

Urban Technologies – The New Everydayness: A Reply to Lehtinen

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This short paper is a reply to Sanna Lehtinen's article *Living with Urban Everyday Technologies* whose aim is to introduce the complexity of the problem of everyday technologies in contemporary aesthetics. Thanks to most recent information, computing, and communication technologies, urban technologies have indeed become an indispensable part of human living standards. In connection with Lehtinen's primary interest in visible technologies with invisible effects, my reply appeals to W. Welsch's use of the term anaesthetics, which refers to the absence of the ability to feel, as a parallel to this group of technologies. The reply also emphasises that it is necessary to study urban technologies together with a focus on human privacy, social justice, and human wellbeing and that everyday aesthetics has to be ready to reflect on the extremely fast development of these technologies. |
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Sanna Lehtinen's paper *Living with Urban Everyday Technologies* (2020a) brings to the fore a very current topic. Technologies have always been connected with urban life. However, thanks to most recent information, computing, and communication technologies they have become an indispensable part of a living standard, and living with them has become our natural environment, our new 'everydayness'. I am very pleased that I was offered a chance to comment on the paper by the organizers, as Sanna Lehtinen's continuous work in the field of urban aesthetics and technology (as a relatively new field of everyday aesthetics) is well-known and these topics need to be discussed (Lehtinen, 2020a; Lehtinen, 2020b; Lehtinen, 2020c; Lehtinen and Vihanninjoki, 2019; Vihanninjoki and Lehtinen, 2019).

As Lehtinen states at the very beginning of her paper, "[t]he urban everyday took an unexpected turn in the Spring 2020 with the Covid-19 pandemic and the ensuing restrictions to social activity." (Lehtinen, 2020a, p. 81) The

situation of the last months has shown cities as the most dangerous places for the virus spread and people in the cities have experienced unprecedented lockdowns. The pandemic, whose second wave is now a reality for many countries, shows the importance of the overall organization of cities not only as regards their infrastructures, but also the quality of life and the way people can use such infrastructures every day or, as we see it now, in the days of crisis.

Importantly, Lehtinen focuses on the place of technologies in contemporary cities from the perspective of their everyday aesthetic qualities but she also recognizes and acknowledges their role and use. She considers the issue of everyday technologies to be often overlooked by philosophical aesthetics and states that this discipline does so “often due to unquestioned ideas of how a city should ideally look and feel.” (Lehtinen, 2020a, p. 81) This is definitely true and I consider her attempt to confront contemporary cities legitimate and useful. Lehtinen says that the “paper brings together recent developments in urban aesthetics with some of the core ideas of postphenomenological approaches to new urban technologies.” (Lehtinen, 2020a, p. 81) In my opinion, these approaches could be presented in more detail to provide a broader theoretical background to the problem. If philosophical aesthetics has a tendency not to regard everyday technologies as a topic, maybe some philosophical approaches focused on the functioning public sphere, relationships and boundaries between public and private, the individual and society, could help ‘to defend’ practical philosophy and its interest in the theme.

Although the paper offers several different suggestions, here I will only try to focus on what seem to me to be the most challenging issues to be discussed. Sanna Lehtinen thematises contemporary urban technologies into three main groups according to their aesthetic qualities 1) bearing noticeable perceptual features, e. g. traffic lights, 2) being invisible or hidden, e. g. water infrastructure, 3) showing a combination of perceptual and non-perceptual forms, visible with invisible effects, e.g. 5G networks or stations for charging electric vehicles. In this paper, she is interested mainly in the last group. I wonder if this third sphere – the technologies whose effects are hidden, the networks we cannot see and feel – could not be described by what Welsch called anaesthetics. Although Welsch is not a postphenomenologist, perhaps his definition of anaesthetics may correspond to this group of technologies. He writes that he uses “the term ‘anaesthetics’ as a counterterm to ‘aesthetics’.” ‘Anaesthetics’ refers to a condition in which the elementary condition of the aesthetic – the ability to feel is absent. While aesthetics intensifies sensation, anaesthetics thematises insensitivity – the sense of loss, interruption, or the impossibility of sensibility – at all levels: from physical numbness to spiritual blindness. In short, anaesthetics has to do with the opposite side of aesthetics.” (Welsch, 2017, p. 12) In my opinion, there are certain parallels to the third group and Welsch’s approach could serve as an inspiration to deal with this specific issue.

In the third part *The Small Banalities of Technological Mediation*, Lehtinen focuses on some problems that are connected with the hidden technologies

and their malfunctions, consequences of surveillance technologies, etc., and in this context she also briefly mentions everyday urban mobility. I think this may open a debate on some social issues that should be discussed further in the urban sphere, e. g., the loss of privacy. Lehtinen aptly illustrates the “aesthetic backlash” against facial recognition in the form of anti-surveillance clothing that is, in my opinion, only supporting the idea of how necessary it is to study the urban phenomena.

The part called “The Aesthetic Potential of New Urban Technologies” emphasizes the role of individuals and active engagement in the development of urban environments – when the city “itself is a multifaceted processual and technological construct.” (Lehtinen, 2020a, p. 86) Referring to Den Tandt (2014), Lehtinen tries to approach emerging technologies through the notion of *the urban sublime* and further referring to the notion of *the technological sublime*. I would appreciate if these two terms were described more in-depth, for example by using some examples, so as to help readers understand them. An interesting question in this regard is whether these two terms cooperate with the active engagement the author refers to in the next part of the paper.

In the conclusion, the author says that she has “aimed at showing that the aesthetic approach to these technologies does not consist only of the most obvious aesthetic consequences, but needs to take a deeper look into how the use of these technologies is changing the aesthetic scope of the urban everyday.” (Lehtinen, 2020a, p. 88) The question that comes to my mind here is how these technologies, that are hidden, relate to everyday aesthetics, i.e., with the everydayness or our actual experience. Although we do not see such technologies, we have some information about their existence, function and use. But does this fact, this knowledge, influence our view or attitude towards the city? If we know and think about technologies, does it change the way we *look* at the city or rather the way we *think* about it? If we speak of “deep-seated role of technologies” in the cities (from infrastructure to navigation or virtual reality apps) when cities today are fully dependent on technologies, does it change the aesthetic optics of perceiving the city?

Of course, we cannot avoid the technological development and the use of technologies in the cities. I agree with Lehtinen that a better understanding of technologies is important both for a philosophical as well as for an applied aesthetics. It is not an issue that could be studied separately; aesthetics has to address the issue together with ethics and sociology as well as social and political philosophy, if it aims to better understand the phenomena of cities. I think therefore that studying technologies in connection with questions of human privacy, social justice or human wellbeing, as Sanna Lehtinen does, is very important. I appreciate that her paper presents a way to introduce a complex problem that has to be further discussed on several levels to be ready to reflect the extremely fast development of everyday urban technologies.

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