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Performative Aesthetic Properties
in Everyday Design Practice

Abstract:

Chairs, cups, books, and utensils populate our everyday lives and are protagonists of much of our ordinary aesthetic experience. It would seem natural, therefore, for the philosophy of design and everyday aesthetics to constitute intersecting fields of inquiry. Yet the contemporary philosophical debate on the aesthetics of design, articulated through three main approaches – formalist, functionalist, and performative – has not offered a fully developed account of this relationship. This article develops a meta-theoretical critique showing how the functionalist approach risks being of little relevance to everyday aesthetics. Building on this critique, the article proposes expanding the performative approach by introducing a distinction between applicative uses, which realize an already given function, and constitutive uses, which institute new practical states of affairs through creative appropriation. This distinction allows for a new working definition of "design" better aligned with everyday aesthetics: one that focuses on the constitutive force of use as a legitimate source of aesthetic properties.

Keywords:

everyday aesthetics, performative aesthetic properties, design, constitutive use, applicative use

1. Introduction

The contemporary philosophical debate on the aesthetics of design revolves around the question of which aesthetic properties emerge from direct experience of design objects and how such properties are constituted. To understand this debate, we must first clarify a fundamental terminological distinction. In Anglo-American analytic literature, the term "design" has a dual meaning that Greg Bamford proposes to distinguish typographically:[1] Design with a capital D indicates a social or institutional practice that emerged with the industrial revolution, characterized by practical nature, producibility constraint, and constitutive aesthetic relevance; design with a lowercase d designates a general type of cognitive activity – the activity of planning and specifying something new to solve a practical problem, an activity found everywhere: in science, politics, engineering, even in everyday life.[2] This distinction is crucial for the argument I will develop because, as I will show, the philosophy of design tends to focus almost exclusively on institutional Design,[3] neglecting the philosophical implications of design as a distributed cognitive activity.

Matilde Carrasco Barranco outlines the main positions within the debate on the aesthetics of Design, namely the "formal, functional and performative accounts of aesthetic properties."[4] By the expression "aesthetic properties," Carrasco Barranco explicitly refers to phenomenological manifestation: aesthetic properties are "properties of the way in which the objects of sense, imagination, and intellect appear to us."[5] This characterization presupposes that appearance is not mere sensible givenness but constitutes an intentional structure of perception, thus differentiating between merely sensual properties and those that make an experience properly aesthetic.

The formalist position focuses on properties "emerging from the contemplation of the appearance of the object."[6] However, this approach has been criticized for its adherence to a unified theory of aesthetic experience that does not differentiate

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1)   Bamford, "Design, Science and Conceptual Analysis," 233.

2)   Parsons, *Philosophy of Design*, 18–20.

3)   Glenn Parsons explicitly states this. Ref. Parsons, *Philosophy of Design*, 21.

4)   Carrasco Barranco, "The Aesthetic Appreciation of Design Objects," 33.

5)   Ibid., 24.

6)   Ibid., 28.

between objects of different natures. Unified theories of beauty, as shown by Jane Forsey, maintain that "beauty is the same wherever it appears, and objects that are beautiful are all beautiful in the same way, or for the same reasons."[7] The problem is that, if such a theory were true, "there would be no need for an aesthetics of design as a uniquely interesting object of philosophical investigation: beauty would be beauty wherever it appeared, in art, sunsets and flamingoes no less than in shoes, kettles, and bicycles."[8] Formalism, by treating Design objects as if they were "objets d'art" or "conversation pieces" to be appreciated for their isolated formal qualities, ends up "aestheticiz[ing] them, in effect moving them from one ontological category of object to another."[9] This aestheticization alienates the object from everyday life and obscures its specificity as a Design object.

The (moderate) functionalist position, distinct from the historical radical one, strives to find a balance between the role of form and function in the emergence of aesthetic properties. Made salient in recent debate primarily by Jane Forsey (2013) and Glenn Parsons (2016), this position starts from the assumption that philosophy has adequate concepts to deal with the relationship with functional objects, but history has privileged the idea of purely formal beauty. Glenn Parsons and Allen Carlson (2008) document in their historical study of functional beauty how since antiquity there existed a tradition that recognized the link between fitness and beauty: thinkers like Xenophon maintained that "all things are both beautiful and good in respect of those purposes for which they are well adapted."[10] Forsey, instead, recovers the Kantian notion of adherent beauty (dependent beauty), which "presupposes a concept of the end that defines what the thing has to be, and consequently a concept of its perfection."[11] In Forsey's perspective, it is precisely "because the notion of dependent beauty affords the contingency in design forms in relation to its purposes, that we appreciate the beauty of certain concrete designs."[12] These recoveries of functional beauty allow

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7) Forsey, "'The Useful-Beautiful Couplet'," 11.

8) Ibid., 11–12.

9) Ibid., 12.

10) Parsons and Carlson, *Functional Beauty*, 6.

11) Kant, *Critique of Judgement*, 60.

12) Carrasco Barranco, "The Aesthetic Appreciation of Design Objects," 29.

for legitimizing the thesis of an aesthetics of design *qua* Design and showing theoretical continuity with an aesthetic tradition interrupted during the period when beauty was conceived as exclusively formal.

Carrasco Barranco notes, however, that a performative opening has occurred in contemporary debate: a third way that, as the author herself admits, is of particular interest to proponents of the everyday aesthetics movement. The term "performative opening" here designates a shift of aesthetic attention from the properties of objects to the qualities of the experience of the activity itself. These properties "emerge in the user's activity itself,"[13] being "salient in the self-reflective aesthetic appreciation of such activities."[14] The adjective "performative" must therefore be understood in the sense of a quality that manifests itself in the very performance of using an object. The paradigmatic example provided by the author is that of the elliptical machine: "a particular graceful form of motion is appreciated, not in the machine's appearance, but only when it is used."[15]

The objective of this article is to formulate a meta-theoretical critique showing how all these positions, primarily the functionalist approach insofar as it focuses on the properties of *objects*, risk being of little relevance to everyday aesthetics.[16] Furthermore, I will show how the performative approach must be expanded to cover the vast scope of investigative interest required by everyday aesthetics, defending the notion of the constitutive force of use (and its related ontology), which the dominant theoretical framework tends to obscure by focusing predominantly on an applicative conception of use.

The thesis I intend to develop is that everyday interactions with functional artifacts are not necessarily guided by the acknowledged functions of objects but can be creative, bringing forth new functional meanings. In the aesthetic experience of functional artifacts, therefore, performative properties also emerge in the sense that they bring into being new states of affairs through their very performance. This is

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13)   Ibid., 33.

14)   Ibid., 24.

15)   Ibid., 33.

16)   Portions of this article, particularly the critique of the functionalist paradigm and the concept of design epistemocracy discussed below, draw on arguments first elaborated in my doctoral dissertation. Cf. Favara-Kurkowski, "Aesthetics of Design." The present article focuses specifically on their implications for everyday aesthetics.

what I call the constitutive force of the act of use: the capacity of an object's use to constitute, in the context of action, a new practical state of affairs, and not simply to realize an already given function.

2. Design and Everyday Aesthetics: The Problem of Designer-Centric Aesthetics

For the philosophy of design to be relevant to everyday aesthetics, we must first understand the fundamental principles of the latter. Everyday aesthetics, developed as a critical movement toward traditional art-centric aesthetics, is founded on three essential theses. First, the rejection of aesthetic exceptionalism, according to which only certain privileged objects – typically works of art – can be objects of genuine aesthetic experience. Twentieth-century Anglo-American philosophical aesthetics, according to Yuriko Saito, has focused "almost exclusively … on issues related to fine arts,"[17] thus excluding vast domains of everyday aesthetic experience, instituting a traditional conception that has artificially limited the domain of aesthetics. Second, the revaluation of ordinary experience as a legitimate dimension of aesthetic inquiry: everyday aesthetics maintains that everyday objects and familiar activities can generate authentic aesthetic experiences without having to be transformed into something extraordinary. Thomas Leddy identifies "everyday surface aesthetic qualities" such as "neat, messy, clean, dirty"[18] that merit philosophical attention as much as the aesthetic properties traditionally attributed to the fine arts. Third, the critique of Kantian disinterest: whereas traditional aesthetic theory postulates the necessity of disinterested contemplation, excluding any practical consideration, everyday aesthetics rehabilitates the legitimacy of practical interest in aesthetic experience. In this perspective, attention to the aesthetic qualities of ordinary experience can serve as a catalyst for melioristic reflection on our lives. Sherri Irvin highlights this transformative dimension of everyday aesthetics: when we cultivate an aesthetic sensibility of the everyday, "our lives come to seem more satisfying to us, even more profound."[19]

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17) Saito, *Aesthetics of the Familiar*, 1.
18) Leddy, "Everyday Surface Aesthetic Qualities," 259.
19) Irvin, "Aesthetic in Ordinary Experience," 41.

Design objects like chairs, cups, books, utensils, populate our everyday lives and are protagonists of much of our ordinary aesthetic experiences. It would seem natural, therefore, that the philosophy of Design should constitute a fertile field for everyday aesthetics. Yet, when we examine the dominant theories in the philosophy of Design, a problematic picture emerges: these theories adopt perspectives that enter into tension with the fundamental principles of everyday aesthetics. Two problems in particular reveal this tension and suggest that inquiry into design, to be effectively relevant to everyday aesthetics, requires a change of perspective.

2.1. Institutional Design and Design Context: The Double Privilege of the Exceptional

The first problem emerges from the double privilege that contemporary aesthetic theory accords to institutional Design and the Design context. As already anticipated in the introduction, lowercase "design" is the activity of planning and specifying something new to solve a practical problem – an activity proper to common everyday experience. Capitalized "Design," instead, is a social practice that emerged with the industrial revolution, characterized by practical nature, producibility constraint, and constitutive aesthetic relevance.[20] And it is precisely on this that contemporary aesthetic theory focuses almost exclusively, aligning Design with other domains of the philosophy of art such as painting, literature, and cinema. Jane Forsey investigates precisely this dimension when she examines "design *qua* design," distinguishing it from both the fine arts and artisanal manufacture.[21] Lowercase design is thus systematically marginalized to the point that Parsons explicitly declares that it "is not a particularly interesting phenomenon from the point of view of aesthetics."[22]

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20)   Parsons, *The Philosophy of Design*, 20–21.

21)   Forsey, *The Aesthetics of Design*, 23–66.

22)   Parsons, *The Philosophy of Design*, 18. However, Parsons's claim is contradicted by multiple fields of research that have long focused precisely on alternative uses of objects and their cultural impact: from the philosophy of material culture (cf. Preston, *Philosophy of Material Culture*), which recognizes users' creativity in the innovative use of artifacts, to the philosophy of improvisation (cf. Bertinetto, *Estetica dell'improvvisazione*), to the "tactics" theorized by Michel de Certeau (de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*), the continuity between art and everyday experience defended by John Dewey in *Art as Experience* ([1934] 2005), and the practices of "*détournement*" and "semiotic guerrilla warfare" developed by Guy Debord and the Situationists (cf. Knabb, *Situationist International Anthology*).

This focus on institutional Design is accompanied by a second privilege: that of the Design context over the use context. To fully understand this second privilege, we need to clarify two central notions in the philosophy of design, particularly relevant to the functionalist theories discussed earlier: "function" and "use." The philosopher of technology Peter Kroes has proposed a fundamental distinction between these two concepts: the former pertains to the physical and material attributes of artifacts, while the latter refers to the contexts in which these objects are actually employed for human purposes and activities.[23] This distinction opens to two very different analytical contexts. Kroes identifies "two significant kinds of context of human action … namely the [D]esign context and the user context," and in each the artifact "manifests itself in different ways."[24] This does not imply radical aesthetic relativism but pluralism: different contexts and perspectives generate different valid aesthetic criteria. On one hand, there is the Design context, where we observe how Designers manipulate functional descriptions and the physical properties of artifacts. C. Thi Nguyen argues that "it is the coordination of the prescriptions and the artifact design that can give the [designer] some measure of control over the audience's experience."[25] On the other hand, there is the use context, where users actually interact with artifacts based on their practical goals. Theodora Vardouli documents how, in the use context, users develop "attitudes to human-artifact engagements" that do not always coincide with the Designer's prescriptions[26] – a divergence that, as I will show in the next section, raises fundamental questions for everyday aesthetics.

The dominant philosophy of Design systematically privileges the Design context in determining which function governs the correct aesthetic appreciation of artifacts. Glenn Parsons and Allen Carlson maintain that the "proper function" of an artifact – that function which emerges from the historical market success of its "ancestors" – establishes the criteria for its correct aesthetic appreciation. Jane Forsey argues that Design objects must be appreciated as instances of Kantian "dependent beauty," where beauty depends on the object's conformity to the functional concept intended by the

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23)   Kroes, "Methodology and the Nature of Technical Artefacts," 295.

24)   Ibid., 297.

25)   Nguyen, "The Arts of Action," 18.

26)   Vardouli, "Making Use," 137–61.

Designer. In both cases, although Parsons and Carlson adopt a "selected-effects" theory that seems detached from intentions, the proper function they establish remains anchored to the Design context: it is success in satisfying market needs or desires through production and distribution that determines which effects count as proper functions. This perspective systematically marginalizes the use context as a legitimate source of functional determination.

This double privilege – of institutional Design and the Design context – creates a serious problem for anyone who wants to put the philosophy of design and everyday aesthetics into dialogue. Thomas Leddy identifies precisely this tension: "although design may already seem a region within everyday aesthetics to some there is a distance here, somewhat like that of the distance between art and life."[27] If everyday aesthetics valorizes the ordinary and the familiar, focusing on institutional Design replicates exactly the same exceptionalist structure that everyday aesthetics criticizes in the domain of art. Forsey herself notes that treating design as art "renders such objects legible to the established terms of discourse" but at the cost of ignoring the rooting in everyday use experience.[28]

But the problem worsens when this privilege of institutional Design combines with the privilege of the Design context. The aesthetic experience of everyday objects is primarily an experience in use: I appreciate the elegance of a cup by drinking coffee from it, the fluidity of a pen by writing. This aesthetic attention is intrinsically linked to activity, not to the detached contemplation of the harmony between form and function in the object or to reflection on the Designer's intentions that belong to the Design context.

Moreover, privileging the design context, as I will now argue, systematically excludes a good part of the types of everyday interactions we have with functional artifacts. When it is assumed that Design must be appreciated in conformity with the designed or acknowledged function, a normative criterion is established that delegitimizes all those forms of appreciation that emerge from creative and unexpected use. The result is paradoxical: theories that would like to connect design and everyday aesthetics end up excluding precisely what makes design an everyday phenomenon – the familiarity

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27) Leddy, "Design and Definitions," 7.

28) Forsey, *Aesthetics of Design*, 196.

acquired through repeated use, the spontaneous integration into ordinary practices, and, as we will see later, also the availability for creative re-appropriation by users.

2.2. The Normativity of Acknowledged Function and the Exclusion of Creative Use

The privilege of institutional Design and the design context intertwine with a second structural problem: the normativity of acknowledged function.[29] Regardless of how it is defined – whether it is "proper function," "intended function," or "primary function" – the acknowledged function always operates as a normative criterion that prescribes which uses are appropriate and, consequently, which aesthetic properties are salient. Therefore, the normative structure is the same in all these variants: an object possesses a function F that establishes standards of correctness for use. But once attributed, this function is treated as a property that normatively constrains aesthetic appreciation: the relevant aesthetic properties would be those that manifest themselves in use conforming to the acknowledged function.

The consequences of this view are evident. Use that deviates from the acknowledged function – regardless of how this was determined – is systematically classified as "improper," "accidental," or "incorrect." Parsons and Carlson explicitly distinguish between "proper function" and "accidental function," where only the former is relevant for aesthetic appreciation.[30] Forsey states that appreciating an object in the wrong category constitutes an aesthetic error, and that the correct category is determined by function.[31] The result is a conception of use as essentially applicative: to use an object

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29) I introduce the term "acknowledged function" as an umbrella term encompassing several definitions present in the literature on the aesthetics of design. Principal variants include: "proper function" (Parsons & Carlson, *Functional Beauty*; Parsons, *Philosophy of Design*), a notion derived from philosophy of biology; "intended function" (Forsey, *Aesthetics of Design*), referring to the function for which the designer intentionally created the object; and "primary function" (Davies, "Aesthetic Judgments, Artworks and Functional Beauty;" Stecker, *Intersections of value*), referring to the function central to the type of artifact, as distinguished from secondary or derived functions. Despite substantial ontological differences among these notions, they share a common assumption: a predominant function is socially recognized in the object, and this function confers functional identity upon the artifact. This shared assumption justifies grouping them under the umbrella term "acknowledged function."

30) Parsons and Carlson, *Functional Beauty*, 66.

31) Forsey, *Aesthetics of Design*, 148.

means to apply its acknowledged function, and only this applicative use brings forth legitimate aesthetic properties.

But this view completely ignores the richness of aesthetic experience that emerges from creative uses, those uses that do not limit themselves to applying acknowledged functions but constitute new functional possibilities. Let us think of concrete examples: a chair used as an improvised ladder generates performative aesthetic properties that emerge from concrete use. A book used as a paperweight, kitchen utensils transformed into percussive instruments, urban architectural elements becoming surfaces for skateboarding: all these cases show not only the creativity of divergent use but also the emergence of new aesthetic properties that would be inaccessible in applicative use. And these aesthetic evaluations are perfectly legitimate from the point of view of everyday experience.

The problem is therefore not which theory of function we adopt – whether intentionalist, evolutionist, or essentialist – but the very fact of according to acknowledged function, however determined, an absolute normative role in aesthetic appreciation. This normative structure systematically excludes from aesthetic inquiry a significant portion of ordinary experience: that creative and transformative dimension of use that characterizes our everyday relationship with objects.

The iceberg metaphor proposed by Beth Preston effectively illustrates this limitation:[32] we see only the tip, while theory focuses on a limited subset of objects and activities, neglecting the vast majority of the design domain.

3. Expanding the Performative Paradigm

These two problems – the double privilege of institutional Design and the Design context, and the normativity of acknowledged function – show how dominant theories in the philosophy of design remain anchored to perspectives that ill accord with the principles of everyday aesthetics. They replicate, in essence, the structure of traditional aesthetics of art: as in the aesthetics of art creation is reserved for artists while the public is assigned the contemplative appreciation of works, so in the philosophy of Design, design is the prerogative of Designers while users are assigned

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32)   Preston, "The Iceberg Model," 11–29.

the correct application of designed functions. In other words, the designer-centric paradigm treats users as mere consumers of functions and as passive recipients of pre-determined affordances.

For inquiry into design to be effectively relevant to everyday aesthetics, we must recognize that significant aesthetic properties emerge from activities of use, not from the formal/functional characteristics of objects considered independently of the use context. Formal properties, privileged by traditional contemplative aesthetics, maintain the object in a condition of distance that reproduces the spectatorial model derived from the experience of art. Functional properties, while recognizing the practical dimension of objects, remain anchored to privileging Design as an institutional practice and therefore the Design context as the locus of value determination. This Designer-centric perspective imposes a normativity of acknowledged function that limits users' agency, classifying uses as "proper" or "improper" based on conformity, among other things, to design intentions. Instead, performative aesthetic properties – those that manifest themselves in doing, in using, in dwelling – constitute the distinctive focus of an aesthetics of the everyday because they escape these normative constraints: they emerge in actual interaction and presuppose neither contemplative distance nor absolute adherence to pre-determined functions. The performative paradigm articulated by Carrasco Barranco represents an important step in this direction, shifting attention to experiences that emerge in actual interaction. This shift is founded on the recognition that aesthetic appreciation of uses is fundamentally different from contemplative appreciation of the object's properties: as Saito observes, in the everyday context aesthetic responses "do not presuppose or lead to such spectator-like experiences but rather prompt us towards actions."[33] Aesthetic experience thus becomes embodied in action itself: our reaction to "dilapidated buildings, rusted cars or dirty linens is to deplore their appearance, prompting us to repair, clean or discard them,"[34] and it is these activities themselves – cleaning, repairing, discarding – that have an aesthetic dimension, not simply the contemplation of the result they produce. In this perspective, what counts aesthetically is the lived experience of using: the way in which the object responds to our actions, how its affordances reveal themselves in practice, the quality of our bodily engagement with it.

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33) Saito, *Everyday Aesthetics*, 10.

34) Ibid., 51.

However, even this paradigm requires expansion. Although it rightly recognizes that aesthetic properties emerge from use, it still tends to concentrate on applicative use. The paradigmatic example remains that described by Irvin: "an experience that one has every day, like drinking a cup of coffee, can become quietly exquisite" when done "with full attention to the feel of the cup in one's hands, the rim of the cup touching one's lower lip, and the sensation of the coffee in the mouth."[35] The aesthetic appreciation described here, however refined, nevertheless remains anchored to use that realizes the acknowledged function of the object.

But in so doing it still excludes the appreciation of performative properties that emerge from constitutive uses, those creative acts through which users do not simply apply acknowledged functions but constitute new functionalities of objects.

I call these acts "constitutive uses" by analogy with Austinian performatives: as in the linguistic act the saying of which constitutes a doing that brings about a reality (pronouncing "I do" does not describe a marriage but constitutes it), so the creative use of an object does not limit itself to applying a preexisting function but generates a new practical relationship with the object itself. The analogy does not imply that the use of objects functions as a linguistic act, but serves to clarify the generative character of certain acts of use in modifying what, in a practical situation, counts as something of a specific type.

In light of this redistribution of creative authority, to fully develop an aesthetics of design coherent with the principles of everyday aesthetics, we need to extend the performative paradigm beyond the boundaries of applicative use, recognizing the constitutive force of creative use.

Let us therefore distinguish two modes of use. *Applicative use* realizes an acknowledged functional meaning. In the "standard view," according to Vardouli, use is "understood as a re-enactment of a function described by a designer."[36] *Constitutive use*, instead, constitutes new functionalities through the act itself. Preston recognizes this possibility: "people can, and constantly do, use their material culture in ways that do not follow established custom."[37]

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35)   Irvin, "Scratching an Itch," 31.

36)   Vardouli, "Making Use," 142.

37)   Preston, *Philosophy of Material Culture*, 161.

Function, in fact, is not an intrinsic but a relational property. Artifacts, according to Kroes, have "dual nature": they are at the same time physical objects whose material structure allows certain functions and intentional objects defined precisely by those functions, and the latter "has meaning only within a context of intentional human action."[38] This dual nature has a crucial implication: the affordances of artifacts are not limited to the acknowledged function, since physical properties offer possibilities of use that go beyond design intentions.[39] It is precisely here that constitutive use intervenes: exploiting this ontological duality, the user's action actualizes latent possibilities that the object's physical properties make available but that the acknowledged function does not prescribe.

Let us consider concrete examples. The artifact we call a "chair," when used as a step stool, does not become a "step stool" – it remains a chair used "improperly." But when such a divergent use stabilizes socially, that is, when use-token identities accumulate into recognized patterns, they can constitute new acknowledged functional meanings. Preston notes that functions grow from "historical patterns of actual use and reproduction for that use."[40] The most significant constitutive use is that which combines novelty, social replicability, and transformation of the object's acknowledged affordances.

Therefore, use has constitutive force: it can constitute new practical states of affairs, bringing forth new functional meanings. Vardouli identifies this dimension when she speaks of "viewing use-acts as a kind of making, as embodied and active engagement with the material world."[41] Constitutive use is literally a form of making – the user creates new functional possibilities of the artifact. This leads us to recognize that constitutive uses are a form of design – design with a lowercase d. Making is not only the activity of the professional Designer but a distributed cognitive capacity. Preston expresses this clearly: "all human action is what you might call

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38) Kroes, "Methodology and the Nature of Technical Artefacts," 295.

39) Design objects, as Michalle Gal (Gal, "Design's Ontology") argues in this same issue, have ontologically unstable identities that are constituted relationally through use. Their properties and affordances are not fixed but emerge through interaction, allowing objects to be incorporated into different social practices in ways that generate an open-ended system of functional possibilities.

40) Preston, *Philosophy of Material Culture*, 11.

41) Vardouli, "Making Use," 149.

small-c creative" and this creativity is "distributed throughout the action itself, as agents respond in an ongoing way to opportunities and problems."[42]

Here emerges the crucial point for the aesthetic properties of lowercase design. In applicative uses, performative aesthetic qualities emerge from the lived experience of using the object according to the acknowledged function; for example, we appreciate the fluidity of the gesture that the object allows. Carrasco Barranco identifies how "performative aesthetic properties are qualities of the activities, not the objects" but emerge from active interaction with the artifact: we appreciate "a particular graceful form of motion" that manifests itself "not in the machine's appearance, but only when it is used."[43] In constitutive uses, instead, aesthetic properties are generated in the relationship between the object's physical capacities and the user's creativity, therefore we appreciate the ingenuity of discovery, the elegance of the improvised solution, the fluidity with which new functionalities are constituted through creative use. In both cases, aesthetic properties are not reducible to the object's static formal qualities but emerge performatively from the practice of use – applicative or constitutive as it may be.

Recognizing the aesthetic legitimacy of constitutive uses implies recognizing that lowercase design is a distributed cognitive activity that we all exercise daily in our engagement with artifacts: perceptual sensitivity to affordances, the capacity for practical problem-solving, relational thinking that interweaves objects, actions, and contexts. When we constitutively use an object, we are literally designing, discovering, and constituting new functional relationships, just as the professional Designer does but in an ordinary and situated mode.

4. Which Design for Everyday Aesthetics?

We thus arrive at the crucial question: which "design" truly interests everyday aesthetics? Aesthetic inquiry into Design – understood as professional institutional practice – is certainly relevant. Barranco argues that "the aesthetic experience of activities can be shaped as part of intentional practices such as [D]esign"[44] and for this reason

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42) Preston, *Philosophy of Material Culture*, 8.

43) Carrasco Barranco, "Aesthetic Appreciation of Design Objects," 32.

44) Ibid.

cannot be ignored. But everyday aesthetics, with its commitment to investigating the everyday and illuminating often obscured aesthetic dimensions, has a particular reason to focus on lowercase design.

Leddy maintains that philosophical definitions of Design do not simply represent failed attempts to capture an immutable essence but are historically situated responses that reflect and constitute the design practices relevant to their time. Each definition of the concept of design has been "useful and 'true' in a pragmatist sense"[45] in its specific context, confirming and encouraging a particular style of creative activity. Following Leddy's approach, I propose that a definition of design adequate to the contemporary era, characterized by the diffusion of digital technologies and the transformation of the relationship between producers and users, must recognize design as a distributed cognitive activity rather than as an exclusively professional practice. In this new historical configuration, a philosophically rigorous definition of design that is of interest to everyday aesthetics inquiry can no longer limit itself to considering the institutional activity of professional Designers but must necessarily include the active role of users as co-creators of functional meaning through use. This necessity becomes particularly evident with the rise of digital platforms, where we observe what Stephen Wright (2014) defines as the "usological turn." Wright identifies in this transformation a fundamental rupture: "with the rise of networked culture, users have come to play a key role as producers of information, meaning and value, breaking down the long-standing opposition between consumption and production."[46] However, it must be emphasized that the theoretical scope of the usological turn exceeds the digital context in which it was originally identified. Its recognition in fact makes visible how creative authority over the world of objects can be redistributed, allowing us to bring to light lowercase design practices operating not only in the immaterial sphere but also in the material one.[47]

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45)   Leddy, "Design and Definitions," 7.

46)   Wright, *Toward a Lexicon of Usership*, 1.

47)   Cf. Favara-Kurkowski, "Everyday Design," 139–46. One could productively deploy the concept of "prosumer" here – users who simultaneously consume designed affordances and produce new functional meanings through constitutive use, thereby blurring the production/consumption distinction in material culture. However, I avoid adopting this terminology because of its strong associations with consumer capitalism and marketing discourse, which are not the precise focus of this article. The performative framework I develop here aims to theorize creative use practices in their aesthetic dimension.

Moreover, although Design is typically considered relevant to everyday aesthetics by virtue of its pervasiveness in the everyday, this justification presupposes precisely the identification between design and professionally designed products that we are contesting. As seen through Leddy's analysis, Design objects, while ubiquitous, maintain the status of products that reproduce the distance between creator (Designer) and user.[48] Everyday aesthetics could instead investigate the distributed design activity that we all exercise daily, recognizing users as creative agents of the material configuration of the everyday: in this way the distance between design and life that Leddy identifies as analogous to that between art and life would be overcome.

The proposal is therefore to expand the performative paradigm including not only the aesthetic appreciation of activities intentionally designed by (experience) Design but above all the everyday practices of constitutive use that emerge spontaneously. This extension of the performative paradigm is not simply a theoretical question but opens to fundamental considerations of a practical order on the relationship between philosophy, aesthetics, and design theory.

5. Conclusion

The argument developed in this article exceeds the confrontation between philosophical positions on design, intersecting three distinct theoretical domains: (1) the philosophy of design, understood as aesthetic-philosophical reflection on functional objects, (2) everyday aesthetics, as a critical movement toward traditional art-centric aesthetics, and (3) design theory, as a discipline oriented toward design practice and its reconceptualization. These three levels – philosophical, aesthetic, and disciplinary – converge in the thesis that the philosophy of design can offer a relevant contribution to everyday aesthetics only if design is understood as a distributed cognitive activity, constituted by aesthetically determined constitutive uses. This convergence is not merely theoretical: it inserts itself into a profound crisis that traverses contemporary design theory and requires both epistemological and normative responses.

Having recognized the constitutive force of uses and their implications for a democratized understanding of aesthetic authority in Design and design, the proposal

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48)   Leddy, "Design and Definitions," 7.

articulated here inevitably assumes a normative dimension. It defines not only what design is but also how it should be understood. However, this prescriptive dimension does not impose arbitrary criteria from the outside: as Leddy emphasizes, "limiting the philosopher to the descriptive makes philosophy too much like lexicography, and too much unlike design theory and design itself."[49] The normative position defended here emerges from existing practices of constitutive use that already challenge, from below, dominant descriptions of Design. Normatively recognizing users' aesthetic authority means making explicit and legitimizing what already happens in everyday practices of engagement with Design objects.

This perspective situates itself in a critical phase of contemporary design theory, characterized by the radical questioning of its disciplinary presuppositions. The crisis emerges from growing awareness of Design's role in current environmental and social emergencies. Victor Papanek already outlined its contours in 1972, stating bluntly that "there are professions more harmful than industrial design, but only a very few of them."[50] His critique anticipated the necessity of a paradigm shift capable of recognizing how "the economic, spiritual, technological, and intellectual needs of a human being are usually more difficult and less profitable to satisfy than the carefully engineered and manipulated 'wants' inculcated by fad and fashion."[51]

The fact that this critique remains current fifty years later confirms that practice has not substantially changed. Tony Fry identifies in Design a practice trapped in an inadequate conceptual system, maintaining that Design has shaped the world in fundamental ways: "design [is] implicated in how everything … is … heard, felt, thought, understood, explained and done."[52] Design practice, governed by obsolete conceptual frameworks, requires a radical reformulation of its theoretical foundations.

Arturo Escobar continues this critical line denouncing "the hegemony of modernity's one-world ontology"[53] and maintaining the necessity of "transforming design from

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49)   Leddy, "Design and Definitions," 7.

50)   Papanek, *Design for the Real World*, ix. The aforementioned citation remains identical in both editions of Victor Papanek's 1985 revised edition and his 1972 original edition.

51)   Papanek, *Design for the Real World*, 15.

52)   Fry, *A New Design Philosophy*, 7.

53)   Escobar, *Designs for the Pluriverse*, 4.

an expert-driven process focused on objects and services within a taken-for-granted social and economic order toward design practices that are participatory, socially oriented, situated, and open ended and that challenge the business-as-usual mode of being, producing, and consuming."[54] His critique is directed at Design's complicity with the capitalist paradigm and with modern dualisms (mind/body, human/non-human, nature/culture) that have exacerbated the environmental crisis and political-economic inequalities.

What emerges from these critiques is the awareness that Design remains trapped in a way of thinking that has exacerbated the environmental crisis and political and economic relations, becoming a practice for unsustainable world-making.[55] The call to "re-design design" presupposes that the work of Designers has often been harmful to the environment, both in ecological terms referring to natural environments and to the cultural environment as well, which is gradually becoming homogenized according to (Western) values of progressive consumption.

The problematic nature of Design does not concern only its ecological consequences: it also manifests itself in its fundamentally excluding nature. Theodora Vardouli identifies this excluding structure as "the design-centric account of artifacts," which assumes that "intentions, goals, and decisions made in the context of [D]esign [have] special authority in determining how artifacts function and how they are used."[56] This what we can call design epistemocracy – the conception of Design as a closed system in which only professionals possess legitimate epistemic authority – not only, as Vardouli maintains, "inexorably results in the reification of the consumer," but also perpetuates what Adorno and Horkheimer had identified as "culture industry":[57] the standardization of material culture that transforms individuals into passive masses. The problem is further aggravated by the fact that this epistemocracy operates through mechanisms that Escobar denounces as a "narrow and exclusionary understanding of beauty, and aesthetic values in general" rooted in "Western frameworks," contributing to cultural homogenization according to values of "progressive consumption."

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54) Ibid., 27.

55) Tassinari, Manzini, Escobar, Huybrechts, and De Rosa, "The Politics of Nature."

56) Vardouli, "Making Use," 142.

57) Cf. Adorno and Horkheimer, "The Culture Industry," 94–137.

The conception of design developed in this article – design understood as an everyday aesthetic-cognitive practice grounded in aesthetically determined constitutive uses – offers a plausible response to this crisis. Recognizing design as a distributed cognitive activity means providing a non-reductive but sufficiently general definition: the capacity to design is a fundamental human competence that manifests itself both in the professional activity of Designers and in the constitutive use of objects by users. This redefinition responds directly to the critiques raised by Papanek, Fry, and Escobar: if the problem resides in the epistemocratic and excluding nature of professional Design, which precludes a real transformation of practices, the solution consists in recognizing design as a distributed and democratically accessible practice. This recognition does not limit itself to contesting from the outside Design's structure of authority: it constitutes a practice that, in its very exercise, calls that structure into question and includes within itself a critical reflection on the conditions that make it possible.

However, this redefinition of design would not be possible without the contribution that everyday aesthetics can offer to design theory. Contemporary design theory suffers from a lack of trust in aesthetic inquiry, compromised by modernist and postmodernist legacies but also by the reduction of Design to questions of style. As Robert Kurz notes, "Commodity aesthetics … is *[D]esign*: not an expression of the 'things-in-themselves' but, on the contrary, of things dressed in their abstract universality as objects of selling and buying – anything but unique."[58] This reduction has generated a theoretical vacuum: among the gaps in contemporary design theory, even in its important critical evolutions, precisely the absence of trust in aesthetic inquiry as a reflective (and not merely ornamental) dimension of design experience emerges.

It is precisely in this theoretical vacuum that everyday aesthetics can offer a decisive contribution. By reintroducing the analysis of aesthetic appreciation, everyday aesthetics provides design theory with the conceptual tools necessary to think aesthetic value beyond the paradigms of consumerism and superficial styling. Aesthetic appreciation operates here on a double register: on one hand, as attention to the aesthetic qualities of ordinary experience that catalyzes melioristic reflection; on the other hand, as imaginative capacity to constitute functional meanings through the recog-

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58)   Kurtz, "Sein come Design" (*Sein as Design*). Translation by the Author.

nition of not yet codified possibilities of use. Everyday aesthetics, with its insistence on the legitimacy of ordinary aesthetic experience and on the continuity between the practical and the aesthetic, offers the theoretical resources to overcome design theory's impasse. The performative opening in contemporary debate on the philosophy of design represents an important step but requires expansion: we must recognize not only the aesthetic appreciation of [D]esigned activities but also the aesthetic legitimacy of constitutive uses – those constitutive acts through which new functional meanings of objects are generated. The notion of constitutive force of use finds in everyday aesthetics its theoretical anchorage: the revaluation of ordinary experience and the recognition that aesthetic attention to the everyday can serve as a catalyst for life transformation provide the foundation for legitimizing users' aesthetic agency as a form of distributed design.

This framework suggests a rich agenda for future research. At the level of the philosophy of design, we need to further develop the notion of constitutive force of use, specifying its modes of operation and felicity conditions. At the level of everyday aesthetics, it would be fruitful to investigate how recognition of users' aesthetic agency transforms the understanding of ordinary experience, opening unprecedented perspectives on the relationship between aesthetic experience and the reconfiguration of material culture, both in its positive and negative shades.

The encounter between philosophy of design, everyday aesthetics, and design theory is thus configured as an occasion to rethink relationships between theory and practice, between creation and fruition, between professional authority and distributed competence. Through this mutual recognition it becomes possible to articulate an aesthetic theory of design that is theoretically rigorous and open to the social turn in design. Recognizing design as everyday aesthetic-cognitive practice means affirming that our capacity to aesthetically configure the material world is not a marginal phenomenon but a fundamental dimension of human existence – a dimension that the current crisis of design theory calls us to recognize and legitimize.

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