

# Contemporary Aesthetics (Journal Archive)

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Volume 13 *Volume 13 (2015)*

Article 5

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2015

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### Recommended Citation

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## The Aesthetic Pulse of the Everyday: Defending Dewey

*Kalle Puolakka*

### Abstract

In the relatively fragmented field of everyday aesthetics, some issues have gradually become the subject of increasingly heated debate. One of the primary disputes concerns aesthetic experience and how that concept should be understood. This article defends the view that the conception of aesthetic experience developed by John Dewey offers a much more promising foundation for a theory on the aesthetics of everyday life than some scholars have believed.

### Key Words

aesthetic experience, Dewey, everyday aesthetics, Haapala, Melchionne, rhythm, Saito

### 1. Introduction

Because of the severe criticism Dewey leveled against the creation of a dichotomy between art and the everyday, he has been generally acknowledged as a forerunner for everyday aesthetics.<sup>[1]</sup> Yet not all have been convinced that Dewey's ideas provide the most adequate starting point for this new discipline. Despite its merits in showing that everyday events and artifacts can be objects of genuine aesthetic reflection, Dewey's view has been considered to involve problematic aspects that call into question its theoretical value and usefulness for everyday aesthetics. One line of criticism sees Dewey's notion of aesthetic experience as too restrictive. Dewey viewed aesthetic experience as one of the peak experiences of human life, as *an* experience. Given, however, that in our waking lives we only seldom have such experiences, Dewey's notion, Yuriko Saito argues, offers a highly limited foundation for a theory of everyday aesthetics.<sup>[2]</sup>

In the first part my paper I counter this argument by showing that Deweyan aesthetic experiences can be part of everyday life in a much more comprehensive way than Saito's criticism assumes. The reading of Dewey's conception of aesthetic experience underlying my response to Saito will form an important basis for the critique I present in the second half of the paper of views that see the aesthetic character of the everyday as constituted by a particular feeling of familiarity. The paper ends with some notes on what the Deweyan aesthetic everyday looks like.

The considerations I tackle in this paper touch on some core issues in the field of everyday aesthetics. In her recent impressive study on the aesthetics of design, Jane Forsey launches a thorough challenge to the movement as it has thus far been practiced. Although finding everyday aesthetics to be important, she nevertheless sees some significant weaknesses in everyday aesthetics' theoretical foundation.

These, she contends, can threaten the very future of the

movement, at least as a philosophically respectable discipline. In Forsey's opinion, a highly loose underlying notion of the aesthetic is the origin of the problems she attributes to everyday aesthetics. In her view, the field is in danger of becoming dominated by a rather trivialized concept of the aesthetic by means of which it is impossible to demarcate genuine everyday aesthetic phenomena from aesthetically insignificant cases like "drinking lemonade," "folding laundry,"<sup>[3]</sup> or the smell of a hotdog and the feeling of sun on one's skin at a baseball game on a clear summer day.<sup>[4]</sup> In short, she claims everyday aestheticians have not yet managed to "ground their work in a rigorous aesthetic philosophy."<sup>[5]</sup>

While Forsey's critique is not a focus of this paper, the defense of Dewey's conception of aesthetic experience I undertake here advances the fundamental discussion for which she thinks there is a pressing need within everyday aesthetics. A more accurate conception of how aesthetic experience should be understood within the context of the everyday arguably plays a key role in enhancing the philosophical rigor of this new field.

## 2. Saito's critique of Dewey

It is well known that Dewey never encapsulated his conception of aesthetic experience in a precise formula; and many philosophers, particularly in the analytic tradition, have been put off by the rather meandering descriptions he provided in his classic treatise *Art as Experience*.<sup>[6]</sup> At bottom, for Dewey, aesthetic experiences are unified wholes having a particular developmental structure that gives them the unique place that he believed they hold in the stream of human events. Aesthetic experience involves anticipation, tension, and resistance, which in the course of the experience culminate in a fulfilling close. Dewey emphasized that the end point of aesthetic experience does not signify a cessation but marks a point of consummation of the previous phases of the experience. One of Dewey's many descriptions of aesthetic experience highlight these aspects of it: "That which distinguishes an experience as esthetic is a conversion of resistance and tension, of excitations that in themselves are temptations to diversion, into a movement toward an inclusive and fulfilling close."<sup>[7]</sup> Aesthetic experience, in other words, possesses an inner movement whose driving force consists of anticipations created at the beginning of the experience. The consummatory ending of the experience is reached once those anticipations have been met.

That these sorts of experiences are not limited to art works but can occur in non-art, everyday settings, as well, is arguably the most fundamental claim of Dewey's aesthetics. For him, there was no predetermined limit to where aesthetic experiences can take place, and Deweyan tools have been used to analyze the aesthetic character of various everyday phenomena. Despite the insistent demand present in Dewey's aesthetics to enlarge the terrain of aesthetic experience from the realm of art to the everyday, Saito, a prominent theorist within current everyday aesthetics, has not been convinced that Dewey's account does give the most appropriate model for understanding aesthetic experience in the context of the everyday. She singles out Dewey's aesthetics and the account

of aesthetic experience it includes as a primary example of "special-experience based aesthetics."<sup>[8]</sup> This view does acknowledge that powerful aesthetic experiences can be parts of people's everyday. The problem in his approach from the point of view of everyday aesthetics, however, is that it is in danger of making aesthetic experiences highly rarefied events. We would almost need to be "lucky" to have the dynamic experience Dewey considered to be aesthetic as part of our everyday.<sup>[9]</sup> Aesthetic experiences become the exceptions to the quotidian flow.

Saito argues that Dewey's understanding is similar to views defining a particular aesthetic attitude as a precondition of aesthetic experience. What unites these perspectives on the aesthetic, she thinks, is an assumption that the emergence of aesthetic experience requires a break from everyday ways of engaging with the world. For Saito, Deweyan aesthetic experience is something that "stands out" from the flow of the everyday and forms "a kind of encapsulated unit that is hermetically sealed off from our ordinary engagement with daily life."<sup>[10]</sup> Aesthetic experience thus signifies an interruption, although a good one, in to the ordinary course of affairs. Given that this kind of experience "is a rarefied occasion and occupies only a small... portion of our life,"<sup>[11]</sup> however, Saito doubts that Dewey's theoretical framework is the best one for everyday aesthetics. Although serving as a key inspiration for the field, Dewey's notion of aesthetic experience within everyday aesthetics turns out, after a proper investigation of its implications, to be much more limited than initially seemed to be the case.

### **3. The Deweyan response: aesthetic rhythm of the everyday**

The picture of the Deweyan aesthetic everyday that Saito portrays looks like this: An aesthetically good everyday containing a high number of encapsulated moments characterized by the qualities I laid out in the account of Dewey's conception of aesthetic experience at the beginning of the previous section. According to this picture, most of our everyday lives consists of a regular humdrum, which Dewey found essentially a non-aesthetic experience.<sup>[12]</sup> To make the everyday more aesthetic means immersing encapsulated aesthetic moments within it. The Deweyan view is problematic from the perspective of everyday aesthetics in that these moments occupy a more prominent place in the everyday of only a lucky few.

Many passages in *Art as Experience* lend support for the interpretation of Dewey's notion of aesthetic experience as "a sort of contained unit,"<sup>[13]</sup> a notion at the heart of Saito's critique, and this impression is fortified by Dewey's frequent descriptions of aesthetic experience as *an* experience. But a very different interpretation of Dewey's notion and the way aesthetic experience is, in the Deweyan framework, seen to intersect with our everyday lives is also possible. It is indeed true that a consummatory end is a vital element of aesthetic experience on the Deweyan understanding. This does not imply, however, that the beginning and the ending of the experience would have to be closely situated to one another time-wise. That is, experience can possess aesthetic qualities

even in cases in which the consummation phase does not immediately follow the starting point of the experience. This is because consummation is not a quality just of the end of the experience, but it can be felt throughout the entire experience in the sense that it is "anticipated throughout and is recurrently savored with special intensity."[\[14\]](#) It is just this anticipation of consummation, that is, the sense that our current doings and undergoings will at some point lead to a consummatory end, that gives experience the "dynamic organization" Dewey believed aesthetic experience possesses. Aesthetic experience moves "toward a close, an ending," and "ceases only when the energies active in it have done their proper work."[\[15\]](#) Again, however, this does not imply that the energies underlying the experience could not be active for a longer, indeterminable stretch of time. The anticipation of consummation, which, in Dewey's view, gives experience an aesthetic stamp, can be part of the horizon of the experience from its early stages. Experiences can possess aesthetic qualities before their energies reach a closing consummation.

This interpretation of Dewey's concept of aesthetic experience shows it to be much more open-ended, and less bounded to a particular span of time, than Saito assumes in her criticism. The Deweyan account of aesthetic experience need not refer to a clearly demarcated, memorable break from the everyday, as Saito thinks, but it can explain the potential for our everyday lives to have an aesthetic character in a more comprehensive sense. If this is indeed the case, Saito's claim that Dewey's aesthetics embraces only a small slice of our everyday aesthetic lives is undermined.

Further insight into the qualities that make the everyday aesthetic in a more pervasive sense from Dewey's perspective is provided by his analysis of rhythm. For Dewey, rhythm is not something "superimposed upon material" but "an operation through which material effects its own culmination in experience."[\[16\]](#) Dissociating his own notion of rhythm from what he calls a "tick-tock" theory of rhythm is a central part of Dewey's explanation. In the latter, rhythm is associated with "the regular repetition of identical elements" of which the ticking of a clock serves as an illuminating example. The conception of rhythm Dewey outlined and that he saw as underlying aesthetic experience is, however, very different. In this case, the recurrence of elements is understood "on the basis of furtherance, through the energy of the elements, of a complete and consummatory experience."[\[17\]](#) Aesthetic rhythm, in other words, possesses an inner drive that mechanical cases of rhythm lack. This particular sense of furtherance or momentum that Dewey believed rhythm involves makes it possible to see it as a quality, not just of some clear-bordered experience but of an experience that spans a longer, indeterminable stretch of time.

Dewey thought that many natural phenomena exhibit the dynamic structure he wanted to capture with his notion of rhythm. These include "a pond moving in ripples, forked lightning, the waving of branches in the wind, the beating of a bird's wing, the whorl of sepals and petals, chancing shadows of clouds on a meadow."[\[18\]](#) What unites all these cases of natural rhythm is their building up of energy that mechanical examples of rhythm do not possess. For instance, the beating

of a bird's wing signifies simultaneously a release of energy and a beginning of a new energy gathering. Dewey found the structure of this natural phenomenon to parallel in miniature the dynamism of aesthetic rhythm. It, too, involves a "resistance" culminating in "energy," and it "institutes conservation until release and expansion ensue."[\[19\]](#) Unlike rhythmic processes in which different elements just follow each other mechanically, aesthetic rhythm conserves energy. This conservation of energy allows experience to grow and develop in an orderly fashion in the way Dewey believed to be typical of aesthetic experience. For Dewey there is rhythm in experience "whenever each step forward is at the same time a summing up and a fulfillment of what precedes, and every consummation carries expectation tensely forward..."[\[20\]](#) The everyday comes to attain an aesthetic character in a general sense for Dewey once it exhibits this rhythmic pulse.

The role of rhythm in Dewey's account of aesthetic experience shows the deep-rooted naturalism of his aesthetics. For him "esthetics is no intruder in experience from without, whether by way of idle luxury or transcendent ideality," but is the "intensified development of traits that belong to every normal complete experience."[\[21\]](#) The naturalistic reading of Dewey's concept of aesthetic experience that I have drawn from his idea of aesthetic rhythm in this section shows, I believe, that Deweyan aesthetic experiences can be much more all-encompassing features of our everyday lives than Saito claims. Aesthetic quality can run through our everyday life in a fundamental way. Life can have an aesthetic pulse. Now, given the possibility of building an interpretation of Dewey's notion of aesthetic experience that avoids the pitfalls Saito attributes to it, her view of its usefulness in describing our aesthetic lives is arguably overly skeptical. I provide a more thorough look at what an aesthetic everyday looks like from a Deweyan perspective in the final part of this paper. But first I want to address another way of understanding the aesthetic character of ordinary life that has been offered within everyday aesthetics.

#### **4. The aesthetics of familiarity**

Reflections on the aesthetic character of the everyday, in contrast to rare, standout experiences, should, in Saito's view, take as their starting point "the daily humdrum with its commonplace, ordinary, mundane, and routine character." That is, everyday aesthetics should overcome a long-held bias in the field against the "ordinary and inconspicuous."[\[22\]](#) The goal is not to question the relevance of the extraordinary and the dramatic. Rather, it is to call attention to the fact that "the ordinary and mundane... need to receive equal attention."[\[23\]](#)

It is not clear how essential a role Saito intends ordinary experiences to have in the entirety of her theory as it is laid out in *Everyday Aesthetics*.[\[24\]](#) Some argue, however, that precisely the humdrum character of everyday experience, or "the gray colors of the everyday," should form the cornerstone.[\[25\]](#) Arto Haapala provides the most systematic account of everyday aesthetics from this angle. His explanation emerges from an analysis of the existential-ontological significance of the everyday for human life. The

concepts of place and familiarity have a key role in Haapala's investigation. What constitutes a given slice of our lives as the everyday for him is not primarily the fact that we encounter the artifacts, people, and environments it includes on a daily basis. Rather, the everyday has to do with a specific relationship of familiarity we build into objects and places. All objects and places are unfamiliar to us at first. Encounters with unfamiliar places, for example, are marked by an inability to move about without special effort. We might need a map to find our way, as well as resorting to outside assistance to identify the different buildings located wherever we have arrived. In other words, operating in an unfamiliar place calls for special attention to the surroundings.

Through recurrent engagements with a place, it becomes familiar to us. We form bonds with it by knowing what buildings the place includes and knowing the easiest route to our desired destination located in the place. We no longer wander around, but have formed a set of habits and routines that make possible an effortless engagement with the place. In Haapala's phenomenological terminology, by forming such habits and bonds, we place ourselves in the environment. Once these ties and bonds are established and are marked by personal features, the place becomes a home for us. For Haapala, the tendency to build familiarity is an essential existential aspect of human life. We are home builders by nature and seek out familiarity. In this respect, he writes, the category of the familiar has a strong existential import.[\[26\]](#)

According to Haapala, when we have placed ourselves in an environment, our perspective on it undergoes a decisive change. The level of attention we pay to the environment decreases as the process of familiarization deepens. Acting effectively in a fully familiar place requires no special effort and attention. The buildings, objects, and people the place includes provide a background for the everyday. In no way, however, do they stand out from the stream of everyday life and attract notice. In Haapala's view, their function, broadly construed, consists in making the everyday possible. Special attention is called for only when the fabric of our everyday is frayed. Haapala points to Martin Heidegger's famous analysis of the tool to illuminate the specific silent and inconspicuous character of our everyday experience. Heidegger maintained that a tool like a hammer disappears into its usefulness and that we pay special attention to the tool itself only when it ceases to function properly. Similarly, the settings of our everyday lives withdraw to the background when everything goes as expected. We notice them only when something does not fit our expectations.[\[27\]](#) Also central to Haapala's position on everyday aesthetics is that there is no predetermined limit to what can become an everyday object and thus be included within the sphere of the everyday. Even an art work or brilliant scenery can be an everyday object in Haapala's sense of the term if our relationship to it is marked by the familiarity he finds essential to everyday experience.[\[28\]](#)

Set apart from the quality of familiarity at the heart of Haapala's account of the everyday is the category of the strange. In contrast to the familiar, the strange stands out from the flow of life and calls for more conscious attention and reflection. A typical setting for the experience of the strange



is the arrival of a visitor in a new city; he cannot just act unreflectively, but needs to be alert and pay careful attention to details of the new place. Haapala observes that in such situations we "are also particularly attentive to [the] aesthetic potentiality" of that environment.<sup>[29]</sup> Strangeness, in other words, "creates a suitable setting for aesthetic considerations." This is because in strange places and in the presence of unfamiliar objects "our senses are more alert" and "in a very concrete sense we are sensitive to the looks of things."<sup>[30]</sup> In contrast, blending into the background of everyday humdrum, familiar objects, artifacts, buildings, scenery, or even art works making up our everyday does not elicit an aesthetic response as directly. Haapala claims that perceiving the aesthetic features of such objects often requires "a special effort."<sup>[31]</sup>

In Haapala's view, the category of the strange is an important ingredient of many traditional accounts of the concept of the aesthetic. Aesthetics is often understood as something extraordinary, as a quality of things that entices our senses and calls for attentive and imaginative perception. The crux of Haapala's theory, however, is that familiarity too is an aesthetic category; it's just very different from the aesthetics of the strange. He explains the aesthetic character of the familiar as follows: "Ordinary everyday objects lack the surprise element or freshness of the strange, nevertheless they give us pleasure through a kind of comforting stability; through the feeling of being at home and taking pleasure in carrying out normal routines in a setting that is 'safe'."<sup>[32]</sup> In other words, the aesthetics of the everyday does not involve creating strangeness and moments of surprise within our everyday lives. The sense of familiarity we have in the presence of objects and environments making up our place in the world, given the "stability" they create for our everyday, can itself be considered a form of aesthetic experience. The aesthetic ambiance our everyday settings create is based on their "trustworthiness," on the guarantee they provide that there will be no surprises.<sup>[33]</sup> Thus, for Haapala, the aesthetics of the everyday is in essence the aesthetics of the unobtrusive.

### **5. The Deweyan response: Is familiarity truly an aesthetic phenomenon?**

Whatever value Haapala's analysis has in revealing the existential significance of the everyday, its problem, from the point of view of Dewey's aesthetics, is clear: Why should the sense of familiarity, which Haapala thinks forms the specific aesthetic character of the everyday, be included within the category of aesthetic experience? One reason Dewey would be skeptical of the aesthetic status of experiences to which Haapala refers with the notion of familiarity is that these experiences do not seem to exhibit the rhythmic quality that Dewey saw as a fundamental factor of aesthetic experience. Instead of furtherance, or momentum, there is what Haapala calls "comforting stability" and regularity, as exhibited, for example, by effortless hammering. Hammering indeed involves rhythm; however, the rhythmic undertone of the hammering by which Haapala illuminates the sense of the familiar is arguably very different from what Dewey tried to capture with his analysis of aesthetic rhythm. The former



rhythmic process lacks the features that, in Dewey's eyes, make a rhythmic process aesthetic. Hammering consists of a regular repetition of identical elements with very little momentum, growth, and energy buildup. This is why it seems senseless to speak of a point of consummation in the case of hammering.

The experience of familiarity at the heart of Haapala's account is a seamless, imperceptible flow. As seen above, it can even be something that we are not directly conscious of until there is a break in our everyday settings and routines, or until we take on a distanced attitude toward them. Given this description of the aesthetic character of the everyday, it is hard to see how there can be room in Haapala's account for the central notions in Dewey's aesthetics of momentum, growth, and anticipation. Also, the specific rhythmic pulse Dewey attached to aesthetic experience must not go unacknowledged, for it gives our everyday lives a clearly felt, lively undertone. Now, the Deweyan challenge would be how familiarity as defined by Haapala could be considered a form of aesthetic experience, given the difficulty of finding a place for the aforementioned Deweyan concepts in Haapala's conceptual terrain. This is where I believe the real clash exists between Haapala's and Dewey's positions on everyday aesthetics. For Dewey, "the enemies of the esthetic are neither the practical nor the intellectual. They are the humdrum; slackness of loose ends; submission to convention in practice and intellectual procedure."[\[34\]](#)

Jane Forsey has similar trouble with Haapala's notion of familiarity.[\[35\]](#) The divergence of Dewey's and Haapala's views can also be approached from the angle of habituation. For Haapala, the aesthetics of the ordinary is a byproduct of becoming familiar with a place or an object. Dewey, however, saw the aesthetic outcomes of this phenomenon in negative terms compared with Haapala. He viewed "greater accommodation of man and the environment" resulting from habituation as "unfavorable to further esthetic creation." This is because, Dewey continued, "things are now too smooth; there is not enough irregularity to create demand for a new manifestation and opportunity for new rhythm." Through such habituation the environment becomes "exhausted, worn out, esthetically speaking," and its experience seems to lose those qualities that Dewey regarded as aesthetic.[\[36\]](#) In a way, the environment becomes overlyfamiliar. Habituation can thus have "a narrowing effect" on our experience,[\[37\]](#) and when the fit between human and environment is too perfect and stable, the breeding ground of aesthetic experience is in danger of vanishing. Experience becomes infused by the qualities Dewey saw as essentially non-aesthetic, like regularity and recurrence without any sense of growth and momentum.

Dewey's analysis, showing that the process of habituation can involve negative consequences for aesthetics, is one to which Haapala does not seem sensitive. According to Dewey, aesthetic experience would not be possible in a world "that is finished, ended," for this type of world "would offer no opportunity for resolution." Dewey continued, "Where everything is already complete, there is no fulfillment."[\[38\]](#) It is then questionable, at least from a Deweyan perspective,

whether the steady, uninterrupted regularity achieved through habituation results in an everyday that can be called aesthetic as unreservedly as Haapala does.

## **6. The aesthetic everyday according to Dewey**

Saito correctly observes that Dewey often saw everyday experience as rather watered down compared to the dynamically organized aesthetic experience.<sup>[39]</sup> The attitude toward ordinary experience present in Dewey's aesthetics is a main reason that Saito finds the perspective it offers on the aesthetics of daily life, in the end, rather limited. Her critique, however, misperceives the ultimate import of Dewey's mournful descriptions of people's everyday experience. It should not be taken as describing some inevitable state of affairs but rather as expressing Dewey's pessimistic diagnosis about the quality of everyday experience for a large number of people of his time.<sup>[40]</sup> What Saito fails to take properly into account is the robust meliorism that runs through Dewey's pragmatism: namely, the belief that the human condition can be improved. For him, rendering people's everyday experience more aesthetic is a vital element in securing that goal.

Kevin Melchionne, another leading theorist in the field of everyday aesthetics, is somewhat dissatisfied with the way aesthetic phenomena of everyday life have been approached by many within the movement. He argues that everyday aestheticians have been too preoccupied with examining individual everyday aesthetic objects and events and have failed to give proper analysis of the way they fit into "the pattern of everyday life." Everyday aesthetics should, in other words, "look at more than just the tiniest slivers of experience." Melchionne insists on a new "ontology of everyday aesthetic life" that resists isolation and sets our everyday aesthetic objects, events, practices, and routines within a larger framework, looking at how they together build the holistic web making up our everyday aesthetic lives. In Melchionne's view, it is "the cumulative rather than individual effect" that matters.<sup>[41]</sup>

The perspective on our everyday aesthetic lives emerging from my response to Saito's critique of Dewey is very similar to the one Melchionne sketches. It, too, insists on understanding everyday aesthetic lives as consisting of mutually reinforcing, cumulative elements. What, then, does an aesthetic everyday look like from Dewey's perspective? For Dewey, everything begins from the interaction between the human and the environment. As he put it, "interaction of environment with organism is the source, direct or indirect, of all experience and from the environment come those checks, resistances, furtherances, equilibria" that, along with "the energies of the organism," determine the character and quality of experience.<sup>[42]</sup> While it is typical to view Dewey as a prime representative of an internalist approach to aesthetic experience,<sup>[43]</sup> his analysis does, nevertheless, assign a significant position to external factors contributing to aesthetic experience. According to Dewey, experience is grounded on "objective conditions," and not all conditions make possible the "cumulation, conservation, reinforcement, transition into something more complete."<sup>[44]</sup> Now, given that Dewey did acknowledge the role of objective factors in constituting

aesthetic experience, one way of making the everyday more aesthetic is by creating spaces and environments that inspire such experiences.

Art can have a role in this attempt. Although Dewey's aesthetics is underlain by a persistent effort to show the aesthetic potential of everyday life, art, nevertheless, was for him the primary source of aesthetic experiences. What he rather sought to call into question is the idea that there would be some inevitable gap between art and the everyday. Specifically, the dichotomous relationship between art and the everyday Dewey found to characterize the cultural climate of his era in no way reflected the inner nature of these entities but was the result of social and political developments that he laid out in his famous critique of the museum conception of art.<sup>[45]</sup> The primary aim of that critique is not to show that institutions of art, by creating a space for art separate from the everyday, would necessarily make art impotent, unable to have an effect on people's everyday. Rather, Dewey's aim was to rethink the role of the different institutions of art within society and to encourage them to more actively engage with people's everyday lives.<sup>[46]</sup> The institutionalization of art is not, by itself, a deplorable development for Dewey; it becomes such only once people no longer think of art institutions as being on their everyday horizons.

Creating aesthetically inspiring environments and making museums and other art institutions into more interactive agents with their surrounding world, however, is only one part of the Deweyan everyday aesthetic. Life could possess aesthetic quality for Dewey even without frequent contact with the world of art. He wrote: "[L]ife ... is a thing of histories, each with its own plot, its own inception and movement toward a close, each having its particular rhythmic movement."<sup>[47]</sup> Put another way, he believed all of life's histories possess a developmental aspect that, in ideal cases, can attain the structure characteristic of aesthetic experience. Dewey found one of the most significant obstacles to people's well-being to be that the experiences accompanying their histories are not given "a chance to complete [themselves]."<sup>[48]</sup> In such cases, experience merely ends without reaching consummation.

It seems that Dewey considered work an area of contemporary life that is particularly in danger of becoming infused by incomplete and fractured experiences. He did not find the mere "increase of hours of leisure" a proper remedy for the stress and conflict he thought these unfulfilling experiences cause, but eliminating them, he said, calls for a radical change in the organization of work. Ideally, work-related activities should give rise to a feeling of participation, which Dewey contrasted to mechanical ways of conducting work. In such cases, the worker's connection to work is highly external.<sup>[49]</sup> Gaining a sense of participation with work is a vital element in making the experience it affords more aesthetic in character, for the kind of participation he projected as an ideal "bears within itself the germs of a consummation akin to the esthetic."<sup>[50]</sup> Dewey wrote, "[I]n ordinary life, much of our pressing forward is impelled by outside necessities, instead of onward motion like that of waves of the sea. Similarly, much of our resting is recuperation from exhaustion; it, too, is

compelled by something external.”[51] So, in creating an aesthetic everyday, the goal should not be to find places of “Nirvana” and “heavenly bliss”[52] to which we can for a moment escape from our stressful lives. Rather, the ideal should be to generate precisely the sense of rhythm for our everyday lives that, according to Dewey, characterizes aesthetic experience.

Dewey also believed firmly that everyday acts of communication can involve aesthetic aspects. He considered conversation a good example of an experiential situation to be invested with the sense of momentum explicated earlier with a discussion of Dewey’s notion of aesthetic rhythm, one that can culminate in a way he found central to aesthetic experience. The aesthetic character of a conversation depends on the interaction that emerges between the speakers. A conversation that moves on only with substantial effort from the conversationalists, and in which the different points of the conversation merely follow each other but in no way build on earlier moments, would not be an aesthetic event for Dewey. With a different type of interaction, however, the conversation can reach a level of organized development similar to what Dewey thought aesthetic experience involves. Conversations can exhibit growth, and a good conversation will end with a phase of fulfillment, when a speaker integrates the past elements of the exchange in a way that gives all involved a heightened sense of closure. In such cases we could say, following Dewey, that the material of the conversation has run its course to fulfillment, and the communication carried out has been a genuinely aesthetic one.[53]

In addition to his extensive investigations of the aesthetic potential of conversations, Dewey referred briefly to the possibility that “objects of use” can contribute “to a heightened consciousness of sight and touch” and thus improve the quality of everyday experience.[54] Now, within the space of this article it is not possible to go any further into the constituents of a Deweyan everyday aesthetic. The considerations put forward above, however, should be sufficient to show that the everyday could be an aesthetic phenomenon for Dewey in a wide-ranging sense, encompassing not just some special slice of it, as Saito’s criticism of Dewey presumes.

Dewey’s views on everyday life seem to be a strange mixture of pessimism and optimism. On the one hand, he found everyday experience to be “often infected with apathy, lassitude and stereotype.”[55] On the other, there is a meliorism clearly present in his attitude toward everyday life; the quality of people’s everyday can be improved and made more aesthetic. As Deweyan everyday aesthetics concerns not just the experiences our everyday environments make possible but everyday activities themselves, work and communication can possess a structure akin to aesthetic experience as well.

These add up to a myriad of ways in which the aesthetic quality of our everyday can be improved. In some cases, rendering the everyday more aesthetic, in the Deweyan sense of the term, may require some radical transformations.[56]

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Published on November 24, 2015.

## Endnotes

[1] For example, Thomas Leddy calls Dewey "the grandfather of everyday aesthetics" in his *Extraordinary in the Ordinary: An Aesthetics of Everyday Life* (Peterborough, Ontario: Broadview Press, 2012), p. 44.

[2] Yuriko Saito, *Everyday Aesthetics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), pp. 43-45.

[3] Jane Forsey, *Aesthetics of Design* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), p. 217.

[4] *Ibid.*, p. 200.

[5] *Ibid.*, p. 203.

[6] See, for example, Noël Carroll, *Beyond Aesthetics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), p. 50.

[7] Dewey, *Art as Experience* [1934] (New York: Perigee Books, 1980), p. 56. Please note that the pagination of the Perigee paperback version I am using differs slightly from that of the perhaps more often used 2005 edition.

[8] Saito, *Everyday Aesthetics*, pp. 43-44.

[9] *Ibid.*, p. 45.

[10] *Ibid.*, p. 44.

[11] *Ibid.*, p. 46.

[12] Dewey, *Art as Experience*, p. 40.

[13] *Ibid.*, p. 44.

[14] *Ibid.*, p. 55.

[15] *Ibid.*, p. 41.

[16] *Ibid.*, p. 147.

[17] *Ibid.*, p. 163.

[18] *Ibid.*, p. 155.

[19] *Ibid.*, p. 155.

[20] *Ibid.*, p. 172. I find John Adams's *Chairman Dances* a

perfect example of this type of rhythm.

[21] *Ibid.*, p. 46.

[22] Saito, *Everyday Aesthetics*, p. 48.

[23] *Ibid.*, p. 49.

[24] *Ibid.*, pp. 55-58. One of the pivotal notions of Saito's account, "the power of the aesthetic," by which she refers to the strong effect that aesthetic qualities of objects can have on our ways of acting and thinking, seems to rest on a more standard notion of the aesthetic, emphasizing its extraordinary and dramatic character.

[25] Arto Haapala, "On the Aesthetics of the Everyday: Familiarity, Strangeness, and the Meaning of Place," in *The Aesthetics of Everyday Life*, eds. Andrew Light and Jonathan M. Smith (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005), pp. 39-55; ref. on p. 41.

[26] *Ibid.*, pp. 44-46.

[27] *Ibid.*, pp. 48-49.

[28] Haapala, "Aesthetic Values and Ecological Facts," in *Raw: Architectural Engagements with Nature*, eds. Solveig Bøe, Hege Charlotte Faber, and Brit Strandhagen (London: Ashgate Publishing, 2014), pp. 199-214; ref. on p. 208.

[29] Haapala, "Aesthetics of the Everyday," p. 44.

[30] *Ibid.*, p. 44.

[31] *Ibid.*, p. 48.

[32] *Ibid.*, p. 50.

[33] Haapala, "Aesthetic Values and Ecological Facts," p. 208.

[34] Dewey, *Art as Experience*, p. 40.

[35] Forsey, *Aesthetics of Design*, pp. 232-234. Forsey concludes her critical investigation of Haapala's views: "While Haapala has provided us with a philosophical framework within which to situate the ethical and existential components of the everyday, he nevertheless neglects the question of what makes these components of particular aesthetic interest" (p. 234).

[36] Dewey, *Art as Experience*, p. 159.

[37] *Ibid.*, p. 269.

[38] *Ibid.*, p. 17.

[39] Saito, *Everyday Aesthetics*, p. 44.

[40] Dewey, *Art as Experience*, p. 27. He wrote, for example: "Only because that life is usually so stunted, aborted, slack, or heavy laden, is the ideal entertained that there is some inherent antagonism between the process of normal living and creation and enjoyment of works of esthetic art."

[41] Kevin Melchionne, "Aesthetic Experience in Everyday Life: A Reply to Dowling," *British Journal of Aesthetics* 51, 4 (2011),

437-442; ref. on pp. 439-440.

[42] Dewey, *Art as Experience*, p. 147.

[43] See James Shelley, "The Concept of the Aesthetic," *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Fall 2013 edition), ed. Edward N. Zalta, <http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2013/entries/aesthetic-concept>. Accessed 22 April 2015.

[44] Dewey, *Art as Experience*, p. 147.

[45] *Ibid.*, pp. 7-9.

[46] I defend this line of interpretation of Dewey's critique of "the museum concept of art" in my "Dewey and Everyday Aesthetics – A New Look," *Contemporary Aesthetics*, vol. 12 (2014), section 5.

[47] Dewey, *Art as Experience*, pp. 35-36.

[48] *Ibid.*, p. 45.

[49] *Ibid.*, p. 343.

[50] *Ibid.*, p. 15.

[51] *Ibid.*, p. 172.

[52] *Ibid.*, p. 17.

[53] *Ibid.* Passages relevant to the aesthetics of conversation include those on pp. 38, 55, 214, 270, and 335. Conversation is a prominent example of an everyday aesthetic event also in Scott Stroud's Dewey-inspired work *John Dewey and the Artful Life: Pragmatism, Aesthetics, and Morality* (University Park, Pennsylvania: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2011). See especially pp. 179-192. It seems to me that my perspective on the aesthetics of conversation differs quite a bit from Stroud's account. He lays heavy stress on the right kind of orientation toward everyday acts of communication in his explanation, whereas I think this is just half the story; conversations are made aesthetic events by their possessing a dynamic organization similar to what Dewey attributed to aesthetic experience.

[54] Dewey, *Art as Experience*, p. 262.

[55] *Ibid.*, p. 260.

[56] I have benefited greatly from the comments of this journal's anonymous referee. I would also like to thank Steven Fesmire for his encouraging words and comments on my earlier "Dewey and Everyday Aesthetics – A New Look" (*Contemporary Aesthetics*, vol. 12 [2014]). They gave me the impetus to begin writing a new article on the topic.