Defining 'Social Aesthetics'

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A Background to Social Aesthetics

> The Master said, if it is really possible to govern countries by ritual and yielding, there is no more to be said. But if it is really not possible, of what use is ritual?[1]

For millennia, the basis of Eastern social philosophy has relied on an interpersonal aesthetics that delineated a powerful dimension of the beautiful and harmonious behind the social and political roles within that society. These roles remained trenchantly relational (if, however, quite misogynistically framed). In East Asian societies, the son behaved in a manner that confirmed deference (that is, filial piety or *xiao* 孝) to his father. The father returned this ritual performance with one as equally sincere and pervaded by benevolence (known as *ren* 仁). Yet the father behaved as a son if his own father happened to be present, and all citizens deferred to the emperor as children before the great father of the nation. In these sometimes quite intricate social performances, the sincerity of the ritual act meant everything. The outward show of grace and elegance in face to face interactions in East Asia confirmed not only the sincerity of the action, but also allowed the aesthetic harmony of the performance to permeate into the heart of the individual. Most importantly, these outward performances confirmed an alignment of the individual to the prevailing political structure. At that point when modernity began to emerge in Europe, nothing could be more different. One's inner experience and

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[1] Confucius, *The Analects*, trans. Arthur Waley (London: Everyman, 1990), 96.

conviction outweighed all outward appearances and interpersonal performances. Roger Sales in his study of Elizabethan playwright Christopher Marlowe, to take one example, delightfully and comprehensively demonstrates that as Protestantism emerged in England, society became alive with both a new sense of self and a range of dissembling performances.[2] Actors crossed the country dressed as aristocrats, priests, and kings, whilst Catholic priests hid themselves from authorities dressed as actors. While recusants dissembled, Protestants proclaimed their individuality based on their personal interpretations of scripture. It was an age when many had vested interests in not seeming who they were, or who boldly proclaimed a new authenticity of their self – not based on how they interacted with others, but on how they interpreted their selves in relation to holy scripture.

As the West continued to develop ideas of the singularity of the self, the manners that dictated both aesthetic interaction and prevailing political structures fell away. When in 1723 Voltaire reported on his meeting with a Quaker in England, he spent much ink explaining the affectless way in which the gentleman addressed him.[3] Voltaire noted how his own court niceties—his bowing and formal speaking register—were at stark odds with the plain speaking, familiar performance, and simple dress of the Quaker. From that moment, simplicity and authenticity of the self in the West seemed to hide the fact that the aesthetics of social interaction remained a vitally important part of how society operated. It was as if, once the French revolution had reduced everyone to the status of citizen, the graceful dimensions of social interaction counted for very little. In the world of aesthetics it counted for nothing at all. After Emmanuel Kant's *Critique of Judgement*, aesthetics became a critique carried out by an individual mind, not of the person in relation to others or their environment. It took developments in architecture, urban planning, sociology, and even performance art after World War II to start to change our minds on how aesthetics could effect human interaction and the built environment within which that interaction took place.

Numerous examples of research from the mid-point of the twentieth century sought to explain the social and aesthetic dimensions of some of the worst events ever recorded in history. Elias Canetti's *Crowds and Power* (1960) was one of a number of texts that sought to examine both the psychology and the style and atmosphere of what seemed the heart of

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[2] Roger Sales, *Christopher Marlowe* (London: McMillan, 1991).

[3] Christopher Hartney, "Concerning Voltaire's English Enterprise," in *Through A Glass Darkly*: *Reflections on the Sacred*, ed. Frances Di Lauro (Sydney: Sydney Studies in Religion, 2006), 112-124.

fascism—the crowd—through a series of challenging poetic metaphors. Additionally, Edward Hall's ideas of proximics from 1963 sought to explain the concept of the self in relation to changing designs. Similarly, out of Chicago, Erving Goffman in 1959 followed through on a number of extensive field studies that demonstrated how humans in particular social scenes strove to give as convincing a performance of authenticity as the scene allowed or demanded. There is something deeply aesthetic in these one-on-one interactions as individuals seek to convince others of their validity in a particular scene. Tellingly he writes,

> The self, then, as a performed character, is not an organic thing that has a specific location, whose fundamental fate is to be born, to mature and to die; it is a dramatic effect arising diffusely from a scene that is presented, and the characteristic issue, the crucial concern, is whether it [the reaction] will be credited or discredited.[4]

Many years later, Richard Shusterman developed the concept of 'somaesthetics' to link ideas of the embodied self in society with the larger tradition of philosophical aesthetics.[5] In this he takes a more analytical rather than sociological approach, but certainly develops upon the interaction that sociologists such as Goffman hold central to their work.

Additional academic developments such as the rise of the discipline of Performance Studies assisted in the examination of not only theatre, but also life *beyond* theatre through the work of Richard Schechner.[6] At an anthropological level, ideas of social drama from Victor Turner also meld aspects of the aesthetic with the resonance of the performative and the ritualised in Western and other societies.[7] And the continued rise of symbolic interactionism and microsociology permitted the concept of aesthetics to move away from a purely philosophical pursuit towards something more embodied and socially framed as with, for example, the work of Randall Collins.[8]

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[4] Ervin Goffman, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1982), 245.

[5] Richard Shusterman, "Somaestetics and the Care of the Self: The Case of Foucault," *Monist* 83 (2000): 532-533.

[6] Richard Schechner, *The Future of Ritual: Writings on Culture and Performance* (London: Routledge, 1993).

[7] Victor Turner, *Dramas, Fields, and Metaphors* (Cornell: Cornell University Press, 1975).

[8] Randall Collins, *Interaction Ritual Chains* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005).

More recently, the term social aesthetics has been used to describe the manner in which artists have sought to intervene in social structures and values through the creation of performance or situations that challenge these structures; however it is also a term used beyond the parameters of any distinct art form towards this new concept of aesthetics noted above. Urban planning may similarly reinforce or challenge social structures, and may be disrupted by graffiti or guerrilla gardening, which in turn develop their own aesthetic dimensions. Such interventions thus presuppose a different sense of aesthetics: one that is fundamentally concerned with the relationships of people to people and the framing of this interaction in a manner that creates, recreates, and maintains social values and structures. This social sense of aesthetics is concerned with an epistemology—an understanding of space or place and social structure—and communication, as closely related to the concept of 'affect'. As such, it is seemingly only distantly concerned with traditional philosophical aesthetics. Yet the relationship of social aesthetics to philosophical aesthetics promises a very rich tradition in its own right when, and if, the academy wishes to engage with this nexus. Social aesthetics itself promises to become the site of a rich crossroads in disciplinary research from fields as diverse as landscape architecture, material culture, performance studies, advertising, ritual studies, microsociology, psychologies of the self in relation to others, manners, interaction rituals, and cultural history. It is a rediscovery of aesthetics in the everyday, and in this there is an immediate political dimension: social aesthetics can comment on the powerful, additional zones of communication that frame how societies work as both systems seeking stability and as structures of power and control.

Aesthetics for traditionalists is primarily concerned with the appreciation of beauty in art and nature, but in contemporary philosophy this has been focussed on a wider range of responses in the appreciation of art. In the last thirty years, philosophers have begun to explore aesthetic relations beyond art, breaking down the idea that aesthetics are distinct from everyday life. One of the most influential contributions in this regard has been American pragmatism. In *Art as Experience* (1934) John Dewey suggested that the experience of aesthetic exultation associated with art has its roots in "the deep feelings of fulfilment that arise from interacting with the environment to satisfy one's needs."[9] More recently, the American philosopher Tom Leddy has used Emmanuel Kant's concept of 'the agreeable' as the basis for developing an

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[9] See: Sherri Irvin, "Aesthetics of the Everyday," in *A Companion to Aesthetics*, eds Kathleen Higgins, Robert Hopkins, Robert Stecker, and David Cooper Stephen Davies (United Kingdom: Blackwell, 2009).

aesthetics of the everyday. Kant suggested that there are two distinct kinds of aesthetic experience: the aesthetic appreciation of beauty, and the appreciation of the agreeable. He felt that this involved appreciation of specific kinds of things such as food, wine, the smell of a rose, the pleasure of the senses. One difference between the two kinds of appreciation, according to Kant, lies in the fact that the agreeable is subject to inclination—a matter of personal taste—whereas a judgement of beauty is applied universally. A second difference is that the experience of the agreeable is not disinterested, but gratifying to the person who experiences it.[10] According to Leddy, everyday aesthetics has a distinct vocabulary, using terms such as messy or organised and clean, nice or disgusting and ugly. Something smells nice, or smells good. Something is ordered, or it feels 'right'. Leddy argues that these everyday aesthetic experiences and judgments are primary in the sense that they are prior to complicated qualities such as 'symmetrical' and 'proportional', even though such complex concepts apply even in everyday aesthetics, such as in home decorating.[11] For Leddy, however, there remains an important difference between the agreeable and beauty. He states,

> The agreeable is primarily a matter of the play of sense and the imagination. The beautiful is primarily a matter of the play of imagination and understanding. Yet, the agreeable may contain, in part, some play of the imagination and understanding, and sense should not be excluded from the beautiful.[12]

One criticism of the development of everyday aesthetics has been whether there was any experience in particular that was identified in the idea of aesthetics. As Sherri Irvin points out, "If aesthetic experience can happen at any time, can take anything as its object, and need have no particular qualitative feel, is there really any distinction between the aesthetic aspects of experience and its other aspects?"[13] If aesthetics can refer to any and all qualitative experience then it is trivial, simply meaning 'sensibility' or 'responsiveness to stimulation of the senses'. In responding to this criticism it seems the answer is that everyday aesthetic experience is distinct for its social or cultural nature. One way in which this might be brought out is simply, as

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[10] Tom Leddy, "The Nature of Everyday Aesthetics," in *The Aesthetics of Everyday Life*, eds Andrew Light and Jonathon M. Smith (New York: Colombia University Press, 2005), 6-7.
[11] Leddy, "The Nature of Everyday Aesthetics," 8-9.
[12] Leddy, "The Nature of Everyday Aesthetics," 7.
[13] Irvin, "Aesthetics of the Everyday," 138.

Alexander Gottlieb Baumgarten suggested, to think of aesthetics as judgements of 'taste'. That is, as something that is culturally relative, we find that there is already a social nature to the judgment.

Another fruitful line of thought can be found in Leddy's suggestion that a judgment about the agreeable involves the imagination. Leddy fails to explain this, but it does need to be expounded upon; one might argue that the smell of a rose is, indeed, pure sensation. Yet, we also frame the process of smelling the rose as a gesture that can be read by others, an experience that can be spoken of (in this case as a sensual example), and we participate in a narrative when we smell a rose and then move to explain it. The rose, and the heritage of its appreciation, is particularly laden with cultural associations. Similarly, eating food has specific narratives attached to it. These narratives are particularly evident in cookery books. They tell us not only what to eat but also when to eat it and how to eat it. In each picture we are given a narrative of how the food might fit into the wider concept of a dinner party or picnic, which we are in some sense recreating for ourselves when we make the dish. The pictures are models to follow. In choosing these models, we simultaneously connect our social judgments with 'taste'. Exhibitions of tastes indicate who we are and the social groups to which we belong, as well as social hierarchies. The shiny buttons on a military jacket indicate status and respectability; the hoodie indicates street culture. As David Novitz has suggested, there can be no innocent or value-free manner of dressing.[14] It is this overlay of symbolic and social value that makes social aesthetics a particularly rich field, but how rich?

A Study of Social Aesthetics
The research contained in this volume has been inspired by a symposium exploring that malleability and the utility of 'social aesthetics' at Monash University in 2012. It is testament to the fact that relationships between the social, symbolic, and sensible qualities are not merely the preserve of philosophers, but are also fruitfully explored in numerous disciplines. Studies in cities and in creativity have explored the rhythm and social patterns that create their distinct style or feel. Cultural anthropologists explore the patterns of small communities, such as schools, and how these structures mould the person aesthetically and emotionally. Other anthropological approaches have focussed on etiquette and manners – the relationships between people and the manner in which these relationships are manifested in sensible configurations.

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[14] David Novitz *The Boundaries of Art: A Philosophical Inquiry into the Place of Art in Everyday Life* [1992] (Christchurch: Cybereditions, 2001), 133. Novitz, 1992).

Semiologists and historians trace symbols and their connotations between the domains of high art and low, religious and popular culture. What they have in common is a focus on the patterns of performance and affect that reflect or recreate social structures.

This volume opens with the work of Stuart Grant who brings the study of aesthetics to play in a qualitative appraisal of atmospheres. By 'atmosphere' Grant means the vivid sensual data of any given space. His paper elucidates the importance of performance phenomenology in the study of spaces, arguing for a body-centred analysis of the qualities of atmosphere. In this he relies on Böhme's concept of atmospheres which itself relies on a re-conceptualisation of the aesthetic tradition as begun by Baumgarten but perverted in a way by Kant:

> The Aesthetic of Atmospheres … rehabilitates Alexander Gottlieb Baumgarten's initial point of departure, i.e. Aesthetics as Aisthetics, as a general theory of perception. It has in the meantime proven its revelatory power by way of a series of case studies – the atmosphere of a city, light as atmosphere, the atmosphere of dusk, the atmosphere of church spaces, on music as atmosphere, and finally in the study of the atmospheres involved in interpersonal communication.[15]

Grant explains the manner in which pathic social communication and the aesthetic dimensions of atmospheres are interlinked. From these observations, he proposes a new performative methodology through which the lived experience of a city may be reported upon. Advocating this qualitative method, Grant ends his paper with a discussion on its impact in the *Senses of the City* project, which is currently occurring in Melbourne. This methodology poses an exciting solution for the manner in which the emotive, aesthetics qualities of a space may be deeply engaged with. It seems fitting that this research into social aesthetics emerged out of a Melbourne university research project, as both Grant and Ian Woodcock explore this city as an aesthetic development in its own right. Woodcock focuses on '*en route*', an interactive artwork-journey by the Melbourne ensemble 'one step at a time like this'. *en route* takes participants around the city's laneways via an iPod tour, asking them to engage with the city in new and unusual ways. Woodcock uses this artwork as a means of discussing the manner in which a body inhabits space and interacts with surrounding architecture – a relationship that illuminates deep connections

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[15] Gernot Böhme, "Acoustic Atmospheres: A Contribution to the Study of Ecological Aesthetics," *Soundscape: The Journal of Acoustic Ecology* 1:1 (2000): 15.

between the social and the aesthetic. Woodcock convincingly argues that we should consider the manner in which spaces are received by those who exist within them as part of the study of aesthetics.

Frank Heidemann throws Western expectations on the socially performantive into stark contrast through his work on the Badagas of South India. He precisely examines the manner in which their social structures are expressed in physical movement. Heidemann explores the importance of an aesthetics of proximity when studying the manner in which humans arrange themselves in a social space and under the consideration of a complex range of social expectations. This arrangement can indicate nuances of social hierarchy and visually reinforce friendships and other bonds. Heidemann vividly evokes dimensions of beauty and unity within this system of the human in space. He explores, for example, the vivid white garments that are worn by the Badagas on formal occasions such as funerals or political events, and writes of the powerful aesethic and visual effect created when so many people are dressed homogenously and appear to move as a single unit across fields of green. This beautiful homogeneity is celebrated as a sign of closeness and communal unity, reinforcing the deep connections between human societies and the visual appearances of our social spaces.

The aesthetic subtleties of human interactions are further explored in the work of Elizabeth Burns Coleman. Coleman focuses on the social aesthetics of graciousness, which she uses as a means of demonstrating encoded patterns of etiquette. Using examples that range from *The Analects* of Confucius to an English tale by Agatha Christie, Coleman explores the subtle behaviours that allow a person to enact 'good etiquette' as a social artform. As Heidemann also argues, the way in which people interact forms intangible group bonds and identities via normative social graces. Thus Coleman encourages the reading of patterns of etiquette as delicate social procedures that are thought to reveal moral codes of civility and virtue, whilst simultaneously imparting a discernable social style. This, she argues, places etiquette as both a moral and an aesthetic practice, demonstrating the inter-relativity of the social with the aesthetic. All four of these articles show that the study of relationships between individuals, societies, and physical spaces deeply benefits from an aesthetic methodology.

The second part of the volume explores the manner in which differences (and similarities) between societies and eras may be accounted for in their aesthetic outputs. This is an important employment of social aesthetics, as it allows the beautiful to be explored as a socially conditional feature, rather than a universal one. Epitomising this is the work of Maryrose Casey. Her research brings to light the vibrant creative culture of Indigenous Australians at the

point of European colonisation and beyond. Casey discusses the oft-ignored history of performative texts within this culture. She records many instances in which a comedic performance was met with laughter by its Indigenous viewers and confusion or indignation from the colonisers. The gap in understanding between colonisers and the colonised is wide, and a misunderstanding of social performance is at the heart of it. This article proves that aesthetic judgement is not based on universal conditions – the political and hierarchical motivations of a community will substantially alter what they consider to be valuable or valid. Whilst Indigenous performances may often be imbued with sardonic jokes, Casey unpacks the manner in which white Australian audiences have has trouble accepting that a supposedly struggling race could creatively explore their tribulations with humour. It is a humour that, in many cases takes the traumatic events of colonisation and retells them on indigenous grounds. Laughter becomes a process of dealing with this trauma.

Like Casey, Massimo Leone explores the artistic transmission of messages across various societies. In contrast, this case study reveals the potential successes of cross-cultural messages. Leone's article describes a narrative in the biblical book of *Daniel* in which a figure of power is frightened by the cryptic and mysterious writing of God that appears before him. Leone's work is a glimpse into the replication of this narrative across different societies, and differing cultural registers, in order to communicate the eternal problem of power crippled by hubris. Because of the enduring popularity of this concept, it has been re-cast by each society in a manner befitting their social and aesthetic priorities. For example, Rembrandt's version of the Biblical account shows Belshazzar decked in Flemish opulence, whilst a modern political cartoon replaces the king with a stupefied George W. Bush in a cruelly caricatured style. Leone leaves us with a fascinating consideration of sacred graffiti, the manner in which it may undermine authority, and the enduring appeal of this scenario across so many different societies who have imbued it with aesthetic dimensions that reflect their own priorities and creative imaginations.

It is useful to consider the manner in which the aesthetic dimensions of personal interaction and the everyday vary between cultures and time periods. If aesthetic practices and evaluations thereof are socially conditional, it is important to recognise that methodological approaches to the beautiful are culturally specific. Tomoe Nakamura draws our attention to Japanese aesthetic theories – in particular, the emergent study of *kanseigaku*. This discipline translates as the study of sensibility or *aisthesis*, but has been overlaid with nuances additional to its Kantian origins. Nakamura also explains the manner in which the adoption of the term *kansei* by advertising agencies has morphed its meaning at a very popular level. This word is now the basis of a style of

consumption based upon individualistic taste and the desire to purchase abstract descriptors such as 'elegance'. Not only is *kansei* a uniquely Japanese take on the philosophical study of beauty, it is also a discourse of aesthetics that has been altered by consumerist society. Through research such as this, we are reminded that the very concept of 'art' has a deep cultural inheritance and is by no means homogenous from society to society.

Finally, Ali Alizadeh closes the volume with his research on Australian poetry and the challenges that contemporary poetic texts have posed to postmodern analyses. Alizadeh argues that, although it has been a successful mode of enquiry in a general sense, the lens of postmodernism fails to account for new directions in the Australian canon. Of a greater utility is Alain Badiou's 'inaesthetics' – a means by which he explored the power of art as a tool for bring about new ideas and truths into the world. Alizadeh makes the important observation that not all contemporary poetry is alike; the Australian context has created a body of work that needs to be appreciated as distinct from international trends and explored as a movement with divergent tastes and artistic schisms. This is a strong warning against the assumption that there is a single method suitable for all aesthetic analysis.

Conclusions

So what is it, we may ask after reading these explorations, that constitutes 'social aesthetics'? It is an examination of the manner in which humans present themselves in space in order to constitute effective and affective social behaviour. Social aesthetics is a descriptive process of examining the qualities exuded by the human environment and through human interaction with the environment. It is the study of aesthetics as embedded in relative social norms. And it is the manner in which a society is visually represented. In collecting the above articles for publication, we have discovered a great variety of approaches to this topic, but there is a constant at work. It is that the philosophical pursuit of aesthetics unleashed from a tight focus on elite art discourse and refined as experience and applied to the everyday. This changes the political nature of the discourse. Social aesthetics has a way of taking the 'feel' or the 'atmosphere' of an event and examining it as deeply as possible for the way power structures and hierarchies encode themselves in much that is unspoken and subtle. If it is this, then we may say that Confucius was well ahead of the times when he linked ritual, sentiment and political structure in his re-alignment of Chinese tradition. In one of his most famous sayings, the Master states with reference to the ancient collection of poems the *Shi Jing* (詩經 or *Book of Odes*) "the Odes are 300 in number, [but] they can be summed up in one phrase: 'Serve not from

the right path'."[16] The admonition is a bodily one – keep to a path through life and through society that is recognisable to you and your fellow humans. The aesthetic dimensions of divining from classical Chinese poetry a right way to live serves as an ancient metaphor for what many papers touched on here – culture as a communicative process for the right life. All these approaches to social aesthetics are valid in their own ways. Yet rather than seeking out a single and definitive strand of analysis here, we have opted to collate multiple perspectives and methodologies that approach social aesthetics in very divergent ways to ensure that this fascinating field does not fall towards the dogmatic.

What truly binds this collection together is the understanding that a study of aesthetic forms must also incorporate a consideration of the human element at play. None of us are neutral critics of the beautiful or neutral creators of texts and places. Our interaction with our spatial environment is informed by social values, and the creative expression we employ and understand depends on a common symbolic language and social perspective that the academic seeks to enunciate and analyse. The study of aesthetics needs to go beyond an appraisal of sensibilities and taste. Instead, we need to look at what drives our conceptions of the good and the beautiful not as mind to object, but as human to human and human to space.

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[16] Confucius, *The Analects*, 63.