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Affirming Difference: Everyday Aesthetic Experience after Phenomenology

Wood Roberdeau

Abstract

This article explores the complex relationships among two different types of critique, the socio-temporal zone known as "everyday life" and the moment of the encounter by those who are encountering art works. It proceeds with a close study of the phenomenology of Maurice Merleau-Ponty and Mikel Dufrenne, and tests their key concepts against generalized contemporary art practices that question a model of the traditional aesthetic experience by suggesting the possibility that within the expanse of postmodernity such a paradigm has shifted, (although it is not completely irretrievable). The paper argues that this shift has been achieved by remobilizing readymade objects and banal customs within spaces otherwise reserved for extraordinary experience. Thus, it also considers the problem of authoritative experience and Jürgen Habermas' extension of the Husserlian *Lebenswelt* in order to map out the urgencies of our current cultural sphere.

Key Words

authentic experience, contemporary art, criticality, everyday aesthetics, phenomenology

1. Introduction

The inferno of the living is not something that will be; if there is one; it is what is already here, the inferno where we live every day, that we form by being together. There are two ways to escape suffering it. The first is easy for many: accept the inferno and become such a part of it that you can no longer see it. The second is risky and demands constant vigilance and apprehension: seek and learn to recognize who and what, in the midst of the inferno, are not inferno, then make them endure, give them space.^[1]

Italo Calvino's concept of the "inferno," related here by Marco Polo to Kublai Khan, stems from his imagining the crisis of modernity as a sort of Pandora's Box. The times in which we now live, when the inferno flourishes, suggest that if we are to expand our horizons, "heal the world," learn from one another, and begin to redefine notions of progress, we must choose to begin such work from a middle ground, a point without origins, that is, what Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari have repeatedly referred to as a rhizomatic state of constant "becomings." In many ways this standpoint has resulted from the general consensus that refuses to validate an antiquated, Eurocentric, patriarchal, heterosexual, and modernist cogito. For decades, the postmodern call for a turning away from models of truth, while controversially grounded in its own idiosyncratic theoretical parameters, has instead insisted on a model of the "no" (and, on occasion, the "maybe"), causing contemporary optimists to search high and low for an alternative pathway to the "yes."

I situate myself here as one of those figures confronted every day with a cultural mainstream that I have been taught to question. Therefore, it is not surprising that I have looked to contemporary visual art as the conduit capable of rearticulating experience as potentially communicable in its inherent ambiguity; that is, at this site platforms are encouraged upon which difference is immediately affirmed. Problems are presented as the solution and dissonance overcomes regimented agreement; both are too often disguised as "democracy" devoid of conflict. Contemporary visual art that reveals the (in)constancy of the banal, often by poeticizing the readymade object or the phatic exchange, presents an escape route from the rule of contradiction and the pedagogical paradigm.

2. Criticality

In general, one might think of experience as a set of sensibilities and possibilities that produce a conscious subject. Culminating at Documenta XI in 2002 in the wake of globalization and identity politics, experience seemed to be reserved for the oppressed or marginalized, proposing a responsibility among those without such experience to recognize and validate it. More recently, at the tenth Lyon Biennial in 2009 entitled *The Spectacle of the Everyday*, attention shifted towards the more simple and yet profound aspects of humanity, towards those common threads connecting each subjectivity to the world at large, in a word, to the quotidian. The question is, how might one go about recontextualizing notions of experience in our current cultural climate in order to present ourselves to one another and bring about new avenues of dialogue in ways that affirm difference and reject homogeneity?

After criticism or the practice of comparing and contrasting, and after structuralist and post-structuralist critique or the practice of analytical assumptions, is there space for what theorist Irit Rogoff termed 'criticality,' for that which uses the language of critique from an uncertain position where we inhabit the conditions we are analyzing? Criticality might be that missing register that combines the analytical with the experiential.^[2] If the space of criticality insists that there is no outside quarter from which to knowingly look in and pass judgment, then the space of everyday activities, routines, and recognitions might act as a viable lens through which we may consider such a position and filter our differences as well as our common traits. The implication that this space of criticality can be realized and facilitated by the artist after his or her conscious evacuation from the role of proprietor.

3. Reciprocity

In her essay, "The Experience of Art as a Living Through of Language," Kate Love wrestled with Giorgio Agamben's claim that experience has been destroyed in the modern world. Through her own performative transcription of a conversation between a student and a lecturer, and the description of an encounter with a photograph by Gabriel Orozco, she arrived at the notion of an "activated space" or "that precise moment when consciousness meets language meets world"^[3] Love insisted that a sense of reciprocity can be shared between the viewer and the creator of an art work in terms of experience.

This sense reveals itself during the encounter with that art work when it acts as a fulcrum between two interpretations of the same event, the two facets of its composition and its reception as connected by experience. After visualizing herself completing Orozco's actions of setting up the scene in his photograph, she wrote, "This supposed anticipation of another's experience ... felt as if it was entirely interwoven with that of mine - appearing to break and double back upon my 'own' experience - rupturing any notional autonomy or self-same identity that I previously supposed."[\[4\]](#)

The binary relationship suggested here, though shaky in the wake of post-structuralist reasoning, began to formulate a position from which to rethink the practice of incorporating everyday objects into art work to more of the praxis of doing so; that is, if being able to visualize another's experience and then intermingle it with one's own experience requires the trigger of the art work, it stands to reason that the trigger itself might vary in degrees of intimacy. Those objects that have more familiarity might hasten the responsiveness Love described as the "constitution of subjectivity" and bring about the continual recognition of the humane through the de-familiarized utilitarian, as opposed to the traditional and limited concept of the readymade cited throughout the history of art *ad nauseam* (for example, the Duchampian question of what is allowed to constitute a work of art). Under these circumstances, the worn out modes of interpretation or searches for meaning within works of art could be replaced by more reflexive, if not cooperative, points of entry. Love continues:

[I]t might be possible to begin to analyze the world through and against the concepts of experience that the work of art, itself, tends to produce. That is, to redefine the notion of art as a mode of analysis whereby knowledges and ideas could be extracted from the process of making art, thereby enabling both the maker and the viewer to tune in to the sorts of thinking or approaches to the world that the apprehension of art itself makes you do.[\[5\]](#)

This hypothesis stemmed from a resolution to confront Agamben's contention that experience in the modern era has been polluted by a shift in values and an imbalance between subjective events and the ability to clearly communicate them to others. Indeed, this observation coincided with Jean Baudrillard's portrait of our age as one of stagnant nullification and useless appropriation.[\[6\]](#) The leveling of all aspects of (post)modern living, the sameness of it all, along with the silencing of the authoritative subject, such as the death of the author, detracts from any possibility of remarkable causes and effects -- or does it? Love concluded that the point of light that appears at the end of the tunnel could be the contemporary work of art, and that it was there that the existence of language itself became apparent and acted as a catalyst for rearticulating lived experience as "unbound and vibrant."[\[7\]](#)

If one is removed from the banality of everyday contexts through an encounter with a work of art, then a type of "living through" what is otherwise overlooked or ignored might

happen. The art work creates a forum in which differing experiences can be thought or even acted due to fresh perspectives and exposures, since the artist appropriates and subtly manipulates the common object in order to imply such appropriation. Therefore a clarification of the problem of being-in-the-world is just as available to the viewer of the work; the same praxis becomes accessible whether it is through the making or the viewing of the work.

4. Lifeworld

Let us now shift the focus towards an idea of communicating such experiences constructively in the aftermath of deconstruction. The work of Jürgen Habermas, rightly considered to be an extension of the modernist agenda, is able to inform and arm a counter-project of affirmative uncertainty, or "criticality," through its teleological insistence on social constants. Even if society can never be self-correcting, as postmodernists such as Jean-François Lyotard have claimed, then at least an understanding of that impulse can be recognized and confirmed in Habermas' scientific approach and in art works that hone in on the quotidian as a stage and protagonist for social betterment. Such attempts begin to hint at the extent to which we are still within modernity, however misguided we may be, in that these efforts rely, perhaps unknowingly, on the negative, that is, on the admission of difference in order to suggest rather than to determine or represent potentiality.

In *The Theory of Communicative Action*, Habermas addressed the notion that meaning can be achieved from the everyday by developing Edmund Husserl's foundational concept of a "lifeworld," or *Lebenswelt*, which asserts that lived experience exists *a priori* to any reflection or analysis that might be imposed on it.^[8] Habermas added weight to this claim by suggesting that such a world or system can be thought of "as represented by a culturally transmitted and linguistically organized stock of interpretive patterns."^[9] As his concern lay with social behavior, he focused on language or speech acts in order to show how patterns are always already in place to guide and determine modes of experience on a daily basis.

He designated three categories of address that situate the speaker in relation to the world. The first mode of address pertains to the world as objective, or from a position of certainty based on common knowledge; the second to the world as social, or from a position of interactivity based on custom; and the third to the world as subjective, or that stance that most closely resonates with what has been described as authoritative experience. Speakers and hearers, the participants of everyday life, are consistently and simultaneously negotiating all three of these positions in order to interact with one another.

For Habermas, the governing system that he referred to as the "normative framework" is all-encompassing and establishes the context of an event or "action situation," and therefore the acceptable or habitual behavioral responses in its witnesses. As we move through our daily tasks, our focus is continually in flux, and it is the event or situation that centers our attention and becomes the spatio-temporal zone where the lifeworld surfaces.^[10] Yet this activation also conceals

the lifeworld; its refusal, in fact, affirms it: "From a perspective turned toward the situation, the lifeworld appears as a reservoir of taken-for-granted, of unshaken convictions that participants in communication draw upon in cooperative processes of interpretation."^[11] All interactivity relies on the lifeworld for its regulation as a sort of script from which the situation can unfold, but this is not a knowing reliance. That is to say, individuals cannot actively communicate within the patterns they inescapably enact and enforce.

Participants find the relations between the objective, social and subjective worlds already pre-interpreted. When they go beyond the horizon of a given situation, they cannot step into a void; they find themselves right away in another, now actualized, yet pre-interpreted domain of what is culturally taken for granted. In everyday communicative practice there are no completely unfamiliar situations. Every new situation appears in a lifeworld composed of a cultural stock of knowledge that is "always already" familiar.^[12]

The challenge, then, is to think beyond these prescribed restrictions in order to locate a space of optimistic uncertainty in everyday life that enables a socio-political transformation that was previously caught up in a utopian meta-narrative. The artistic encounter presents itself as a viable starting point for such a consideration; a catalyst is needed to galvanize a space where criticality can operate in conjunction with Habermas' observations by pushing past their limits and affirming difference. Therefore, if such an encounter is our launch pad, then a phenomenological investigation can qualify and prepare it for extended sociological readings.

5. Merleau-Ponty

In *The Phenomenology of Perception*, Maurice Merleau-Ponty outlined and engaged with the study of the subject and his or her relationship with the physical world. Criticizing René Descartes for limiting his scope to the mantra *cogito ergo sum*, or the idea that the mind projects and thereby posits the world as it is recognizable by its thinker, Merleau-Ponty expanded upon the earlier work of Husserl and suggested that the world and the subject are interdependent and therefore mutable. The world cannot be considered to be an object separate from us in it, and hence is not one of independent physical objects or disconnected subjectivities but rather a phenomenological or inter-subjective world. Within the world, perception is always physical, and experience is achieved only by encounter, not by what he takes to be the impossibility of completely isolated postulation. That is to say, "[t]he body is our general medium for having a world."^[13]

Encounters with art works inevitably involve the viewer's physicality and previous experiences, which are inseparable from any capacity to analyze. Therefore, phenomenology and its relationship to aesthetic experience should also be addressed in order to establish a foundation from which to reconsider the experience of art within everyday life. Love's essay established that the viewer brings something of his or her own life history to the table, as it were, when facing a work of art with recognizable components. Several individuals before an art work will each enter their encounter with it

subjectively, but then perhaps comprehend a common bond rendered accessible by the work itself; the personal opens the door to the public. According to Merleau-Ponty:

[T]he phenomenological world is not pure being, but the sense which is revealed where the paths of my various experiences intersect, and also where my own and other people's intersect and engage each other like gears. It is thus inseparable from subjectivity and inter-subjectivity, which find their unity when I either take up my past experiences in those of the present, or other people's in my own.[14]

If we take "pure being" to mean that meditative state in which "I think, therefore I am," then it cannot be party to any notion of lived experience since, phenomenologically, to perceive means to act, to intuitively connect one's own being with the being that is the world; thought alone yields nothing but hindered speculation. The knowledge that others, in addition to the subject, are simultaneously acting-perceiving occurs when the viewer recognizes the experience of the artist within the art work, and also when the experiences of other viewers are brought to light in the presence of that art work. This environment can be seen as a revealing microcosm of what otherwise involves the broader, general realm of lived experience that occurs on a daily basis. The art work acts as an aid by which one can begin to recognize that the isolationist and existentialist notion of totally segregated subjectivities is misconstrued.

It is interesting to note that the characteristics of the work itself might also contribute to the ease by which such realizations might occur. For instance, it could be maintained that Daniel Spoerri's *tableaux-pièges* ("snare pictures") facilitate accessibility to concepts of inter-subjectivity more readily than Jackson Pollock's overbearingly authorial drip paintings. I do not mean to suggest that any art work that has not made use of readymade materials completely obfuscates the experience of the viewer before it, only that such materials serve to enhance the possibility for a recognizable field of common experience between artist and viewer in the moment of the encounter. These works by Spoerri aim at the literal capturing of everyday experiences, and are achieved by permanently attaching every item left on a surface to that surface, thereby fixing those moments of exchange in time. By this arresting gesture, the artist is able to inject an art work with a past temporality and a social interactivity that would otherwise go unnoticed in the moment of its happening and be unremembered after the fact. In his own words, the objects

... contaminate one another and tell us about a moment of one particular personal history. It's exactly the same history as a city's, only it's shorter and perhaps less complicated I lent everything an equal optical value: cigarette butt, piece of bread, plate, cheese rind. After that, what was important was putting it up on the wall.[15]

In addition to provoking a close observation of the act of sharing a meal and what that might indicate for a broader sociological interpretation, these art works also question the

field of abstract expressionist painting that came to prominence in the late 1940s. The apparent need to arrive at an alternative potentiality for the picture plane challenged Spoerri to include the seemingly banal in his work so as to attach the world, quite literally, to the canvas on the wall and, in so doing, reconcile the distances between the artist, the art work, and the viewer.

Merleau-Ponty insisted that "[w]e must re-examine the dilemma of for itself and in itself, which involved putting 'significances' back into the world of objects and freeing subjectivity, as absolute non-being, of any kind of inherence in the body. This is what we are doing when we define sensation as co-existence or communion."^[16] The idea that a work of art might be conceived as autonomous, with meaning ingrained, is quite audacious in this sense. Meaning, for lack of a better word, stems from the limitless perspectives of active viewers; the "eye ... is a certain power of making contact with things, and not a screen on which they are projected."^[17] Vision, in a way, is predatory and latches onto the object within its field, but there is no way to visualize the world in its entirety, only facets of it, indicating that because visual experiences are many and varied between subjects, there is no way to conceptualize a fully intact or non-yielding world. In this way, meaning cannot be pinned down; whatever meaning one finds only suggests there are others to be found. However, Merleau-Ponty is careful to insert the point that the object is not entirely inactive:

But we have learned in individual perception not to conceive our perspective views as independent of each other; we know that they slip into each other and are brought together finally in the thing. In the same way we must learn to find the communication between one consciousness and another in one and the same world. In reality, the other is not shut up inside my perspective of the world, because this perspective itself has no definite limits, because it slips spontaneously into the other's, and because both are brought together in the one single world in which we all participate as anonymous subjects of perception.^[18]

Though we might acknowledge the existence of others in the world, it is difficult to imagine their own individual subjectivities without forcibly relinquishing our own; one cannot ever fully fathom what it means to physically see from someone else's perspective. Objects, whether art works or not, act as links between ourselves and others, and stimulate the understanding that the world is shared and perceived infinitely. Observing things being taken up and put to use in the world by others reveals that any notion of an entirely subjective, private, or unique experience is misguided. Experiences cannot be tallied up and collected but are always in flux, since witnessing the experiences of others with things modifies one's own understanding of them in relation to the self. In this sense, affirming differences may relate to the expansion of the limits of the real in terms of subjective perception. That is, by seeing objects encountered by others, "... they are no longer simply what [one] could make of them, they are what this other pattern of behavior is about to make of them."^[19] The conclusion Merleau-Ponty arrived at is not

unlike the goal Spoerri set for himself as an artist, namely that by baptizing everyday objects and incorporating them into works of art, they extend the horizon of everyday experience and eventually allow for a potentiality of an everyday aesthetics to be appreciated *outside* the realm of art, a challenging and crucial problematic explored by Yuriko Saito in her own recent work.[\[20\]](#)

Since the concept of criticality infers that there is no external position from which to analyze an event but only the simultaneity of its experience and thinking through it, it is useful to note that Merleau-Ponty emphasized the need to re-examine the social world by declaring:

It is as false to place ourselves in society as an object among other objects, as it is to place society within ourselves as an object of thought, and in both cases the mistake lies in treating the social as an object. We must return to the social with which we are in contact by the mere fact of existing, and which we carry about inseparably with us before any objectification.[\[21\]](#)

Here is a call to ignore no longer the very real presence of the other in favor of an antiquated notion of the self as one that is in complete control of one's surroundings and the perception of them. We are always involved and, in terms of the above, operating within reach of criticality. That is, participation cannot be chosen but is always already happening. This is why the goings on of everyday life must be illuminated. It is without question that art works, or the experience of them, facilitate this essentially simple realization.

6. Dufrenne

In the historical context of phenomenology beginning with Husserl, Mikel Dufrenne followed Merleau-Ponty in relying on the physicality of the subject to predicate any concept of perception. His focus in *The Phenomenology of Aesthetic Experience* was on the viewer's encounter with the aesthetic object or art work in the light of earlier theories on the idea of the lived body, but also in relation to the antiquated and elitist notion that aesthetic experience should be heightened, elevated, or removed from the banality of the everyday. Therefore, Dufrenne's work is an essential resource.

Echoing Marcel Duchamp, Dufrenne asserted that a work of art is nothing without the spectator's presence since "the work has value only as long as it has being, and the primary task of the public is to fulfill this being. What the work expects of the public is, first of all, its completion."[\[22\]](#) This effectively established the reciprocal relationship between artist and viewer. At this early stage in his text, however, he reasoned that the differences between aesthetic objects and generic objects should be considered, since every object requires the recognition of a perceiving subject. It is the common experience of those everyday objects that enables us to comprehend their various uses; we can be taught their meanings. Conversely, the aesthetic object must be experienced first-hand: "[T]he reality of this object can only be revealed, not demonstrated. It has no other guarantee than to be attested to by a perception and to be situated at the crossroads of a plurality of perceptions."[\[23\]](#)

It is important to note that, like many theorists in the immediate post-war era, the examples of aesthetic objects Dufrenne had in mind were, for the most part, conservative. Yet this is useful rather than antithetical because it becomes easier to postulate that, by the 1960s, experimentation in the visual arts directly confronted such assumptions regarding the experience of art work. If it is viable that an encounter with an aesthetic object is distinct from an encounter with any other object, then what might be the effect of that aesthetic object incorporating objects that are not? For many postmodern artists, in order to conceive the world one must make use of the characteristics already of the world. Any concept of the imaginary must develop from being grounded in reality, in real shapes and compositions; that which we imagine is an amalgam of those things that we have seen. Following this logic, Dufrenne's postulation that the dichotomous relationship between the ordinary and the aesthetic object might be reopened in order to allow for the possibility that the aestheticization of those ordinary objects encourages a less rigid concept of the perceiving subject during the aesthetic experience. As Dufrenne was concerned with the witnessing of the art work, he took steps to resolve exactly what occurs when one takes on that role.

It seems, and especially in the plastic arts, that the witness is first of all a registering apparatus placed at one point or another in space by the work as it organizes its own way of being viewed. A painting is created to be seen at a certain distance and from a certain viewing point. It organizes itself under our gaze.^[24]

Here is a description of what Michel Foucault later referred to as an aspect of the "classical episteme;"^[25] the elements of the picture communicate their own representational qualities in conjunction with the viewer's organized and momentarily directed gaze. Dufrenne insisted that, at the stage of aesthetic experience, the viewer is stunned into awed submission by the art work.

Our presence to the aesthetic object has something absolute about it - not at all the absolute of a transcendental cogito, which would be out of play, but the absolute of a consciousness which is entirely open and as if possessed by what it projects. In short, the witness is not a pure spectator but an involved one - involved in the work itself.^[26]

Though involved, viewers are so enveloped that reality is figuratively suspended. "[I]t is in the work that they find meaning, not in themselves as something to transfer onto the work....But we must add at once that it is the work which awakens us to ourselves."^[27]

If the art work is in control of both artist and viewer in the sense that it forcefully demands to be created and then agreeably asks to be understood, then the aesthetic experience is discovered rather than dictated, even if such an experience, by requiring a witness, teaches us more about that witness's own subjectivity than another type of experience might do. Within such a framework, the art work

becomes what Rebecca Schneider calls a "witness machine." In her own words (and perhaps more tactfully than Dufrenne), she suggests, "Such objects ... stand as witness to the event as seen and make the museum viewer witness to the event as missed. In such a scene, a viewer becomes, like the object, a witness."[\[28\]](#)

Remembering what Kate Love concluded regarding the notion of a reciprocal relationship between artist and viewer locatable at the encounter with the art work, and taking into account Dufrenne's conditional and revelatory model, one may infer from their comparison with Schneider's theory that all three support the concept that the fluctuation of subjectivities before the stalwart work of art denies a fixed mode for its analysis. In support of the concept of criticality, attention shifts from the need to establish meaning in and of the work itself, such as a superfluous focus on the circumstances of its genesis, to the possibility that the unique responses from each witness may be compared and contrasted. In essence, the visual art work is positioned as an event to be continuously revisited, and it is this variable space-time that enables the formulation of a concept for an engaged and experiencing public.

In order to better understand the idea of such a public, it is helpful to return to Dufrenne's treatment of it, one that is careful to differentiate between definitions of "public" and "audience." If the work of art presents itself in such a way as to formulate an otherwise unlikely model of a collective, then "[t]he important thing ... is to see how this public tends to embody the universality which is already found in the solitary witness."[\[29\]](#) What has been called the "witness machine" generates potential multiplicities of the subject, rendering personal identities less distinct. In addition, Dufrenne insisted that equilibrium is desired by the viewer, since an inherent aspect of the experience of a work of art is that it be shared:

The aesthetic emotion wants to communicate and spread. It seeks confidants and co-witnesses. And it seeks guarantors as well. The demand for a public corresponds to a craving for security. The judgment of taste which ratifies and concludes the aesthetic experience feels sure of itself only insofar as it has supporters. For the judgment of taste, the homage of a public or of a tradition is the best assurance.[\[30\]](#)

The encounter with a visual art work differs from one with others. Dufrenne's viewing subject is nurtured by the shared reaction of others and is related to Merleau-Ponty's example of the reading subject submitting to a broader expressive source and relinquishing the thinking ego. Even if no one else is present, the knowledge that another will react to the work influences the experiencing of it; visual art promotes an idea of a receiving public and opens a space of, and time for, what can be understood as a position of criticality. That is, "the aesthetic object gains being from the plurality of interpretations which attach themselves to it."[\[31\]](#) The visual art work is not necessarily fixed, but infinitely embellished and expanded in meaning and modes of reception by a revolving set of subjectivities; it is elusively anti-compositional. The key question is, "[H]ow does it create its public?"[\[32\]](#)

The aesthetic object demands a specific type of attention that is capable of unifying individuals in a different manner from how a theatrical or musical performance unifies an audience. Rather than being held captive by the spatio-temporal spectacle on stage, "the aesthetic object enables the public to be constituted as a group because it proposes itself as an eminent objectivity which wins individuals to itself and compels them to forget their individual differences."[\[33\]](#)

This real community is fragile, however, and can immediately be dispersed if it chooses to be. Therefore, the eminence of the object requires a suspension of disbelief, to some degree, advancing a possibly elitist viewpoint that the aesthetic experience should not be associated with the real or feasible but should be respected upon its plinth, loftier than the banality of everyday life. Regarding the quotidian, Dufrenne argued that it is the space and time in which an idea of a public becomes problematic; it is an arena of conflict and difference. Kept apart from such a realm of adversity, the experience of the aesthetic object transports individuals toward an arena of unanimity: "Man in front of the aesthetic object transcends his singularity and becomes open to the universally human."[\[34\]](#) The feasibility of an art of everyday life, in terms of one that might be socially transformative, is unlikely, since the collectivity inspired by the aesthetic object is an experience isolated from all others; in this Dufrenne was decisively modernist. In other words, what the presence of the art work accomplishes cannot be accomplished without it, for "[i]t is the identity of the object which assures the identity of its representations. Thus it is not a question of a collective consciousness but of a consciousness directed by a common [i.e. shared] object."[\[35\]](#)

In the chapter entitled "The Truth of the Aesthetic Object," Dufrenne considered the anomaly of the art work in relation to other objects in greater detail. For the viewer, the art work presents an opportunity for slowing down or dissolving the world outside its presence.

At first sight, there seems to be no common measure between the world of the aesthetic object and the real world – that is, if one identifies the "real" with "objective". The aesthetic object reveals a world which is subjective – indeed, less a world than an atmosphere of a world – and which represented objects illustrate but do not determine.[\[36\]](#)

Keeping in mind that, again, the objects referred to here are most likely traditional art works, such as paintings and sculptures, it becomes easier to understand how the world-as-illustrated could be considered separate from the world-as-lived. The moment of contemplation as the autonomy of art and the suspension of real time is supported by the idea that the art work is a world unto itself. For Dufrenne, the "objective world" of everyday life is unstable in comparison with the moment of aesthetic experience because it is made up of countless and indeterminate variables that one must navigate using what can only be called common knowledge or rationality. And yet

it is not with the objective world as conceived by science one should compare the aesthetic object. Instead, the

aesthetic object should be compared with the real, which we must intercept at the point where it does not yet have a determinate signification and can accept the signification which the aesthetic object confers on it.[\[37\]](#)

Here, the important suggestion is that what we might think of as the everyday, though it exists as a figurative temporality, cannot be articulated or conceived without first having been represented in some way by the aesthetic object. Even though an art work derives from the stuff of life, so does the stuff of life proceed from what is represented by the art work. "The objective world is the result of a projection onto the real."[\[38\]](#) Aesthetic objects are therefore necessary, acting as soothsayers to those whose perceptions are occluded by the weight of reality.

For the real does need to be illuminated, and this can occur through the agency of art as well as through science. The real is the pre-objective. It is manifested in the bruteness of fact, the constraining character of being-there, the opacity of the in-itself....There is truth only through the discovery of a meaning which illuminates and transfigures the real and through the ability of a subjectivity to seize this meaning.[\[39\]](#)

It is the concept of *transfiguring* the real that is important. If the "everyday" or objective world is a broad generalization, a way of qualifying and quantifying the indeterminable, then it serves only to alleviate or make sense of the real, which one experiences under hardship or duress. Dufrenne's arguments support a model that empowers the art work with the ability to redirect the viewer's attention away from the personal and towards the social. Yet this model is one of autonomy, indicating that the space of aesthetic experience must be separate from that of "real" experience. This position is significant since it establishes an oppositional view to the historical avant-garde's attempts at proclaiming the exact equality of art with everyday life, and also a problematic platform from which the neo-avant-garde could begin to experiment, within the context of the predominating idea of the art institution as an ivory tower. Lyon's recent biennial that was mentioned above showed that these experiments continue to this day. Hence, Dufrenne's distinction between the real and the objective might be thought of as a forerunner of more contemporary concerns, for example, the relational or participatory, because it begins to question the utility of art within modernity. It is as if his phenomenology sought to invite the next phase.

7. Conclusion

Returning to the problem of the (im)possibility of these subjective experiences before art works that are then carried back into the "public" or "city of spirits" and therefore into everyday life, it is necessary to underline that Dufrenne grappled with this issue and maintained that even if viewers experience a moment of humane clarity before the work of art, it cannot ever be truly transposed onto the external world.[\[40\]](#)

Instead, he seems to favor a model of art for art's sake, which raises the question of whether or not in contemporary circumstances the model of an art that acts as a conduit

between art and life can actually be taken seriously. Dufrenne closed his exploration of the work of art and its public by expressing great doubt that an art for the masses will ever be achievable, since the prerequisite common bond or faith that would allow it has not been found. Like Baudrillard many years later, he blamed commercialized visual culture. Yet, is it not that very consumerism that so entranced the artists of the mid-twentieth century and has since resurfaced again and again through the appropriation of ready made commodities? The faith then common in the prospect of progress being equivalent to the accumulation of wealth is now recognized as a social handicap, one that is located in the drive to acquire material goods in the name of one-upmanship, and the inability to recognize that we take our different status symbols for granted as modern luxuries.

The challenge for all contemporary art has been to evade the regulations imposed upon the experience of art that cause it to be included within the normative framework of the lifeworld in the same way as shopping for groceries or attending a lecture. While it has become important to acknowledge all of these localities as equally worthy spaces of communication and participation, it is the crisis of art that it should be excused from yet still inform the mundane. As Habermas explained, "[t]he lifeworld is, so to speak, the transcendental site where speaker and hearer meet, where they can reciprocally raise claims that their utterances fit the world (objective, social, or subjective), and where they can criticize and confirm those validity claims, settle their disagreements, and arrive at agreements."^[41] Adjusting his reasoning slightly, I would argue that it is the tendency of some art forms, specifically within contemporary visual culture, to demarcate these experimental sites by borrowing from the everyday, so that once such sites have been exited, the once normative and banal begin to take on an unexpected luster. *Dis*-agreement, or the experience of difference brought about by the commonality of the utilitarian, will then be able to prove that the political and the aesthetic can function at the same time.

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Endnotes

^[1] Italo Calvino, *Invisible Cities*, (1972), trans. William Weaver (London: Vintage, 1997), p. 165.

^[2] Irit Rogoff, "Experience" (paper presented in research seminar at Goldsmiths, University of London, January 11, 2007).

[3] Kate Love, "The Experience of Art as a Living Through of Language," *After Criticism: New Responses to Art and Performance*, ed. Gavin Butt (Oxford: Blackwell, 2005), pp. 157-175; ref. on p. 171.

[4] *Ibid.*, p. 171.

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

[6] Jean Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*, (1981), trans. Sheila Faria Glaser, (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1994).

[7] Love, pp. 172-173.

[8] Edmund Husserl, *The Crisis of European Sciences and Transcendental Phenomenology*, (1936), trans. David Carr (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1970), pp.142-143.

[9] Jürgen Habermas, *The Theory of Communicative Action: Lifeworld and System: A Critique of Functionalist Reason*, [1981], 2 vols, trans. Thomas McCarthy (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1987), vol. 2, p. 124.

[10] *Ibid.*, p.123.

[11] *Ibid.*, p.124.

[12] *Ibid.*, p.125.

[13] Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, trans. Colin Smith (London: Routledge, 1962), p. 146.

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

[15] Daniel Spoerri, "Daniel Spoerri: In Praise of Curiosity," *Art Press*, no. 197, trans. J. O'Toole, (December 1994), p. 45.

[16] Merleau-Ponty, p. 213.

[17] *Ibid.*, pp. 278-9.

[18] *Ibid.*, p. 353.

[19] *Loc. cit.*

[20] Yuriko Saito, *Everyday Aesthetics*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), pp. 32-37.

[21] Merleau-Ponty, p. 362.

[22] *Ibid.*, p. 47.

[23] *Loc. cit.*

[24] Mikel Dufrenne, *The Phenomenology of Aesthetic Experience*, trans. Edward S. Casey (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1973), p. 55.

[25] Michel Foucault, "Las Meninas," *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences*, trans. Tavistock Publications (London: Routledge, 1989).

[26] Dufrenne, p. 56.

[27] *Ibid.*, pp. 59-60.

[28] Rebecca Schneider, "Solo Solo Solo," *After Criticism: New Responses to Art and Performance*, pp. 42-43.

[29] Dufrenne, p. 64.

[30] *Loc. cit.*

[31] *Ibid.*, p. 65.

[32] *Loc. cit.*

[33] *Ibid.*, p. 66.

[34] *Ibid.*, p. 68.

[35] *Ibid.*, p. 69.

[36] *Ibid.*, p. 528.

[37] *Ibid.*, p. 529.

[38] *Loc. cit.*

[39] *Ibid.*, pp. 530-31.

[40] *Ibid.*, p. 69.

[41] Habermas, p. 126.