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Dewey and Everyday Aesthetics - A New Look

Kalle Puolakka

Abstract^[1]

John Dewey is frequently mentioned as an important forerunner of everyday aesthetics. In this article, I attempt to provide an updated view of Dewey's place within everyday aesthetics by drawing attention to aspects in Dewey's own work and in contemporary interpretations of his philosophy that have not been thoroughly discussed in the context of everyday aesthetics. In the first part, I offer a reading of Dewey's notion of aesthetic experience that unties its content through noting the important position Dewey ascribes to imagination in aesthetic experience in the later parts of *Art as Experience*. The second pillar of the pragmatist theory of everyday aesthetics developed in this paper is formed by recent Deweyan-inspired views in pragmatist ethics on the vital role of imagination in moral life. I will place the view of everyday aesthetics emerging from these pragmatist sources within current developments of everyday aesthetics and defend it over other positions on offer.

Keywords

aesthetic experience, Dewey, everyday aesthetics, Haapala, imagination, Leddy, Saito

1. Introduction

As a sub-discipline of philosophical aesthetics, everyday aesthetics is a relatively new phenomenon. However, it has often been noted in the growing literature on the aesthetics of everyday life that this field is not without historical predecessors.^[2] A figure that most frequently comes up in this connection is the pragmatist philosopher John Dewey; he has even been called "the grandfather" of the discipline.^[3] That Dewey has been widely seen as an important forerunner for everyday aesthetics, and that his work has served as a source of inspiration for contemporary everyday aestheticians is understandable since the connections between the central tenets of Dewey's classic work in aesthetics, *Art as Experience* (1934), and everyday aesthetics are quite evident. For example, at the beginning of this work, Dewey insisted that "in order to understand the aesthetic in its ultimate and approved forms, one must begin with it in the raw," that is, "in the events and scenes that hold the attentive eye and ear of a man, arousing his interest and affording him enjoyment as he looks and listens." Among these sorts of objects and events Dewey counts such everyday phenomena as "the fire-engine rushing by; the machines excavating enormous holes in the earth; the human-fly climbing the steeple-side."^[4]

Dewey expanded his attempt to restore the starting point of analyses of aesthetic experience to non-art, everyday phenomena by developing a critique of a view he calls "the museum conception of art." According to this critique, the dichotomy between art and the everyday that Dewey found the aesthetic theory of his time to be dominated by was based on an erroneous conception of aesthetic experience, the historical roots of which Dewey tries to untie in the beginning of *Art as Experience*. The idea of art museums and other art institutions as the only places where genuine aesthetic experiences can occur was, in Dewey's view, a result of certain historical developments having to do with the rise of nationalism in the Western world. The conception of art, meshed with

nationalistic tendencies, implied a view of the art museum as “the beauty parlor of civilization,” as Dewey’s trenchant phrase goes,^[5] where each nation exhibited its greatest artistic achievements or, in some cases, artistic robberies.

In Dewey’s eyes, there were no winners in this development. Art was concealed in a realm of its own that was understood as an arena essentially different from people’s everyday goals and interests. There was no room for genuine manifestations of the aesthetic in the web formed by the needs, values, and attitudes characterizing people’s everyday lives. In order to achieve a genuine aesthetic experience one had to leave this everyday baggage behind and enter the demarcated spaces of the museum and the concert hall.^[6]

Even though these critical edges of Dewey’s aesthetics connect it to the general *ethos* of everyday aesthetics, the relationship of Dewey’s aesthetic thinking to this developing field of contemporary aesthetics is not without problems. This is because his main work in aesthetics contains passages in which he grieves over the fact that people’s “ordinary experience is often infected with apathy, lassitude, and stereotype” characterized by our inability to “get neither the quality through sense nor the meaning of things through thought.” In these experiences, “the ‘world’ is too much with us as burden or distraction” and “we are not sufficiently alive to feel the tang of sense nor yet to be moved by thought.” “We are,” Dewey wrote, “oppressed by our surroundings or are callous to them.” Dewey concludes his pessimistic analysis of ordinary experiences: “Were it not for the oppressions and monotonies of daily experience, the realm of dream and reverie would not be attractive.”^[7]

This analysis of ordinary experience found in *Art as Experience* shows that Dewey does not find everyday phenomena, in some ways, unreservedly aesthetic. Rather, people’s everyday must include experiences with specific qualities before it can be considered aesthetic in a genuine Deweyan sense. In this paper, I shall first shed light on these qualities by offering a reading of Dewey’s notion of aesthetic experience that highlights the role he attributes to imagination in this form of experience in the later parts of *Art as Experience*. Dewey’s complex (and some might describe as rambling) account of aesthetic experience has not been approached through his notion of imagination as systematically as I intend to do in the first part of the paper. I believe that this sort of approach to Dewey’s central concept helps to illuminate some of its key features. However, it also opens up an interesting connection to pragmatist-inspired ethics, where imagination has been recently seen as a key element in the moral aspects of our lives. In this context, aesthetic experience has been considered to have a central role in developing the capacities required in a flourishing moral life.^[8] My belief is that this trend of pragmatism offers some new perspectives on assessing Dewey’s significance for the more recent developments of everyday aesthetics.

Richard Shusterman has provided a distinction between two possible ways of understanding a theory on the aesthetics of everyday life that I think helpfully frames some of the key debates within contemporary everyday aesthetics.^[9] The first one concentrates on the everydayness or ordinariness of the everyday and argues that the feelings of familiarity, in particular that arise from everyday objects and events, involve their own, though different, kind of aesthetic character from those raised by artworks, where we usually value the new and the surprising.^[10] The second understanding of everyday aesthetics included in Shusterman’s distinction does not build the aesthetic

character of everyday objects and happenings on their familiarity and routine-like character but takes a more reconstructive attitude toward the everyday. It tries to find the means to integrate those experiences that grab people's attention from the flow of ordinary experience and merit a heightened perception, like the best experiences of art do, as more significant elements of peoples' everyday lives.^[11] Dewey clearly belongs to Shusterman's second understanding of everyday aesthetics. It is my belief that the reading of Dewey's notion of aesthetic experience that emphasizes the role of imagination in it provides some fresh insight into the significance of Dewey's aesthetics for this part of everyday aesthetics, and brings forth some merits that the Deweyan approach to everyday aesthetics has over the first variation in Shusterman's distinction.

2. Dewey on aesthetic experience and imagination

Dewey's *Art as Experience* depicts the experiential dimension of human life as a kind of continuous transformative flow that never finds a final rest. Douglas Browning provides an apt description of the character of this stream of experience that Dewey finds essential to human life:

Day after day we find ourselves within an integral part of those ever-changing and always unique situations that constitute our lives and mark out their shifting horizons. Each of us is bound within this situational stream, a stream which is never at rest, always in transit. We cannot stop it or freeze it even for a second.... [T]his stream of situations in our lives is precisely that to which Dewey refers by the term 'experience'.^[12]

An important reason why this stream of experience never finds a rest is that our surroundings are in endless change and we constantly encounter new situations and environments. "[L]ife goes on in an environment; not merely in it but because of it, through interaction with it."^[13] This is the heart of Dewey's interactional view of our relationship to our environments. Dewey believed that we are literally shaped by the environments we encounter and the kinds of experiences we have in them. Environments, for example, provide opportunities for certain kinds of experiences, but they can also impose limits on our ways of thinking and acting.

Dewey locates the roots of aesthetic experience in this general interactional relationship that he sees prevailing between "the live creature" and his or her environment. In this respect, aesthetic experience is not some isolated particular in the sea of experience that makes up our lives. But there is also something exceptional in aesthetic experience for Dewey; it forms, within the general experiential flow of human life, a particularly heightened and complex experiential condensation. As is well-known, Dewey never provided a definitive definition of aesthetic experience. However, qualities that often appear in his analyses include cumulativeness, intensity, and fulfillment.

Dewey contrasts aesthetic experience to what he calls "inchoate experience," which involves the opposite qualities. Unlike aesthetic experience, here the material of experience does not reach a fulfillment. Things follow each other, but the different points of the experience in no way build on earlier phases of the experience or develop them. However, "because of continuous merging" there are "no holes, mechanical junctions, and dead centers" in aesthetic experience.^[14]

Aesthetic experience is set off by some individual factors, such as opening a book; directing a first glance at a painting; beginning to

listen to a piece of music; entering a natural environment or a building; or beginning a meal or a conversation. Aesthetic experience has a temporal aspect, which means that the material of the experience does not remain unchanged but the elements initiating the experience, like the first lines of a book, merge into new ones as the experience proceeds and complex relationships are formed between the past and newer elements of the experience. When these different parts of the experience form a distinctive kind of orderly, developing unity that stands out from the general experiential stream of our lives, the experience in question is an aesthetic experience. This is why Dewey thought aesthetic experience marks "experience in its integrity."[\[15\]](#)

Especially in the later parts of *Art as Experience*, Dewey considers aesthetic experience more intently in light of the notion of imagination.

Right at the beginning of Chapter Twelve, Dewey states that "esthetic experience is imaginative."[\[16\]](#) Imagination is, of course, a highly contested concept in philosophy and aesthetics; imagination is also a rather tricky notion in Dewey's philosophy. It appears widely in his work and different aspects are highlighted in different contexts.

However at a basic level, Dewey uses the term 'imagination,' to refer to a capacity to take on complex wholes and to build relationships between the different elements making up these totalities. In other words, for Dewey it is "a way of seeing and feeling things as they compose an integral whole."[\[17\]](#)

The connections Dewey builds between aesthetic experience and imagination are, in my view, explained by the distinctive features he attributes to this form of experience. Aesthetic experience is composed of individual parts that fuse into new elements as the experience proceeds, ultimately forming a distinct, complex experiential unit.

Imagination, in the Deweyan understanding, seems to be the faculty that keeps the experience intact and structures the experience into an articulate, complex unity. Imagination, in other words, guarantees the unity of the experience but at the same time gives the experience its structure by connecting and merging earlier parts of the experience into new ones. As Dewey explained, "[i]maginative vision is the power that unifies all the constituents of the matter of a work of art, making a whole out of them in all their variety."[\[18\]](#) This kind of merging of old and new elements is one of the key aspects of the Deweyan sense of imagination, and this feature is, according to Dewey, most powerfully present in aesthetic experience.

The Deweyan sense of imagination also has to do with entertaining possibilities. Dewey argued that it is particularly artworks that embody possibilities "that are not elsewhere actualized." This aspect of artworks makes them into important arenas for the use of imagination in Dewey's eyes, for the kind of embodiment of possibilities artworks exhibit "is the best evidence that can be found of the true nature of imagination."[\[19\]](#)

It is also an important aspect of Dewey's theory of imagination to reject views that identify imagination with "a power that does certain things."

In connection with imagination, Dewey also wrote of "an imaginative experience," which is "what happens when varied materials of sense quality, emotion, and meaning come together in a union that marks a new birth in the world."[\[20\]](#) This characterization found in Dewey seems to suggest that he did not consider imagination a mental faculty that a person can actively operate but instances of imaginative experience happen without conscious effort on the part of a person. In other words, imagination seems to be more akin to a way of experiencing than a mental faculty like the power to entertain certain

thoughts.

It can be argued that in describing imagination as having to do with building relationships within a complex whole, my reading of Dewey fails to account for the kind of happening-like aspect that Dewey attributes to the work of imagination. It is true that for Dewey imagination is not a capacity that a person can switch on and off at will. Nevertheless, I think it can be described in the kind of terminology I have used in my explication, for I believe the consciousness a person has of the working of his or her imagination can take different levels.

Sometimes a person's experience can reach an imaginative level without much conscious effort, for the capacity to feel things as complex wholes that Dewey found central to imagination may be so ingrained in a person's character, as Dewey might put it, that no conscious effort is needed. In some other cases, for example when encountering a highly complex work of art like Wagner's *Parsifal*, reaching the imaginative level in one's experience, that is, experiencing the work as an integral whole, may require much more conscious effort on the part of the agent. Also, if a person lacks a capacity to feel things as integral wholes altogether, his or her experience cannot reach the level of experience Dewey singled out as imaginative. I believe that, at least in this weaker sense sketched here, the Deweyan understanding of imagination can be considered as a capacity or a power of an agent. It is, in other words, a kind of trait of a person's character.

It might also be useful to explicate Dewey's notion of imagination from the perspective of the artist and receiver. For it might be argued that my explication of imagination as a form of building relationships within a complex whole looks at imagination from the side of the artist. That is, it is the task of the artist to *build* complex relationships, for example between characters in a novel he or she is writing. When the receiver, in turn, manages to *feel* the complex relationships the artist has built, he or she is able to experience the final work imaginatively. Dewey would, however, reject this dichotomy, for he did not view the activities required from the artist and the experiencer as completely distinct since they both involve similar phases of doing and undergoing. That is, according to Dewey, "taking in" an artwork "involves activities that are comparable to those of the creator," and "[R]eceptivity is not passivity. It, too, is a process consisting of a series of responsive acts that accumulate toward objective fulfillment."[\[21\]](#) In this respect, Dewey would arguably not consider feeling things as integral wholes and building relationships between parts of a whole as distinct activities but as two sides of the same coin.

A distinction between two forms of imagination, the imaginative and the imaginary, is still one important element of Dewey's view of imagination and aesthetic experience I want raise. The key difference between these two forms of imagination is their relationship to the material that serves as the basis for its functioning. In the case of the imaginary, it is distanced and detached because the relationship between imagination and material cannot reach the kind of cumulateness that characterizes the imaginative form of imagination.

It is imaginary, that is, illusory or fanciful, precisely in this respect. In cases of the imaginary, "mind and matter do not squarely meet and interpenetrate" but rather "mind stays aloof for the most part and toys with material rather than boldly grasping it."[\[22\]](#) Contrary to the imaginary, the imaginative is characterized precisely by the kind of merging of different elements that Dewey saw as essential to aesthetic experience. Imaginative experience, in other words, "exemplifies more fully than any other kind of experience what experience itself is in its

very movement and structure.”[23]

3. Imagination in pragmatist ethics

Imagination has become a center of focus also in contemporary pragmatist ethics. Dewey had already found imagination to be “the chief instrument of the good,”[24] and some pragmatist-inspired moral philosophers have continued in Dewey’s footsteps by attempting to build a more complete view of imagination’s relevance for the moral aspects of our lives. Now, it is my belief that some key points of this trend of pragmatism are highly relevant to the topic of this paper, namely Dewey and everyday aesthetics, for they reveal aspects of value in Dewey’s conception of aesthetic experience that have not been previously considered within everyday aesthetics. The fuller understanding of the significance of the Deweyan idea of aesthetic experience revealed by the framework of pragmatist ethics also provides a background for defending the Deweyan take on everyday aesthetics against some criticisms, which I shall consider in the next part of the paper.

One of the chief background assumptions of this tradition of ethics is a kind of “situationalist”[25] approach to moral problems, according to which moral situations often include unique and situation-specific features and irresolvable-seeming conflicts, for example, between individual hopes and communal demands, that cannot be adequately embraced with the help of abstract principles and generalizations.

Since moral situations do not “come in duplicates,”[26] the view of ethics arising from Dewey’s writings postulates a more limited role for pre-established rules and principles in the encounters our moral life consists of, and in untangling the possible situational exigencies they may involve than more normative oriented approaches to questions of moral philosophy.

This is where imagination enters the picture. Steven Fesmire has argued that imagination is precisely the sort of capacity that, with the help of moral deliberation, can be attuned to the kind of key the Deweyan situationalist approach to moral situations requires. It allows for a creative “tapping of a situation’s possibilities,” which, as we saw in the previous section, is one of the central senses of imagination found in Dewey’s work.[27] Imagination, in other words, signifies “the capacity to concretely perceive what is before us in light of what could be” and can bring to light “undisclosed possibilities” inherent in the situation at hand.[28] Thus, imagination becomes an indispensable source of material for moral deliberation.

While Fesmire has been the most important proponent of the imagination-centered approach in contemporary pragmatist ethics, the importance of imagination in a moral life has also been acknowledged by other philosophers working in this tradition. Gregory Pappas, for example, argues that from Dewey’s texts on ethics there emerges a view of an ideal moral self.[29] The capacity for sympathy is one of the important virtues of this kind of self.[30] According to Pappas, for the concept of sympathy Dewey referred to “a special kind of sensitivity” that consists of the ability to take on the viewpoints of other people. This virtue is a vital part of the ideal moral self Dewey outlined, for with the help of sympathy, material for moral deliberation can be acquired “that cannot be obtained through any other means.”[31] The feeling of sympathy widens the horizon of our moral deliberation and, according to Pappas, Dewey found it to be a key element in the capacity to approach other people as ends in themselves.[32]

The characteristic traits of sympathy again show the importance of

imagination for the ethical vision contained in Dewey's works. According to Pappas, the ability to "reach beyond one's narrow view of things and understand others through sympathetic communication requires imagination, rather than the mere manipulation of information."^[33] Even though Dewey emphasized the affective aspects of sympathy, the emergence of the feeling of sympathy within a person also requires a grasp of the other's situation and how things look to a person in such a situation. In other words, sympathetic engagement with another does not primarily consist of entering another person's mind but requires a wider engagement with the situation of a person. This is precisely what imagination makes possible. Without such understanding, a proper feeling of sympathy toward another person could not arise.

Pappas also attaches a strong communal dimension to the feeling of sympathy. The emergence and development of sympathy is only possible in certain kinds of communities and through certain kinds of communal experiences. Imagination is yet again a key element in both, for "significant learning and shared experience" can only occur "when individuals in communication are able to emotionally and imaginatively take the role of the other."^[34] Pappas sees the feeling of sympathy as crucial for the emergence of a morally good self and, in fact, argues that communities that do not provide the possibility for the kinds of imaginative experiences at the heart of it have very little hope.^[35]

Fesmire illuminates the important role he believes imagination has in moral life with the distinction between the imaginative and the imaginary form of imagination mentioned earlier. It is imagination precisely in the imaginative sense outlined by Dewey, the vital position of which Fesmire seeks to defend for moral life. Following Dewey, Fesmire compares the imaginary form of imagination to "moral fantasy," and believes that it is this type of imagination to which the negative connotations sometimes attached to imagination of "caprice" and of mere "imagining things" apply. These criticisms, however, do not apply to the imaginative, for it is, in Fesmire's words, "imbued with sociocultural meanings and rooted in problematic conditions."^[36]

Unlike the "mind-wandering and wayward fancy" of the imaginary,^[37] "the imaginative vision elicits possibilities that are interwoven within the texture of the actual."^[38] So once the notion of imagination has been properly understood along the lines of Dewey's imaginative sense, its place as a "central focus in ethical theorizing" should be acknowledged,^[39] along with the key role it plays in enriching people's possibility of living more responsive and morally rewarding lives.^[40]

4. Dewey and contemporary everyday aesthetics

Even though Dewey has been widely considered an important background figure for the emerging field of everyday aesthetics, some central ideas of Dewey's aesthetics have also been seen as hard to reconcile with the goals some of its most important theorists have found central to it. Attempts to build a more systematic theory of everyday aesthetics on the principles of Dewey's aesthetics seem to face a key problem concerning the Deweyan notion of aesthetic experience itself. For it has been argued that peoples' everyday experiences only rarely seem to achieve the kind of rhythmic, cumulative, and developmental character that Dewey found central to aesthetic experience. For example, according to Yuriko Saito, Deweyan aesthetic experiences are among "the exceptions" in the flow of peoples' everyday life. She does acknowledge their significance, but because of their rarity, the conception of aesthetic experience understood according to Deweyan principles offers a rather limited basis

for building a comprehensive understanding of the aesthetics of everyday life.

Instead of focusing on what Saito calls “standout experiences,” which she considers the Deweyan aesthetic experience to be a prime example, a theory of everyday aesthetics should focus on the everydayness of everyday life and analyze the experiential aspects of the everyday in terms of such concepts as recurrence, routine, and closeness. We do not often pay such close attention to the objects belonging to our everyday, but they nevertheless manage to provide a kind of silent feeling of safety for our lives.^[41] Or, as Arto Haapala, another proponent of this trend of everyday aesthetics, formulates this kind of concealed aesthetic character of the everyday, “Ordinary everyday objects lack the surprise element or freshness of the strange; nevertheless this gives us pleasure through a kind of comforting stability.”^[42]

Thomas Leddy, however, has offered a different view of the starting points of everyday aesthetics that exhibits a much more favorable attitude toward Dewey’s aesthetics. Though he finds Dewey’s conception of aesthetic experience too narrow for covering the whole domain of everyday life,^[43] he nevertheless argues that everyday aesthetics should pay more attention to experiences that rise above the mundane and the ordinary than Saito considers necessary. Most of our everyday experiences, indeed, do not satisfy the criteria of a Deweyan aesthetic experience. However, Leddy thinks this does not remove the possibility of approaching it as “an ideal” that we should aim for.^[44] It is not the ordinariness of the ordinary that is important but rather “the way in which the ordinary can be made extraordinary,”^[45] and Dewey’s conception of aesthetic experience provides for Leddy an important model for what it means to render the ordinary extraordinary. However, it is my belief that the way in which imagination has been approached in the framework of pragmatist ethics reveals lines of defense for the Deweyan take on everyday aesthetics that Leddy does not explore.

5. Aesthetic experience and the imaginative everyday

In his interpretation of Dewey’s ethics, Fesmire places aesthetic experience at the very heart of the vision of moral life emerging from Dewey’s work.^[46] In his reading of Dewey, this aspect proves highly relevant to weighing the significance of Dewey’s ideas for everyday aesthetics. Given the capacities considered vital for a flourishing moral life in the conception of morality contemporary pragmatists have built on Dewey’s views, aesthetic experience turns out to have an important role in developing those capacities. This is explained by the connection Dewey builds between aesthetic experience and imagination, which I introduced earlier. One of the benefits of approaching Dewey’s concept of aesthetic experience in light of his views on imagination is that it gives a more robust sense of its structure and conditions, that is, that it consists of a coherent, developing unity. If aesthetic experience indeed has this kind of structure, then it cannot be grounded on a simple sense perception but must be underlain by more complex mental phenomena. I understood Dewey to refer to these with his concept of imagination.

As we saw, imagination, indeed, is not for Dewey a power a person possesses, like the power to move one’s arm or to think certain thoughts. It may not be a power to do certain things, but I argued that imagination can, nevertheless, be considered a capacity of a person, at least in the sense that certain people have the ability to engage with and experience situations imaginatively and that Dewey, moreover,

thinks this ability can be developed. If this were not the case, much of Dewey's writings on education would not really make much sense.

Now, if imagination and aesthetic experience are indeed connected in the way I suggested in my reading of Dewey's conception of aesthetic experience in the first part of this paper, environments, artifacts, situations, artworks, and so on, that give the possibility for aesthetic experiences are also among the things that stir and activate our imaginative capacities and the imaginative traits of our character. In other words, our imaginative capacities to see and feel things as complex integral wholes are actively engaged when our experience reaches an aesthetic level. Even though Fesmire does not provide as thorough an examination of Dewey's notion of aesthetic experience and of its connection to imagination as I have done in this article, his understanding of the power of aesthetic experience to sustain and develop our imaginative capacities seems to coincide with the view emerging from my reading of Dewey, for he wrote that "we imagine most effectively when we live in an aesthetically funded present."[\[47\]](#)

Now, in my view, the significant role that aesthetic experience turns out to have in this pragmatist framework puts the critique leveled against the Deweyan notion of aesthetic experience within contemporary everyday aesthetics in a new light. If the aesthetic aspects of our lives can indeed have the sorts of ramifications presented above, it would seem strange or even harmful not to include Dewey's notion of aesthetic experience among the central components of everyday aesthetics. In this respect, I support Leddy's understanding of Dewey's place within everyday aesthetics. Dewey's notion of aesthetic experience should be one of the cornerstones of the field, and more investigation should be devoted to how the aesthetics of our everyday life can contribute to the development of our imaginative capacities to experience things and situations as integral wholes, which the pragmatists considered important pillars of a flourishing moral life. It is also important to notice, particularly in the context of everyday aesthetics, that the position of imagination is not limited to the highpoints of one's everyday experience, that is, cases of Deweyan "experiences," but by helping one to get more out of the situations one faces in one's everyday, it can enliven everyday life in a more general sense.[\[48\]](#)

The Deweyan conception of everyday aesthetics developed in this article also provides a new perspective on another point of controversy between Leddy and Saito. Leddy criticizes Saito's take on everyday aesthetics for ruling out art from its domain in a too categorical way.[\[49\]](#) The problem he sees in this kind of approach to everyday aesthetics is that it is in danger of overlooking the ways in which everyday life serves as a source of inspiration for many artists, and the different ways in which art can have an effect on our experience and perception of everyday life. Instead of exclusion, Leddy suggests that everyday aesthetics should devote more attention to "the dynamic relationship" that he thinks prevails between art and the everyday.[\[50\]](#)

Leddy's criticism of Saito is, again, in line with Dewey's views, for one of the central points of Dewey's critique of the museum conception of art is to reveal the artificiality of all sharp distinctions between art and the everyday. Leddy's insistence on the need for a further examination of the dynamic relationship he believes there is between art and the everyday actually and interestingly draws attention to the other side of Dewey's famous critique. An attempt to undermine the dichotomy between art and the everyday by focusing on the potential many everyday items and events have for engendering experiences of the

aesthetic kind is surely an important part of that critique. However, it is an equally important goal of Dewey's criticism to highlight the fact that the effect of the experiences we undergo in museums and concert halls do not cease at their front doors but can, in a way, live on and heighten the quality of our everyday lives.

Further insight into this aspect of Dewey's critique of the museum conception of art is provided by the distinction Dewey made between an art product and a work of art. With this distinction, Dewey tries to draw attention to two sides of an artwork. The concept 'art product' refers to artworks as concrete physical objects. The other pole of this conceptual distinction highlights the experiential aspects and dynamic potentials artworks possess. That is, for Dewey the work of art is "what the product does, its working," and ideally the product's working marks "the beginning of a complex interaction."[\[51\]](#)

When combined with Dewey's critique of the museum conception of art, this distinction implies that museums and other art institutions should not be seen as mere containers for art products but should also actively seek out the means of enhancing the potential of the products they contain. Thus, museums would serve as spurs for complex interactions, thereby extending the effect of imaginative experiences people have in connection with artworks to their everyday lives. So from a Deweyan perspective, excluding art from the domain of everyday aesthetics does not only appear arbitrary but it may even be potentially harmful. What is needed is more investigation on the dynamic relationship between art and the everyday, which Leddy frames as a central question for everyday aesthetics.

The points of emphasis apparent in the Deweyan approach to everyday aesthetics listed here show why it can be considered a primary example of the second variant of everyday aesthetics in Shusterman's distinction introduced at the beginning of this paper. This kind of take on everyday aesthetics does not merely propose a certain analysis of aesthetic experience but puts forth reasons why such experiences are significant and tries to develop means for making them more omnipresent phenomena in people's everyday lives.

Now, I have said very little about the pragmatic or reconstructive aspects of the Deweyan approach to everyday aesthetics developed in this paper, that is, about the ways in which the characteristic features Dewey lists for aesthetic experience can be made into essential parts of the experiential dimensions of people's everyday life.[\[52\]](#) But needless to say, this would mean a close look at the environments people inhabit, the kinds of interactions they afford, and how those environments need to be transformed so that they allow a ground for aesthetic and imaginative engagements of the Deweyan kind. This examination needs to be left for another occasion. However, what I hope to have shown in this article is the significance of such undertakings, and that the line of everyday aesthetics taking its inspiration from Dewey uncovers important paths of research that should be further explored within everyday aesthetics.

The pragmatist understanding of everyday aesthetics also reveals problematic aspects in some other recent conceptions of everyday aesthetics. In *Art as Experience*, Dewey outlined two possible worlds in which aesthetic experience could not occur. In one of Dewey's scenarios, aesthetic experience is depicted as an impossible phenomenon in a world that is "finished, ended." Aesthetic experience could not occur in this kind of world because it lacks the elements of "suspense and crisis" and, therefore, there would be "no opportunity for resolution." "Where everything is already complete," experience could

not develop cumulatively nor could it reach a closing fulfillment in the way aesthetic experience, in Dewey's understanding, requires.^[53]

The world so portrayed by Dewey comes strikingly close to a world that is saturated by familiarity and routines, that is, by qualities where the first variant of everyday aesthetics in Shusterman's taxonomy searches for the proper aesthetic character of the everyday. From a Deweyan perspective, this would be an aesthetic world only in a rather barren sense of the term. Though critical of Dewey, Saito incorporates within her conception of everyday aesthetics what she calls "the hidden gems" of the everyday within which she includes such things as "the cracks on the floor boards, the way in which mold and mildew grow, and the oil stains on the driveway surface."^[54] In her view, these sorts of surprising phenomena are important sources of enrichment of everyday life and they disrupt in a positive sense the routine-like character of our everyday life. Thus, it is debatable how far Dewey's picture of an unaesthetic world corresponds with the conception of the everyday implied by Saito's theory of everyday aesthetics.

However, the world portrayed by Dewey bears some significant similarities at least with Haapala's understanding of everyday aesthetics, and Dewey's account also raises some genuine worries about it. For, if Dewey's analysis of the relationship between aesthetic experience and imagination is accurate, then the kind of world in which Dewey finds aesthetic experience an impossible phenomenon would also provide very little stimulation for our imagination. One of the primary goals of the Deweyan take on everyday aesthetics sketched in this paper is precisely to find ways of avoiding this kind of world and, in this respect, it stands in stark contrast with theories that build an aesthetics of everyday life on the everydayness of the everyday.^[55]

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Endnotes

^[1] This essay was completed during my term as the Erik Allardt Fellow at The Swedish Collegium for Advanced Study (SCAS). The stipend from Riksbankens Jubileumsfond, which made my visit possible, is gratefully acknowledged. An earlier version of this paper was presented at the SCAS seminar series. I thank the participants of the seminar for an extremely live conversation, as well as the people at SCAS, both the fellows and other personnel, for making my visit the most rewarding time of my academic life thus far.

^[2] See especially the historical look provided by Thomas Leddy in his

Extraordinary in the Ordinary. An Aesthetics of Everyday Life (Peterborough, Ontario: Broadview Press, 2012), Chapter 1. See also Ossi Naukkarinen "What is 'Everyday' in Everyday Aesthetics?" *Contemporary Aesthetics*, Vol. 11 (2013), endnote 1.

[3] Leddy, *The Extraordinary in the Ordinary*, p. 44. Arnold Berleant and Crispin Sartwell give similar assessments of Dewey's place within everyday aesthetics. See Arnold Berleant, *Aesthetics beyond the Arts. New and Recent Essays* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2012), p. 164; Crispin Sartwell "Aesthetics of the Everyday," in *The Oxford Companion to Aesthetics*, ed. Jerrold Levinson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), pp. 761-770.

[4] John Dewey, *Art as Experience* (New York: Perigee, 1934; reprinted 1980), pp. 4-5.

[5] *Ibid.*, p. 344.

[6] *Ibid.*, pp. 6-9.

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

[8] See especially Steven Fesmire, *John Dewey and Moral Imagination. Pragmatism in Ethics* (Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press, 2003).

[9] Richard Shusterman, "Back to the Future: Aesthetics Today," *The Nordic Journal of Aesthetics* 43 (2012), 104-124, ref. on 110. For an online version of Shusterman's article see: <http://ojs.statsbiblioteket.dk/index.php/nja/article/viewFile/7500/6349>.

[10] Shusterman does not explicitly mention which theorists he thinks belong to this strand of everyday aesthetics, but at least Yuriko Saito's and Arto Haapala's work contain points of emphasis that arguably make them members of this trend of everyday aesthetics. See Yuriko Saito, *Everyday Aesthetics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press), pp. 48-53 and Arto Haapala, "On the Aesthetics of the Everyday. Familiarity, Strangeness, and the Meaning of Place," in *The Aesthetics of Everyday Life*, eds. Andrew Light and Jonathan M. Smith (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005), pp. 39-55. It should be noted that there are also some important differences between Saito's and Haapala's approaches. Saito, for example, emphasizes the importance of detecting hidden "aesthetic gems" in our everyday life such as a peculiar looking stain in a linen or "an interesting shadow cast by a broken window," Saito, *Everyday Aesthetics*, p. 244. These sorts of factors do not play a significant role in Haapala's theory of everyday aesthetics. Instead, he seeks to locate the aesthetics of the everyday to a level of experience, which does not involve the kind of conscious attention like the concealed "aesthetic treasures" Saito discusses do.

[11] By defining everyday aesthetics as the transformation of the ordinary into the extraordinary, Thomas Leddy seems to be the prime representative of this line of pursuing the aesthetics of everyday life. See Leddy, *The Extraordinary in the Ordinary*.

[12] Douglas Browning, "Understanding Dewey: Starting at the Starting Point," paper presented at the XIV Congresso Interamericano de Filosofia, Puebla Mexico, August 19, 1999. Quoted in Gregory Pappas, *John Dewey's Ethics. Democracy as Experience* (Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press), p. 24.

[13] Dewey, *Art as Experience*, p. 13.

- [14] *Ibid.*, p. 36.
- [15] *Ibid.*, p. 274.
- [16] *Ibid.*, p. 272.
- [17] *Ibid.*, p. 267. Italics in the original.
- [18] *Ibid.*, p. 274.
- [19] *Ibid.*, p. 268.
- [20] *Ibid.*, p. 267. Italics in the original.
- [21] *Ibid.*, p, 52.
- [22] *Ibid.*, p. 268.
- [23] *Ibid.*, p, 281.
- [24] *Ibid.*, p. 348.
- [25] Pappas, *John Dewey's Ethics*, p. 47.
- [26] Fesmire, *John Dewey and Moral Imagination*, p. 58.
- [27] *Ibid.*, p. 65.
- [28] *Ibid.*, p. 66.
- [29] Pappas, *John Dewey's Ethics*, p. 8.
- [30] Leddy also shortly raises the importance of sympathy for proper moral reflection and considers it "the only basis upon which any sort of moral equilibrium and understanding can be achieved." See his *Extraordinary in the Ordinary*, p. 118.
- [31] *Ibid.*, p. 199.
- [32] *Ibid.*, p. 200.
- [33] *Ibid.*, p. 206.
- [34] *Ibid.*, p. 235.
- [35] *Ibid.*, p. 254.
- [36] Fesmire, *John Dewey and Moral Imagination*, pp. 66-67
- [37] John Dewey, *Democracy and Education: An Introduction to the Philosophy of Education*, Vol. 9 of *The Middle Works of John Dewey 1889-1924: 1916* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1976-1988), p. 245.
- [38] Dewey, *Art as Experience*, p. 345.
- [39] Fesmire, *John Dewey and Moral Imagination*, p. 60.
- [40] *Ibid.*, p. 92.
- [41] Saito, *Everyday Aesthetics*, pp. 44-48. Sherri Irvin raises similar worries about Dewey's notion of aesthetic experience. See her "The Pervasiveness of the Aesthetic in Ordinary Experience," *British Journal of Aesthetics*, 48, 1 (2008), 21-44.
- [42] Haapala, "On the Aesthetics of the Everyday," p. 50.

[43] Leddy, *The Extraordinary in the Ordinary*, p. 90, p. 204.

[44] *Ibid.*, p. 207.

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

[46] Fesmire, *John Dewey and Moral Imagination*, p. 4. Pappas also frequently describes the Deweyan ideal of moral life in aesthetic terms, as well as contrasting the mechanical life-style caused by a too severe belief on the power of rules and codes to engender genuine morality that Dewey argued against to "an aesthetic moral life." See Pappas, *John Dewey's Ethics*, p. 46, p. 51, p. 152, p. 177.

[47] Fesmire, *John Dewey and Moral Imagination*, p. 128.

[48] The position of Dewey's views within everyday aesthetics also depends heavily on how widely the Deweyan notion of "an experience" can cover the domain of everyday life. I think a problem with Saito's critique of Dewey is that it involves a reading of Dewey's notion, which overemphasizes the standout character of aesthetic experiences of the Deweyan kind. See Saito, *Everyday Aesthetics*, pp. 44-46. For more mundane examples of "an experiences" see Scott Stroud's Deweyan inspired discussion of work and communication in his *John Dewey and the Artful Life. Pragmatism, Aesthetics, and Morality* (University Park, Pennsylvania: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2011), pp. 154-162 and pp. 179-188.

[49] Leddy, *Extraordinary in the Ordinary*, p. 112.

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

[51] *Ibid.*, p. 162.

[52] Scott Stroud has provided such examinations in his *John Dewey and the Artful Life*. See especially chapters 6-8.

[53] Dewey, *Art as Experience*, p. 17.

[54] Saito, *Everyday Aesthetics*, p. 202

[55] A great thank you to the anonymous reviewer of *Contemporary Aesthetics* for many helpful and challenging remarks.