

# Contemporary Aesthetics (Journal Archive)

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Volume 0 *Special Volume 9 (2021) AESTHETIC  
ENGAGEMENT AND SENSIBILITY:  
REFLECTIONS ON ARNOLD BERLEANT'S WORK*

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Article 3

1-5-2021

## Disinterestedness, Disdain and the Reception of Berleant's Major Idea

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### Recommended Citation

Foster, Cheryl (2021) "Disinterestedness, Disdain and the Reception of Berleant's Major Idea," *Contemporary Aesthetics (Journal Archive)*: Vol. 0, Article 3.

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Volume: Special Volume 9 (2021)

## Disinterestedness, Disdain and the Reception of Berleant's Major Idea

Cheryl Foster

### Abstract

Arnold Berleant's philosophical theories have proven to be prescient in their identification of an aesthetic interface between human beings and the natural world – the interface he calls “engagement,” a form of participatory aesthetics. This essay presents the context out of which Berleant's theory of engagement has evolved and then touches upon the application of engagement first to cases of aesthetic appreciation and then to a very recent case in coastal ecology and management. It is suggested that Berleant's elaboration of a “participatory aesthetics” both mirrors and informs the scientific model of “participatory research,” which in turn has implications for how philosophers might understand the relative roles of objectivity and engagement in aesthetic practice.

### Key Words

Berleant, coastal research, disdain, disinterestedness, distance, ecology, engagement, participatory aesthetics

### 1. Dichotomy, disinterest, and distance

In the life work of Arnold Berleant we see a faithful call to examine our duties with respect to how theory interprets aesthetic experience. Throughout the essays and books of more than five decades, Berleant presents a plausible account of how and why aesthetic theory came to institutionalize disinterestedness as the principle of choice for proper aesthetic orientations, interpretation, and judgments. A good historian of

his subject, Berleant locates the root of theory's current malaise in the 18th century philosophy of the British empiricists, especially the work of Shaftesbury. Shaftesbury argued for the separation of the visual arts from their contexts in decorative locations and their relocation onto plinths, into frames and within the single view. Kant further exacerbated this emphasis on disinterestedness by separating the aesthetic from pleasure and quite specifically from the "lower senses," with the result that his critical project internalized and extended the dualism and ocularcentrism first perpetrated by Descartes at the dawn of modern philosophy.

Today, notes Berleant, aesthetic theory continues to remain attached to presumptions and conventions originally generated in response to the shifting place of the visual arts in society – away from the décor of home and firmly into the hands of emergent royal academies. The problem with this inheritance is that theories attached to provisions intended for quite narrow and specific sets of artistic experiences have little capacity to get at the character of aesthetic experiences in arenas that do not emulate them – arenas such as architecture, performing arts and installations in the artworld; everyday life and the human body in the world beyond art; environments in general and natural environments, in particular, in the world beyond what is strictly or only human. This profound limitation has not mitigated the capacity of theories based on disinterestedness from flourishing nor has it lessened their dominance in philosophical aesthetics for most of the post-war period. This dominance, in Berleant's view, has further occluded alternative perspectives on aesthetics from gaining much of a foothold within professional discourse.

The fact of marginalization within mainstream aesthetic discourse has far less to do with professional politics than with problems generated by locating the aesthetic proper within the narrow and rigid limits derived from disinterestedness and distance. In essence, according to Berleant, aesthetic theory as practiced in the mainstream today is not tethered in a sturdy way to the empirical ground of aesthetic experience. Surveying samples of work from the range of Berleant's writings from 1964 through 2005, I find that his philosophical position yields a polite but firm indictment of our discipline. In *The Aesthetic Field* Berleant notes that a call for change "can serve a valuable purpose by instructing us on the handicaps that partial data inflict on aesthetic theory."<sup>[1]</sup> In *Art and Engagement* he observes that theory often drives which facts we pay attention to, but that "in the temporal order of things experience ultimately claims priority. Cognitive activities inevitably occur

within the dynamic context of life, and every theory must recognize its origins in these conditions....Yet the fascination with ideas can exercise an attraction that often casts its pall over evidence, especially empirical evidence...."[2] And in "The Aesthetics of Art and Nature" (reprinted in *The Aesthetics of Environment*), Berleant asks whether the premise of objectivity in aesthetics follows from appreciative experience or if insistence on its necessity is dictated by theoretical commonplaces or even complacency rather than by empirical perception.[3]

In response to the divorce between contemporary aesthetic theory and what he interprets as the empirical evidence of direct acquaintance, Berleant argues at both ends of his work's spectrum for various forms of corrective, including the early call for a "reformation in aesthetic theory that would be achieved by supplanting the priesthood of the surrogate theories by the Protestantism of direct communion with experience" and the more recent mandate in *Rethinking Aesthetics* for a "reconstruction of philosophy," one that promotes a healthy humility in the face of our failure to represent the world adequately in our theories, while also forging ahead with a "severe reappraisal of aesthetic dogma." [4] Indeed Berleant goes so far as to reject outright the radical and ultimately artificial separation of self and world in the primary stages of aesthetic experience, claiming that personal involvement and utility can enlarge our appreciation of the arts by recognizing their function in social roles.

Berleant's claims in *Rethinking Aesthetics* remain well-mannered but sound to my ears newly bold: disinterestedness distances the object of appreciation and circumscribes it within boundaries. Theory reflecting this dogma offers us false clarity and a deceptive order, one that simplifies the "complex contextual character of human experience." [5] In the larger picture, we have come to amalgamate valuation and e-valuation, substituting an obsessively critical focus in aesthetics for a pluralistic engagement with the ground of good theory. Berleant will have us renew our acquaintance with valuation, with the knowledge by acquaintance that gives rise to descendant theory. And his reasons for urging the reacquaintance emerge clearly over the course of his career. Berleant sees a duty to do so in service to a fundamentally more truthful articulation of aesthetic experience as it is and not as we would have it be for cognitive convenience.

## 2. Engagement

If disinterestedness can be understood as requiring the subject's distance, division, separation and isolation from the object of appreciation – a sort of mental map or cognitive embodiment of intentionality played out – then its aesthetic manifestations stress boundaries between appreciator and appreciated, an observational stance privileging sight and, to a lesser extent, aural attention when required. For sight and hearing are, *pace* Kant, those senses that detach themselves from the realm of appetitive sensation to yield a path to formal discernment and adjudication. The need for a theory of disinterestedness, with its attendant boundaries and circumscribing dissections, arose when art objects, displayed as discrete entities, were removed from the context of their generation, use and lifescape. Berleant's theory of engagement, conceived and developed over the course of several decades, returns us as fully embodied creatures to the lifescape of our being. While he does preserve the openness and spirit of the phenomenological tradition in outlook, Berleant nevertheless betrays an ethical fidelity to the empiricism of analytic philosophers, who value the inductive accumulation of evidence when deduction will not do. Plus, he writes much better prose than most practitioners cemented to either of these methods, and he lacks the myopia of thinking that only one method will do. His is an engagement built on pluralism and tolerance.

Pluralism of spirit and practice necessitates that Berleant resist a single, rigid or uniform standard to which all engaged experiences must adhere.[6] Yet, within and across the essays and book chapters of many years Berleant has successfully identified the qualitative features of engagement in experience. Specifically, engagement is characterized by sensory acuteness, perceptual unity, congruity of awareness, understanding and involvement, and a focus on immediacy and directness of the occasion.[7] Furthermore, relations among the objects or surfaces picked out by the aesthetically engaged perceiver do exist, but they are felt rather than cognized.[8]

This is perhaps the most important distinction between the environmental aesthetic orientation of Allen Carlson and that of Berleant: the way relations among features function in experience differs in the two theories. For Carlson relations are perceived as occurring within the natural order. For Berleant relations are perceived at the level of felt embodiment. Aesthetic experience occurs before the projection of conscious cognitive organization for Berleant and that is where he locates his theoretical emphasis. For Carlson the stress is firmly and self-consciously cognitive, and while time does not permit me to explore the larger implications of their comparative emphases

here, I would venture to claim that they are not so incompatible as they look if we account for time in the scale of appreciation. Berleant grasps the urgency of aesthetic magnetism — what often motivates us to care about things and places — and Carlson understands what we might do to articulate those things and places within the values and language of a particular system.

But as Berleant notes, experience takes priority in the development of a system, and thus directs his attention to a better method for gleaning what aesthetic experience might yield. Referring to aesthetic magnetism in the performing and musical arts, Berleant observes that these forms of expression insinuate themselves into our bodies.<sup>[9]</sup> (I think this phenomenon often hits one as a sensation near the bottom of the spine at particular moments in aesthetic engagement with performance.) Berleant sees that theories based on disinterestedness and distance cannot account for the intimacy and involvement we feel with art in such instances; they cannot reconcile actual aesthetic experience with the impulse to adjudicate. Furthermore, in *Rethinking Aesthetics* Berleant reveals an appealing prescience in grasping very early on in his writing the implications for emergent art forms that broke out of boundaries to become installations, performance pieces and environmental art. Disinterestedness as a necessary feature of aesthetic theory does appear to obscure and elide the nature of aesthetic engagement as it appears before we levy self-conscious judgments.

The engaged aesthetic, when moving beyond art into the natural world, rejects the observational landscape as the model for nature appreciation and instead embraces the fundamental and inviolable continuity of human beings and the natural world, stressing intimate perception of sensory qualities, immediately encountered, and in an attitude of reciprocity.<sup>[10]</sup> This, says Berleant in “Down the Garden Path,” is the aesthetic world, before it is deliberately colored by personal and cultural dimensions that necessarily enter all dimensions of human action. It is a world we know, he claims in “The World from the Water:” a world we know not by proposition or system but rather by engagement with the experiential properties of the constantly moving world.<sup>[11]</sup> It is important to stress that engagement comes bundled with two additional features in aesthetic experience: continuity, the connectedness of human beings to their environments, and in particular nature, and the humbling proportions of that connection; and assimilation to our environments and especially to nature both within and beyond the limits of our individuated selves. The natural world



especially surrounds and includes us; it is boundless in its reach and in this sense it is empirically impossible to distance ourselves from that which we most fundamentally are. Of course, conceptual distance, theoretical distance, is not at issue – Berleant remarks in several places that conceptual distance is not merely possible but even desirable in certain circumstances – but what is at issue is the concomitant denial in much of contemporary aesthetics of our evolutionary and genetic kinship to the ecological stage on which we perform our theoretical dance.

Thus in engagement we do not stand in judgment of the intentionally displaced object. By contrast, we perceive environments or experiences from the same plane. Engagement is not disqualified from being labeled as aesthetic but instead presages the very use of the term through the intense presentation of perceived, immediate, sensory experience. The residual boundaries of dualism, distance and disinterestedness, fade in engagement; engagement renounces the false separation of subject and world at the heart of all experience, rejecting as well the dichotomizing metaphysics on which it is based. Elegantly and steadily over the years, Berleant has traced the historical roots (both in classics and in enlightenment models) of the dichotomous distance between us and aesthetic objects/experiences. From this we have in our addiction to ideas let the critical frames of theory become the focus rather than the content of what is in them. And like most frames left untreated, unexamined, unlubricated, our theories have grown brittle and rigid, and crack under the atmospheric pressure of other, unbounded perspectives. Engagement as a principle alongside continuity and assimilation offers a less obfuscating, more honest account of what happens at the onset of aesthetic experience, when the immediacy of relations perceived in the world insinuates itself in felt memory.

### **3. Edges and continuity in nature: the participatory strain**

Let us return for a moment to the concept of the “boundary,” which appears steadily and with increasing frequency in Berleant’s work over the last several decades. As mentioned in the previous discussion, Berleant traces the influence of boundaries in aesthetic theory to the 18th century shift in painting and sculpture from décor to fine art display. Taking the idea into environmental aesthetics, Berleant, in “Down the Garden Path,” contrasts the observational landscape with the engaged landscape, where the observational approach preserves the impulse to frame everything discretely.<sup>[12]</sup> The landscape tradition based on visual judgment relies upon

enclosure — walls, fences, hedges and borders — in isolating a particular view. (This is especially evident in the period following Shaftesbury, when theories of Uvedale Price, for example, posited picturesque values of landscape on their possession of painterly virtues). The observational landscape also stresses linear perspectives and a static “picture” in fixing a sense of place. Berleant sets up an alternative by comparing this with the engaged landscape, which stresses continuity over isolated enclosure, diffuse sensory intimacy over linear perspectives, and reciprocity of relationship over the static determination of place. This notion of reciprocity does, I think, invite further reflection, and it is my hope that we might explore its meaning when literally taken outside its more familiar and conventional social context.

The comparison of the observational and engaged landscapes finds a parallel in Berleant’s consideration of coastal environments, where in “Aesthetics of the Coastal Environment” he sees a conceptual dichotomy between boundaries and edges. In this sphere boundary denotes the external limit of a space as considered from beyond that space’s border, a limit often expressed linearly as something different from us, from a vantage point on the shore.[13] Edge, by contrast, denotes the outside limit of a place as considered from within that place, a region expressed as a zone around our bodies and with which we maintain some form of continuity. Berleant does not deny that we experience the coast as both boundary and edge, as is often the case when making neat distinctions of opposition, the device of conceptual contrast functions heuristically here. But rather he introduces the contrast to illuminate the extent to which perspective, language and, most of all, theoretical standpoint function to suggest apparent incompatibilities of observational emphasis and attitude. Seeing coastal environments from within the plane of experience makes them part of the locus from which we think about them – such a perspective is continuous with the posture of engagement that locates the subject of aesthetic experience within the same plane as the “object” considered.

Berleant makes this continuity of self and environment more explicit in “The World from Water,” where he not only asserts that we know the fluid environment by engagement with it but also that the experience of water unveils more “insistently and dramatically” the properties of change and motion that characterize all natural places, even when changes and motions are not perceived directly by human beings.[14] So too does the world from the water appear as edged rather than circumscribed – indeed we cannot apprehend “bodies” of water



in their entirety unless we see them from a great height or they are rather small. Considering the world while on the water provides a more dynamic sense of ebb and flow, of our insufficient power to pin down or contain for long the aqueous pattern preferences of our environment. Many contemporary aesthetic theories of the natural environment rely far too heavily on landscape models when illustrating the robustness of their hypotheses. Berleant's consideration of the aquatic environment offers a fresh set of considerations while also suggesting the shortcoming of theories that cite environments where systemic stability appears readily – and perhaps as a misrepresentation- for case study use.

But the border on which we rely so desperately in such theories — the clear demarcations, the boundaries – are only possible because we have first engaged a place or environment fully enough to establish its perceptual features. At Berleant's stage of aesthetic engagement with the environment, boundaries fade.[15] He does not deny that we bring systems, values, and presumptions with us when we appreciate a place. In this his thinking has changed over the years from a phenomenologically mainline denial of cognitive input to a more nuanced and realistic empirical one. Rather he denies that principles of cognitive and cultural organization should predominate in attending to environments sensorily, as embodied coagulates of perception. Indeed, it seems to some philosophers that a preoccupation with aesthetic quality now shapes other practices more overtly than it once did. The aesthetician Wolfgang Iser has long heralded the aestheticization of Western capitalist society and we need not look far beyond home improvement programs, classes at the local houseware store or kamikaze makeovers by celebrity make-up artists to understand the basis of his assertion. Iser goes much further than the obvious, however, and painstakingly unwraps the dependence of science, epistemology, social policy and even legislation on the powers of metaphor, allusion and analogical thinking when framing their own propositions.[16]

I want to suggest that, just as Wolfgang Iser has illuminated an aesthetic dimension of science and epistemology, Berleant has begun to demonstrate an environmental dimension to aesthetic theory *per se*. In "The Aesthetics of Art and Nature," Berleant argues that aesthetic theory should be "naturalized" to overcome its imprisonment in the boundaries of disinterestedness.[17] Such boundaries include the implicit but unexamined belief about the necessity of distance that privileges disinterestedness as a principle of approach. Berleant believes that this model can be turned inside out if we

emphasize continuity and association with the very thing we claim to appreciate; if we use a sensorily immediate experience of nature as the model by which to rethink contemporary aesthetic theory. In other words, if Welsch sees aesthetics lurking at the heart of science, Berleant sees environmental continuity lurking at the heart of aesthetics. Welsch and Berleant are a set of nesting dolls! But here's the rub: continuity is a technical term in ecology and it is a supervenient property of complex ecosystems. One of the ways ecologists posit and test for ecological continuity (sometimes called 'operative connectivity') is by considering perspectives beyond those of technical science. In short, there is a nesting doll inside of Berleant, inside of environmental continuity, and his name is Dr. Rod Fujita.

Fujita is an ocean ecologist and Senior Scientist with Environmental Defense in Oakland, California. Trained at Woods Hole as a Marine Biologist, Fujita has played a key role in setting up marine reserves in the Florida Keys and the Channel Islands. In addition, he is the lead scientific developer of a GIS-based mapping program called OceanMap. OceanMap provides tools to solicit and chart the ocean-related observations and preferences of individuals outside of science in order to enlarge the scope of value attributed to particular coastal environments. Fujita and his colleagues have pioneered this method of solicitation and mapping of non-specialist perspectives in a political arena where perspectives of the public have normally been captured by and confined to the crude instrumentation of cost/benefit analyses and rational choice preference surveys of resource economists. Fujita calls the OceanMap method "participatory research" because non-specialist members of the community participate in identifying and characterizing features and values of particular coastal environments. Participatory research bridges what Fujita designates as an epistemological gap between scientific values and public values.[18]

This gap caused the failure in the California Legislature of previous attempts to establish a marine reserve in the Channel Islands, attempts that relied exclusively on panels of scientific experts heard behind closed doors. A third attempt on a smaller scale succeeded because it utilized non-scientific perspectives to augment and amplify persistent ecological interpretations of place value. According to Fujita, participatory research works because it identifies collaborative projects to bring different kinds of knowledge together and creates a system to elicit this knowledge. As he noted in a seminar at the University of Rhode Island's Coastal Institute, "Ecology has various ways to define connectivity and a lot of them make sense, scientifically

speaking. But you can have all the logic in the world and it won't work if people do not trust you.”[19] And why do people fail to trust attempts to establish environmental laws on the basis of science? Perhaps because science cannot give the fullest account of environmental value if that value is taken to include something other than systemic description. Participatory research begins by making people feel valued. As a process, this kind of research respects the non-scientific viewpoint and welcomes pluralism of perspective in mapping environmental features.

Consider, in this light, that in “The Aesthetics of Art and Nature” Berleant calls for a new mode of aesthetic theorizing, one that takes our relationship to nature as the model for art appreciation. Citing the full flowering of aesthetic engagement as “participatory aesthetics,” which he claims “transforms not only our appreciation of nature but the nature of our appreciation.”[20] I find an uncanny affinity between the theory of Berleant and the fieldwork of Fujita and his colleagues, in part because both rely upon what we philosophers think of as “knowledge by acquaintance” in understanding the breadth of their enterprise. Both also grasp the empirical significance of the conceptual distinction between projective, classificatory science and other modes of perception that doubtlessly rely on cognition but do not perceive the environment consciously through the lens of systematic thought.

Fujita argues that environmental action flows from the realization that all nature is interdependent, ourselves included. [21] Even so, most methods for framing environmental value fail to capture the main benefits of that interdependence because they do not identify and quantify the full range of values operative in the environmental sphere. Fujita worries that the diminution of religion and ritual in relation to local ecosystems has resulted in a corresponding diminution of community connection to natural places, and that our predominant attitude today reflects a belief in human use and domination. For Fujita, science-based resource management in the absence of respect for other modes of human value — he explicitly cites aesthetics several times – contributes to the problem.

Scientific understanding is limited, not omniscient, especially with regard to natural ecosystems – the planet’s life support systems. The arrogance of science-based natural resource management has been tempered by spectacular failures, such as the collapse of fisheries that once seemed inexhaustible.[22]

In developing OceanMap – which as Open Source software is encouraged for adaptation and use by other groups – Fujita

highlights the fact that scientific data collection in the deep ocean is often intermittent, expensive and crude, resulting in “dirty” data with visible patches of emptiness that require wide hypothesizing to fill. By contrast, fishermen working the same areas mapped by scientists spend weeks at a time in a zone and develop a keen eye for perceptual detail that the data can only suggest. The fishermen, claims Fujita, are always more accurate about catch potential and fecundity than are the scientists, and no wonder: they have the familiarity and the resources to observe patterns in empirical ways that abstract data analysis represents but does not narrate. OceanMap attempts to account for diverse ways of knowing not merely to mount a prudent approach to communicating environmental value to lawmakers but also in deference to what its creators perceive as an empirical fact: no one of us as an individual can take in everything there is to take in about an environment. By analogy, no perspective built on a limited frame of reference can articulate all features of a place. If nature is in us and we are in nature, then environmental policy must itself reject oversimplification in scientific terms to account for motivation and value in legislating change.

For Fujita, “the atomistic world of dualisms and dichotomies where we spend most of our time is an artifact, perhaps the legacy of our rapidly increasing power to control nature in the absence of a concomitant increase in wisdom.”[23] Echoing Berleant’s rejection of a “dichotomizing metaphysics,” Fujita and other scientific practitioners seem to grasp something here that we aestheticians have not. When a model of practice appears to under-represent or even mis-represent key aspects of the field of which it is a projection, you scrap the model and try to build a better one. If we are really listening to scientists in the field, we should be hearing something from them. Things in the world are interconnected. Old dualisms will not do.[24]

And yet, despite the theoretical persistence of dichotomies, Fujita remains optimistic because “the walls between humans and nature can dome down anytime, anywhere, if we stop actively trying to isolate ourselves from nature.”[25] Fujita actually left academic science to take up the mantle of environmental advocacy after he underwent a profound experience of continuity with nature on a coral reef monitoring exercise. Fujita is careful to point out that the continuity was felt and not derived or inferred. As a marine ecologist he understood, intellectually, the systemic manifestations of continuity. But he had failed to apprehend that continuity through his status as an embodied individual until he yielded the perspective of the scientist to that of the man. Just as

Berleant's environmental continuity lurks at the heart of aesthetics, Fujita's pluralism of value has invaded the heart of environmental continuity.

#### 4. Disdain

Pluralism. In Fujita we see that a scientist – and there are many others like him – need have no difficulty with the realm of the sensuous; no problem in questioning presumptions, in rejecting dualisms and dichotomies in favor of more representative models for charting the human relationship to nature. By contrast, Berleant takes note of aesthetic theory's suspicion of sensuous experience in his 1964 article "The Sensuous and the Sensual in Aesthetics," reprinted in *Rethinking Aesthetics*. Contemporary theory not only continues to bear the imprint of Shaftesburian boundary-making in its emphasis on distance and disinterestedness; it also carries the legacy of Kant in its rejection of bodily knowledge. Berleant thinks that because of suspicion of the body – the old somaphobia in philosophy! — aesthetic theory has unconsciously under-theorized and thus amalgamated the distinction between the sensuous and the sensual in understanding the full range of aesthetic experience. And in doing so, mainstream aesthetic practice has alienated itself from meaningful and multifarious possibilities for articulating aesthetic features of or value in nature.

Perhaps more disturbing than even this – an institutional stubbornness and collective risk aversion that clings pitifully to outmoded forms of aesthetic inquiry — is the disdain often present when one philosopher decides to interrogate the work or ideas of another. Fujita does not disdain sensorily immediate experience or find it intellectually inchoate, nor does he hesitate to speak of things like engagement, continuity, and pluralism in reference to natural value. Yet philosophers of art have frequently employed disdain as a device by which to insinuate the inadequacy of their peers or alternative approaches when taking on aesthetic problems. I am confident in claiming, however, that Berleant has never shown disdain to those who might oppose, reject, or even ridicule his theory of engagement. In fact he explicitly rejects disdain as a mode of collegial interaction, noting in *Rethinking Aesthetics* that he chooses not to undertake critical commentary on contemporary icons in the field of aesthetics.

In having the courage to engage the general thrust of others' theories rather than exhibit what I see as a collective compulsion to joust with celebrity axioms, Berleant gets on with the work of doing philosophy, and in time we will see its rewards. Already it is easy to detect the prescience of Berleant's



judgment in writing philosophically, decades ahead of current fashions, about body-knowledge, sensuous properties, nature, movies, and genre-breaking art forms. He also foreshadowed by about forty years the current blurring of the ideological boundaries between analytic and phenomenological methods in philosophy, though it may be fruitful to consider whether that noble refusal to reduce philosophical practice to hidebound method did in fact leave his work undervalued until recently. There is comfort, however, in seeing that Berleant was far ahead, as well, in understanding how a non-classificatory approach to the aesthetic experience of nature might enlarge rather than undermine the pragmatic effort to preserve the environment.

The sort of thing that Fujita and the creators of OceanMap are recording, and want to record more fully, is exactly where Berleant's work can lead us. Rod Fujita tells us that OceanMap needs better ways to mark out aesthetic features of the environment, that interviewer language to help research participants identify sensuous richness and relational patterns is required for better mapping of aesthetic value. Berleant, similarly, encourages us to "look for the special contribution that aesthetic value can make to the normative complexity that pervades and is inseparable from every region of the human realm."<sup>[26]</sup>

In making his own contribution Berleant has never failed to preserve a spirit of collegiality even when he is critiquing concepts like disinterestedness. In his essay "Beyond Disinterestedness" Berleant takes explicit steps to excise what we can from this otherwise over-determined principle, one long rejected by artists, a principle at best anachronistic and at worst false. But in sorting out disinterestedness Berleant is far more generous to his opponents than many of his opponents have ever been to him or to each other, for in paring distinterestedness down he nevertheless affirms that those who promote it doubtless were trying to do something valuable: to figure out what was distinctive and important about art and aesthetic experience.<sup>[27]</sup> In this spirit Berleant exemplifies the virtues of the very Social Aesthetics he extols in the essay of that name.<sup>[28]</sup> His graceful acceptance of methodological difference, direct criticism and even professional indifference in his own country have allowed him to engage in depersonalized perception of what he sees as genuine problems in aesthetic theory without descending into rancor; indeed these virtues liberated him to discover new approaches to what we take to be admissible empirical data – approaches involving the body and a

non-classificatory continuity with the natural world that were decades ahead of their time.

Attending to the experience of nature with the acuity of one who uses far more than his eyes, Berleant never neglects sensuousness as a palpable dimension of the human relationship to the environment, a sensuousness through which the interplay of prior knowledge and immediate communion reaches Reciprocity even as we strive for more resonant expressions of Continuity with what is non-human in this world. These are the guiding ideals of a social aesthetics that we might well adopt in professional philosophy, not merely to refine social manners but also, more compellingly, to re-envision ourselves as working together toward better evocations of and perhaps solutions to commonly perceived problems. And to be sure that we do indeed perceive the same problems, we might learn something from Berleant's notion of engagement, which requires more than anything else a posture of receptivity, of listening, of letting-in before giving-out. More observing, less jousting – okay, maybe a little jousting, in the name of good fun – but not without remembering the duty to call the facts as we see them and not as we would have them be.

This surely captures Berleant's philosophical comportment. He rejects distinterestedness not on the basis of logical flaws or metaphysical oversimplification (though he sees these, and points them out patiently) but on the basis of its being misleading as a tool for understanding aesthetic experience – as promoting a patent falsehood. In other words, Berleant refuses to lie, to use philosophical problems to indulge the appetite for cleverness and attainment when his talents require fidelity to a more stringent set of duties. In this Berleant emerges as unique – a genuine philosopher in a time of technicians; a gracious and generous colleague who gave years of his life to service in national and international organizations in an era that condones spirited self-promotion; a courageous and at times isolated voice for *auslander* topics and roguish alternative views in a profession where venal careerism will get you hired, published and reviewed more readily; a heart capacious enough to avoid both sycophancy and condescension to those above and below him in the professional pecking order; and a mind sufficiently longsighted to exhibit patience when the world of aesthetic theory was not yet ready to embrace or even understand the empirical validity of his work.

I should not say the world, for Berleant's work has always been valued appropriately beyond the borders of his own country, the United States. But then again, you know what they say about

prophets. That's surely what Berleant is, for the clarity of his foresight both in grasping the implications of new art forms and presaging a cutting edge method for conducting and modeling environmental research. Participatory aesthetics, participatory research. Berleant's own experiences as a hiker and waterman find complement in his expertise as a musician: in the end his grasp of aesthetic engagement across the art/nature divide is directly rooted in the very experience he promotes as prior to cognitive versions of environmental aesthetic theory. In "A Phenomenology of Musical Performance" Berleant, like Schopenhauer before him, sees what is instructive in musical experience, its relation to communal experience and to the structure of nature itself.[29] And like Schopenhauer, he was decades ahead of his time but not fully recognized as a prophet. Not recognized due to the dogma surrounding framing, boundaries and separation. This special volume, focusing as it does on the unparalleled contributions of Arnold Berleant to aesthetic theory, represents a decided reversal of that trend – and for this I am profoundly grateful.

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Published January 5, 2021.

Cite this article: Cheryl Foster, "Disinterestedness, Disdain and the Reception of Berleant's Major Idea," *Contemporary Aesthetics*, Special Volume 9 (2021) *Aesthetic Engagement and Sensibility: Reflections on Arnold Berleant's Work*, accessed date.

## Endnotes

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[1] Arnold Berleant, *The Aesthetic Field* (Springfield, Ill: CC Thomas Press, 1970), p. 9.

[2] Arnold Berleant, *Art and Engagement* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1993), p. 3.

- [3] Arnold Berleant, *Aesthetics of Environment* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1995), p. 79.
- [4] The first passage is from *Aesthetic Field*, p. 43, and the latter passages are from Arnold Berleant, *Rethinking Aesthetics: Rogue Essays on Aesthetics and the Arts* (Aldershot: Ashgate Press, 2004), p. 50.
- [5] Berleant, *Rethinking Aesthetics*, p. 16.
- [6] Berleant, *Aesthetics of Environment*, p. 35.
- [7] Arnold Berleant, "The Aesthetics of Art and Nature," in *The Aesthetics of Natural Environments*, eds. Allen Carlson and Arnold Berleant (Peterborough: Broadview Press, 2004), p. 83.
- [8] Berleant, *Aesthetic Field*, p. 113.
- [9] Berleant, "Aesthetics of Art and Nature," p. 78.
- [10] Berleant, *Aesthetics of Environment*, pp. 34-5.
- [11] Arnold Berleant, *Aesthetics and Environment: Variations on a Theme* (Aldershot: Ashgate Press, 2005), p. 57 and p. 64.
- [12] *Ibid.*, pp. 31-40.
- [13] *Ibid.*, pp. 49-55.
- [14] *Ibid.*, p. 64.
- [15] *Ibid.*, p. 152.
- [16] Berleant, *Rethinking Aesthetics*, p. 14.
- [17] Berleant, *Aesthetics of Environment*, pp. 160-75.
- [18] Rod Fujita, 2005. Seminar with the University of Rhode Island Coastal Institute IGERT Project, 10/19/1995.
- [19] Rod Fujita, 2005. Seminar with the University of Rhode Island Coastal Institute IGERT Project, 10/19/1995.
- [20] Berleant, *Aesthetics of Environment*, p. 84.
- [21] Rod Fujita, *Heal the Oceans* (Gabriola Island, BC, Canada: New Society Publishers, 2003), p. 5.
- [22] *Ibid.*, p. 179.
- [23] *Ibid.*, p. 196.
- [24] Fujita, 2005.
- [25] Fujita, *Heal the Oceans*, p. 197.
- [26] Berleant, *Rethinking Aesthetics.*, p. 18.
- [27] *Ibid.*, pp. 41-53.

[28] Berleant, *Aesthetics and Environment*, pp. 147-61.

[29] Berleant, *Rethinking Aesthetics.*, pp. 169-76.

Volume: Special Volume 9 (2021) | Author: Cheryl Foster

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ISSN 1932-8478