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## Arnold Berleant's Project of Post-Kantian Aesthetics

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Volume: Special Volume 9 (2021)

## Arnold Berleant's Project of Post-Kantian Aesthetics

Krystyna Wilkoszewska

### Abstract

Changes in art and culture toward the end of the twentieth century have become a challenge for aesthetics. Arnold Berleant is one of the forerunners of the revising of modern aesthetics, and has been from the very start of his research. He has especially examined the relationship of aesthetics to philosophy.

His critique resonates with views expressed by Nietzsche, Merleau-Ponty, James, and Dewey, in addition to ecological and feminist departures from Kantian aesthetics. He has criticized the category of disinterestedness and the aesthetics of separation, isolation, contemplation, and distance. This critical analysis is linked to overcoming the notion of experience in Western philosophy as based on the subject-object duality. Art, according to Berleant, provides a domain where experience relies on continuity and thus serves as a model for all experience.

### Key Words

aesthetics of engagement; aesthetic experience; art; ecology; environment; modern and post-modern aesthetics

### 1. Introduction

In 1999, a group of Cracovian aestheticians published a work, entitled *Reconsidering Aesthetics*, both in Polish and English language versions. In 2005, Arnold Berleant's book, *Re-thinking Aesthetics*, was published in the USA. These works have nothing in common. Ours presented considerations on the philosophical

aesthetic systems of the twentieth century, particularly in its first half, while the American aesthetician's work was a continuation and further development of his own project of aesthetics suitable for our days—an aesthetics of engagement.

Nevertheless, the similarity of the titles is meaningful, since it indicates the need for a rethinking of what aesthetics is as a domain of knowledge that has a centuries-long tradition, with its roots in antiquity that, at the same time and paradoxically, has formally existed as the modern philosophy of fine arts since the middle of the eighteenth century.

In the final decades of the past century, this modern formulation of aesthetics, strictly connected with the process of increasing the autonomy of art and the concept of Kantian disinterestedness of an aesthetic experience, started to evoke certain doubts, especially that it could no longer cope with the phenomena taking place in art itself or with the ongoing processes of aestheticization of various areas of everyday life. The rejection of the aesthetic character by art, on the one hand, and connecting this character with the nonartistic, on the other, presented a serious challenge that the aesthetics of the day had to face.

Today, numerous aestheticians work on developing a new formula of aesthetics, an aesthetics that will cope with the new, post-modern needs. It should be emphasized that Berleant was among the first to understand the importance of this challenge. Even in his early works, he entered the path of, as we can now say, “deconstruction” of the traditional aesthetics; that is, he first deconstructed what was given, and then built a new construction on those elements that could be used. Berleant's project from the area of meta-aesthetics seems to deserve particular attention, especially insofar as it is present, to a greater or lesser extent, in all his academic work comprising his subsequent books.

## **2. Aesthetics as philosophy of art**

Since modern aesthetics came about as the philosophy of fine arts, the project of building a new aesthetics has started with a critical look at both parts of the formula: the relations between aesthetics and philosophy and between aesthetics and art.

Let us take a closer look at the former relation. In his preface to the book, *Re-thinking Aesthetics*, the author reveals that it is a result of his forty-year-long work targeted at rejection of “the received wisdom of modern aesthetics.” While reading the book, however, we can see that he does not have in mind simple rejection, but a thorough re-thinking of the philosophical

foundations of aesthetics as knowledge about art. The author cites the example of physics from the first half of the twentieth century, for he thinks that the situation of present-day aesthetics resembles that of physics a few decades earlier. The thing is, that when Einstein's theory of relativity came into being, the Newtonian model was neither overthrown nor rejected; it was simply included in the broader frames of that theory. In this way, Newtonian physics discovered its own limitations regarding the range of its application. We are dealing with a similar situation in aesthetics: Construction of the new theory will not destroy the previous one, but reveal its weaknesses and indicate its limitations.

Berleant is skeptical about the relation between aesthetics and philosophy. In philosophy, the problems of aesthetics are treated peripherally and instrumentally, nearly always with a view of benefiting philosophy rather than aesthetics. There exists a basic disparity between the subject of aesthetics, that is, art in its unique manifestations in the form of works of art, and philosophy, which uses general and often a priori concepts. That is why it is necessary to reach the very foundations of this philosophical tradition on which aesthetics was built and to basically revise the assumptions of the philosophy that gave birth to modern aesthetics. Work understood in this way not only will be a criticism of the present aesthetic theory, but also a "profoundly philosophical act," thanks to which "re-thinking aesthetics may suggest new ways of doing philosophy."<sup>[1]</sup>

Therefore, in the critical considerations of philosophy conducted from the point of view of aesthetic theory, an aesthetician will support the efforts of those philosophers who, within their discipline, have entered the path of its reconstruction. Here, Berleant mentions Nietzsche, Merleau-Ponty, James, and Dewey, in addition to the newer trends like ecology and feminism. Their reflection on the foundations of philosophy includes criticism of Kant, recognized as the builder of the modern/Enlightenment image of the world. Berleant shares this conviction in full; in his opinion, Kant determined the shape of modern aesthetics in his philosophy. Thus, "If I can characterize the dominant tradition in aesthetics as Kantian, what we need to explore are the possibilities of a non-Kantian aesthetics or, better yet, a post-Kantian aesthetics, and to consider the characteristics such a radically different aesthetics might display."<sup>[2]</sup>

Thus, first of all, getting rid of the Kantian category of disinterestedness and all the consequences implied by this category will be a condition for the development of a "radically different aesthetics." The principle of disinterestedness that was

initiated by the British and fixed by Kant caused a unique kind of experience, called aesthetic, to be distinguished and put in opposition to other kinds of experience. The so-called aesthetic experience, disinterested and autotelic, fitted into the model of cognitive contemplation inherited from Aristotle and based on the principle of psychological distance. At the same time, works of art were granted a special status isolating them from the issues of life, and, since that moment, they were to be nothing more than a source of the specific, aesthetic pleasure attainable only in the disinterested contemplation of an object called a work of art.

Summarizing this model of aesthetics, Berleant describes it with the words: aesthetics of separation, isolation, contemplation, and distance. Let us notice that disinterestedness is strictly connected here with the way of experiencing art; Berleant's rejection of Kantian disinterestedness is based on a thorough and deep critical analysis of the concept of experience in Western philosophy. Here, we have to do with the intended effort aimed at liberating the concept of experience from the bonds of inherited properties.

Berleant cites several traditions of studies on the category of experience. Although sometimes they radically differ from one another, they are all similar in their treatment of experience as something subjective, that is, belonging to the subject. This regards both phenomenology and empiricism. In order to express what experience is, one should beware of the "omnipresent tendency" to treat experience as a "purely subjective phenomenon."<sup>[3]</sup> This is an extremely important statement, and ignoring it will probably make us unable to understand the author's path of thought. I am convinced that Berleant, whose doctoral dissertation discussed John Dewey, takes his idea of the necessary de-subjectifying of experience from the pragmatist tradition, though he is more likely to attribute this inspiration to M. Merleau-Ponty.

The basis for the conviction about the subjectivity of experience comes from the dualism separating the self from the world, that is, the subject from the object. With this assumption, an experience is "my" experience; it is something that takes place in my mind. This can be clearly seen in the way this is understood by British empiricism, which additionally reinforced the thesis about the cognitive nature of experience.

According to Berleant, this fixed tradition of understanding the structure of experience, which is based on dualism, need not be recognized as obvious. The thesis about the continuity of experience that combines its subjective and objective aspects

within the network of interrelations in which the experience takes place is an alternative to the dualism of empirical tradition. This idea of experience was developed by Bergson and Lipps, the author of the theory of *Einfühlung*, and representatives of certain trends in phenomenology like Dufrenne and Merleau-Ponty, in addition to the pragmatist Dewey, who based his whole philosophy of experience on the theory of continuity, as opposed to dualism. What is more, in the holistic conception of experience, Dewey and Merleau-Ponty took into account its somatic and sensual aspects, thanks to which the embodied subject and material object remain in the process of experience not at a distance from each other, but in a union conditioning their existence.

The experience of art is the most expressive example of subject-object unity and continuity. Like Dewey, Berleant believes that the experience of art is a model of all experience and, therefore, aesthetics provides knowledge that is important for philosophy. Here, we witness a specific role reversal: While aesthetics, treated as a peripheral area of philosophy, did not receive much from the core domain, aesthetics gives so much to philosophy, making it revise its concepts, that it can be recognized in the very heart of philosophical thought.

Thus, the aesthetic theory based on dualistic philosophy has brought us on the wrong path and, by the force of inertia, it blocks all our efforts to overcome it. The more so that, firstly, simple rejection of the philosophical principle of dualism is not enough, since it penetrates, usually implicitly, all kinds of reflection, and secondly, the traditional aesthetic theory based on dualism seemed to be quite relevant for art, which was supposed to justify its legitimacy.

Despite the above-mentioned difficulty in, at least, undermining the powerful but highly outdated structure of modern philosophical aesthetics, Berleant boldly enters the path of building a new model of aesthetics.

Our next step, after having followed the complex interrelations between aesthetics and philosophy, will be an analysis of relations between aesthetic theory and art.

### **3. Aesthetics and art**

When aesthetics is treated as a part of philosophy, aesthetic theory is developed without a reference to the works of art themselves and the experience of them, but refers to the sphere of concepts. Such a theory not so much explicates as rather distorts the problems issuing directly from art itself. According to Berleant, today the art itself demands that we revise the



relation between aesthetic theory and works of art, together with the context that co-creates and surrounds them.

At the very beginning of his path, Berleant outlined several directives that determined the basis of his research methodology. He realized that “fascination with concepts” may remove us from the proofs provided by experience. That is why he did not want to submit to such fascination, and his opinions are sometimes marked by anti-intellectualism. Distrust of pure concepts was powerfully expressed by American pragmatists, and Berleant seems to belong to this circle.[4] In the preface to the book, *Art and Engagement* (1991), covering the output of twenty years of considerations discussed in articles, fully aware of the importance of his enterprise, he wrote: “My argument does not pursue a primarily dialectical course, even though it rests on a general dialectical structure. Instead I weave a net of instances ...” and “This book offers, then, not so much an argument from text as an argument from art.”[5]

The conviction about the necessity of building aesthetics “from below” and not “from above” explicitly and implicitly penetrates all of Berleant’s works. In writing that he does not pursue a “dialectical course,” he meant, first of all, that an aesthete is supposed to not so much differentiate and specify concepts as indicate their mutual penetration or even unification. Especially when the subject matter of the study is art, we should not apply to it the rationally explicated concepts; it is better to trust imagination, intuition, and empathy and not to be afraid of ambiguity. On the other hand, the categories of traditional aesthetics are “formed in the interest of rationalization and universalizing knowledge, these vastly simplify the complex contextual character of human experience.”[6]

Instead of universal concepts, rather one should apply descriptions of particular cases, always examining the possibility and range of introducing generalizations without eliminating significant differences, and avoiding essential approaches that reduce multiplicity to a common basis, thus neglecting their individual and complex nature determined by the diverse context of their occurrence. It is also worthwhile, as Dewey taught us, to remember that a multitude of nouns is a hypostasis of concepts and attaining their actual meanings is connected with the unveiling of their adjectival or verbal roots. Our language reflects the vision of a stable, substantial world and not its dynamics and qualitative markings. It should be emphasized again that present-day art, transforming the objectified works into processes, clearly demands a change in the language.

Berleant is convinced that aesthetics should remain closer to art and the observation of processes occurring in it, and that it requires more empirical anchors and fewer a priori concepts. If this is so, let us ask what knowledge art provides aesthetics.

Advocates of a re-thinking of aesthetics watch, first of all, the latest art, since they believe that twentieth century art, particularly art created in its second part, entered the path of radical transformation; and, having assumed a new shape, it demands a new aesthetic theory. Nevertheless, the art of the last decades, according to Berleant, not only shows that traditional aesthetic categories no longer fit it but goes further, revealing the truth that modern aesthetics has been inadequate for older art, too, bringing out from art what was not essential "from the point of view" of art itself. Thus, the erroneous conviction that traditional aesthetics was tailored to the needs of traditional art, and that this art fully justified the existence of that aesthetic theory, should be rejected. The aesthetic theory developed on the basis of the latest art will allow for better understanding not only of the present-day art, but also that created in the past, revealing its essential aspects that were falsified, overlooked, or not perceived by the traditional theory.

The message that art directs towards aesthetics includes the following guidelines:

- The changes in the art of the past century were evoked by both new technologies and social transformations. They caused dethronement of art in its modern formula of autonomous fine arts and its slow assimilation in everyday life.
- The newest forms of art transform the rooted convictions about what art is and change the character of its experience. An aesthetic theory should primarily direct attention towards artistic practice and watch the changes that take place in it.
- The center of interest of aesthetics should include not so much art itself, especially that reduced to works of art isolated from life, as art in the abundance and diversity of its context.
- As art cannot be separated from life, so is it impossible to maintain the artificial division between the fine arts and the applied arts or the division into kinds of art; borders are replaced by continuity and continuation.
- The objective character of works of art (being an object) is incidental in art, as clearly shown by twentieth century art. De-objectification of art started with the disintegration of an object represented in art, especially in a painting, and it led to the image being replaced by an action (happening, performance) or by the semantic context (conceptual art).



- Art is not limited to the senses of sight and of hearing; the senses of contact also take part in its perception, and, therefore, they should be taken into account in aesthetic theory.
- Works of art are not unique because of their aesthetic value and neither do they require a specific or unique kind of experience, disinterested or aimless; a work of art recognized in its context requires not a contemplative perception but an engaged participation.

#### 4. Aesthetics of engagement and participation: the role of experience

One of the most important actions in the development of Berleant's project of aesthetics has been the transferring of emphasis from the work of art, especially as an object, to experience. Experience is the core aesthetic concept, closely connected with art and allowing for comprehension of the artistic and aesthetic processes.

The transfer of emphasis was executed as early as the author's first book, *The Aesthetic Field. A Phenomenology of Aesthetic Experience* (1970). The field mentioned in the title covers all the elements taking part in the aesthetic experience. *Art and Engagement*, published in 1991, develops the concept of aesthetic experience characterized in the categories of engagement and participation, in a conscious opposition to Kant, and in the belief that construction of a model of post-Kantian aesthetics was necessary. The author's statements show that he was fully aware of the essence and importance of his project. In the Preface, he wrote that aesthetic engagement undermines the whole tradition of aesthetics, since it indicates continuity instead of separation, acknowledges the importance of the context, and offers historical pluralism in place of objectivity.

A year later, Berleant published *The Aesthetics of Environment*, thanks to which he became a leading representative of environmental aesthetics and a spiritual teacher of the Scandinavian School successfully dealing with the so-called applied aesthetics.

Nevertheless, it seems that Berleant did not need this turn towards the ecological trend, with its basic category of environment, in order to develop a branch called environmental aesthetics. His goal, first of all, was to apply the new and reviving claims introduced by ecology as useful elements in construction of the new model of post-Kantian aesthetics. It is in this book that we can follow the gradual emergence of the aesthetics of engagement and participation.

In the chapter "Environment as an Aesthetics Paradigm," the author summarizes his earlier criticism of the category of disinterestedness and indicates architecture, which obviously evades this category. Let us quote three fragments here:

There is, first, the inadequacy for architecture of the theory of disinterestedness and the need for what I call an aesthetics of engagement. Second is the recognition that architecture is extended and fulfilled in environment. Environment then becomes the exemplification, indeed, the very paradigm of a new aesthetics, the aesthetics of engagement.[7]

The environment is not the object of a subjective act of contemplation: Environment is continuous with us, our very condition of living.[8]

By taking aesthetic experience of environment as the standard, we are led to abandon the aesthetics of disinterestedness in favor of an aesthetics of engagement.[9]

Berleant is rooted in the tradition of American pragmatism and draws important conclusions from the views of John Dewey, the author of the pragmatist philosophy of experience, claiming that experience is of nature as well as in nature. Experiencing, we are not distanced from the object of the experience but, together with it, are immersed in the common context. In ecology, this context is called the environment. The environment is not understood as something external to man, as space filled with objects, but rather as a complex network of relations, connections, and interdependencies, a set of physical, psychological, and social conditions. In this approach, the simple dichotomy of the subject-object relation reveals its inadequacy as too simple and schematic. "There is no outside. Nor is there an inner sanctum in which I can take refuge from inimical external forces. The perceiver (mind) is an aspect of the perceived (body) and conversely; person and environment are continuous." [10]

According to Berleant, contemporary ecology, which prefers holistic and contextual approaches, avoids the dualism of the subject-object relation and, thanks to this, is a fertile field of research for this aesthetics, in which the revised concept of experience is the focus.

Thus, the ecological idea of the environment allowed Berleant to equip the developed aesthetics with a concept of experience that was not based on the dual opposition of the subject and the object, but on the principle of unity and continuity, in which the subject and the object constitute a continuation, their mutual extension, two sides of the same coin. Experience understood in this way is not an experience belonging to the

subject because the latter is immersed in the experience, just like the object that, in the course of experience, loses its stiffness, becoming fluid and variable. When the dualist model is rejected, the contemplative experience and perception at a distance are no longer possible. The objective and subjective aspects of experience perforce remain in close contact with each other, in the dynamics of interaction.

In this situation, the eye and the ear, as the senses of distance and, at the same time, the only senses connected with the tradition of Western art, no longer fully reflect the character of the aesthetic experience. It is the broadened field of aisthesis, extended with the contact senses, that becomes an integral part of aesthetics of engagement and participation. The experience of art fully becomes a sensual experience, and the subject participates in this experience not only mentally but also corporeally.

The next book by Berleant, *Re-thinking Aesthetics* (2005), is the result of reflections from the previous decade. The issues of the somatic and sensual nature of the aesthetic experience are discussed in it in their full complexity, especially in the chapters, "The Sensuous and the Sensual in Aesthetics," and "Aesthetic Embodiment." Here, the distinction between sensuality connected with the mental senses of sight and hearing and sensuality connected with the bodily senses of contact is used as a methodological procedure, for it is aimed at the rejection of this very distinction: "characterizing an art on the basis of the sense through which it is perceived, as in calling music an aural art and painting a visual one, leads to a gross distortion of aesthetic experience."<sup>[11]</sup> Similar results are caused by negligence of the somatic aspect of the experience. Introducing the concept of "aesthetic embodiment," Berleant emphasizes the importance of the presence of the body and sensual concentration in the experience of art: "Aesthetic embodiment has powerful implications for aesthetic theory. It leads to a somatically grounded understanding of aesthetic experience. (...) Such an understanding constitutes genuine theoretical progress."<sup>[12]</sup>

This way of thinking is partly continued in *Sensibility and Sense: The Aesthetic Transformation of the Human World* (2010), in which the sensual experience gets incorporated into the broader concept of perception, embracing material, biological, social, and cultural forces as elements of the human world. Berleant understands the aesthetics of perception as a way of re-ordering the world in which we live.

## 5. Conclusion

The aesthetics of engagement and participation is an alternative to the modern aesthetics of disinterestedness and distance formulated mostly under the influence of Kant. The need for transformation mainly emerged from observation of the art of the latest decades, and the conceptual instruments were provided by the environmental ecology. The aesthetics of engagement is based on the concept of experience understood in a different way than that present in various trends and traditions of continental philosophy, but in accord with the works of the pragmatist John Dewey and the existential phenomenologist M. Merleau-Ponty. The conceptions of experience developed by them rejected Cartesian dualism and included the somatic and sensual aspects in the contact with art.

Numerous aestheticians of today realize that it is necessary to substitute the modern formula of aesthetics as philosophy of the fine arts with some new conception appropriate for the changes that are taking place both in art itself and in the surrounding world. Apart from Berleant, Wolfgang Iser has offered an advanced project of new aesthetics—"aesthetics beyond aesthetics." The scholars are in touch with each other and refer to each other's considerations; yet they come from different traditions and follow their own paths.

The aesthetics of engagement and participation, to which Berleant has devoted his life, is now a complete project, although it remains open to all new phenomena requiring reflection of an aesthetic nature.

Invited to write a paper for the *Bulletin of Polish Society of Aesthetics* in 2003 (issue 3), dealing with contemporary aesthetics, Berleant remarked: "I offer (...) the concept of aesthetics which I developed in my academic output. (...) My understanding of aesthetics was being formed for forty years becoming continually more perfect and distinct while I was developing and explaining its sources. In my opinion, the result can be regarded as a consciously post-Kantian aesthetics."

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## Endnotes

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[1] Arnold Berleant, *Re-thinking Aesthetics. Rogue Essays in Aesthetics and Arts* (Aldershot: Ashgate Publishing Company, 2004), p. 13.

[2] *Ibid.*, p. 15.

[3] Arnold Berleant, *Art and Engagement* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1991), p. 14.

[4] Today this is done explicitly by Richard Shusterman.

[5] Berleant, *Art and Engagement*, p. xiii.

[6] Berleant, *Re-thinking Aesthetics*, p. 16.

[7] Arnold Berleant, *The Aesthetics of Environment* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1992), p. 148.

[8] *Ibid.*, p. 156.

[9] *Ibid.*, p. 157.

[10] *Ibid.*, p. 4.

[11] Berleant, *Re-thinking Aesthetics*, p. 76.

[12] *Ibid.*, p. 88.

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