

Aesthetics as Philosophy of Art and Life

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Philosophers have frequently focused on the definition of art. In recent times this project of defining what is art has often been formulated in terms of the question of when and how an ordinary object of real life (a urinal, a bed, a shovel) becomes an artwork. This contrast of art and life might perhaps be traced as far back as Plato's opposition of art and reality. But we can also look at the relationship of art and life in a different way -- by formulating the fundamental question of why is there art at all? Among the different answers that may be given, one obvious answer is that art exists because there is human life and that art would not exist without it. Although many artists, philosophers, theorists, and critics have made much of the distinction between art and life, the intimate link and continuity between the two seems to me undeniable and inescapable. Art is an expressive emergence of the energies, forces, experiences of life, even when it is focused on expressing life's experience of death. Art depends on life and in some way serves life, even when it has been pursued under the purist ideology of art for art's sake. If art had no use-value for life (even if such use is mere pleasurable diversion from ordinary practical value), then art's persistent survival and transcultural ubiquity would be very hard to explain.

If art depends on human life, then conversely human life has evolved to survive by developing and deploying art's cultural forms and meanings to bring people together and inspire them with shared values, projects, and joys. Human life has incorporated art's communicative pleasures, imaginative visions, cultural symbols, and social glue to make both our shared experience and our private moments more satisfying. If life ultimately survives because we living creatures want to continue to live, then art (in its multiple forms and styles, high and low) helps make us feel that life is truly worth living by giving us experiences of deep meaning, value, and pleasure.

Besides this interdependence, art and life are also continuous in that art takes its materials, energies, meanings, and values from life, while conversely enriching life by giving it additional energy, meanings, ideals, pleasures, and new modes of perception. This reciprocal influence and continuity, however, does not mean that art and life should be simply equated, that there is no point in distinguishing art from life. If we identify art with works of fine art made by professional artists for exhibition in a gallery or museum, then there is clearly a difference between art objects and objects of everyday life. It is likewise obvious that artists, theorists, critics, and art appreciators both express and recreate this difference through their different behavior with respect to artworks and ordinary objects, even when artworks are made from those ordinary objects. As I argued in my book *Pragmatist Aesthetics*, the framework of our traditional "artworld" is so deeply entrenched that even when avant-garde artists attempt to create works that erase the boundary between art and life, these works -- by being put and appreciated within the separating frame of the artworld -- paradoxically

underline the difference between art and life.¹

My pragmatism argues against the traditional Western division between art and life that has led to art's marginalization from ethical self-cultivation and political praxis; it instead urges more continuity between art and life by refining life aesthetically with artistic skill to make one's life a work of art.² But in doing so, it does not deny that there is a difference between art and ordinary life and that this difference is important. It is arguing only against certain sharp divisions between art and life that have been drawn by philosophers and that have been damaging to the role art has played in Western culture. It recognizes that some ways of distinguishing art from ordinary life can serve to heighten the value of them both. We must distinguish between the different reasons and motives for distinguishing art from life, and also the different meanings of "ordinary" or "normal" life.

Recall the founding philosophical motivations for the art/life distinction. Philosophy first defined art, in ancient Athens, in order to define itself as something better; not only as the source of superior wisdom for the conduct of life, but also as the source of the noblest and most intense joys of contemplation. But philosophy took its major epistemological and metaphysical orientations from art. The ideal of knowledge as *theoria*, the detached contemplation of reality rather than active reconstruction of it, reflects the attitude of contemplating artworks. Plato's philosophical notion that reality ultimately consists of well-defined, enduring, and beautiful Forms that are rationally and harmoniously ordered and whose contemplation gives sublime pleasure seems likewise borrowed from the Greek's existing passion for viewing works of fine art. With keen dialectical ingenuity philosophy transformed its own imitation of art into a depreciating definition of art as imitation or mimesis. For Plato, art as an imitation of mere appearance (hence twice removed from the true Forms of reality) was condemned for being deceptive and appealing to the lowest part of the soul, hence unqualified to properly guide our lives or truly portray the real. Aristotle's defense of art as more philosophical than history because it imitates the universal simply reinforces the imitation theory and the hegemony of philosophy. Similarly, Aristotle marginalizes art for ethical and practical life by distinguishing sharply between art and action (as *poesis* and *praxis*). Art is making (*poesis*) that has its goal outside itself and its maker (its end and value being wholly in the object made), while action (*praxis*) has its end both in itself and its agent, who is affected by how he acts though allegedly not by what he makes. Aristotle's defense of art in terms of catharsis, the discharge of emotions in a neutralized artistic context so that they won't be directed to real-life action, is yet another example of how philosophy tried to isolate art from ordinary life to limit its role, its importance, and its impact.

This ancient philosophical agenda of marginalizing the artist was powerfully reinforced in the Enlightenment through the process of differentiation of cultural spheres that Max Weber and Jürgen

¹ Richard Shusterman, *Pragmatist Aesthetics: Living Beauty, Rethinking Art* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1992) ; 2nd edition (New York: Rowman and Littlefield, 2000) .

² See *Pragmatist Aesthetics* and also Richard Shusterman, *Practicing Philosophy: Pragmatism and the Philosophical Life* (New York: Routledge, 1997) .

Habermas identify as the project of modernity. In modernity's division of cultural spheres, art was distinguished from science as being not concerned with knowledge, since its aesthetic judgment was essentially non-conceptual and subjective. It was also sharply differentiated from the practical activity of ethics and politics, since Kant defined aesthetic judgment as free from any practical interest or appetitive will. Instead art's proper role for aesthetic appreciation is the disinterested pleasure of pure form. The aesthetic attitude is defined by Kant as "complete indifference" to "the real existence of the object."³ Adopting this attitude as the proper way to understand art strengthens the trend to separate art from the serious practice of life and minimizing the social role of the artist. Hegel, by insisting that art is only "real art" when it is "free" of serving the ends of life but instead simply expresses transcendental truths (which religion and philosophy express better), continues the separation of art from everyday living.⁴

Pragmatist aesthetics, as I conceive and practice it, recognizes that art is different from ordinary, everyday life in the sense that it involves an intensification or framing of life. Art heightens life's meaning by putting experience or action into a formal, focusing frame that intensifies that experience or action, transfigures it, making it special even if its material was initially ordinary. Art dramatizes in the double sense of intensification and the mise-en-scene of framing or staging. This is why I have argued that art can be usefully defined in terms of dramatization, even though such a definition does not (and does not try to) precisely cover the exact extension of art, including nothing more nor less than objects commonly called art.⁵ The coverage is not exact because dramatization also includes ritual and other intensifying practices or performances outside the artworld, in the world we call real life in which we also play different roles like actors in a drama. However, understanding art as dramatization is helpful in understanding how art both builds on life but separates itself through its formal frame to intensify both art's experience and the experience of life. Though fine art can be distinguished from real life, we should realize that without life's energies, meanings, materials, institutions and habits of mind there would be neither the factors that enable art's dramatizing framing nor the significant contents to be framed.

Dramatization does not require elaborate staging with special equipment and a constructed stage; the framing can be essentially mental in terms of the attitude through which the person frames and conducts his life and the various roles he plays in it. In this way, with the proper attitude, a person can make his ordinary life artistic by considering his experiences and activities of living within the framework of a project of self-cultivation and self-creation. The attitude of dramatization intensifies the attentiveness or mindfulness of the person's experience and actions. But it also puts them in the

³ Immanuel Kant, *The Critique of Judgement*, trans. J.C. Meredith (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1952), 43.

⁴ G.W.F. Hegel, *Introductory Lectures on Aesthetics*, trans. B. Bosanquet (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), 9.

⁵ Richard Shusterman, "Art as Dramatization," in *Surface and Depth: Dialectics of Criticism and Culture* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2002) .

formal frame of explicit attention for stylization.⁶ The person thus makes his life an ongoing work of art that is not in the artworld but in the real world, stylizing his way of living to give it aesthetic form and quality, even in the simple actions of daily life, such as eating or dressing or walking. I often invoke Montaigne in regarding such an art of living as the highest of arts, higher because more comprehensive, more complicated, more vital, and thus more meaningful and consequential than each of the different, specialized fine arts. But I can also invoke my American pragmatist forefather Ralph Waldo Emerson. Rather than simply eating and drinking and breathing so that we can have the strength to make artworks of ideal beauty that we then elevate as superior to life, we should, says Emerson, “serve the ideal in [the very act of] eating and drinking, in drawing the breath, and in the function of life.”⁷ Through such heightened, appreciative awareness and the mindful movements and actions that emerge from it, one can achieve extraordinary aesthetic experience in everyday life, as I also learned from personal experience during my training with a Japanese Zen master at his Dojo on the Inland sea, not far from Hiroshima where I was a Visiting Professor in 2002-2003.⁸

In advocating the value of everyday aesthetics in the art of living, I should distinguish between two very different conceptions of everyday aesthetics. Though both are concerned with appreciating ordinary objects and events, the first notion puts its emphasis on the ordinariness or banality of the everyday, while the latter instead highlights the heightened aesthetic character in which ordinary or everyday things can be appreciated through aesthetic perception and thus be transfigured into a special experience that is in some way transcendent. This second conception of everyday aesthetics conveys aesthetics’ root meaning of perception but also emphasizes the idea that aesthetic experience is a matter of conscious, concentrated attention that is essentially aware of itself as focused or heightened experience whose object is the focus of explicit attentive consciousness and is appreciated as such. As the first conception of everyday aesthetics is resolutely focused on appreciating the ordinary *as ordinary* rather than as special, so the aesthetic quality appreciated in this first kind of everyday aesthetics would not call special attention to itself as an intense quality or powerful experience. It would instead be like appreciating dull weather with an ordinary, dull appreciation of its dullness, rather than a sudden spectacular vision or special experience of its dullness. In contrast, the second conception of everyday aesthetics is about the transfiguration of ordinary objects or commonplace experience into a more intensified perceptual experience that is characterized by explicit, heightened, appreciative awareness that gives us a special experience or perception of the ordinary that however transcends the ordinary way (in the sense of dull, humdrum, vague, mechanical way) of seeing or doing that ordinary thing.

⁶ For a discussion of the different levels of consciousness and the methods of reaching higher levels through attentive awareness, see Richard Shusterman, *Body Consciousness: A Philosophy of Mindfulness and Somaesthetics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008).

⁷ Ralph Waldo Emerson, “Art,” in *Emerson: Essays and Poems* (New York: Library of America, 1983), 439.

⁸ For a detailed discussion of such experience and the aesthetic theories that emerged from it, see my essay, “Art and Religion,” *Journal of Aesthetic Education* 42.3 (Fall 2008): 1-18; and my new book, *Thinking through the Body: Essays in Somaesthetics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), ch. 13.

While recognizing the validity of the first conception, I find the second more interesting and more promising for aesthetics, especially when the latter is conceived melioristically as a field of study aimed at enriching our lives by providing richer and more rewarding aesthetic experience. From this perspective, an aesthetic appreciation of ordinary objects and events serves to sharpen our perception of them so that we can derive from them the richest experience and most enlightened apprehension they can offer. If this approach sounds paradoxical because its heightened perception renders the ordinary somehow extraordinary in experience, this paradox is less problematic for everyday aesthetics than a parallel paradox with the first conception, where the ordinary is experienced in the most inattentive, habitual, unconscious way so that one does not really perceive it aesthetically at all, in the sense of having an explicit awareness of its experience.⁹

The second conception attracts me also for another reason. It offers an alternative to the dominant logic that fine art felt compelled to pursue in order to achieve this same goal of rendering perception more conscious and focused, and thus making our experience both richer and more memorable. That logic is the method of defamiliarization or “making strange,” especially by making more difficult. As Viktor Shklovsky, the Russian formalist thinker, dramatically and influentially formulated it, the special technique or “device of art” is to awaken us to a fuller perception of what we see and feel “by ‘estranging’ objects and complicating form.” This technique purposely “makes perception long and laborious,” because the perceptual process in art has a purpose all its own [is an aesthetic end in itself] and ought to be extended to the fullest.” Underlying this argument is the assumption that art’s aesthetic forms must be difficult in order to compel the prolonged attention needed to render our perception of things more conscious and clear. Because our habitual, mechanical, unmindful modes of perception and action deprive our lives of meaning, Shklovsky advocates the “estranging” difficulty of art as a way to shock us into paying more attention.¹⁰

One proven danger of this technique, however, is that such difficulty alienates art from the everyday lives of most people who have neither the cultural education nor the leisure to ponder the sophisticated difficulties that contemporary fine art imposes to make its perception “laborious.” Another sad result of this strategy is art’s recent trend toward ugliness and violent vulgarity. In the face of the increasingly beautified environments of our aestheticized lifeworld, contemporary art reacts too often and too easily by trying to shock us into attention by being ugly, coarse, and brutal, and then justifying its negative hideousness in terms of the positive goal of waking us into greater critical consciousness. But the heightened mindfulness version of everyday aesthetics, I believe, offers the same sort of transfiguring intensity of awareness, perception, and feeling, yet without

⁹ In distinguishing between these two forms of everyday aesthetics, I do not wish to suggest that they are incompatible; accepting or preferring one does not mean that one must reject the value of the other. In fact, these two forms of everyday aesthetics can be connected. The first form of appreciating the ordinary often seems to serve as a background or preliminary stage to the second, transfigurative or intensified form of appreciation. For helpful discussion on the connection between these forms, I am grateful to Hyijin Lee and Tanehisa Otabe of Tokyo University.

¹⁰ Viktor Shklovsky, “Art as Device,” in *Theory of Prose*, trans. Benjamin Sher (Normal, IL: Dalkey Archive Press, 1991), 5-6.

contemporary art's alienating difficulty and isolating elitism.

Although this alternative path of enhanced, awakened perception and stylization of the ordinary requires no special skill in painting or poetry, it can be greatly helped through aesthetic education. Moreover, it has its own form of difficulty, requiring a discipline of perception, a special quality of attentive consciousness or mindfulness that can open a vast domain of extraordinary beauty in the ordinary objects and events of everyday experience that are transfigured by such mindful attention. If this mindful, stylizing art of living implies art as way of life and life as a form of art, then perhaps we can understand aesthetics as a philosophy of both art and life. I understand classical Confucian thought as bringing together art and life in this productive way, without abolishing all distinctions between them.

But, in advocating an art of living through attentive, stylizing mindfulness, I should, to close this essay, return to the American tradition that shaped my pragmatist aesthetics and cite Henry David Thoreau who, like Emerson, has inspired my philosophy of art and life and who, like Emerson was inspired by Confucius. "It is something to be able to paint a particular picture, or to carve a statue, and so to make a few objects beautiful; but it is far more glorious to carve and paint the very atmosphere and medium through which we look, which morally we can do. To affect the quality of the day, that is the highest of arts. Every man is tasked to make his life, even in its details, worthy of the contemplation of his most elevated and critical hour."¹¹ These eloquent words should serve not simply to end my short essay but rather spur us forward in the ever new beginnings of the challenges of art and life.

¹¹ Henry David Thoreau, *Walden*, in *Walden and Other Writings* (New York: Modern Library, 2000), 209.