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Editorial Introduction to Special Volume 9: Aesthetics Beyond Philosophy: Exploring Berleant's Concept of Engagement Editorial Introduction

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Aesthetics Beyond Philosophy: Exploring Berleant's Concept of Engagement Editorial Introduction

Bogna J. Gladden-Obidzińska

As this volume's authors explore, in depth, from many different angles, Arnold Berleant's contribution to the field of aesthetics can be understood as twofold. First, through the prolific books and essays that he has published over the course of several decades, Berleant has managed to explicitly shift the focus of aesthetic research from categorial analysis of the notions inherited from the eighteenth century to the aesthetic experience itself, with its unique domain, demands, and cognitive and social potential. Second, by shifting the aesthetic discourse in this way, Berleant has succeeded in not only moving aesthetics beyond art appreciation and its self-imposed theoretical rules, but also beyond philosophy, especially that construed as critical analysis. The articles presented in this volume investigate different facets of this transformation of aesthetic thought that has been driven by Berleant's vision.

A careful reader of Berleant's works will have noticed that his intervention restructures the Kantian triad of philosophical realms – the cognitive, the ethical, and the aesthetic – in such a way that the aesthetic becomes not a sphere of thought parallel to epistemology and moral philosophy but a meta-philosophy. The concept of meta-philosophy usually implies a hierarchical system in which that which is “meta” is “above” (in a regulatory manner) that to which it is “meta.” Berleant's argument seems to be of a different character: Aesthetics, as a meta-philosophy, is not “above” philosophy, just as it is not “above” art appreciation, but it rather embeds philosophy within the domain of the

aesthetic. Thus, aesthetics, in Berleant's terms, provides an environment in which all philosophical inquiry (ethical, epistemological, social, ontological, political, and so on) is rooted and from which it draws its substance, with regard not only to the matter but also to the methodology.

What is particularly remarkable in his bold proposition is that, by enacting this shift, Berleant does not separate aesthetics as a method of thinking from its faithfulness to particular objects of study: the sensual, environmental, artistic, historical, moral, technical, cultural, existential, and axiological aspects of reality and human activity. On the contrary, aesthetics-as-meta-philosophy is a participatory (engaged) study of, for example, particular urban spaces, concrete patches of nature reserves, actual social practices, cultural processes that we are witnessing, historical events, and so on. In this sense, I will permit myself to add, Berleantian aesthetics is more than a theory; it is a way of being in the world as a sentient and compassionate entity whose consciousness enables it to recognize its *vincula* within the network of all other entities and with the network itself – and to discriminate among them. This is perhaps most clearly represented in his unambiguous account of the role of the aesthetic experience in confrontations with violence, previously considered a legitimate source of sublime pleasure:

An aesthetics of engagement encourages empathetic human feeling. It recognizes the inseparability of the moral and the aesthetic in the confrontation with violence in the arts. Moral interest is inescapably present; it is inherent in the encounter with the image. To exclude or ignore the moral content in such depictions of violence is to eviscerate the image, to render it lifeless. By the standard of such experience, the aesthetics of violence is unqualifiedly negative: It is not contemplatively benign or complaisant but appalling. The engaged aesthetic of violent occasions produces experiences that are never pleasant but are genuinely distressing emotionally and repugnant morally. It is a direct encounter with negativity.[1]

Thus, Berleant's aesthetics to date synthesizes and fulfills the cumulative efforts and contributions from figures like the Pre-Socratics and Boetius to Grosseteste, Leibniz, Thoreau, Dewey, Ingarden, and Merleau-Ponty. The path pioneered by such thinkers presents an invaluable alternative vision that runs parallel to the (until recently dominant) approach of those who opted for unilateral rational solutions lacking sympathy and sensibility. One can only look forward to where this philosophical journey will lead Berleant in his new works, especially in view of advancing scientific knowledge that

uncovers ever more grounds for recognizing unity rather than disjunction in the micro-structure of reality.

It has been a privilege to help facilitate the creation of this collection of essays dedicated to Berleant's thought, which – alongside the contributions of other pivotal Post-Kantian thinkers like Katya Mandoki, Wolfgang Iser, or Stephen Davies – has given new vibrancy and significance to the field of aesthetics within the world of contemporary scholarship.

This special volume of *Contemporary Aesthetics* is based on a volume of *Sztuka i filozofia | Art and Philosophy* published in Poland in 2010. That volume contained original published versions (in Polish) of the articles that we are now making available for the first time in English to the international community of readers. Most of the authors took advantage of this opportunity to update their texts in light of ongoing developments in aesthetics over the last decade.

Before 2010, Berleant's aesthetic ideas had been known among Polish researchers thanks to translations of his texts that were prepared in Kraków under the supervision of Prof. Krystyna Wilkoszewska and published by Universitas[2]. The publication of our issue of *Sztuka i filozofia* in 2010 enabled a wider range of Polish and Central and Eastern European aestheticians to more deeply appreciate Berleant's contribution to world aesthetics, in the context of the commentary of his American, Japanese, Chinese, and Polish colleagues and collaborators. In the decade since that publication, many more articles and books have been dedicated to Berleant's thought, not only by American, Asian, and Polish scholars but also other European thinkers, for example, in articles contributed to the special issue of the Slovak journal of aesthetics *Espes*, entitled "Aesthetics Between Art and Society: Perspectives of Arnold Berleant's Postkantian Aesthetics of Engagement." [3]

I will not summarize each of the authors' contributions here, as Arnold Berleant himself highlights and comments on key insights from each article in his recapitulating essay at the end of this rich volume.

The issue published in 2010 included a number of pieces of art generously provided by scholar and artist Mara Miller. In developing this English-language volume, we invited her to contribute a new collection of pieces, which she has kindly done. They appear as what we are calling "Visual Interludes," with their presence complementing the volume's written contributions. This is my attempt, as editor, to at least partially embody Berleant's mission of reinstating the sensual realm as one that

communicates to us as much as the intellectual one. If only it were practically viable to convey here the sounds, the smells, and the textures of what he calls “the aesthetic field” – that is, the realm where our thoughts and sensations are perceived as one – we would eagerly do so.

Last, but not least, I would like to express my personal gratitude to Arnold Berleant for his openness and for his contribution to the volume, both in 2010 and now. It is a privilege to have the opportunity to not only think and write *about* a scholar’s ideas but also to think and write *with* him, and as editor I have been particularly happy that such a fruitful dialogue was possible between this volume’s many contributors and the author whose thought inspired them.

It was immensely enriching to work with all the contributors, and my special thanks are extended to Mara Miller, for contributing in two different media, and to Anna Wolińska, for her involvement with the translation of and editorial work on Alicja Kuczyńska’s article. Finally, this special volume of *Contemporary Aesthetics* would not have been created without the encouragement, support, and vision of Yuriko Saito, to whom I am especially grateful.

While the contents of this special volume of *Contemporary Aesthetics* trace their origins to ideas that the contributors began developing in 2010, this volume is not intended (primarily) as a work in the history of contemporary aesthetics: its articles are all very pertinent to today’s ongoing debates and I trust that they will also prove inspiring for future discourse.

With best wishes for 2021,

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Endnotes

[1] Arnold Berleant, "Reflections on the Aesthetics of Violence," *Contemporary Aesthetics*, Special Volume 7 (2019); <https://contempaesthetics.org/2019/11/03/article-872/>, accessed on Dec. 20, 2020.

[2] Full name: Scientific Papers Authors and Publishers Society UNIVERSITAS; <https://universitas.com.pl/strona/19/O-nas/>, accessed on Dec. 20, 2020.

[3] *Espes*, Vol 6, No 2 (2017); <https://espes.ff.unipo.sk/index.php/ESPES/issue/view/9>, accessed on Dec. 20, 2020.

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