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What is Aesthetic Engagement?

Arnold Berleant

Developments in the arts associated with modernism began in the latter part of the nineteenth century with Impressionism and Post-impressionism. These movements were followed by a succession of stylistic innovations that came to a head in the second half of the twentieth century. In the 1960s and '70s, a proliferation of artistic practices emerged that trespassed conventional boundaries. Innovative practices gave rise to new perceptual features in the arts, breaking out of the frame of the canvas and extruding from its flat surface, descending from the proscenium stage into the audience, and other such modifications of appreciative experience that discarded the traditional separation of audience and art object. Not only did the arts incorporate new materials and practices; they reached out to incorporate surprising subject-matters. All the arts began to intrude on the formerly safe space of the spectator by demanding active involvement in the appreciative process. Audience participation became overt and necessary for the fulfillment of the art, not only in the visual arts but in theater, fiction, sculpture, and other art forms. The traditional separation between the sequestered, contemplative experience of art and the world of ordinary experience was deliberately breached.

Aesthetics was in a quandary and, for a time, became obsessed with the problem of defining art that had far exceeded its customary bounds. Moreover, traditional ways of characterizing appreciative experience, in particular a contemplative, distancing attitude joined with Kantian disinterestedness, seemed inappropriate and irrelevant to the world of art that had emerged. This was the context in which attention began to shift for some theorists away from a focus on the art *object*, which came to be called by the assumptive term 'artwork,' and to the appreciative *experience* of art. In a series of papers and books beginning in the mid-1960s, the American philosopher Arnold Berleant began to develop a theoretical account that could accommodate these challenging developments in the contemporary arts. The central concept to emerge in this inquiry was the idea of 'engagement,' later specified as 'aesthetic engagement.' Aesthetic engagement became the central concept of an aesthetic that emerged as an alternative to the aesthetic disinterestedness that was central to traditional aesthetic theory.

Aesthetic engagement rejects the dualism inherent in traditional accounts of aesthetic appreciation and epitomized in Kantian aesthetics, which treats aesthetic experience as the subjective appreciation of a beautiful object. Instead, aesthetic engagement emphasizes the holistic, contextual character of aesthetic appreciation. Aesthetic engagement involves active participation in the appreciative process, sometimes by overt physical action but always by creative perceptual involvement. Aesthetic engagement also returns aesthetics to its etymological origins by stressing the primacy of sense perception, of sensible experience. Perception itself is reconfigured to recognize the mutual activity of all the sense

modalities, including kinesthetic and somatic sensibility more generally.


The concept of aesthetic engagement, then, epitomizes a holistic, unified aesthetics in place of the dualism of the traditional account. It rejects the traditional separations between the appreciator and the art object, as well as between the artist and the performer and the audience. It recognizes that all these functions overlap and merge within the aesthetic field, the context of appreciation. The customary separations and oppositions between the functions of artist, object, appreciator, and performer disappear in the reciprocity and continuity of appreciative experience. Thus it is no longer necessary to maintain the fiction that turns different functions into opposed entities. They become aspects of the aesthetic process rather than discrete objects or actions, and the appreciative experience becomes perceptually active, direct, and intimate. Aesthetic engagement recognizes that beauty, or aesthetic value more generally, inheres not in the object or in the perceiver but is rather the leading feature of the reciprocal process of perceptual participation between appreciator and object.

Understood in this way, aesthetic engagement is a valuable concept for understanding and appreciating recent developments. At the same time, it reinvigorates our experience of the traditional arts. Aesthetic engagement has a transformative effect when applied to seventeenth century Dutch landscape painting and portraiture, to the classical canon of music, to poetry and the novel, as well as to the modern arts. Moreover, aesthetic engagement lends itself particularly well to the wide interest in environmental aesthetics, where engagement offers a more appropriate description of environmental appreciation that has descended from the contemplative distance of a scenic outlook to tramping along a woodland trail or paddling a meandering stream. Aesthetic engagement is useful, too, for the still more recent interest in everyday aesthetics where, again, the Kantian model of disinterested contemplation becomes irrelevant.

The central issue now is not the difference between art and non-art but between aesthetic and non-aesthetic. Both for its theoretical value in accommodating artistic innovations, for its ability to encompass developments in aesthetic appreciation that extend to ordinary life and activity, and for its ability to provide a unified theory of the arts and the aesthetic appreciation of nature, aesthetic engagement has proved particularly useful. What is needed now are specific studies of the arts and other occasions of aesthetic value that will demonstrate its capacity to illuminate the experience of appreciation.

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