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## A Philosophical Retrospective

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Volume: Special Volume 9 (2021)

## A Philosophical Retrospective

Arnold Berleant

The question of what to contribute to this issue of *Sztuka y Filozofia* has ironically been made more difficult because of the generosity of its contributors. It would have been challenging, no doubt, and also stimulating to respond to questions, explain away misunderstandings, or develop new explanations of what I have written. That would have served a constructive purpose, the driving motive of my work. But my colleagues have adopted the same motive in their own contributions, carrying out what, from the beginning, has been my positive charge to readers to develop, extend, and apply the ideas and proposals that lie embedded in that work.

Now, after half a century since my earliest publications, I have found myself looking back in some wonder at the scope of what I have written. Even more, though, has been the growing awareness that my ideas, ever evolving, display a certain developmental logic and coherence that was entirely unplanned. I did not set out with an agenda or a mission, much less with the intent to carry on the work of others. Rather, I tried to look with a clear eye at the philosophical landscape in which I was living and to make my way through and possibly beyond it. Exposure to Marvin Farber's naturalistic phenomenology early in my philosophical studies provided me both with a useful method and a criterion of judgment. There was nothing emulative in the effects of that influence, and my independent judgment and iconoclastic proclivities served to keep me on my own path. Of course, prior education in music was ideal preparation for the use of a phenomenological orientation and pragmatic straightforwardness, both of them becoming principal philosophical influences on my thinking.

I have found this retrospection revealing, both personally and philosophically. Perhaps by re-tracing the path along which my ideas have emerged and developed, I can offer the best commentary on that work and a suitable complement to that of my collaborators. And it would not have been possible to do this, much less appropriate, if I had not gained a certain confidence in where I have arrived.

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As a child, my experiences of landscape and of the arts, especially music, began my aesthetic education. These were occasional, erratic, and unguided, but they aroused in me a fascination with the magical quality of musical sound and the evocative ability of simple drawings, as well as of the boundless beauties of nature. Simple curiosity about the effects of music, literature, and visual representation led me to wonder about their strange power. Sporadic as these experiences were, their aesthetic energy has continued their influence, affecting the development of my ideas about art and the aesthetic.

I came to philosophical aesthetics indirectly, for my fascination with the arts centered around music, and I began my higher education not by attending university but rather a music conservatory, focusing on music composition and theory, and on piano. My active practice of music has continued without interruption to the present, but it is only recently that I have begun to realize how profound has been its influence on my theoretical understanding. The emphasis I have always placed on setting, on perceptual immediacy, and on art's basic non-cognitivism can be traced, I think, to musical experience. Early in my reflections on art, the idea began to develop that the experience is not a purely internal, subjective state but is highly complex, occurring in a situation in which many factors combine to form its distinctive character. The idea in theoretical physics of a field of forces was suggestive, and it led me to think of this context as an *aesthetic* field, identifying its principal components as an appreciative factor (a perceiver), a focal factor (an object or focus of perception), a creative factor (an artist), and a performative factor (a performer or activator). Essential in this concept is that all the factors are in reciprocal interaction under the influence of cultural, technological, material, social, historical, and other such conditions.

I also began to realize the difference between appreciative *experience* and cognitive *analysis*, and the importance of keeping them distinct. The aesthetic field offered a descriptive analysis, whereas the experience itself, in contrast, was holistic and integral. I found that this distinction clarified aesthetic

experience and, in the process, acknowledged the importance of features usually overlooked, in particular the performative one. The performative character of aesthetic experience had heretofore been ignored, and my first book, *The Aesthetic Field: A Phenomenology of Aesthetic Experience* (1970), was unusual, perhaps unique in aesthetics at that time, in giving performance a key role. Some of the recognition that the book received came from this feature.

I expressed this activist factor in various ways in that book and in subsequent writings, and it led me later to adopt the concept of engagement to identify it. This term turned out to be a felicitous choice, and I quickly realized that it stood in opposition to one of the dogmas of traditional aesthetic theory, the concept of aesthetic disinterestedness. Recognizing this led me to develop an extended critique of disinterestedness in a series of related papers. The idea of engagement expressed my conviction and also my experience that the appreciation of art requires involved participation and an active contribution by the appreciator.

My second book, *Art and Engagement* (1991), developed this idea by applying it to a number of different arts. Each of these arts not only illustrated aesthetic engagement but at the same time was used to exemplify one of the four factors in the aesthetic field: creative, performative, focal, and appreciative. I found that the perspective contributed by each of these factors, separately and in combination, strikingly illuminated the experiences of painting, architecture, literature, music, dance, and film, which I examined in successive chapters. I also came to realize that such experiences possess extraordinary ontological implications. A later book, *Sensibility and Sense*, developed these implications in more mature form.

Since my youth I have been sensitive to natural environments and to environmental qualities, more generally. It was a revelation to discover that the concepts of the aesthetic field and aesthetic engagement could be applied equally not only to the traditional fine arts but also to the aesthetic appreciation of nature and of environment more generally. An aesthetics of art and environment was not something I had envisioned originally; it emerged rather as a confirmation of their resemblance.

Exploring environmental appreciation from the perspective of these ideas was so fascinating that not only did environment receive the most extended discussion in *Art and Engagement*, it led to my next book, *The Aesthetics of Environment*, which was published the following year (1992). This book carried forward this theoretical orientation to the aesthetic appreciation of

environment. It contained a variety of studies of natural landscapes, of urbanism both as a built environment in general and in specific inquiries into the design of museum exhibitions and of outer space. The book also proposed developing a new discipline of environmental criticism and insisted on the essential philosophical harmony in the aesthetic appreciation of the arts and environment.

These ideas illuminated still other questions in aesthetics, and developing their ramifications took form in many essays that I collected in several books that followed. *Living in the Landscape* (1997) pursued new dimensions of the aesthetics of environment, including its implications for education and for architecture. Theoretical developments were also introduced here that later came to assume major importance. One was a discussion of negative aesthetics and the negative sublime, and another considered the implications of aesthetics for our understanding of community. Creativity, usually thought to be an unbridgeable difference between art and nature, I found inherent in environmental experience. I also examined sacred environments, not in the obvious sense of religious structures but rather in the capacity of some built environments to evoke the sacred in experience.

Two further collections appeared during the next decade. *Re-Thinking Aesthetics: Rogue Essays on Aesthetics and the Arts* (2004) gathered some of my early work that prefigured later themes, both of my own and of others, such as the aesthetic relevance of the sensual and of the body, and the theoretical significance of the enlarged scope of new art media and techniques. The book also brought together later papers critiquing the entrenched idea of aesthetic disinterestedness and demonstrating its inadequacy for understanding the contemporary arts, and it continued my efforts to revitalize our experience of the individual arts.

The essays in *Aesthetics and Environment: Variations on a Theme* (2005) continued the explorations I had begun in *The Aesthetics of Environment*. The book included studies of various environments, such as the garden, the city, and the seacoast and sea, and of environmental engagement evoked by music. I also began to write more directly on the aesthetic presence in social life and on its fusion with ethical values in many social issues. Important here was a group of papers that developed in several directions ideas nascent in my earlier study of the aesthetics of community. I called this section of the book "social aesthetics," and it included a broad range of concerns, from artists' morality to the subsidization of the arts, from the cultural

dimension of aesthetic experience and the place of social values in the judgment of art to the aesthetic aspect in human relationships.

These two books carried forward a growing awareness of the wide scope of the aesthetic in experience, especially in environmental contexts. This line of development had led me earlier beyond the natural and urban environments and into social relations, and I began to expand the idea of a social aesthetics that is highly perceptual and also environmental, not just by including but in centering around social experiences. These human situations, like the aesthetic field, which encompasses both the arts and environmental experiences, are emphatically contextual. They are field experiences that invariably have an aesthetic dimension and are sometimes predominantly aesthetic, which is where their beauty lies.

Each of these enlargements of the aesthetic, from the artistic to the environmental and from the environmental to the social, led me to recognize further dimensions of perception and to explore how they enhanced the rich possibilities of experiencing the aesthetic. This sequence was not planned, nor could I have predicted it. Moreover, as I extended the aesthetic to the social, it became apparent that the idea could illuminate a whole domain of experiences that did not exemplify the wondrously illuminating and exhilarating occasions we associate with the arts and with natural and urban environments. The very sensibilities that aesthetic awareness encourages make us more vulnerable to the ways in which those sensibilities are abused, and this led me to return and inquire further into negative aesthetics.

Aesthetic negativity was a dark illumination, the revelation of shadows in our experience that we ignore through habituation, blindness, or simple ignorance. Living in built environments, our perceptual field is actually flooded with perceptual experiences that are often negative. Our sensibilities are repeatedly offended, abused, even damaged by aesthetic negativities unwittingly imposed on us. Their forms are endless, from the many kinds of sensory pollution and environmental degradation to social barbarities. Not only do these implicate the aesthetic; at the same time they involve the moral. And because they are social, they are also political.

The political dimensions of the aesthetic are not always simple or obvious. However, it quickly became clear to me that, in admitting negativity, aesthetics has the potential of becoming a powerful instrument of social criticism. Our aesthetic welfare demands an end to environmental pollution as much as our



physical well-being requires it. I realized that aesthetically harmful social practices in this age of world-scale human engineering and environmental modification are on a scale so overwhelming and with effects so devastating that they exceed our capacity to encompass, let alone control them. At the same time, they are aesthetic in that they are manifested perceptually. Recognizing this domain of negativity, it became clear that the vocabulary of aesthetics contains a concept that can express this with devastating eloquence: the sublime—the negative sublime. I explored this idea in a study of terrorism that I incorporated in my next book, a comprehensive social philosophical statement based on the centrality of the aesthetic: *Sensibility and Sense, the Aesthetic Transformation of the Human World* (2010).

The invitation to write a book on aesthetics and social philosophy that had come a few years earlier was fortunate on two counts. It led me to extend my reflections on social aesthetics on a level and scale I had not anticipated. And this turn to the social significance of aesthetics produced unexpected insights. It was an undertaking that also gave striking symmetry to my intellectual development, for early in my study of philosophy I had developed an interest in social philosophy.<sup>[1]</sup>

I approached this new project as an opportunity to speak without constraint and in my own voice, and I began by articulating a fuller philosophical groundwork than I had in the past. I took the leap into ontology, developing more comprehensively in the first part of *Sensibility and Sense* ideas I had anticipated earlier in various essays and in the final chapters of *Art and Engagement*. The social significance of aesthetics became more explicit in the book's middle section, where I tried to show how pervasive social and cultural influences are in our experience of nature, the city, and even the celestial sphere.

At this point I found myself moving irresistibly into the domain of the political, and such issues preoccupied the last part of the book. Political order is a manifestation of our social values and, as this became clearer, new ideas began to emerge that assumed central importance for a political aesthetics. One such idea, with enormous implications, is the concept of a perceptual commons.<sup>[2]</sup> I elaborated its core meaning to hold that everyone has a *prima facie* claim to a perceptual realm that is unaltered, undistorted, undiminished, and unpolluted. This, of course, is an ideal, but I quickly recognized that, nonetheless, it can be the touchstone by which every modification of the

perceptual realm may be judged. Observing this claim would lead to a massive transformation of the quality of human experience of nature as well as of the city, not to mention its consequences for health, well-being, and indeed the social order.

Another related idea that emerged in this conceptual development toward an aesthetics of politics came from recognizing that people cannot be expected always to choose their own good, in aesthetics as well as in politics. As the underlying justification both for the philosophy of democracy and also the autonomy of taste, this fails dismally. The failure of choices to be self-enhancing comes not just from the lack of rationality or from ignorance or insensitivity. Choices are corrupted by more than the fact that people's judgment is warped by incessant and pervasive political and commercial propaganda. Choices are not freely made because people's very sensibilities have been taken prisoner by invisible forms of control. This is more than thought control; it is *perceptual* control.

I called this widespread practice "the co-optation of sensibility," in order to identify the insidious process whereby people's very taste, still thought of as private, personal, and incontestable, is formed and controlled by the designs and interests of others, interests that are primarily commercial and political. In writing about this now, I realize that this practice is actually a particularly insidious breach of Kant's categorical imperative, usurping people's very sensibilities and training us to respond in ways that promote not our own well-being but rather the interests of others. This insight transforms aesthetics into a powerful instrument of social and political criticism and it led to extending the idea of negative aesthetics as the ground of critical judgment. I have come to regard the social domain a rich field for aesthetic research.

As I consider this history of an evolving aesthetic, it becomes clear that I have arrived at a generalized aesthetic: aesthetics as the theory of sensibility. Such a conception of aesthetics serves all its uses well. It accommodates the arts, it embraces environmental experience, it illuminates social experience, and it underwrites political criticism and action. And, in its simplicity, it captures the very heart of the aesthetic.

One idea stands at the center of this reformation of the aesthetic, an idea toward which it seemed aimed from the outset and from which my later work followed: aesthetic engagement. Its contextual character is found in the concept of the aesthetic field, which reflects the activist, participatory,



performative dimension of aesthetic experience. Similarly, the wide applicability of aesthetic engagement is inherent in its generality and in being not confined exclusively to the arts. Further, the centrality of perceptual experience for aesthetic engagement became the touchstone for judging the genuineness of experience and in determining its value. From these emerges the moral significance that lies implicit in the aesthetic and in negativity as a critical judgment. Re-casting aesthetics as the theory of sensibility is thus the clear consequence of making aesthetic experience fundamental. At the same time, aesthetic experience epitomizes that very sensibility, in addition to opening social and political conditions for appraising such experiences. Cultivating the idea of aesthetic engagement has produced a healthy plant that can be richly productive.

Since completing *Sensibility and Sense*, I have continued to work in both familiar and new directions. In recent years I have written essays on individual arts, such as music and architecture; on specific environments, such as the forest and the city; on the philosophical influences on the aesthetics of Kant and Dewey; and on theoretical issues in environmental aesthetics and aesthetics more generally. An essay of special importance is "The Aesthetic Politics of Environment," which develops and expands the final chapter of *Sensibility and Sense*. These recent efforts are collected in my latest book, *Aesthetics beyond the Arts*.

This personal intellectual history must not be seen as a self-contained development. No thinker, especially no philosopher, stands apart from the historical, cultural, and intellectual currents of the time. Numerous influences have shaped and impelled my work, and I must give explicit recognition to two. One is the phenomenological fixation on perception that is intentional, albeit pure, direct, and unencumbered with assumptions, more effectively advocated by Merleau-Ponty than by Husserl. This has been my guiding ideal for the aesthetic without implicating it in any of the metaphysical and ontological assumptions sometimes associated with phenomenology and that, I believe, compromise its effectiveness, such as subjectivism and egology. The second formative influence on my work has been pragmatism, which recognizes ideas as embedded in natural human experience and practice, and understands and judges them by their uses and effects. I believe that my work exemplifies the possibilities of both.

Lastly, I am struck in retrospect by the theoretical continuity and coherence of a vision that became clear and full only as it

matured. It is a vision that is moral as it is aesthetic, that embraces environment equally with art, and society with environment, and that illuminates the full landscape of philosophy with the grace, relevance, and insistence of the aesthetic.

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[1] My doctoral dissertation was on the relation of Dewey's logical theory to his social philosophy, and as a graduate student I had co-edited a collection of essays for a course I taught on that subject.

[2] I owe this term to my former student and present friend, Clarice Allgood, who had once made passing use of it.

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