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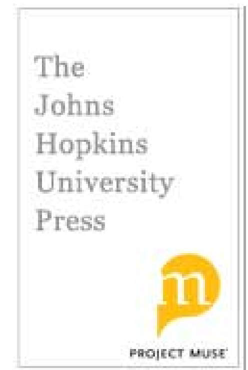

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Aesthetic Experience in Everyday Worlds: Reclaiming an Unredeemed Utopian Motif*

Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht

It would certainly be a plausible first reaction to say that the topic I want to come back to, that is, aesthetic experience in everyday worlds, has the structure of an oxymoron. For when we speak of "aesthetic experience" in the most broadly accepted sense of these words, we imply that its content (whatever "content" may exactly mean here) is something that, invariably and metahistorically, will not be available in everyday situations. If this is true, however, must we then not draw the conclusion that an experience cannot be "aesthetic" and, at the same time, part of an everyday world?[1]

And yet, we all know the long, somehow venerable, and consistently unsuccessful tradition of intellectual and sometimes even self-declared "political" resistance against the common-sense argument about the incompatibility between aesthetic experience and the everyday. The shared starting point for the different historical instances in this tradition of resistance was to criticize "aesthetic autonomy," in the form that it had developed as a philosophical concept and as an institutional structure since the late eighteenth century, for being one of the pathologies of "bourgeois" or "capitalist" society. Once aesthetic autonomy was thus identified as part and symptom of a larger phenomenon and of a more troubling problem, visions for the reintegration of "art and life," or of "aesthetic experience" and "everyday experience," were bound to come up with a certain degree of logical necessity—and certainly with a flavor of utopian promise.[2]

* I want to thank my colleagues from the Universidade Federal de Minas Gerais at Belo Horizonte for the invitation and the challenge to engage in a more- than-casual reflection about "everyday aesthetics." Many complex questions from students and colleagues at the Institut für Theaterwissenschaften (Freie Universität Berlin) and at the International University Bremen gave me those difficult discussion moments that are necessary for any type of intellectual progress (if "progress" can ever be an adequate descriptor for the movement of thought within the humanities). I am also indebted to Dominick La Capra for the opportunity to go through an earlier version of this essay at the School of Critical Theory, held at Cornell in June and July 2005. Finally, I hope that Robert Young will see how good it was not to let me get away with easy solutions during that Cornell discussion.

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Think, for example, of the arts and crafts movement within late nineteenth century socialism, and of William Morris reminding those who listened to his popular lectures "that the true secret of happiness lies in the taking a genuine interest in all the details of daily life, in elevating them by art instead of handing the performance of them over to unregarded drudges."[3] Think of John Dewey's powerful polemics against aesthetic autonomy and some of his more detailed critical observations on this behalf that appear as fresh and pertinent in our present-day situation as they may have appeared when they were first published in 1934: "So extensive and subtly pervasive are the ideas that set Art upon a remote pedestal, that many a person would be repelled rather than pleased if told that he enjoyed his casual recreations, in part at least, because of their esthetic quality. The arts which today have most vitality for the average person are things he does not take to be arts: for instance, the movie, jazzed music, the comic strip, and, too frequently, newspaper accounts of love-nests, murders, and exploits of bandits."[4] And there were, of course, as part of the same tradition and discourse, all those variations of the quest for a "fusion between life and art" in the countless manifestos of the early twentieth century avant-garde, a movement that our admiring academic predecessors only agreed to qualify as "historical" as late as the 1970s.[5]

Now, if some of us today may still be receptive to the utopian tones and promises of such programs, our appreciation of the historical avant-garde has become predominantly nostalgic and even melancholic, rather than future-oriented and confident. Against our past and present dreams and desires, we tend to find the semantic argument about an incompatibility between everyday worlds and aesthetic experience all too convincing again, and this may well be the reason why we have become so interested in analyzing, from the very angle of their joint incompatibility with the everyday, the similarities between aesthetic experience and religious experience.[6] Both what we call "religious experience" and what we call "aesthetic experience" refer to moments that do not seem to have a place in today's everyday patterns of behavior or in today's pragmatic strategies of action—moments on which we decide to concentrate (or cannot help concentrating) nevertheless, despite their lack of any practical function.[7] From this angle, we will indeed see how the aesthetic "sublime" in religious experience and the religious "sacred" in aesthetic experience are interchangeable.

The question is, however, what we can gain from such an identification of aesthetic experience as religious experience, that is, as something different from what it primarily appears to be—to claim, for example, that religious experience is more fundamental than aesthetic experience and, therefore, that its true ground has no solid philosophical

or empirical basis. If anything, such a move would only contribute to assigning a problematic status to aesthetic experience within a secular understanding of the tradition of modernity. But is there a more viable and convincing way to distinguish between religious experience and aesthetic experience—against the evidence of their convergence? We might of course answer that whatever we experience as "beautiful" or "sublime" are feelings that we strongly desire (think of "harmony" or of "grace"), and that we therefore appreciate whatever chance we get to enjoy such feelings in situations of eccentricity.

Religious experience, by contrast, may often be something that we neither desire nor immediately appreciate—something that we typically experience as imposed upon us (imagine, as an example, the dramatic event of Saint Paul's conversion on his way from Jerusalem to Damascus). Then again, there are obvious modes of religious experience that appear very desirable, at least in certain historical and cultural contexts (mystical encounters with God, for example), and there are, on the other hand, modes of aesthetic experience that overcome us without our making any previous choice or decision (for example, the unusual intensity of the light in northern California that strikes me after long absences from home).

It seems that neither the convergence of nor the distinction between aesthetic experience and religious experience can help us here. But what exactly should they have helped us with in the first place? What is the point of coming back to the motif of a possible intertwinedness between aesthetic experience and everydayness, if all the traditional programs of their fusion have remained unredeemed and do not convince anybody today? Clearly, the central promise of those programs still fascinates us, despite a skepticism that we can no longer overcome. Some of us feel, in this spirit and within the conceptual tradition founded by Max Weber, that a "re-enchantment" of the world could be a desirable goal[8]—but we are scared, at the same time, by the antimodern connotations of such an endeavor.

This is exactly why I find it worthwhile to revisit the traditional problem of the relation between aesthetic experience and the everyday under a more modest premise. The more modest premise would be that we all feel how multiple modalities of aesthetic experience permeate our everyday worlds today (without becoming a part of or identical with the everyday)—and the question following from this premise is whether trying to describe such different modalities of aesthetic experience in the everyday and attempting to understand their specific conditions could help us produce an intellectual opening towards an attitude according to which the possibility of aesthetic experience would be less dependent on traditional frames of aesthetic autonomy. This, if you want, could turn

into a toned-down version—and perhaps even into a belated redemption—of the old program of a fusion between life and art. Let me then propose a tentative distinction between three different constellations in which aesthetic experience may happen within everyday contexts—and this necessarily means, as we no longer engage in the program of a "fusion between life and art," that such moments of aesthetic experience happen as "crises" in the literal sense of the word, that is, as interruptions of everyday experience.

I

For a first illustration I would like to persuade you, if I can, to remember for a short and potentially unpleasant moment those "precious" ornaments into which, today, cleaners of hotel rooms all over the world are shaping the end segments of toilet paper rolls. Rumor has it that this habit emerged under the influence of Japanese origami, while a more pragmatic interpretation claims that such ornaments simply help the cleaners to anticipate when they will have to replace toilet paper rolls. Whatever their origin or their possible function may be, my point is that these ornaments can trigger a form of aesthetic experience that imposes itself as an interruption within the flow of the everyday. We pause—and see toilet paper like we have never seen it before.

For a second type, I want to refer to a motif from the "New Sobriety" movement of the 1920s, in the larger historical context of the avant-garde dream about the "fusion" between life and art, as it was so intensely discussed among the protagonists of Bauhaus. This was the conviction that maximum adaptation of an object's form to its function would necessarily produce the highest aesthetic value. "The more functional, the more beautiful" could have been the appropriate slogan. In such a case, it is the smooth functioning of an object which, somehow paradoxically, ends up suspending our pragmatic everyday attitude.

Thirdly and finally, remember some of those moments in which what we consider to be a thoroughly normal everyday experience all of a sudden appears in a new, exceptional light, in the light of aesthetic experience. These are moments that make sudden changes happen through a switch in the situational frames within which we experience certain objects. We suddenly think of food as "artsy food," we suddenly see clothes as "fashion," we suddenly begin to appreciate an "elegance" in the solution of a mathematical problem, or we are suddenly surprised to hear a rhyme that we have inadvertently produced while speaking. Under which specific conditions do such switches occur, and how do we return from them, if ever, to the more pragmatic everyday attitudes?

What these three types of aesthetic experience in everyday worlds share is the status of being exceptional within their larger contexts. But they are different among each other in as much as each of them depends on a different constellation of circumstances (one could also say: in as much as each of them belongs to a different modality of crisis). It will be my main concern further to describe and analyze the three constellations of aesthetic experience in everyday worlds that I have just introduced—without of course claiming that they represent the entire range of such possibilities. Before I do so, however, I will develop a series of concepts for the description of aesthetic experience, based on some key distinctions from Immanuel Kant's *Critique of Judgment*, from Martin Heidegger's essay "The Origin of the Work of Art," and from the recent book by the German philosopher Martin Seel on the *Aesthetics of Appearing*.[9] Starting out from this admittedly eclectic conceptual basis, and after a commentary on its systematic and historical status (part II), I will discuss in more detail the modalities of aesthetic experience in the everyday as interruptions of the everyday (III), as emerging from a maximum adaptation of objects to their functions (IV), and as resulting from a switch in situational frames (V). The concluding discussion (VI) will be about a state of exhaustion that I believe has become characteristic for the traditional, autonomy-based frames of aesthetic experience in our present and about the need for and the potential viability of their replacement by a different constellation within which aesthetic experience could take place in the future.

II

What aesthetic experience produces, according to Kant's argumentation in the *Critique of Judgment*, are "intimate feelings" of different kinds. It produces either the feeling of a "purposefulness without purpose" (this is Kant's most widely known formula for the "beautiful") or the feeling of something that exceeds all measures and concepts by which we normally react to the world and make sense of it (that is, that which we call "sublime"). Kant does not say much about the objects that will trigger these two types of intimate feelings—and less about a possible distinction of such objects into two groups. He famously relates wallpaper ornaments to the beautiful and the overwhelming spectacle of the sea to the sublime. But this, clearly, is an aspect that Kant is only marginally interested in. Rather, he concentrates on a detailed analysis of the conditions under which aesthetic experience takes place. Different from other situations in which we react to the world, aesthetic experience—and only aesthetic experience—obliges us to judge without any possible recourse

to preexisting measures or concepts. This lack of shared measures or concepts on which to base our judgment is probably one of the reasons why Kant describes aesthetic experience as "disinterested pleasure," that is, as a pleasure independent of the purposes and functions that we pursue in our everyday worlds. It is an experience unlike any everyday type of experience that we are engaged in and think about, and this makes it convincing indeed to say that aesthetic experience cannot be judged by criteria that work for other types of experience. But although such "disinterestedness," together with the lack of stable measures and concepts, makes aesthetic experience depend, to a particularly high degree, on individual dispositions and preferences, we are always convinced, spontaneously and, of course, counterfactually, that everybody will agree with our own choice of what is beautiful and sublime. Kant says that we indeed "demand" (*heischen*) such consensus—but there is no guarantee that it will happen.

The central ideas and arguments are much less transparent in Heidegger's essay "The Origin of the Work of Art."[10] With the concept "earth," Heidegger seems to point to what he considers to be the central content of aesthetic experience. This is the intuition that objects as we are experiencing them—not only or predominantly those objects that trigger aesthetic experience—are grounded in some primordial "givenness" that is both the condition of the objects' everyday status and that which remains mostly concealed by them. I then believe that Heidegger uses the concept "world" to describe how such givenness is indeed concealed under historically specific concepts and objects, and to emphasize that, at the same time, this givenness itself ("earth") is historically specific.

World, then, is as much a condition for earth, as earth is a condition for world—and at the same time world and earth are in a relation of tension (as world "covers" earth as its own primary givenness). Earth does certainly not have the status of an idea or of the generalized prototype of a thing. Rather, the distinction between world and earth appears to be similar to (although not identical with) the distinction between "objects" and "things" that Bill Brown proposes: "You could imagine things . . . as what is excessive in objects, as what exceeds their mere materialization as objects or their mere utilization as objects—their force as sensuous presence or as metaphysical presence."[11] Now, this raw givenness of things (earth) that underlies the objects of the world is the content of aesthetic experience for Heidegger, and it is an experience that will always hit us like an event because it necessarily interrupts the flow of everydayness. The Greek temple, however, that Heidegger evokes in his essay, that is, the artwork, is not the content of aesthetic experience but that which triggers aesthetic experience, that whose presence makes it possible at all that we catch a glimpse of earth, as Being and as primordial givenness.[12]

In his *Aesthetics of Appearing*, Seel, differing from Heidegger, claims that the content of aesthetic experience is not just the givenness of a thing but a thing in inseparable union with the concept that we attach to it through language. As a specific property of aesthetic experience, the effect of "appearing" would then depend on the thing and the concept being detached from all the conceptual and material contexts to which they belong in different everyday worlds. Although what we call "works of art" are, according to Seel, things and concepts particularly apt to trigger such decontextualization, he holds that, in principle, any object and any concept are capable of being decontextualized and thus of producing an effect of appearance. The effect that appearance is supposed to produce is the awareness of a multiplicity of possible perceptions and functions of the thing and of the concept in question, that is, an awareness of multiple perceptions and functions that we do not even begin to see as long as objects present themselves within their standard contexts.

Culled from these conceptual constructions that Kant, Heidegger, and Seel are offering, I would like to propose, as a series of distinctions meant to be metahistorically valid for the description of aesthetic experience, the following four concepts. By *content of aesthetic experience* I mean intimate feelings, impressions, and images that are produced by our consciousness—and that are inaccessible to us in our historically specific everyday worlds. The impression of a "purposefulness without purpose," for example, of "earth" and "Being unconcealed," or of an object and its concept "appearing" once they are detached from their context. Different from its content, the *objects of aesthetic experience* would be the things that can trigger such feelings, impressions, and images. The Greek temple in Heidegger's essay, for example, wallpaper ornaments and the sea for Kant, and any object according to Seel. By *conditions of aesthetic experience* I refer to historically specific circumstances on which, in each case, the happening of aesthetic experience will rely. "Disinterestedness," for example, that is, the distance vis-à-vis all practical purposes, is a condition of aesthetic experience that did not exist in Western culture before the eighteenth century. Finally, we can call *effects of aesthetic experience* the consequences and transformations produced by aesthetic experience and its contents that remain valid beyond the very moment in which aesthetic experience occurs. The impression of independence and liberty coming from discovering hitherto hidden potentialities of things would be such an effect, as well as composure (*Gelassenheit*), the specific serenity and disillusionment that Heidegger associates with aesthetic experience.

What makes it possible to bring together, despite their differences, the positions of Kant, Heidegger, and Seel in a series of three distinctions, is these philosophers' joint emphasis on a subject-centered mode

of aesthetic experience and their joint bracketing of the ontology (or, less dramatically, of the structure) of the artwork. While only Seel goes so far as to claim that any object can provoke the effect of appearance that he describes as aesthetic experience, it becomes clear that for Kant and in Heidegger, too, to produce aesthetic experience is not the exclusive privilege of those artifacts that we call "artworks." In a recent essay, Martin Jay has warned against such shifting of the accent in philosophical aesthetics and against its consequence, that is, a "democratic expansion of the realm of art objects beyond the limits of their elite predecessors," whose historical origin he correctly locates in Kant's Third Critique.[13] The reason for Jay's warning is his concern that once we give up a narrow connection between aesthetic experience and the artwork, including the artwork's status of autonomy as its frame, "representation is confused with reference, and unmediated reality becomes fair game for aesthetization" (19). Walter Benjamin's "Work of Art" essay as a central source for the academico-intellectual fear of any "aesthetization of politics" is looming large here. Is one not obliged to take Jay's—and Benjamin's—warnings seriously? A first reaction—and a first reservation—in this respect would be to say that Benjamin, for historically and biographically obvious reasons, identified "aesthetization of politics" at large with "Fascist aesthetization of politics," which today we no longer believe to be a necessary implication. More central for me is the argument, however, that the very "reenchantment of the world," which Jay mentions explicitly and with obvious disapproval, is exactly the future horizon (not to say the "goal") that I want to discuss in this essay. I certainly cannot wish for a proliferation of events and places of aesthetic experience in the everyday and keep it restrained, at the same time, to canonized artworks and their status of autonomy.

Now, the metahistorically valid components and levels of aesthetic experience that we have identified will develop their specific (or perhaps we should rather say their typical) forms and concretizations in historically and culturally different situations. Today, in a cultural environment that makes us fear that we have lost touch with the materiality of things,[14] we appreciate, as a central content of aesthetic experience, the impression of an oscillation between meaning effects and presence effects, that is, an oscillation between the concepts and functions that we associate with objects, on the one hand, and, on the other hand, their tangibility as things.[15] If it is impossible to repress or to stop our meaning production in relation to the things of the world ("interpretation"), we have developed a particularly strong desire today and a particularly high appreciation for the "grain" of the world, for its "punctum" (to make metonymical use of a concept invented by Roland Barthes in describing photography).

Perhaps there is not more to that much-maligned and sometimes even feared longing for reenchantment than the very wish to recuperate a dimension of the world as a dimension of things to be touched and of things to be in sync with. Such an attitude would be the latest stage in a long and mostly venerable genealogy of criticizing modern Western culture ("Cartesian" culture, "metaphysical" culture) for its ever growing tendency towards abstraction.[16] Friedrich Nietzsche would have to be considered as one of its founders. From Nietzsche, it leads to Oswald Spengler who, in *The Decline of the West*, famously accused modern culture (which he called "Faustian culture") for the dematerializing habit of experiencing and subjecting the world to numbers. Astonishingly, the same critique returns, on an incomparably higher level of descriptive sophistication, in "The Age of the World Picture," Heidegger's account of the rise of modern science. Finally, abstraction appears again, as the dark side of a rationality held responsible for the devastating excesses of the Nazi regime, in Max Horkheimer's and Theodor Adorno's *Dialectic of Enlightenment*.

More than ever before perhaps (and due to our longing for the grain of the world), many of us want to play with everyday things as potential objects of aesthetic experience (with "to play" meaning here to oscillate indeed between the status of an object and the status of a thing)—although we have of course not completely forgotten the idea and the expectation that certain objects are potentially made and should therefore be specifically apt to trigger aesthetic experience. As far as the conditions of aesthetic experience are concerned, I think we are above all aware today of a specific temporality that belongs to them. Contents of aesthetic experience present themselves to us as epiphanic, that is, they appear all of a sudden ("like lightning") and they suddenly and irreversibly disappear, without allowing us to hold on to them or to extend their duration.[17] Finally, as to the contemporary effects of aesthetic experience, it is my impression that in a cultural and social environment whose frantic (and yet empty) pace Jean-François Lyotard once ironically characterized as "general mobilization," we are longing, more than ever perhaps, for a feeling of inner quietness and stability as it is evoked by the concept of "composure." It would be a grotesque misunderstanding, by the way, to identify such a desire for quietness with political conservatism (or with its opposite).

III

Let us now finally return to some of the always crisis-like modalities under which aesthetic experience occurs in everyday contexts. I begin with

those cases in which aesthetic experience is an unexpected interruption in the flow of the everyday. To all of us those moments are familiar when an object that has long been familiar, all of a sudden and without any obvious reason, looks or feels strange. It happens to me, about once every week, that while I am shaving in the morning, my ears turn into an odd addition to the shape of my face as it appears in the mirror. Their form becomes strange, almost grotesque, they look superfluous and obsolete in relation to what I know about their function. Sometimes I even feel embarrassed about my ears, although there is nobody else looking at me. Clearly, these moments of estrangement impose themselves upon the flow of my everyday experience and my activities. They are never welcome or even desired, but they also vanish quite independently of my reactions and of my will. I couldn't make them return at a moment or in a situation of my choice, however much I wanted them and however hard I tried.

Shall I call them moments of "aesthetic experience"? They certainly correspond to what we have described as typical for the content of aesthetic experience in our contemporary world. For that early morning effect of estrangement in front of the mirror invariably triggers an oscillation between the impulse of trying to get back to normal by holding on to the familiar concept and to all that I know about the function of my ears ("meaning effect") and that other impression of my ears having turned from objects into things so that I cannot help being astonished about and fascinated by their all-of-a-sudden unfamiliar form and materiality ("presence effect"). On the other hand, while I don't share Jay's political concerns about the free proliferation of moments of aesthetic experience, there is no need to extend ad infinitum the use of the corresponding concept. Perhaps we should settle on a solution suggested by Paul Valéry who, in one of his most famous essays,[18] discusses conditions and modes of aesthetic experience on behalf of an "ambiguous object," found at the beach, that nobody seems to have produced and that has no obvious function. Valéry resists the temptation of engaging in the discourse of philosophical aesthetics here, for the one reason, he says, that the "ambiguous object" was obviously not created to be an artwork. At any event, my early-morning seconds of estrangement highlight the suddenness and surprise with which certain contents turned into things can impose themselves in our consciousness upon the flow of our everyday perception.

What the toilet paper ornaments that I mentioned earlier share with my moments of estrangement in front of the mirror is precisely the very suddenness and irresistibility with which they come up. Like my ears, at certain unpredictable moments, such ornaments quite literally catch my attention, and I cannot do anything about it. They also trigger the

by-now familiar oscillation between a particularly strong perception of the material quality of the paper and an interpretation of the forms into which it is folded. Is it a face or a flower? And if it is a face, is it meant to look male or female, old or young? In the end, such oscillations are different from my private mirror moments of estrangement because I will identify the ornaments as a form that goes back to somebody's intention. Somebody folded that paper in order to catch somebody else's (and perhaps even her own future) attention.

Seen from this angle, the ornaments function like the multiple frames ("frames" now in the literal sense of the word—not in the sense of "aesthetic autonomy": at large) by which Japanese culture draws attention to certain objects, most obviously by those monumental gates, painted in red, through which one enters Shinto temples, but also by the forms with which the arrangement of trees and branches in a Japanese garden can produce a frame that functions as a structural threshold in the flow of our perception and can thus highlight the beauty of a view or of colorful flowers. We find such forms, in which branches from different trees have grown together, remarkable enough to pause. We pause and we let ourselves be attracted by a picture of real landscape that the branches constitute by framing it. This framing technique is also an important part of traditional Japanese houses where sliding doors function as moveable frames, and during the past century it has even been turned into a device that is now central in Japanese films and television programs. Frames and framing gestures are ubiquitous in Japanese culture—instead of being restrained to situations that would fit our stern concept of "aesthetic autonomy" (as, for example, the traditional theater forms). At the railroad stations between Kyoto and Kobe, the arrival of different trains is regularly announced by different motifs from Beethoven's symphonies and these motifs, as frames, give a different status to the visual and acoustic impression of the train entering the station.

Perhaps we could say that certain temporal thresholds, based on the Christian church year, fulfill similar functions in Western culture. We expect and thus become more receptive to specific visual, acoustic, and culinary impressions during the weeks before Christmas. Since the mid-nineteenth century, the seasonal change in the forms and colors of fashion has been bound to certain spring and autumn weeks, creating thus a temporal frame that triggers a specific intensity for a specific type of experience. Clearly, such temporal frames do not possess the flexibility and the preciseness of the more space-oriented framing devices in Japanese culture. And yet I do not hesitate to subsume all these deliberately produced effects of interruption within the flow of our normal experience under "forms of aesthetic experience in the everyday." Some of them may have an astonishingly prolific future waiting.

IV

If we now concentrate on those cases in which aesthetic experience in everyday worlds depends on a particularly high level of an object's adaptation to its function, it is obvious that "interruption" can no longer be the adequate concept to describe the relationship between this type of experience and the everyday. Imagine, for example, one of those designer chairs that have made Bauhaus famous and whose forms continue to inspire the industrial production of expensive furniture today. These chairs are supposed to be optimally adapted to the anatomy and physiology of the human body, thus providing maximum seating comfort. Based on the doctrine that the most functional design would necessarily be the most aesthetically pleasing, Bauhaus furniture was not produced, if we can trust those high-modern manifestos, with a great concern for beautiful (let alone sublime) forms. How can these chairs then trigger aesthetic experience in the everyday?

While you may feel comfortable right from the start chatting, drinking your bourbon, or reading a book in one of them, you will but gradually (if ever) become aware how much this good feeling is the result of the chair's superior design. The emphasis is on "gradually" here, as opposed to the suddenness with which the previously discussed modality of aesthetic experience interrupts the everyday. Rather than an imposed-upon interruption or an epiphany, a gradual process of emergence is the form of aesthetic experience here. To use the language of the Russian formalists, it is not the effect of a "de-automatization" but precisely the "automatization" of the seating comfort that may trigger our interest in its reasons and thus transform preconscious comfort into aesthetic experience. With a distinction proposed by Heidegger in *Being and Time*, one could also say that an object's being perfectly "ready-to-hand" (for example, the adaptation of the designer chair to its function) becomes the condition for its turning into "present-at-hand" (here, into an awareness of seating comfort and its conditions). Obviously, it is difficult to pinpoint the switch between smooth functioning and maximum familiarity, on the one hand, and a state of awareness, on the other hand, that allows us to indulge in this function. Familiarization is a process in which, quite regularly, such transitions seem blurred once we retrospectively discover that something in our attitude towards an object has changed.

We may further ask whether this second modality of aesthetic experience in everyday worlds is not the illustration of an idea that took shape, slowly, during the final years of Heidegger's philosophizing, above all in his essay on "The Question Concerning Technology." It is the intuition that certain phenomena within modern technology may have the potential of turning into "truth events," in the sense of becoming

instances of the unconcealment of Being—but also that we will miss such epistemological opportunities offered by technology within the "history of Being" (*Seinsgeschichte*) as long as we are too obsessed with seeing and using technology in an exclusively instrumental way. Finally, Heidegger points to what he identifies as the modern obsession with holding back Being as a potential, as a "standing reserve" (*Gestell*), instead of letting Being come to the fore.[19] There is a short passage in "What Is Called Thinking," a lecture class that Heidegger taught in the early 1950s, where, almost in passing and quite surprisingly, the philosopher of the Black Forest suggests that flying an airplane could turn into a way of experiencing an unconcealment of the Being of energy that would be categorically superior to any scientific description of energy through mathematical formulas.

Whenever I return to this paragraph of "What Is Called Thinking,"[20] I am reminded of my oldest son, who is a captain in the German Air Force and who, ever since flying supersonic airplanes has become a well mastered professional routine for him (in other words: since his flying has become "automatized" in the sense of his aircraft being "ready to hand" for him), speaks about moments in his professional experience that might well have the status of "truth events" (or of moments in which he "presences" an unconcealment of Being—without him of course caring too much about possible philosophical interpretations of such moments). It makes me happy to hear him say that "flying can be so good that he does not even know why he receives a salary for it"—but then I cannot help wondering whether he is not referring to moments in which, for him, a primarily instrumental ("professional") relation to technology turns into technology as unconcealment of Being (into truth events based on aesthetic experience), and whether this is perhaps much closer to what Heidegger wanted to evoke than any learned essay that I could ever write.

Incompatible as such situations may look at first glance, Heidegger's perspective helps us discover that learning how to fly an aircraft and feeling comfortable in a piece of furniture (or with any other object that we "use" on a daily basis) have a surprising point of convergence. They converge inasmuch as they are both processes in our everyday behavior that set us up to approach, gradually, moments of aesthetic experience. Seen from the other side (that is, from the side of Being, rather than from that of human existence, *Dasein*), these processes in our everyday behavior correspond to movements in which Being emerges from "under" the everyday layer of the "entities" (or *das Seiende*, the "world" experienced as "ready-to-hand," as being instrumental) in order to unconceal itself, in other words, the movements that will transform objects into things.

Let me insist, however, that our second modality of "aesthetic experience in the everyday" is anything but "sudden." Rather than being events that impose themselves upon our consciousness, rather than interrupting its usual pace, these are "slow events" of transformation, quiet episodes in which the Being of things—quite literally—is "growing on us." Their ultimate yield is the affection that we can feel for certain objects turned into things that have grown on us and changed with us. Nobody has described this affection more beautifully than the Chilean poet Pablo Neruda: "At certain hours of the day or of the night, it is very convenient to watch intensely how things rest. . . . Those worn-out surfaces, the scratches that hands have left on things, the often tragic and always charged atmosphere of things, they all produce a pull towards the reality of the world. We sense the blurred impurity of human beings in those things, the classification, the use, and the waste of materials, the imprints from fingers and toes, the eternity of a human atmosphere that inundates things from outside and from inside."[21]

V

This brings us to a third modality of aesthetic experience in everyday worlds (and I insist that no claim of being exhaustive is implied in my three-part typology). Here, the "everyday" component is given by a primary level, an institutionalized situation, or an institutional "frame" in which certain practices and behaviors are supposed to take place. "Behind our backs," so to speak, this primary frame is then replaced by a different frame that can and should indeed be described as "aesthetic." In other words: in these cases it is a preconscious switch between different frames that produces the (always exceptional) contiguity between aesthetic experience and everydayness as a sequence between a primary situational frame and a replacing situational frame.

My favorite (and passionately admired) example for this third modality of aesthetic experience in everyday worlds is all kinds of sports as experienced from a spectator's perspective. Even more than the possibility of identifying with a victorious team (or in some cases with an "underdog" team), it is the fascination of beautiful plays that I believe has attracted billions of spectators, since the late nineteenth century, to watch team sport events.[22] In soccer, rugby, and American football, in basketball, baseball, and hockey, a beautiful play can be described as the surprising epiphany of a complex, embodied, and temporalized form. The beautiful play as a form is always surprising and thus epiphanic, for it has to be achieved against the "defensive" effort of the other team (and can therefore never be taken for granted). The play is a complex form

because it is necessarily constituted by a multiplicity of bodies, and it is temporalized because it begins to vanish from the moment in which it begins to emerge.

One doesn't need to be a philosophically minded spectator in order to understand that we react to beautiful plays with exactly that oscillation between meaning effects and presence effects that I have described as typical for aesthetic experience today. For, on the one hand, the spectator will assess the contribution of an individual play to the larger picture of the game's outcome (meaning effect). But he or she will also relate to the play as an embodied form which, while it emerges, is moving close to and away from the spectators' bodies, thus making the spectators a physical part of the scene that is unfolding (presence effect). In addition to the play (as an object) and in addition to the spectators' reaction (as a content of aesthetic experience), the stadium, by establishing a distance between the game and the outside everyday world, turns into a materialization of "disinterestedness" ("aesthetic autonomy") as the key condition for aesthetic experience.

And yet, Dewey's observation still holds true here that, for different sociological reasons, both intellectual observers and true fans would hesitate to describe watching team sports (and most other types of sports) as aesthetic experience. We can actually anticipate that some of the more enthusiastic fans would feel quite literally insulted by such an identification. Therefore, it makes double sense to say that aesthetic experience is a frame that establishes itself "behind their back." But in what exactly does the switch between such different frames consist here? We might say that, without being aware of it, spectators at sports events normally do come to the stadium with the adequate frame, that is, the aesthetic frame. But for most of them indeed there are strong reasons (coming from the accumulated effects of two hundred years of class condescension) not to confess this to themselves and to the world. Therefore, the switch that we have been talking about would less be a switch between different actual frames than a switch towards the awareness of a preexisting frame's character.

A different modality of (now true) frame switching that produces aesthetic experience in the everyday is the one that takes place when we enjoy tasty food "on a high level." In this case, the primary "pragmatic" function of eating is much more obvious than any primary "nonpragmatic" function that we might associate with practicing and watching sports (although, in the case of some athletic events, practical origins—like military exercise or health care—can of course be easily traced). On the other side, on the side of a distinctively aesthetic frame, certain arrays that will operate the replacement of the pragmatic frame of sheer calorie-intake are also much more visible than in sports. In order

to push towards a switch from purely nutritional intake towards aesthetic experience as an oscillation between a complex sensual perception of food (presence effect) and a reflection about how it was produced (meaning effect), in order to operate this switch, a disproportion between the (often minimal) quantity of the food served and the (very high) price to be paid for it can be crucial and very efficient. More recently, a similar disproportion has become customary in the form of particularly large plates on which particularly small orders of food are being served by top restaurants—and also through a tendency to ritualize the act of paying with bills presented in precious envelopes or small wooden boxes. In addition, the waiters of expensive restaurants recite their menus in the style of a strangely operatic performance—and almost everybody is in awe of the knowledge and taste authority that the sommelier (preferably with a French accent) exudes (and in comparison to which even the most austere academic traditions and rituals will look casual and user-friendly). Finally, the architecture of contemporary top restaurants tends to opt for high-modern minimalism, underlining that it is exclusively the food and the wine that deserve and demand the clients' concentration.

VI

But why does it matter at all to insist that watching sports or eating in a top restaurant are forms of aesthetic experience? Will it make the food that we enjoy or the game that we watch any better? Needless to say, beautiful plays and good food do not need this type of promotion (and in the worst case it will cover their appealing flavor with a blanket in stale academic colors). The reason why I believe it matters to talk about modalities of aesthetic experience that emerge within everyday frames and under conditions that we have characterized as "exceptional" and as "crises" lies in my impression that the institutionally "official" frames of aesthetic experience have been strangely inflexible for the past two or three centuries. The number and the forms of those situations that Western culture has marked as appropriate for the production of aesthetic experience have been astonishingly small and rigid: books under elegant covers and written within certain discursive confines; museums and paintings or drawings in wooden frames; concert halls and a small canon of musical pieces, preferably from the half century between 1780 and 1830; and the occasional, long-emasculated "provocation" of a soup can or a piece of sanitary furniture—rather than the unpretentious tune that you hear on your car radio or the graffiti that you see somewhere in the street (why did graffiti get so much more attention a decade and a half ago than they seem to receive today?). With the exception of those

avant-garde "happenings" that try so hard to go against the grain of institutional art that, by a paradoxical effect, they become its hyperbole, nothing that would not have fit into the established frames of aesthetic experience two hundred years ago is ever allowed to be enjoyed as beautiful or as sublime today.

At the same time, it is hard to resist the impression and to avoid the conclusion that in terms of their contents and effects some of these traditional frames of aesthetic experience are not only strangely inflexible but have reached a high degree of exhaustion. If, in order to illustrate my point, I will now deliberately refer to a type of aesthetic object with which I am particularly unfamiliar, I do so with the intention of presenting myself as the sociologically typical case—and of course not in order to question the taste of those who do enjoy this particular art form. What I want to discuss, then, is the type of music that we call "modern classical music," above all, the music produced in the tradition of the atonal revolution—but also certain forms of highly sophisticated jazz. Independently of the undoubted intrinsic merits of these musical genres, there are two observations that I associate with my general diagnosis of a state of exhaustion in our frames of aesthetic experience.

The first observation is that the enormous amount of knowledge and sophistication required to grasp the form and to enjoy the beauty of modern classical music has the effect, to use a formula invented by Niklas Luhmann, of transforming conditions of inclusion into mechanisms of social exclusion.[23] The other symptom of exhaustion that I want to mention is the contemporary obsession with "autoreflexive" gestures and functions as the supposed central effect of aesthetic experience. How much longer will the visitors of museums be bored to near-death with the self-accusatory truism that museums (inadvertently or not) give a certain aura even to the most banal objects? How many more generations of readers of poetry will be reminded, with torturing insistence, that it is possible indeed to produce sequences of words, even sequences of words in a clear rhythmic form, in which these words do not constitute an equally clear meaning—or any meaning at all? Where is the need, where is the desire (where is the need and desire outside academia, I should specify) for so much art and so much literature that consumes itself in obsessively showing that it indeed is—art and literature?

To show that art and literature were "Art" and "Literature" indeed (and to protest against it) did fulfill a function in those long-gone avant-garde days when artists and authors wanted to fight the "autonomy," that is, the "disinterestedness," in the production and reception of artworks and literary texts. Today, however, we do not mind art being artistic all that much. On the contrary, it has become vital for us to make ourselves aware of those small crises in the everyday from which islands and uncharted

new lands of aesthetic autonomy may ultimately emerge. For it might well be that, without such crises and islands, the resources of aesthetic experience would run dry within those all-too narrow frames and their inflexible conditions. And it might well turn out, as it so often has in the past, that we, the academic specialists of aesthetic experience, would be the last to notice how dramatic this situation has become.

But how can we do better—should there be any (however marginal) space where we academics can still live, with some realism, that otherwise long-evaporated dream of being "political"? All that we know and sense, with a certainty that sometimes we don't dare to speak, is that, today, many of the forms and of the institutional conditions of aesthetic experience and of aesthetic autonomy that we teach (and thus further canonize) have lost their appeal and their vitality so that they have long enlisted themselves under the (formerly embarrassing) banner of subsidized entertainment. Unfortunately, we know equally well that the generous socialist promise and poetic avant-garde dream of a "fusion between life and art" will never come true—it will never come true to sanitize, revitalize, and ultimately sublimate those exhausted frames of aesthetic autonomy.

But perhaps trying to revitalize these frames, that is, trying to defend Art and to bring it back to new life under the traditional conditions of autonomy, is simply the wrong approach. Not at all because "aesthetic autonomy" would bear those unfashionable labels of being "bourgeois," "capitalistic," you name it—in whose pertinence and power of exclusion nobody today believes anyway. Rather, it might be that, at the intersection between some possibilities offered by contemporary technology with that longing for re-enchantment (doubtless provoked and produced mainly by the same contemporary technology) we have a chance of discovering the potential for a much more dispersed and decentralized map of aesthetic pleasures, and of a much less "autonomous," stale and heavy-handed style and gesture of Art. We might find something like the ubiquity of those attention-enhancing frames in Japan.

Should such a possibility exist indeed, much will depend on the capability of artists and intellectuals to avoid its transformation into a "program." For I am not talking of the complicated merits of new art forms like "video art" or "digital installations" here but, rather and very much in the spirit of Neruda, of straightforward pleasures like driving a high-powered car, riding on a speed train, writing with an old fountain pen or, for some of us at least, running a new software program on the computer—pleasures that do certainly not require the institutional status of aesthetic autonomy. To intercept (rather than to propagate) such possibilities might turn into the redemption of those utopian concepts and claims that William Morris and Oswald Spengler, John Dewey and

Martin Heidegger, fashion designers in the early Soviet Union and poets in Civil War Spain had wanted to promote.

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NOTES

1 Regarding the use of the concept "everyday worlds" and its history, see Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht, "*Everyday-World* and *Life-World* as Philosophical Concepts: A Genealogical Approach," *New Literary History* 24, no. 4 (1993): 745–61.
2 Luiz Costa Lima, in "The Autonomy of Art and the Market," *Literary Research / Recherche Littéraire* 39–40 (2003): 95–109, has discussed the historical reasons for the astonishingly stable association of such programs with the tradition of the political Left.
3 William Morris,"The Aims of Art," in *The Collected Works of William Morris; With Introductions by His Daughter May Morris . . .* (London: Longmans, Green, 1915), 23:94.
4 John Dewey, "Experience as Aesthetic," in *The Philosophy of John Dewey*, vol. 2, *The Lived Experience*, ed. John J. McDermott (New York: Putnam, 1973), 528.
5 See Peter Bürger's, *Theorie der Avantgarde* [Theory of the Avant-Garde] (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1974), a book that has become a historical classic of criticism itself. If, thirty years ago, an author like Bürger was still trying to hold on to the avant-garde's programs as aesthetically viable, the discussion has since then switched toward more historically oriented case studies. See, as two outstanding examples, Christina Kiaer, "The Russian Constructivist Flapper Dress," and Jeffrey T. Schnapp, "The Romance of Caffeine and Aluminum," both in *Critical Inquiry* 28 (2001): 185–243 and 244–69, respectively.
6 There is a long, mainly French tradition of the comparison between religious experience and aesthetic experience, stemming from the Durkheim school via Georges Bataille to the work of René Girard. Walter Benjamin's variations on this point in "The Work of Art in the Age of Technical Reproduction" were probably inspired by the same line of tradition. See Gumbrecht and Michael Marrinan, eds., *Mapping Benjamin: The Work of Art in the Digital Age* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2003), 195–280 (and see in particular the contributions by the medievalists Horst Wenzel and Stephen G. Nichols).
7 See a similar description of the act of "historicizing" in my book *The Powers of Philology: Dynamics of Textual Scholarship* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2003), 54–67.
8 See the forthcoming volume by Joshua Landy and Michael Saler, eds., *The Re-Enchantment of the World: Secular Magic in an Age of Rationality* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, forthcoming).
9 Martin Seel, *Aesthetics of Appearing*, trans. John Farrell (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2005).
10 First published in *Holzwege* (Frankfurt am Main: Klostermann, 1950). The reflection of this essay goes back to notes from the early 1930s and to lectures that Martin Heidegger gave at Freiburg (1935) and at Frankfurt am Main (1936). See the excellent interpretation by Andrea Kern, "Der Ursprung des Kunstwerkes: Kunst und Wahrheit zwischen Stiftung und Streit," in *Heidegger-Handbuch: Leben, Werk, Wirkung*, ed. Dieter Thomä, 162 (Stuttgart: J. B. Metzler, 2003).
11 Bill Brown, "Thing Theory," *Critical Inquiry* 28 (2001): 5. See also Brown, "The Secret Life of Things: Virginia Woolf and the Matter of Modernism," in *Aesthetic Subjects*, ed. Pamela R. Matthews and David Bruce McWhirter, 397–430 (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003).
12 Kern's analysis of Heidegger's essay (see my note 12) gives greater importance than I do to the artwork as the place where the unconcealment of Being / "earth" happens. She would probably not agree with my tendency to interpret the function of the artwork

in Heidegger's conception as that of a catalyst. This said, I believe that the difference between Kern's and my readings of the artwork essay is but gradual.
13 Martin Jay, "Drifting into Dangerous Waters: The Separation of Aesthetic Experience from the Work of Art," in *Aesthetic Subjects,* 19 (hereafter cited in text).
14 See Brown, who tentatively associates the present "digitization of the world" and our renewed intellectual fascination with things and thingness ("Thing Theory," 16).
15 For a more complex description of this "oscillation" as the core of aesthetic experience under contemporary conditions, see Gumbrecht, *Production of Presence: What Meaning Cannot Convey* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2004). See above all chapter 3.
16 See my contribution to Landy and Saler's forthcoming volume, *The Re-Enchantment of the World,* "Gators in the Bayou: What Have We Lost in Disenchantment?"
17 See Karl Heinz Bohrer, *Suddenness: On the Moment of Aesthetic Appearance* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994) and, by the same author, *Der Abschied: Theorie der Trauer: Baudelaire, Goethe, Nietzsche, Benjamin* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1996).
18 Paul Valéry, "Eupalinos ou l'architecte," in *Oeuvres,* ed. Jean Hytier (Paris: Gallimard, 1960), 2:79–147.
19 Martin Heidegger, "The Question Concerning Technology" (1955), in *The Question Concerning Technology and Other Essays,* trans. William Lovitt (New York: Harper and Row, 1977), 3–35. On the missed epistemological opportunity, see 34–35.
20 "If . . . Being of beings did not prevail—in the sense of the being here and thus objectivity of the inventory of objects—not only would the airplane engines fail to function, they would not exist. If the Being of beings, as the being here of what is present, were not manifest, the electric energy of the atom could never have made its appearance, could never have put man to work in its own way—work in every respect determined by technology." Heidegger, "What Is Called Thinking?" trans. J. Glenn Gray (New York: Harper and Row, 1968), 254.
21 Pablo Neruda, "Sobre una poesía sin pureza," in *Caballo verde para la poesía 1* (Madrid: Concha Méndez y Manual Altoaguirre, 1935), 5 (my translation).
22 About the specific type of aesthetic experience offered by team sports, see chapter 3, section 6 of my book *In Praise of Athletic Beauty* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2006).
23 Niklas Luhmann, "Das Kunstwerk und die Selbstreproduktion der Kunst," in *Stil: Geschichten und Funktionen eines kulturwissenschaftlichen Diskurselements,* ed. Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht, Karl Ludwig Pfeiffer, and Armin Biermann (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1986), 620–72 (see esp. 650).