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Design and Aesthetics: New Ontological and Epistemic Perspectives

“The study of aesthetics proceeds along many lines, containing both the theory of beauty and the theory of art, and investigating both aesthetic objects and aesthetic experiences, employing description, prescription, analysis, and explanation.”¹ Thus begins Władysław Tatarkiewicz’s seminal work on the history of aesthetics from antiquity to the mid-eighteenth century, the period in which aesthetics emerged as a coherent field of philosophy, thanks to thinkers such as Alexander Gottlieb Baumgarten. Tatarkiewicz invari-

1) Władysław Tatarkiewicz, *History of Aesthetics*. Vol. 1, *Ancient Aesthetics*, trans. Adam and Ann Czerniawski, ed. Jean Harrell (Mouton, 1970), 1.

ably followed these “many lines” in his works without favoring any of them. There is little doubt that this approach yielded notable results, improving our understanding of Western aesthetics. It can undoubtedly be equally effective when applied to the period from the 1750s onwards, during which time philosophical aesthetics flourished. In fact, there are good reasons to believe that it could be particularly productive today. While Baumgarten, Hegel, and many others identified aesthetics with the philosophy of fine arts, another tendency has gained importance since the turn of the twenty-first century. This new tendency transcends the art-centered tradition, both by “sublating” the tensions that define this tradition – they are conserved, but also negated, and thus function differently – and by crossing the limits of the field. Not only has aesthetics been “rethought,”² it has also been practiced “beyond aesthetics.”³ Consequently, innumerable categories and phenomena that Tatarkiewicz did not find interesting because they were located too far from the “many lines of the study of aesthetics” have been included in the aesthetic agenda. The two vectors that are currently redefining the study of aesthetics reinforce each other, but at the same time encourage us to look to the past to rediscover ideas and perspectives that were either forgotten or marginalized, or even excluded by the aesthetic tradition. Beauty versus utility, contemplation versus engagement, rationality versus corporeality, immutability versus transience, ideas versus matter, the extraordinary versus the ordinary: these and many other dichotomies known from antiquity are still useful frameworks for analyzing what can be termed “the aesthetic field” and everything that can be included in it. *Pace* Tatarkiewicz, this field may cover everything, including business,⁴ the everyday,⁵

2) Arnold Berleant, *Re-thinking Aesthetics: Rogue Essays on Aesthetics and the Arts* (Taylor and Francis 2004).

3) Wolfgang Iser, “Aesthetics Beyond Aesthetics: Regarding the Contemporary Relevance of the Aesthetic and Recharting the Field of Aesthetics,” *Journal of Comparative Literature and Aesthetics* 18, nos. 1–2 (1995): 1–23.

4) E.g. Stella Minahan, Julie Wolfram Cox, eds., *The Aesthetic Turn in Management* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2007); Daryl Koehn, Dawn Elm, eds., *Aesthetics and Business Ethics* (Springer, 2014).

5) E.g. Andrew Light, Jonathan M. Smith, eds., *The Aesthetics of Everyday Life* (Columbia University Press, 2005); Katya Mandoki, *Everyday Aesthetics: Prosaics, the Play of Culture and Social Identities* (Ashgate, 2007); Yuriko Saito, *Aesthetics of the Familiar: Everyday Life and World-Making* (Oxford University Press, 2017); Lisa Giombini, Adrián Kvakacka, eds., *Applying Aesthetics to Everyday Life: Methodologies, History and New Directions* (Bloomsbury, 2023); see also Mateusz Salwa, “Philosophy and the Urban Everyday.” *Eidos. A Journal for Philosophy of Culture* 7, no. 2 (2023): 1–8.

food,⁶ law,⁷ mass culture,⁸ medicine,⁹ natural environments,¹⁰ politics,¹¹ sports,¹² and terrorism.¹³ However, the relationships between the extremes that define the aforementioned dichotomies are much more complex than traditional views would have us believe, and the hierarchies involved are much less stable and much more questionable. Many twentieth century philosophers, culture theorists, artists, and designers deserve credit for showing that the aesthetic does not have to be exclusively associated with disinterestedness, immutable ideals expressed in the most subtle forms and, above all, art. However, their efforts would have been unsuccessful had it not been for the countless ordinary people who, unaware of philosophical debates, make daily “judgments of taste,” stating what they like or dislike and why, and making decisions about mundane issues. Indeed, it could be said that it is only due to the shortsightedness of philosophers that they could not recognize, acknowledge, let alone philosophically appreciate the various aesthetic aspects of their own lives. Today, it is hard to ignore the fact that, as Richard Shusterman states, “the aesthetic dimension is important, both when philosophy is practiced as a textual exercise or conceptual inquiry, and when it is practiced more broadly as a deeply embodied way of life” (see the interview with Richard Shusterman

6) E.g. Carolyn Korsmeyer, *Making Sense of Taste. Food & Philosophy* (Cornell University Press, 2002); Nicola Perullo, *Taste as Experience: The Philosophy and Aesthetics of Food* (Columbia University Press, 2016).

7) E.g. Adam Gearey, *Law and Aesthetics* (Hart Publishing, 2001); Fabio Macione, *The Law of Beauty: The Troubled Relationship Between Law and Aesthetics* (Routledge, 2026, forthcoming).

8) E.g. Noël Carroll, *A Philosophy of Mass Art* (Clarendon Press, 1998); Josef Kovalčík, Max Ryyänen, eds., *Aesthetics of Popular Culture* (Slovart 2014).

9) E.g. Irvin Sherri, ed., *Body Aesthetics* (Oxford University Press, 2016); Alan Bleakley, *Medical Humanities: Ethics, Aesthetics, Politics* (Routledge, 2024).

10) E.g. Allen Carlson, Arnold Berleant, eds., *The Aesthetics of Natural Environments* (Broadview Press, 2004); Arnold Berleant, Allen Carlson, eds., *The Aesthetics of the Human Environment* (Broadview Press, 2007); Allen Carlson, Sheila Lintott, eds., *Nature, Aesthetics, and Environmentalism: From Beauty to Duty* (Columbia University Press, 2008); Glenn Parsons, *Aesthetics and Nature: the Appreciation of Natural Beauty and the Environment* (Bloomsbury Academic, 2024).

11) E.g. Crispin Sartwell, *Political Aesthetics* (Cornell University Press, 2010); Jacques Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics: The Distribution of the Sensible*, ed. by Gabriel Rockhill (Bloomsbury, 2017).

12) Stephen Mumford, *Watching Sport. Aesthetics, Ethics and Emotion* (Routledge, 2011); Jason Holt, *Kinetic Beauty: The Philosophical Aesthetics of Sport* (Routledge, 2019).

13) Emmanouil Aretoulakis, *Forbidden Aesthetics, Ethical Justice, and Terror in Modern Western Culture* (Lexington Books, 2016); Arnold Berleant, *The Social Aesthetics of Human Environments: Critical Themes* (Bloomsbury, 2023).

in this issue). No matter what choices we make, we very often appeal to aesthetic values, whether intentionally or inadvertently, and these values are as important as other values, both culturally and existentially (see the interview with Sue Spaid in this issue). It is important to reiterate that the “aesthetic dimension” can be found in both philosophical theory and life’s practices.

Material culture and designed objects offer a particularly vivid instance of where aesthetics operates in everyday life. This is why the Thematic Section of this issue takes this domain as its central philosophical focus. Designed artifacts, whether material or digital, constitute our daily environment, shaping the possibilities and limits of our actions through their very functionality and presence. When we reflect aesthetically on such artifacts, design itself appears as a decisive factor: it determines their aesthetic success or failure, what grants aesthetic value through the interplay of form, material, and functional elegance. As Maurizio Vitta puts it, “the modern object has discovered its aesthetic dimension in design”¹⁴ – a formulation that captures how thoroughly design has become the lens through which we understand the aesthetics of ordinary things.

When we speak of “design” in these terms, certain celebrated examples come to mind: Achille Castiglioni’s iconic lighting fixtures, Dieter Rams’ Braun radios, or Teresa Kruszevska’s *Muszelka (Little Shell)* chair. Today, the same term extends to contemporary design objects of a different nature: tools such as ChatGPT (itself a fruit of design) for example, which, when prompted about design icons, suggests artifacts like the iPhone or the Google Search interface. Moving beyond these canonical works, we find the thoughtful but less celebrated designs of manufacturers like the elegant functionality of the Moka *Bialetti*. Yet design extends to entirely anonymous objects: the mass-produced Bic pen, designed for efficiency rather than authorship; the generic ceramic coffee mug; the standard office chair; the plastic fork. These everyday artifacts, whether bearing a designer’s signature or emerging from anonymous industrial processes, all participate in design as a practice that shapes our material environment and daily experience.

14) Maurizio Vitta, “Dall’oggetto all’oggetto. Le radici profonde dell’estetica [From Object to Object. The Deep Roots of Aesthetics],” in *Estetica e pratica del quotidiano: oggetto, esperienza, design*, ed. by Giovanni Matteucci. (Mimesis, 2015), 99. Translation by the authors.

The cultural importance of this conception is evidenced by the fact that national museums have progressively integrated design sections alongside art, celebrating both great designers and those everyday objects that have transformed our lives. As Paola Antonelli, senior curator of the Department of Architecture and Design at MoMA, demonstrated with her celebrated exhibition *Humble Masterpieces* (2004), “in spite of their modest price and demure presence, some of these things are true masterpieces of the art of design.”¹⁵ Antonelli’s curatorial criterion is eloquent: “If this object did not exist, would it be a pity?”¹⁶ and explains that “all the objects in this [exhibition] are affordable... and are understandable – their form efficiently describes their function.”¹⁷

Yet the relationship between design objects and their meanings proves more elusive than such celebrations might suggest. The recent exhibition *Stan Rzeczy* (*The State of Things*, 2022) at the National Museum in Warsaw, featuring functional everyday objects from the museum’s archival collection, inadvertently exposed this instability. As the director observed, many of the objects on display have become so remote from contemporary experience that “it’s hard even to manage their very names, let alone attempt to guess their function.”¹⁸ The identity and purpose of these objects, which were once self-evident, have become opaque. This observation suggests that a new ontology of design may be needed, one that allows us to reassess the nature of these objects in relation to the contexts in which they are used. Today, positioned within the museum, they function as historical testimonies, yet they could equally well be objects bearing entirely new functions and meanings: the flea market find repurposed as a curious decoration on our shelf exemplifies this ontological fluidity. These exhibitions also raise fundamental questions about aesthetic evaluation: *the exhibition value* of these artifacts, to invoke Walter Benjamin’s concept, comes to the fore precisely

15) Paola Antonelli, “Introduction,” in *Humble Masterpieces: Everyday Marvels of Design* (Regan Books, 2005), 1.

16) Paola Antonelli, “Ripping up the Rulebook: How Paola Antonelli Transformed MoMA,” interview by Rebecca Fulleylove, *It’s Nice That*, October 2, 2017, <https://www.itsnicethat.com/features/paola-antonelli-museum-of-modern-art-021017>.

17) Paola Antonelli, “Introduction,” in *Humble Masterpieces: Everyday Marvels of Design* (Regan Books, 2005), 3.

18) Łukasz Gawęł, “Od Dyrektora,” in *Stan rzeczy: wystawa, Muzeum Narodowe w Warszawie, 29 kwietnia – 7 sierpnia 2022*, eds. Grażyna Bastek, and Monika Janisz (Muzeum Narodowe w Warszawie, 2022), 9.

because they are presented as mysterious objects with incomprehensible forms, in their own way “uncanny.” One wonders: do we evaluate them differently today than they were evaluated when they were commonplace and comprehensible?

Such questions are central to aesthetic inquiry, and recent decades have witnessed renewed philosophical interest in addressing them, alongside a fundamental rethinking of how we conceptualize design and its experience. This shift reflects an effort to move beyond the constraints inherited from traditional art theory by recognizing design’s fundamental connection to practical human purposes. Our engagement with design objects differs substantially from our engagement with artworks precisely because design is constitutively tied to “function” and “use” in ways that art is not – or at least not primarily. This fundamental difference has revealed the insufficiency of pure beauty as an adequate aesthetic framework for design. The constitutive relationship between design and use opens possibilities for describing forms of aesthetic appreciation that traditional aesthetic theory had largely overlooked: forms intrinsically tied to the instrumental values and practical concerns of everyday life.

Jane Forsey (2013) and Glenn Parsons (2016) were among the first to articulate this orientation systematically, working to establish criteria for delineating the aesthetic appreciation of functional objects. Their work marks a deliberate departure from formalism and shares a fundamental insight: the aesthetic appreciation of design objects emerges through recognizing how functional requirements relate to formal realization.

This (moderate) functionalist paradigm is not immune to criticism and development. From its inception, the debate on design has intersected with alternative investigative frameworks, particularly everyday aesthetics and environmental aesthetics. Everyday aesthetics explicitly distances itself from art-centric approaches, focusing instead on the aesthetic experiences that emerge as we navigate the world we habitually inhabit.¹⁹ Environmental aesthetics, in turn, challenges the fundamental presupposition of aesthetic tradition, namely that disinterested contemplation constitutes the proper stance for aesthetic experience, occurring apart from practical, utilitarian, or personal interests and divorced from knowledge about the object of appreciation.²⁰

19) See footnote 5.

20) See footnote 10.

Recognizing that design objects compose our everyday environment, both everyday aesthetics and environmental aesthetics redirect inquiry away from isolated artifacts toward holistic, immersive experiences. Rather than focusing on individual objects and their properties, these approaches valorize phenomenological engagement and embodied involvement with the material world, treating aesthetic experience as inseparable from the activities and modes of being they afford.

These questions reveal a fundamental problem with dominant approaches to the idea of what design is. Whether celebrating innovative designers or preserving everyday artifacts, there is a common tendency to treat design objects as entities with stable, determinate identities grounded in predetermined functions, meanings and designers' intentions. Yet exhibitions like *Stan Rzeczy*, viewed through the lens of contemporary aesthetics of design, reveal how problematic these assumptions are. What happens when we question these assumptions directly? Functionality and correctness – the two pillars of the functionalist-intentionalist paradigm – constitute the main knots interrogated by the articles in the Thematic Section. The reason for this interrogation is simple but radical: design objects resist stable, predetermined identities, generating new meanings and properties through their relational engagements with users and through the contrasts between what they appear to be and what they actually are.

This special issue develops precisely this alternative ontological discourse in design aesthetics grounded in theories of cognitivism, emergent properties, and affordances. Approaching the question of design through these lenses offers crucial insights into its nature that dominant functionalist and intentionalist paradigms – and even museal celebrations – fail to fully grasp. This is not simply about recognizing the aesthetic value of well-designed objects, but about understanding how their ontology is constituted through dynamic, emergent, and open relations that go well beyond designers' intentions.

The three articles in the Thematic Section address design from distinct yet complementary aesthetic perspectives. Taken together, they challenge functionalist reductionism and establish the rich ontological structure of design. The issue opens with Michalle Gal's "Design's Ontology: Emergent Properties and Affordance," which develops a visualist ontological framework grounded in theories of emergent properties and affordances. Gal challenges the established assumption that designers can predict and control how users engage with objects. The second article, Chiara

Brozzo's "On the Proper Aesthetic Appreciation of Nature in Design," defends a cognitivist thesis: aesthetic experience of design is not merely an emotional or sensory activity but also requires a cognitive dimension; in other words, knowledge plays an essential role in appreciating the aesthetic value of a work. The third article, Monika Favara-Kurkowski's "Performative Aesthetic Properties in Everyday Design Practice" expands on the idea of thinking of design in performative terms, namely of replacing the traditional approach focused on objects and their functions as expressions of their designer's ideas by a view that stresses the fact that users put designed objects to different uses, ultimately defining them according to their needs.

The articles by Gal, Brozzo, and Favara-Kurkowski, while addressing different domains – design objects as complex systems, *haute couture* and natural materials, everyday design practice through constitutive use – converge in rejecting conceptions that treat the aesthetically relevant properties of artifacts as independent of those who engage with them. All three show how the ontology of design is inseparable from relational engagement: what an object is depends on how it appears, how it is used, and crucially, how perceivers and users relate to it. Gal demonstrates this through emergent properties arising from the interaction between material components and users' capacities; Brozzo through the constitutive tension between the artificial and the natural in *haute couture*; Favara-Kurkowski through the distinction between applicative uses – which realize acknowledged functions – and constitutive uses – which performatively generate new functional meanings. By bringing to the field of design theoretical frameworks developed in adjacent domains – emergence theory from philosophy of science, cognitivist debates from aesthetics of nature, the dual nature of technical artifacts from philosophy of technology – these authors not only illuminate aspects of design previously obscured by functionalist paradigms, but transform these theoretical frameworks themselves, revealing unexpected implications for the ontological understanding of design.

Design shapes our material environment and mediates our everyday experiences more pervasively than any other cultural practice. Understanding its aesthetic foundations is not a mere academic exercise, but helps us grasp how we give shape – materially and practically – to our being in the world. The collection of articles presented here unfolds in a hermeneutic circle: philosophical aesthetics enriches our understanding of design, while design practice challenges and extends aesthetic

theory. Just as the philosophy of music gained ground by recognizing that sound reduces neither to pure Pythagorean mathematics nor to pure emotional expression, so the philosophy of design must recognize that designed objects reduce neither to pure forms nor to pure functions. They are instead entities whose ontological identity emerges through visual and material surfaces that invite cognitive engagement, generate emergent properties through use, and enable open-ended relations between objects, users, and environments.

Taken together, these three philosophical investigations demonstrate that the ontology of design cannot be grasped through either formalist or functionalist paradigms alone, but requires an approach that recognizes the fundamentally relational, emergent, and open nature of designed objects. This ontological openness carries far-reaching social and political implications. If design objects possess unstable identities shaped through relational engagement rather than predetermined functions, then the political dimension of design shifts fundamentally: instead of top-down imposition of behavioral patterns, we find bottom-up processes of negotiation in which users may accept, partially adopt, or reject the designer's proposals. This opens space for subversion and contestation – “correct” use becomes a choice rather than a necessity, and that choice itself carries meaning. The articles that comprise this Thematic Section represent a step toward understanding this complexity – and a contribution to the ongoing dialogue between philosophical aesthetics and design culture.

As mentioned above, aesthetics is ubiquitous even if sometimes only implicitly. In fact, Tatarkiewicz suggested that one should distinguish “explicit aesthetics,” that is, “explicit aesthetic statements made by aestheticians,” and “implicit aesthetics,” that is, aesthetic ideas that can be deduced from art works.²¹ Given the contemporary broad understanding of aesthetics, there is no reason to limit the implicit aesthetics to artworks. Going “beyond” the traditional boundaries of philosophical aesthetics more often than not amounts to diving into what is aesthetically implied by the phenomena under study. Thus, aesthetic dimension may be also found in the rest of the contributions to this volume that address distinct but equally pressing concerns in the philosophy of culture and aesthetics, complementing the focus on design: from Friedrich Nietzsche's views on, among other things, human existence and world as an

21) Tatarkiewicz, *History of Aesthetics*, 5.

aesthetic phenomenon, to psychoanalytical interpretation of contemporary political myths as responses to Polish fantasies and desires, to an attempt at tracing a historical rhythm (an aesthetic category!) of military conflicts.

The Forum section opens with Stephen Priest's thought-provoking analysis of Friedrich Nietzsche's philosophical project, challenging readers to reconsider familiar interpretations. In "The End of the Will to Power: From Aesthetics to Theology," Priest offers a reinterpretation of Nietzsche's proclaimed death of metaphysics and theology. According to the author, Nietzsche remains, paradoxically, entangled in both. Rather than accepting Nietzsche's anti-metaphysical stance at face value, Priest shows that the central concepts of the *Will to Power* – especially its aesthetic theory – rest on the very Platonic and theological foundations Nietzsche claimed to reject. What makes this contribution compelling is its dual movement: it not only challenges how we read Nietzsche, but also invites us to reconsider whether modernity's rejection of the theological has diminished rather than enriched our understanding of art, meaning, and reality itself.

The question of recurrence, central to Nietzsche's thought and here transposed into an empirical key, frames the next contribution. In "Philosophical Historiography, Military History, and 2020s Crisis War," John R. Shook questions a fundamental assumption in contemporary historical scholarship, namely that the proper work of historiography is to examine the past, not to anticipate the future. Against this conventional view, Shook defends a pragmatist approach in which meaningful historiography must offer what he calls "anticipatory intelligibility," that is, the capacity to prepare us for what is likely to come. His contribution challenges readers to reconsider whether philosophy can treat history as simply a record of what has already happened, or whether we must confront the unsettling possibility that the future is already taking shape in the patterns of the present.

A related concern with the structures underlying collective life animates the essay "Between Myth and Fantasy: On the Application of Psychoanalytic Tools to the Analysis of Political Discourse" authored by Barbara Barysz. The piece addresses a fundamental problem in contemporary political philosophy: how can we critically examine the myths that shape collective identity without turning our own analytical methods into myths? This contribution extends beyond political theory, offering conceptual tools drawn from psychoanalytic theory for any philosophical

investigation into how our practices of meaning-making both reveal and disguise the desires driving them.

These contributions are followed by two interviews that further expand the theoretical dialogue. In the first, Sue Spaid discusses with Mateusz Salwa her latest volume *Making Values Explicit: On How We Are Moved to Do, Act, Care, and Change*, where she argues that values underpin virtues as the more fundamental elements of human motivation and action. At the heart of her approach is a triangular structure in which values, personal identity, and wellbeing mutually influence one another. This structure rests on a central insight: values are intrinsically relational, becoming authentically ours only when our actions make them explicit or when others recognize them in us. Wellbeing, in turn, emerges when we successfully enact our values – when what we do aligns with who we are and how we wish to be seen. Particularly relevant here is the role she attributes to art in transforming values, as art operates through “wordless,” that is, non-linguistic, means that work directly on our perceptual and emotional sensibility. The interview thus raises questions about the relationship between theory and practice, between description and normativity, inviting readers to consider aesthetic practices not as mere objects of analysis but as effective tools for knowledge and transformation.

The issue closes with an interview, “Confessions of *The Critical Shusterman*,” in which Crispin Sartwell and Richard Shusterman, two prominent voices in Anglophone aesthetic theory, engage in conversation. The exchange unfolds as an intimate and personal reflection on what philosophy itself means, carrying a clear meta-philosophical import that goes beyond an account of Shusterman’s life. Through Sartwell’s questions, Shusterman traces his philosophical development through the various cultural and philosophical traditions he has encountered and “respectfully appropriated”: from analytic philosophy to pragmatism, from phenomenology to Zen practice, from European critical theory to classical Chinese aesthetics. The conversation moves through the people who shaped him – lovers, teachers, artists – who opened Shusterman to understanding philosophy not only as embodied critique (his pioneering work on somaesthetics), but as a creative art of living. Far from being a conventional academic philosopher immersed in dusty library books, Shusterman emerges as a transcultural and restlessly curious thinker whose philosophical work is driven by what he candidly describes as the need to

“arouse philosophical libido.” Particularly striking is his reflection on transcultural nomadism, where belonging to multiple cultures becomes not a mere biographical detail but a philosophical resource.

We hope readers will find in these contributions both intellectual stimulation and fresh perspectives on the philosophical questions that shape our cultural experience. Enjoy the exploration.



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