

Reflections on Everyday Aesthetics

Considerations on Photography – Insights from Nino Migliori’s works

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This interview covers topics related to Everyday Aesthetics and confirms the multi-faceted, rich and inclusive environment surrounding Nino Migliori,¹ both as a human being and as a photographer. In particular, the experience from some of his workshops reveal how such concepts as space and time, playing and experiencing, amplify and broaden the classic definition of Everyday Aesthetics provided by field literature.² More generally, this approach also provides a cue to conduct an aesthetic analysis that is free from judgments in taste. This means considering Migliori’s photographic gesture within an everyday life aesthetic perspective and proposing that it is analyzed along a pragmatic course. Therefore, pragmatism-related observations are here brought forward to provide research insights within the nature of Everyday Aesthetics.

Meeting the photographer Nino Migliori is always a remarkable experience – first of all, because of the vital energy he radiates and above all because, from the very outset, one realizes that he is part of the history of photography, as he has been a professional photographer since the end of World War II. All his works have experimental nuances that, beyond proving his mastery, accompany us along the progression of photographic camera technologies through time. All this explains why the names of some friends of his, like those of Peggy Guggenheim, Emilio Vedova, or Tancredi Parmeggiani, often pop up during conversation. One can just picture them, gathered together as guests of the Guggenheim home in Venice, intent on exploring new artistic expressions whilst aware of being the trendsetters of new cultural directions. Migliori has always followed this innovative, free-spirited course.

¹ Nino Migliori (*1926), Italian photographer.

² In particular, see the definition of Everyday Aesthetics, primarily by Ossi Naukkarinen (2013), Kevin Melchionne (2013) and Yuriko Saito (2008).

The project entitled *Favole di luce [Tales of Light]*⁵ was comprised of activities that were in between education and play – can you elaborate on this experience?

I believe that *the expression the enjoyment of knowing* implies the idea of having fun and therefore of playing as a means of acquiring knowledge and skills in an *easy* – although not superficial – way. In fact, almost all of the workshops I have held from 1978 to date, have been run along a double track – playing while acquiring skills – and this regardless of the age of the participants. *Tales of Light* in particular, was a unique experience, a challenge, considering that it was aimed at children between 3 and 5.

In your opinion, was it an experience that significantly changed the way the children perceived the space around them?

The MAST⁴ nursery school is a peculiar institution, where space is organized according to an educational project that focuses on children and which is coordinated by Reggio Emilia Approach.⁵ From the outset, the project had a two-year timeframe. I was sure that children would respond, but as is often the case, reality outperforms one's most fanciful expectations.

Learning a well-defined, consequential process, where time also plays a role – using trays containing developer and fixer solutions, water for washing the prints arranged on the floor, moving from one tray to another to produce a photographic print, while avoiding putting one's foot in the trays, taking turns at the equipment without creating mutual discomfort – all this, may seem difficult to implement. The magic of seeing the images appear, and the impatience to replicate the experience obviously led the children to become enthusiastic, but they soon realized that coordination and harmony were necessary: learning and coordination spontaneously arose, I would say. I think it can be said that the workspace became the space of creativity, yearning, and respect.

How much did this endeavor change your attitude towards everyday life, in relation to the children's own attitudes?

As I mentioned, I assumed it would have been a unique experience. I think it is easy to imagine my enjoyment in seeing the children's lighting up from the

³ *Tales of Light* project: experiences of the photographer Nino with the children of the MAST Foundation nursery school, in Bologna (Italy). The project started in 2005 and continued for two years, during which young children were introduced to the discovery of the photographic medium, also through everyday items (such as pens, pencils, notebooks, and puppets). Thus, the children were able to create stories about their daily life, in a playful, story-telling fashion. On his part, the photographer used *off-camera* techniques such as *oxidations*, which are part of his well-known repertoire.

⁴ MAST Nursery School – MAST = *Manifattura di arti, sperimentazione e tecnologia, [A Manufactory for Arts, Experience, and Technology]* – in Bologna (Italy). It offers educational services for young children aged 3-36 months and 3-5 years. Research and experimentation in innovative educational contents is at the center of the activity of this nursery school. Coherently, this collaboration with the photographer Migliori, was aimed at letting the children get involved in activities linking experience, play, and mutual interaction. The ultimate objective was to make the children "feel good" when gaining practical knowledge.

⁵ The Reggio Emilia Approach®, is an educational framework where every child is deemed to have a strong potential for development and being entitled to specific rights. Children learn through the many languages belonging to all human beings and grow while relating with other people.

very moment some of them would spot me arriving and notify the others screaming, “Nino’s here! Nino Migliori is here!”. Enthusiasm in doing, understanding the need for generous relationships, curiosity about the new, not giving up in front of a failure are marks that have always been part of my work, but they have certainly been revived by experiencing them together with the children.



Figure 1: Nino Migliori, *Tales of Light*, Maxxi Museum, Rome, 2018.
Source: Photo by Giovanni Stella. Copyright: Mast Foundation, Bologna, Italy



Figure 2: Nino Migliori, *Tales of Light*, Maxxi Museum, Rome, 2018.
Source: Photo by Giovanni Stella. Copyright: Mast Foundation, Bologna, Italy

Did you feel like you were the onlooker or the actor throughout this experience? Alternatively, did you perceive those two roles as being interchangeable?

I would say neither onlooker nor actor – it was a shared experience, consisting of working and playing together. I guess I could call myself a project facilitator.

While set to carrying out project activities, did the children replicate everyday life gestures or routines?

They certainly did. Besides their usual gestures for group work, there are others I can mention. For instance, the children would choose and pick up leaves and vegetables from the green and vegetable garden of *MAST* nursery school as one would do when taking a walk in a park or in the woods. When at *Re Mida (King Mida)* – a waste recycling centre with outreach activities aimed at schools – they would select and pick items the same way one would behave when in a shop.

The next step was also part of their usual behaviour, that is, they would use the “ingredients” they selected to carry out a project.

In your opinion, can this sort of learning by doing provide awareness of a better relationship with oneself and with the environment around us?

The ancient adage “I hear and I forget. I see and I remember. I do and I understand” is at the basis of my approach – paraphrasing it, I could change it to “I understand and I learn.” It is no coincidence that one of my first workshops for middle-school students was based on reading urban and school spaces, which I named *Giocafoto – immagine e linguaggio [PlayPicture – Image and Language]*.⁶ The awareness of living in a particular place– sharing it, analyzing its merits and weaknesses, also making suggestions – was the fulcrum of the work we did.

Have you considered replicating a similar experience with adults?

I have been holding workshops for over 40 years, and in any case, playing has always been one of their defining factors. For instance, there were the workshops I held at the end of the 1990s in Cavezzo,⁷ which were attended by an interestingly heterogeneous mix of adults. Each workshop, which was comprised of at least 6 or 7 meetings, focused on a specific photographic technique: one was focused on the photogram and took place in two locations. I had selected because of their historical and social peculiarities. We used spaces and objects on the premises of the old weigh house. The resulting works brought to life what had remained stuck in a temporal bubble until then. The second location was the local village cemetery that we “visited” and photographed “by night” bringing all the necessary equipment – darkroom

⁶ *Giocafoto – immagine e linguaggio [PlayPicture – Image and Language]*, 1986. Workshop held by Migliori with the kids of the middle school of Suzzara (Mantua), Italy. The kids were encouraged to take unusual pictures of their own town by means of Polaroid cameras. The outcome was interesting thanks to the freshness and freedom of the kids’ view on their surroundings. This showed them the significance of *discovering* their own every day, familiar setting, which becomes unique through cognition and awareness.

⁷ Cavezzo is a town in the province of Modena, Italy.

trays, chemicals, flashlights – you name it. The participants also replicated and photographed daily gestures such as preparing a real dinner in the weigh house. The enjoyment of getting together and having a good time, overcoming psychological blocks, realizing with a positive attitude what had been formerly in denial – these were some of the experiences the participants said they had.

IN: Which of your past projects shared the following characteristics with the present one: education, awareness of the relationship between space and time in change, photographic gesture as a care of the self, or as an experience related to daily life?

I think *Via Emilia Crossroads* was an undertaking that resulted in historical awareness, and I was part of that. This is the only road that has given its name to a region – it runs through the very center of the towns that have grown along its path and its identity has significantly shifted through time. Part of my work demonstrates this. For instance, we know that we are on the Via Emilia road when we read its name from a sign, but how many people are there who know that the two landmark towers of Bologna actually stand on the very path of the Via Emilia road? Moreover, there are stretches of this road running through what used to be open countryside and has now become heavily built-up areas over time. There are suburban stretches of the present-day Via Emilia that do not retrace its original path and have been laid out in recent times, like in some sort of “roadway diplopia” condition.



Figure 3: Nino Migliori, *Via Emilia Crossroads*, Provinciale, 136-49, 2005.
Source: Photos by the artist. Copyright: Nino Migliori Foundation.

The value of photography in this context (*playing – doing – knowing*) is that it stimulates interest in active learning as opposed to passive learning, do you agree?

Photography primarily is language, narrative activity, iconic expression. By means of images you can tell stories, communicate feelings, impressions. Turning back to the project at the *MAST* nursery school, it is no coincidence that it is accompanied by a catalog entitled *Tales of Light*. Over the last six months of this two-year project, the children created stories through photography, and this despite the fact that they did not know about writing literature. They are articulated narrations that need no words to be

understood. The children took turns in inventing not only the narrative, but also choosing the costumes and objects to depict it – then, lying on photographic paper and assuming adequate poses under the direction of their companions, they converted the narrative into images, making photographs of sizes up to 106 x 247 cm.

Would you consider *Tales of Light* a learning experience for both you and the children?

Every time one gets to meet and know a person, this always results in mutual enrichment. You can just imagine what a wonderful experience I had with 20 children!

Afterword

Migliori's innovative experiences can help define useful elements enriching Everyday Aesthetics studies. First of all, they make us realize that the experiential environment within which the photographer operates and engages his audience (as in his workshops), strengthens the basic relationship between humans and their environment and which traverses pragmatic philosophy since its dawn. The works of John Dewey (1925, 1934) and George Herbert Mead (1938) testify to this possible osmotic connection which was mainly directed to go beyond the dualisms⁸ that classical philosophy had tirelessly dealt with. Moreover, it is almost obvious that, when it comes to photography, the link with the environment becomes a central aspect of gesture itself – it is no coincidence that the photographer Henry Cartier-Bresson defined the photographic gesture as a window on the world, thus strengthening one of the main “rules” of pragmatic philosophy. The question that arises here is whether, when considering the bond with the environment as a given, photographic gesture can be part of a vision of aesthetics in the everyday. The nature of the everyday (or everydayness) can hardly be pinpointed, as mentioned in the studies of Melchionne (2013), Naukkarinen (2013) and Saito (2012). The difficulty of centering on everydayness arises from the vague nature of the object of study – daily practices and activities within a possible aesthetic characterization.⁹ Dewey's definition of aesthetic experience can clarify the scope of this study – in Dewey's words (1934, p. 36): “We have *an* experience when the material experienced runs its course to fulfillment.” Conclusion, i.e. *consummation*, a term which was introduced by the American philosopher – is not a secluded event, instead, it actually creates the meaning of action itself – it is in this process leading to meaning that aesthetics lies. Furthermore, Dewey indicates that aesthetics cannot be distinguished from intellectual experiences or from daily experiences, such as when observing a thunderstorm, or a game of chess. “The enemies of the esthetic are neither the practical nor

⁸ The American pragmatist philosopher's effort was generally aimed at recomposing and renewing the approach to aesthetics to include the world of art as part of everyday life. In doing so, they created an active and osmotic practice between the environment and the person, which, therefore, is no longer comprised of subject-object dualisms but consists instead of an inclusive, relational vision.

⁹ Dewey is very similar (Dewey, 1934).

the intellectual. They are the humdrum; slackness of loose ends; submission to convention in practice and intellectual procedure” (Dewey, 1934, p. 42). Any action, to be determined as being aesthetic, should have no boundaries and be instead one where energies flow inwards and outwards, animating the action. While any aesthetic action has a complete meaning, it also is the basis for other actions and experiences. Thus, experience, and consequently aesthetic experience, can be considered as a process. The matter at hand, here, is not only accessing aesthetics through art or artistic gesture, but also understanding that we live in a world that is potentially aesthetic although not strictly artistic. In essence, Dewey argued that aesthetic experience enables a possible aesthetic reading of actions – gestures, daily experiences. In this sense, I consider him a philosopher who asserted and proposed a dynamic reading of *everydayness*.

Turning back to Melchionne’s analysis (2013), he proposes to characterize everydayness within aesthetics, with the following definition: “An everyday aesthetic object or practice is: daily routine [...], [it] represents a particular way that the aesthetics exists outside of conventional form of artistic expression”. Indeed, this clarifies that painting or creating an artifact is not part of a daily aesthetic. However, Melchionne argues, it is the adjective *common* that best defines the aforementioned notion, that is, an experienced or carried out action. So, even a common daily activity, such as cooking, becomes accessible and practiced because it is general. In addition, the activity translates into doing rather than into its product.¹⁰ The author also points out that it is not ordinary objects that are central here, but their role. In fact, Melchionne (2013) writes:

For example, a window with a view of a landscape has no everyday aesthetic value if the room is rarely occupied or the blind always drawn. However, if the light, the view, and the bench beside it contribute to the aesthetic character of some daily moment, then we may speak of the window of the evening sunset.

The interesting meaning offered here is that it is the departure from the ordinary that defines an action, or an object that is part of everyday aesthetics; thus, it is the term *aesthetic* which shapes the *everyday*. Following this line of thought, one can well understand how something that is not art, in its traditional sense, changes into an art-like item or activity which “takes influences from artistic ways of thinking and practicing” (Naukkarinen and Saito, 2012). Drawing from Dewey’s thought, if this is the attitude toward the world, then it is not just observation that enriches us, but also *doing, undergoing, suffering, acting* within an experiential world to be lived and known.

Signaling the approach to the world allows us to also consider the spatial¹¹ -temporal elements that are not well clarified or engaged. The sense of *familiarity* – which comes from knowing and sharing a space at a given

¹⁰ It is of interest here focusing on the notion that for pragmatic philosophy the concept of action is a continuous process, with moments of negativity and positivity. In this sense, the concept of *practice* in everyday aesthetics can take on process-related connotations, whether they are *routines or habits of action*.

¹¹ See Heidegger (1966); he wrote about space in the Aristotelian sense, that is, the set of *tópos*

moment – certifies and completes our everydayness. This is the case with Migliori's work at MAST in Bologna, where the children operated in a well-known environment, which contributed to them interacting in a relaxed way. Although the photographer was a stranger to them, through play, novelty, and curiosity, they interacted to create new forms of doing and sharing – thus, the boundary between everydayness and aesthetics was removed. In addition, especially in this case, the process of acquiring knowledge – understood as learning something new – came to fruition. I would define this kind of learning as being *situated*¹² or born of an act of *belonging* and *participating* – here the concept of everydayness can be linked to learning as a process distributed among the participants in an experience. In this way, everydayness opens up to learning. Certainly, using everyday items and materials made it possible for this experience, which stands in between photography, play, and the world of children, to unfold in a natural way.

Turning again to Migliori's workshops, the elements of time and space are obviously always present,¹³ but it is the interaction with shared daily gestures and materials¹⁴ that make these experiences an example of everyday aesthetics. The dynamic relationship with practices that have the elements of daily life provides awareness to the participants. This logic, therefore, is characterized by positive meaning.

At this point, it does not seem far-fetched to analyze the other side of the coin, the element of negativity and specifically what happens when instead of having a positive development and context, the experienced situation is quite the opposite. Considering everydayness also from a negative standpoint – such as, for example, in a game of soccer where our own favorite team loses, or routine elements that can hinder our vision of what is important and meaningful – can make everyday life more realistic, as, of course, it cannot be just made of positive events. Here, it is worth recalling Dewey's thought, who, in *Art as Experience* (1934), offers us a vision of aesthetic experience also in its possible negative passages – which is when streams of positive and negative energy intersect and characterize our aesthetic experience. Thus, proposing a pragmatic vision of everydayness implies a non-reductionist approach which indeed includes the space of everyday life. However, the risk here is that of adopting a sweeping concept of everydayness and of the aesthetics which

(space that the body immediately occupies) and *córa* (determined space). The space occupied by the body takes shape thanks to the body (*sóma*). For the Greeks, then, the limit (of space) is not something that ends, but that from which something begins, that is, thanks to which something has its fulfillment. In this sense, Aristotelian philosophy has pragmatic elements precisely in considering the beginning and not the end of things-space. Hence the passage appears direct to the understanding that: "I perceive the world in terms of how I can engage with it; and I perceive others in term of how I can interact with them" (Gallagher, 2021, p. 13).

¹² Lave and Wenger (1991) define the concept of *situated learning* and place it in the context of specific forms of social sharing. The two scholars are not interested in determining what cognitive processes and conceptual structures are involved in learning but rather scrutinize the forms of social participation that provide the appropriate context for such a process to come to fruition. Situated learning involves students in cooperative activities where they are challenged to use their critical thinking and kinesthetic abilities.

¹³ This refers to *PlayPicture – Image and Language* and to a workshop held by Migliori in Cavezzo (Modena, Italy).

¹⁴ "Photographing daily gestures such as preparing a real dinner in the weigh house contributed to the joy of getting together and having a good time"; see the interview above.

comes with it. Migliori's photographic gesture may exemplify this, when analyzed by just focusing on the image, not internalizing the value of gesture as a process of creation. In summary, the interview shows that such elements exist that enrich the experience of the participants in an aesthetic sense, such as playing, being aware of space and interacting with it, participating and sharing, and learning – which in a familiar environment, is defined as *situated* – and practice. All these aspects, which characterize photographic gesture, designate and define it. In other words, there is a motion from vagueness to meaningfulness, and this passage is relevant to a vision of a dynamic and synthetic photographic gesture.

Therefore, the proposal of including in everyday aesthetics photography as gesture – a dynamic and synthetic process, as it leads to a meaning – can provide a new approach to everydayness. The work of Giovanni Maddalena (2015) on the philosophy of gesture can represent a way of considering routine and habit¹⁵ certainly as an aspect of incompleteness, but one that is remedied when meaningfulness is achieved. It is sense and meaning that give concreteness and completeness¹⁶ to gesture.¹⁷

Along the same line of thought, Migliori's photographic gesture – when part of an everyday aesthetics environment – is relevant to synthesis, because it transforms a vague object-action by charging it with meaning, which puts daily life in an area where awareness emerges, making the subject central and reinforcing that characteristic element of pragmatism which is the fundamental and continuous link with the environment. Not last in consideration, is the vision according to which, within a possible everydayness with aesthetic aspects, the subject acts (Melchionne, 2013), that is, it is built up in a practical but also intellectual environment (Dewey, 1934), giving new meanings and possibly, or alternatively, an aesthetic character to actions. It is for this reason that it is not of secondary importance not to face daily life by considering the subject as being solitary and monadic (Naukkarinen, 2013), but instead immersed in a complex of relationships that, according to pragmatic logic, are a foundational element of the dynamic, social self (Mead, 1938).

This aspect, when subsumed in the main body of literature on everydayness, would provide a *social* and fruitful direction to this area of studies. I am convinced that, although within the framework presented in this article, gestural acts such as photography would then take on new connotations that are not merely linked to the image, but also to the emergence of awareness and growth in learning. Reaching and heading toward the meaning of an action or an object – whether an artifact or a functional object – resolves the possible dualisms that are present in everyday life such as routine vs. non-routine, or

¹⁵ On the notion of habit, see also Naukkarinen (2013), Saito (2017) and Poulakka (2018).

¹⁶ “Is not just one action among many others. It is the expression of meaning embodied in one person at a singular moment and it tends to become a habit for the person and eventually for the generalized person, the people, or the tradition” (Maddalena, 2015, p. 72).

¹⁷ This notion of gesture shows us a different point of view from the one provided by Barbara Formis (2010) which is based on the contrast between ordinary and artistic gesture. Differently, in the present article, the theme of gesture is taken into a context of signification that gives direction to gesture itself, whether ordinary or artistic.

conventionality vs. unconventionality, just to mention a few. Therefore, it is by focusing on meaning that we are driven toward the aesthetics – according to Dewey, toward *an* aesthetic experience – that emerges from Migliori’s works. Certainly, following his work and his quest into experiential realism leads us to experience a form of well-being that is not contemplative, but practical – that is, the search for new meaning conveyed by the things that surround us.

In conclusion, practice and sharing, connection with the environment in an osmotic and dynamic way, give meaning to actions – in fact, meaning can guide the subject to new practices and awareness – reconsidering experience in an aesthetic sense, is *situated learning*.¹⁸ Thus, everydayness brings on new meanings and significations, within the setting of everyday life.

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¹⁸ In this sense, photographic gesture can be considered an example of a *situated learning* both for children and adults in everyday life.