

# Ordinary Sensibilia

## Barbara Formis

In this paper, I propose some philosophical reflections arising from the encounter with a work of art, namely the *Squatting Aphrodite*, which is one of the Roman copies that is held in the same room as the *Venus de Milo* in the Louvre Museum in Paris, France. From the description of this artwork and the effect it has on the spectator, I draw three main consequences: the conceptual difference between ordinary sensibility and everyday aesthetics; the criticism of aesthetic conformity, and the political implications of adopting an ordinary perspective towards aesthetic experience. | Keywords: *Ordinary, Body, Greek Sculpture, Performance, Everyday Aesthetics*

### 1. Being Struck by the Ordinary

When one visits the Hall of the Caryatids at the Louvre Museum, one wanders through the remains of Greek and Roman statuary. As soon as one enters, one passes under a balustrade held by columnal goddesses, the so-called caryatids, statuesque figures of immense women who hold the architectural forms on their heads, without really carrying their weight, as if architectural stone blocks were held by the vulnerable strength of their necks, in a posture of grace and power. At the other end of the room, opposite the entrance, as the culmination of the visit, one will come face to face with the *Venus de Milo*, the symbol of classical beauty. She is placed on a pedestal, alone in the middle of the last room, she appears as if she is raised above the ground, surrounded by tourists taking pictures of her, like paparazzi.

We know the *Venus de Milo*, her fame has already touched us, we have heard of her, we have seen photographs, we already know her and now we meet her in real life for the first time. She seems to be looking at us from the top of her pose, her torso is undulating, her breasts and her stomach are naked, a sheet surrounds her hips, and her arms are missing, even if one can guess their position. Her face is similar to Apollo's: she has a beautiful, gentle but distant gaze, exactly like him. Her look is slightly androgynous just as his look is slightly feminine. She is larger and taller than human size. She incarnates the ideal beauty and she is indeed a goddess, a star.

Yet before reaching the *Venus de Milo*, one discovers other statues, some of them are relatively famous, some are very well preserved, some others are

broken, their bodies amputated. And there, before the end of the larger middle room, just to the left of the wall separating you from the *Venus de Milo*, next to a window, one will see a replica of the *Squatting Aphrodite*. It is also called the *Venus of Vienna*, it is quite a compact and round sculpture of a naked woman, coming out of a bath or preparing to go into it.



Figure 1: Squatting Aphrodite.  
Source: Photo by the author

This particular copy was discovered in 1827–1828 by M. Michoud in the *frigidarium* of the thermal complex of Saint-Romain-en-Gal called the Mirror Palace, a place identified in 1835 by Prosper Mérimée on the right bank of the Rhone and classified in 1840. It is one of the numerous Roman replicas of a theme Hellenistic artists were fond of; that of Aphrodite in the bath. These ancient copies decorated baths and gardens. The original model, probably in bronze, has not survived. It is attributed to the Greek sculptor Doidalsas of Bithynia, according to the description of the portico of Octavia in Rome by Pliny the Elder. This sculpture, carved from Paros marble and polished, measures 140 x 42 x 60 cm.

One will notice the representation of the folds of the skin on the belly of the figure as well as the marked right hip. If the Greeks represented Aphrodite as a severe and cruel goddess, the Romans on their side, retained more of her benevolent aspect. The statue strikes us; it interests us and at the same time it makes us uncomfortable, we are intrigued by it, but also somehow driven back from it. It attracts us, but for no clear reasons, in a sort of opaque way, it appeals to us in an intuitive way, we cannot really make sense of it, and it feels somehow liberating. It is a human-sized statue of which only the body remains. She is crouching, her back is bent, and her round belly bulges. The label tells us that she is represented as performing her toilette, we imagine her at the edge of a lake or a pond. We are embarrassed to surprise her in an intimate moment. The head, arms and feet are missing: the statue is damaged; traces of torn marble can be seen on her right buttock, on her thighs, and the neck shows a deep mark at the level of the internal central axis. She has been slaughtered.

We are here in front of a trashed, wrecked beauty, so unclassical, without pride, and vulnerable. She has been caught during a moment of an ordinary ritual, washing. Her curves are realistic, and contrary to the ideal of harmonious Greek beauty she carries scars of violence and mutilation. Moreover, nobody looks at her. All the visitors rush to the *Venus de Milo* who is assailed by photos: the visitors form a court around her, standing up to take a picture, aiming their cell phones upwards from below, admiring her immense and imposing figure. Meanwhile, the *Squatting Aphrodite*, being of human size and due to her posture and her height (it is only 140 cm tall), forces us to bend, to curve our backs, mirroring her posture. And whilst everybody is so busy admiring the *Venus de Milo*, the *Squatting Aphrodite* looks lonely. She is indeed alone, next to a window, in a corner, as if left behind, as if she had been abandoned.



Figure 2: Squatting Aphrodite.  
Source: Photo by the author

But if we take time to discover this ordinary beauty, if we explore her body, we will be surprised. The *Squatting Aphrodite* is neither attractive nor charismatic, she easily passes unnoticed, but she provides an aesthetic experience once we turn around her. Her body is rounded and full, and there, in the middle of her back, we are struck by an astonishing detail: a very small hand, a child's hand, placed on the right-hand side of her back, just at the level of the shoulder blades. The five fingers are intact and the hand is cut off at the level of the wrist. The label tells us that it is the hand of her son *Eros*, the demigod of love. Her son *Eros* is present *in absentia*, through a hand alone, whilst his body is completely missing, and this lone hand will strike us as the ordinary but powerful bond of a lovingly feeling, the trace of a new sensibility.



Figure 3: Squatting Aphrodite.  
Source: Photo by the author

The *Squatting Aphrodite* is embedded in an ecological environment, she is not separating and establishing herself from a distance, she is grounded and related to the natural elements. She is connected to the *earth*, she turns her body towards the ground and has a direct link to what Wittgenstein would call the “rough ground” that we have lost and to which philosophy has to be able to return. The *Squatting Aphrodite* is also connected to the element of *water*. She performs a commonplace gesture of washing, keeping herself clean, purifying her body and keeping it in good health. Other replicas of the original Greek statue show that she is usually accompanied by her son *Eros*, leaning on her back. Between her and her son an exchange takes place of glances of complicity and love. In the replica in the Louvre, only the tiny hand of *Eros* has remained

on Aphrodite's back since the rest of the body has disappeared. Our gaze is electrified by this hand which is like a relic, a lost grasp, a gesture between the tragic and a joke. This hand is entirely attached to the mother's back, as if to symbolize the bond of dependence, the ethics of care and relations that brings the goddess down to the status of the mother.

The type of love that is expressed through this statue can be defined as *ordinary*. Why? Because it is a common and widely shared feeling because this sensibility recalls 'love' with a small 'l', ordinary love, maternal eroticism, the relationship and the interdependence of the bonds of care. It is a non-idealistic aesthetic feature marked by an elementary form of desire. This is how we are struck by ordinary aesthetic qualities: we don't know about this figure before coming to the Louvre, we haven't seen pictures representing it. This sculpture is not preceded by its fame, it is not perceived dominantly by its visual form. But we get to access this figure in another way, she touches us from the inside, through a feeling: we understand the emotions the statue is communicating because we carry these emotions in our guts, we recognize the emotions that the *Squatting Aphrodite* is expressing not thru comprehension but from a non digested experience.

Why do we pay attention to the *Venus de Milo*, androgynous and proud in her posture, and not to this mutilated copy of the *Squatting Aphrodite*? Why is the violated, vulnerable, realistic and ordinary body not attractive? Why is the logic of beauty an aesthetics of verticality and not of horizontality? Why do we prefer to look at bodies that expose themselves to the gaze, bodies that do nothing, that are carried by their own audacity, instead of being interested in ordinary bodies, in everyday gestures, in those bodies that are doing something, caught in a universe of use and practice? If we erect the *Venus de Milo* on a pedestal, and sideline the *Squatting Aphrodite*, if we relegate the latter to the category of the low and vulgar, it is because we rank theory as superior to practice, because we value the ideal over the ordinary and because we prefer an aesthetics of contemplation to an aesthetics of practice.

And yet, this hierarchy is not particularly stable and these distinctions are not very clear: they can be re-examined. It is not so much a question of rewriting the history of art and the logics of power, but rather of revealing intricate confusions between what is supposedly ugly and what is supposedly beautiful, vulnerability and strength, practice and theory, contemplation and use. This inquiry is helped along by recalling that the term *aesthetics* has two meanings: on the one hand it refers to harmony, order and visual contemplation, and on the other hand it is indebted to the senses, embodiment, disorder, violence and erotic desire. Indeed, the main reason why the *Squatting Aphrodite* does not encounter the same fate as the *Venus de Milo* is that she expresses the link between the aesthetic and the erotic in a far more sensual way and connects the aesthetic to the realm of the body in all its earthly qualities.

This mutilated, violated figure is above all a maternal figure. She also incarnates the violence practised on certain subjects, who might be perceived as different or eccentric. This form of violence is related to her being

a maternal figure because maternity is a condition of the female body. From a feminist perspective, the *Squatting Aphrodite* is an alternative figure to masculinity and it stands for the minor figures and the subalterns. However, the differences, the conflict, the domination and the discrimination evoked here are not exclusive but inclusive. What I mean by this is that the *Squatting Aphrodite* strikes us not so much by her specificity, but by the fact that she suggests a vulnerability that is more or less shared by everyone. She strikes us as ordinary because her eccentricity is a source of vulnerability. Indeed, human subjects are constructed through a form of mediation which has its starting point in the body as the seat of consciousness, of force and weakness. In this manner the hand of *Eros* seems to act both as a call for *help* but also as *support*. The child helps the mother to carry herself, as if this hand came to support the fragility that unites them. The aesthetic feature that links these mutilated and love-driven figures is not that of beauty but that of sensitivity. Such a sensitivity doesn't strike us through visually harmonious forms or through a call to desire and frustrated love, but rather through a mediation built on the vulnerable dimensions of corporeality, namely through the reality of being a body and having a body: the reality of vulnerability due to corporeal materiality.

## 2. Getting out of conformity

The *Squatting Aphrodite* not only helps us to oppose an ordinary aesthetics to an idealizing one, but it also helps us exit aesthetic conformity, it helps us resist placing the value of the aesthetic experience in collective and pre-established expectations. An attitude of conformity is the act of matching our behaviour to group norms, especially if we experience an object inside the walls of a museum and a gallery and we perceive it through the lenses of the institution. Certainly, expectations and psychological circumstances change if we are in the street or in a theatre, but there is no evidence that this is true also for empirical conditions: it is with the same body and with the same eyes that we watch a show and that we observe passers-by in the street. In a theatre, our perceptual modality does not vary, it is only our attitude that changes. Conversely, one could contemplate a passing street as if one were in the theatre, thus dissociating the subjective experience from its usual physical context. Georges Perec's *Tentative d'épuisement d'un lieu parisien* (Perec, 1974) is a literary example of this second attitude.

Now, that the *artworld*<sup>1</sup> gives legitimacy to the work does not imply – and it would even be a contradiction – that it generates the qualities that this same world recognizes as artistic. Conformity only recognizes art through its institutional codification and not through the process undergone by the artist. It sees art only once the latter has died, mummified in a museum, the living process of its insurrection in the world lost forever. Aesthetic conformity forgets the process of poietics (*poïétique*), a practice of inspiration dear to Paul Valéry (Valéry, 1937, 1944); it also forgets René Passeron's concept

<sup>1</sup> This expression by George Dickie, itself borrowed from Arthur Danto, has now become a standard way of defining the whole institutional context of art (See Dickie, 1973).

of “instauration” (Passeron, 1989); it forgets the preliminary outlines, the sketches, the blockages, the failures, the experiments which are the very fabric of the “creative process”, dear to Marcel Duchamp and to the artistic lineage he inspired.

And yet, as we have seen previously, the *Squatting Aphrodite* is placed in *exactly* the same room as the *Venus de Milo*, the material is the same, the forms represented are similar. Of course, we possess a cultural heritage bound to our consciousness and knowledge. As spectators holding a ticket, we enter the Louvre with certain expectations and experience. We already know the *Venus de Milo*, we have seen it represented, in photos, on posters and even sometimes on coffee cups. Her presence is expected and we will meet her as if she were a celebrity. The *Squatting Aphrodite*, on the other hand, is a mutilated copy of a lost and more precious statue made of bronze. We do not know her, we did not expect to meet and face her, nor did we look for her. This is why the encounter we might have with the *Squatting Aphrodite* is similar to the encounter with what Duchamp names “the beauty of indifference” which he invokes for his ready-mades. The power of the ready-made is a sort of delayed sabotage: ready-mades are objects of neutral or contradictory beauty, which we don't really like, and they don't possess harmonious qualities. The beauty of indifference implies that we like them precisely because we look the other way. The *Squatting Aphrodite*, while being a sculpture, embodies ordinary qualities; although installed in a museum, it nevertheless strikes us with both indifference and attractiveness.

The *Squatting Aphrodite*, with its mutilated form, is more easily recognizable as an aesthetic object by the gaze of a spectator who has become accustomed to modern and contemporary art. Her shape is trans-temporal. The political and aesthetic characteristics of the *Squatting Aphrodite* are more contemporary and turn away from classical categories. As a mutilated sculpture, it could also be seen as purposely unfinished and, since it has realistic characteristics, it could be understood as a figure of the modern era. It thus contradicts the place that has been chosen for her in the Louvre, and in particular next to the *Venus of Milo*, which dominates the room. In this situation, the aesthetic conformity is undermined since the institutional context and the cultural history no longer play their role.

Hence, if we take the problem not from the standpoint of what John Dewey called, not without irony, “the museum conception of art”, but rather from the standpoint of the artists, their experience, their grammar, or their life, we can see that the criterion of context changes, and becomes less decisive. It is possible to understand and shape the definition and the experience of art *outside* its conventional places (museums, theatres or galleries). This is what artists themselves have been demonstrating for more than half a century. The physical places and institutions that publicize themselves as representatives of the art world can no longer, according to this new perspective, act with creative power, but must be satisfied with symbolic power.

The ordinary, with its erotic and sensitive impact, is not transmitted through the symbolism of ideas. During the neo-avant-garde, artists set themselves up against the limits imposed by the traditional artistic contexts. The aesthetics of the ordinary, the art of the banal became exemplary in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. It suffices to think of Daniel Buren's unofficial urban poster campaigns, Allan Kaprow's happenings, the Situationist Internationale's urban rambles, Joseph Beuys' actions, Anna Halprin's life-like-dances, Fluxus' ironic gestures, Trisha Brown, or the Judson Dance Theatre's choreographies to realize the fecundity of this approach and its importance with regard to critical theory. By placing themselves in an urban space or within nature, these practices, while being recognized as artistic, sought to extract themselves from the "genetic" influence of the institutional artistic context, as well as from the capitalist and neo-liberal influence that animates it.

Through the strength of its form, and through its practical posture, the *Squatting Aphrodite* instructs us on the vulnerable strength of ordinary life. She shows that living is a form of response to life's injunctions (washing, eating, sleeping, finding shelter), that life is a kind of domestication of feelings and emotions, and that experience is never immediate but always interspersed with layers of meaning. The life we live requires us to perform obligations and leaves little time for relaxation and pleasure, especially for those people who are subalterns, poor and in distress. The *Squatting Aphrodite* shows that living is a holistic and intertwined experience, in which ordinary gestures related to bodily needs are directly connected to an emotional dimension: washing one's body is also a moment of the exchange of love. The *Squatting Aphrodite* embodies, in my opinion, the condition of living, which Hannah Arendt (1958) named "the human condition". This condition is to be sought in "plurality", i.e., in the fact that we are born in a relation of care and dependence.

From the standpoint of Arendt's notion of plurality, if the *Venus de Milo* is isolated, a unique, one of a kind figure, on the other hand, the *Squatting Aphrodite*, in contrast, is 'double': she is not alone, she is with her son. Plurality as part of the human condition opens to the dimension of politics, as Arendt shows. Each of the activities categorized under the concepts of "labour", "work" and "action" are caught in a web of interdependent relationships. Acting in isolation is a contradiction in terms. The idea of *vita activa* as Arendt proposes it in *The Human Condition*, shows that biological life and political action are connected and that philosophy needs to grasp the inner relation between natality and history. Of course, in Arendt this is more a political than an aesthetic problem. Arendt underlies the features proper to the subject who acts under the often merciless light of public life. In parallel to Arendt's political insight, we can see how, within the realm of aesthetics, once conformity no longer plays a role, aesthetic experience is emancipated from the art world and its institutional contexts. A work of art is capable of striking us so deeply that it shows us our own intimacy and the plurality of our shared emotional condition, to the point that it sets in motion the very foundations of identity. On this basis, we can see that any situation whatsoever becomes active and *vital* in so far as a relationship is engaged within it: this incites us to define the situation through plurality, vulnerability and inclusiveness.



### 3. Ordinary sensibility and everyday aesthetics

We have seen previously that the *Squatting Aphrodite* helps us to look at the ordinary instead of the ideal (through the distinction with the *Venus de Milo*) and it helps us also to escape the context of the museum through the link with the plural condition of humanity. In this third section, I will show how it serves us in understanding the difference between ordinary sensibility and everyday aesthetics. What is ordinary sensibility and why is it not the same as everyday aesthetics?

Let us simply recall that *sensibility* is not an equivalent of *aesthetics*. Even though aesthetics concerns the domain of the sensible, as the Greek term *aisthesis* indicates, the history of aesthetics and its link with culture has taken the idea of aesthetics out of the body and its organic senses in order to intellectualize aesthetics and to produce a particular kind of consciousness. This philosophical turn, accomplished in an exemplary manner within the German tradition from Baumgarten to Hegel and beyond, is of crucial importance. It is in this way that aesthetics has become independent and separated from the philosophy of knowledge. The problem is that this transformation occurred at the expense of relegating the body, and especially the deeply animal somatic characteristics of human experience, to a lower level, excluding them from the realm of aesthetics, as happens for instance in the Hegelian system of the fine arts, which dismisses the role of the senses of smell and touch in aesthetics.

In contrast, everydayness and ordinary aesthetics opens the path seeking to recover the sensible even from the standpoint of its sensibility, which can be defined simply as a return to the senses and to things that can be sensed. From a very basic point of view, it can be related to *sense data* without being reduced to it. Sense data is a popular concept employed in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century by philosophers such as Bertrand Russell, C. D. Broad, H. H. Price, A.J. Ayer, and G.E. Moore. The important point for me here is that *sense data* are supposedly properties that are known directly to us via perception. In other words, sensible properties are derived from an unanalyzed experience. These data are thus distinct from the ‘real’ objects in the world outside the mind, about whose existence and properties, in contrast, we can often be mistaken. This is the main reason why sense data theories were criticized by philosophers such as J.L. Austin, and Wilfrid Sellars, mainly because sense data appears as something that is simply given (Sellars most notably formulated his famous “Myth of the Given” argument).

This is not the place to go into details about the complicated debate concerning *sense data* in contemporary philosophy. Rather, I would like to invoke the importance of the senses over intellectual understanding in order to grasp the specificity of ordinary aesthetic experience. The non-reflexive experience afforded by ordinary life does not possess the structure of logical judgment, nor does it provide clear knowledge, and yet it is quite evident to the senses. This evidence could be linked to a type of intuition that does not require the operations of cognition; it is the realm of *sensibilia*. How can we

describe *sensibilia*? *Sensibilia* can be understood in this context as sense data that give rise to an aesthetic experience without judgment or imagination. They are experienced with no distance and they build an aesthetics with no imagination.

This is why, in order to maintain the ordinary aspect of aesthetic experience, it is important to remain on the bodily level of *sense data* without including imagination, which can lead us into rather misleading metaphysical grounds since it involves the intellect. Contrary to ordinary *sensibilia*, imaginary sense data are abstract stimuli as presented from the senses to consciousness because imagination includes inner subjective states of self-awareness such as expressive emotion and self-reflection. This is why I prefer to think of sense data as separate from abstraction and related to the animal senses and the biological dimension.

This aspect of our inquiry leads us to explore the role of animality in aesthetics, as Wittgenstein pointed out: there is something fundamentally uncertain in our supposed knowledge, an uncertainty reassured by mutual trust, which reveals the primitive form of our functioning. Wittgenstein, most commonly considered the father of the philosophy of language, never invoked abstraction in philosophy. On the contrary, especially in his latest philosophy we find a form of logic that is primitive and unanalysed, as shown by § 475 of *On Certainty*: “I want to regard man here as an animal; as a primitive being to which one grants instinct but not ratiocination. As a creature in a primitive state. Any logic good enough for a primitive means of communication needs no apology from us. Language did not emerge from some kind of ratiocination [Raisonnement]”<sup>2</sup> (Wittgenstein, 1969, p. 38).

Language is a veil draped over a feeling of shame coming from our animality. Wittgenstein encourages us to be uninhibited, to remain on “the rough ground” of the ordinary, to assume the mixture of impressions and expressions, to keep the indistinguishability between my gesture and that of others, to remain in the minimal primitivism of our ways of communicating, because, in some odd ways, *shame could be useful to comprehension*. This animal primitivism evoked by Wittgenstein could assist us in redrawing the sense of our gestures and our language. It could allow us to understand how animality plays an essential role in the expression of our *forms of life*, and how such expression builds continuity between nature and culture.

After having outlined the main features of sensibility and its difference from the aesthetic, I still need to explain what I mean by the *ordinary* and how it is not identical to the *everyday*. First of all, the ordinary possesses a form of neutrality, it has no special or distinctive features, it is somehow normal. The ordinary is ‘common’, and ‘average’ and in contrast to the everyday the adjective ‘ordinary’ is often used in a derogatory sense. “This restaurant is very ordinary” does not simply mean that it is normal or mainstream, but rather that it is mediocre. This is one of the main reasons why the semantics of the ‘ordinary’ is resistant if not oppositional with regard to the realm of

<sup>2</sup> The French word *Raisonnement* is in the original version.

traditional aesthetics. The everyday can still contain something special and remarkable, but the ordinary is intrinsically common, both banal and shared.

The everyday does possess its own aesthetic tradition that I can quickly recall here, particularly in the French tradition. Maurice Blanchot (1962) *L'Homme de la rue* was directly inspired by Henri Lefebvre (1961) - and particularly by the second volume of the *Critique de la mise en scène quotidienne*, called *Fondements d'une sociologie de la quotidienneté*. Other authors have also worked on this everyday: Michel de Certeau (1980) was interested in the social procedures of consumption and production; Georges Perec (1974) discovered an inexhaustible source for literary innovating in the observation of the everyday. More recently, two works have admirably summarized previous results and opened them up to new avenues of research, whether in literature (Sheringham, 2006) or in philosophy (Bégout, 2005).

One could add to this scholarly research, a whole series of scientific books, artists' monographs, exhibition catalogues, writings in criticism and art history on this theme of the everyday. Among this vast panorama, we can quote the very well-known works of Yuriko Saito (2007; 2017) who carried aesthetic investigation to the margins of ethical and ecological concerns by focusing on the qualities of our common existence as the dirty, the neglected and the organized. She developed a very subtle critique of 'neutrality' by opening the debate to the Japanese aesthetics. A similar concern is also present in the research of Thomas Leddy (2012) who investigates the connection with the aesthetic categories of the natural environment and the sublime. Arnold Berleant (2010) also raises questions of a political nature and anchors all human activity in aesthetic experience. The interest of this vast research enterprise lies in the fact that the idea of the everyday helps to craft a dimension of aesthetic values that serves as a counterpoint to the classical idea of beauty and aesthetic judgement as 'pure' intellectual operations. The everyday refuses the posture of the Hegelian "belle âme" or the Kantian disinterest in order to situate the aesthetic experience in a 'raw' context. From the point of view of the everyday day, aesthetics is already covered with meanings, signifiers, cultural habits and affects; aesthetics is never pure.

Nevertheless, a crucial difference between the ordinary and the everyday, is that the idea of the ordinary seems to be much less flexible. Indeed one can indicate a very organized formal modality in the ordinary, a way of proceeding that is less personal or less free than that animating daily life and experience. Etymology lends support to this aspect of the ordinary: *ordinarius* means 'judge' in Latin, someone who is discerning and applies order. More generally, in the semantic range of the ordinary, if one moves away from the subjective realm, one also moves away from the world of the intimate and of ritualization. The ordinary thus loses the religious residue that the everyday, on the contrary, maintains.

Thus, the concept of the ordinary has also arisen through a kind of democratization if not even a profanation of the everyday, as we can see in the

work of one of its greatest defenders, the American philosopher Stanley Cavell (1988). In the wake of Wittgenstein, Cavell was able to turn the ordinary into a real philosophical object. Cavell discovers, or better ‘recovers’ in the ordinary an unusual, even disturbing dimension, aptly summarized by the Freudian expression of “the uncanniness of the ordinary”. Cavell’s approach is meant to show the ordinary through a ‘sceptical’ conversion of the gaze, in which doubt plays the same role as philosophical astonishment. This conversion is fecund because it takes the ordinary to be a non-obvious dimension. It contradicts any presupposition that the ordinary is inferior.

Yet, there are two main reasons that I prefer the ordinary to the everyday: its form of temporality and its inter-subjectivity. The first reason lies in the fact that the ordinary remains fundamentally indeterminate with regard to the temporality according to which activities take place. If the everyday is repeated automatically (every day), the ordinary is more a matter of the simple possibility of repetition (one could do it each day). Sweeping the floor is an ordinary activity, although it is not necessarily a daily one. The daily belongs to the present, the ordinary is projected onto the conditional. The second reason (inter-subjectivity), lies in the fact that the everyday is subjective and individual whereas the ordinary is inter-subjective and plural; the everyday of an acrobat or an airplane pilot cannot be called ‘ordinary’. If the everyday is *ad personam*, the ordinary is impersonal. As I have shown elsewhere (Formis, 2010), the ordinary encompasses several ‘everydays’: it is a modality of living, whereas the everyday brings together the multiple singular applications of this general modality.

If the everyday is private and intimate, the ordinary is collective and social. If the everyday is what everyone does, the ordinary is what could be done by anyone. The everyday is in the actual, the ordinary in the potential. We can say that the everyday calls upon a very precise individuality and temporality (what I do every day), whereas the ordinary is less determined: it evokes a larger community and potential capacities (what I/we could do at any moment). While the everyday consists of a series of daily personal activities and thus remains of the order of the real, the ordinary is not always an execution, but very often a potentiality of execution. The ordinary thus adds a dimension of possibility to the real.

Thus, unlike the everyday, the ordinary firmly opposes a resistance to the extra-ordinary – and this point is crucial since it testifies to its anti-metaphysical tendency. My everyday life can become extraordinary once I extract (*extra*) a certain number of qualities (ritual, intimate, poetic, imaginary, etc.) from it. The ordinary, on the other hand – as long as it is intrinsically common and collective – retains only the minimal qualities of experience: it does not ‘colour’ itself with a whole series of personal and singular nuances, and if it does, it is as an attitude or a way of doing things and can never be universalized. It is because the ordinary remains more neutral than the everyday that it poses a real challenge to our idea of art and aesthetics, the latter being understood as the privileged places of pleasure and beauty. From my perspective, the ordinary is similar to what Pierre Bourdieu

calls the *habitus*<sup>3</sup>, namely the generating principle of our life modalities, and also to what John Dewey names ordinary, a dimension potentially collective and thus differentiated from the every-day<sup>4</sup>. The indeterminacy of the ordinary is thus more fundamental than that of the everyday. Its difference with the everyday is thus useful insofar as it confers a collective and multiple character upon life.

#### 4. Conclusion. Political Implications of Ordinary Art

Let's now go back, one last time, to our visit at the Louvre. The *Squatting Aphrodite* is thus profoundly ordinary, with also the derogatory implications that this adjective embodies. That's why she embodies ordinary sensibilia more than the everyday aesthetics and seems to be particularly rich in philosophical and aesthetic qualities: she approaches what Wittgenstein calls "forms of life" (*Lebensform*). Moreover this powerful concept has been massively imported into the field of the art by artists themselves or by theorists, such as Nicolas Bourriaud (2009) who made it into the foundation for his theory of *relational aesthetics* (Bourriaud, 2003). There is something extremely banal in the very fact of living in a human body, but this banality is in reality highly rich in meaning, because it is precisely in the multiplicity of the micro-events that are common to all of us that one of the most philosophical and truthful meanings of existence is hidden: the irreducibly shared and indiscriminate plurality of living beings. It is through gestures that we inhabit the world, that we shape it in our own way, it is through gestures that the world gives itself to us, in all its texture, its form of appearance and in its vitality.

My hypothesis is that it is not really when experience rises above the mediocrity of everyday life that it becomes aesthetic, but rather it does so by recourse to an inverse process. It is when experience infiltrates and 'dives' completely into the murky waters of reality, with all that it may have in common with repetition and indifference, that it shows potentially aesthetic qualities. This contrasts obviously with classical aesthetics in the sense that art does not try to improve life, but takes it with its own qualities, without any attempt at transformation. Thus, for example, repetition allows one to relive and show an experience without transfiguring it, *contra* Arthur Danto's conception (Danto, 1981). Consciousness within such repetitions remains distracted as in the ordinary accomplishment of our activities, if not even more so.

This kind of ordinary aesthetic experience is impersonal and collectively shared and thus avoids the risk of subjectivity via a fundamental critique of the exceptional and the singular. With respect to this line of thinking, the *Squatting*

<sup>3</sup> Bourdieu defines the habitus, as the "capacity to produce classifiable practices and works, and the capacity to differentiate and appreciate these practices and products (taste), that the represented social world, i.e., the space of life-styles, is constituted" (Bourdieu, 1984, p. 94). Similar to habitus, ordinariness allows us to understand the modus operandi of an individual and a social class in relation to the cultural context. Moreover, because it makes habitus a principle of "distinction", Bourdieu's approach would also evoke the primary function of the ordinary as judge, namely discernment.

<sup>4</sup> Although he sometimes uses the term every-day, Dewey follows the English usage and often prefers ordinary and compares 'ordinary' experience to 'aesthetic' experience (Dewey, 1934, see especially p. 12 and p. 6).

*Aphrodite* is very instructive. Ordinary art, especially in its gestural or performative form, opens up another kind of experience, it reveals a corporeal experience in which the subject is collective and dispersed, and which does not lend itself to the classic criteria of judgment, nor to the distance of contemplation. Of course, one could object that this will lead to the dissolution of art in the troubled waters of life. Perhaps this is the case, but it is probably the only way to aesthetically frame a properly performative experience of ordinary life. *Ordinary sensibilia* instruct us in the aesthetic character of human experience. They show how human experience is anchored in a cultural and collective context. They reveal the vulnerability of human beings, the possibility of making mistakes, appearing weak, and feeling emotions that are difficult to control.

Vulnerability is what leads to sociability, dialogue and the emergence of communities around work. When vulnerability is evoked by ordinary *sensibilia*, recipients take on an active position of witness and go beyond the comfortable position of a passive, uninvolved audience. Such human characteristics are not to be considered as defects to be corrected, according to an idealistic vision of the human being, but on the contrary as powers and forces for action. This is one of the major challenges posed by contemporary art, especially in its relationship to political space and social practices. It is a challenge worth undertaking, though, one that should also be taken up from the standpoint of art's philosophical anchoring and its capacity to create conceptual operations. Ordinary art could thus act as a philosophical and social laboratory in which concepts and relationships may be forged in an exploratory and experimental way.

Ordinary aesthetics, or the aesthetics of the ordinary teaches us that the incompleteness of figures and the display of mutilation become forms of resistance. Plurality *per se* is a challenge to individualization. The *Squatting Aphrodite* can thus be assumed as a model, an exemplar. It presents a broken but resistant subject who does not function like the Kantian subject of a transcendental order, which is capable of accompanying all our representations. Rather, the type of subject emerging from this work's gestural indiscernibility arises from an animal organism, from a body that is capable of emotions, of sensitive impressions, of desires and fear. This subjective form is fundamentally impersonal and plural, breaking from the idea of individual subject and embracing the realm of practice: it moves amongst things, reacts and interacts with the forces and tensions that surround it as well as those that inhabit it.

This kind of subjective form is highly political because individualization forges a single form by considering all the objects, machines, and instruments that the body uses as subordinate to it, as in a hierarchy. This is Simondon's great lesson in *Du monde d'existence des objets techniques* (1958) et *L'individuation à la lumière de notion de forme et d'information* (2005). The collective force of the gestures is thus employed to reorganize culture through shaping nature, nature itself being understood as a formless matrix. This quite patriarchal vision sees in the forms of action a way of identifying forces and tensions

which can unify and avoid alienation only if subordination is set up. The machine and the tool must be governed by our hands. This alienation is connected, as Marx had already indicated, to a capitalist vision of society, since it is based on the division between mental and manual, between the contemplative and the practical, between knowledge and labor. It is an alienation that is not simply economic and political, it is not limited to the possession of the means of production (in Marx's terms), but it also touches more widely the psychological and anthropological dimensions that account for what we call an 'activity'.

The *specter* of alienation can also cover ordinary experiences, because the latter is produced by multiple forms of interactions and reactions. It is essential to integrate this fear of alienation rather than attempting to avoid or banish it, because otherwise it risks creating other alienations and other dominations, as it systematically does. These forms of alienation are more insidious and dangerous precisely because they have been rendered invisible: the fear of feeling alienated, of losing one's means of production and reflection, makes the human subject (often masculine, or at least masculinized) lose his equilibrium, which will, in turn, start alienating natural energies and ecological resources, just like a whole series of other human subjects who belong to other social classes, races and genders. These subjects and these energies are thus in their turn instrumentalized and subordinated.

Through this speculative analysis of the impression, the impact, and effect of the ordinary in its gestural form within a single statue, we have seen that forces and tensions emerge between means and ends, domination and subordination, power and alienation, violence and freedom. It is quite remarkable that a simple gesture and a banal posture can reveal a whole panoply of attitudes and postures caught up in a multitude of intertwined relations. This multitude of relations shows that the subject of a supposed 'gesture' can only forge herself as an individual subject at the price of a certain violence that impacts something or someone else: an object, an instrument, a machine, or another living being (human or non-human). The human subject completes her process of individualization once she has overcome a resistance and has been made able to forge a form where the forces are minor, or minorized. Hence, although non-completion and mutilation may be perceived as dangers, they nevertheless remain a stage to be included in the very process of giving rise to subjectivity worthy of this name; that is to say, a subjectivity that is neither individual nor violent, but collective and peaceful.

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Barbara Formis  
 University Paris 1 Panthéon-Sorbonne  
 School of Arts of the Sorbonne  
 Institute ACTE  
[barbara.formis@univ-paris1.fr](mailto:barbara.formis@univ-paris1.fr)