

Book forum

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On Arnold Berleant, *The social aesthetics of human environments: critical themes*

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Arnold Berleant (Long Island University)

Précis: *Critical themes in the social aesthetics of human environments*

This book of independent yet related essays takes philosophical aesthetics into new, largely untraveled regions. Its unifying concern is social: the use of aesthetic experience, value, and theory as critical instruments in revealing and appraising social practices. The questions raised and the practices examined from an aesthetic perspective are not often considered in their social context. Guided by an understanding of aesthetic experience and appreciation as engaged sensible perception, aesthetic theory provides a powerful tool for social critique. The inquiries in this book cast new light on social understanding and practices in the present-day world that use aesthetic values to manipulate and exploit populations commercially and politically, and to romanticize violence. The book inaugurates and applies this critical use of social aesthetics through a range of studies, many of which identify significant negative practices, such as commercial exploitation, violence, and terrorism, and others that examine the place of the distinctive perceptions that emerge from aesthetic analysis in art, culture, ecology, and human relations. The insights that arise show how the fresh and unencumbered character of aesthetic experience makes new and important awareness possible in social ethics.

The social aesthetics of human environments: critical themes expands the circumference of environmental aesthetics beyond the many domains of environmental experience, such as landscape and the urban environment, to cast an eye on the social expressions of environmental experience. While my previous books have touched on social factors, it seemed to me desirable to focus on the social aspect of aesthetics not incidentally but directly and, by implication, to identify social aesthetics

as a distinct domain of aesthetic inquiry. Ironically, the form this took often turned out to be negative and critical. Is this the fault of an aesthetic perspective or, perhaps, the peculiarity of my idiosyncratic application? I suggest that it is neither but rather the largely unexplored capacity of aesthetic analysis to recognize and critique the negative social exploitation of aesthetic experience.

This book develops an understanding of social aesthetics by exploring a series of critical themes on the embodiment in aesthetic form of social values in positive, exploratory, and often negative normative situations. It begins with a brief proposal to treat aesthetics as a study of sensible experience that is infused with culture, history, meaning, and memory. This understanding of aesthetics becomes both the origin of value and the standard against which it is judged. It leads to transformations in our grasp and understanding of aesthetic experience and value, and to their vastly expanded scope. This enlargement carries unexpected implications, as in a comparative study of Descartes' *cogito* using the model of Duchamp's Ready-Mades that assume the presence of what I call the complicit participant. The social is enlarged, as well, to embrace environment, where conceptual understanding reshapes perceptual experience.

The central portion of the book (Chaps. 7 through 11) contains critical studies of the social application of the aesthetic. It begins with a critical study of Disney World that sees this theme park as an experience of multiple national cultures and traditions that use the influences of an aesthetic presence and specious experiences to seduce and exploit its visitors culturally as well as commercially. This critique is followed by an examination of how aesthetic values are exploited by a consumer culture of marketing and profit. These critical analyses end by identifying different modes of sensible cooptation. From the exploitative uses of the aesthetic, the book turns to its negative forms with a study of terrorism and the aesthetics of violence in its various forms, leading to what I identify as "the negative sublime".

The claim that a critical aesthetics is not the whole of its social application is supported by the final essay that explores the idea of aesthetic community as a sensitive and humane social order. The fact that this comes at the end of the book is not the result of an afterthought but of seeing aesthetic criticism as the prelude to a new and positive inquiry in social ethics, an opportunity I hope others will pursue. The aesthetic stands here at the creative heart of such inquiry, so the book concludes on a positive note, exploring how a social aesthetic can enhance cultural life and how it can be utilized to support the achievement of community. The many

topics in this book are intended to provide a model in stimulating new extensions and applications of aesthetic value that have their source in the freshness and innocence of aesthetic experience.

Because I am convinced of the human presence and contribution to aesthetic values, and because humans are social in the formation and expression of such values, I consider this book a study in social aesthetics. It centers around the region of aesthetic experience that involves social values that affect allegiance and commitment, and that influence behavior, promote belief, and affirm values. It does this by identifying negative forms as well as positive values. These uses of the aesthetic are pursued, not by employing the arts for seductive purposes, as is customarily done by religion and the national state in order to achieve influence and gain control, but for promoting and appropriating humane experience more generally.

My intent in fashioning a study of social aesthetics was to recognize a domain of inquiry that bears on social values, recognizing, enhancing, and explaining aesthetic values that are distinctively social. This is all the more important because aesthetics is conventionally associated with personal, often private experience. For that very reason, the social uses of aesthetic experience are elusive. At the same time, enhancing the aesthetic can serve as a positive, constructive balance against environmental meanness and poverty, and can serve to improve social relations. The aesthetic enhancement of social life offers an opportunity for ingenuity and imagination. By approaching this broad and inchoate subject matter somewhat indirectly through its negative manifestations, this book leaves the field open for constructive elaboration in both directions, positive as well as critical. I hope that I have set the stage for others to pursue and develop such new directions in aesthetic inquiry.

Yrjö Sepänmaa (University of Eastern Finland)

Life with an aesthetic spectrum

Arnold Berleant (born 1932) has had a long career as a professor of philosophy (Long Island University) as well as holding positions of trust in aesthetics, his field of specialization, most evidently in the International association for aesthetics. Berleant has been a sought-after speaker at universities, congresses and seminars, and his writings have been trans-

lated into numerous languages, including Finnish. In addition to his research work, Berleant has, from the outset of his career, maintained his connection to artistic creativity as a composer and pianist. He rose to the vanguard of digital scientific publishing in 2003 with his founding of the online journal “Contemporary aesthetics”, which he edited until 2017. He is succeeded by Professor Yuriko Saito, and the journal has solidified its position as an open access publication for new ideas.

After retirement Berleant has edited his articles into eight collections. He has reviewed earlier articles and added new texts chiefly from congresses and invited presentations. The publications are broadly structured thematically rather than chronologically, the unifying subject is the experiential relation to the environment.

Berleant’s *The social aesthetics of human environments* (2023) is, according to its author, the conclusion of a career spanning more than half a century. The various articles in the collection dating from different periods again comprise a broadly progressing series. The subtitle is *Critical themes* and there are seven descriptive sections comprised of 13 chapters: “Wherefore aesthetics?”, “The complicit participant”, “Environment as cultural”, “Aesthetic exploitation”, “Negative aesthetics”, “Aesthetics as cultural critique” and “Aesthetic community”.

The final focus, “Aesthetic community”, contains the oldest material (i.e. from 1994), with a new philosophical interpretation of Duchamp’s *ready made* (see Berleant 2022). The timespan is thus almost 30 years. The references over the course of an entire career are from the monograph *The aesthetic field: a phenomenology of aesthetic experience* (1970). The theme as well as the approach is never just a single connection. This justifies the realization that a later collection may contain material published in previous collections.

1. *Aesthetics as sensory knowledge research*. Berleant’s basis into aesthetics is Alexander Baumgarten’s *Aesthetica* (1750-1758), concerning sensory knowledge and observation. The research field Baumgarten envisioned derives from the Greek word *aisthesis*. The question for neither man concerns purely sensory observation. Aesthetic experience is always connected to the living and value world. Berleant states: “Such experience is not purely sensory but is colored by culture, education, and personal history” (Berleant 2023: 107).

The concept and claim is precisely *aesthetic engagement*, a collocation reflecting attachment and fixation, encounter and connection, commitment and entwining, as well as dependence and reciprocity. A second

key concept, linked to the aforementioned, is *aesthetic field*. This is a domain in which actors with different functions commit to a common social construction and maintenance of an aesthetic culture. The individual or group creates an environment of social impact, an affective sphere, extending not only to its own species but also to other living and non-living ones.

Being part of the environment and the human community and connected to its lifestyle and value world is the polar opposite to *disinterestedness* and detachment. This view has led to the opposition to the dominant Kantian tradition. The aesthetic relationship is compassionate and participatory, not externally disengaged from that which is being examined. The world also transforms and flows; it is not stuck in place, an order composed of fixed objects.

2. *From thinker to experienter*. There is always a fixed point in all movements: the experienter, though they too in the same movement. Berleant ponders the experienter's position in Berleant (2022), which celebrated his 90th birthday. The basis for this is Descartes' classic conclusion, *I think, therefore I am*. The artistic variations on the statement – in which the thinking I replaces the experiencing I – Berleant finds in two Marcel Duchamp *ready-mades* produced 300 years later, in the 20th century.

In the work *En prévision du bras cassé (In advance of a broken arm)* a single snow shovel is not only what it contains. Our imagination connects the use of the shovel, the shoveler – and I wish to add, as the title implies, what threatens to happen to the shoveler. In the second, *Étant donnés... (Given:...)*, there is a Spanish wooden door, in which a hole opens out to a surrealistic landscape with a waterfall and a gas lamp. The view invites the voyeur; the object “looks back”, comes towards. Thus the outsider enters a fictive environment, and the border between the real and the imagined disappears.

A recent Finnish example of immersion into the environment would be *Välittäjä/The mediator* (2023), the memorial to president Mauno Koivisto. The artist Kirsi Kaulanen encouraged guests at the unveiling to walk through the two-part sculpture and consider what Koivisto meant to each of them. It is not essential to know what the viewer thinks of the sculpture but what they felt and remembered of the impact of the Koivisto years (see <https://www.presidentti.fi/niinisto/en/news/memorial-to-former-president-mauno-koivisto-unveiled/>).

3. *Ecosystem as living environment.* The environment is seen as an ecosystem-like network of service-providing centers. The main concept is the continuum. Berleant sees the same type of strong connection in the spiritual bond between friends.

Berleant is impressed by the communality of oriental philosophy and develops these ideas about ecological aesthetics with his Chinese colleague Cheng Xiangzhan. The feeling of belonging prevails in the relationship between humans and the rest of creation: “This ecohumanism, recognizing the interconnectedness of humans, human institutions, and the nonhuman environment, is in direct contrast to the Western tradition in aesthetics that removes ethical values from the scope of aesthetic appreciation” (Berleant 2023: 62).

Ecohumanism guides the path to cultural ecology and then to the aesthetics of everyday life, which e.g. Thomas Leddy and Yuriko Saito have outlined. The world is aestheticized when we begin to see value in the usual and the everyday. Aesthetic consciousness need not mean being fully aware; just a casual, relaxed glance produces its unique calm state of mind. The aesthetic life-style is reflected in the everyday since choices are made according to individual and societal taste in regard to dressing, gardening, interior decoration, cooking – and hanging laundry, even. The aesthetics of the everyday already existed in Ludwig Wittgenstein’s aesthetic model and idea presented to a group of his close students in summer 1938; broader consciousness, however, was only achieved in 1966, when a booklet comprised of students’ lecture notes was published (see Wittgenstein 1966).

Attention should be paid to everyday phenomena and discern their aesthetic power. It is unnecessary to stop assessing and accepting the situation but to attempt to correct and develop matters in the desired direction. Berleant provides even surprising details from the aesthetics of everyday life concerning *do this, not that* type operating instructions. Implementation is about caring for the future and taking responsibility. The extensive practice of applied aesthetics would then require close cooperation between different fields of specialists and, of course, the inclusion of administration, business, law and education.

4. *Negative aesthetics.* If “everything” is aesthetically significant, then there must naturally be a reverse side to positive aesthetics: negative values and matters. How can everything be appreciated aesthetically and in what ways can the use of aesthetics be manipulated? Professor Paul Ziff

also considers this in Ziff (1979). What would be the object that could not be viewed – would it be an alligator wallowing in the mud?

One can at least be disgusted, and that is also an aesthetic reaction. The ugly has previously been considered, broadly and systematically by Karl Rosenkranz in his 1853 work on the aesthetics of ugliness (see Rosenkranz 1853). Berleant's negative aesthetics does not concern the bland and meaningless or a failed attempt anymore than a seriously affected morally distorted one. At the same time this creates a tension between the aesthetically fascinated and the morally horrifying. The composer Karlheinz Stockhausen was unable to contain his admiration for the spectacular fire and collapse of the Twin Towers of New York's WTC and was forced to explain and defend the legitimacy of his experience. Berleant ponders the same dilemma and includes other negative displays of force from war to terrorist attacks. They are paralleled with natural disasters independent of humans such as tsunamis, earthquakes and volcanic eruptions.

In each is a question of the negative side of the sublime (*grand*): the attraction of the shocking and horrifying. This enjoyment is accompanied by a moral accusation. The complex relationship between good and evil, beauty and ugliness, create a weird depth and profundity to the experience. In contrast to Harold Osborne, who in his later period in the shift from the 1970s to the 1980s wished to establish boundaries to art and hold accountable all experimental artists and all aesthetes who easily accept the prohibited, Berleant is curiously fascinated by border phenomena (see Osborne 1979 and 1980). They are an example of how the violence of art may be transformed into a part of the reality of life.

Negative aesthetics also represents the unmasking of the surface beauty. A critical approach marks the relation to commercial popular culture. Field work in the spirit of applied aesthetics is reflected in Berleant's visit to Disney World. The article initially describes in detail the clean and well-groomed external appearance of the theme park, then the conflicting expectations of the inside spaces. The façade and the interior, the superficial and the intense, are in striking contradiction; beneath the glossy shell lies "empty pleasures". This creates aesthetic disappointment – and irritation.

5. *Aesthetic community*. The seventh and final chapter concerns the social connections and forms of community, which are the rational, moral, organic and aesthetic communities. Human beings are in the sphere of influence of group dynamics. The concepts of taste and values are also formulated communally.

This is no longer a question of the individual's own good, since one is dependent on the communal good. Whether the emphasis is on the individual or the community, there are significant differences between cultures. Western individualism occupies a position opposed to Asian community-centeredness. This leads to a discussion of lifestyles and ways of life, cultural criticism, and the search for ideal aesthetic communities. The ideal of Western individualism is replaced by Asian communality.

Should the need for community and belonging be understood in a broader sense than the human community? The experiential sphere includes animals, plants, natural and cultural artifacts, buildings and various entities, such as landscapes. They, however, are no longer seen as separate elements but in relation to one another and as the fabric woven by invisible threads of the culture. A physical and psychological closeness is formed towards the elements, a continuum extends from the individual to the community. This network can also be thought to be created in the opposite manner, originating from the non-human elements. "The aesthetic community is a social aesthetic joining humans and environment in multidimensional reciprocity", as the author asserts in Berleant (2023: 162).

Following the ideas developed in Buber (1923), Berleant sees the construction of a dialogical cohesion. This does not to be edgeless. The unifying factor is attitude: belonging and solidarity, rather than cold observation and withdrawal from active participation. I see in it a kinship with the Wagnerian total work of art (*Gesamtkunstwerk*). The difference is that Berleant's model permits internal tensions in contrast to Wagnerian harmony and a utopia seeking perfection.

6. *The full picture*. Berleant's research profile contains permanence and change. The permanent has since the 1960s been the idea of the human being's immersion in engagement. This is related to the notion of aesthetic field, which appears as the title of the first monograph in 1970. Change in his view appears in the early inclusion of environmental questions, so that a sole perspective of the art field is discarded. Examples of art often emerge from the margins and crossing borders, some involving form, others substance.

Change also reflects the inclusion of active aesthetics; in fact, it is only in the final chapter, "Aesthetic community", that the term *applied aesthetics* appears. Berleant had already pondered its possibilities in the afterthoughts of the 13th International congress of aesthetics, "Aesthetics in practice", in Lahti, Finland (1995). His article, "Aesthetics in practice and the practice of aesthetics" (Berleant 1996), is in a dialogue with Pro-

fessor Stefan Morawski's work (see in particular Morawski 1996). A frame of reference for practical and applied aesthetics is applied (or public) philosophy; Professor of Theoretical Philosophy, Ilkka Niiniluoto, discussed its Finnish forms in terms of participatory philosophy in his article Niiniluoto (2023).

Berleant's model of academic aesthetics is systematic, but at the same time opens paths and perspectives for social impact. It is a series of thought movements in which the critic not only follows the line of thought but is a co-thinker. It is a comprehensive picture created by an influential actor which extends to environmental aesthetics, aesthetics of the everyday and social aesthetics.

Actors profiling themselves in this circle include Professors Yuriko Saito, Katya Mandoki and Cheng Xiangzhan. Classical support is drawn from Immanuel Kant (to whom Berleant relates polemically), Friedrich Schiller as a proponent of aesthetic education, Henry David Thoreau and John Muir as nature-writers, and the pragmatic philosopher John Dewey.

While Berleant is open-minded and listening, he is, when necessary, ready to dispense harsh criticism of culture and lifestyle. He condemns wasting natural resources, superficiality and falsity. Care and conservation are valued characteristics. A good life is good for both the individual and others; it represents aesthetic well-being. The basis for all this is a conviction that aesthetics is the core and richness of a humane life. In this way, Berleant connects the roles of the astute academic scholar and the eloquent advocate of aesthetic culture¹.

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¹ This text is based on my book review published in Finnish in "Synteesi. The interdisciplinary arts research journal", 1/2024, pp. 79-84, Engl. transl. by R. Goldblatt.

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Yuriko Saito (Rhode Island School of Design)

Putting aesthetics back into the human lifeworld

Arnold Berleant's most recent book, *The social aesthetics of human environments*, is a culmination of his oeuvre spanning more than half a century. This work offers a passionate expression of his long-standing effort to restore aesthetics' rightful place in human perceptual experience and social existence by steering inquiry away from the dualistic framework and

the separation of aesthetics from various life concerns that have dominated Western academic aesthetics discourse. In particular, he calls attention to the often-neglected contributions aesthetics makes to human well-being and argues for the social responsibility of aesthetics.

One of the main themes underlying Berleant's oeuvre is the primacy of perceptual experience, identified as aesthetics, and this defines the human mode of living in the world. He reminds us of the Greek origin of the term aesthetic, "perception by the senses" (Berleant 2023: 107), which was developed into a subdiscipline of philosophy by Baumgarten as a study of sensory perception. While the aesthetic perception includes the experiences of art and beauty, the long-held *foci* of aesthetic discourse, the pervasiveness of aesthetic perception covers a much wider range of experiences. This ubiquity of aesthetic perception is critical for Berleant because he is particularly concerned with negative aesthetic experiences. It is an unfortunate fact today that some things we experience in our lifeworld are aesthetically harmful, degrading, repulsive, destructive, and reprehensible. They range from inhospitable urban spaces to environmental pollution, whether visual, auditory, or olfactory, to inhumane work environments and pornography, all assaulting our senses, compromising our well-being, and damaging our health.

Berleant urges us to take such negative experiences seriously, as aesthetic perception is invaluable in detecting social ills, gauging the success of a society, and determining the quality of life. Here, "aesthetic theory merges with ethics to form a powerful instrument for social criticism" (Berleant 2023: 13). Aesthetics thus has "become a moral instrument and even a political factor in developing new thought in cultural analysis" (Berleant 2023: 85). As such, aesthetic discourse and practice are charged with a moral responsibility to cultivate sharp perceptual acuity and sensibility.

While the negativity of the aforementioned examples of negative aesthetics is quite obvious, there are other ways in which negative aesthetics operates. The most extreme case is the stunning spectacle of the terrorist violence of 9/11 that many of us have witnessed, which Berleant declares is "unqualifiedly negative" (Berleant 2023: 115), despite the possibility of a positive aesthetic experience one can gain *if* one follows the time-honored model of aesthetic experience as a disinterested contemplation.

Without such a dramatic one-off phenomenon, we are often subjected to what Berleant calls the 'co-optation' of aesthetic sensibility which occurs when our perception is appropriated for the purpose of promoting goals which are harmful to our well-being, whether political or commercial. "Current practices that employ aesthetic values as vehicles to dimin-

ish human well-being” (Berleant 2023: 7) are often insidious because they paint an aesthetically pleasant façade, such as experienced in Disney World. The ever-present and eternally happy atmosphere of Disney World may offer us an enjoyable experience with no false notes, but it is disguising the mass marketing ploy for corporate profit. The same observation can extend to various advertising and marketing strategies by today’s capitalistic enterprises fueled by the so-called “experience economy” which focuses on creating an enticing environment for consumers to shop and dine in. Although its immediate goal is to provide an aesthetically satisfying experience for consumers, it is not an end in itself but rather a means to increase profit for companies and industries.

In these cases, the judgment of negativity is derived from the purposes which the specific aesthetic features of the experience are intended to serve, which are more morally-driven, as the experience itself can be pleasant, delightful, amusing, comfortable, exciting, and aesthetically satisfying. That the basis of his critique of co-optation of aesthetics is morally-based becomes clear when we turn to other built structures that do not seek commercial gain. Berleant himself points out that any built environment, whether designed by artists or architects, guide the visitors’ and dwellers’ perceptual experience, thereby determining the character of a social environment: “An environment devised by an artist is a *fabricated perceptual construct* that concentrates features found in every environment” (Berleant 2023: 131, emphasis added) and “buildings are not self-sufficient objects but are places for human activity, determining the patterns of movement toward, into, and out of them, as well as within them. This fact transforms architecture from an art of physical structures into an art of complex social and environmental organization” (Berleant 2023: 136).

Consider the FDR Memorial in Washington D. C. Its outdoor structure ordered sequentially traces FDR’s career with distinct segments utilizing not only visual and spatial cues but also acoustic effects with a roaring sound of waterfall followed by a peaceful quietude, corresponding to the war-time chaos followed by peace. Similarly, the Holocaust Museum, also in D.C., orchestrates a vicarious experience by having a visitor choose a victim’s name card with a biographical information at the beginning of the exhibit, which takes place mostly in the dark, cramped space until one gets to the end where an ethereal brightness filters in from the ceiling.

One could argue that these structures also manipulate our experience, but I doubt Berleant would claim that they are also examples of co-optation of aesthetic perception. The difference is then not the presence or

absence of aesthetic manipulation but the goal which is served by such manipulation. One is for commercial gain and the other is for historical education through inducing an indelible aesthetic experience. If so, there are different ways in which we need to be vigilant against negative aesthetics. Sometimes we should be attentive to the sensory experience itself while other times we have to critically examine the purpose which is served by an otherwise positive aesthetic experience.

However, Berleant would most likely point out that the aesthetic negativity associated with Disney World and other commercial enterprises is derived not merely from the moral judgment concerning the problematic goals served by aesthetic strategies. He would insist that such moral concerns by themselves do not justify the negative aesthetic judgment. They have to affect the *aesthetic* experience itself, just as the cognitive understanding, such as scientific knowledge, becomes aesthetically relevant only if it affects the perceptual content of our experience of nature: “aesthetics embraces the full range of perceptual experience, and cognitive factors (history, information, theory, interpretation, and such) are relevant *only insofar as* they enhance direct perceptual experience” (Berleant 2023: 84, emphasis added). So, he may point out how Disney World with its relentless and in-your-face parade of happy cheers does not leave any room for imagination, hence preventing us from deepening our perceptual experience, while the FDR Memorial and the Holocaust Museum exhibit promote imaginative engagement, thereby illuminating various details of the sensuous features which may have escaped our notice. Their modes of ‘manipulating’ our experience thus affect us differently, one discouraging and the other promoting a rich aesthetic experience.

However, even among commercial enterprises, there may be different degrees of co-optation of aesthetic perception. Otherwise, any kind of commercial environment would have to be automatically judged as cases of co-optation of aesthetic perception. It may be that sometimes the product they are promoting is indeed of a superior quality fitting to a positive aesthetic environment, thereby rendering the entire shopping or dining experience fulfilling. On the other hand, a positive environment may be a ploy to compensate for the poor quality of the product. Since we do sometimes act as consumers by shopping in stores and dining out, one could argue that it is preferable to have a pleasant experience facilitated by various aesthetic strategies rather than being subjected to an unpleasant experience. Ultimately, what is most important is to cultivate a sharp and critical aesthetic perception so that we can detect when aesthetics is

co-opted and works against our well-being, thereby also compromising the content of experience itself.

This is particularly pertinent when it comes to the aesthetic strategies used for political purposes. Nazi Germany's use of art, uniforms, gestures, marches, and graphics is, in principle, no different from the utilization of Shepard Fairey's posters featuring Barak Obama's face in red and blue with black outline and a repeated chanting of "Yes We Can" in his first presidential campaign, or the songs and fashions associated with the American Civil Rights movement. All these examples illustrate how powerful aesthetic persuasion is, and we only lose by not recognizing and attending to this fact, which is a major concern of Berleant. He thus warns: "For philosophical aesthetics deliberately to ignore the political potential and use of the arts is to hand that power over to others whose values, standards, and behavior are often ignorant, manipulative, and self-aggrandizing. The traditional separation of aesthetics from daily life has freely allowed the political appropriation, often the misappropriation, of the arts" (Berleant 2023: 97).

The power of the aesthetic is a double-edged sword, and the other side of negative aesthetics is how aesthetics can promote human thriving and enhance our well-being. The essential sociality of human beings, Berleant observes, consists of cooperative co-existence and reciprocity. We exist in this lifeworld not as independent autonomous beings, but rather as interdependent beings supported by and in turn support a web of collaborative relationships. The best experiential manifestation of this mode of existence is a successful aesthetic experience of art facilitated by the *fusion* of the artist, the object, experiential subject, and the performer, where "there is no separation between the components but a continuous exchange in which they act on each other" (Berleant 2023: 25). He calls this situation the "aesthetic field", a happening generated by the dynamic and responsive correspondence between and among them. Both human sociality and aesthetic experience, according to him, are thus characterized by relationships, mutual engagements, synergy, and cooperation, rather than the separate and isolated existence of independent components, the conventional starting point of Western philosophy, including aesthetics.

This model of aesthetic engagement also characterizes a successful social environment, whether "in business, in commerce, in entertainment, and in routine activity involving manual labor or regular, simple patterns of activity" (Berleant 2023: 31). Berleant emphasizes that the environment is not something outside or separate from us. Neither is it an objec-

tively identifiable object, an item for scientific study: “environment is not experienced objectively but always here with us, where we are” (Berleant 2023: 49). We are never independent, self-sufficient beings isolated from the world, but we are constantly working with the world, including other people. As such, we are implicated in creating and sometimes reshaping social environment, in “personal relationships, vocational situations, educational, therapeutic, and creative activities, and ideally, political processes” (Berleant 2023: 32). Perception provides the basis for this ongoing project: “When we recognize that ideas originate in perception and should be translated back into experience, we can then proceed to reshape our world in ways that better meet our interests and fulfil our needs” (Berleant 2023: 55).

By thus drawing equivalence between aesthetic experience and social aesthetics, both promoted by and in turn promote acceptance, reciprocity, and engagement, Berleant holds that there is no separation between the moral and the aesthetic in social aesthetics. The aesthetics of human interactions, ranging from gestures and facial expressions to the tone of voice and general demeanor, affects, and often determines, the moral character of our action. Furthermore, as some examples of negative aesthetics indicate, the aesthetics of the material world, such as the built environment, cannot but have an impact on the quality of life, ranging from deprivation, hostility, and alienation to humaneness, generosity, and celebration of human dignity. In light of the ubiquity of aesthetic perception and its power to affect our thinking and actions, the cultivation of a critical aesthetic perception and sensibility is a paramount responsibility for all of us, as well as for aesthetics discourse.

It is not farfetched to characterize Berleant’s life-long contribution to aesthetics discourse as a manifesto for restoring aesthetics to its rightful place in human life and community. Aesthetics has suffered too long from “the fragmentation that results from the many divisions drawn by traditional theory, as between the appreciator of art and the art object, between beauty and utility, and between cognitive and noncognitive experience” (Berleant 2023: 16). We need to put these fragmented pieces back together to make aesthetics and human life whole again. Berleant’s work has been dedicated to spearheading this rehabilitation of aesthetics, and this book is its most recent call.

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The importance of escaping aesthetic co-optation

Arnold Berleant's latest book – *The social aesthetics of human environments: critical themes* – rounds out a long-term project of excavating the depth of the possibility of aesthetics to address our current situation and the means to resetting our trajectory. It is a bold thesis articulated in a modest style that belies its radical nature. As is the way with books containing some previously published work there are some overlaps and repetition but the whole builds steadily towards its striking crescendo where he ends by saying:

What stands here as a study in social aesthetics and philosophy is, at the same time, a matter for political science and practice, and perhaps the cardinal occasion of applied social aesthetics. At this stage in social evolution at this millennial point in human history, is any task of philosophy more compelling? (Berleant 2023: 162)

How does he get there? What does the book contain to guide us on this task? As this is a forum discussion and not a review, rather than go chapter by chapter describing the book I am going to pick out a strand that runs through and discuss why it is brave. I say that not in the ironic sense of “a brave decision” meaning a bad choice, but in its meaning of ready to endure danger by defying what has come to be accepted.

The strand that drew my attention (and had me exclaiming “Yes Go Berleant!” at some points) can be followed through the many complex and interlocking themes and it begins with the idea that aesthetic perception can be nurtured and can form a crucial part of a worthwhile human life. If aesthetic perception can be nurtured it can also be subverted, that is, trained in a way that does not support a worthwhile human life and is, in fact, purposely antithetical to that aim. And that this is happening in a wholesale way in contemporary culture. This subversion is what stands in the way of a positive social aesthetic.

Discussions that critique popular culture are always haunted by the counter objection that to criticize what is popular is elitist – the preserve

of the highly educated – and not a position that sits well in more egalitarian times. The idea that a particular aesthetic pleasure is something that requires effort or contextual knowledge is as challenging today as it is obvious. A strange conjunction. Thus, Berleant braves deep waters in this book, but his is an essential discussion for the times. We must break the erroneous connection between elitist culture and its history of exclusivity and the making of perfectly justifiable statements about better or worse aesthetic values: between states of affairs that enhance our humanity and the world and those that don't. As Berleant points out: "Aesthetic enquiry [...] offers a revelatory perspective that can encourage a vigorous critique of harmful social practices" (Berleant 2023: 7). We can, as he says, "take issue with current practices that employ aesthetic values as vehicles to diminish human well-being" (Berleant 2023: 7). (It goes without saying that in a work by Berleant environment is part of that context and carefully considered throughout).

In the discussion of how contemporary culture subverts and distorts our aesthetic values Berleant uses the unusual phrase "co-optation of sensibility" (Berleant 2023: 86). In discussions of contemporary ills, pointing out the subversion of natural desires into unhealthy channels is common in areas such as food politics and pornography. However, through the lens of aesthetics, Berleant is able to conduct a broad analysis of the currents at play. Before looking at the five modes of co-optation he discusses I should outline what the lens of aesthetics means in this context; just in case anyone thinks aesthetics is only about what goes on in art galleries.

Throughout the book Berleant makes it clear that aesthetics is about *sensory* perception – not only sensation but the associations and meanings that are brought along with it. Thus, aesthetics is both primary, a bedrock of our experiences, and filled with the complexities of emotion, thought, history, social dynamics and so on. We could think of this as a cauldron through which experience passes. Everything is involved: all experience has aesthetic value – good, bad, indifferent – and is open to question. Hence it is no stretch at all to think in terms of social aesthetics. As Berleant says: "when aesthetics questions everything must be prepared to answer" (Berleant 2023: 7).

With that clarification in place we can look further at the important matter of the manipulation of our senses for ends that are not to the benefit of ourselves or the social fabric. Berleant identifies five modes under which to discuss this widespread and amorphous phenomenon: gustatory, technological, auditory, emotional, and psychological. The aim here is admirable and the instances identified are insightful. However, the cate-

gorisation seems odd. For example, we end up with spatial points about architecture being made under “auditory” and smells and colours under “technological”. A clearer path would surely be to use the senses plus the emotional and psychological as the categories. In this way the olfactory, the visual and the kinesthetic/somatic sense could receive a fuller treatment and the pervasiveness of technology in impacting each of these could be addressed in each when relevant. Perhaps that structure would not communicate so much of the amorphous interweaving of the senses and their enmeshment in the social/political/ technological world, but it might allow for a stronger feeling for the subtlety and richness of aesthetic experience that is lost through this manipulation.

The gustatory section helps to explain the mechanics of co-optation. Discussing the clear example of the way taste is manipulated by the food industry to maximise profits by increasing the public taste for sugar, fats and salt and tolerance of preservatives “provides a vivid illustration of the phenomenon of co-optation” (Berleant 2023: 87). This is a clear case of an aesthetic value that humans have, e.g., the sweetness of ripe fruit, being subverted. An appreciation of occasional sweetness amongst other flavours becomes an addiction for overly-sweet refined sugars that are added to a vast range of processed foodstuffs and come to define the whole diet. Because the evidence of a junk food diet being unhealthy is so clear this is a good example of something being done to society not for the benefit of society, but being embraced by society, hence co-optation.

Berleant mentions the ubiquity of garish colours, but let me explore this idea of co-optation and give the visual sense a fuller treatment. I used to live near and enjoy visiting the city of Winchester in the UK. Called a city due to its cathedral it is actually the size of a moderate town. It just seemed to me more attractive than the centres of other towns and cities. One aspect of its charm that I absorbed but didn’t consciously observe was that there were no fluorescent shop signs. It wasn’t until my brother, who worked as an electrician on such signs, said he never got calls from Winchester because the council doesn’t allow fluorescent signs that I “noticed”. The shops had their names and characteristic logos attractively painted above their doors but they were not SHOUTING. Winchester is unusual in holding its ground (it helps having historic status) to protect its visual aesthetic against the commercial pressures of businesses.

When an innovation comes along it can seem exciting and “modern” but, as with the signs, to draw attention the next one has to be bigger and brighter, more *eye-catching* and the result is a cacophony of visual stimulation that is typical of city centres across the world. The degree of control

over shops in Winchester could seem dictatorial, but as in many such matters the alternative is the visual equivalent of “the tragedy of the commons”.

Just as with the fat, salt, and sugar we become inured to strident colours and flashing images and no longer notice the tiring impact they have, perhaps we even need them to feel that a place is where things happen. Even on an otherwise quiet streetscape advertising signs demand their place so that waiting at a bus stop is accompanied with, for example, images of a deodorant followed by a hamburger on a rolling sequence. This background noise desensitises us to more subtle visual stimuli and it is considered normal. The desensitising and the “considering it normal” are both, I think, signs of co-optation. The public in public spaces are treated as consumers not citizens, we become commercial fodder for business. Other aspects of citizenship, of belonging, of community are drowned out. Or as Berleant, more eloquently puts it: “Mass corporate culture turns humans into consumers, not only by propaganda in the form of sophisticated advertising designed to create and intensify desires but by restructuring their very capacity for sensible experience, the substance of life” (Berleant 2023: 91).

Can aesthetic analysis actually be, as Berleant claims, “an instrument of emancipation”? (Berleant 2023: 91). Aesthetic analysis can help us to identify co-optation, but can it also help us escape it? I think it can, but this would mean resensitising our responses to experience, and, as we are warned, if our perceptual capacities are enhanced they “become more vulnerable to abuse and to pain” (Berleant 2023: 107). This does seem to be the case, as anyone will discover if they take time away from the crass overexuberance that so dominates mass culture. On re-entry the strange mixture of hype and banality is suddenly more evident. Contemplation of a street scene, a clip of “reality” TV, or a child’s toy from a movie franchise, has the painful impact of a distant pneumatic drill sound after a visit to the dentist. Given that resensitising in a desensitised milieu is not an easy or painless experience, why bother, why resist? The answer to this question is because we must. There is too much at stake in terms of building the kinds of communities that can experience the depth and meaning of our true aesthetic capabilities. The wider environment and the possibilities of authentic friendship, love, and camaraderie, along with all the possibilities to add to the beauty and splendour of the world, are just too much to sacrifice.

Bibliography

Berleant, A., *The social aesthetics of human environments: critical themes*, London, Bloomsbury Academic, 2023.

Arnold Berleant (Long Island University)

Responses

I am honored to have the reflections on my most recent book of three esteemed scholars with whom I have associated over much of my professional life. Because they have such a long perspective on my work, it is helpful for me to learn what has impressed them in its leading features, in addition to their observations on the specific purview of the book itself. I am especially gratified that all three commentators recognize and endorse my long concern with the social uses and implications of the aesthetic as elaborated in this new book. They see it correctly as the culmination of a lifetime of exploring the understanding and value of the aesthetic.

My commentators also recognize the importance for me of the identifying mark of the aesthetic in the experience of engagement. Because my vision of the aesthetic is not that of a disinterested, passionless spectator but of an active, participating collaborator, aesthetic experience carries consequences that have personal and social significance. The focus of this book, then, is no surprise to any of these readers.

Professor Sepänmaa refers to my first book, *The aesthetic field, a phenomenology of aesthetic experience*, in recognizing that the claim such experience is social is implicit in the very concept of an aesthetic field. This places the aesthetic in a context that goes far beyond the subjectivity of an private response by including the influence of historical, institutional, and cultural factors. As Sepänmaa notes, “The aesthetic relationship is compassionate and participatory”. He recognizes my influence in the current emphasis on the pervasive presence of the aesthetic in the broad context of the human life-world that has been emphasized by Thomas Leddy and Yuriko Saito in giving important attention to the aesthetic in everyday life. Professor Sepänmaa also calls attention to the importance I assign to negative aesthetics, another manifestation of the aesthetic that has special significance in affecting the quality of social experience. His discussion makes clear that there is much more that needs

to be said on the social significance of the aesthetic, an invitation to future contributors.

The breadth and detail of Saito's commentary offer recognition of my work as a whole, which she sees exemplified in this most recent book. Saito clearly discerns that, for me, the primacy of perceptual experience is the heart of the aesthetic, and that this defines the human mode of living in the world. Sensory perception also underscores the pervasiveness of the aesthetic and the wide possibilities of its perversion. Saito's exploration of the negative social manifestations of the aesthetic is exemplary in its breadth and detail, and is a valuable complement to my own.

I am grateful to Prof. Saito for exposing so astutely the extraordinary possibilities of negative aesthetic analysis. She sees with penetrating clarity the "equivalence between aesthetic experience and social experience, both promoted by and, in turn, promoting acceptance, reciprocity, and engagement". She also recognizes the integrative social import of my work taken as a whole, as it is focused in this most recent book. Saito gives eloquent expression to my long-standing efforts to extend the aesthetic in its scope, its range of values, and its social importance. And not surprisingly, Saito gives proper attention to the importance I ascribe to the aesthetic in everyday life.

What I find especially gratifying about Professor Isis Brook's response to my book is her recognition and appreciation of the passion that empowers its observations and analyses. These, for me, are not sterile academic issues. In challenging the pious conventions and contrived disputes that sometimes guide discourse in aesthetics, my work has been motivated by the conviction that aesthetic value is both primal and primary: primal in the sense of having its proper place in the heart of life, and primary in the sense of standing first in the order of experience. As a philosopher I am concerned with attaining clear understanding to the degree that knowledge and circumstance make that possible, and joining this to the direct force of perceptual engagement. I am pleased by Brook's appreciation that this motive is not alien to visionary scholarship. Like the other contributors to this forum, she recognizes and approves, and for that I am deeply grateful.

In bringing together many of my discussions of various ways in which the aesthetic incorporates and influences social values, negative as well as positive, I intended to reveal how aesthetic experiences acquire social importance and can assume manipulative and often subversive social forms. One of these, which I think is particularly elusive but the more influ-

ential, I identify as *the cooptation of sensibility*. This is the practice, widely used on many different levels, not only commercial but also political, religious, and social. It consists in shaping people's feelings, beliefs, and very sensibility by deliberately instilling tendentious patterns that determine the aesthetic character and quality of their perceptual experience, that is, by (mis)educating experience. This is particularly insidious when used for commercial purposes with exploitive intent by stimulating feelings of warmth and acceptance or otherwise attempting to shape sensible perception to create the desire for a specific product.

Promoting political, religious, or social allegiance through the publicity and reiteration of normative logos, slogans, and chants has become, in our time, a powerful political weapon. These theatrical techniques acquire further aesthetic force when they appears as design elements in the form of a decorative badge, a logo on a cap or uniform, or a crowd chant that turns into a hypnotic mantra. So does the use of identifiable colors in clothing and the wily employment of public statements and other forms of spoken or written publicity for dramatic effect. There is a fine line between eloquence and manipulation. Moreover, vocabulary and speech patterns are frequently formulas associated with particular roles from which they may take their force. Even demonstrations and parades are choreographed social theater.

A case in point is the military, which is thoroughly infused with theatrical forms, speech, and patterns of behavior. Uniforms are costumes that carry with them specific roles to be played. Behavior is staged and formal, and the movements of individuals and groups strictly choreographed. Formal events, such as parades and demonstrations, and rehearsed practices such as maneuvers, are pure theater. Even zones of combat are called "theaters" of operation.

Clothing styles, fashions, and conventional dress, from the formal suit and tie to the slovenly jeans with holes and patches, are costumes that determine roles and behavior. The fact that the availability of clothing styles is often severely limited forces people into choices and roles not freely chosen, sometimes condemning them involuntarily. There is an exposé here waiting to be written.

The pervasiveness of the aesthetic of the social is so extensive and influential that these reflections on the observations of my commentators have expanded irresistibly into further documentation of the book's thesis. Perhaps I may be allowed to join my commentators by extending the book's claims by these remarks.

All three commentators grasped this book as the culmination of my life-long enterprise of recognizing the profound value and the inestimable power of the aesthetic in human life. Through their thoughtful commentaries and elaboration of my ideas, all three recognize and confirm the power of those ideas. They have also contributed to grasping and extending their relevance. I am grateful for their willingness to join with me in documenting the social significance of the aesthetic.

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