

DOES IT SPARK JOY?

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ABSTRACT

The question is asked by Japanese clutter-clearing expert Marie Kondo in a Netflix program, where she helps North Americans deal with their many things and where she also teaches participants to fold their clothes in organized ways. The question ‘Does it spark joy?’ in my text is used in an intellectual act of folding together thoughts from situational aesthetics, vital materialism and a philosophy of mingled bodies - into a relational and processual ontology, which overcomes the subject-object divide, highlights the transcendence of self and promotes receptivity to the dynamic and open-ended character of the world. The mundanity of clothing clutter is used to develop an approach of designing with care. The metaphor of the fold is part of the composition of the argument.

INTRODUCTION

Yesterday evening for the first time I watched a couple of episodes of a for-me new reality series on Netflix which was about tidying house with a Japanese woman called ‘Marie Kondo’. Each episode is a transformation story. A family or a couple have problems with clutter. They have too much stuff or too much disorganization. Kondo – who primarily speaks in Japanese – with help from a translator takes the family through a process of tidying and organizing their things.

There is a simple method to follow: A sequence of steps to go through under the instruction of the sweetly smiling and energetically present Kondo. Clothing is always the first category of stuff to tackle. Kondo instructs people to take out all of their clothes; take it

out of drawers and closets and pile it all together, for example on the bed. This generates huge piles of clothes, at least in the three episodes I watched yesterday.

In one of the episodes it actually generated a heap so large that it almost filled a whole room the size of my kitchen. After having piled all of the clothing on a bed, couch or whatever, the next step is to take each item in hand; to hold it and connect with it and feel: does it spark joy?

If it sparks joy, you keep it. If it doesn’t spark joy, you pass it on. Important note: you don’t just throw it away. You first thank the item, again connecting energetically with it, you thank it for the time you have had it, and then you pass it on. You have now let go of it.

PEST CONTROL

My writing was just interrupted for a moment.

Pest control. I live in an organized society which takes care to avoid the spread of illness via pests. The other day our cat Samson brought home a dead rat, so the landlady – who apparently has a great fear of rats – called the municipality pest control.

The man in blue fleece jacket and overalls knocked on the door. I told him about the rat and said the cat may have gotten it at the beach which is right across the street and he said, yup, I’ve had some incidents further down the road and a bit up the road as well. But if you haven’t actually seen anything, I don’t want to put out poison. It’s not a nice thing to have poison lying around in nature.

I agreed and suggested that some fallen apples in our yard might be attractive for rats and that he might want to talk a walk around there to see if he could spot any sign of rat activity? If I were a rat, I would surely eat those apples.

He agreed and said that if he didn’t see anything, he would just take off again, but that I of course should call, in case I see more signs of rats.

SITUATIONAL AESTHETICS

Does it spark joy? This question, which by Kondo is accompanied by a gesture of holding the item against the soft, middle region of the body, the area of the solar plexus, stomach and heart, and a sensing-feeling into the item, makes me think of philosopher and design scholar Yuriko Saito and her presentation of Japanese aesthetics as a contribution to the extension of the fields of inquiry of philosophical aesthetics (Saito 2017; Saito 2017b). Aesthetics is commonly connected with art, but contemporary aesthetics is much broader than art. Everyday aesthetics explore modes of engagement which are governed by the senses, experienced with sensibility. This invokes the etymology of aesthetics as *aistheta*: meaning *of or for perception by the senses* and includes exploring mundane objects of the everyday, environments such as the home, the route to work (Leddy 2005, p.4; Haapala 2005, p. 45) and the workplace (Carlsson and Schaeffer 2017). Everyday aesthetics highlights our sensuous engagement with the world. This points to the relevance for design of the emerging field of everyday aesthetics. Here I use the work of Saito and Japanese aesthetics, but there are a range of approaches to everyday aesthetics also in Western traditions. For an interesting account of thinking and discussing the everyday experience in a Nordic scholarly context, see Annus 2017, p.7 ff)

Saito uses Japanese aesthetics as an example of a kind of aesthetics, which is not debilitated by the subject-object divide that so much of Western aesthetic thinking is shaped by. Saito says that in Japanese aesthetics, you don't describe the object as having aesthetic properties; if a Japanese person is asked to describe which qualities they appreciate in the appearance of a bird for example, the response will not be to highlight some specific characteristic of the bird. The response more likely will be the description of a situation: the bird when it soars in the violet-bluish sky above the setting sun, for example.

What is highlighted here is the coming together of a situation. Saito calls this kind of aesthetic appreciation 'situational aesthetics'. The sensitivity of situational aesthetics is centered on circumstance and interaction. It is a description of something appealing which occurs relationally and in process. It refers to what we might describe as entities coming together in a passing moment.

Saito tells more about Japanese aesthetics:

"aesthetic sensibility is directed toward 'jōkyō' 状況 (variously translated as the state of things or affairs, conditions, situations, circumstances) rather than 'jittai' 実体 (translated as substance, subject, entity). That is, the aesthetic qualities of birds cannot be determined apart from the relationship with their surroundings."

The situational aesthetic is a processual and relational aesthetic. Below follows a lengthy quote from Saito.

"...the Japanese worldview, particularly reflecting Buddhism, characterizes reality as consisting of relationships rather than discrete individual beings and objects. Robert Carter summarizes the Japanese worldview as a "*declaration of interdependence*," that is, "*a recognition that we are not only inextricably intertwined with others but with the entire cosmos*" (Carter 2008, p. 5). The best illustration reflective of this worldview is the Japanese term for human beings, 'ningen' 人間. The first character designates "human" and the second one "between," indicating that an individual is defined by the relationship she holds with others. The Japanese ontology, therefore, does not subscribe to the Western dichotomy of the subject and the object. Tetsurō Watsuji, one of the most influential Japanese thinkers of the twentieth century, refers to human existence as "betweenness," ('aidagara' as referenced by Böhme), leading one commentator to remark that the precise translation of 'ningen' 人間 should be "human being in betweenness" (Inutsuka 2017, p. 103).

This de-emphasis (looked at from the Western viewpoint) of an independently existing self is further reflected in the Japanese language usage. As Augustin Berque points out, it is customary for a well-formed Japanese sentence to lack a subject pronoun, "I," that is required in English and many European languages. For example, instead of saying "I am going," it is more common and natural to say "going." The (sometimes exclusive) focus on the predicate indicates the primacy of what Berque calls "*a scene*" or "*a particular set of circumstances*" (Berque 2017, p. 16). The Japanese aesthetic tradition reflects this primacy of scenes, circumstances, or atmospheres in its preoccupation with a seasonal atmosphere, no doubt due to Japan's distinct four seasons comprised of meteorological phenomena, plants, and events." (Saito 2017, p. 21)

The situational aesthetic resonates with a relational ontology: implying that reality is understood as constituted by relations, rather than independent, autonomous units. A relational ontology is an ontology of connections: we are related; and in a Japanese understanding: we are also related to the world, we are part of cosmos (Carter 2008, p. 5, in Saito 2017, p. 21).

VITAL MATERIALISM

From a different position – from the field of political science – Jane Bennett outlines a not entirely different kind of relationality. Bennett writes of 'thing-power': "the curious ability of inanimate things to animate, to act, to produce effects dramatic and subtle" (Bennett 2010, p.6) and of the vibrant materiality of lively matter, which has the capacity: "not only to impede or block the will and designs of humans but also to act as quasi

agents or forces with trajectories, propensities, or tendencies of their own.” (2010, p. viii).

Bennett further describes how leaning into thing-power has a foundation in quantum physics, in what Bennett calls a ‘same-stuff claim’: that everything is ‘made of the same quirky stuff’; particle streams and matter-energy. Bennett refers to Michel Serres work “The Birth of Physics” where the world is accounted for as “a turbulent, immanent field in which various and variable materialities collide, congeal, morph, evolve, and disintegrate.” (Serres, 2001, in Bennett 2010, xi)

In her account of vibrant matter Bennett takes point of departure in a walk she took on a sunny Tuesday morning in June in Baltimore. On the walk she comes across a number of items lying in the gutter, shimmying back and forth between debris and thing; alternating between being stuff to ignore and stuff that commands attention. Among other things, an unblemished, dead rat.

With Bennet, I can further unfold a relational ontology: “all bodies are kin in the sense of inextricably enmeshed in a dense network of relations. And in a knotted world of vibrant matter, to harm one section of the web may very well be to harm oneself.” (2010, p. 13)

Bennett suggests – in a somewhat programmatic account for vital materialism – that a measure of methodological naiveté is appropriate in attempts to highlight whatever thing-power there may be. The reason being that postponing critique / adopting naiveté may allow the researcher/writer/scientist to “linger in those moments during which they find themselves fascinated by objects, taking them as clues to the material vitality that they share with them. This sense of a strange and incomplete commonality with the out-side may induce vital materialists to treat non-humans – animals, plants, earth, even artifacts and commodities – more carefully, more strategically, more ecologically.” (Bennet 2010, p.17).

Bennett suggests that the debris she came across in the street, which arrested her, stopped her from moving on, may be an instance of the agency of/in vital materiality. She rhetorically asks if the real agent of her immobilization on the street is “the cultural meanings of “rat”, “plastic”, and “wood”, and is open to this being the case, but finds it more poignant to suggest that the ‘swarming activity’ which this shimmying debris creates in her head is “an instance of the vital materiality that also constitutes the trash.” (Bennett 2010, p. 10).

RELATIONALITY OF CARE

To be more straight to the point: I am suggesting that Bennett’s vital materialism and Saito’s situational aesthetics have a relational and processual ontology in

common and that this ontology is crucial in an interrogation of care.

These intellectual traditions can help us understand and highlight the materiality of which we are composed – as humans – and to see our being as enmeshed in a network of relations; in a knotted world of vibrant matter (Bennet 2010), as ‘betweenness’ (Saito 2017), situated, unfolding in a series of events.

“Aesthetic engagement requires overcoming the subject-object divide and adopting an attitude of open-mindedness, responsiveness, reciprocity, and collaboration. [...] These requirements characterize not only the nature of aesthetic experience but also, perhaps more fundamentally, our mode of being in the world and the accompanying ethical responsibility,” says Saito 2017, p. 19).

I find this relational, processual ontology interesting for several reasons in relation to the question of care. I find that the simple question: Does it spark joy? And the more elaborate philosophical account of situational aesthetics and vibrant materiality, addresses and makes it possible to highlight what I tentatively call an energetic sensibility, composed of presence, empathy and responsiveness, which I suggest is fundamental in caring. To care is something that happens relationally and as process.

“Although there are differences over the exact definition of care, most academic work shares the idea that care is less about predetermined behaviors than a situated, embodied way of responding to interdependence as it shifts across the life course.” (Bates, Imrie and Kullman, 2017, p.3).

Earlier studies provide the features of infrastructures and practices of care. Caring involves: attentiveness, responsibility, competence, responsiveness, empathy, compassion, generosity, imagination and kindness. Care is situated, embedded and relational; grounded in habitual practices. Tronto points out that “caring is intertwined with virtually all aspects of life” and that “vulnerability is omnipresent in the world” and actually presupposes the agency of caring. (Bates, Imrie and Kullman, 2017, p.3).

HUMAN INTERACTIONS

Just spent 17 minutes on the phone with my sister, who is struggling with her thesis writing and the feedback she gets from her supervisor.

This is making me think of the difference between reaction and response. I first became aware of a distinction between the two when a department vice deputy from my university did a presentation during a study programme leadership course I was on.

The difference between reaction and response is that when you react to something, you kind of mindlessly just act. To respond is more mindful: a more mindful action. This stuck with me.

The vice deputy has since given me more depth and background for her distinction between reaction and response. She had been on sick leave due to stress and was working on how to handle the many tasks she had; how to work with them. A book had been instrumental in developing a new approach: a book by Mark Epstein about how to 'break down without falling apart'.

Psychodynamic psychology combined with Buddhism leads to a suggestion to 'insert an interval of time' between the vernacular urge to react and immediately act on the things we are presented with - and the actual action.

The suggestion is, and here I quote her testimony: "We need to give up on the need for the instant gratification of 'having done something' and allow ourselves to stop, circle around what we are presented for; allow ourselves to sense and feel - and only after this to act. This allows one to respond to the intention of a command for attention instead of just reacting from one's own perspective." (personal communications, e-mail January 2019).

ETHICS THROUGH AESTHETICS

This brings us to the ethics of care. And back to Saito.

Aesthetic appreciation according to Saito is a bridge to a specific kind of ethical stance – to a mode of existence which involves transcendence of the self; being willing to meet the other (be it a work of art, a natural object, or another person) on its own terms, rather than imposing one's own preconceived idea.

This ethical stance, highlighting the transcendence of self, according to Saito is recognized and promoted by many thinkers and practitioners across disciplines – and, says Saito: there is common acknowledgement that aesthetic experience is "the most effective means of cultivating this ethical mode of being." (Saito 2017, p. 22).

Saito strings together Iris Murdoch's notion of "unselfing", Dewey's view that works of art are means by which we access other forms of participation than our own, Kupfer's point that art provides an invitation to 'responsive freedom', as there are no rules to follow in art or appreciation of art, and the transcendence of self which is the focus of Zen Buddhism:

"Zen Buddhism characterizes this ethical stance as a necessary preparation for enlightenment, describing it as overcoming, forgetting, or transcending one's self." (Saito p22).

KENYA HARA EMPTINESS

Saito relates this to design practice via Kenya Hara, a leading contemporary Japanese designer, who advocates "emptying" oneself when designing.

Kenya Hara talks about design by talking about the kind of communications, he strives for with his design. He uses the image of interpersonal communications as a way of characterizing the dialogue he seeks to facilitate between designed objects and people:

"'Emptiness' (utsu) and 'completely hollow' (karappo) are among the terms I pondered while trying to grasp the nature of communication. When people share their thoughts, they commonly listen to each other's opinions rather than throwing information at each other. In other words, successful communication depends on how well we listen, rather than how well we push our opinions on the person seated before us. People have therefore conceptualized communication techniques using terms like 'empty vessel' to try to understand each other better" (Hara 2010: prologue, quoted in Saito 2017, p. 23).

AN ETHICAL STANCE

Saito lists open-mindedness, acceptance, humility, respect and mutual collaboration as characteristics of the ethical stance which is needed in communications and interactions with others, and indeed which is cultivated by and necessary for aesthetic engagement. Quality human interactions here become a figure for or indication of ethical responsibility.

For Saito, human interactions are the most explicitly illustrative example of ethically-grounded interactions with the world. This, according to Saito, is an inconvenient truth for object-driven aesthetics, as well as being the platform for the launch of an aesthetics of human interactions, which we might also call an aesthetics of the familiar, mundane, vernacular – an aesthetics of the everyday.

"...all of us are [...] producers, not just spectators, of an aesthetically-charged situation. The clearest example of our co-creation of an aesthetic situation is human interactions. This situation provides another layer of a person's ethical responsibility when practicing aesthetic engagement." And here Saito notes that she limits her discussion here to human-to-human interactions, although she believes that such aesthetic considerations can be present also in human-to-nonhuman interactions, for example with non-human animals and objects. (Saito 2017, p. 23)

THING-POWER IN CARE

Here we can appropriately bring Bennett back into our exploration. In *Vibrant Matter*, Bennett argues that a

more responsible and ecologically sound politics might be cultivated if agency were seen to emerge as the effect of ad hoc configurations of human and nonhuman forces. Following Latour (who builds on Serres), Bennett suggests that agency is distributed: things make a difference. Things can produce effects – dramatic and subtle.

In line with this, contemporary approaches to our understanding of care are informed by posthuman and new materialist philosophies such as science and technology studies and Bennett's vital materialism. These studies have shown how care is often distinguished from mundane artefacts and technologies. This is an error, given that these mundane artefacts and technologies play central roles in infrastructures and practices of care (Mol 2008). Attention is now directed towards broader ranges of caring practices, including sanitation and renovation, as well as everyday environments. These contributions extend our understanding of care from being about human-human relations, to including a much broader range of entities and environments (Bates, Imrie and Kullman, 2017).

The implication is that design must take into account a comprehensive set of elements in an estimation of its qualities or lack thereof.

EFFECTS

Design may stabilize human action, play crucial roles in organizational processes of symbolization, coordination and communications. Design may equally disturb, be instruments of undesired control and create unwarranted effects (Svabo 2009). Design mediates human action and experience (Verbeek 2011, p. 90). Design shapes lives.

To ensure that caring becomes an integral part of design, designers need skills and sensibilities that allow them to understand the complex relationality of the objects, spaces and services they are shaping.

At a time when industrial systems beyond our control create unwanted/unwarranted effects, where we are eating and drinking our own plastic waste, where leaders of large financial institutions demonstrate blatant lack of morality and where the human form has transmuted into a hand-held device radiating insomniac blue light, yes – at present, there is something very relevant in watching and learning how to deal with exorbitant excess, almost archaeologically excavating it, in search for its relevance in the present.

Does it spark joy?

JOY

Philosopher Michel Serres in the book *The Five Senses: a philosophy of mingled bodies*, counterintuitively does

not follow our typical division of the senses into touching, seeing, hearing etc. Serres provides a different take of the five senses and surprises with a final chapter called Joy.

Multiple and shimmering relations between human and world are the central theme of Serres' philosophy of mingled bodies (Serres 1985/2008). The central notion of the philosophy is that of *mingle*; an incessant, fluid and flickering blend of human and world. Human and nonhuman are continuously mixed. In Serres' account *sense* is the primary mode of relationality. Sense is the medium through which experience emerges, and this happens through movement and process. Sense does not belong to the body. Sense is mediator, intermediary, point of exchange and extension. Sense may be extended into an object; the point of connection between the person and the world may be located outside of the body, in an object, for example. The body fuses and intertwines with the world in activity. In doing. Relationality is contemplated not as a separation in object and subject, but as a flowing together, a commingling in activity (Svabo 2010, p. 116).

This is where Joy comes into Serres' philosophy of mingled bodies, in a reflective meditation on the moving body, in his characteristic, evocative and poetic style:

“To fall asleep is to acquiesce, waking tends towards refusal. To dive is to consent; to drag oneself up on the rocky coast. To be born each morning with the day. Joy. / The body is far from behaving as a simple passive receptor. Philosophy should not offer it to the given of the world in its recent repulsive manifestation, sitting or slumped over, apathetic or ugly. It exercises, trains, it can't help itself. It loves movement, goes looking for it, rejoices on becoming active, jumps, runs or dances, only knows itself, immediately and without language, in and through its passionate energy. It discovers its existence when its muscles are on fire, when it is out of breath – at the limits of exhaustion. / It breathes.” (Serres 2008, p. 314).

Serres here points us in the same direction as Kondo, Saito and Bennett, towards a self-transcending, mingling, processual and relational ontology.

DESIGNING WITH CARE

Together these approaches help unfold the complex relationality of the objects, spaces, communications, services and experiences that design creates.

Contemporary life is saturated by design and design decidedly shapes and changes the world at individual, societal and environmental levels (Highmore 2008, p. 3; Simonsen et al, 2014, p. 2).

The combined work of Saito, Bennett and Serres helps unfold a relational and processual ontology, where all parts are entangled. Human life is intertwined with the agency of matter. This entanglement has ethical implications for design.

Design should care about the human, about all sorts of human and more-than human interactions, about the coherence of societies and about the environment, our cosmos.

This highlights the interactions and interdependencies of design actors, actants, agencies and involves taking into account all the “thinging” that goes into making things. As pointed out by Bjögvinsson, Ehn and Hillgren ‘things’ being designed are not merely objects: “A fundamental challenge for designers and the design community is to move from designing ‘things’ (objects) to designing Things (socio-material assemblies).” (2012, p. 102).

This preoccupation is found across the design community, voicing that design is not driven by caring practices and that design education stimulates the creation of artist-stars rather than designing for collective well-being (Imrie and Kulmann, 2017, p. 8).

The countermove to these challenges is to develop designers’ caring sensibilities and insight into everyday lives. Designers need to develop sensibilities towards experience, towards the here and the now, practice and the everyday. (An early proponent of this stance is Lynch (1981, p. 154), as referenced Imrie and Kullman 2017, p. 9)

Situational aesthetics, vital materialism and the philosophy of mingled bodies highlight the situated and ongoing character of design.

INNOVATION WITH CARE

Design is embedded in broader societal and commercial dynamics. Promoting design with care also necessitates the promotion of innovation with care. Care and accompanying ethical issues can be seen not only as barriers to innovation, but also as drivers of innovation.

Care can help direct action for design and innovation. One first step in the development of innovation with care (Fuglsang 2008, p. 8f; Fuglsang and Mattsson, 2009, p. 21) suggests that innovation with care requires a reflexive approach and includes both economic and social elements. This calls for a new conceptualization of innovation which takes into account the heterogeneity of relationships that evolve around innovative activities. Innovation hence becomes an activity which is not only an industrial and technological mode of operation, but also a reflexive form of activity which involves many types of

institutions, sectors, companies and social groups (Fuglsang 2008, p. 5).

METHODOLOGICAL CRUMPLE

Parallel with the activity of going through garments from the pile, heaped on beds and couches and floors, the participants in Marie Kondo’s Netflix program learn how to fold clothes, in a particular and neat way, involving folding in halves and thirds and last but not least storing the clothes vertically in boxes and drawers for easy visual accessibility.

Methodologically, my text may be accused of a being a disorganized bringing together of separate worlds, resulting in untidy crumpling instead of organized folding. With the bringing together of disparate fragments of popular culture, philosophy and political science, I seek to move us towards care as being something which is accessible to all of us all of the time, in specific everyday situations, in human interactions, as well as in human - non-human animal interactions and human-thing interactions.

Following Saito, I suggest that the traditional orientation towards the extraordinary in aesthetics results in overlooking the positive and negative aesthetics of everyday life. It cuts out the possibility of dealing with engagement of everyday interactions which also are influenced by choices made on the basis of aesthetic value – consciously or unconsciously. These are decisions about what to wear, what to live in, how to decorate, garden and cook and what to purchase or not.

Saito makes the point that the ordinary and mundane are often overlooked in aesthetic discourse, but that these aspects of life need to receive equal attention as the dramatic and extraordinary (Saito 2007, p. 49). The general public assessment of some species as being more aesthetically attractive and thus more important than others is an example of the romanticizing and stereotyping of the aesthetics of the extraordinary. Creatures that seem insignificant or unattractive are not offered aesthetic interest, even though they may have significant roles to play in an ecosystem.

Designing with care is about turning the eye also towards our own back yards and pointing to the significance that lies in the ability of everyday objects and matters to raise ecological awareness (Svabo and Ekelund 2015). Developing an ethics of care through aesthetic sensibility is about pointing to the ability of everyday objects and matters to be occasions for responsive caring. Our everyday lives and the choices we make have substantial environmental, social and moral impact. The aesthetics which are intertwined with our everyday lives are significant occasions for caring.

In a conversation between Michel Serres and Bruno Latour, talking about space, Serres says: “If you take a

handkerchief and spread it out in order to iron it, you can see in it certain fixed distances and proximities. If you sketch a circle in one area, you can mark out nearby points and measure far-off distances. Then take the same handkerchief and crumple it, by putting it in your pocket. Two distant points suddenly are close, even superimposed.” (1995, p.60)

In the spatio-temporal pocket of this academic text, I seek to crumple the handkerchief in a manner which brings the personal and the sensory into my academic account. This is done as a carefully considered communicative act, seeking to contribute to the manifolds of caring in design research (Koskinen et al 2011, p. 171).

Addressing the theme of care with all its implicit and explicit relationality makes it appropriate, not to say necessary, to push at the supposed objectivity of the conventional academic format.

The style of writing adopted in this paper has its foundation in an extensive body of work on methodology in academic research, tackling questions of voice, authority, representation, disclosure and involvement. For example: arts-based research (Leavy, 2009), autoethnography (Ellis and Bochner, 2000), narrative (Czarniawska, 2004), performative writing (Pelias 2011), mess (Law, 2004), inventive methods (Lury and Wakeford, 2012), non-representational methods (Vanini, 2015) and scholartistry (Shanks and Svabo, 2018).

Common for these approaches is that they ‘speak from somewhere’, paraphrasing Haraway’s (1988) critique of researchers playing the *God-trick* and ‘speaking from nowhere’. Text is not a transparent or innocent medium and the act of authoring is not an anonymous act.



Figure 1: The cat Samson and an unblemished, dead rat.

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