

Contemporary Aesthetics (Journal Archive)

Volume 0 *Special Volume 9 (2021) AESTHETIC
ENGAGEMENT AND SENSIBILITY:
REFLECTIONS ON ARNOLD BERLEANT'S WORK*

Article 9

1-5-2021

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Recommended Citation

Wolińska, Anna (2021) "Sculpture and its Meaning in the Context of Berleant's *Aesthetic Engagement*," *Contemporary Aesthetics (Journal Archive)*: Vol. 0, Article 9.

Available at: https://digitalcommons.risd.edu/liberalarts_contempaesthetics/vol0/iss9/9

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Sculpture and its Meaning in the Context of Berleant's *Aesthetic Engagement*

Anna Wolińska

Abstract

It is not my intention to provide a comprehensive analysis of Berleant's notion of *aesthetic engagement*. My goal is modest. I hope to account for the key significance of the philosophical problematization of sculpture, in the context of engaged aesthetics. In writing about the philosophical problematization of sculpture, I am thinking most of all about the problem of space, a phenomenon that emerges in the relationship of the solid form to its surroundings. It is a relationship that is usually perceived as directly connected with the sculpture. I want to emphasize that Alicja Kuczyńska was well aware of the significance of this problem. She expresses this awareness discretely and indirectly by taking up the problem of space and sculpture, in the context of Brâncuși in her essay in this special volume on Berleant's aesthetics, "Berleant's Phenomenology of Sculptural Space: Brâncuși." Kuczyńska's interpretation goes beyond the topics taken up by Berleant in his essay on Brâncuși but is consistent with his way of thinking about the relationship of a specific volume to its surrounding space and to movement.

Key Words

aesthetic engagement; being as becoming; Brâncuși; environment; movement; sculpture; space; volume

When we try to pick out anything by itself, we find it hitched to everything else in the Universe.

John Muir, *My First Summer in the Sierra*[1]

I begin by quoting fragments drawn from Arnold Berleant's polemical "Note," written in response to Crispin Sartwell, who had claimed that a realist ontology is the basis of Berleant's philosophical position.[2] These fragments ideally problematize the question of the character of Berleant's philosophical views. In a short response to Sartwell's article, Berleant claims:

His charge more specifically is that I equivocate between a realist ontology and a phenomenological, hermeneutical one, and he cites passages that he thinks corroborate each position, in turn, although neither citation supports a realist ontology, and both are fully consistent with my experiential ontology.[3]

In his "Note," Berleant disputes another claim that has been attributed to him: that we live in a world of pure feeling,[4] an attribution appearing in Sartwell's article, together with the call to provide an "experiential account of the aesthetic field by acknowledging *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.*"[5] Berleant completely disagrees and says in response:

Body and environment are not two things; my body is an inseparable part of my environment. This is not idealism nor is it materialism. I'd rather call it a kind of phenomenological naturalism. In any case, it is monistic.... Yet I continue to claim that ... we live in a world of perceptual experience and, whatever we say of it, whether we call it "matter," "thought," "objects," or "the external world," we are only identifying modes of perceptual experience, and thus we humans are necessarily a factor and a feature of that world. That is why it is misleading to speak of "the" environment, as Sartwell does, as if environment were an "outside" force impinging on us and constructing us.[6]

This line of thought on the overcoming of subject-object dualism returns in several places in Berleant's writings, taking on a variety of forms. It is present in the critique of modern aesthetics, which invokes the ancient idea of contemplation "at a distance." This critique is especially relevant in Berleant's critical discussion of the characterization of aesthetic judgments as disinterested, a conception that took deep root in aesthetics, thanks to Immanuel Kant. The topic of overcoming dualisms is also present when Berleant refers, in a positive spirit, to received ways of thinking. This is the case with John Dewey's conception of *Art as Experience*, which Berleant draws on in making experience a central point in discussions of aesthetics. In this conception, experience serves to break down the distance written into subject-object relations. Another case is when Berleant expresses his indebtedness to Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology. Berleant was inspired by Merleau-Ponty's

conception of embodied perception, a conception that also infringes the dualism of subject and object.[7] Berleant's notion of 'aesthetic engagement' emerges out of the combination of positive and critical lines of thought.

It is not my intention to provide a comprehensive analysis of Berleant's notions, all the more so since it is, as Krystyna Wilkoszewska put it, "permanently by design—open." [8] My goal is modest. I hope to account for the key significance of the philosophical problematization of sculpture in the context of engaged aesthetics.

But before we take up the main issue, I would like to make two remarks. First, in writing about the philosophical problematization of sculpture, I am thinking most of all about the problem of space, a phenomenon that emerges in the relationship of the solid form to its surroundings. It is a relationship that is usually perceived as directly connected with the sculpture. Secondly, I want to emphasize that Alicja Kuczyńska was well aware of the significance of the problem that concerns me. She expresses this awareness discretely, indirectly, by taking up the problem of space and sculpture in the context of Brâncuși in her essay on Berleant's aesthetics.[9] Her interest in this subject, expressed in an issue of *Sztuka i Filozofia (Art and Philosophy)* devoted to Berleant's philosophy, is only initially apparent in the fact that Berleant also wrote an essay inspired by Brâncuși.[10] Kuczyńska's interpretation goes beyond the topics taken up by Berleant in his essay but is consistent with his way of thinking about the relationship of a specific volume to its surrounding space.

Berleant was also keenly aware of the particular meaning of the location of the sculpture and the particular issues raised by sculpture in contrast to other arts. He expresses this awareness directly at the beginning of his essay on Brâncuși and space:

Sculpture is an art whose locus lies in ambiguity. As art it appears to stand apart from the everyday world and occupy a special place. Traditionally elevated above the ground on which we stand, the sculptural object appears before us motionless, untouchable, more like a secular idol than an object of ordinary use. When we approach sculpture, we are accustomed to adopting a certain reverence and to maintaining the deferential distance due a sacred object.

Yet the perennial challenge to an aesthetics of distance and difference is the strange ability of art to bridge that gap and so insinuate itself into our sensibilities as to possess and transform

them. A sculpture of contemplation thus does not leave us at peace, for its radiance both warms and disturbs us.[11]

In this fragment, there are a few points worth considering. First of all, sculpture, more than other artforms, encourages us to enter into a direct relationship. As a spatial form of art, it demands an active attitude— to walk around it, at least, if possible, but perhaps even to enter into a closer relationship based on touch. Unfortunately—and this is the second point — the domination of a sensitivity based on an aesthetics of distance leads to a passive, distanced contemplation of sculpture based on the sense of sight. Indeed, this sensitivity of distance is shared not only by art's audience but also by its creators. These matters are analyzed by Rosalind Krauss. She begins her essay, called "Sculpture in the Expanded Field," from the invocation of a contemporary object, Mary Miss's *Perimeters/Pavilions/Decoy* (1978), that completely departs from everything we have become accustomed to calling sculpture, including the remarks on sculpture from the aforementioned Berleant fragment.[12] This object is not raised above the surface. Here, we are faced with an object that is not "raised above the surface" but a lower part of the floor, a hole out of which the only thing sticking out above the level of the floor is the top of a ladder that you can go down, underground. To conceive of this object as a sculpture, or the objects made by Richard Serra, Robert Smithson, or Robert Morris, requires a reformulation of the "field" in which we have placed sculpture in terms of the "the logic of the monument." [13] Krauss claims:

By virtue of this logic a sculpture is a commemorative representation. It sits in a particular place and speaks in a symbolical tongue about the meaning or use of that place. The equestrian statue of Marcus Aurelius is such a monument, set in the center of the Campidoglio to represent by its symbolical presence the relationship between ancient, Imperial Rome and the seat of government of modern, Renaissance Rome. Bernini's statue of the Conversion of Constantine, placed at the foot of the Vatican stairway connecting the Basilica of St. Peter to the heart of the papacy is another such monument, a marker at a particular place for a specific meaning/event. Because they thus function in relation to the logic of representation and marking, sculptures are normally figurative and vertical, their pedestals an important part of the structure since they mediate between actual site and representational sign. There is nothing very mysterious about this logic; understood and inhabited, it was the source of a tremendous production of sculpture during centuries of Western art.[14]

Nevertheless, this assimilated and recognizable logic began to fail at the turn of the nineteenth century. As an example of a

work that stands at the border, so to speak, of these trends in sculpture, "mediat[ing] between extreme past and present," Krauss points to Brâncuși's *Endless Column*.^[15] This is not the place to detail what Krauss means by the concept of an "expanded field" that allows the aforementioned objects to be conceived of as sculpture. What is important here is that sculpture in this "expanded field" cannot be reduced to an autonomous or self-referential object in space. Sculpture is not something "you bump into when you back up to see a painting," as Barnett Newman wittily put it, in the context of commenting on traditional thinking about sculpture.^[16] It is also not something that is just there in the building or in front of the building, as with modernist sculpture, or there in the landscape, without belonging to it. The need to expand the field is the result of becoming aware of the fact that we need to work with a nonbinary structure in the case of sculpture objects, things *versus* free space, one definitely more complex and open.

Sculpture is *apparently* an object found in something free space, that does not belong to it. As a spatial art, sculpture can never be reduced to a mere object; its spatiality cannot be conceived in terms of the place it occupies, which it fills. So, as Berleant puts it, the sculpture maintains a "locus of ambiguity;" it is a work of art that distinguishes itself from its space and, at the same time, its spatial nature means it enters into an intimate relationship with the surrounding space. We may add here, it is never autonomous. No other genre illustrates the significance of the work in relation to external space as keenly as sculpture. In contemporary art, this ambiguity is not merely an obstacle to be removed; it is one of the main subjects taken up by artists. In this context, Berleant, like Krauss, draws attention to the unique place of Brâncuși's work. Like Krauss, he interprets his oeuvre in relation to the art of the past, "the classical, pure, eternal stature of that art,"^[17] while at the same time pointing out that this search for elementary forms, even ideal forms, goes together with a Brâncușian attitude of being "strangely open to space."^[18] The subtle, carefully wrought forms of birds, fish, and turtles

is more than [a mere] extension of mass. It activates space, setting up a dynamic with the space that surrounds it. Perhaps one can describe this as energizing space. That is because volume is neither self-contained nor complete. As the shape of a clay pot is the shape of the volume within, the surface of a sculptural object is the projection, the outer extremity, of its interior volume. Thus it is not a skin or a container but the limit of lines of force generated at times by properties of the materials the artist is working with, at other times by the properties of the forms he is both shaping and being guided by.... Moreover, at the

same time as volume is the limit of its interior forces, sculptural volume is at the centre of its surrounding space.[19]

Berleant points out that there is a particular aura of instability in these sculptures, an imbalance generating a sense of movement along the vertical shapes.

.... [The] most overwhelming instance of such movement is the experience of the Endless Column, a work that stands at the pinnacle of its art and, indeed, of any art. To describe this work one can only narrate the experience of it; no mere description can evoke it. This is a deceptively simple column, repeating an unadorned trapezoidal nodule in fifteen and a half symmetrical pairs, each about six feet high and four feet wide, made of cast iron gilded in bronze and tending to a height of nearly one hundred feet. Yet the genius of this pillar lies not in the details of its construction but rather in how it moves. As one approaches it, the column inclines perilously backward; as one backs away, it leans forward as if about to crash down on the observer. Because of its enormity, this sculptural mass has intimidating power, yet at the same time it exhibits surprising lightness and grace. As one walks around the column, the vertical succession of its panels and edges appear to curve and twist, alternating from light to dark as the illumination strikes different planes and leaves others in shadow. It is a myriad of columns joined into one, succeeding each other with striking variety. This endless column is a moving column, pulsating in our presence. It is geometry become alive.[20]

Kuczyńska refines Berleant's analyses when he reveals how Brâncuși's sculptures are reduced to what is elementary and necessary: as "purifications of living objects." [21] This leads to the positing of a further thesis. We are dealing here with art "that approaches [a] material exemplification of Plato's Ideas." [22] Nevertheless, this art contains an element of surprise within itself. As sculptures, they are the opposite of Platonic forms; they open themselves to the space, not unchanging or immobile. Kuczyńska draws our attention to the presence in this artwork of a Platonic and Neoplatonic philosophy. In her interpretation, Brâncuși "is looking for an absolute affirmation of being through sculpture." [23] She is aware of the impossibility of expressing this affirmation through the imitation of the external form of things; transcendence cannot in this way be captured, nor can it be reduced to a symbol. Art can realize this intention by reaching out to what is primordial, at the source. Kuczyńska writes:

With Brâncuși's sculptures, the relation of external and internal acquires a particular dimension, a meeting of two manifestations of existence, in some sense analogous to the judgment of Hercules at the crossroads. [24] In this dynamic of the meeting, however, a certain fleeting moment is noticeable, one in which

both opposing forces become equal to each other. Yet in contrast to the ancient myth, this moment is not externalised in an absolutely permanent way. It has the unstable status of being perpetually *between* as a peculiar as yet unmaterialised state, but one that is *already announced, sensed by the artist as immanent...*[25]

What Berleant calls a surprise lying at the “core” of life and carried into the fully ideal form of Brâncuși’s sculptures is analyzed by Kuczyńska again, with reference to the Platonic tradition. She departs from Berleant, however, with her invocation of the Neoplatonic conception of being as becoming. From this latter perspective, the openness to space—the forms given by the artist to his material—is the result of an intention to solidify what is impermanent, momentary, transient, and fragile: that which ultimately cannot be captured in a solid form. To happen in a “lightning movement” that transgresses boundaries of solid form and environment, of inner/outer, belongs to the nature of art, in general, but, in the case of sculpture, it takes on a spectacular form.

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Published on January 5, 2021.

Cite this article: Anna Wolińska, “Sculpture and its Meaning in the Context of Berleant’s *Aesthetic Engagement*,” *Contemporary Aesthetics*, Special Volume 9 (2021) *Aesthetic Engagement and Sensibility: Reflections on Arnold Berleant’s Work*, accessed date.

Endnotes

[1] John Muir, *My First Summer in the Sierra* (San Francisco: Sierra Club Books, 1988), p. 110. As cited in B. Heinrich, *The Trees in My Forest* (Boston: Addison-Wesley, 1997).

[2] Crispin Sartwell, “Otwarcie Berleanta” (“Berleant’s Opening”), trans. M. Bańkowski, *Sztuka i Filozofia (Art and Philosophy)*, 37

(2010), 48-56. (English text unpublished.)

[3] Arnold Berleant, "Notatka na temat ontologii" ("A Note on Ontology"), trans. M. Bańkowski, *Sztuka i Filozofia (Art and Philosophy)*, 37 (2010) 57. [English text unpublished.]

[4] Berleant, *Notatka na temat ontologii (A Note on Ontology)*.

[5] *Ibid.*, 57-58.

[6] *Ibid.*, 58.

[7] See also: Arnold Berleant, *Art and Engagement* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, S1991).

[8] Krystyna Wilkoszewska, "Arnolda Berleanta projekt estetyki postkantowskiej" ("Arnold Berleant's Project of Post-Kantian Aesthetics"), *Sztuka i Filozofia (Art and Philosophy)* 37 (2010), 46.

[9] Alicja Kuczyńska, "Falowanie materii w sztuce. Brâncuși" ("The Heave of Matter in the Art Brâncuși"), *Sztuka i Filozofia*, 37 (2010), 128-135.

[10] Arnold Berleant, "Brâncuși and the Phenomenology of Sculptural Space," in *Re-thinking Aesthetics: Rogue Essays on Aesthetics and the Arts* (Boston: Routledge, 2004), accessed via EBSCO Publishing: eBook Collection (EBSCOhost) Jan. 16, 2020. Account: s9253487.main.edseb.

[11] Berleant, p. 141.

[12] Rosalind E. Krauss, "Sculpture in the Expanded Field," *October*, 8 (Spring, 1979), 30-44.

[13] *Ibid.*, 33.

[14] *Op. cit.*

[15] *Op. cit.*

[16] Krauss, 35-36.

[17] Arnold Berleant, *Re-thinking Aesthetics: Rogue Essays on Aesthetics and the Arts*, p. 141.

[18] *Ibid.*, p. 142.

[19] *Ibid.*, pp.142-143.

[20] *Ibid.*, p. 144.

[21] *Ibid.*, p. 142.

[22] *Op. cit.*

[23] Alicja Kuczyńska, "Falowanie materii w sztuce. Brâncuși" ("The Heave of Matter in the Art Brâncuși"), 131.

[24] Panofsky's interpretation of Hercules' predicament at the crossroads comes to mind. Cf. Erwin Panofsky, *Hercules am Schweidewege und andere antike Bildstoffe in der neueren Kunst*, (Berlin: B. G. Teubner, 1930).

[25] Alicja Kuczyńska, "Fallowanie materii w sztuce. Brâncuși" ("The Heave of Matter in the Art Brâncuși"), 132.

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ISSN 1932-8478