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REFLECTIONS ON ARNOLD BERLEANT'S WORK*

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## Berleant's Opening

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## Berleant's Opening

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### Abstract

Throughout modernity, aesthetics had been marked by a significant narrowing of its subject matter, the early peak of this trend being Kantian aesthetics of disinterestedness and modernist formalism based on distance. Arnold Berleant's mission in aesthetics has been to re-open its domain towards all elements of every-day life, including consumer products, political systems, and the environment. By defining the aesthetic field as an environment of continuity between the self and the non-self, Berleant has managed to transform the Kantian subject-object relation into one of unity. However, the paper argues that such an environmental aesthetics requires a basically realist or materialist ontology of perceiving bodies in a physical environment that seems incompatible with the sort of ontology Berleant deploys. Thus, in Berleant's perspective, a sensory or aesthetic field and a material, partly-external environment seem to be two ways of articulating the same space. But this elides or collapses a series of key distinctions. The paper argues that the status of "woods" or "mountains" as objects outside our sensorium, objects not constituted by interpretation, is ultimately needed for a fully responsive and responsible environmental ethics and aesthetics. Nevertheless, despite this difficulty, Berleant's opening in aesthetics is extremely salubrious.

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### Key Words

Berleant; disinterestedness; environment; materialism; ontology

In many disciplines even within philosophy, the subject-matter is relatively fixed. You can tell more or less usually whether a question is a mathematical question or an issue in meteorology or an ethical dilemma. But the history of aesthetics has been marked by a constant shifting of and debate over what to include in its portfolio. Is aesthetics the philosophy of perception? Is it the philosophy of art, or is it a philosophy, too, of nature? Does it range over the fine arts, the crafts, form or function, the landscape, nature, all the world, or the very conditions under which the world is experienced? Is it an empirical or a transcendental inquiry? For that matter, does it have any proper subject-matter at all other than perhaps unreasoning emotional responses? Indeed, this might suggest that aesthetics is not quite a respectable subject; its foundations remain unelucidated in part because the material that we are trying to account for is always at stake or is not well agreed on. Indeed, to select the subject-matter over which aesthetics ranges is largely already to have made an aesthetic theory, which then appears to emerge almost *a priori*.

On the other hand, in some ways this makes the discipline of aesthetics radically open or subject to even more thorough continuous revision and creative speculation than most disciplines. This would connect aesthetics to the arts, which are similarly and in connection to aesthetics at stake in their own practice, which are constituting their essence historically. Indeed Arnold Berleant has celebrated this radical contingency, or played in the space it opens out.

Now one way to interpret this ebb and flow is to read the history of aesthetics as an oscillation in its self-constitution between broadening and narrowing its own subject-matter. If we thought of at least certain early practitioners—I would emphasize Shaftesbury and Schiller—the scope of aesthetics is broad indeed, and partly out of connoisseurship (the taste of both men was exquisite) all issues were to be addressed as aesthetic issues, as matters of taste. But men of affairs such as Jefferson embodied the same ideal. For the person of sensibility, every area of experience is also an aesthetic arena. For example, the vision of the *polis*, in all three cases a republican vision, is grounded in a classical aesthetic. You might say that Shaftesbury, Jefferson, and Schiller pursued aesthetics as a reading of the subject-matters of ethics, political science, or even mathematics.

Nothing surely is more strongly imprinted on our Minds, or more closely interwoven with our Souls, than the Idea or Sense of *Order* and *Proportion*. Hence all the Force of *Numbers*, and those powerful *Arts* founded on their Management and Use. . . .

Whatever things have *Order*, the same have *Unity of Design*, and concur *in one*, are Parts constituent of *one Whole*, or are, in themselves, *intire systems*. Such is a *Tree*, with all its Branches; an *Animal*, with all its Members; an *Edifice*, with all its exterior and interior Ornaments. What else is even a *Tune* or *Symphony*, or any excellent Piece of Musick, than a certain *System* of proportion'd Sounds?[1]

That is, the subject-matter of aesthetics for Shaftesbury was extremely wide, from natural objects to numbers to works of architecture: anything that can be understood as a system. It is a fundamentally classical conception of beauty, of course, but it is applied across a comprehensive scope of materials. Indeed aesthetics for Shaftesbury is a comprehensive discipline, a discipline that ranges over the material of every other discipline.

Kant begins one movement toward a narrowing of the material, moving from an early Shaftesbury-esque aesthetic approach to ethics (for example, in *Observations on the Feeling of the Beautiful and Sublime* (1763)) to a purification of the aesthetic into, as we might say, the science of form and the philosophy of the fine arts. By the time of high modernism—the heyday of formalism—and then an analytic aesthetics that in some ways took over this tradition and in others threw into the doubt the propriety of aesthetics in any form, the material was considerably narrowed in scope. Nor was this necessarily an unfortunate or incomprehensible response. The aestheticization and finally sublimization of politics in Schiller or Herder, in Wagner and Nietzsche, had its extreme dark side. Hegel pictured the history of art as a history of purification; art was to become itself alone, and then it would have fulfilled its telos and would disappear.

At any rate, aesthetics started dumping off various subject-matters. Its proper material, fine art, had to be distinguished or purified not only of politics and ethics (at least initially a liberatory development), but from craft, manufacturing, popular art and folk culture, and so on. Indeed this is precisely the strategy used by Collingwood, for example, to arrive at a definition of the concept of art and the subject-matter of aesthetics: start lopping off everything inessential; what's left is art properly so called. This was reflected by and reflected practices in the arts themselves, not only how they were made but how they were displayed, circulated, valued, understood.

Now I said that the narrowing of the subject-matter was in some sense desirable, and I think we would have to acknowledge that someone like Collingwood or Peter Kivy is considerably more precise than Shaftesbury or Schiller, the wooliness of whose

thought is exacerbated by an unwillingness to make, or a principled objection to making, distinctions. Really there is a cosmic neo-Platonic metaphysics underlying Shaftesbury and Schiller, to say nothing of the gargantuan metaphysical system that comes with trying to accept or even understand a Hegelian or a Schellingian system of the arts: too much for most folks to accept or even fully grasp, and too distant from real questions of how people make and experience art. On the other hand, the narrowing of the subject-matter of aesthetics was, in retrospect, draconian. One very concrete result was that aesthetics, absolutely central to the philosophies of romanticism, for example, became a kind of philosophical backwater, a little eddy in the roaring river. So it was a bit of a subprofessional crisis among other things. You'd have to try to convince the department that there was any point in having a tenure-track aesthetician; it was deemed interesting but inessential.

And now, if you will permit me, an autobiographical excursus. By the 1980s, which I more or less spent in graduate school studying aesthetics, there was widespread dissatisfaction with the state of play. This arose partly from developments in the arts: the various distinctions enumerated above were all in question in the art practices of postmodernism. How were you going to deal with the distinction between fine and vernacular arts (which never had much purchase in reality, if you ask me) in the face of Lichtenstein or Philip Glass? Was a strict distinction between art and craft going to help you deal with Judy Chicago? But it arose also from various cross-fertilizations that were constructing challenges to the style and subject-matter of aesthetics.

As an undergraduate and initially as a graduate student, my training was exclusively in the analytic tradition in aesthetics. I enjoyed that discourse, and respect it still. But I read Dewey's *Art as Experience* (inexplicably still sitting on a list of readings for the aesthetics comprehensive exam at Johns Hopkins) and felt that new horizons were opening, despite or because of the status of the book as an outlier on the reading list. Perhaps I had the misgiving that I eventually would become bored trying to figure out why Marcel Duchamp's work counted as art; already as a baby aesthetician I wanted to move these skills and categories into different subject-matters. Dewey made his project the reconnection of art to everyday life, something I regarded as desirable both as a theoretical move and as a guide to art practice.

I fetched up at the University of Virginia, where Richard Rorty was breaking the analytic tradition open in a number of

dimensions, while also by no means abandoning it. But he was reading Dewey and Heidegger (from a basically non-phenomenological standpoint), which immediately established for me a way to set up various dialogues and juxtapositions in aesthetics, a subject that Rorty was fundamentally not that interested in.

If *Art as Experience* started me on this road, I fetched up with Berleant's *Art and Engagement* at the beginning of the nineties. Coming into contact with that book showed me that perhaps the sort of opening I was groping toward was already a bit of a movement. Now *Art and Engagement* did present itself in the light of postmodern art and art theory. By the time he was declaring that art and the experience of art were characterized by total engagement rather than disinterestedness, Berlant could make the point obvious and literal:

Appreciating certain sculptures requires walking into or through them, or repositioning their parts. One is expected to clamber up or sit on Mark do Suvero's ride'em pieces, such as *Homage to Brancusi*, a wooden desk chair set on a steel rod, and *Atman*, which incorporates a swinging platform, while his arrangements of balanced steel beams must be pushed into motion. Again, there are wall sculptures of polished metal that need the reflected image of the viewer to be complete. Wall pieces, paintings, and sculptures are common that respond to environmental stimuli, emitting sounds, echoes, or light at the approach of the appreciator.[2]

As Berleant insisted, disinterestedness had always been a veneer over forms of engagement in the arts, or perhaps disinterestedness marks one particular kind of engagement if it marks anything. When one starts taking dance seriously as an artform, when one realizes that music consists in an environment of waves in which the listener is engulfed, one begins to be able to articulate the history of forms and categories of art as dimensions of engagement.

One of the marks of Berleant's work from beginning to where it is now is its supreme eclecticism, not only in the arts but in its reading of various pieces of the tradition, different figures, discourses, traditions: its effortless swings through Husserl, James, Dewey, Merleau-Ponty, Langer, Sparshott, Ingarden, Eagleton, Lyotard, Stanley Fish. However, Berleant also peeled back the layers to the moments before or beyond the distinctions he rejected: to Schiller and Baumgarten, but then behind that as well. He tried to reveal not only a response to the opening of the arts but also the intrinsic openness of aesthetics. In various ways, he showed how these figures might be put into dialogue with one another within a larger environment.



From *The Aesthetic Field* in 1970, Berleant has insisted on identifying aesthetics flatly with sensory experience: an almost perversely-wide opening, as in one way or another Berleant has also made sensory experience the basis of a phenomenological metaphysics. That is, the aesthetic is or reveals the basic building-blocks of the world. But however we interpret the details of this opening, it is thorough; it is profound. There is nothing it leaves out of possible consideration as an aesthetic datum.

Concomitant with that was Berleant's basic concept of aesthetic engagement. It is as bold an inversion of the tradition against which Berleant pitted himself as could be imagined. If one was going to open the subject-matter, Berleant believed, one had to open up the experiential mode; indeed these were two ways of formulating the same project, as Berleant always insisted on destroying the dualism between subject and object. That is, if we were going to consider nature, or the city, or popular music as data of aesthetics, then we needed to elucidate simultaneously the ways these things are experienced or what they are experienced as. Following Merleau-Ponty, Berleant radically invoked the body in aesthetic experience, and even the traditional objects of aesthetic regard were to be replaced in the world of bodies and experiences, a realm of somatic interpenetration. He appealed also to an essentially pragmatist notion of experience organized into aesthetic wholes, displaying the originary function of the aesthetic in experience, even at the level of organization of the world into objects.

Whether one endorses this opening in all its implications, I would say that it is an extremely good practical starting-point or program. I think it is precisely this sort of opening which is now leading to the development of entire fields within aesthetics. From that angle, this is an astonishing time in the discipline, and I think Berleant deserves credit not only for anticipating these results, but for practically developing them and encouraging them. So, for example, Berleant's approach suggested the idea of "everyday aesthetics," or the aesthetics of the most mundane objects and experiences – the objects and experiences in which we actually live and move and have our being – explored in the work of Yuriko Saito, myself, and many others. By the 1990s people were exploring the aesthetics of gardens, or country music, or Wal-Marts, or the internet.

Finally I might mention the field of environmental aesthetics, wherein much of the most interesting work in aesthetics is being done right now. From *The Aesthetic Field* a rich environmental aesthetics was present in Berleant's work, and he has developed

it continuously and systematically; his work must be regarded as fundamental in the field. In a way, of course, “environment” sweeps up and includes and articulates all the other possible subject-matters. When we throw the distinction between the natural and the artificial into question along with that of subject and object, “the environment” can be construed as a word for absolutely everything. And yet it also retains its flavor as the environment *of* an organism or a sphere or perhaps dome of experience: what I can experience from here.

What is most right in Berleant’s environmental aesthetics, what the field will be catching up to in coming years, is his sense of the person within the environment, of the ways we are always simultaneously shaping and being shaped by the environment.

It may already be apparent that I do not ordinarily speak of “the” environment. While this is the usual locution, it embodies a hidden meaning that is the source of much of our difficulty. For “the” environment objectifies environment; it turns it into an entity that we can think of deal with as if it were outside and independent of ourselves. Where, however, can we locate “the” environment? Where is “outside” in this case? Is it the landscape that surrounds me where I stand? Is it the world outside my window? The walls of my room and house? The clothes I wear? The air I breathe? The food I eat? Yet the food metabolizes to become my body, the air swells my lungs and enters my bloodstream, my clothes are not only the outermost layers of my skin but complete and identify my style, my personality, my sense of self. My room, apartment, or home defines my personal space and world. And the landscape in which I move as I walk, drive, or fly is my world, as well, ordered by my understanding defined by my movements, and molding my muscles, my reflexes, my experience, my consciousness at the same time as I attempt to impose my will over it. . . . For there is no outside world. There is no outside. Nor is there an inner sanctum.[3]

This replacement of the human in the world, or this reading of the human as the world, opens up various ways of reconceiving environment, though perhaps it is not *Berleant’s* (“my”) world after all, but a world we share and that constitutes each of us differently in different places.

Trying to open up the subject-matter of aesthetics in the 1980s and 90s could feel pretty isolating, or like it was just a few people working at the margins of the discipline. But the people who were trying to do this were configured around Berleant. I might mention Barbara Sandrisser, Yuriko Saito, Mara Miller, Jo Ellen Jacobs. It was almost a physical thrill to see these geographies of inquiry suddenly open up, as Berleant fundamentally established an autonomous zone in aesthetics where eccentrics could gather. Many of the opening sub-



disciplines of aesthetics focus aesthetic scrutiny on things other than the arts, from interior design to political systems to . . . everything that exists. Since then, these inquiries have moved abroad. In 2010 I was at a conference on environmental aesthetics, and Berleant's work was foundational; you had to know the basic concepts to follow the papers. Berleant's work, that is, has been actually fecund beyond expectation, and now the field against the background of which we work is partly constituted by the opening he worked to instigate.

But I do want to register some reservations. Berleant's environmental aesthetics presupposes, it seems to me, a basically realist ontology.

Environment does not depend entirely on the perceiving subject; the surrounding world also imposes itself in significant ways, engaging the human person in a relationship of mutual influence. . . . The body is more than active, shaping the contours of space through its dynamic force. There is a reciprocity, an intimate engagement with the conditions of life that joins person with place in a bond that is not only mutually complementary but genuinely unified. How is it possible to represent such a pervasive field of experience and action from which the human percipient cannot be separated?[4]

This appears to give an at least partly materialist ontology of percipient-bodies in a physical environment, with the continuous interaction or interarticulation always a theme. Indeed, I think it is precisely the standpoint from which we need to do environmental aesthetics (and ethics, for example), as I have already said. But Berleant seems also to deploy an ontology that is phenomenological/hermeneutical, in which the perceiver *produces* anything from a work of art to a world through acts of interpretation.

Interpretation is ubiquitous, and it is becoming evident, moreover, that this is as true of the physical, spatial world as it is of the social and cultural one, of facts and of perception as it is of texts. The hermeneutical character of cultural knowledge is now well-established, yet a dependence on interpretive consciousness is not true of historical and social beliefs alone. Facts are themselves hermeneutical; like all forms of meaning they are human constructions.[5]

This tension in Berleant's fundamental ontology represents a series of attempts to bring together rather than fracture spheres of meaning and philosophical traditions. That is admirable, but it does nothing to resolve the basic problem; and it seems to me that Berleant often fudges or papers over the difficulties right at that point; are we physical bodies embedded

in a physical surround, all together forming a natural system, or are we wanderers among the shimmering phenomena?

Throughout his writings, Berleant has tried – struggled, I want to say – to reconcile the founding gesture of phenomenology – Husserl’s “bracketing” of the existence of an external world – with a rich appreciation for the world’s externality to us, its repleteness and strangeness, its excess to what we want or think. That is, I think there is an unresolved tension in Berleant’s ontology that runs from his earliest to his latest writings. One way to read this tension is that it derives from Berleant’s most basic influence: Merleau-Ponty, always struggling toward a fully-embodied phenomenology of bodies in a world. It is a difficulty within the tradition of phenomenology, in other words. A phenomenologist is someone who has *felt the power* of this notion of being true to the flow of lived experience, of Husserl’s founding gesture, experience as the panoply of phenomena. Berleant certainly has, even if he is also critical of it.

No sooner has Berleant swept us up in a world of pure phenomenal experience, or a Jamesian stream of pure sensation, than he is returning us in our bodies to an opaque world of external particulars with which we are interaction. With regard to the arts, this expresses itself as an attempt to preserve in Berleant’s participatory model the wonder of a pure sensation, portrayed as a kind of underlying reality. In *Sensibility and Sense*, Berleant writes:

The intimate quality of this appreciative experience may overcome the sense of separateness that divides us from things so that we become an integral part of the aesthetic field. The intimate involvement that often characterizes aesthetic appreciation and makes it so difficult to encapsulate and categorize is an essential quality of that perceptual experience. And it is so distinctive a feature of aesthetic appreciation that we can describe such experience as a kind of engagement, as “aesthetic engagement.” Thus we cannot only use aesthetic perception as direct experience; we can recognize such perceptual experience as the clearest measure by which to assess the values that emerge. Aesthetic perception may indeed stand as the touchstone of human values.[6]

I suggest we have here an almost foundationalist epistemology of the sort that, were he to confront it squarely, Berleant would surely reject. The aesthetic, i.e. the sensory field, is the primary datum of experience, that from which we infer or upon which we build our values, including facts. The “aesthetic field” is equated with “perceptual experience,” but I suggest that the aesthetic field is a human body in an environment, and that we

should understand form, for example, as material configuration under an interpretation.

I am going to register my opinion that stipulating a phenomenal field or a field of sensation or an aesthetic field that is not merely the external world is otiose and non-explanatory. Berleant worries about this notion, attacks it, qualifies it, says things seem incompatible with it. Five pages later, there it is again in something like its pristine form.

So I would respectfully press Berleant to consider and clarify these essentially metaphysical questions at a fundamental level, perhaps apart from issues in the philosophy of art. In some ways this critique is unfair or at least does not capture the complexity of Berleant's position, and I think that Berleant would probably ultimately say that a sensory or aesthetic field and a material, partly-external environment are two ways of articulating the same space, or that ultimately the world that we sense and the world as it is are, for us, the same world. I might come at it the other way round and think first about how the environment constructs us and only afterwards the way we construct the environment. If Darwin is anything like right, for example, we are essentially produced by the environment; we are built to be alert to it, to sense its real qualities. If not, we'd be extinct. I am suggesting, in other words, that the phenomenological aspect of Berleant's work is not fully squared with a naturalistic picture of the universe. This may or may not exactly be a drawback, I suppose.

In other words, though many strands of post-Kantian philosophy have us constructing the universe, the universe constructs us. Among other things, everything we do is part and parcel of various naturalistic systems in which we are embedded. I prefer to think of 'fields' as distinct from 'woods' or 'mountains' rather than as a sensorium I am constructing by interpretation. We need to fully acknowledge the externality of the world to us as well as our location within it. Were the environment my phenomenal field, it is hard to see, for example, how I could do anything wrong to it; global warming would be a fever of the imagination.

I might finish by saying that eventually the subject-matter of aesthetics after Berleant's opening might profitably be somewhat narrowed. The foundation of all values is a lot to expect from the aesthetic on any account, and the initial identification of the aesthetic as the sensory field might be somewhat too broad. But too broad in my book is far preferable to too narrow. Even vagueness or ambiguity can be useful in opening new spheres or modes of knowledge. There is an

intelligence that draws distinctions and an intelligence that collapses or complicates them. Berleant's is fundamentally the latter. Even when he draws careful distinctions, he is doing it to show you an underlying unity. The method, the material, and the conclusion are the same: synthesis, a welcoming, the opposite of a Collingwood or an analytic aesthetician who is bristling with exclusions. Berleant's is a generous or welcoming soul. That might not be the only thing we need in philosophy, but it's one thing we need in philosophy.

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## Endnotes

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[1] Anthony Ashley Cooper, the Third Earl of Shaftesbury, "The Moralists: a Philosophical Rhapsody," *Characteristicks of Men, Manners, Opinions, Times* (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 2001), volume II, pp. 161-62.

[2] Arnold Berleant, *Art and Engagement* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1991), p. 27.

[3] Arnold Berleant, *The Aesthetics of Environment* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1992), p. 4.

[4] Berleant, *Art and Engagement*, pp. 88-89.

[5] *Ibid.*, p. 59.

[6] Arnold Berleant, *Sensibility and Sense: The Aesthetic Transformation of the Human World* (Charlottesville: Philosophy Documentation Center, 2010), p. 30.

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