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**REDISCOVERING HARMONY  
AND ENGAGEMENT  
ARNOLD BERLEANT'S  
ENVIRONMENTAL AND SOCIAL  
AESTHETICS**

Arnold Berleant

*Sensibility and Sense. The  
Aesthetic Transformation of the  
Human World*

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Professor Emeritus of Philosophy at the Long Island University and a Former President of the International Association of Aesthetics, Arnold Berleant is well-known for his contribution to the environmental aesthetics and his constant advocacy of the expansion of aesthetics beyond art. His last book sets forth his inquiries in this field and extends them to new objects for analysis within the frame of a "social aesthetics". From twelve essays gathered in

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the volume, six adapted papers delivered at conferences or published in international journals between 2007–2009, the chapters are structured in three parts that deal with the general philosophical background of aesthetics, with the aesthetics of natural and built environment, and, finally, with issues of social aesthetics. Given this multilayered structure and the repetition of leitmotives that confer to the book the ‘coherence of a cantilena’ (p. 13) rather than of a classical philosophical treatise, the book may serve as an ideal introduction to Arnold Berleant’s aesthetics.

Useful in this respect is the author’s introductory review of the development of his thinking. Here Berleant explains key concepts of his philosophy such as ‘aesthetic engagement’ and the ‘aesthetic field’. The characterization of the art experience as an aesthetic engagement gives account of the enhancement of the performative and interactive dimension of contemporary art. It also confronts the Kantian disinterested contemplation with the necessity of an ‘intimate involvement’ with the entire aesthetic field in which art is embedded and which influences the perception, understanding and evaluation of art.

Also, compared to other books of the same author, *Sensibility and Sense* helps the reader to better situate Berleant’s thinking by indicating its three main roots: phenomenology, art history (as a source of empirical data) and pragmatism. The phenomenological method is called for retrieving the facts as they are experienced in the everyday life and for describing them accurately, that is, free of presuppositions. In this respect, Berleant regards his thinking as ‘a kind of radical phenomenology’ (p. 214). However, he does not endorse the

transcendental turn of phenomenology and rejects both the evidence of consciousness as the absolute beginning of the philosophical inquiry and the phenomenological *epoché* as a methodological scepticism. Instead he proposes a double corrective to phenomenology: to emphasize the *social* history of the individual subject and never question the *reality* of what we experience. Finally, Berleant finds the decisive criterion of the aesthetic judgment in the pragmatist focus on the practical consequences of thinking (‘[...] the ultimate criterion in assessing any human environment is how it contributes to the fulfilment of the people who are an inseparable part of it’, p. 134 sq.).

According to Berleant, sensory perception (from Greek, *aisthesis* – “sensation”) lies in the core of aesthetics. In other words, perceptual richness (‘dense perceptual experience’, p. 126) and distinctive features of the sensory experience represent the criteria for the aesthetic quality of the environment. The definition of aesthetics as ‘the theory of sensibility’ (p. 13) recalls Alexander Baumgarten’s first theory of aesthetics in the 18<sup>th</sup> century; however, unlike Baumgarten, Berleant emphasises the ambiguity of an alleged ‘primary’, ‘immediate’ perception: on one hand, perception is the beginning and the end of any experience and inquiry about the experience. On the other hand, there is no pure perception of a subject that would initially be a *tabula rasa*, but the sensory experience is mediated by biological, social and cultural factors, filtered by language and loaded with specific cultural meanings. Also from a somatic perspective, perception cannot be equated with mere sensation (which phenomenologists discarded as an abstract con-

struct), but is embedded in the synaesthetic activity of the body as a functional whole.

The focus on intrinsic perceptual experience as the nucleus of the aesthetic experience calls for the expansion of the scope of aesthetics beyond fine arts and the beauty of nature. Along with this, several revisions of the traditional aesthetics become necessary: the hierarchies of arts and senses turn out to be rooted in the anthropology of the 18<sup>th</sup> century; the positive aesthetics of the beauty has to be completed by a negative aesthetics, etc. In sum, 'art is not the most fundamental factor in aesthetic analysis' (p. 194). Beside art objects, the scope of aesthetics is extended to natural and built environments, technology, popular culture, sport, social relationships and politics. Finally, nothing in the human world may be excluded on principle from the realm of aesthetics.

However, this generous reinterpretation of the 'aesthetic' as both a field of study and a dimension of experience raises the objection that the very meaning of 'aesthetic' is dissolved by equating it with the 'social', like in the statement about the 'merging of the aesthetic with the activities and objects of human life' nowadays (p. 9; Wolfgang Iser had to face the same objection in the 1990s). And does the social aesthetics refer to an all encompassing aesthetics or is it just one particular kind of aesthetics beside the aesthetics of art or of environment? The next step in such an understanding of aesthetics would be to justify the so-called 'aesthetic thinking', like in the heyday of postmodernism. Yet Berleant does not remove any borders of aesthetics and – due to the inextricable link between aesthetic and ethical values he postulates – his thinking has still kept intact

its force of persuasion. His 'aesthetic argument' in the epistemology does not promote an aesthetic regime of thinking, but only stresses the importance of the 'aesthetic perception as source of the knowledge process and as the test of knowing' (p. 54). The reason why aesthetics may be considered 'a foundational discipline, perhaps *the* foundational discipline' from a heuristic perspective (p. 85) is the author's faithfulness to the live truth of experience. The most radical consequences of this principle are drawn in the chapter "The World as Experienced", in which Berleant rejects the concepts of soul, spirit, consciousness, mind or even subject from an almost 'nominalistic' perspective, for being mere fictions. (Activities of the conscious experience are conceived as forces, entities or essences that cause those activities, p. 69.) Berleant himself describes his own perspective as 'naturalism in a broad sense' (p. 72); this means that all we can know is what the experience tells us, everything else is mere speculation.

While Berleant's humanistic legacy prevents him from falling back into the postmodern destruction and deconstruction of the subject, the ontology he subscribes to is not exempt of similarities with this, for example in terms of the ontological indeterminacy of the borders of objects. Also the ecological background of his aesthetics makes him reject any patterns of dualistic thinking and replace sharp separations with differences, degrees of intensity with qualitative distinctions, breaks with continuities, and disjunctions with synergies, eventually an entire ontology based on individuation with one based on universal interpenetration and interdependence (in particular between humans and nature).

After these general considerations, let us consider specific aspects of the environmental aesthetics in the second part of the book and of the social aesthetics in the third part. The interdependence of natural and cultural factors is suggestively exemplified in the chapters “The Soft Side of Stone” and “Celestial Aesthetics”. The first essay – a detailed analysis of stone as a natural and cultural material, of its sensory qualities and symbolic-cultural meanings – partly reminds of Gaston Bachelard’s phenomenology of elements. The intense observation of stone in all its forms leads to a correction of the standard equating of stone with stability and permanence, by discovering its malleability and transience, for example in its relation to water.

At the other end of the scale of nature, the sky has inspired for centuries both the imaginary of mythologies and philosophical interpretations (e.g. Kant’s concept of the mathematical sublime). However, asks Berleant, is the scientific image of the cosmic space still compatible with its poetical value? And is it possible to enlarge the ecological aesthetics so that it includes the sky into a ‘celestial ecology’ (p. 151)? In spite of his surprising intuitions, in the final analysis Arnold Berleant manifests certain uneasiness in praising the sky. And it is perfectly understandable that an environmental philosopher regards the rediscovery of the Earth as the most important benefit of flying. (Günther Anders came to a similar conclusion when he analysed the astronauts’ observation of the Earth from the Moon.) Also we cannot know either if the entire universe functions as an ecosystem or if the human actions have repercussions on the cosmic order.

If we cannot know whether the universe is an environment or not, a city certainly is one, that is, an ‘integrated region with distinctive perceptual features’ and a ‘dynamic whole’ made of complex synaesthetic patterns, such as ‘sounds, smells, textures, movement, rhythm, colour; the magnitude and distribution of volumes and masses in relation to the body; light, shadow and darkness, temperature’ (p. 127). Moreover, the description of the city is pervaded by analogies with art: an attentive look reveals the city to be a ‘formal ballet of social living’, an ‘improvisational theatre’ and an ‘environmental drama’ (p. 125), in other words, a *Gesamtkunstwerk*; this interpretation situates Berleant in the same line with Lewis Mumford, Henri Lefebvre or Richard Sennett. Also the metaphor of the theatricality of the city, where humans are at the same time actors and audience, reiterates Berleant’s characterization of the aesthetic experience as aesthetic engagement or participation in the city life (in somatic, intellectual and often critical respect). Therefore the urban aesthetic ecology implies to overcome the spectator’s attitude and become involved in both the suppression and reduction of *negative* aspects (pollution, intensities of sound and artificial illumination, proliferation of ‘canned music’) and the enhancement of *positive* elements in the public and semi-public spaces. Situations of an apparent incompatibility between the ecological and the aesthetic appreciation are not excluded, yet their conflict is dissolved in a superior synthesis: ecological knowledge (for example, about the sustainable development of a landscape) leads to a better understanding of the real natural ‘beauty’ and enriches its forms.

Maybe the most interesting section of the book is the last one, which investigates the possibility of developing a social aesthetics. On the whole, this requires refuting the autonomy of art and emphasising its social, religious, political and above all ethical implications. On one side, the aesthetic theory should dispel or deconstruct the cultural influences on perception (p. 45); given that no perception can be isolated from its social context, 'pure perception' serves only as a regulative idea, as the ultimate layer of experience and the final goal of the inquiry (p. 58). On the other side, it is precisely its social embedment that invests the aesthetic experience with the power of a transformative social instrument (p. 31). The politics of aesthetics implies, like for Schiller (whom Berleant explicitly mentions on p. 196), to transform the human world 'not by physical or material change but by altering the kind and quality of our experience' (p. 84) and to 'make social harmony possible by establishing harmony in the individual' (p. 197). And since this 'harmony in the individual' obviously has a moral dimension, the social aesthetics is ultimately based on the intertwining between the aesthetic and the ethical evaluation and calls for a politics which should be compatible with aesthetic and moral criteria: 'Ultimately the morality of beauty and the beauty of morality cannot be kept separate. Each enhances and contributes to the other.' (p. 222) Nevertheless, Berleant's aforementioned 'naturalistic' devotion to the reality of the senses does not allow him to argue the convergence of the *pulchrum*, *bonum et verum* from a metaphysical or scholastic perspective – but based on the deep personal conviction about the 'truth' of harmony.

Still this does not impede him to identify cases of conflict between moral and aesthetic values and to elaborate on diverse relations between these, like: ugly environments with annoying negative effects (both values are negative); valuable art on the costs of social exploitation (conflict between values); the aesthetic dimension as factor of wellbeing and productivity (both values are positive); critical art that presents negativity with moralising intentions, etc. (p. 169 sq.). Further complex differentiations can be found in the essay on "The Negative Aesthetics of Everyday Life". The author distinguishes here between the absence of aesthetic value (deficiency), what is offensive, producing discomfort, distress and even pain (kitsch, pollution) and the uniformity that brings about a sensory deprivation (sterile cityscapes). In some cases, negative aesthetic values may exert a social critical function, in others they contribute to the transformation of perception, being accepted in the long run as positive values (the dissonances in music). The diversity of situations requires in any case avoiding premature generalisations and developing a flexible judgment.

The author's concern for a differentiate analysis *sine ira et studio* is evident also in his discussion of terrorism as a possible example of the negative sublime, starting from the strange fascination exerted by the 9/11 on artists like Karlheinz Stockhausen and Damien Hirst. From the perspective of art history and art theory, what might be called 'the aesthetics of terrorism' has predecessors in the aesthetics of the sublime (Burke) and in the Happenings that connected art and life. According to Berleant, terrorist acts have indeed a powerful aesthetic and emotional impact; moreover, un-

like other political or social messages, they are designed on purpose to have such irrational effects, given that they are mostly perceived only indirectly and thus are 'mediatically' prepared. On the whole, in spite of their deliberate theatrical dimension, such actions are extremely ambiguous; above all, no goal can ever justify the irreparable losses they produce.

However, the main message of Berleant's social aesthetics is a positive one: the belief that the aesthetic experience is able to give meaning to life and even to improve it (p. 57). The author himself describes his work as a *positive* aesthetics that is in the first place constructive and transformative, not critical. Its occasional lack of precision from the viewpoint of a 'critical aesthetics' is compensated by a generous humanistic vision. The aesthetics should neither propose escapist palliatives ('comforting visions'), nor call to action (militant art), but contribute through its specific means to identify 'what harms or otherwise diminishes human values' and combat it, as a 'modest but irrepressible instrument of human betterment' (p. 62). Once again, the pragmatist argument prevails in the interpretation of the aesthetic: encountering aesthetic situations or environments has positive effects on the engaged spectator. The transformative power of the aesthetic is synonymous with aesthetic politics and eventually with a positive politics.

From this perspective it is worth mentioning that the essay "Perceptual Politics" discusses theories which regard aesthetic communities as possible models for politics (F. R. Ankersmit, Kenan Ferguson, Josef Chytrý, Jacques Rancière). Berleant's own answer to this issue stresses the importance of 'perceptual commons', understood as

'the most inclusive environmental condition of human life', beyond the distinction between private and public, individual and social, such as the air or the visual aspect of environment (p. 209 sq.). The physical continuity of the perceptual commons requires mutuality, support and assistance within a society (or even globally) in order to preserve or increase the quality of life. The idea of perceptual commons replaces the essentialist philosophical fiction of a *sensus communis* with an encompassing environment which is shared by all humans and whose reality may be confirmed perceptually in our daily life. Also humans are entitled, on the basis of the natural justice, to claim their equal enjoyment and access to the perceptual commons (p. 211). This claim may be understood in the prolongation of the right of citizens and communities to participate in the decisions about shaping their environments. To sum up, the social aesthetics is based on an ethics of profusion, care and justice, which promotes engagement, openness, co-operation, connectedness and the recognition of the own vulnerability as moral virtues (p. 219).

An affirmative attitude in the best humanistic tradition, clarity of formulations, originality of interpretation and coherence of vision recommend the book to a broad audience. In particular Arnold Berleant's ideas achieve a high actuality in the post-socialist countries, which are shattered by excesses of individualism, the absence of responsibility for natural environments and public space and a general moral crisis. Berleant's *Sensibility and Sense* teaches that sensitivity does not necessarily mean weakness, but may become a powerful agent of a positive and meaningful transformation of the society. Also it encourages

the civil society to claim its aesthetic rights. And finally it draws the attention to the philosophical aesthetics that it cannot escape responsibility towards the political use (and misuse) of arts; to ignore this means

‘to hand that power over to others whose values, standards, and behaviour are often ignorant, manipulative, and self-aggrandizing’ (p. 178).