

Introduction to Arnold Berleant's Perspective

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"Aesthetic engagement thus pervades human experience and it accounts for both the appreciation of the arts and the appreciation of environment. Leading us beyond the arts, aesthetic engagement can also illuminate and enrich social relations. By recognizing the experience of aesthetic engagement, its presence can be valued and its influence encouraged" (Berleant, CSA, 2016).

Arnold Berleant's philosophy should be viewed as rather a broad and profound, engaged and subtle philosophical perspective, than a detailed theory. Within this perspective there is an elaborated theory of an aesthetic field, with detailed categories¹, but the overall perspective encompasses all human sense experience in the horizontal line, and social, ecological, political conditions and contexts of different kinds of experience in the vertical one. Berleant's view on aesthetics comes back to its core, which is aesthetical experience not limited to art.² Broadening the scope of aesthetics, Berleant shows its possible social and political role in contemporaneous reality. Berleant's aesthetics of engagement is argumentative and convincing, offering an analysis of aesthetic experience immersed in the everyday world, conditioned by the environment and having a reciprocal effect on the environment. The proposal is appealing and it gives space for development of analysis of various spheres of human life and experience. It inspires its use in particular research and the following issue of the "ESPES" journal is the evidence of the theoretical fruitfulness of Arnold Berleant's aesthetics of engagement.

Berleant's aesthetical approach allows one to investigate, very profoundly, social and cultural environments, giving way to a deep political critique of harmful environments in which people live. The direction, which Berleant gives, is oriented towards democratical aims. Berleant's claim that the main goal is human satisfaction and fulfillment is based on a kind of epicureism – I would say (not hedonism). However this what, for Epicurus, was a personal ideal becomes for Berleant a political, democratical goal.

¹ Berleant describes the aesthetic field as "*characterized by an actively perceiving human participant within and part of a sensory environment*" (Berleant 2013b, p. 50) and as exhibiting four prinipal factors: the appreciative factor, the focused factor, the creative factor and the performative factor (see also Berleant 1970).

² Wolfgang Welsch states barefacedly this what Berleant subtly conjectures that modern Western aesthetics was invented as an advertising agency for *public relations*, but it is not its neither necessary, nor essential feature – W. Welsch, *Estetyka poza estetyką*. O nową postać estetyki, transl. to Polish by K. Guczalska, ed. by K. Wilkoszewska, Cracow: Universitas 2005, [Title of the original: *Grenzaenge der Aesthetik*, 1996], p. 5-6.

Such a broad understanding of aesthetics is evidently opposed to the tradition of Kant's and Hume's aesthetical reflections on taste and beauty. Berleant confronts directly Kant's idea of subjective universality of the judgement on the beauty (Kant 1951, § 1) and Hume's belief that judgments, differnetly to sentiments, can be (should be) universal, because "[t]*he general principles of taste are uniform in human nature*" (Hume 1961, p.17). The ground from which Berleant steps out of is pragmatist, drawing from John's Dewey approach, oriented philosophically towards life itself, not to the problems inherent to the strictly theoretical sphere, and from William James' recognition of the limitation of the notion of independent objectivity.³ For this, Berleant argues that "aesthetics is itself grounded in experience" and criticizes both Kant and Hume (Berleant 2013b, pp. 42-44), but especially Kant, for subordinating the empirical data and the live experience to the logical desideratum of universality. This logical desideratum is the normative ideal, which cannot be attained, because for Berleant "*the requirement of universality is ungrounded and* [...] *it engenders a philosophical problem that is false and therefore insoluble*" (Berleant 2013b, p. 42).

The differences in our aesthetic judgements rests on the disparity between various experiences of beauty, which take place in different cultures, surroundings, times, places, in different moods, dispositions and interests, which cannot be universalized, but at most generalized. This, what for Hume and Kant was a disability, which needed to be trespassed from the rationalist standpoint, which is the variability of aesthetic judgement "[f]*rom an empirical standpoint* [it] *is no disability; it simply reflects the motile conditions of appreciative experience*" (Berleant 2013b, p. 50).

Opposing traditional philosophical aesthetics, Berleants ponders what philosophy can contribute to aesthetics, on which development in recent century pshychology and sociology had an important impact. This move shows how much Berleant's perspective is non-canonical and that his prior interest is human perceptory experience and not philosophy as such. The centrality of sense perception causes the reorientation of classical aesthetical views asking for "*perceptual experience as the basic constituent of appreciation, perceptual experience as underlying the creative proces* [...], *and perceptual experience as the basic constituent of appreciation, perceptual experience as underlying the creative proces* [...], *and perceptual experience of art criticism*" (Berleant 2013b, p. 46). From this point of view, he rejects the separation of that which is aesthetic from other kinds of human experience, pointing at the essentially aesthetic character of all human experience. This separation, as is well known, was sanctioned by the Kantian division of the realm of knowledge, morality and aesthetics, but pragmatism challenges it showing those values, which we experience are both, in their contexts and forms, simultaneously ethical, social and aesthetic (Berleant 2004). Insisting on the inclusion of a body and its senses into aesthetical experience and noticing moral ties binding art in its social context, Berleant introduces that which is aesthetic into the area of activities and practices from outside of the artistic realm.

Kant can be considered as Berleant's major oponent, because the proposal of aesthetics of engagement stays in obvious contradition with the Kantian idea of the disinterestedness of aesthetic judgement, which in Kant's view assures the possibility of achieving really universal judgements. Berleant then posits aesthetic evaluation and judgement in the light of aesthetics of engagement and not aesthetical disinterestedness, facing in the book *Re-thinking of Aesthetics: Rogue Essays on Aesthetics and the Arts* one by one traditional categories of: contemplation, distance, universality and disinterestedness, searching what can be preserved from them, becuase in their traditional form they do not conform to the reality of human aesthetical experience. Therefore, in place of contemplation, Berleant proposes orientation and focus on the attention, and openess of mind and receptivity (aceptance of this, what we experience)

³ "[T] he general law of perception, which is that, whilst part of what we perceive, comes through our senses from the object before us, another part (and it may be the larger part) always comes out of our own mind" (James 1892, p. 329)



(Berleant 2004, p. 62); in place of distance – a call to focus on the inherent qualities of objects and situation, without isolating the object of aesthetic appreciation or our own objectives and aims, if they are active in the current perception (Berleant 2004, p. 64); in place of universality – an empirical generalization; and in place of disinterestedness – an engagement, which is not just mental or somatic, but which demands an engagement of the whole body in an experience, which is both total and integral (Berleant 2004, p. 67). Such understanding of aesthetical experience is not searching for aesthetic values in the object, is not essentializing aesthetical qualities and is not treating art as an etity separate from other domains of human lives.

Arnold Berleant broadly explained, in his books, the idea of aesthetic engagement⁴ and applyed it to parcticular analysis of aesthetic perception of art, landscape, and urban environment. "Aesthetic engagement is the idea that appreciation in the arts, in nature, and, indeed in any aesthetic context, elicits an involvement that is participatory, engaging the appreciator's active contribution in the event" (Berleaant 2016a, p. 5).

Our participatory involvment is always an involvement in a certain environment, with which we are continuous, because of the air we breathe, the water we drink, the sounds we hear and so on. Then the idea of aesthetical engagement guides Berleant to the aesthetics of the environment, because appreciating perceptual qualities of the environment demands physical engagement (Berleant 2014, p. 66). The pragmatist view opposes dualism of traditional philosophy and perceives the world holistically, binding together body and mind, knowledge and practice, nature and culture, human and environment. The idea of an environment offers the broadest grasp on the living perceptual human experience in everyday life and the idea of aesthetic engagement allows one to focus on various forms of human involvement in the environment. Then, Berleant writes that "the engagement with the object of art or with the envoronment becomes an ecological event or an ecological cultural phenomena" (Berleant 2011, pp. 135-136).

Berleant explicitly acknowledges this line of development of his thinking, from critique of traditional Kantian aesthetics contained in *Re-thinking Aesthetics* (2004) to special concern paid to the environment in *Aesthetics and Environment* (2005). The environment – as understood by Berleant – can also be theoretized with the use of phenomenologist categories originated by Maurice Merlea-Ponty "as the flesh of the world, as well as the <chiasm>, which denotes the reciprocity that permeates human relations of self, other living beings, and the features and objects of the natural world" (Berleant 2013b, p. 48). I agree with the reference to Merleau-Ponty identifying continuities between the perceiver and the perceived world, because they express embeddedness of humans in the world so important from Berleant's point of view. They also give room for analysis of different forms of human perceptual, sensual engagement with the environment.

"People are embedded in their world, their life-world, to use an important term from phenomenology. A constant exchange takes place between organism and environment, and these are so intimately bound up with each other that our conceptual discriminations serve only heuristic purposes and often mislead us. For instance, we readily speak of an interaction of person and object or person and place, but the term <interaction> presupposes an initial division, which is then bridged. Yet in the most basic sense of existence, there is no separation but rather a fusion of things usually thought of as discrete entities, such as body and consciousness, culture and organism, inner thought and an external world. Therefore we may understand the sitting of

⁴ Particulary in: A. Berleant, Art and Engagement, but also in: The Aesthetics of the Environment (1992), Living in the Landscape: Toward an Aesthetics of Environment (1997), Re-thinking Aesthetics: Rogue Essays on Aesthetics and the Arts (2004), Aesthetics and Environment: Variations on a Theme (2005), Sensibility and Sense: The Aesthetic Transformation of the Human World (2010) and in others.

human life as an integration of a person and her or his environment. As we have seen, they also include somatic, psychological, historical, and cultural conditions. Environment becomes the matrix of all such forces. As an integral part of an environmental field, we both shape and are formed by the multitude of forces that produce the experimential qualities of the universe we inhabit. These qualities constitute the perceptual domain in which we engage in aesthetic experience" (Berleant 2005, p. 115).

Environment is not just a nature opposed to culture, it is not a recreational space separated from other domains of everyday life, but it is our dynamic surroundings, in which we are immeresed and with which we permeate mutually. It has a profound influence on human health, well-being, possibilities of fullfilment and mood - the influence not limited to individual persons counted singularly, but embracing human communities and societies in their live complexities. The state of the environment and the set of perceptual qualities sensed by humans in it has, then, together aesthetic, social and political effects. Aesthetics is, for Berleant, the theory of sensibility (Berleant 2013a, p. 329) and that which is sensible, perceptual in a wide sense, is aesthetic par excellence. Aesthetic perception is not just personal experience, but it has a social dimension, too. When we engage ourselves in art or in the environment with our knowledge, beliefs, opinions and attitudes - which have a social and cultural dimension and historical roots - they direct our attention, open or close us for that which is taking place, prepare us for experience or disturb it (Berleant 2014, p. 67). This knowledge, these beliefs and opinions do not enjoy universal value but are constructed and reconstructed in a broader context of socially dominating practices of understanding the world, perceiving art in museums, galleries and concert halls, enjoying qualities of the natural and urban environment. "Our social dimension is inscribed in our aesthetic experience of both art and environment [...] [because] the environment as integrated whole is the unity of people and place, connected with each other with various relationships and dependences, and affecting one another" (Berleant 2014, p. 68).

Recognition of cultural and historical variables influencing aesthetic experiences of people in different places in the world and in different times, which serves as the naturalistic basis for rejecting the idea of the universality of aesthetic judgement, does not lead Berleant to utmost relativism. He recognizes the existence of perceptual common ground, i.e. the perceptual ground of all experience. Perceptual common ground "*do[es] not have recourse to a <state of nature>;* [and its'] *claim does not rely on a constructed history*" (Berleant 2013a, p. 325), but it relies on human perceptual condition and on simple human presence, resting on the biological order. The idea of perceptual commons allows one to build on the vision of aesthetic polity, oriented towards democratical aims – not first of all in the legislatory space, but from the point of view of lived human experience. The most valuable objective for Berleant is human satisfaction and fulfillment, so that the deliberate consideration of aesthetic qualities of environment has important social and political aspects. Berleant states firmly that "*perceptual equality preceeds and underwrites political equality*" (Berleant 2013a, p. 326) and conjectures that aesthetic critique of the social environment and the new aesthetics (of engagement) can promote new patterns of life and new models of culture, which would provide more perceptual equality and justice for all (Berleant 2013a, p. 327).

Berleant's perspectives on politics of aesthetics are very different from the famous view propsed by Jacques Rancière staying in the line of French post-structuralism. For Rancière, the division of sensibility has a political implication imposing the struture of that which can be seen and represented in the social space (Rancière 2007), while for Berleant, sensibility has a strong somatic character not limited to just visual properities and is the basis for the political claim for perceptual equality. Aesthetic judgement occupied with experienced aesthetic qualities is appreciative and aesthetic features are not possible to be



grasped within the contemplative approach, but only in the engaged one, both with art⁵, and with environment (Berleant 2014, p. 73). This move gives way to a normative hold on aeshetical values, because air pollution, sound pollution, land (the urban landscape, too) pollution are negative conditions of the aesthetic experience of the environment.

Berleant moves away from art, building up an aesthtic model for crtical analysis of human environment, the model focused on aesthetic properties of the environemnt. This model he applies to contemporary cultural, technological, social ecological conditions in the world, reflecting the specifically developed consumerist environment creating loud, polluted cites and areas of exclusion. In the book *Sensibility and Senses*, he broadly describes the so-called "negative everyday aesthetics", which refers to daily perception of negative aesthetically, and harmful for the health or morally elements of the environment (Berleant 2011, p. 171-189). The situation (environment, landscape or the object of art) has a aesthetically negative value "when the aesthetic situation has got a prevailing negative character, dominating over the positivity, for example when it is banal, shallow perceptually, offensive, humilating or even harmfull, becuase the value defines here the character of the whole experience" (Berleant 2011, p. 173).

Then, the negative character is not only affecting a psychological level, because perceptual experience involves the whole human organism in its cultural modalities and biological properties. Sense perception is an ability developed within certain historical, cultural and material conditions, which are not universal but shared by many people living in these conditions. Sharing of these common conditions and enjoying common abilities (which are never the same) causes that the aesthetic judgement of aesthetic negativity gains a normative value and can be used to criticize various forms of violence against human sensibility (Berleant 2011, p. 178). Berleant consequently shows the mutual permeation of aesthetic and moral values, presenting how aesthetic critique can have social and political goals, when it turns to visual and sound pollution, crowded and oppresive life and work space, advertisments and media, and so on. Discovering negative aesthetically values can give an impulse for rejecting practices, to which there are serious moral objections (Berleant 2011, p. 186).

Berleant's aesthetics is then connecting the human and his/her environment, aesthetics with morality, individuality and social, communal perspective, what characterizes pragmatist aesthetics. He shows and analyses human aesthetical engagement in his/her contemporary life-world, which embraces art, but which is not limited to it. This understanding gives great power to aesthetics, which oriented that way becomes not mere artistic critique, but rises up to the critique of contemporaneus civilization.

Arguments for such a perspective are developed by Arnold Berleant himself in the article: *Objects into Persons: The Way to Social Aesthetics*, where he shows the path leading to social aesthetics. The redefinition – he proposes – of traditional aesthetics approaching objects in a cognitive way, towards analyses of a complex aesthetic field, in which different forces are in power, is intriguing. It starts with a discussion of Kant's idea of disinterestedness, and ends with invitation to transform human relations in an aesthetical way. "A social aesthetic may characterize personal relationships, vocational situations, educational, therapeutic, and creative activities and, ideally, political processes. Because human life is thoroughly and pervasively social, social aesthetics offers a basis for a humane world view, one that both redeems our humanity and guides us in fulfilling it" (Berleant, Objects into Persons: The Way to Social Aesthetics, this volume).

⁵ "Paintings require a beholder, and the mode of the viewer's bodily perception, multi-sensory and kinesthetic, is the pivotal factor in the experience of engagement" (Berleant 1993, p. 73).

A deep, sensitive and wise analysis of human environment focused on an appreciative engaged experience is the theme of an article following Berleant's own words. Yuriko Saito refers to Berleant's social aesthetics and to the related with it the concept of negative aesthetics as the practical theory on human experience oriented towards human well being. The author also shows and analyses the deep connection between Arnold Berleant's social aesthetics and the Japanese approach towards aesthetics, art practices and everyday interactions, because in both attitudes similar understanding predominate on the world and the human. The fact that the human is not opposing the world – according to subject-object divide – but is immersed in the environment is recognized by Berleant and is present in the core of the Japanese understanding of the human existence as characterized by "betweenness", being inextricably intertwined with the entire cosmos (Saito, *The Ethical Dimensions of Aesthetic Engagement*, this volume).

These reflections related to Japanese tradition are, in a way continued, in the discussion between Berleant's aesthetics of environment and contemporarily developed ecoaesthetics, presented by Cheng Xiangzhan (Xiangzhan, Some Critical Reflections on Berleantian Critique of Kantian Aesthetics from the Perspective of Ecoaesthetics, this volume). Since the 1990's, when Berleant visited top Chinese academic institutes such as Zhejiang University and Shandong University (two books: The Aesthetics of Environment (1992) and Living in the Landscape: Toward an Aesthetics of Environment (1997), were translated into Chinese and published in China in 2006), he was "taken as the main theoretical resource for the construction of Chinese ecoaesthetics" (Xiangzhan, Some Critical Reflections on Berleantian Critique of Kantian Aesthetics from the Perspective of Ecoaesthetics, this volume). Representing another side in these matters, Xiangzhan develops a sympathetic critique of Berleant's critique of Kant's concept of disinterestedness, showing the possibility of using a transcendental Kantian approach for the construction of eco-aesthetics, and discusses the ways of understanding environment in close affinity with Berleant's sense.

The validity and significance of Berleant's view for the far-Asian one is an interesting reapproachment of Western and Eastern thought. However, there are more affinities that may be traced with reflection by the American philosopher. One of them is brought up by Madalina Diaconu, who offers an interesting insight into the comparison of Hartmut Rosa's theory of modernity, brought up on the Frankfurt School, with Berleant's perspective on social, environmental, cultural aesthetics, charged with pragmatism and phenomenology (Diaconu, *Engagement and resonance: two ways out from disinterestedness and alienation*, this volume). In doing so, Diaconu contributes to the research on finding analogies between different theoretical, philosophical traditions, not contenting oneself in finding apparent differences, but going deep into essential perspectives on human life and experiences expressed in different words.

Another bridge is construed by Katarzyna Nawrocka, who uses Arnold Berleant's urban metaphors to show movement in cities as choreographed by architects and urbanists. Applying aesthetics of engagement to contemporary dance strategies and design practices in architecture and urban planning Nawrocka develops a metaphor of urban mobility as choreographed and experienced by living bodies, creating a greater whole. Different kinds of cities evoke different kinds of movement, different "dances". Described by Berleant, metaphors of the forest city, garden city, asphalt jungle, and wilderness combined with the vision of urban mobility as a dance, in which many individuals participate, and of a city as a stage for that dance, enables – according to Nawrocka – the deeper analysis of the social and economic dimension of life in different kinds of cities (Nawrocka, *Architecture of Movement*, this volume).

The social face of Berleant's aesthetics – developed in the intercultural and interdisciplinary way by Saito, Diaconu and by Nawrocka – turns towards analysis of human life conditions, well being and urban



environment. Besides it does not overlook the experience of art and art practice. The insightful article by Benno Hinkes expounds how an environmental approach to aesthetics in the theory can support research in and on contemporary art practice, especially working with instalations, as in case of Bruce Nauman and Ilya Kabakov. He argues that the transformations in art that took place in 20th century are parallel to the transformations in philosophy and art theory, and notices that cooperation between environmental theory and environmental art practice could lead to fruitful research (Hinkes, *Installation Art and Aesthetics*, this volume).

While Hinkes recommends an engaged environmental approach for the understanding of contemporary art and art practice, Thomas Leddy enters into personal philosophical dialogue with Arnold Berleant, concerning Berleant's discarded ideas of disinterestedness, contemplation, distance in analyses of aesthetic experience and experience of art. Leddy agrees with Berleant about the importance of engagement, the necessity of its recognition after being neglected in modern aesthetic reflection, but he advocates for an understanding of aesthetic experience as formed with engaged, contextual sensual perception AND with contemplative, disinterested attention that gives rise to "free-play of imagination" and allows for the the object to be noticed (the situation, the view, the person, etc.) suspending practical interest. Therefore, Leddy wishes to complement Berleant's view in a return to Kantian aesthetics, though devoid of transcendentalism (Leddy, *A Dialectical Approach to Berleant's Concept of Engagement*, in this volume). However he also recognizes that Berleant's writings on aesthetics are practically engaged and that they are 'political' in a way on stressing the side overseen in modern times. Berleant not only proposes aesthetics of engagement, but he personally, as an aesthetician and philosopher, is engaged in moral character of human being in the world.

I have a similar sense noticing that the American thinker does not undermine the importance of language and culture, although they are essential for the view he hold of human beings in the world. It is just something he does not discuss, because he wishes to present a certain perspective, to open us to attentive perception of our environment and critical thinking on its condition and values. His perspective is calling out, inspiratory, inviting metaphors and opening paths for individual development. The views he opens up fascinate many theorists on various continents. I wish to contribute to that dialogue with this collection of articles discussing Arnold Berleant's ideas of aesthtetic engagement, social aesthetics, negative aesthetics, and environmental aesthetics.

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