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Aesthetic Practices

1

Sanna Marin, Finland's Prime Minister, reveals in an interview that she relaxes by cleaning her house. There is regular staff who cleans the residence, but Ms Marin enjoys cleaning. While cleaning, she can experience the same kind of flow she had as a child when drawing or painting.[1]

A related everyday household chore, laundry hanging, has been analysed in the field of everyday aesthetics, but with a focus on the result more than on the process.[2] Objects, whether individual things or settings, have been the dominant focus of both academic aesthetic analyses and the lay understanding of the aesthetic field. In Finland, people sometimes characterise an object as "aesthetic" as a synonym for its beauty or attractiveness.

Alongside objects, philosophers have discussed aesthetic appreciation and judgement, or taste, and aesthetic experience at length, more recently integrating perspectives from empirical research. The object of study is then typically a type of individual experience, or judgement, and its characteristics. The default situation is an individual who appreciates something, or has an experience, at one moment in time. Nevertheless, to enjoy cleaning or laundry hanging is not quite like that.

To enjoy cleaning is to enjoy the practice and activity of cleaning, its flow as Ms Marin says, and the sense of contentment that arises afterwards. It is different from appreciating order as produced by someone else. In this sense, the personal component is irreplaceable.

2

Aesthetics has a strong connection to the arts; yet to enjoy cleaning is intuitively different from appreciating art. Perhaps an underlying reason for this intuition is that we have learnt to

[1] Sami Sillanpää, "Pääministerin muotokuva" [Portrait of the Prime Minister], *Helsingin Sanomat*, *Kuukausiliite*, July 2020; https://www.hs.fi/kuukausiliite/art-2000006557996.html.

[2] Pauliina Rautio, "On Hanging Laundry: The Place of Beauty in Managing Everyday Life", *Contemporary Aesthetics* Vol. 7 (2009), www.contempaesthetics.org/newvolume/pages/article.php?articleID=535; Yuriko Saito, *Aesthetics of the Familiar: Everyday Life and World-Making*, Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press 2017, Chapter Five.

think of aesthetic matters from a perspective of precisely appreciation rather than production. Aesthetic objects are there for us to enjoy, like flowers in a vase or a painting on the wall.

However, before the painting hang on the wall, someone painted it. The flowers may have grown in a semi-wild garden, where an amateur gardener sowed the seeds and was happily surprised to find the offspring. The enjoyment of cleaning is more akin to the painter's or the gardener's happiness of achievement than to the customer's in the flower-shop or the audience's in a gallery.

Aesthetics has lost from sight the perspective of production. Moreover, production is practice; it builds on practices. There is aesthetics in practices, preoccupations, habits and hobbies.

3

In Finland, people sometimes describe themselves as "aesthetic" not to claim their own beauty but in order to communicate the importance of beauty for them. A declared aesthetic person tends to enjoy interior decoration or creating beauty by some other means.

It is hardly controversial that people who love cleaning or hanging laundry with care tend to contribute to the beauty of the world, at least in their own view. However, is this enough to call these practices aesthetic?

There is a rich discussion about what constitutes the core of the aesthetic. Some twenty years ago, I suggested that the core components of an aesthetic experience are sensuousness, sensitivity, imagination and evaluation.[3] The components can be present in varying degrees, and no strict line separates the aesthetic from experience more broadly. In addition, aesthetic experiences are characterised by an overall responsive quality, or, as John Dewey would say, "doing and undergoing".[4]

Below, I suggest preliminarily some characteristics of aesthetic practices. Let me just add that we meaningfully use the term "aesthetic" in the context of art, beauty and related qualities, and to describe certain experiences. My aim is not to revolutionise the meaning of the aesthetic, but to extend its use to practices. A stronger claim would however be that aesthetics is always rooted in practices.[5]

4

What counts as an aesthetic practice? Cleaning, gardening, collecting, motorcycle maintenance, horseback riding, home decoration, playing videogames, carpentry all either

[3] Pauline von Bonsdorff, *The Human Habitat. Aesthetic and Axiological Perspectives* (Lahti: International Institute of Applied Aesthetics 1998, 78-92.

[4] John Dewey, *Art as Experience*, New York: Perigree Books 1980 (originally published 1934), 44-57.

[5] On agency and action, see C. Thi Nguyen, "Games and the Art of Agency", *The Philosophical Review* 128: 4 (2019): 423–62 and "The Arts of Action", *Philosophers' Imprint* 20:14 (2020): 1–27; Pauline von Bonsdorff, 2018). "Children's aesthetic agency: the pleasures and power of imagination", Jonathan Delafield-Butt, Aline–Wendy Dunlop and Colwyn Trevarthen, eds. *The Child's Curriculum: Working with the Natural Values of Young Children*, Oxford: Oxford University Press 2018: 126-38.

are, or carry the potential of being, aesthetic practices. Art making, performing art and appreciating art, if practiced with some regularity, are definitely aesthetic practices. The notion of aesthetic practice, then, does not belong to everyday aesthetics as opposed to art, but indicates a continuity between arts and other aesthetic practices.[6]

Preliminarily, an aesthetic practice is one where people respond to and transform their world through making something with aesthetic considerations. If the scope is that large, can anything we do count as an aesthetic practice? Not quite.

First, a practice has to be practiced in order to count as one. A practice is part of a person's life, and done with some regularity, even if there are breaks. It is not a one-time event, although every practice naturally starts at some point.

Second, aesthetic practices are not categorically separate from other practices. Like with aesthetic experience, the difference is one of degree rather than kind. The aesthetic components can be stronger or weaker. What to one person is labour to gain a living is for another person a source of replenishment. This is the case with cleaning. Let us reflect a little on its varieties.

5

Cleaning is mostly considered a non-creative, routine activity. However, this depends on circumstances. We can distinguish cleaning as labour and cleaning as an aesthetic and existential practice. This distinction is similar to the one Aristotle made between work, or labour, and leisure, where work comprises activities that are done out of necessity and serve some end, while leisurely activities are done for their own sake.[7] A similar distinction can be made within cleaning.

Cleaning as labour is the reality for most people who do it to earn a living. People who work for cleaning companies typically have a strict schedule and a battery of chemicals and utensils. They have no time for pausing, reflecting upon, or enjoying the result of their work, nor are they allowed to arrange the rooms in a personal way. Quite the contrary, they are replaceable; anyone with the right training and instructions could do the work. Their fingerprints – in any of its senses – must not be visible. The impact of work is negative in the sense of being about removing something rather than adding anything. On top of this, low wages are likely to add to the general dullness that accompanies the work.

For people who love to clean, cleaning may on the contrary offer relaxation from work. Here cleaning is not just getting rid of dust and dirt; it is also a way of maintaining and transforming a personally created, constantly varied order that arises through one's life, and is co-created by companions and shared with visitors. Rather than cleaning away the traces of life, a person who enjoys cleaning can have the aim of providing room for life in a

[6] See Denis Dutton, "But They Don't Have Our Concept of Art", Noël Carroll, ed., *Theories of Art Today*, 2000: 217-238 and Denis Dutton, *The Art Instinct: Beauty, Pleasure, and Human Evolution.* New York: Bloomsbury 2009.

[7] See, e.g., Donald McLean, "Speaking of virtue ethics: what has happened to leisure?", *Annals of Leisure Research* 20:5 (2017), 529-45, DOI: 10.1080/11745398.2017.1357046.

dynamically balanced way. They might enjoy moments of improvisation as they clean their way through spaces they know but further appropriate by cleaning.

For those who enjoy cleaning, it can be an aesthetic and even existential practice. It shares with cleaning as labour the negative function of cleaning away dust, dirt and disorder but in addition, it has positive qualities of creating or recreating an aesthetically pleasing whole. This involves the transformation of both self and world, admittedly on a micro- rather than macro-scale. One cleans to make a difference, and often to feel better, and make other people feel better.

In the very activity, there is a constant reciprocity between the environment and the person who notices not only what needs to be done in terms of basic cleanliness and order, but also the potential of spaces and objects to provide, for instance, a habitable atmosphere. Thus cleaning as an aesthetic practice has a creative potential. On the other hand, cleaning need not result in anything novel, original or unique in order for us to enjoy it. It can be about restoring a cherished order, or (re)producing specific qualities, such as the smell of pine soap, clean linen or clear air, or an overall atmosphere of peace and rest.

Several temporal qualities influence the qualities and possibilities of cleaning as an aesthetic practice. An enabling factor for an aesthetic practice of cleaning is that it is done at one's own pace and at a suitable moment. There is then time for contemplating and enjoying the results, and for spontaneous adjustments of objects in the room. A sense of getting it right[8], at least for the time being, may arise, and a joy of aesthetic discovery. Cleaning typically relates to beauty in the sense of order and balance; where order is more than the lack of disorder: a creation in itself. In addition, whether cleaning is done out of one's own will also influences its quality, both how it feels and the result.

A person whose cleaning can be considered an aesthetic practice is mostly able to choose the time for it, to pause and reflect and to make choices. Moreover, there is continuity between different times and moments of cleaning, both consciously, as in remembering and looking forward to the reflections of bright spring sunlight on clean windowpanes, and less consciously in the embodied memory of rhythms of work, particular scents and smells, or the softness and wear of one's hands. Here, the practice also manifests and evokes a shared, cultural field of meaning. Through practicing, which involves repetition, one connects to a larger community of practitioners and traditions.[9]

Cleaning as self-fulfilment in the sense just described may elevate it to the level of truly leisurely activities. Following David Roochnik, when Aristotle emphasised the intrinsic value of certain activities, his idea was that the value is precisely in performing that activity rather than in what is achieved through it.[10] Consequently, it is not primarily some particular products that possess intrinsic value; an idea that leads to complicated discussions about how values can be part of things *per se*, unrelated to any person who values them. If value is in the activity, intrinsic value or end in itself become much easier to grasp.

The decisive factor for whether it makes sense to consider a particular person's cleaning practice aesthetic is not how it looks like in the end or to outsiders; it is in the qualities of

[8] See Elaine Scarry, *On Beauty and Being Just*. Princeton: Princeton University Press 1999.
[9] Being part of a tradition is one of Dutton's (2000 and 2009) criteria for art.
[10] David Roochnik, *Retrieving Aristotle in an Age of Crisis*, SUNY Press 2013, 156.

doing. Yet while I have emphasised the activity of cleaning as an aesthetic practice, this does not mean that the result is unimportant. However, the end result can be seen as part of the activity. Having finished cleaning, the cleaner sits down with a cup of coffee, to read or to chat, takes a breath and takes in the situation. Or perhaps they settle for other work, but strengthened by contentment and a joy of achievement.

6

Let us get back to a larger panorama of aesthetic practices, including art making, art appreciation, performing art, craft practices, certain sports, gaming, grooming, home decoration, etc. They are different, and performed in various ways. Nevertheless, I suggest they typically involve the following characteristics.

First, in aesthetic practices, the aesthetic components are primarily in the activity; in this sense, it is a form of process aesthetics.[11] "Practice" however emphasises that it is a habitual activity, a type of activity that is performed repeatedly, over time, rather than as singular performances. Repetition builds up skills and provides the background for meaningful variations, and for success as well as failure.

Second, while the activity is primary, aesthetic practices involve production. They produce material or immaterial objects; they alter and transform existing things and situations. The practice itself can be the object of transformations, such as in dance or in children's play, where "the play" is an entity with a particular life-span, played by a group over time. The object or type of object – such as in many forms of painting – is taken up again, and modified. This is an important part of the pleasure of the practice.

Third, aesthetic practices are first-person aesthetics, and should be understood primarily from the practitioner's perspective. This foregrounds embodied qualities: the feel, rhythms and intensities of doing (often referred to as flow). Practicing the practice is, in addition, both focused and tacit. Having internalised patterns of action, the practitioner need not think about every movement. This enables acting and responding in the situation. This is foregrounded in social aesthetic practices that demand co-operation, co-ordination, and interaction with responsive improvisations in a group. Rather than being irrelevant, sharing and showing are integrated in the practice.

Fourth, aesthetic practices are means of forming and transforming self and world. They can offer new avenues for personal development, means of escape from a difficult life, or become obsessive. Whether their impact is positive or negative, they are existentially relevant. In terms of meaning and value, aesthetic practices involve many kinds and dimensions. One central point is perhaps that they offer means of sensuous (re)connection to the world, what R.W. Hepburn called life-enhancement.[12]

7

[11] Nguyen 2020.

[12] Ronald W. Hepburn, "Life and Life-Enhancement as Key Concepts of Aesthetics", *The Reach of the Aesthetic. Collected Essays on Art and Nature*, Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press 2001, 63–76.

Because aesthetic practice, as a key concept of aesthetics, is new, I end by suggesting some reasons to pursue this line of thought rather than by conclusions. My hope is to inspire more people to participate in the discussion.

Aesthetic practices bridge the fields of everyday aesthetics and art, and thereby indicate a central place for aesthetic agency (as thinking and doing) in human life. They indicate that an aesthetic dialogue, involving and connecting self and world[13], is not the privilege of art only, but takes place in more mundane contexts as well. Aesthetic practices make visible the aesthetic as a given component of human life; and one that precedes language.[14] Thus, the perspective can help us understand better what matters in aesthetic experience from a human point of view, and how the aesthetic transformations in art and beyond actually take place.

From the perspective of leisure, and its potential for human self-education and fulfilment, aesthetic practices highlight the aesthetic dimension in different ways. The emphasis on intrinsic value, in other words, that aesthetic practices are done for their own sake, is one similarity to Aristotelian leisure. Rather than narrowing the topic, this connection broadens it. The existential and aesthetic dimensions of well-being and self-formation, including creative and responsive interactions with the world and others, invite ethical reflection.

The practice perspective highlights the temporality of aesthetic experience on many levels, including its different rhythms. It provides a way to continue on the path John Dewey indicated when emphasising the dialectic of doing and undergoing, and regretting the lack of an English word to connect "artistic" (production) and "esthetic" (reception).[15]

Overall, aesthetic practices can help develop an embodied and worldly understanding of human life, one that calls for holistic and complex analyses. Their understanding would certainly benefit from empirical and qualitative methodologies to supplement and inform, and be informed by, philosophical analysis. So far, this approach has not been too much part of aesthetics, which is mostly, and with reason, considered a branch of philosophy. However, this should not withhold us from dialogue with other fields and methodologies.

[13] See, e.g., Paul Crowther, *The Aesthetics of Self-Becoming. How Art Forms Empower*. London: Routledge 2019.

[14] See, for example, Pauline von Bonsdorff, "On equal terms? On implementing infants' cultural rights", Elin Eriksen Ødegaard and Jorunn Spord Borgen, eds., *Childhood Cultures in Transformation*, Leiden: Brill/Sense, *forthcoming* November 2020.

[15] Dewey 1980, 46.