

From Everyday Aesthetics to Rethinking Existence

The Possible Dialogue between Jean Luc Nancy's Ontology and the Aesthetics of the Everyday

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My aim is to argue that Jean Luc Nancy's conception of Being can be particularly valuable for underlining Everyday Aesthetics' specificity and thus for revealing its philosophical worth, one that I believe is overshadowed when treating Everyday Aesthetics solely as an extension of traditional aesthetics. Nancy's ontology is nevertheless rooted in the Heideggerian perspective of Being, and is thus seemingly opposite to an Anglo-American approach, which is the sort of ground that Everyday Aesthetics seems to rely on. This paper will be divided into three parts: first, I discuss what separates Everyday Aesthetics from the European approach – Heidegger included – and why this rupture is legitimate. Secondly, I present what I consider to be the strongest philosophical points that Everyday Aesthetics puts forward. Finally, I show why Nancy's work, in its specific way of challenging Western thought, can make a considerable contribution to Everyday Aesthetics. | Keywords: *Everyday Aesthetics, Jean-Luc Nancy, Ontology, Quotidian, Touch*

1. Having to Leave (European) Tradition (Very Much) Behind

Even though I agree that Everyday Aesthetics (EA) already possesses the background and the tools necessary for its explorations, and that these explorations are pertinent enough to be the issue to focus on (e.g. the environmental effects of the choices we make based on aesthetic preferences and regarding our everyday objects (Saito, 2010)), I also believe that a more manifest contrast to what has been previously done in aesthetics and in philosophy in general is not at all futile and can only play in favour of EA. Such a contrast would indeed help, first, to better outline EA's specificity, so that EA's 'objects' are not merely seen as 'something new' that aesthetics has 'absorbed' through the enlargement of its boundaries. Secondly, it may contribute to disclosing more discerningly EA's conceptual richness. In this

way, EA could be understood, not as merely offering additional ‘subjects’ to discuss, but as the possibility of calling into question what we traditionally understand as aesthetics. Thirdly, it may serve us to detect and thus avoid unneeded remnants of the tradition.

EA and Jean-Luc Nancy’s work do have a few points in common, one of them being the fact that EA takes into consideration the ‘lower sense’ of touch, and touch is undoubtedly a central notion in Nancy’s philosophical proposal. They appear however to share something more essential. Both EA and Nancy seem to adopt the same philosophical stance towards a particular denial, a manifest exclusion, that has been applied by European thinking to everydayness and the ordinary, a stance that, from my perspective, informs both EA’s and Nancy’s approaches. In short, in EA, or at least in some of its variants, and in a more explicit and developed manner in Nancy, what we find is not simply the discussion of this or that subject, but the call for a shift in philosophical thought.

1.1 A General View

When considering the conceptual conditions required for its development, one could argue that EA, by being focused on the aesthetic experiences that take place within the ordinary, not only had to perform a deliberate and radical rupture with traditional aesthetics but also with the European approach to Being in general. In other words, what EA can unfold is much more complex and far-reaching than the already rich debates it generates within aesthetics. What it unfolds goes further since it concerns the manner in which the (European) philosophical tradition in general conceives – or has conceived up to very recently – of existence itself. To put it (very) briefly: the European approach, in aiming to reach what is considered to be the realm of truth, has persistently chosen to distance itself from the immediate and the familiar presence of things, i.e. the realm of the everyday. Now, such a depiction of European philosophical history – an overly complex and heterogeneous history of well-known disputes, and thus, of disparate perspectives and methods – is certainly a generalization that, to say the very least, lacks rigour. Nevertheless, when it comes to the main European referents, namely, those whose work has shaped in greater extent than others the path, the contours, the ground, the contents and the style of philosophical thought, it is not completely incorrect to recognise a somewhat recurrent dismissive attitude towards the immediate and the everyday. Focusing on this particular dismissal, let us name a very few examples. First, Plato’s rejection of *aesthesis* not only as a mode of perception but more importantly as that which is perceived by our senses – in a word, Plato’s rejection of the objects that circulate in the immediacy, and this immediacy itself; second, Descartes, who – as he confesses in his *Meditations* – had to persuade himself to discredit what he saw, touched and surrounded him, and determined what he perceived through his senses as ontologically dependent and thus subsidiary, in sharp contrast to an autonomous *res cogitans*; finally, Hegel’s distinction between *Wirklichkeit* in a proper sense and what we usually but wrongly call ‘reality’, i.e. the external world as it surrounds us with its materiality but also our

internal world (Hegel, 2015, 2Ho).¹ (Interestingly, this very distinction is formulated when presenting his philosophy of art). In short, it could be argued that a persistent (albeit multifaceted) conceptual tendency has been underlying the ‘European approach’, thus explaining why certain ‘things’ have been regarded as philosophically pertinent, and contrastingly, why others have been ontologically and epistemologically devalued.

As we all know, one of the most – if not the most – explicit and radical efforts to shift from this philosophical tradition was Heidegger’s *Being and Time* (and evidently his following publications continued that same path), where it is explicitly asserted that “we should raise anew *the question of the meaning of being.*” (Heidegger, 1978, p. 1)² Now, Heidegger not only goes back to the fundamental question of the sense of Being. In this major shift that his thought undertakes, he also takes into consideration exactly what the tradition neglected: everydayness. Hence, the question arises: what did this Heideggerian radical approach that aimed to overcome the philosophical tradition mean for the comprehension and treatment of the everyday?

1.2 Heidegger and the Place of Everydayness in the *Destruction of the History of Western Ontology*

One of the several informative examples in Heidegger’s work of how in order to properly think philosophically we have to go past the everyday and the immediate, is his radical distinction between the ‘surrounding world’ (*Umwelt*) and the ‘shared – or common – world’ (*Mitwelt*). The former is limited to the (measurable and quantifiable) physical space and the totality of on-hand entities that we encounter in everyday life. *Umwelt* hence corresponds to an ontic comprehension of the world. Conversely, *Mitwelt* concerns only *Dasein* and thus coincides with the proper (*eigentlich*) manner of being-in-the-world (which is not simply being ‘within’ the world) and being-with-one-another (*Miteinandersein*). In other words, *Mitwelt* corresponds to an ontological grasp of the world. Consequently, even though for Heidegger Being cannot be understood independently from the world, the world he is thinking about, the one that is part of the ontological structure of Being, is not the world as we perceive it in our quotidian way of being.

Such a distinction between *Umwelt* and *Mitwelt* – which is far from being the only distinction in Heidegger’s writings between notions apparently close but profoundly unlike in an ontological level³ – rests on, and thus also enables, the ontological lessening of the *Umweltdinge* or ‘environmental things’, i.e., that which composes our everyday concerns, the mere things and their mere presence, that which we perceive with our senses, that which we can

¹ It has been claimed that Hotho imposed his own views on his edition of Hegel’s 1823 lectures on the philosophy of art, yet it is also true that the Introduction is regarded as a reliable Hegelian direct source, since in contrast to the majority of the other segments of Hegel’s notebooks (i.e. short and isolated sentences), the introduction was formulated in an integral and stylistically polished manner (Gethmann-Siefert, 1998, p. XXXI).

² I am following the pagination of the *Gesamtausgabe*.

³ To name just a few: Cause (*Ursache*) and origin (*Ursprung*), fabrication (*Erzeugung*) and production (*Herstellung* and *Hervorbringung*), exactitude (*Genauigkeit*) and rigour (*Strenge*), etc.

touch. Subsequently, even though, with Heidegger, everydayness (*Alltäglichkeit*) went from being overlooked to earning a place in philosophical thinking – hence, some sort of philosophical ‘dignity’ – it did so solely as a strategy, as a way for thought to ‘simply’ let the world be and unveil itself, instead of rushing to impose on it our (usual) categories. Taking everydayness into consideration certainly didn’t equate to “leap right away over that domain of things in which we know ourselves [to be] immediately at home” (Heidegger, 2018, p. 145). Hence, everydayness is in Heidegger chiefly a method, and thus a means (it is also a way for Heidegger to distinguish himself from the tradition). Everydayness does therefore earn a place in Heidegger but only as a starting point that has to be later abandoned in favour of something belonging to another ontological order. It can thus be said that Heidegger’s dismantling of metaphysics did not amount to a withdrawal from the proclivity for conceiving truth as something not to be found in the immediate presence. In other words, Heidegger’s approach, as those of his predecessors, continued to (philosophically) disqualify what takes place within the ordinary in the manner as it takes place ordinarily.⁴

Even though Heidegger is not the subject of this paper, reviewing some of his terminology associated with the renewal of the question of Being serves as a significant reminder when developing EA’s theoretical ground: when affirming finitude, it is not enough to take as the starting point the finitude (or the ordinary), as opposed to the infinitude (or the out-of-the-ordinary). First and foremost, one has to remain within it. As we shall see later on, some EA’s accounts propose to acknowledge the extraordinary in the ordinary, as a way to make everydayness philosophically relevant. Such a perspective is not only unnecessary, but does a disservice to EA’s interests.

1.3 The Pervasiveness of Significance

EA rightly drew attention to the fact that traditional aesthetics had neglected a whole and undeniably critical dimension of our aesthetic experience: our aesthetic interactions and responses to the objects and matters that constitute our everyday life.⁵ Nevertheless, if aesthetics has disregarded certain objects and experiences, we should also notice that ‘plain’ existence has suffered from the same intellectual indifference, or what is more, discredit. The inclusion or the omission of certain modes of existence (by ontology and/or by epistemology) is not by any means simply a matter of taste, merely a preference for certain subjects over others. That disregard is on the contrary rooted in an ontological disqualification. Was the neglect of the everyday philosophically legitimate?

Being in the immediate surroundings as entities that are simply there among other entities is a mode of being. Furthermore, and no matter how this observation may humble our particular way of being as humans, that simple mode of being is the most basic, i.e. the most rudimentary and the primordial

⁴ It goes without saying that scientific truth (laws, explanations), as something that does not correspond to the mere description of the immediate surroundings, is another matter.

⁵ I am here paraphrasing Yuriko Saito’s introduction to her *Everyday Aesthetics* (Saito, 2007, p. 1).

mode of being, and, by extension, the shared way of being.⁶ To rephrase it in terms closer to Heidegger, we can say that there may be a privileged entity (at least from the human perspective of language, sense-making, self-determination and other considerations of the sort), which is of course *Dasein*, but this 'favoured' way of existing does not rest on a special ontological status. Or as Jean-Luc Nancy would put it: "the ontological difference is null" (Nancy, 2007, p. 71). On that account, not only aesthetics is pervasive, but being is as well, as redundant and as self-evident as this assertion may seem. Is it however really so evident?

If the philosophical tradition before Heidegger seems to have proceeded as if it were possible to conceive Being independently from *time*, the *world* and the *others* – hence, some sort of 'overexistence' – Heidegger, on the contrary, posits time as the horizon for the understanding of Being; the world as *the* way of *Dasein's* way of being; and being with others as coessential to *Dasein*. Another manner of 'overexisting' nevertheless seems to permeate this new approach.

Being in its 'authentic' (*eigentlich*) sense exceeds what simply is. And I call it an 'excess' because what the other entities experience as being, time, world and 'with' is also possible for *Dasein*. *Dasein* can indeed experience them in that way and as a matter of fact, it frequently does (*Dasein's* inauthentic way of being). This way of being is a *possibility* for *Dasein*. *Dasein*, however, is also concerned by another way of being which is only *Dasein's* possibility, whereas for the other entities this particular way of being is impossible.

There is also an excess in the sense that that which defines *Dasein* is not simply the sense of Being that is characteristic to it but also what is closer to the proper understanding of Being in general. In other words, *Dasein* is not only that entity for whom the sense of Being is an issue (which distinguishes itself from other entities). *Dasein's* authentic way of being is what better exposes what something really is. Accordingly, *Zeitlichkeit* is not the ordinary time, *Being-in-the-world* is not simply being-within-the-world, and the 'Mit' from *Mitsein* cannot be understood as any kind of 'with', i.e., a mere spatial contiguity, for it is not enough to be next to each other (*Nebeneinandersein*) to properly be *with* another. The latter, evidently, is only possible for *Dasein* – and only within its proper way of being – which is what allows the passage from the *Mitsein* to another fundamental trait of *Dasein*, the dangerous telos that is the shared destiny (*Geschick*). To put it briefly, there are reasons to suggest that, with Heidegger, European thought went from one type of 'overexistence' to another. In other words, Heidegger put finitude on the forefront but only as a (privileged) access route to something that in the end revealed itself to be another type of infinitude.

If going back to ontology is justified, it is because EA is not only a matter of aesthetics. To put it another way, the way we think of Being and existence determines how we develop aesthetics. It is indeed not a coincidence that as happens with 'being', 'aesthetic' – the adjective, not the theory – in its core is

⁶ To some degree, I am borrowing this idea, to which I shall come back later on, from Nancy (2000, p. 9).

also something very basic, and that it is the manner in which its theoretical evolution was conducted that detached it from what is simply on-hand. Moreover, by trying to present the philosophical pertinence of everydayness not as an *intention* but as an equally legitimate way of existence, one of the aims is to make possible for EA's legitimacy not to rely on some sort of aesthetical or ethical voluntarism, on a, however well-intentioned, injunction. Some EA's accounts indeed suggest that we *should* promote moral activity (Irvin, 2008, p. 44) or that the ordinary *should be* seen as a source of aesthetic wonder (Formis, 2010, p. 8). However, there are stronger approaches to EA.

2. Why I Prefer EA's 'Strong Version'⁷

2.1 Because of the 'History' of Aesthetics

When questioning Sherri Irvin's interest in the acknowledgment of how pleasurable some 'insignificant' private experiences are, Christopher Dowling rightly reminds us of Kant's distinction between agreeableness and beauty (Dowling, 2010, p. 228). That there are 'minor' experiences that are pleasurable is undeniable, but should we call them 'aesthetic'? Dowling's main concern is to draw attention to the possible danger of "trivializing what counts as the aesthetic" (Dowling, 2010, p. 226). And partially, I agree – as Kevin Melchionne would do too: examples such as Irvin's are "strikingly banal observations" (Melchionne, 2011, p. 439). I do not agree, however, with Dowling's premise – a supposed core concept of the aesthetic (Dowling, 2010, p. 226). Even less do I agree with his way of reading Kant, whom he heavily references in order to formulate what constitutes this core, and therefore the criteria that – according to him – must be taken into account when determining what has a proper aesthetic value; all of which is used to call into question some of EA's claims. Is there thus a key principle that determines what is and what is not 'aesthetic'? As Dowling's article suggests, this question concerns EA's general pertinence but more importantly, how far can EA go. Now, Kant is undeniably a decisive philosopher, but is his contribution in aesthetics so unequivocal?

Since it is mostly because of his first Critique that he gained such a prominent place in the history of philosophy, we should not minimise the fact that, before reflecting on the *a priori* principles pertaining to the aesthetic judgment, Kant used the term 'aesthetic' in a manner that had nothing to do with art or beauty. Moreover, Kant underlined at the time that the use of 'aesthetic' for matters of 'taste' was grounded in a failed hope (elevating the criteria for the estimation of the beautiful to a science). Consequently one had to desist from using 'aesthetic' for those other matters and – as he did for some years – reserve its use to epistemology. What I want to point out is quite simple: that particular meaning of 'aesthetic' – the adjective that depicts our immediate experience and contact with the world – is still valid to this day. Why is this relevant? As mentioned before, Yuriko Saito's focus is on our aesthetic interactions with the objects and matters of our everyday life, not on art. Not to mention the fact

⁷ Succinctly, the 'strong version' is the version that asks to be removed from the authority of the art-centred criteria. Other articles have already identified and analysed the main variants of EA (cf. Dowling, 2010; Ratiu, 2019).

that she is rather explicit about the need of separating ‘aesthetic’ from ‘art’ (Saito, 2017, p. 1). She even calls for EA’s autonomy from art-centred criteria, and is certainly not concerned about an approval from aesthetics in its restrictive sense. It could be said then that her conception of what ‘aesthetic’ is, is closer (certainly, not identical) to the meaning Kant gives it in his first Critique than to what ‘aesthetic’ has come to mean today. Certainly, things are not that simple. Saito’s concerns are not purely limited to the immediate, the routinary and the material, but also consider the fact that what circulates in this immediacy exerts on us through our senses – here, we are still within the limits of the ‘basic’ sense of the aesthetic – an attraction, which is closer to the other sense of the aesthetic. In other words, some degree of ‘beauty’ plays a role in Saito’s account. Nevertheless, even if that ‘attraction’ relied entirely on beauty, the matter in hand would still be beauty and not art. And since we were discussing Kant, if we were to omit his first Critique and focus only on his third one – the first half, that is – to a certain extent we could claim the same. Kant’s concern when examining this ‘new’ sense of ‘aesthetic’ was neither exclusively nor primarily art, but ‘beauty’. Furthermore, although aesthetic judgments are about empirical objects, what ‘aesthetic’ describes is the *subjective* side of such experiences, not the qualities of the objects, i.e. what can be evaluated, debated upon and normed. The latter are closer to judgments of knowledge, which Kant explicitly distinguishes from aesthetic ones, something Dowling seems oblivious of. Also, the universal validity (or ‘universal communicability’) claimed by those judgments – unlike Dowling’s way of presenting it – does not refer to a set of universal “established conventions” (Dowling, 2010, p. 229). Such conventions or norms would not be of an *a priori* nature. In other words, the matter of ‘communicability’ is not intended to produce tools and norms so that we can “engage critically with others” (*Ibid.*). The §33 of the *Critique of the Power of Judgment* is rather clear on that subject. As a matter of fact, a pure aesthetic judgment, i.e., an aesthetic judgment in its proper sense, is one that judges forms without resorting to concepts, which also explains Kant’s preference for natural beauty over artistic beauty (i.e. beauty that is created in accordance to rules).

To summarize, Kant’s third Critique is not intended as a contribution to our ‘critical’ contemplation nor to our ‘critical’ exchanges about artworks. And yet – always with Kant as his source – Dowling reiterates that an appropriate aesthetic judgment implies having tools and norms, so as to elevate our discourses and debates about art. In fact, it could be suggested that the interest that lies in (the first half of) Kant’s third Critique, not only surpasses art, but also beauty, inasmuch as the feeling of beauty appears to be a glimpse of a wider issue: a particular rapport we have with the surrounding world, one that is neither exhausted by knowledge nor by moral imperatives.

Now, this does not mean that there is not a history of aesthetics. Yet, instead of a ‘core’ concept, what this history rather unveils is a flux of agreements and disagreements, with some approaches certainly being more eventful than others. However, every philosophical ‘event’, perhaps precisely because of its magnitude, seems to have been quite rapidly followed by alternative

interpretations, oppositions, and even new major shifts. And a major shift did indeed take place, a development that did refine major concepts and restrict the discipline's scope. However, that shift took place with the emergence of 'Philosophy of Art', that is, when *aesthetics* was deemed either insufficient or unsuitable for the new philosophical ambitions regarding art.⁸ This new period was inevitably much more conscious of the tradition that preceded it, and subsequently chose much more carefully which subjects to include and which concepts to use, and all in the name of the 'dignity' of the discipline (philosophy as a whole) and of the new understanding of art (narrowing the contents suitable for 'great art'). Nevertheless, this shift didn't pertain solely to philosophy of art. It was rather a manifestation of how the academic sphere as a whole embarked on a more 'serious' path where 'plain everydayness' had little to no place.⁹

2.2 Because of Its Potential to Undermine Some Lasting Assumptions of the Tradition

For Yuriko Saito – one of the main exponents of EA's 'strong version' – the philosophical pertinence of EA seems to be, above all, the series of implications that objects and matters of everyday life have in our lives since of course our lives are not only ours. Our lives are indeed not limited to a private sphere but, quite contrarily, have considerable consequences (e.g., of an ethical and environmental type) for other people's lives and for the world in general. To put it in a different way, Saito's research does not have as a central argument that there is an extraordinary dimension within the ordinary. As a matter of fact, she is rather aware of the theoretical danger of such a claim: "by making the ordinary extraordinary and rendering the familiar strange, while we gain aesthetic experiences thus made possible, we also pay the price by compromising the very everydayness of the everyday" (Saito, 2007, p. 50). Indeed, arguing that there is an extraordinary dimension in the ordinary would amount to falling again in the trap of making the out-of-the-ordinary, which has also been regarded as the out-of-this-world, the criterion for philosophical legitimacy. And as I have already underlined, more important than making the ordinary the starting point, is to remain in it, that is to say, to keep the everyday in its everydayness.

In what could be the opposite end of EA's theoretical spectrum, Barbara Formis certainly stresses how embedded in routine and thus how ordinary our daily experiences habitually are, and how uninterrupted these ordinary experiences are by the extraordinary (Formis, 2010, pp. 7-8). However, despite emphasising

⁸ Even then, what followed was not an homogeneous path. The focus on beauty was not replaced by a focus on art. Both Schelling and Hegel reserved a central spot for beauty, but took it to another level. 'Nature', on the other hand, received a different treatment from each. If in general, 'nature' was finally given more credit, in Hegel it lost almost all philosophical dignity. And it was Hegel's approach that prevailed over those of his contemporaries.

⁹ In other words, it was within European intellectual development that a restrictive tendency came into play. I therefore disagree with Saito when she singles out the twentieth-century Anglo-American aesthetics as the one that, because of its narrowness, sees in EA the "opening of a new frontier" (Saito, 2017, p. 1). It is true that Saito does not mention a 'European approach' in those pages. She does however specify the Anglo-American approach as being restrictive, and, contrastingly, refers to the Greeks and also to Baumgarten, i.e. the Europeans, as an example of a broader conception of the aesthetic.

this clear manifestation of finitude, Formis does not remain within the limits of the latter, and does the complete opposite. She characterises the occurrence of those repetitive and meaningless experiences, i.e. the fact that they actually happen without being interrupted (that they are possible everyday), as extraordinary, and what is more, as a *miracle* (*Ibid.*, p. 8). This, she clarifies, is not a celebration of banality. However, even though a celebration of banality is certainly not needed, stressing how pervasive banality is would be intellectually more stimulating than appealing to words such as ‘miracle’. What we perceive in Formis is our perennial need for significance, for some sort of transcendence, i.e., precisely what has nourished and justified the neglect of everydayness. And neither Saito nor Jean-Luc Nancy are afraid of the fact that existence can present itself in a trivial manner.

Another reason why I prefer EA’s ‘strong version’ is because its main concern is not simply the appreciation of the private experience (in itself and for itself). If Dowling sees Sherri Irvin’s account as problematic in that it trivializes ‘aesthetics’, my concern is rather how trivial Irvin’s argument appears to be. Irvin seems to merely acknowledge that our everyday experiences are “replete with aesthetic character” (Irvin, 2008, p. 29). She notices indeed that many of her experiences, perhaps all of them, are of sensuous and pleasurable character. She acknowledges that she is there in a familiar environment, existing as a singular Being yet intertwined with everything around, directly or indirectly touching and being touched (for seeing, hearing and smelling are ways of being reached by), experiencing and interacting with colours, forms, sounds, movements, volumes, etc. And because she is inter-acting with different entities (or parts of them) and these in turn inter-act with her – by the way, these entities can be anything around us, not just entities especially suited for contemplation – it is safe to say that we constantly and inevitably shape and are shaped by the world. It is beyond our choice. To be honest, however, this is not her argument. It is the way I present her series of examples (cf. Irvin, 2008, p. 31) with a little help from Jean-Luc Nancy. By themselves, Irvin’s examples are mostly a description of a few of her recurrent behaviours and how these are a source of personal satisfaction. That is, her analysis is not about how we are deeply intertwined with the world, but how *I* nourish *my* world. Later in her paper, the segment of her argumentation centred on the moral reasons for her claims does not go past an invitation to develop a more satisfying relation with what we already have, which at the very most constitutes a moral recommendation.

Finally, perhaps I am overestimating this version of EA, but from my perspective, there is a (potentially substantial) difference in the fact that Saito doesn’t limit her sights to neither the isolated traits of isolated objects nor to the isolated ‘I’ going through a flow of sensations. Rather, she sets her attention on how the traits that we get *from* an object X that we touch and use *on* Y, exert an influence on our decisions and thus on our actions, and therefore on the network that we are and that we are in. It is not then so much about the (everyday) objects in themselves, nor about us feeling satisfied with ourselves (through the private and pleasurable insignificant experiences). It is more

about the *circulation* of it all, and how this circulation is aesthetic. In this sense, Saito's account leaves the door open for further explorations, whereas the accounts centred primarily on private enjoyment or on how the ordinary is actually extraordinary stray us away from this other understanding that is opened up by a more radical approach to EA.

3. Jean Luc Nancy's Ontology (or Keeping Existence within Finitude)

Just as he highlights how pivotal Heidegger's work has been for Western philosophy, as well as for his own thought, Jean-Luc Nancy also explicitly stresses Heidegger's shortfalls (Nancy, 2008b, p. 5). These shortfalls, however, as Nancy underlines, are not exclusive to Heidegger. On the contrary, they permeate the whole of Western thought (*Ibid.*). Nancy's own work could hence at least partially be read as a response to those shortfalls; thus, as a conscious drifting away from the tradition. Throughout his oeuvre, the recurrence of some particular concepts ('singular plural', 'touch', etc.) and the specific way of treating some familiar notions ('community', 'art', etc.) could be interpreted as a call to undertake a turn in our philosophical path. As a matter of fact, Nancy explicitly underlines the urgency for such a shift (Nancy, 2000, p. xv). Notwithstanding this shift, Nancy's approach remains a 'European approach': he does not abandon the often criticised 'European' way of being particularly technical in his terminology. His thought unfolds through the pages in a somewhat opaque way. Nor does he ever discard ontology. Rather Nancy makes the question of the sense of Being the fundamental one. In what could be considered his most important work – 1996's *Being Singular Plural* – Nancy clearly states that this book's ambition is to redo the whole of 'first philosophy' (*Ibid.*). One should not, however, be fooled by this expression, which certainly echoes an old concern but most importantly, a traditional way of thinking and thus of disregarding certain ways of being. It has indeed to be noted that Nancy's ontology is profoundly rooted in what the tradition, contrary to him, predominantly either dismissed or devalued: *presence*.

3.1 Presence (and the Other Sense of Sense)

Here are a few examples of Nancy's main ideas on the subject: being is the being of an entity and *nothing other* (Nancy, 2007, p. 71); (as quoted earlier) "the ontological difference is null" (*Ibid.*); the world is just present and this presence does not differ from anything (*Ibid.*); "a world is nothing that is outside existence" (Nancy, 2000, p. 29). Consequently, and in clear contrast to Heidegger, in Nancy there is no privileged entity when it comes to ontology; likewise, being-in-the-world equates to being-*within*-the-world.

Through these and a variety of other assertions, Nancy stresses finitude, one that seems to be in need of being repeatedly underlined given our 'natural' propensity to look elsewhere and not here or to make of what we encounter next to us something other than what presents itself. By privileging presence, Nancy diminishes the predominance of 'meaning' in our understanding of the world and of things in general (he does not, however, nullify meaning nor he invalidates it). In other words, in Nancy's thought, the fundamental sense of 'sense' is not meaning but what goes through the senses. And it is indeed

a going-through, a circulation: passages from one entity to another; human, not human, 'natural', manufactured, etc. The consequence is no small matter: it is the *space* between the entities and the 'touching' that goes through it, that exposes existence more than *time*, more than *meaning*, and more than the entities in themselves (i.e. isolated). Hence, our (rudimentary) relation with the world, our being-in-the-world, our understanding of it, is aesthetic. Or, to rephrase it, the aesthetic comprehension of things is the comprehension of things. In any case, whatever significance, meaning, discourses or norms we can construct, all of them rely on presence, they come 'after' presence (although, in this attempt to drift away from the tradition, we should find alternatives to the habitual thinking in terms of 'before' and 'after' as if there was something 'behind' and 'preceding' everything else). An inability to trust presence has however shaped our perception of the world. We see, we touch, we are touched, we go through things. Despite all this, "we have to seek assurance for it. That *the thing itself* would be there isn't certain" (Nancy, 2008, p. 5). If someone were to retort that Nancy wrote that sentence not to talk about our dealing with entities in general but quite exclusively with respect to the body – the book I took that quote from is titled *Corpus* – it must be reminded that for Nancy, the body is not a 'particular' entity: "The *ontology of the body* is ontology itself: being's in no way prior or subjacent to the phenomenon here. The body is the being of existence » (*Ibid.*, p. 15). Such a claim shows how far Nancy intends to go when rethinking ontology, for the body has notably been devalued by the tradition, ontologically, epistemologically and morally.

Could such claims be read as a trivialization of ontology? From a certain perspective that remains faithful to the tradition, certainly yes. However, I want to focus on another possible objection to this insistence on presence. An objection that could be considered legitimate, particularly when combined with the claim that there is no ontological difference. Indeed, one may argue that such ideas could lead to social and political indifference and inaction, e.g. not identifying ourselves as responsible to elaborate a plan of action, initiate it, to carry it through, etc. Nancy is nonetheless clear that emphasising presence does not equate to surrendering to some sort of 'presentism' (Nancy, 2017, p. 123). On the contrary, by underlining the ontological primordially of what surrounds and touches us, by stressing that this world is the only world, that being is being-with-others (any others), ontology cannot but be political (and consequently, neither indifferent nor passive). However, expressed in this way, it might seem that what forces us to redo ontology is a need (for instance, a political urgency) or some sort of good intention, and thus not a legitimate philosophical re-evaluation of Being. When analysing Nancy's proposal in detail, however, this redoing proves to be not only needed but also possible, and since possible, necessary. Western's thought has missed a fundamental trait of being: the 'with' that is structurally essential to being (Nancy, 2008b, p. 5). Being is being-with, fundamentally, and thus, all the time, every time. Furthermore, unlike Heidegger, Nancy's 'with' concerns all entities, not just humans. It is partially through the development of what entails the being-with that, in Nancy, the political – and, by extension, the social and the ethical – reveals itself as constitutive of Being. Consequently, it proves to be not

a separate and external dimension from the (supposedly) primordial one of the individual, i.e. something to resolve afterwards or in a complementary way (Nancy, 2000, p. 38). How is this pertinent to this article's concerns? First, because one of EA's concerns is the ethical dimension of the pervasiveness of the aesthetic in our everyday life. Second, because it encourages us to reflect on the potential reach of EA. Nancy's ontological approach paves the way to thinking beyond the acknowledgment of the agreeable moments of our private experiences; beyond the 'self', the 'subject', and even 'intersubjectivity' (a notion that, more or less, still privileges the 'subject'); and beyond the consideration of our life experience as humans and our connexion to other humans. Finally, it also allows us to rethink our relation with simple things and with the world in general, outside the enduring perspective of the 'higher' and 'lower' senses, of the 'meaningful' and the 'merely instrumental'.

3.2 Touch, the Highest Sense?

Trying to go past the criterion of 'significance' as one of the decisive ones within ontology, discussing 'touch' should not be a matter of 'higher' or 'lower'. If touch plays a central role in Nancy's understanding of Being, it is because it not only exposes the basic and rudimentary way of being, it is that basic way of being.

As focused as it is on meaning, philosophy seems to have lost track of this other sense of 'sense', the basic sense, when in fact, *the sense of the world* is that sense, since what the world presents to the touch is not "a mere exteriority of [an] impenetrable thing" (Nancy, 1997, p. 11). To put it another way, sense "does not signify" (*Ibid.*, p. 10), "sense is touching" (*Ibid.*, p. 63). And it is because thought is *touched* by existence (by the world) that thought creates meaning.

Given our 'bad habits', Nancy warns us of the obvious risk in all of this: making of this 'basic' sense "a superior signification" (*Ibid.*, p. 10), i.e. going back to our intellectual (mal)practice of oversignifying, thus exalting the sensory to a caricatural extreme (Nancy, 2008, p. 23). In other words, the sensory has to remain sensory. In this sense, Nancy's ontology could therefore be useful in addressing one of AE's theoretical issues: preserving everydayness as everydayness. This, however, does not mean that thought and meaning do not play a critical role. What it does mean is that there is no thinking without touching (*Ibid.*, p. 37). Besides, since existence touches thought and, in turn, thought touches existence, we are always producing-sense (both senses), and therefore, making-the-world. Once again, it is our (rudimentary) aesthetic relation with the world, the base of our making-the-world. Nancy's ontology could therefore also be useful – once more – when working on the ethical implications of the everyday.

3.3 The Quotidian

If Heidegger identified the quotidian with the inauthentic, the undifferentiated and the statistical, Nancy conversely understands what manifests itself in the quotidian as an "affirmation of the world" (Nancy, 2000, p. 9). The quotidian

exposes existence, in that existence has no essence and is not a substance. Heidegger, as the tradition before him, seems to have been moved by a 'natural' distrust, ontologically lessening what presents itself in an ordinary way (e.g., a stone, that which has no 'World'). However, what is it that legitimises the everyday to be considered as a lesser manifestation of *what is?* Nancy contends the opposite: "[existence's] intimate discord, its polymorphy and its polyphony" (*Ibid.*) is exposed by the everyday, through the everyday, in the everyday. Nancy is rather explicit about it: "the humble layer of our quotidian experience contains a fundamental ontological attestation" (*Ibid.*, pp. 8-9). That fundamental attestation is that Being is *being singular plural*, i.e. existence's singular and material manifestations are not simply 'multiplicity', something whose 'truth' is to be found in a non-material 'totality' elsewhere. Also, that there is not *one* origin, but a plurality of them, happening at each moment, each one affirming the world, this world. The quotidian is thus not the trivial nor the inauthentic. Any entity is, and its way of being is the shared way of being by any other. Furthermore, the absence of an ontological difference does not mean that we are indistinct from one another, for every entity is singular (hence the discordance, the polymorphy and the polyphony) and remains so, but always as a being-with.

Another idea that shows that Nancy not only welcomes what the tradition would consider as trivial but actually takes it into serious consideration, is his suggestion that thought itself – i.e. not just the ephemeral mental acknowledging of some random perception but philosophical thought – is intruded, and thus shaped, by the 'trivial'. Nancy notices that not only cities, but also the countryside, have increasingly become louder (cars, machines, tractors, trains); radios and TVs are never too far away, cell phones are ringing here and there. Thinking happens *throughout this network*, and is consequently "surprised, shaken, called or summoned from very far or very near" (Nancy and Lèbre, 2017b, pp. 13-14). To put it another way, existence – in its plainest sense – *touches* thought. As a general rule, in Nancy, nothing is free from being affected by the ordinary. Not only during thought's process, but also because any object can stimulate thought to apply itself to its exercise: to start thinking (Nancy, 2002, p. 55). In other words, thinking – a process that happens within (this) time and (this) space, and hence, is entangled in matter – not only is interrupted, but shaped by the way the everyday unfolds. In short, the way Nancy works ontology is a door to the everyday.

3.4 Art

Art may seem absent here but it is certainly not absent in Nancy's body of work. Nancy's general idea of art brings art closer to the broader sense of the 'aesthetic'. According to him, art is *the most telling exposure of existence*. Art makes more evident what constitutes existence: senses, gestures, matter, entanglements, lines, shapes, volumes, sounds, touching, forming, dislocating, the using of tools, the choosing of tools, randomness, deciding, doing, and so on. Art lies primarily in its operation(s) more than in the finished artwork. It lies in the plurality of aesthetic exchanges that do not (because they could not) exclude the non-artistic and the banal. In short, the aesthetic should not be,

and actually is not, dominated by 'Art'. It is the arts that are formed by the aesthetic, and are therefore determined by it.

3.5 Conclusion

One random and trivial experience may not tell us much about anything. Nevertheless, the fact that existence manifests itself as if it were primarily constituted of the singular, the ephemeral, the sensory and the 'insignificant' is worthy of our philosophical attention. This should not entail, however, that we should make a totality of the singular, a necessity of the contingent, and so forth. More than the trivial, the problem seems to lie in our need for 'meaning' and in how far we carry this need. Indeed, this need seems to play a considerable role when our intellect ontologically and epistemologically dismisses certain things that, even though they are, are not in a certain way. The neglect of the everyday might therefore rely not on its limitations, but on our limitations regarding our conception of Being.

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