Design and Tacit Aesthetics: Design as the Art of Objects-in-Use

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Abstract: Like architecture, design objects are constitutive parts of everyday life: used in various situations where they gain meaning and value. However, while engaging with objects we often do not focus our attention on them but enjoy their qualities as part of performing some action. The practical and the aesthetic merge, and while vision plays a role, touch is more important. The article suggests that the aesthetics of designed everyday objects need recognize a tacit aesthetic dimension, comprising what figures in the background of experience. Tacit aesthetics is discussed based on Michael Polanyi's ideas about the "from-to" structure of knowledge and perception, and Maurice Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology, highlighting the temporal structure of perception. Through examples of Finnish designed tableware from the mid-20th Century, especially by Kaj Franck, it is shown how material, form, and design ideologies interact with patterns of use, informing our aesthetic appreciation and engagement with things.

Keywords: design, tacit aesthetics, everyday aesthetics, aesthetic practices, Michael Polanyi, Maurice Merleau-Ponty

1. Introduction

Writing on architecture and sculpture, Anthony Savile (1993, 164) made a distinction between architecture as "an art of objects-in-use" as distinct from sculpture. Works of sculpture are objects of visual appreciation without practical function, but works of architecture are more than that. Buildings serve institutional and social functions; they are part of the life of communities. To appreciate a work of architecture aesthetically, as the sort of object it is, therefore implies modifications in our ideas about the functions it serves. As Savile (1993, 176) observes, "the truly architectural masterpiece … fashions … thoughts and emotional responses of ours which impinge on the sort of activity that the particular building houses."

The same distinction can be applied within design, although less categorically. Some designed objects are firmly functional whereas others are intended as, or acquire the status of, standalone, unique pieces and centres of attention. Thus architect couple Alvar Aalto's and Aino Marsio-Aalto's Savoy vase, originally designed for the Paris World Fair in 1937 (e.g., Michl 1991), has since become a common object in many Finnish homes, while retaining its status as a thing of beauty. Finnish designer Kaj Franck's decanter "The Bells of Kremlin" (1958–1968; Collection Kakkonen: https://collectionkakkonen.fi/fi/pieces/kremlin-kellot/), originally meant for fruit syrup and water, has travelled the other way and is today an expensive collector's piece that few people would use when serving juice. Franck's Kilta tableware series (1953–75; Vihma and Yli-Viikari 2011), likewise a classic, has, on the contrary, retained its position as a functional part of everyday life, i.e., as objects-in-use.

Unique design objects are primarily there to be displayed and admired by looking whereas users engage with everyday design objects through handling them. As part of intentional, practical ac-

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tions we touch, move, grip, hit, lift, push the objects in ways that have become so habitual that we often barely notice what we do, let alone reflect upon it. To do justice to our appreciative engagement with everyday design, we might need to rethink the relationship between the practical and the aesthetic and develop a theory that recognises their entanglements. Steps in this direction have been taken in the aesthetics of agency (Nguyen 2020) and in everyday aesthetics (cf. Saito 2022). In my view, we should recognize that practical action and aesthetic appreciation often feed on each other; everyday practices often have an aesthetic component, and they can evolve into aesthetic practices (cf. von Bonsdorff 2023).

The line traditionally drawn between the practical and the aesthetic is connected to the line drawn between sense modalities. Traditionally, Western aesthetics used to privilege the arts of the so called "higher" senses, i.e., vision and hearing, which do not presuppose direct contact with the object that produces the stimuli. The three other senses in this scheme, touch, smell, and taste were considered "lower" because they were seen as closely connected to bodily pleasures. In his seminal aesthetic theory, Immanuel Kant drew upon this model when he described proper aesthetic pleasure. With the lower senses, we are both directly affected by and interested in the real existence of objects, which makes these senses unfit to provide disinterested attention, a hallmark of aesthetic judgment proper (Kant 1990, §§ 1-5). Reflective appreciation, essential for aesthetic judgment, is hindered by embodied entanglements with objects.

Against Kant, I shall argue that touch and our practical engagement with everyday design objects are both essential for and co-exist with our aesthetic appreciation of them. Yet these aspects have been marginalised for philosophical and other reasons, such as the increased role of visual images in marketing and selling. Furthermore, I show how our experience of handling objects of everyday design contributes to reflective awareness. My approach entails that we conceive the enjoyment and appreciation of everyday objects as more than either singular events or encounters between a subject without experience and an object without context. The latter approach is typical for modernist aesthetics, exemplified by critic Clement Greenberg's (1960) analysis of painting as purely optical, untainted by tactile and other associations (for a critique, see Krauss 1990). I suggest, on the contrary, that we engage with everyday objects in ongoing activities, through variously tuned cultural practices, and influenced by cultural and personal habits, memories, and values. All this informs aesthetic perception, experience, and judgment.

Instead of "lower" senses, it might be more appropriate to refer to certain sense modalities as tacitly sensed. On the other hand, tacit and focal are not fixed but depend on where we direct attention. In the following, I start by outlining the idea of tacit aesthetics, referring to qualities we mostly do not consciously think about, but which influence our experience of objects or situations. The tacit dimension is especially relevant for how we aesthetically experience the everyday and environments, where we usually do not focus on objects in the way we do with art. Through Michael Polanyi's discussion of the tacit dimension and Maurice Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology, I show how the scope of the tacit reaches beyond sense perception. Among sense modalities, touch often functions tacitly. With examples from the sphere of household utensils and tableware I show how materials and forms interact with use and enjoyment, reinforcing and transforming contexts of use, contributing to atmospheres, while also carrying design ideologies with them. Much of this is, however, tacitly rather than explicitly present to users. Finally, all my examples have some sort of charm – a phenomenology of charmless objects would be different. Most of them represent a golden age of modern Finnish design, the post-war period, with some anonymous items included.

2. Tacit aesthetics

The familiar list of five senses - vision, hearing, touch, smell, and taste – by no means covers how we gain sensorial information about the world. Our sense of balance (the vestibular system) and of movement (kinaesthetics and proprioception) are, for example, missing. On the whole, touch is a

rather crude term to cover many of the sensations we have when handling things, which cannot be located as belonging to any other of the five senses. However, adding more senses to the list does not solve the problem if the list itself is part of the problem, as I argue.

First, approaching the senses through different organs or capacities leads to a fragmented and mechanistic model of perception with little potential for elucidating what is going on when we perceive, attend, act, or just are in some place. Second, studying the senses separately tends to come with a mechanistic model of the mind, whether empiricist or computational, and mind-body dualism (for critiques, see von Bonsdorff 2020; Stock 2016; Gabriel 2015). This is not to deny that receptors receive data that is processed in the brain. The point is that research on these mechanisms explains the physiology but not the phenomenology of perception. As classical authors such as Maurice Merleau-Ponty and J.J. Gibson argued, we do not perceive sense data; we perceive the world and things in the world (Merleau-Ponty 1992; Gibson 1966; Covarrubias & al., 2017). We therefore need a more holistic approach, one that recognizes interactions between sense modalities, but also how perception is both active and influenced by earlier experiences and internalized values. Tacit aesthetics is a contribution to this field.

To give an example: when I lift a Teema mug with mint tea to my lips, having just come in from two hours of physical work outside, I feel the weight and smooth surface of the mug, and the scent of the tea, but also the tiredness in limbs and joints and a sense of contentment about the moment of rest. I sit down, the wooden chair softened by a cushion that warms my buttocks, tired from pushing the wheelbarrow uphill. I enjoy the simple design of the mug; an enjoyment informed and deepened by tacit awareness of having by and large inherited the taste of my architect-mother, but also by awareness that I planted the mint that thrives under the lilacs. Moreover, the scent of mint is both contrasted and connected to that of the horses, including manure and hay. I munch the mint leaves as horses munch hay: earth connects us.

Understanding perception in a more integrated, broader but also deeper way is important for understanding the aesthetic and use values of everyday design objects, where appreciation comes through an intimate engagement while using the objects. Gibson's ecological theory of perception (1966) was an important step in this direction. He proposed that we consider the senses as perceptual systems, not separate senses, that together serve an organism in exploring its environment. Vision and balance, touch and vision, etc., inform each other. As we focus on certain things in our perceptual field, many other sensations nevertheless influence our sense of the situation. We can think of tacit aesthetics as a form of aesthetic enjoyment which is not produced through focused attention but is felt as an integral part of a situation. For example, we feel at ease in a room, without being able to explain why. The feeling can be a sum of the quality of light, acoustics, the shape of the room and its elements, and other perceivable features which are not beyond analysis, although we may not initially be conscious of them at all. As Peter Zumthor (2022, 13) writes, "I enter a building, I see a room and sense the atmosphere, and in fractions of a second I have a feeling for what is there." The tacit aesthetic can also rise to consciousness and reflection momentarily, as when I enjoy the kind dignity (metaphorically speaking) of my coffee cup while raising it to my mouth. We can have a similar relationship to public works of art whose presence we enjoy, e.g., on our way to work and while simultaneously thinking about other things. This is like nodding to an acquaintance.

In Michael Polanyi's philosophy, 'tacit' has a meaning that goes far beyond perception in the narrow sense. In *The Tacit Dimension* (1966) he points out that all knowing and thinking, in addition to being intentional, is "necessarily fraught with the roots that it embodies. It has a *from-to* structure" (Polanyi 1983, 10). In other words, whenever we think of something, say something, or attend to something, whatever the object, we do so from a background of internalized knowledge and beliefs. To further explain the from-to structure, we can compare it to Polanyi's analysis of focal and subsidiary awareness in *Personal Knowledge* (1956, 55-56).[1] Thus when using a hammer, we are focally aware of how the hammer hits the nail and subsidiarily aware of muscular action and tensions

in our body. Subsidiary awareness enables us to use the hammer and adjust our movements to its balance and weight, but we do not pay attention to it. If we did, the action would be disturbed. We are focally aware of the object, and subsidiarily aware of the instrument. In *Personal Knowledge*, Polanyi described the two kinds of awareness as mutually exclusive, a view he later revised.

In *The Tacit Dimension*, Polanyi (1983, 6–7) emphasizes that tacit knowing operates in the theoretical as well as in the practical field. He also adjusts his view of the relationship between the subsidiary and the focal or, with the terms he now prefers, the proximal and the distal, no longer describing them as mutually exclusive. The proximal can figure in awareness, but holistically. Describing the "phenomenal structure" of tacit knowing he writes (1983, 11): "we are aware of that *from* which we are attending *to* another thing, in the *appearance* of that thing." For example, we perceive a face as expressing a mood without being able to specify what features make us recognize that mood – although they are all in view.

Now in the aesthetic context, perception is precisely about overall appearances, including expressive aspects. With a view to tacit aesthetics, I suggest that perceiving everyday objects as cultural objects, rather than just tools, activates manifold contexts, where sense experience, patterns of use, internalized values and design ideologies together constitute the tacit dimension from which we perceive a particular object. Moreover, as part of everyday life, the objects appear in individual situations, as in my example of the mug with mint tea above.

The holistic and entangled, although mostly tacit, character of our experiences with everyday design calls for some adjustment of Polanyi's conception of the personal. He distinguishes the personal, entailing choices, commitments, and values, and the subjective, referring to desires, ideas, and feelings we are "subject to" (Polanyi 1956, 301–302). However, especially with a view to aesthetics, the distinction is hardly applicable. We tend to be more affected, positively, or negatively, by things we have a readiness to value, based on previous experiences and knowledge. On the other hand, commitment often grows through experiences we have not chosen but have been unexpectedly "subject to".

Since for Polanyi all knowing, including the tacit, is personal, the tacit dimension includes social practices, norms, choices, as well as elements of self-education. Personal knowledge is more than practical knowhow of, e.g., how to lift a cup to one's lips, aware that coffee can be hot. In the context of everyday aesthetics, aesthetic choices at least in some cases include commitments that go beyond the immediate level of sense perception and pleasure. It is a question of what we perceive in what we perceive, informed by the tacit dimension.

Let me add some observations on the role of tacit aesthetics as part of action and performance. Polanyi (1983, 18) suggests that "[b]y concentrating attention on his fingers, a pianist can temporarily paralyze his movement". However, this probably happens only if the pianist attends to their fingers in an objectifying way, separating the movements of the fingers from what they are doing: performing a piano piece. Within the performance, as an aesthetic act, the pianist is, on the contrary, conscious of their fingers (hands, arms, legs, body) as an integral part of how they play. As we recognize that aesthetic enjoyment can be about performance and agency rather than objects only (Nguyen, 2020), we also realize that the tacit dimension comprises skills with cultural meaning. In the more practical context of handling everyday objects, awareness of *how* I perform my actions can likewise be present, as I shall argue in Section 4 below.

In the aesthetic context, Polanyi's theory of the tacit dimension need some adjustment and elaboration, as I have suggested. His basic idea about how our attention shifts between levels, and how we "dwell" in whatever is at each instance the proximal term (Polanyi 1983, 16), is however fruitful. It also harmonizes with Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology on a fundamental level. Merleau-Ponty (1992) explored perception with unsurpassed versatility, extending its scope from epistemology to ontology especially in his late period (Merleau-Ponty 1991). One of his most important contributions was to foreground the temporal and layered character of perception, using key terms such as

"sedimentation" and the "perceptual arc". Sedimentation points to how meaning is layered; in the case of everyday design through repeated and varied situations of using an everyday object, including emotionally charged and memorable occurrences. When we use the object, our earlier shared history is present as an echo we can attend to, but it need not figure clearly in our mind. The perceptual arc points to the halo of meanings stemming from former experience that, as it were, surrounds us. It could be added that with things, the concrete object can be a token of a type rather than a singular object, as when someone exclaims "my Granny had similar cups".

In his last period Merleau-Ponty (1991) introduced the key term "flesh", thereby suggesting that the world, as it exists for humans, is dynamic and "alive" but also opaque in ways that make it similar to us. Like Polanyi's proximal and distal, flesh indicates shifting relationships of attention. But flesh is a more radical, holistic, and fundamental concept, emphasizing the ontological reciprocity of perceiver and perceived. In this period, Merleau-Ponty abandoned the terms subject and object as too dualistic. When I use them here, they should not be taken to imply ontological dualism but two poles in a shifting relationship. While it includes the chiasmatic shift between active and passive touch (cf. Gibson 1962), it also points to a "hidden depth" of objects and of us. Further on, I shall reflect on how aesthetic qualities of objects can suggest such depths, and what it contributes to experience. For now, suffice it to say that everyday objects do not exist just here and now, serving certain purposes. They can carry past and future with them and are by no means always trivial.

Merleau-Ponty (1992) writes about how, while sitting at his desk, he reaches out for his pipe, almost without the need to look at it. He knows it is there and so his hand can perform the movement of grasping it. We can imagine the enjoyment in the movement, the contentment of feeling the round familiar shape and warmth in the fingers, the ritualized act of inhaling and sensing the nuances of the tobacco in the mouth, stimulating thoughts even before the nicotine chemically effects the body. Expectations and experience are part of the situation. For Merleau-Ponty, perception is part of our being towards-the-world (*au monde*) rather than just being in it, as if in a container. Perception is an ongoing dialogue with the world, a reciprocal process of active exploration and reception already on the muscular level of "motor intentionality". In fact, for Merleau-Ponty (2011) perception is already an articulation of the world that is at the same time a transformation, even expression.

The pipe illustrates the multimodal character of perception. It has a particular color, smell and feel, and these qualities become associated, giving rise to acquired synesthesia based on experience and associations (cf. von Bonsdorff, 1999). In a similar way, the pipe can carry a promise of happiness, of imminent pleasure. Such expectations are part of reaching for the pipe, of lifting and lighting it. The movement is habitual but invested with meaning, where previous experience is merged with present intentions. Merely by looking at a familiar thing, we are reminded of its feel, smell, and functional roles. This is, in the aesthetic realm, the "from-to" of the tacit dimension.

3. The touch of things

We engage with household utensils and tableware, and with most other objects, using our hands and bodies to grasp, move, lift, clean, etc. For example, lifting a kettle with hot soup may include grasping its ears with mittens on our hands, feeling the warmth and weight of the full kettle while balancing it, the steam in our faces and the scent in our noses. We also use muscles in our arms, torso and legs to secure balance and support. In an article from 1962, Gibson pointed out that among the senses, touch has been understudied. Moreover, it has been poorly understood, for it comprises a wealth of both exploratory actions (active touch) and receptive sensitivities (passive touch) (Gibson 1962; cf. Carello and Turvey 2017). Many of these play a part in lifting the kettle. When I refer to 'touch" in the following it should be understood broadly, as including a variety of bodily sensations. Whenever relevant, I will be more precise, also to remind about the spectrum of sensations touch comprises.

In this section, I make some observations on the tacit dimension of everyday objects used for cooking and at meals, focusing on qualities these objects have regardless of how we use them just

now. This includes materials, colour, and form, communicated to us through touch and vision, handling and looking. Yet each individual item also has a life history, and some of this narrative can be visible as marks. They can also be the fruits of specific design philosophies, such as Scandinavian functionalism that shaped and was shaped by Kaj Franck (Aav and Viljanen 2011). Following the insight that we perceive objects, not sense data, and that household utensils normally have sedimented meanings, often originating in repeated practices of use, I use concrete examples. They are meant to exemplify how various kinds of meaning and value become tacitly part of such objects. To indicate their rich layers of meaning, concrete and contextual, I refer to objects as things. Incidentally, in Scandinavian languages "ting" can refer to both objects and gatherings.

We touch materials, but how we experience them is co-dependent with form and context. The shape of the red plastic tumbler (designed by Tauno Tarna in 1969 as part of the Katrilli series, in production by the Sarvis company 1969–1985) that I use while travelling makes it easy to handle and stack. Its lightness is due to the material and communicates a carefree tone, because we know how easily glassware is broken. This item is strong, the plastic thick enough, and its base is wide enough to stand firmly. The same shape was earlier used by Saara Hopea for glassware. In comparison to glass, the plastic appears opaque and one-dimensional, appropriate on a train or on a picnic but out of place on a table. The one-dimensionality of plastic is at least in part due the homogeneity of the material. There are no variations in colour, no stripes, no traces of production other than the factory stamp at the bottom. In a sense, the object is perfect.

Wood is comparable to plastic in lightness but on the opposite side when it comes to variations in the material. Wood utensils for cooking and eating are unpainted, and therefore the veins are visible. In addition to forming interesting visual patterns, they remind of the organic origin of the material, which is at the same time the prehistory of the object. Through its material, each wooden object, even an eating stick, is individual and we know its organic origin in principle. In this respect, our "common sense/scientific knowledge" of nature that Allen Carlson (1979, 273) suggests is relevant for the aesthetic appreciation of environment, informs our relationship to everyday objects.

In comparison to many other materials used for cutlery and cooking utensils, wood is soft, which makes it subject to wear and tear. Wood may also be rather unique in our acceptance of its olfactory qualities: the faint smell of fresh wood, of oils or other food that have touched the objects. Wooden ladles, forks and spoons may be light-coloured when we buy them, but with time they turn brown, especially the bowl, from contact with food stuff. Due to the objects' vulnerability incidents can be preserved as visible marks, as in the injured bowl of a ladle, caused by a grandchild in her early years. The ladle is still in use, each time reminding of the rough play. The object has both a material prehistory and a life history as a household object. Both are part of its tangible individuality and temporal depth. Of course, at some point, we may think the object is broken and throw it away. Yet wear and tear can also be part of the object's tacit narrative aesthetic value, just like "weathering" in architecture (Mostafahvi and Leatherbarrow 1993).

Wooden objects can also show signs of making, such as traces of carving. In hand-blown glass, we can spot small bubbles that in fact move upwards, although at an extremely slow pace, way beneath what the eye can perceive. These traces of a manual process of production have an effect comparable to Roger Scruton's (1979, 206–236) arguments about the importance of the "sense of detail" in architecture, reminding of skill and care in the process of production. However, while Scruton points to intentional articulations, I would like to extend the argument to embrace the communicative value of unintentional traces of the production process. Indeed, bubbles in glass, when not part of the design, can be seen as signs of imperfection. Perhaps the reassuring quality of an object's beauty spots is that they make us feel at home. As individuals, we share in imperfection, not in perfection. The unfinished is part of life, while the finished and perfect is dead.

The tacit includes sense impressions that build up and become part of the sedimented meaning of objects, but also other kinds of contextual knowledge that can change. In a context of design – and the

ladles are examples of vernacular design, or craft – materials are not just dead matter. Today the ladles, especially if we know they are locally produced, take on new meaning as small-scale carbon sinks while their low-tech character gains new significance. On the other hand, the plastic designs from the 1960s and 1970s represent the utopia of an easier life, liberated from bourgeois rules of appropriateness. Franck's plastic tableware from 1979 was called Easy Day (*Pitopöytä* in Finnish, referring to the buffe table at a celebration; Franck 1992, 9). The objects are durable and honest. Regarding the present ubiquity of oil and plastic, sometimes mixed with other materials and made to look like wood, their proud plastic aesthetic appears refreshingly straightforward, although perhaps naïve as well.

The post-war period in Scandinavia is well-known for prize-winning designs, for example in the Milan Triennials of the 1950s. In Finland, Kaj Franck represented an approach that combined harmony and beauty with social responsibility, in the spirit of "more beautiful everyday goods", a slogan coined by Swedish Gregor Paulsson in 1919 (Creagh & al., 2008). In a country with huge war debts, there was a scarcity of materials but also an experimental spirit and a willingness to design life from a new and sounder basis. Teamwork, anonymity, and the designer's knowledge of how objects should feel when we use them are part of this. Design was not just about looks: thus Franck was not content with the weight of knife handles, the depth of spoon bowls, and the prongs of forks in the Scandia cutlery set (in production by Hackman 1952–89 and 1996–2000; with size alterations by Iittala from 2016), and therefore renounced his share in the sales revenue (Aav 2011, 34). My architect mother, on the other hand, appreciated the Scandia spoons precisely for being "mouth-friendly". It is of course hard to say how aware users are of the ideological context, but with growing popularity and collecting, awareness increases. Dwelling with the things, we also dwell with their background.

Relevant contextual knowledge can also be added retrospectively to objects. For example, I bought thick, coloured glasses from flea markets in Helsinki in the late 1980s, in the Kallio district that was undergoing a slow change from worker to hipster area. Only recently, I learnt that they were designed by Franck (Tumbler 5023, 1953). This adds to their value, but so does, and at least as much, the possibility that some of them were used by people with little income and recent experience of the war, in a city still partly in ruins. As designed objects, the glasses invite prolonged touch and vision, awakening the pleasure of being "skin to skin" and suggesting something special in the everyday. History, known and imagined, is part of their tacit dimension too.

4. Spirals of use and enjoyment

Things may have specific roles in the life of a family or a household. Some are used daily, some only on special occasions. Sometimes particular items are used according to the mood of their owner, to produce a special atmosphere, or for nostalgic reasons. But things also both demand and inspire different patterns of use based on qualities that have been revealed in user experiences, including touch and movement.

Above, I pointed to material qualities of objects, that is, properties they have regardless of how they are used. This is to some extent an abstraction, as everyday objects are part of our lives precisely through being handled. Through a few examples, I shall now discuss how designed everyday objects orchestrate life through suggesting ways of being handled, thereby influencing domestic "social choreographies", i.e., patterns of movement and social interactions (Hewitt,2005; Cabeen 2024). As they do this, they take on additional meaning that becomes part of them as things and is tacitly present when we engage with them. This can lead to an aesthetically and ethically benevolent circle of use and appreciation, where how we use objects reinforces appreciation and vice versa.

Among the sets of tableware Kaj Franck designed, the Kilta ("guild", in English), with its follower Teema ("theme" in English) and the Sointu ("chord" or "harmony" in English) are among the best

known (on the two former, see Vihma and Yli-Viikari 2011). Kilta comprised flatware as well as serving dishes, cups, saucers etc., whereas Sointu was for coffee and tea. The items are in one colour; Sointu in pastel nuances with a stripe pattern and Kilta in rich nuances of brown, black, blue, green, and yellow. The idea was that items in different colours can be combined, also with older dishes in the household. Kilta items were sold as single pieces, which was new at the time. While Sointu, delicate and refined, appears tailormade for peaceful, perhaps shared moments of having coffee or tea, Kilta is both rustic and flexible, epitomising the everyday. However, their appropriateness for different occasions is about more than looks.

Comparing tableware for coffee, the Kilta objects are thicker, without being heavy, while Sointu is thinner, and this affects how we handle them. The movements they invite are different, and so are the sound they produce. In Sointu, cups have saucers, which demand more precision when the cup is put down. Because they weigh little, the movement of lifting and putting down the cup is more of a pure movement, without any muscular effort of lifting. When the cup, held by the ear with one hand, is put down on the saucer, the sound is delicate and may include a faint clink. The Kilta cup is not heavy, yet when put down on its saucer the sound is straightforward and lower. And since the saucer lacks indentation, the cup need not seek its right place. The overall impression Sointu gives, due to a delicacy in weight, form, and colour, is to be handled with care and used while sitting at a table.

Kilta cups and Teema mugs travel effortlessly inside a house with their user, or even outside; they can be put down in many places. Features such as these affect the modes and rhythms of having coffee or tea. Thus, the tacit aesthetic of everyday objects is jointly about material qualities and performance. Naturally, tableware gives rise to different patterns of use in different households; yet their design will encourage certain types of acts rather than others.

When we handle objects that we like, the patterns of use are also patterns of enjoyment, where material qualities merge with sedimented meaning, including memories of situations where the items have been used and perhaps admired. We tend to form habits with certain objects, using them in special situations. As objects in use, they contribute to articulating the everyday, to giving it rhythm and form that can then be varied. We arrange objects, set the table for display and eating, and do this with a view to our own mood or the atmosphere we wish to create. Atmosphere has been suggested as a key term for aesthetics by Gernot Böhme, who describes it as the sum of what an object or space communicates to us through embodied, perceptual experience, including cultural meaning (e.g. 1998, 2001; cf. Zumthor, 2022; also Griffero 2010). Atmospheres have a variety of ingredients but are sensed immediately. I suggest that we also transform them in largely tacit ways, through internalised patterns of use that can be adjusted according to the situation.

How is the aesthetic situated in these situations and practices? It seems that it is inseparable from the functional or practical dimension. The aesthetic is in the style and mood, in the how rather than the what of situations and actions. It accompanies what we do. That it is part of the practical, and tacit, means that it is simultaneously an aesthetics of agency and one of objects (Nguyen, 2020). Over time, this merge of performative and appreciative action can give rise to aesthetic practices, e.g. regular joy in setting the table with familiar objects but with an eye for variations. The relationship between the things and how we handle them is reciprocal: we choose certain object for certain occasions because of how they feel, and then the occasions are modified through the objects. Some glasses demand to be lifted and put down slowly, some held by the foot, some with the whole hand.

5. Conclusions

Tacit aesthetics is a multi-layered concept. First, it is related to sense modalities that tend to be marginalised in a culture where buying and selling are increasingly mediated through images. In addition, there is the tradition within Western aesthetics to privilege vision at the expense of the other senses. Second, the tacit reaches beyond sense perception to our former experience with things, as well as to hopes and expectations. Here it is clearly personal and demands a first-person

aesthetic understanding. The meaning of a thing for one person differs from its meaning for another, but they are similarly structured and intimate in character. Meaning dwells in the thing and touching it, we can touch and be touched, reciprocally, by deep layers of memory and values. Third, tacit aesthetic enjoyment is merged with practical action in situations where we use or handle things. The appreciation can rise to the foreground momentarily while we do something with the thing, but typically enjoyment is subsidiarily present all the time. This is one way in which cherished objects add to the quality of life, where they can give rise to positive circles of use and enjoyment.

Through observations on forms and materials and on how we frame utensils through practices and narratives, I have argued that the aesthetic appreciation of everyday household utensils is often tacit, but that tacit appreciation is as significant as reflective. These reflections are, perhaps needless to say, applicable mutatis mutandis to other groups of design objects.

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Notes

[1] Polanyi's analysis is very close to Martin Heidegger's analysis of tools in *Sein und Zeit*, but I have not found references to Heidegger in Polanyi.

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