

Contemporary Aesthetics (Journal Archive)

Volume 15 *Volume 15 (2017)*

Article 28

3-21-2017

The Aesthetics of Mud and the Muddiness of Aesthetics

Arnold Berleant
ab@contempaesthetics.org

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcommons.risd.edu/liberalarts_contempaesthetics



Part of the [Aesthetics Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Berleant, Arnold (2017) "The Aesthetics of Mud and the Muddiness of Aesthetics," *Contemporary Aesthetics (Journal Archive)*: Vol. 15 , Article 28.

Available at: https://digitalcommons.risd.edu/liberalarts_contempaesthetics/vol15/iss1/28

This Short Note is brought to you for free and open access by the Liberal Arts Division at DigitalCommons@RISD. It has been accepted for inclusion in Contemporary Aesthetics (Journal Archive) by an authorized editor of DigitalCommons@RISD. For more information, please contact mpompeli@risd.edu.

Arnold Berleant

Tom Baugh's note on the aesthetics of mud is both evocative and illuminating in its vivid recollection of the viscous slip and slime of mud. Wetlands are his professional territory and Baugh understands them well. Interestingly, he also appreciates this distinctive ecosystem aesthetically, not only with a trained eye but also for its feel, its smells, its sucking pull on the boot, as well as the improbable beauty of the Canada lily and the other flora of the bog. His appreciation is for the many beauties that such places offer. What some find in a garden, he finds in a bog: he calls this the aesthetics of mud.

This may be puzzling to the philosopher for whom aesthetics is a discipline concerned with deciphering the experiences and meanings of the appreciation of beauty in the arts and in nature: what constitutes beauty, its appreciation, art, and aesthetic judgment more generally. Both philosopher and ecologist recognize the aesthetic value found on such occasions and circumstances, but the concerns of each are different and so their understanding of aesthetics is different. Rather than debating at cross-purposes about whose understanding is the correct one, it would be well to recognize that the concept of aesthetics has different meanings. For the wetlands ecologist, aesthetics means the appreciation of the range of sensible beauties in the rich environment of the bog. The philosopher, on the other hand, puzzles over what constitutes aesthetic appreciation proper, such as the appropriate attitude, the proper object of appreciation, the senses suitable for aesthetic enjoyment, the meanings embodied in such experiences, and the relation of aesthetic pleasure to other concerns such as function and utility.

Yet these meanings of aesthetics are not independent of each other. Indeed, acknowledging the beauties in a bog challenges many of the tenets of traditional aesthetics. For example, appreciation of a wetland, as of every environment, is not directed at an object, as such, but involves the sensory qualities of an environment that encompasses the appreciator. Here one's encounter with beauty is an experience that requires physical, bodily involvement. It is an effort that is part of appreciative experience in ways comparable to the aesthetics of sport. Here the traditional aesthetic senses of sight and hearing are amplified and surrounded by the insistence of tactile engagement with the mud, the smell and the taste of the air, indeed the full somatic participation of aesthetic experience. What does this tell us about the traditional paradigm of aesthetic appreciation? It would be helpful for the ecologist to temper his sensory delights by considering the meanings and implications of those pleasures, just as it is incumbent on the philosopher to recognize the false constraints that traditional aesthetics imposes on appreciation. These involve dismissing the need for distance and disinterestedness, engaging the tactile, olfactory, and kinesthetic sensory modalities, and recognizing the aesthetic appeal of function and practice.

Recent developments in philosophical aesthetics have powerful implications for traditional theory. The short note on mud exemplifies the increasing attention to environmental aesthetics, an interest that undermines the conventional focus of aesthetics on an art object. For in environment there is no

[About CA](#)

[Journal](#)

[Contact CA](#)

[Links](#)

[Submissions](#)

[Search Journal](#)

[Editorial Board](#)

[Permission to Reprint](#)

[Privacy](#)

[Site Map](#)

[Publisher](#)

[Webmaster](#)

object, as such, but rather a diffuse scene or landscape that involves the appreciative participant. And, more recently, everyday aesthetics has gained the attention of aestheticians despite the fact that it ignores the Kantian convention that dismisses function and relegates practical interest and use to a lower level. Everyday aesthetics, on the contrary, does not countenance *a priori* constraints but legitimizes purpose and function on occasion as aesthetic features.

These two concerns with aesthetic value, then, the occasions in which we have aesthetic satisfaction and their theoretical understanding, are related but different. One requires perceptual openness and sensitivity together with a cultivated sensibility informed by the knowledge and background that conduce to them. For the other, to be valid, we need a cognitive activity that tries to account for those experiences on their own terms without dictating in advance what is acceptable and what is not. And each must recognize the legitimacy of the other. Appreciation as perceptual engagement is not a cognitive exercise, and the theory that accounts for the values in a bog is not aesthetic appreciation. To confound the two is to impede both: muddiness can be found in more places than a bog.

Arnold Berleant
ab@contempaesthetics.org

Published March 21, 2017.