

**Stephen Johnstone, ed.** *The Everyday*. London and Cambridge, MA: Whitechapel/MIT Press, 2008. 240 pages.

Stephen Johnstone's anthology *The Everyday*—the latest in the Whitechapel/MIT series "Documents of Contemporary Art"—brings together a wide-ranging collection of texts that deal with contemporary art's encounters with the quotidian. The artists, critics, curators, and theorists presented in this anthology examine the immediate history, methodologies, and aims of the aesthetic category of the "everyday": the phenomenological *hic et nunc*,<sup>5</sup> the trivial and unseen, the passive and boring, and the repetitive non-events that characterize the mundane. According to Johnstone, while the notion of "the everyday" has been considered a subdivision within historical-materialist sociology, historiography, and philosophy, it has received significantly less attention as an aesthetic category.<sup>6</sup> As such, this collection seeks to formalize "the everyday," encouraging its transition from a broad theme that has inspired a profusion of exhibitions and discussions since the 1990s, into an aesthetic genre in its own right.

Like the other anthologies in this series, such as *The Gothic*, *The Artist's Joke*, and *The Archive*, this volume consists of documents that map the different ways contemporary artists have taken up a particular motif. *The Everyday* focuses on the modernist avant-garde call for the integration of theory into praxis, and acts as a vital interdisciplinary compendium of the late twentieth-century fusion of art into life. Each text discusses how the aesthetic focus on everyday life brings fundamental but "overlooked aspects of lived experience into visibility," while at the same time arguing for the socio-political importance of this visibility (12). As Johnstone puts it, "[...] running through many of these examples is the sometimes unstated but always implicit notion that a turn to the everyday will bring art and life closer together" (13). Johnstone's anthology is unique in that it thematically and structurally represents the ambiguous nature of its subject matter. Unlike the themes of other anthologies in this series, "the everyday" has no discrete boundaries. Thus, no ostensible

---

<sup>5</sup> That is to say, the "here and now."

<sup>6</sup> Johnstone includes thinkers such as Henri Lefebvre, Paul Virilio, and Ben Highmore; however, he mysteriously neglects Michel de Certeau's histories of the everyday and Norman Bryson's excellent discussion of *rhopography*, "[...] the depiction of those things which lack importance, the unassuming material base of life that 'importance' constantly overlooks" as a tradition of attending to everydayness that begins with still-life imagery (Bryson, *Looking at the Overlooked: Four Essays on Still Life Painting* [London: Reaktion, 2001], 61).

overarching concepts, structure, or *telos* is provided, other than the ongoing and differentiating structure of the everyday itself.

The 53 texts included in this volume range from philosophical considerations of the nature of the everyday (Henri Lefebvre, Maurice Blanchot, Vincent Kaufmann, Abigail Solomon-Godeau), to socio-political arguments for its re-evaluation as a fundamental category of aesthetic experience (Ben Highmore, Nikos Papastergiadis, Susan Hiller, Sally Banes), to artists' statements outlining strategies of communicating the vital meanings, values, and experiences of everyday life. Johnstone constructs and arbitrates a dialogue between these theoretical and artistic works in his introduction. He explains four basic features of the nature of "the everyday" that help connect the plurality of voices that constitute this volume. First, he claims that the everyday is what is overlooked in the world, since the ordinary is at once everywhere and nowhere in particular. Second, the everyday is authentic and democratic because it cannot be traced to a principle of becoming (such as an originating idea or cause), nor can it be restricted to an elite or hegemonic group. Third, the everyday thus located is the place where people creatively transform their world. Fourth, allusions to the everyday are about immanence, not transcendence to a rarefied aesthetic realm.

As an anthology, *The Everyday* is loosely organized around three sections. The first, "Art and the Everyday," offers varying accounts of twentieth-century art's concern with the mundane. Each text strives to explain how the objects and activities of ordinary life became the focus of artistic investigations. Not surprisingly, a selection from Henri Lefebvre's profoundly influential Marxist critique of everyday life kicks off the volume. In "Clearing the Ground," Lefebvre argues that the everyday is the realm of thought and activity marginalized from specialized knowledge, monumentalized history, and institutionalization (34). As such, the everyday is an eruptive and revolutionary force that can disarm social, political, and disciplinary confines. Lefebvre's account provides the touchstone for the rest of the first section and, indeed, for the entire book. Maurice Blanchot follows with "Everyday Speech" declaring the everyday an unperceived force that invisibly mediates subjects, objects, and processes of life because it escapes reification in any of these categories. When art takes up the everyday, it adopts the role of experience as a medium, revealing the everyday by "re-mediating" it (to use the jargon of communication theorists) with its own inflections and processes. Ultimately, Blanchot claims that art renders the elusive nature of the everyday visible by

exhibiting its own “mediality” as art. This is a fundamental point of the anthology: artists such as Yoko Ono, Sophie Calle, Andy Warhol, and Tracy Emin bring into view the hitherto unnoticed creativity that is enacted everyday without monumentalizing it. The claim is that this art demands the viewer experience its objects in the repetitive, passive, and uneventful terms of the everyday without reverting to more familiar viewing practices that tend to set the artwork off from the world. As compelling as this argument is, however, it never fully addresses why we should consider these objects as art.

The second section of the book, “The Poetics of Noticing,” delineates the modes by which the art of the everyday encourages viewers to attend to the experiences and exhibitions of everydayness. Fundamental to “noticing” is the concept of attention. Although the anthology does not reference Simone Weil, it is her definition of attention as a neutral, unpossessive openness to the other that is at stake here.<sup>7</sup> Noticing is poetic because it involves selflessly attending to the ordinary reality of others, a process that enlarges vision, stretches the imagination, and elicits judgments. According to the authors in this section, there are two ways of practicing the poetics of noticing or attending: we allow art to mediate our experience of the prosaic, or we live the everyday aesthetically. The first option makes art out of everyday life, as with Tracy Emin’s installations or Andy Warhol’s films; the second makes everyday life into an art, as with the Situationist *dérive*. Within *The Everyday*, writings by Marcel Duchamp, Sally Banes, Patrick Frey, and Michael Sheringham claim the value of art is in how it selects particular features of the overlooked world and brings them to our attention, thereby revealing the everyday without qualifying it as anything but the common ground of experience that connects individuals, events, and histories. By contrast, the Lettrist International, Georges Perec, Alison and Peter Smithson, Ian Breakwell, and Francis Alÿs offer the other option, where the everyday is not re-mediated through art, but re-experienced through the spyglass of the aesthetic.

“Documentary Style and Ethnography,” the final section of the book, attempts to unify the issues presented in the first two parts. The questions raised by the essayists here pertain to value: what is achieved in documenting the detritus, the overlooked, and the marginalized? What happens when we aestheticize everyday life? In his essay “Mad For It: Philistinism, the Everyday and the New British

---

<sup>7</sup> See Simone Weil, *The Notebooks of Simone Weil*, 2 vols., trans. Arthur Wills (New York: GP Putnam’s Sons, 1956).

Art,” John Roberts argues that the embrace of the everyday by contemporary art is marked by philistinism, but that this opens up the “popular enculturization of art [...] the incorporation of art’s production and its forms of attention” into ordinary life (211). Abigail Solomon-Godeau concludes in “Inside/Out” that the implication of art within everyday life is a fundamental post-Freudian feature of the contemporary world: there is neither an intimate truth of being that is unreachable by art or an existence of pure surface which art only mimics. She claims that art is the “third term”—the medium for communicating the everyday that re-mediate our experience, as the previous section tells us. In a similar vein, Helen Molesworth finds that the decidedly different and contradictory modes of referencing the everyday by feminist artists converge in the shared interest in “exposing the porosity of public and private spheres” (180). Art is not made into life (or vice versa); rather, art becomes a form of legitimate social discourse by which experimental ways of mediating the experience of the mundane can be tested publicly. Overall, the texts in this section argue that there is fundamental merit in the interaction between art and the everyday, yet once more they fail to fully address the aesthetic question: But why is it art?

It is important to keep in mind when reading this book, however, that Johnstone’s three categories perform a tacit philosophical categorization that the collection as a whole seeks to avoid. Not only can Johnstone’s threefold division of the collection easily be read as Truth, Beauty, and Goodness, but it is also grounded in the metaphysical concept of “becoming” as an ongoing activity of differentiation, where the mundane is what it is by continually becoming anew. When the everyday is understood to be the field of creativity or the potentiality out of which events become actualized, then it is also the transcendent principle which determines the entire aesthetic category of “the everyday”—precisely the designation that Johnstone, as evident in his introduction, wants to avoid.

Moreover, this anthology is wide-ranging, but not comprehensive. The primary conceptual apparatus for considering the everyday is Lefebvre’s Marxist socio-political critique, which leaves out an entire tradition of considerations regarding the nexus between art and everyday life: namely, American pragmatism. When John Dewey argued for *Art as Experience* (1934), he was arguing for a notion of the aesthetic that was homologous to people’s everyday lives. He reasoned that if art were brought down from the transcendental, sublime, or spiritual realm and nearer to the mundane experiences of the people, art could be better integrated

into everyday life and, ultimately, help to improve life by engaging in socio-cultural transformation. Pragmatism offers the resolute position lacking in this otherwise informative and absorbing anthology. It argues for the instrumental goal of improving everyday experience by bringing art to bear on everyday life in all the localized, contingent, and revisable ways that the various authors in Johnstone's volume promote. Johnstone's editorial embrace of the elusive structure of the everyday releases him from the responsibility of giving this collection a socio-political point. But the volume's neglect of pragmatism, the one tradition that twentieth-century American aesthetic theory offers to a study of the everyday, is problematic. It seems to me that the everyday is valuable as a site of experience that impels contemporary artists to pay attention to it; pursuing this point is one of the volume's strongest virtues. But I remain unconvinced that the everyday is the overarching category of aesthetic determination that the anthology attempts to create.

Jennifer Dyer, Memorial University of Newfoundland