

## Note on the Commonplace

*A micro-aesthetics perspective<sup>1</sup>*

### Abstract

In western languages, we still have a number of adjectives inherited from the past that continue to influence our conception of what could be aesthetics of everyday life. These adjectives are, for instance: trivial, undignified, mundane or prosaic. Within art field, they are all implementing a strong distinction between lowliness and loftiness regarding subject and material. Today, in art, the prosaic is everywhere since mundane world imposed itself progressively from the intrusion of everyday objects and scenes in still life or genre painting, the increasing role of description in literature to the massive circulation of photography and film. Significantly enough, this progressive introduction of objects and scenes from the everyday life is following the development of democracy as a social norm. In a sense, as Jacques Rancière stressed it, the traditional art hierarchy of genre vanishes at the same rate than the capability for the people to express increases. The direct consequence was a gradual tolerance towards the commonplace in art which opens up awareness towards our environment and its component.

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<sup>1</sup> A previous version of this paper, entitled *Still life and Everyday Aesthetics*, was presented at the 20th International Congress of Aesthetics, Seoul, July 2016.

## Preamble

The scale of Everyday aesthetics is a micro scale that is focusing on modalities, rhythm and intensity<sup>2</sup>. Those can be formulated as a micro event of surprise, delightful disruptions or feeling of harmony. However, before being apprehended within the net of philosophical presupposition and its conceptual ramification, the very peculiar event of beauty that makes a difference in our everyday life perception - the one that forces us to stop our routine and forces us to think or act otherwise - belongs to a pre-predicative state of mind, that is to say a state of mind where things are things because they are not apprehended within a discursive standpoint.

As we know, Aesthetics as such was born within the frame of Kantian philosophy of knowledge dealing with a reflection about the nature of the *knowledge* coming from the senses and its possible status. (See Baumgarten (1750) and its "*Scientia cognitionis sensitivae*".) Nevertheless, even if after then, with Hegel, an artificial and detrimental separation was made between the sensory experience of nature and the experience of art, we progressively moved from this cognitive perspective to the reflection about the nature and the possible status of mere *experience* coming from the senses. Today, this broader view opens up a series of sub-categories within aesthetics investigation, such as Environmental aesthetics, Everyday aesthetics, Aesthetics of design, Aesthetics of mass culture and so on. However, despite the richness of these inquiries, we wonder if we still not have a general problem of scale in the aesthetics approach. More precisely, despite the multiplicity of perspectives we continue to think of it according to the Modern classical fiction of the individual subjectivity, the latter always considered as the stable receiver or transmitter of information instead of seeing it as a dynamic distribution of perceptions and interpretations through which the subject is building itself. In other words, the subject does not pre-exist at the experience rather he is a direct consequence of it.

Therefore, when we mention the idea of a possible micro-aesthetics perspective, it is because there is no real future for such endless sub-division. This is precisely what

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<sup>2</sup> See Yves Millet, *Rhythm and Intensity. The Art of Punctuation and the Aesthetics of Everyday*, in *Contrates*, International Journal of Philosophy, supplement number 17, p. 207-219, Spain, 2012.

everyday aesthetics allows us to think: the idea that there is no need for such vertical sub-division if we make a change of scale, if we switch from the upper individual scale to the horizontal micro field of interrelations within a milieu. In fact, everyday life is nothing other than what composes it: ordinary objects and artistic ones or institutionalized situations and spontaneous ones without strict boundaries between them. I do not change of space-time dimension going from my apartment in the morning to the visit of an exhibition in the afternoon. The change is more probably the regime of intensity.

Micro-aesthetics means a scale under common social identities which are like temporary conventions (codes, forms and inherited classifications). Micro-aesthetics means to point at the distributive nature of these variations of interrelation of intensity of the self rather than the fiction of the fully constituted receiver or transmitter role of the individual in order to be able to seize the series of micro-events that build up in time the singularity of sensory experience which sometimes leads to an artistic practice; to seize rhythm, punctuation and modalities or nuances of weaving our worlds.

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In 1599, Caravaggio painted "*Canestra di frutta*", claiming that he spent as much time and attention on it as for a human figure. This equality of treatment and consideration towards fruits was probably one of the first real points of entry of everyday objects in western painting<sup>3</sup>. The turbulent Italian painter – which had its equivalent during the 20<sup>th</sup> century with the poet and filmmaker Pier Paolo Pasolini (See *La Ricotta* - 1962) – got rid of many conventions in order to pursue a form of realism that would not tolerate any compromise.

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<sup>3</sup> According to historian of art, the first painter was Jacopo de' Barbari, ninety-five years earlier (1504).



To find an equivalent we might have to wait for Edouard Manet, who also gave the same equality of treatment between a basket of fruit and a female nude with his famous *Luncheon on the Grass* (1863). However, it is important to stress that is not only the subject (the *what*) that matters but, on an equivalent level, the manner (the *how*). In other words, what was shocking at the public in Caravaggio and Manet paintings was rather this equity than what was represented; that is to say, when the traditional hierarchy between human figure and objects had been obliterated. Such obliteration marks the definitive entry of the mundane in art, if not the definitive entry of art in modernity if we refer to the definition of artistic modernity coined by Charles Baudelaire in 1863: “He [the artist] makes it his business to extract from fashion whatever element it may contain of poetry within history, to distil the eternal from transitory.”<sup>4</sup>

Why start with these two examples coming from painting when we were supposed to focus on the commonplace ? Because, in my view, everyday aesthetics is possible only when what composes the everyday life that is things, beings, events, places or situations, is perceived as such, for itself, without specific connotation (mythological, religious or moral) or without trace of symbolism. In other words, when a thing is perceived as a *thing* before to be considered as an *object* in an utilitarian, mercantile or

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<sup>4</sup> Charles Baudelaire, *The Painter of Modern Life*, 1863; Translated by Jonathan Mayne, Phaidon press. 1964.

scientific perspective. It is properly at this moment that sensory experience of the world or everyday life poetry exists.



However, for such everyday-life-poetical-experience to emerge, a certain amount of awareness is needed. Everyday aesthetics is nothing but simple or 'natural'. For the everyday to become relevant within aesthetical framework, a preparation or a specific disposition is required. In one word, the eye has to be educated. This is precisely what the equality of treatment and consideration within these two paintings and, in a broader view, equality between human figure and everyday life object such as fruits, flowers or vegetables, denotes. It denotes precisely the time when the painting and poetry of ordinary life are merging into one another and denotes the time when concrete sensory experience finds its artistic expression, and artistic expression finds its source of inspiration in everyday life. This form of 'conversation' is going in both directions. Therefore, our working hypothesis is that the development of everyday

aesthetics seems to be a direct consequence of our acceptance or tolerance towards the commonplace in art. We are not saying that aesthetic appreciation of daily life is impossible without art. What we would like to stress is the fact that the constant interaction between life and art contributes to a reinforcement of our appreciation of our everyday environment. Nevertheless, this micro-dialogue between everyday life and art can be conceived if and only if the notion of commonplace is added into the equation and well taken into account.

In western languages we still have a number of adjectives inherited from the past that continue to influence our conception of what could be an everyday aesthetics. These adjectives are, for instance: trivial, undignified, mundane or prosaic. Within art field, they all implement a strong distinction between what is lowly and lofty regarding the subject and the materials. In French language, for instance, some of them became substantive such as 'the trivial' or 'the prosaic'. Even though the use of the substantive form is rare, this occurrence gives us the opportunity to investigate how still life could be seen as the Trojan horse allowing everyday life to enter the city of academicism when, for instance, Caravaggio painted the *Canestra di Frutta* allowing fruits to be perceived for their own qualities, letting the viewer appreciate them without any symbol or connotation related to them.

As we know, the word prosaic as adjective derives from the word 'prose' which refers to all kind of writing that are not submitted to versification rules. Therefore, 'prosaic' qualifies the entry of commonplace within the art of writing which was at this time poetry and theatre. As a consequence, the prosaic as substantive names also the entry of an unusual vocabulary that describes actions, objects and details of everyday life that never appeared before in literature. Needless to say that 'prosaic' kept a negative connotation during a long period of time despite several notorious examples from Boccaccio with his *Decameron* to Cervantes or Swift. The second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century is commonly labelled as the period during which mundanity triumphed (with Dickens, Balzac, Flaubert, Melville, Zola and so on) due to novels and, more specifically, due to the increasing role of description within narratives, where everyday objects, sceneries and scenes of common people are fully described; when human actions are not anymore the unique perspective, when 'the prosaic' is decentring the classical anthropocentrism in favour of the non-human reality which is permitted to

have voice. From a complementary point of view, at the same period, we saw the development of the poetic prose (*prose poétique*) with writers like Nerval, Baudelaire or R. W. Emerson, till the point where novel and poetry joined together with Marcel Proust's work, for instance.

Today, in art, the prosaic is everywhere, since mundane world imposed itself progressively from the intrusion of everyday objects in still life and everyday scenes in genre painting and, as mentioned, since the increasing role of description in literature, until what Adorno labelled "the Age of Mechanical Reproduction", namely photography and film. At the end of the day, a certain number of non-human realities - such as flowers, fruits, jar and so on - progressively gained a status in our ordinary life and can explain why, because of this long micro cultural dialogue between art and life, we still gain pleasure from setting flowers in our living room or a basket of fruits on our kitchen table. Let's mention the painters of the Dutch Republic (1581-1795) who consolidated the still life as an autonomous genre and developed the genre painting as well. (As we will see, the fact that this kind of painting developed within this specific political regime is not a coincidence.) Then this was followed by the naturalism of the *bodegones* of the Spanish School, painters - among many others - such as the mid-18<sup>th</sup> century French painter Jean-Baptiste Chardin, Paul Cézanne, Giorgio Morandi or Pop art artists, until the contemporary British painter David Hockney and, at the extreme end of the chain of consequences, the contemporary practice of Foodporn.





Significantly enough, according to these western paintings<sup>5</sup>, this progressive introduction of objects and scenes from the everyday life is following the development of democracy as a social norm. As Jacques Rancière stressed<sup>6</sup>, the traditional hierarchy of genre based on Aristotle's *Poetics* (in which still life was the poorest) vanished progressively at the same rate than the capability for the people to be represented and to express themselves increased. Therefore, from an aesthetics point of view, the prosaic, understood as the poetry of the commonplace, opens up awareness towards our environment and, in return, from a political standpoint, the prosaic in art allows the possibility for a larger community to have regard to itself.

In addition to representing the socio-historical moment of the birth of a prosperous bourgeoisie, as with Dutch and Flemish painting, still life could also be regarded as the peculiar moment when human and non-human realities started to coexist with a more neutral or equivalent relationship, in which it is shown that human lives are constantly in connexion with non-human realities, and that we are much less autonomous than linked to a multiplicity of agents through which we are experimenting with ourselves. In a sense, still life could be considered as a good sample of the "Parliament of things", as Bruno Latour puts it<sup>7</sup> that is to say when still life becomes progressively a place where things can be considered from a less anthropocentric perspective, where

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<sup>5</sup> It would be necessary to mention Asian art such as, for instance, Korean painting known as *ch'aekkŏri* (books and things), which flourished in Korea from the late 18th to the early 20th century.

<sup>6</sup> See Jacques Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics*, translated by Gabriel Rockhill, Continuum, NY, 2004.

<sup>7</sup> See Bruno Latour, *We have never been modern*, Harvard University Press, 1993.



commonplace could be appreciated for itself, for its own sensuous qualities and not used as a symbolic pretext for a meta-speech like with *Vanitas* or enacting a mere decorative function.

### **List of illustrations**

1. *Canestra di Frutta*, Caravaggio, 1599
2. *Boy with a Basket of Fruits*, Caravaggio, 1593 (detail)
3. *Luncheon on the Grass*, Edouard Manet, 1863. (détail)
4. *The Milkmaid*, Johannes Vermeer, 1660. (detail)
5. *Van Gogh's Shoes*, Vincent Van Gogh, 1888. (detail)
6. *Formosa Still Life*, Guillaume Hebert, 2015.