heller, Ágnes. *Sociología de la vida cotidiana*. Barcelona: Ediciones Península, 1987

Irvin, Sherri. “Everyday aesthetics”. *Companion to Aesthetics, Blackwell*. Ed. Davies, Stephen *et al.* *Companions to Philosophy*, 2009.136-139. Web. March 2011.

Irvin, Sherri. “The pervasiveness of the aesthetic in ordinary experience”. *British Journal of Aesthetics* 48, 2008. 29-44. Web. March 2011.

Lipovetsky, Guilles. *La era del vacío. Ensayos sobre el individualismo contemporáneo*. Barcelona: Anagrama, 1998.

Mandoki, Katya. *Estética cotidiana y juegos de cultura. Prosaica I*. Mexico: CONACULTA-FONCA and Siglo XXI editores, 2006.

Saito, Yuriko. *Everyday aesthetics*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007