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The Aesthetics of Imperfection in Everyday Life

Yuriko Saito

Introduction

The notions of perfection and imperfection were the subject of lively discussion in eighteenth-century Western aesthetics. One motivating factor was the perceived need to justify what came to be regarded as the imperfect state of the earth and its bumps, warts, and scars, such as mountains, valleys, grottoes, and the like. These irregularities ruined what was once assumed to be a perfectly smooth and beautifully proportional “mundane egg.” In response, Thomas Burnett proposed *Sacred Theory of the Earth* (1681–9) to explain that the great deluge caused by humanity’s sin destroyed the once perfect state of the earth. Soon after, those intellectuals who embraced the emerging scientific account of order and regularity of nature’s workings offered an aesthetic justification of the earth’s imperfection.¹

Many eighteenth-century philosophers and advocates of the picturesque argued for the aesthetic value of imperfection, understood as irregularity and disorder. They found these qualities in mountainous landscapes, ruins, old objects showing wear and tear, and deformed creatures sometimes referred to as “imperfections of nature.”² Picturesque aesthetics transformed landscape gardening from formal geometry to a semblance of wild nature.

In this chapter, I revisit and expand upon ideas that I formulated earlier in my article “The Role of Imperfection in Everyday Aesthetics.”

¹ See Basil Willey’s *The Eighteenth Century Background: Studies on the Idea of Nature in the Thought of the Period* (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1961), Chap. II; and Marjorie Hope Nicolson’s *Mountain Gloom and Mountain Glory: The Development of the Aesthetics of the Infinite* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1963).

² Joseph Addison, “The Pleasures of the Imagination” (1712), in *Essays in Criticism and Literary Theory*, ed. John Loftis (Northbrook: AHM, 1975), 143.

It also created the cult of ruins that included the construction of artificial ruins.³

This historical example represents a typical narrative regarding the *aesthetics of perfection and imperfection*. In this narrative, an accepted norm of aesthetic perfection—whether regarding landscapes, gardens, or architectural structures in the case of the eighteenth century—is questioned and challenged, giving rise to *imperfectionist aesthetics*. The same narrative resonates with particular force in the sphere of art. This is indicated by the many examples discussed in this volume: “willful mistakes” in Flaubert’s writing in *Madame Bovary*; Mieke Bal’s directional strategies that defy conventional filmmaking in her *Madame B*; a celebration of cracks, dirt, and glitches in contemporary music; artist Xu Bing’s challenge to perfect language by inventing characters that look like Chinese but aren’t; and creations by contemporary fashion designers that emphasize imperfect body shapes and socially unacceptable bodily expressions. I can add many contemporary works of art in textile, ceramics, and metal that promote such imperfect qualities as cracks and signs of repair.⁴

These examples indicate that the notion of imperfection has provided, and continues to provide, inspiration for creativity and imagination in art, giving rise to rich and thought-provoking experiences in the audience. What should be noted is that the imperfectionist aesthetics underlying these works of art presupposes a norm of perfection—correct language, clean musical sounds, or the undamaged state of objects, for instance—to which they offer rebellion or critique. The realm of art is a space in which various norms can be challenged; norm negotiation constitutes art’s *raison d’être* particularly today.

When it comes to our everyday life, while there are plenty of examples of challenge and rebellion, the power of societal norms, including perfectionist aesthetics, seems rather strong. My focus in this discussion is notions of perfection and imperfection in *everyday aesthetics*—that is, aesthetic discourse that explores issues of our daily lives that are not captured by commonly held art-centric aesthetics. Aesthetics is certainly not the only dimension of everyday life in which the norm of perfection is invoked. It is often used to evaluate, say, individual achievements, systems, and

³ See *The Genius of the Place: The English Landscape Garden 1620–1820*, ed. John Dixon Hunt and Peter Willis (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1990) for excerpts from primary sources. For commentaries, see John Dixon Hunt, *Gardens and the Picturesque: Studies in the History of Landscape Architecture* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1997); and Malcolm Andrews, *The Search for the Picturesque* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1989).

⁴ See Kiff Slemmons, “On Imperfection,” *Metalsmith* 28, no. 1 (2008): 26–9; Allen S. Weiss, “The Toilet Bowl and the Tea Bowl,” *ArtUS* 27 (2009): 80–5; Allen S. Weiss, “Cracks,” *ArtUS* 29 (2010): 62–7; and Lois Martin, “Patina of Cloth,” *Surface Design Journal* 28, no. 4 (Summer 2004): 16–21.

technologies.⁵ While aesthetics is sometimes referenced in these matters—as when we praise an elegant system or a beautiful technological solution—my main concern here is the dimension of aesthetics that is directed toward the sensuous appearance of material objects. Furthermore, while contemporary art projects often blur the distinction between art and life by creating an art event in an everyday setting and encouraging participation, everyday aesthetics specifically addresses those aesthetic experiences that are gained without the intervention of art.

Thus, what follows is a reflection on the role of perfection and imperfection in everyday aesthetics, as we interact with the world and manage our daily lives. I will first present examples and consequences of *perfectionist aesthetics* from contemporary everyday life, followed by examples of responses promoting an *imperfectionist aesthetics*. After presenting the philosophical underpinnings of perfectionist aesthetics, I outline moral and aesthetic reasons in support of imperfectionist aesthetics. However, I will argue against *indiscriminate* promotion of imperfectionist aesthetics for both aesthetic and social/political reasons.

My discussion primarily builds on everyday life in the United States today. However, I draw theoretical considerations of imperfectionist aesthetics from two past examples outside of the United States: the eighteenth-century British picturesque and the Japanese *wabi* aesthetics associated with the tea ceremony that has been practiced since the sixteenth century. Both aesthetic movements stand out as influential historical exceptions to the preponderance of perfectionist aesthetics.⁶ Although culturally and historically distant from the present-day United States, I believe that their arguments for imperfectionist aesthetics go beyond their respective context and are relevant and helpful to this day.

Perfectionist Aesthetics in Everyday Life

Despite the artistic treatments of various types of imperfection cited above, a perfectionist aesthetics seems to prevail in everyday affairs in the United States today. However, perfectionist aesthetic ideals often impact negatively

⁵ See Simon Winchester's *The Perfectionists: How Precision Engineers Created the Modern World* (New York: HarperCollins, 2018). On imperfect systems, see also Part II of this book.

⁶ David Lowenthal observes in his study on the Western aesthetics: “the balance of evidence ... shows general dislike of age and decay.” *The Past Is a Foreign Country* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 127.

on individual well-being, environmental sustainability, quality of life, or the state of the world. Let me give some examples.

For quite some time, Americans have been obsessed with creating a 'perfect' lawn that is a velvety smooth green carpet bordered by well-manicured bushes. One book on the so-called American "lawnaholic" preoccupation is subtitled: "The Obsessive Quest for the Perfect Lawn."⁷ Its creation and subsequent maintenance incur considerable environmental cost: heavy use of water, fertilizers, herbicide, fungicide, insecticide, and fuel for lawn equipment, such as lawn mowers. Furthermore, this mode of landscaping is hostile to such living creatures as birds and butterflies, and it poses risks to human health and safety. In contrast, environmentally friendlier gardens consisting of wildflowers and community gardens that grow vegetables in urban areas are often objected to on the grounds that they are messy, disorderly, and unkempt in appearance and are thus considered aesthetically inferior to the monoculture of the green lawn.⁸

The effect of perfectionist aesthetics has reached supermarket shelves as well, as Ilona de Hooze demonstrates in detail elsewhere in this volume. Harvey Blatt, an earth scientist, points out, too, that the "apparent perfection" of "strangely uniform and incredibly shiny red tomatoes and picture-perfect peaches" results from discarding "deformed" and "ugly" fruits and vegetables—think two-legged carrots, cucumbers that are too curvy, and green peppers with an extra lump.⁹ According to one estimate, the process of weeding out imperfect fruits and vegetables by both farmers and supermarkets wastes one-third of the total fresh produce grown in the United States. Furthermore, the carbon footprint for growing them is considerable, and rotting fruits and vegetables that end up in landfills emit methane gas, a major contributor to climate change.¹⁰

It is well recognized that today's consumerism is guided by aesthetics. Quoting a shopper's declaration that "aesthetics ... is why you buy something,"

⁷ Ted Steinberg, *American Green: The Obsessive Quest for the Perfect Lawn* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2007). See also Virginia Scott Jenkins, *The Lawn: A History of an American Obsession* (Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1994); and Georges Teyssot, "The American Green: Surface of Everyday Life," in *The American Lawn*, ed. Georges Teyssot (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 1999), 1–39.

⁸ Diana Balmori, "Beauty and the Lawn: A Break with Tradition," in *Edible Estates: Attack on the Front Lawn*, 2nd ed., ed. Fritz Haeg (New York: Metropolis Books, 2010), 13. Also see William McDonough and Michael Braungart's *Cradle to Cradle: Remaking the Way We Make Things* (New York: North Point Press, 2002), 86 and 119.

⁹ Harvey Blatt, *America's Food: What You Don't Know about What You Eat* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2008), vii. The following estimate regarding food waste also comes from this work.

¹⁰ Conor McGlone, "Asda's Ugly Veg Drive Divides Supermarkets," *ENDS Report* 480 (February 2015): 40.

Virginia Postrel, a political and cultural writer, argues that today's consumer culture operates on "the aesthetic imperative."¹¹ It is a widely known secret, too, that the past industry practice of planned obsolescence regarding functionality is replaced by perceived obsolescence, sometimes also called aesthetic obsolescence.¹² Objects are perceived to be aesthetically obsolete in the following two senses even if their functionality remains intact: (1) when they are no longer fashionable because their style ranks as outdated and (2) when they show signs of aging by repeated use, wear and tear, and accidental damages. These two ways of privileging newness comprise the perfectionist aesthetics in consumerism.¹³

This perfectionist-driven aesthetic imperative encourages the phenomenon of "fast fashion," causing the accelerated pace of production of objects ranging from clothing and automobiles to hi-tech gadgets like iPhones. Consumers are compelled to seek more fashionable, stylish, and up-to-date goods and to replace older objects with newer ones when they start showing signs of wear and tear, even if they still function perfectly well. The resulting never-ending cycle of production, consumption, and disposal is responsible for resource depletion, environmental degradation, mounting garbage, not to mention human rights violation in those developing nations where many goods are manufactured and developed nations dump their garbage.

Another set of problematic consequence of perfectionism is the human body. Such efforts to achieve an ideal physique as extreme dieting, cosmetic surgery, use of steroids, and tanning booths often harm a person's health, and even lead to death, as tragically shown by French fashion model Isabelle Caro, who died of malnutrition in 2010. As Patricia Pisters's chapter in this volume indicates, pursuits of perfection can take a heavy toll on one's mental health as well.

In addition to compromising health, many people whose bodily appearance falls short of societal ideals suffer from various forms of discrimination. Obesity, deformity, disability, and unattractive facial features work against employment, acceptance to a certain group, and interpersonal

¹¹ Virginia Postrel, *The Substance of Style: How the Rise of Aesthetic Value is Remaking Commerce, Culture, and Consciousness* (New York: HarperCollins, 2003), 8. See also the scholarship on today's "aesthetic economy" and "emotional capitalism" as referenced in this book's introduction.

¹² See Stuart Walker's *Sustainable by Design: Explorations in Theory and Practice* (London: Earthscan, 2006), 58, 87, 140–2; and Kate Fletcher's "Durability, Fashion, Sustainability: The Processes and Practices of Use, Fashion Practice," *Journal of Design, Creative Process & the Fashion Industry* 4 (November 2012): 223–36.

¹³ See my "Consumer Aesthetics and Environmental Ethics: Problems and Possibilities," *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 76, no. 4 (Fall 2018): 429–39.

relationships, not only damaging one's self-esteem and quality of life but also adding yet another kind of injustice in today's society.¹⁴

These examples indicate that our everyday aesthetic judgments are often guided by a degree of conformity to the societal norm of perfection. They also indicate that various forms of perfectionist aesthetics in everyday life lead to problematic consequences, such as environmental harm and social injustice. The recognition that perfectionist aesthetics is implicated in creating those negative consequences has given rise to a number of contemporary responses in art, civic projects, commerce, and industries. I now turn to some of these examples that advocate an imperfectionist aesthetics.

Imperfectionist Aesthetics' Responses

An imperfectionist aesthetics resonates, first, in landscape design. As has been mentioned before, wildflower gardens and community gardens are typically criticized for their messy, unkempt appearance compared to the perfectly maintained and manicured gardens primarily consisting of a green lawn. However, this aesthetic standard is challenged in different landscape projects: community gardens that are proliferating in urban areas; public art projects that feature native plants and wildflowers, such as Piet Oudolf's Lurie Garden in Chicago's Millennium Park and New York City's High Line; and art projects that replace green lawns with edible plants, such as an American artist Fritz Haeg's *Edible Estate* (2005–).¹⁵ These gardens shift the landscape paradigm from the monoculture aesthetic of the green lawn to a rich diversity of colors, shapes, textures, and sometimes fragrance. They celebrate vivacity and liveliness because of the frequent visits by birds and butterflies. In addition, these gardens, often supported, created, and maintained by community residents, generate a sense of community pride, neighborliness, and environmental stewardship.¹⁶

¹⁴ See Rosemarie Garland-Thomson, *Staring: How We Look* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009); Tobin Siebers, *Disability Aesthetics* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2010); Deborah Rhode, *The Beauty Bias: The Injustice of Appearance in Life and Law* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011); Sherri Irvin (ed.), *Body Aesthetics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016); and Heather Widdows, *Perfect Me: Beauty as an Ethical Ideal* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2018).

¹⁵ Fritz Haeg, *Edible Estates: Attack on the Front Lawn*, 2nd ed. (New York: Metropolis Books, 2010). See examples at <http://www.fritzhaeg.com/garden/initiatives/edibleestates/main.html>, accessed March 1, 2017. Also see Sue Spaid's *Green Acres: Artists Farming Fields, Greenhouses and Abandoned Lots* (Cincinnati: Contemporary Art Center, 2012).

¹⁶ Balmori, "Beauty and the Lawn," 13. Also see McDonough and Braungart, *Cradle to Cradle*, 86 and 119.

As discussed by De Hooge in this volume, food marketing is another domain where multiple initiatives challenge perfectionist aesthetics. Supermarkets in Europe and the United States have started to promote “Inglorious Fruits and Vegetables” and “Produce with Personality.”¹⁷ With strategic placement and favorable lighting, these campaigns highlight the unique beauty of products that traditionally rank as imperfect. These products even star in artistic works, such as Uli Westphal’s photographic project, *Mutatoes*.¹⁸

Contemporary designers concerned with today’s overconsumption also offer design strategies to reduce waste and facilitate products’ longevity. Some examples are: (1) choosing materials with a multicolored, variegated, and/or irregular surface that “absorb wear and tear in ways that do not detract from the overall appearance of the object”;¹⁹ (2) leaving objects unfinished to encourage consumers to actively engage in completing, transforming, and personalizing them to facilitate an intimate and personal “life *with* a product” in addition to “the life *of* a product”;²⁰ and (3) highlighting the (hi)story of an object from its origin to store-shelf to encourage consumers to develop a holistic understanding and respectful appreciation and to continue its story through alteration, repair, and other active interactions with it.

Here the practice of repair deserves special attention. Once a common part of people’s daily lives in the United States and elsewhere, repair has become neglected in a consumerist age that treats various manufactured goods as disposables. Thanks to initiatives such as repair cafés, repair manifestos, and the right to repair legislations, this practice is making a comeback.²¹ Indicative of its popularity is the growing acceptance of visible repair. Alison Gwilt, a fashion design theorist, points out that the traditional repair of clothes requires invisibility. For example, adding a patch to hide a hole or a rip traditionally requires fabric and thread that match the ripped garment’s color and texture, so that the appearance of repair is minimized. This assumes that a visible indication of the repair is aesthetically inferior

¹⁷ They are the campaigns of Intermarché, a French supermarket chain, and Giant Eagle, a US supermarket chain, respectively.

¹⁸ See <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=d8a4GqSaQcU> and <http://www.ulwestphal.de/mutatoes/index.html>, both accessed on March 1, 2017.

¹⁹ Walker, *Sustainable by Design*, 87.

²⁰ Lance Hosey, *The Shape of Green: Aesthetics, Ecology, and Design* (Washington, DC: Island Press, 2012), 107.

²¹ The “Repair café” initiative is gaining global momentum. The author of the epilogue in this volume, Joanna van der Zanden, is a cofounder of this initiative. See <https://repaircafe.org/en/>, accessed May 1, 2019. The first Repair Manifesto was issued in 2009 by a Dutch group, Platform 21, which was soon followed by a California company, iFixit. At the time of writing, twenty states in the United States passed the right to repair legislation.

to the invisible or inconspicuous repair, not to mention the undamaged appearance.²² Ultimately, our interest in keeping the object's surface as close to the original state as possible is motivated by the presumed aesthetic superiority of the appearance of perfection, which encourages signs of wear and tear and damage to be made as inconspicuous as possible.

In contrast, visible repair by advocates of imperfectionist aesthetics, both professionals and laypeople, celebrates signs of damage by rendering them prominent and aesthetically pleasing. The most common example is proudly displayed patches and stitches on clothing.²³ Some art projects also feature visible repair, such as Daniel Eatock's *Visible Vehicle Repairs* (2017–) that results in two-colored cars; Rachel Sussman's *Sidewalk Kintsukuroi* (2016–), which appropriates the Japanese traditional repair method called *kintsukuroi* (gold repair) in repairing sidewalk cracks; and Jan Vormann's *Dispatchwork* (2007–), in which, across different parts of the world, he repairs the crumbling edifice of brick structures with Lego pieces.²⁴

Many practitioners of visible repair are inspired by the Japanese tradition of *kintsugi* (or *kintsukuroi*), an art of repairing cracked pottery with visible filling, often with gold, that became popularized with the establishment of the tea ceremony in the sixteenth century. They also gain inspiration from the Japanese fabric repair termed *boro*, which mends tattered clothes with equally tattered fabrics to the point where almost every part is replaced. This mode of repair was born among the poor out of the necessity of making do with scarce resources, similar to quilt-making in the American South.²⁵ The aesthetic effect of these repaired objects is stunning and today they are often exhibited in museums. They illustrate vividly that the so-called imperfections

²² Alison Gwilt, "Producing Sustainable Fashion," in *Shaping Sustainable Fashion: Changing the Way We Make and Use Clothes*, ed. Alison Gwilt and Timo Rissanen (London: Earthscan, 2011), 59–73.

²³ Ibid. Also see Katrina Rodabaugh, *Mending Matters: Stitch, Patch, and Repair Your Favorite Denim & More* (New York: Abrams, 2018) for innovative examples of visible repair.

²⁴ See examples at <https://eatock.com/books/visible-vehicle-repairs/>, <http://www.rachelsussman.com/portfolio#/sidewalk-kintsukuroi>, and <https://www.janvormann.com/testbild/dispatchwork/>, all accessed on November 22, 2019. For examples of both invisible and visible repair, see RISD Museum publication, *Manual 11* (Fall 2018), dedicated to the subject of repair.

²⁵ For *boro*, see Timo Rissanen, "Designing Endurance," in Gwilt and Rissanen, *Shaping Sustainable Fashion*, 130, and Sasha Rabin Wallinger's "Mottainai: The Fabric of Life, Lessons in Frugality from Traditional Japan," *Textile: The Journal of Cloth and Culture* 10, no. 3 (November 2012): 336–45. For quilts, see John Beardsley, William Arnett, Paul Arnett, Jane Livingstone, *The Quilts of Gee's Bend* (Atlanta, GA: Tinwood Books, 2002) and John Beardsley, William Arnett, Paul Arnett, Jane Livingstone, *Gee's Bend: Women and Their Quilts* (Atlanta, GA: Tinwood Books, 2002).

associated with damage and repair can become aesthetic assets instead of defects, thereby supporting the basic tenet of imperfectionist aesthetics.

As for countering the negative consequences of the norm of bodily perfection, we witness a growing movement to include various body types and differently abled bodies as dancers, stage performers, and fashion models to promote public awareness of body positivity. One example is the Swiss campaign called “Because Who Is Perfect?” that features five mannequins whose bodies—one model has legs of different length, another uses a wheelchair—traditionally rank as imperfect.²⁶ This kind of inclusiveness and celebration of diversity is a welcome antidote to perfectionist norms regarding the human body, whose extreme version can include white and Aryan supremacism. Furthermore, a movement is on the rise among beauty product industries not to photoshop images in advertisements in order to showcase diverse facial features and skin conditions.²⁷

Thus, the perfectionist aesthetics that has dominated our everyday life is undergoing much needed changes today by these specific applications of imperfectionist aesthetics.

However, rather than these applications in themselves, what interests me are the philosophical underpinnings of imperfectionist aesthetics and their beneficial consequences when compared to perfectionist aesthetics. In order to explore these philosophical foundations, I shall first present the conceptual framework that supports perfectionist aesthetics.

Theoretical Framework for Perfectionist Aesthetics

The aforementioned examples of perfectionist aesthetics suggest two fundamental desiderata: permanence and uniformity. Let’s first consider the reasons for privileging permanence. To regard inevitable signs of aging and breakage as aesthetically negative degradation and deterioration implies a yearning for permanence of material objects in their perfect

²⁶ See <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=E8umFV69fNg>, accessed March 1, 2017.

²⁷ One of the most recent and notable examples in the United States is CVS Pharmacy’s “Beauty in Real Life” campaign launched in January 2018 that was featured in *Glamour* (Rachel Nussbaum, “We Need More Beauty Ads Like This Totally Unretouched Skin Care Campaign,” January 25, 2018, <https://www.glamour.com/gallery/babor-unretouched-skin-care-campaign> and Zoe Weiner, “CVS’ New Photoshop-Free Ads Were Produced by Women,” April 19, 2018, <https://www.glamour.com/story/cvs-photoshop-free-beauty-ads>, both accessed January 25, 2019). Also see Anne Marie Todd’s “The Aesthetic Turn in Green Marketing: Environmental Consumer Ethics of Natural Personal Care Products,” *Ethics & the Environment* 9, no. 2 (2004): 86–102.

condition. Favoring timelessness over vicissitude and impermanence goes back to Plato's theory, which identifies reality as Forms or Ideas that are immutable and exist beyond and apart from the empirical world. A more recent powerful force behind the penchant for permanence of the material world is the Enlightenment agenda, which equates the good life with a life free from the constraints of nature. This ideal is best exemplified in Francis Bacon's utopia *The New Atlantis* (published posthumously in 1626), which can be taken as a blueprint for technological advancement. Most of the future projects that he conceptualizes—airplanes, submarines, genetic engineering, and holography, to name a few—have today been accomplished. Bacon expects that we humans are capable of creating an ideal world on this earth, populated with perfectly and permanently functioning objects that help us overcome limitations placed on us by nature, including impermanence and the vicissitudes of the material world.²⁸

This stance of privileging permanence manifests itself in various social practices. Architectural practice is one of them. As Rumiko Handa, herself an architect, documents, architects tend to exert what she calls an "authorial authority" that prohibits any modifications once a building is completed.²⁹ At the time of completion, the structure is deemed perfect and any change, whether intentionally inflicted or naturally developed, ranks as a deterioration, a fall from grace. Some architects even dictate the activities and objects used within their designed space, regardless of the lifestyle and wishes of its users. Frank Lloyd Wright, for instance, was notorious for designing everything within the space, including furniture and even plates, so as to create an overall harmony. In Philip Johnson's Glass House, "even table-top bric-a-brac are discreetly marked with indications of their correct location," making the space "unlivable as a domestic space," according to one critic.³⁰ Architects' desires and attempts to freeze buildings and things in them at the time of completion reflect an unrealistic expectation that defies the reality of the lived world.

This penchant for permanence is also reflected in today's industrial production system. The identity of a manufactured object is defined as the end state of the production process when it is in mint condition. Any deviation from this condition is considered defective, deficient, or degraded—in short,

²⁸ Francis Bacon, *The New Atlantis*. 1626. <https://www.gutenberg.org/files/2434/2434-h/2434-h.htm>, accessed February 27, 2020.

²⁹ Rumiko Handa, *Allure of the Incomplete, Imperfect, and Impermanent: Designing and Appreciating Architecture as Nature* (Oxon: Routledge, 2015).

³⁰ Kevin Melchionne, "Living in Glass Houses: Domesticity, Interior Decoration, and Environmental Aesthetics," *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 56, no. 2 (Spring 1998): 191.

imperfect. Information-and-technology scholar Steven J. Jackson terms this privileging of the end result of a production process a “productionist bias” and instead calls for what he terms “broken world thinking,” which foregrounds “erosion, breakdown, and decay, rather than novelty, growth, and progress, as our starting points.”³¹

The productionist bias promotes another tenet of perfectionist aesthetics: uniformity. Industrial production is premised upon the uniformity and consistency of manufactured goods. Any glitches in the production process result in defective goods; these are often discarded or sold cheaply as “factory rejects” because of “slight imperfections.” This ethos favoring uniformity guides not only factory production but also other forms of perfectionist aesthetics that I listed before, such as fruits and vegetables without defects and deformity, the green lawn that features uniformly smooth surfaces without weeds or brown spots, and human bodies without deformities or blemishes. We can interpret this rejection of diversity as another legacy of the Enlightenment, which accords high value on universality, uniformity, consistency, and context-independence. This ethos has come under increasing criticism, particularly today by those who question the colonialist practice of imposing Western-centric worldviews and one-size-fits-all solutions on different cultural practices and geographical conditions, without respecting their specific contexts.

Thus, perfectionist aesthetics can be understood to be directed by a philosophy and practice that favor uniformity, context-independence, timelessness, and non-changeability. In response, imperfectionist aesthetics challenges perfectionist beliefs for philosophical, moral, and aesthetic reasons, and uses these criticisms to support an alternative view. I explore its criticisms in the next section.

Moral and Aesthetic Support for Imperfectionist Aesthetics

First, there is a moral argument in support of imperfectionist aesthetics. One of the necessary ingredients of our moral life as we interact with others is that we do not impose our ideas and ideals on them but rather become a good listener and respect their own reality, dignity, and integrity. Instead of focusing on the fairness, neutrality, and universality that characterize

³¹ Steven J. Jackson, “Rethinking Repair,” in *Media Technologies: Essays on Communication, Materiality, and Society*, ed. Tarleton Gillespie, Pablo J. Boczkowski, and Kristen A. Foot (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2014), 221.

Western justice-centric ethics, care ethics, proposed primarily by feminist thinkers, emphasizes the paramount importance of respecting the singularity of an individual in our ethical life (see on the nexus between ethics of care and aesthetics of imperfection Jakko Kemper's chapter in this volume). Lawrence Blum, a moral philosopher, states that "care morality is about the *particular* agent's caring for and about the *particular* moral patient. Morality is not (only) about how the impersonal 'one' is meant to act toward the impersonal 'other.'"³²

There is a structural similarity between aesthetics and care ethics. An early proponent of ethics of care, Nel Noddings, explains the structural analogy between aesthetics and care ethics thus: "The receptivity characteristic of aesthetic engagement is very like the receptivity of caring. Consciousness assumes a similar mode of being—one that attempts to grasp or to receive a reality rather than to impose it."³³ Although not specifically discussing the parallel between aesthetics and care ethics, Ronald Hepburn, a British aesthetician, similarly observes that aesthetic experiences of art are possible only "when we see it ... as an inherently valuable, irreplaceable artifact, whose message ... is *individualized* by its embodiment in that *unique* object."³⁴

Engaging with the other, whether a person or an art work, in its singularity, requires open-mindedness and a willingness to meet it on its own terms. Art is particularly effective in this regard, according to pragmatist philosopher John Dewey. He states that the moral function of art is "to remove prejudice, do away with the scales that keep the eye from seeing, [and] tear away the veils due to wont and custom." Specifically, "works of art are means by which we enter, through imagination and the emotions they evoke, into other forms of relationship and participation than our own."³⁵

Iris Murdoch's notion of "unselfing" can be understood similarly. Concerned with the fact that "our minds are continually active, fabricating an anxious, usually self- preoccupied, often falsifying *veil* which partially conceals the world," she claims that "anything which alters consciousness in the direction of unselfishness, objectivity and realism is to be connected with virtue."³⁶ Consequently, she regards the appreciation of good art as the

³² Lawrence A. Blum, "Gilligan and Kohlberg: Implications for Moral Theory," *Ethics* 98 (1988): 476–7, emphases added.

³³ Nel Noddings, *Caring: A Relational Approach to Ethics and Moral Education*, 2nd ed., updated (Oakland: University of California Press, 2013), 22.

³⁴ Ronald W. Hepburn, "Life and Life-Enhancement as Key Concepts in Aesthetics," in *The Reach of the Aesthetic: Collected Essays on Art and Nature* (Hants: Ashgate, 2001), 12.

³⁵ John Dewey, *Art as Experience* (New York: Capricorn Press, 1958), 325 and 333.

³⁶ Iris Murdoch, *The Sovereignty of Good* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1970), 82.

reward of successful unselfing that helps one “transcend selfish and obsessive limitations of personality and can enlarge the sensibility.”³⁷

I believe that this moral function of art stated by Dewey and Murdoch can be applied to everyday aesthetics as well. Although art is the best vehicle for cultivating an open-minded and respectful attitude that helps overcome a self-centered and uncritical worldview, everyday aesthetic experiences can also aid in this moral education. In this regard, perfectionist aesthetics is morally problematic for its failure to attend to and respect the individual singularity of an object, whether it be a consumer product that has seen better days, a weed-filled garden, or a deformed human body.

In addition to this moral shortcoming, the second argument against perfectionist aesthetics concerns the price we pay by unduly limiting our aesthetic palette. Those objects that are considered imperfect are more challenging for aesthetic appreciation than perfect objects that offer easier beauty. However, precisely because of this difficulty, imperfect objects can provide a richer aesthetic experience and help cultivate a sharper sensibility.

Here, historically noteworthy movements that celebrate imperfectionist aesthetics, namely the eighteenth-century British picturesque and the Japanese *wabi* aesthetics, are helpful in explaining the benefits of widening one’s aesthetic horizon.

Picturesque Aesthetics

One of the early advocates of the eighteenth-century picturesque, William Gilpin, acknowledges the beauty and elegance of Palladian architecture with its symmetry and orderly design, but recommends that “should we wish to give it picturesque beauty, we must use the mallet instead of the chisel, we must beat down one half of it, deface the other, and throw the mutilated members around in heaps. In short, from a smooth building we must turn it into a rough ruin.”³⁸ According to Gilpin and other advocates of the picturesque, such as Richard Payne Knight and Uvedale Price, the experience of ruins requires a fine-tuned aesthetic sensibility—one that appreciates their complex, irregular, and asymmetrical shape, interplay of interior and exterior spaces, and rough surfaces due to destruction, weathering, and plant growth in crevices.

³⁷ Ibid., 85.

³⁸ William Gilpin, *Three Essays on Picturesque Beauty; on Picturesque Travel; and on Sketching Landscape: to Which Is Added a Poem, on Landscape Painting* (1792) at <http://quod.lib.umich.edu/e/ecco/004863369.0001.000/1:4?rgn=div1;view=fulltext>, accessed March 1, 2017, 7.

In addition to the purely sensuous appeal of irregularity and signs of damage or decline, imperfect objects stimulate the imagination that enriches their aesthetic appeal. Joseph Addison, writing in the early eighteenth century and foretelling the subsequent development of picturesque aesthetics, for example, characterizes our aesthetic experience as “the pleasures of the imagination” and identifies the great, the uncommon, and the beautiful as the causes of such pleasures. Among them, the uncommon stimulates our mind and “it is this that bestows charms on a monster and makes even the imperfections of nature to please us.”³⁹ Addison claims it is the imagination that “makes the most rude, uncultivated parts of nature administer to his pleasures” and helps discover “a multitude of charms that conceal themselves from the generality of mankind.”⁴⁰ For Gilpin, ruins again serve as the prime example of imperfect beauty. The imagination becomes engaged as we contemplate their original state, the cause of their transformation, and the parallel transience of human life. His contemporary Knight summarizes the source of the specific pleasure of picturesque beauty thus: “As all the pleasures of intellect arise from the association of ideas, the more the materials of association are multiplied, the more will the sphere of these pleasures be enlarged.”⁴¹

Wabi Aesthetics

Another well-known historical example of imperfectionism, Japanese *wabi* aesthetics, was established with the tea ceremony in the sixteenth century, long before the popularization of picturesque aesthetics in eighteenth-century Britain. Initially proposed as an alternative to the prevailing taste for opulence and luxury, *wabi* aesthetics, like the picturesque, also celebrates irregularity, rough surfaces, asymmetry, and defects in tea bowls, other implements, and tea huts. These qualities often result from aging processes or occur accidentally during the creative process—think of an unexpected run of the glaze or the adherence of ashes and bits of straw on the pottery surface. Some other times, tea masters create these effects by a destructive act, as when they break one handle of a vase.⁴²

³⁹ Addison, “Pleasures,” #412, 142.

⁴⁰ Ibid., #411, 140.

⁴¹ Richard Payne Knight, *An Analytical Inquiry into the Principles of Taste* (1805), in Hunt and Willis, *The Genius of the Place*, 181.

⁴² See my “The Japanese Aesthetics of Imperfection and Insufficiency,” *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 55, no. 4 (Fall 1997): 377–85.

Wabi aesthetics gives a specific term to a long-standing Japanese aesthetic sensibility informed by the Buddhist notion of the impermanence of everything. A prominent example is a series of essays written in the fourteenth century by Yoshida Kenkō, a retired Buddhist monk. Kenkō extols, for instance, the beauty of a silk scroll wrapper that “has frayed at top and bottom, and the mother-of-pearl [that] has fallen from the roller.”⁴³ He also argues for the beauty of cherry blossoms when they are falling rather than at the height of blooming, although he recognizes that this appreciation is challenging to many, because “people commonly regret that the cherry blossoms scatter.”⁴⁴

As with the picturesque, the activation of imagination underlies the aesthetic appeal of *wabi*. Kenkō poses the rhetorical question whether an aesthetic pleasure is gained only through the eyes: “Are we to look at the moon and the cherry blossoms with our eyes alone?”⁴⁵ In answering, he declares: “How much more evocative and pleasing it is to think about the spring without stirring from the house, to dream of the moonlit night though we remain in our room!”⁴⁶ For the same reason, Sen no Rikyū (1522–91), the tea master who established *wabi* aesthetics, criticizes those who lament a landscape devoid of flowers and colorful foliage because they “are merely capable of taking pleasure in the colorful sights which appear to their physical eyes alone.”⁴⁷ Kenkō invokes a poignant appreciation of a festival’s aftermath—when various objects used in the procession are taken apart and a sense of desolation sets in—by drawing (just as fans of the picturesque will do later) a parallel to human life: “You realize with a pang of grief that life is like this.”⁴⁸ Formative to his appreciation is the imaginative engagement with something that is considered to have declined from the height of its aesthetic appeal (to the eye).

⁴³ Kenkō Yoshida, *Essays in Idleness: The Tsurezuregusa of Kenkō*, trans. Donald Keene (New York: Columbia University Press, 1967), 70. In the text, I follow the Japanese custom of putting the family name before the given name, but the order is reversed in the citation information to be faithful to the English publication of the translation. With historical figures, such as here, however, it is customary to refer to the first name.

⁴⁴ Kenkō, *Essays*, 115.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 118.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*

⁴⁷ Sōkei Nanbō, “Record of Nanbō” (Sen no Rikyū’s teaching recorded by his disciple, Sōkei Nanbō), in *The Theory of Beauty in the Classical Aesthetics of Japan*, ed. and trans. Toshihiko and Toyo Izutsu (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1981), 156–7.

⁴⁸ Kenkō, *Essays*, 120.

Consumer Aesthetics

Engaging the imagination as an aesthetic benefit, as advocated by the picturesque and *wabi*, is particularly pertinent in our dealings with contemporary consumer products. Today's demand for the new and fashionable results at least in part from the fact that many consumer products are mass produced and soon carted off to a dumping place on the other side of the globe. This geographical distance between the consumer and the object's origin and afterlife makes our typical relationship with them one of alienation, disconnection, and disengagement. As David Orr, an environmental educator, points out, the problem is that we do not often see the true ugliness of the consumer economy and so are not compelled to do much about it. The distance between shopping malls and the mines, wells, corporate farms, factories, toxic dumps, and landfills, sometimes half a world away, dampens our perceptions that something is fundamentally wrong.⁴⁹

Today's relationship between consumers and products has thus become rather dysfunctional. A design educator, Stuart Walker, characterizes this state of affairs "a severe detachment from our material world" and "a lack of understanding and a devaluing of material culture"; we have become "increasingly divorced from an intimate connection with things."⁵⁰

This disengagement renders consumer goods mere objects on the store shelf with no history or story to tell. However, the fact is that they are not mere "stuff" devoid of life stories; we just have not activated our imagination to listen to their individual stories. Far from being story-less, an object undergoes quite a journey during its production process and continues this journey into its so-called "afterlife" in the junkyard. The story is often dark, featuring environmental problems and human hardships. While this dark story may not necessarily render the aesthetic value of the object negative, it makes its aesthetic appeal more complicated and possibly richer, though perhaps creating unease and discomfort. It renders its sensuous appeal more fragile and precarious. If we do purchase an object, feeling the weight of its past dark history and the likely continuation of a dark future story would encourage a more respectful interaction—one of caring for it and prolonging its longevity by repairing when needed, rather than treating it as a disposable item to throw away at the first sign that it no longer satisfies our aesthetic appetite.

⁴⁹ David Orr, *Nature of Design: Ecology, Culture, and Human Intention* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 179.

⁵⁰ Walker, *Sustainable by Design*, 53, 54, and 53.

Imperfectionist aesthetics thus widens our aesthetic horizon by open-minded acceptance and appreciation of, as well as imaginative engagement with, those objects and situations that fall short of what is normally seen as their perfect condition. Such interactions enrich our aesthetic life and cultivate a morally sensitive attitude in our engagement with the world. If a person's notion of beauty consists only of a perfectly maintained Palladian architecture, blossoms in full bloom, the monoculture of a green lawn, well-formed fruits, and unblemished objects of daily use, we can safely judge that her aesthetic life is not as rich as it can be. Alternatively, suppose that technology becomes advanced to the point that all manufactured materials can self-heal, thereby retaining their perfect condition permanently and alleviating the need for care, maintenance, and repair.⁵¹ While such a scenario may be welcome for things like airplanes and bridges, I suspect that our life will become impoverished due to the lack of diversity of objects for appreciation, as well as the loss of opportunity for active engagement with the material world through maintenance, care, and repair. Thus, as historical thinkers from various world locations have taught us from the fourteenth century onward, imperfectionism is beneficial to our aesthetic and moral life.

Arguments against Indiscriminate Imperfectionist Aesthetics

Thus far I have been discussing the benefits of imperfectionist aesthetics in general. But my promotion of imperfectionism does not imply that I reject perfectionist aesthetics by default. I believe there are reasons against an *indiscriminate* adoption of imperfectionist aesthetics. Let me explore these issues.

Some imperfectionism advocates systematically elevate imperfection above perfection. The aforementioned picturesque praise for imperfection in architecture, gardens, and artifacts is always accompanied by a criticism of perfection, such as found in perfectly symmetrical, orderly gardens. Kenkō's celebration of cherry blossoms past their glory as "worthier of our admiration" is accompanied by his claim that "only an exceptionally insensitive man" would find beauty only in flowers in full bloom.⁵² Rikyū's teaching recommends that tea ceremony implements "should, in every way and aspect, fall short of perfection," and some tea masters, as said, intentionally

⁵¹ For this thought experiment, see Daniela K. Rosner's "A Beautiful Oops," *Continent* 6, no. 1 (2017): 77–80.

⁵² Kenkō, *Essays*, 115, emphasis added.

damage objects used in the tea ceremony.⁵³ These statements and acts all indicate that both advocates of the picturesque and tea aficionados regarded imperfect objects as aesthetically superior to perfect objects.

This tendency to elevate imperfection above perfection is an understandable protest against the common perception of imperfectionism as aesthetically challenging or requiring a cultured sensibility. However, I believe that the matter is not a case of either/or; it is rather a judicious coexistence of both. Let me offer both aesthetic and sociopolitical reasons against an indiscriminate promotion of imperfectionism.

First, if one of the reasons to support imperfectionism is to promote an *inclusive aesthetics*, perfectionist aesthetics should retain its place in the aesthetic discourse. After all, even those who advocate imperfect beauty caused by damage, wear, and aging effects would most likely appreciate the perfectly smooth and lustrous appearance of a lacquerware piece when it is finished by the craftsman, an apple with a perfectly round shape, and the smooth skin of a youthful body. The different aesthetic appeals of lacquerware with crackled surfaces, an apple with an asymmetrical shape, and wrinkles marking an aged face do not negate the beauty of these perfections.

Second, even those who advocate imperfectionism often point out the complementarity of perfection and imperfection. It is instructive to consider again the aforementioned historical examples. The picturesque movement appeared in Britain when the land was being rapidly marked by checkerboard-patterned hedgerows due to the enclosure movement. The geometrical monotony of enclosed fields is best broken by landscaping utilizing picturesque aesthetics. Conversely, William Marsden, a British historian and linguist with pioneering scientific works on Indonesia, praises the regularity and order of a pepper garden *after walking through a jungle* in his 1783 report from Sumatra. However, he claims that “a pepper garden cultivated in England would not ... be considered as an object of extraordinary beauty; and would be particularly found fault with for its uniformity.”⁵⁴

⁵³ Sen no Rikyū in *Nambōroku o Yomu (Reading Nambōroku)*, ed. Isao Kumakura (Kyoto: Tankōsha, 1989), 45. Translation taken from Toshihiko and Toyo Izutsu, *The Theory of Beauty in the Classical Aesthetics of Japan* (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1981), 146.

⁵⁴ William Marsden, *The History of Sumatra* (1783), cited by Keith Thomas, *Man and the Natural World: A History of the Modern Sensibility* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1983), 263. Immanuel Kant criticizes Marsden's praise for a pepper garden by claiming that “all stiff regularity (such as approximates to mathematical regularity) has something in it repugnant to taste; for our entertainment in the contemplation of it lasts for no length of time, but it rather ... produces weariness.” However, Marsden's text reveals that his praise is contextual. Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, trans. J. H. Bernard (New York: Hafner Press, 1974), 80.

It is also instructive that advocates of *wabi* aesthetics often point out the aesthetic effect created by a contrast between perfection and imperfection. In the words of the fourteenth-century tea master Murata Shukō, “A prize horse looks best hitched to a thatched hut.”⁵⁵ While *wabi* tea highlights an irregularly shaped tea bowl, cracked vase, and crooked wooden pillar, all of these irregular and misshapen objects are placed against the geometrical pattern of *tatami* mats.⁵⁶ If everything, including the floor, in the tea hut is irregular and misshapen, most likely the overall effect is more grotesque than the *wabi* appeal. On the other hand, if the perfectionist aesthetic pervades everything, as in Philip Johnson’s Glass House, the effect will most likely be stiff and rigid, not allowing much free play of the imagination.

Thus, the ideal relationship between perfectionist and imperfectionist aesthetics can be characterized as a judicious balance between them, rather than an indiscriminate promotion of everything perfect or everything imperfect. If it is problematic to adhere to perfectionist aesthetic ideals by rejecting other possibilities, the same applies to promoting imperfection as exclusive aesthetic ideal.

Negative Aesthetics

In addition to this aesthetic criticism, there are moral, social, and political considerations against indiscriminate support for imperfectionist aesthetics. Today we witness an increasing attention to *negative aesthetics*, which challenges traditional aesthetic discourses’ focus on beauty. In *Everyday Aesthetics* (2007), Katya Mandoki devotes considerable attention to exposing the “fetishes” of Western aesthetics.⁵⁷ One of these fetishes, according to her, results from what she calls the “Pangloss Syndrome,” characterized as “the tendency to deal only with things that are nice and worthy, good and beautiful,” through “a surgical operation of systematic exclusion of all phenomena that are not positive and useful in their supply of pleasure and nice thoughts.”⁵⁸ However, she observes that we are confronted with “the disgusting, the obscene, the coarse, the insignificant, the banal, the ugly,

⁵⁵ Cited by Kōshirō Haga, “The *Wabi* Aesthetic,” translated and adapted by Martin Collcutt, in *Tea in Japan: Essays in the History of Chanoyu*, ed. Paul Varley and Isao Kumakura (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1989), 196.

⁵⁶ See Marc Treib’s “The Dichotomies of Dwelling: Edo/Tokyo,” in *Tokyo: Form and Spirit*, ed. Mildred Friedman (Minneapolis, MN: Walker Art Center, 1986), 122.

⁵⁷ Katya Mandoki, *Everyday Aesthetics: Prosaics, the Play of Culture and Social Identities* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2007).

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 37.

the sordid” and other negative aesthetic qualities, which she calls aesthetic poisoning, every day.⁵⁹

Another noted contemporary aesthetician—Arnold Berleant, who coined the term *negative aesthetics*—identifies aesthetics as “the theory of sensibility,” rejects the common association of aesthetics exclusively with art and beauty, and calls attention to occasions and environments that trigger an experience that “offends, distresses, or has harmful or damaging consequences.”⁶⁰ By analyzing many cases that involve different relationships between the aesthetic and the moral, including pollution, commodification, political propaganda, and urban planning, Berleant stresses the importance of developing an awareness of “aesthetic deprivation,” “aesthetic damage,” and “aesthetic harm.” Positive aesthetics—the focus of the traditional aesthetics discourse—delights, enlightens, and uplifts our sensibility and contributes to human flourishing. Negative aesthetics, on the other hand, dulls, numbs, or assaults our sensibility, stifles creativity, and compromises our well-being and quality of life. He calls for the need to acknowledge this existence of aesthetic negativity.

I do not think that anybody would believe that we live in an aesthetic utopia with no need for improvement. Unfortunately, negative aesthetics exists in today’s world and in our lives, ranging from muzak in malls to gaudy billboards, street litter to offensive landfill smells.⁶¹ They also resonate in such imperfect-looking objects as peeling paint, a dilapidated house with broken windows, weeds growing in sidewalk crevices, and tattered clothes worn by homeless people. These instances of negative aesthetics in everyday life result from a lack of choice suffered by the economically disadvantaged, instead of conscious aesthetic decisions made by them.

I previously advocated for an open-minded approach and cultivating an aesthetic sensibility to be able to appreciate these signs of imperfection. Part of the reason to do so were the environmentally and socially harmful consequences of adhering to perfect aesthetic ideals. However, by the same token, if examples of imperfectionist aesthetics indicate social ills and injustice, it is problematic not to regard them as instances of the negative aesthetics that disclose that things are not quite right and need improvement. There is something morally repugnant about deriving an aesthetic pleasure from the signs of social ills suffered by others.

⁵⁹ Ibid., 38.

⁶⁰ Arnold Berleant, *Sensibility and Sense: The Aesthetic Transformation of the Human World* (Exeter: Imprint Academic, 2010), 155.

⁶¹ For examples of negative aesthetics in today’s world, see Berleant’s *Sensibility*, Chapter 9, “The Negative Aesthetics of Everyday Life,” 155–74.

Indeed, both picturesque aesthetics and *wabi* aesthetics were criticized for this reason. As early as 1790, writer and women's rights activist Mary Wollstonecraft was critical of the picturesque estate where "every thing ... is cherished but man," and "the eye ... had wandered indignant from the stately palace to the pestiferous hovel."⁶² Half a century later, the famous art critic John Ruskin was also critical of "the heartless 'lower picturesque' delight in the look that an old laborer has, not knowing that there is anything pathetic in his grey hair, and withered arms, and sunburnt breast."⁶³ The *wabi* aesthetics associated with the art of tea ceremony became a target of pointed criticism in the eighteenth century by Dazai Shundai, a Confucian scholar:

Whatever tea dilettantes do is a copy of the poor and humble. It may be that the rich and noble have a reason to find pleasure in copying the poor and humble. But what should those who are, from the outset, poor and humble find pleasure in further copying the poor and humble? ... All that a tea dilettante does is to copy everything which looks poor and shabby.⁶⁴

Today, many instances of imperfectionist aesthetics, such as shabby chic, grunge fashion, and distressed looks, invoke charges of elitism, classism, and dilettantism. Wearing an expensive pair of jeans sporting rips, tears, frays, patches, and faded color may remind some of Marie Antoinette playing at being a milkmaid, others of appropriating the appearance of a homeless person. Furthermore, although ripped clothes may indeed offer a counterpoint to fast fashion's obsession with the ever new in the sense of not showing wear and tear, as soon as they become a fashion trend, they themselves are bound to become out of style, thereby contributing to fast fashion. The façade of shabby houses of the economically disadvantaged residents of Gee's Bend—a small community in Alabama where stunning-looking quilts are created—certainly offers inspiration for quilt patterns, but I doubt that they have a positive aesthetic appreciation of the expression of poverty they are suffering.⁶⁵ The same is true for today's so-called ruin porn and poverty tourism in cities like Detroit and New Orleans, where physical

⁶² Mary Wollstonecraft, "A Vindication of the Rights of Men" (1790), in *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman and A Vindication of the Rights of Men* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 58.

⁶³ John Ruskin, *Modern Painters*, cited by Lowenthal, *The Past is a Foreign Country*, 166.

⁶⁴ Dazai Shundai, *Dokugo* (1816), cited by Hiroshi Minami, *Psychology of the Japanese People*, trans. Albert R. Ikoma (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1971), 90.

⁶⁵ See Beardsley, Arnett, Arnett, Livingstone, *The Quilts of Gee's Bend* and Beardsley, Arnett, Arnett, Livingstone, *Gee's Bend: Women and Their Quilts* for examples of the residents' houses.

manifestations of social ills and suffering morph into an object of the gaze primarily for nonresidents.⁶⁶

Calling attention to instances of negative aesthetics in our lives and experiencing them as negative is important because of what I call the *power of the aesthetic*. The aesthetic manifestations of imperfection communicate social problems more powerfully and effectively than things like statistics regarding poverty rates. Our sensibility, assaulted by these negative aesthetic experiences, affects us immediately and viscerally, and I believe that it is important that they affect us this way. The term “aesthetic” does not necessarily refer to something positive and pleasurable, if we remain faithful to its original value-neutral meaning of having to do with the senses. Similarly, ‘appreciation’ does not always mean something enjoyable. It means having a deep understanding of something, which includes things like difficulties and problems. Accordingly, it is important that we cultivate sensibility and activate imagination so that we develop an appreciation of negative aesthetics in the sense explained.

Does this consideration regarding negative aesthetics mean that those objects resulting from or bearing witness to social ills and injustice should be eradicated or replaced? I believe that the issue is more complicated and that it requires a carefully considered and individually tailored judgment. For example, some, but perhaps not all, ruined structures that result from a war or an evil human deed should be preserved as historical witnesses and cautionary reminders of “never again” for the future generation.⁶⁷ Similarly, Sannon Lee Dawdy, an anthropologist, argues against completely eradicating the traces of destruction caused by Hurricane Katrina in New Orleans and replacing them with a sanitized version of what things used to be or, worse, their Disneyfication for consumption by tourists. She instead argues for a judicious preservation of patina, which she defines as “a medium of aesthetic value *perceived* to have accumulated through time that represents the social palimpsest” and supports “a process of both accumulation and decay that

⁶⁶ See on poverty tourism also Domnica Radulescu’s contribution to this volume. For the analysis of “rustalgia,” “Rust Belt chic,” or “Rust Belt porn” regarding the American Rust Belt represented by Detroit, see Renee M. Conroy, “Rust Belt Ruins,” in *Philosophical Perspectives on Ruins, Monuments, and Memorials*, ed. Jeanette Bicknell, Jennifer Judkins, and Carolyn Korsmeyer (New York: Routledge, 2020), 121–32, as well as Kate Wells, “Detroit Was Always Made of Wheels: Confronting Ruin Porn in Its Hometown” and Christopher T. Gullen, “Gods and Monsters: A Solastalgic Examination of Detroit’s Ruins and Representation,” both in *Ruin Porn and the Obsession with Decay*, ed. Siobhan Lyons (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), 13–29 and 31–44.

⁶⁷ See my “Reflections on the Atomic Bomb Ruin in Hiroshima,” in Bicknell, Judkins, and Korsmeyer (ed.), *Philosophical Perspectives on Ruins*, 201–14.

must be kept in a cared-for balance.”⁶⁸ Ultimately, both my discussion of perfectionism/imperfectionism in everyday aesthetics and Dawdy’s view on patina are a call for recognizing, appreciating, and working with the material world that never stands still.

In conclusion, my examination of perfectionist and imperfectionist aesthetics in everyday life underscores the power of the aesthetic. Aesthetics in our lives tend to be dismissed as dispensable luxury or superficial fluff. However, I hope to have shown how the quality of life and the state of society and the world are significantly affected by aesthetic considerations. Aesthetics can direct our decisions and actions in everyday life, offer a paradigm shift, such as the shift from perfectionism to imperfectionism, counter negative consequences of our decisions and actions, and provide a powerful and effective instrument for exposing social problems. It therefore behooves us to develop respect for this power of the aesthetic, cultivate aesthetic literacy and vigilance, and ultimately use it to improve and enrich our lives.⁶⁹

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⁶⁸ Shannon Lee Dawdy, *Patina: A Profane Archaeology* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2016), 5 and 16.

⁶⁹ The original and much different version of this chapter was first presented at the Symposium on the Aesthetics of (Im)perfection held at the University of Tokyo (April 2017) organized by Peter Cheyne, and published in *Contemporary Aesthetics*, 15 (2017). It was further revised for this volume after presentation at the Imperfections conference (March 2019) organized by Ellen Rutten. I thank both organizers for inviting me to the respective meetings and the participants in both events for stimulating discussion and much food for thought. Scott Cook edited the final text, for which I am grateful. Last but not least, I thank the coeditors of this volume for their comments and edits on the earlier drafts of this chapter.

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