The Ethical Dimensions of Aesthetic Engagement

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Abstract: This paper explores the ethical dimensions of aesthetic engagement, the central theme of Arnold Berleant's aesthetics. His recent works on social aesthetics and negative aesthetics explicitly argue for the inseparability of aesthetics from the rest of life, in particular ethical concerns. Aesthetic engagement requires overcoming the subject-object divide and adopting an attitude of open-mindedness, responsiveness, reciprocity, and collaboration, as well as the willingness and readiness to expose negative aesthetics for what it is. These requirements characterize not only the nature of aesthetic experience but also, perhaps more fundamentally, our mode of being in the world and the accompanying ethical responsibility. Among the present paper's principal aims is to show how this view of aesthetic and ethical stance is also shared by the important aspects of the Japanese worldview, aesthetics, and artistic practices.

Keywords: Aesthetic engagement; Arnold Berleant; Japanese aesthetics; negative aesthetics; social aesthetics.

Introduction

In recent years, aesthetics has become liberated from the focus on fine arts that dominated its Anglo-American discourse throughout the past century. Starting with nature aesthetics and more broadly environmental aesthetics, aesthetics as a discourse has been steadily expanding its scope by including popular arts, sports, body appearance, consumer aesthetics, and everyday activities. While this expansion is often considered to be a new development, it is more accurate to characterize it as restoring the original meaning of aesthetics: a study of sensory perception.

Throughout his career in aesthetics spanning several decades, Arnold Berleant has been arguing for such a restoration of aesthetics with the notion of aesthetic engagement. Recent challenges to the art-focused aesthetics and its assumptions and implications can be interpreted as variations on his notion of aesthetic engagement. I, for one, owe my work on everyday aesthetics to his trailblazing oeuvre.

 My particular interest here is to explore aesthetic engagement as an ethical practice. Although initially proposed as a characterization of aesthetic experience, Berleant's notion of aesthetic engagement has always been ethically-grounded, and his recent works on social aesthetics and negative aesthetics make this explicit. I find it illuminating to consider the ethical dimensions of aesthetic engagement along with some aspects of the Japanese worldview and aesthetics. There are remarkable commonalities and resonances between them that are not mere coincidence. Specifically, both locate aesthetics in its intimate, intricate, and intertwining relationship with other life concerns, namely moral, social, and existential. I hope to shed some light on their shared insights.

Overcoming the Subject-Object Divide

One of the dominant frameworks governing the Western philosophical tradition is the dichotomy and separation between a subject and an object. The reach of this dualistic framework has been deep and

extensive, including aesthetics. Despite the controversies regarding the ontological status of music, literature, and contemporary art consisting of happenings, events, and people's participation, all of which lack material existence, the persistent paradigm of aesthetics is that there is an object distinguishable and separable from an experiencing agent and that the subject takes in whatever is provided by the object. As a result, events, situations, and activities that one performs, that is, those aspects of our life experiences that are not directed toward a clearly defined or framed object, become a kind of 'inconvenient truth' and they are made to disappear from the aesthetic radar. Furthermore, this model of aesthetics based upon an independent object-hood tends to direct its inquiry toward making a judgment regarding beauty or artistic value, instead of savoring the process of experience.

In contrast, following John Dewey, Berleant characterizes aesthetic experience as a dynamic process that emerges from the collaboration between the object and the subject facilitated by reciprocal responsiveness.[1] It is never a one-way street; that is, it is neither object-driven nor subject-driven. Instead, the process is like a dialogue between them, the object speaking to the subject and the subject in turn responding to the object. As an experiencing agent, I approach the object with an open mind, respond to what the object offers me with the most effective mode of what Paul Ziff calls "aspection" (1962, p. 75), sometimes scrutinizing details while at other times taking a sweeping look, or sometimes letting the whole body become engulfed by a swelling musical passage while at other times keeping up with a regular rhythm of a meticulously performed tune. I also activate my imagination and fuse it with the sensory experience, thereby creating a rich layer of associations. While making a judgment of the aesthetic value of an object is not anathema to aesthetic engagement, the emphasis is on the experience which may or may not lead to a judgment.

One example of aesthetics' inconvenient truth is atmosphere, which is gaining more attention today. Though atmosphere is constituted by identifiable items, such as a spatial environment and its ingredients, including non-material factors like sound, light, smell, and temperature, as well as human interactions at times, an atmosphere itself lacks object-hood. It is sensed and felt by an experiencing agent who unifies various ingredients into a harmonious whole. As such, atmosphere effectively illustrates aesthetic engagement by emphasizing the interdependence of all the elements and parties involved.

Advocating atmosphere as the fundamental aesthetic concept, Gernot Böhme claims:

> "[…] *atmospheres are neither something objective, that is qualities possessed by things, and yet they are something thinglike, belonging to the thing in that things articulate their presence through qualities.* […] *Nor are atmospheres something subjective* […] *and yet they are subjectlike, belong to subjects in that they are sensed in bodily presence by human beings and this sensing is at the same time a bodily state of being of subjects in space*" (Böhme 1993, p.122).

In addition to overcoming the subject-object dichotomy underlying the conventional art-centered aesthetics, the aesthetic experience of atmosphere is directed more toward savoring than judging. We simply envelop ourselves in a particular atmosphere. Hence, Böhme observes that "*the old aesthetics is essentially a judgmental aesthetics, that is, it is concerned not so much with experience, especially sensuous experience* […] *as with judgments, discussion, conversation*" (Böhme 1993, p. 114).

What is particularly noteworthy for my purpose is that Böhme compares atmosphere, "the prototypical 'between'- phenomenon," to the Japanese notion of inbetween, "aidagara" (Böhme 1998, p. 112). Indeed,

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[1] Because of the sheer volume of passages in Berleant's oeuvre that informs my discussion, in this paper I shall present his view in my own words rather than providing many quoted passages.

the Japanese worldview, particularly reflecting Buddhism, characterizes reality as consisting of relationships rather than discrete individual beings and objects. Robert Carter summarizes the Japanese worldview as a "*declaration of interdependence*," that is, "*a recognition that we are not only inextricably intertwined with others but with the entire cosmos*" (Carter 2008, p. 5). The best illustration reflective of this worldview is the Japanese term for human beings, 'ningen' 人間. The first character designates "human" and the second one "between," indicating that an individual is defined by the relationship she holds with others. The Japanese ontology, therefore, does not subscribe to the Western dichotomy of the subject and the object. Tetsurō Watsuji, one of the most influential Japanese thinkers of the twentieth century, refers to human existence as "betweenness," ('aidagara' as referenced by Böhme), leading one commentator to remark that the precise translation of 'ningen'人間 should be "human being in betweenness" (Inutsuka 2017, p. 103).

This de-emphasis (looked at from the Western viewpoint) of an independently existing self is further reflected in the Japanese language usage. As Augustin Berque points out, it is customary for a well-formed Japanese sentence to lack a subject pronoun, "I," that is required in English and many European languages. For example, instead of saying "I am going," it is more common and natural to say "going." The (sometimes exclusive) focus on the predicate indicates the primacy of what Berque calls "*a scene*" or "*a particular set of circumstances*" (Berque 2017, p. 16).

The Japanese aesthetic tradition reflects this primacy of scenes, circumstances, or atmospheres in its preoccupation with a seasonal atmosphere, no doubt due to Japan's distinct four seasons comprised of meteorological phenomena, plants, and events.[2] For example, *Kokinshū* 古今集, the first court-sponsored anthology of poems compiled in 905, is organized according to seasons. *The Pillow Book* 枕草子, a collection of observations and essays written by a court lady in the eleventh century, is full of sensitive observations of seasons, with its well-known opening section that extols the best of each season consisting of the time of the day, natural creatures and phenomena, people's activities, and objects.[3] Both are classics and their influence on subsequent Japanese literature and aesthetic sensibility in general is immeasurable.

This long-held aesthetic sensibility regarding atmosphere is still alive and well in Japan. In his discussion of the Japanese sense of beauty, Shūji Takashina comments on agricultural research devoted to people's attitude toward non-human animals. In response to the question about which is the most beautiful non-human animal, American respondents immediately chose horse, lion, and so on, while the same question puzzled Japanese respondents. What they finally came up with was an answer like: "*little birds scattering and flying against the sky lit with sunset*" (Takashina 2015, p. 164, my translation). Commenting on this anecdote, Takashina discusses how the Japanese aesthetic sensibility is directed toward 'jōkyō' 状況 (variously translated as the state of things or affairs, conditions, situations, circumstances) rather than 'jittai' 実体 (translated as substance, subject, entity). That is, the aesthetic qualities of birds cannot be determined apart from the relationship with their surroundings.[4]

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[2] Haruo Shirane points out, however, that the idea of a seasonal order also resulted from the Heian court's (794-1185) strategy for expressing its power by giving an organizational order to nature (Shirane 2012).

[3] See Sei Shōnagon's (1982) *The Pillow Book*.

[4] It is interesting to note that Kenya Hara, one of today's leading designers in Japan, puts priority on creating 'koto' (variously translated as affairs, circumstances, events, occurrences) over 'mono' (objects, things). He derives this idea from medieval Japanese art practices, the subject discussed in the next section (see Hara 2012, p. 74). A good empirical study regarding the appreciation of atmospheres can be found in Miyahara and Fujisaka 2012 and its English summary (Miyahara and Fujisaka 2014). I should also note that a similar aesthetics was proposed by

We may call this aesthetic sensibility 'situational aesthetics,' and we can interpret aesthetic engagement similarly. A situation arises when I offer myself to open-mindedly accepting whatever various players are approaching me with, and I weave them into a unifying theme that casts a color over them. This is decidedly a creative act on my part, but my experience is not a pure construct of mine, either; it is created in response to what I accept from others. As Berleant puts it, "*humans' relation to things is not a relation between discrete and self-sufficient entities. On the contrary, just as people impose themselves on things, so, too, do things exercise an influence on people*" (Berleant 2012, p. 85).

In light of the Japanese notion of interdependence, I suggest that aesthetic engagement characterizes not only an aesthetic experience but also, and perhaps more important, the authentic mode of being in the world. That is, one's self is not a monad-like isolated center of the world but exists and is defined only in its interaction with others. Herein lies the first existential dimension of aesthetic engagement: the interdependent relationship between the self and the other.

Transcendence of Self

There is a further ethical implication of aesthetic engagement understood as our authentic mode of existence in this world. As an experiencing agent, I have to make an effort to facilitate successful aesthetic engagement. Specifically, it starts with suspending the world familiar to me and transcending my own horizon. I am willing to meet the other, whether a work of art or another person, on its own terms, rather than bringing in and imposing my preconceived idea. I approach the other as "Thou" rather than as "It." I actively render myself receptive to what the other offers. This open-mindedness paves the way for a reciprocal exchange and a collaborative effort to bring about an aesthetic experience. This process often enables me to discover new connections and a vision of the world different from mine. This attitude toward aesthetic engagement takes an ethical stance and its importance is recognized and urged by many thinkers and practitioners from different disciplines. What is noteworthy for my discussion here is that they all point to aesthetic experience as the most effective means of cultivating this ethical mode of being.

Zen Buddhism characterizes this ethical stance as a necessary preparation for enlightenment, describing it as overcoming, forgetting, or transcending one's self.[5] The favored vehicle for Zen discipline is artistic practice because it aims not so much at an acquisition of skills but rather at becoming a person whose mode of being in the world is ethically and aesthetically grounded. Commenting on Japanese artistic training, Robert Carter points out that "*ethics is primarily taught through the various arts, and is not learned as an abstract theory, or as a series of rules to remember*" (Carter 2008, p. 2). I believe what is true of artistic practice is also applicable to having an aesthetic experience.

Iris Murdoch's notion of "unselfing" can be understood similarly. Concerned with the fact that "*our minds are continually active, fabricating an anxious, usually self-preoccupied, often falsifying veil which partially conceals the world*", she claims that "*anything which alters consciousness in the direction of unselfishness, objectivity and realism is to be connected with virtue*" (Murdoch 1970, p. 82). Consequently, she regards the appreciation of good art as the reward of successful unselfing that helps one "*transcend selfish and obsessive limitations of personality and can enlarge the sensibility*" (Murdoch 1970, p. 85).

Archibald Alison in the eighteenth century. He points out, for example, that the circumstance, such as the time of the day or the spatial environment, affects the character of the sound animals make. I give specific examples from his work in Saito 2007, p. 121.

[5] The best primary text is *Shōbōgenzō* (*The Storehouse of True Knowledge*), the major work of the thirteenth century Zen priest, Dōgen. The most important chapters are translated and compiled in Dōgen 1986.

In this regard, consider John Dewey's view that "*the moral function of art* […] *is to remove prejudice, do away with the scales that keep the eye from seeing, tear away the veils due to wont and custom, perfect the power to perceive*" (Dewey 1958, p. 325). Specifically, "*works of art are means by which we enter, through imagination and the emotions they evoke, into other forms of relationship and participation than our own*" (Dewey 1958, p. 333). In order for good art to take us out of our own familiar world, however, we must be able and willing to practice aesthetic engagement. The invitation of good art for us to enter its world, in the words of Joseph Kupfer, places "*the burden of entering into an open-ended, indeterminate creative process*" without any rules to follow (Kupfer 1983, p. 71). We do gain "responsive freedom" but it comes with an "aesthetic responsibility" (Kupfer 1983, p. 73, p. 77).

In a somewhat surprising context, Kenya Hara, one of the leading designers in Japan today, advocates "emptying" oneself when designing. He explains how communications with users of the designed products, rather than concern with the expression of his ideas and creativity, guide his practice:

> "*'Emptiness' (utsu) and 'completely hollow' (karappo) are among the terms I pondered while trying to grasp the nature of communication. When people share their thoughts, they commonly listen to each other's opinions rather than throwing information at each other. In other words, successful communication depends on how well we listen, rather than how well we push our opinions on the person seated before us. People have therefore conceptualized communication techniques using terms like 'empty vessel' to try to understand each other better*" (Hara 2010, Prologue).

This minimization of the designer's ego is reflected in 'anonymous design' embraced by his firm that does not identify the designer of a product.

All these characterizations of the ethical stance needed for one's successful interaction with others are the requirements of aesthetic engagement: open-mindedness, acceptance, humility, respect, and mutual collaboration. This ethically-grounded interaction with the world is most explicitly illustrated by human interactions. While exemplifying an inconvenient truth for the object-driven aesthetics discourse because of its lack of an object to speak of, human interactions not only have a bona fide place in aesthetics discourse but also provide a vivid indication of the ethical responsibility involved in aesthetic engagement.

Aesthetics of Human Interactions

As much as Böhme's aesthetics of atmosphere overcomes the subject-object dichotomy, his discussion often refers to "aesthetic workers," those professionals working on "*design, stage sets, advertising, the production of musical atmospheres (acoustic furnishing), cosmetics, interior design – as well […] as the whole sphere of art proper*" (Böhme 1993, p. 123). His aesthetics thus seems to be more directed toward those atmospheres created by professionals. This emphasis on designed atmospheres, however, tends to neglect the fact that, even without specific training as aesthetic workers, all of us are also producers, not just spectators, of an aesthetically-charged situation. The clearest example of our co-creation of an aesthetic situation is human interactions.[6] This situation provides another layer of a person's ethical responsibility when practicing aesthetic engagement.

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[6] I limit my discussion here to human-to-human interactions, although I believe that aesthetic considerations can be present in human-to- non-human interactions, such as with non-human animals and objects.

Take a conversation as the most recognizable form of human interaction that is experienced by all of us almost daily.[7] A successful conversation consists of a give and take when each party is willing to listen and build upon the other party's thoughts and ideas, even including criticism and disagreement. As it is the case with successful aesthetic engagement with a work of art, my experience here is a process in which I proceed with "undergoing" and "doing" by fully attending to what the other party is saying, sometimes discovering new things along the way, adjusting my initial reaction in light of the new discoveries, and mobilizing my imagination and going beyond what is immediately available to my senses. There is neither a list of specific topics suitable for an aesthetically satisfying conversation nor a set of formula to follow because the aesthetics here is more concerned with the form of exchange, such as rhythm, development, and culmination, as well as the style that includes gesture, facial expression, and the tone of voice.[8]

Furthermore, as Ossi Naukkarinen points out, "*tactful behavior cannot be planned in advance, but it is always an art of acting in the here-and-now*", requiring "*good situational sensitivity*" (Naukkarinen 2014, p. 32, p. 36).[9] For example, although modesty is often regarded as necessary for a successful interaction, what is required is not modesty per se, but the ability and sensitivity to grasp the situation and atmosphere quickly and adjust one's participation accordingly to contribute to the mutual and reciprocal creation of a certain atmosphere.[10] In some situations, it may be appropriate and desirable for me to talk about myself and my accomplishments. What matters is when and how. As Marcia Eaton points out, "*both aesthetic and moral sensitivity are demanded in making judgments such as 'This situation calls for bold action' or 'This situation calls for subtlety'*" (Eaton 1997, p. 362).

I do admit, however, that a general characterization of civil, rude, polite, disrespectful, or thoughtful behavior and demeanor has been integrated into the fabric of each culture and society. Matters of proper behavior are usually relegated to etiquette and manners and they are often criticized for being superficial or, worse, a means of discrimination and exclusion based upon gender, race, and social class. However, I believe that the aesthetics of human interactions, or social aesthetics as termed by Berleant, has a much deeper ethical significance in our lives. Here, again, the Japanese aesthetic tradition is instructive.

As Eiko Ikegami argues in her historical and sociological exploration of Japanese traditional arts (Ikegami 2005), people from all social ranks and educational backgrounds participated in artistic practices, particularly since the fifteenth century, the middle of Japan's medieval feudal period. Through perfecting artistic skills, the ultimate goal of various artistic practices was to sharpen the sense of civility and sociability and the skills necessary to act on them. The most prominent examples are the linked verse composition and the tea ceremony, both flourishing from the late medieval period to the Edo period (1603-1868). Although linked verse is no longer practiced, the tea ceremony and its accompanying aesthetics continue to inform Japanese cultural sensibility today.

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[7] An excellent discussion of the aesthetics of human interactions can be found in Naukkarinen 2014 and Puolakka 2017.

[8] Georg Simmel in his discussion on sociability also emphasizes that it is the form of conversation that determines its aesthetics. However, he also denies that "*the content of social conversation is a matter of indifference; it must be interesting, gripping, even significant,*" although such content is relevant insofar as it aids in creating an aesthetically positive form (Simmel 2000, p. 126). Kalle Puolakka also observes that "*conversation can be aesthetic even if its material […] does not, in most cases, have intrinsically aesthetic quality*" (Puolakka 2017, sec. 2).

[9] The spontaneity required in an aesthetically engaging human interaction is also stressed in the aesthetics of the Japanese tea ceremony that I discuss below. We may also understand why Roquentin's rather strenuous verbal effort to create perfect moments with Anny fails, as depicted in Jean-Paul Sartre's (1964) *Nausea.*

[10] The importance of modesty in a sociable interaction is brought up by Simmel in *Culture of Interaction* (Simmel 2000, p. 109-135) and David Hume in *Of Qualities Immediately Agreeable to Others* (Hume 1970, p. 263-67).

Linked verse is a form of parlor game in which a group of people of all social ranks gather and co-create a series of poetic verses. One person starts with a few lines, followed by the next person who continues the theme or image while adding his own contribution, which is followed by the next person, and so forth. This communal activity goes on for many hours, sometimes all night resulting in as many as ten thousand links.[11] What is critical in the successful linked verse co-creation is to adjust one's contribution to the preceding lines composed by others without sacrificing one's own voice. Good listening skill is required, in addition to poetic imagination and creative power. As Ikegami points out, "*in order to make a good poetic sequence, the participants had to develop a willingness to listen attentively to others and to appreciate their poetic creativity*" (Ikegami 2005, p. 78). Thus, with the pretext of participating in a poetry-making communal activity, "*socialization through the composition of linked poetry was an ideal vehicle for creating an atmosphere of civilized fellowship*" (Ikegami 2005, p. 78).

If linked verse practice resembles "*an educational program for developing civility in public space*" (Ikegami 2005, p. 78), so does the tea ceremony. The aesthetics of tea ceremony, however, adds another layer of human interactions: non-verbal communication through the mediation of objects and body movement. In the tea ceremony, the significant portion of interactions between the host and the guests takes place through what Ikegami calls "*tacit modes of communication*" (Ikegami 2005, p. 221-235). Such interactions include the host's thoughtfulness expressed in the specific choice of various items used for the event and preparation of the garden and the tea hut suitable for the guests and the occasion (such as the season and the weather). Every aspect of the host's body movement in making and serving tea also communicates his thoughtful regard for the guests. That is, "*the host's care and consideration is expressed through artistry of motion and gesture*" (Ikegami 2005, p. 226). The guests in turn show their gratefulness and appreciation through the gestures involved in receiving and holding the tea bowl, drinking tea, eating the snack, and bidding farewell. The tea ceremony thus creates an occasion where "*the deepest human communication took place through silent aesthetic communion*" (Ikegami 2005, p. 227).[12]

The tea ceremony provides an artistic microcosm in which the aesthetics of human interactions is crystallized. It also reinforces the preponderance of human interactions without verbal communication in Japanese culture and aesthetics, variously referred to as indirect communication, suggestion, implication, or accomplices of silence. However, we should note that non-verbal communication is integral to human interactions beyond this specific cultural tradition. Regardless of a specific cultural context, we often experience that the nature of a verbal exchange is determined by gestures, facial expressions, tone of voice, pause, and the like, in addition to, or sometimes irrespective of, the verbal content of the conversation.[13]

Regardless of the mode of communication, however, both linked verse and the tea ceremony show that successful human interaction requires the full aesthetic engagement of all parties. Whether in a conversation or in the tea ceremony, the interaction fails if one party refuses to or is unable to participate in the reciprocal collaboration effort. A one-way conversation or parties talking past each other never makes for a satisfying and fulfilling experience. The tea ceremony will not succeed if the host's utmost hospitality is not graciously acknowledged and appreciated by the guests. The chain of verses is broken by somebody who strikes a false note by failing to submit her imagination and creativity to the collaborative

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[11]For specific examples of linked verse, see Donald Keene 1955, as well as Ikegami 2005, p. 84-93.

[12] I discuss this point in more detail in Saito 2017, p. 150-51 and 184.

[13] I explore this issue in Saito 2016, p. 225-42.

creative process. In these examples, the interaction fails both aesthetically and morally. Although this ethical concern was always present in Berleant's work, social aesthetics, the subject of his recent work, makes this abundantly clear, as indicated by the following passages: "*the aesthetics has expanded to include what I call social aesthetics, social values manifested in the relations among people, individually and in groups, and in discussions that recognize aesthetics and ethics are inextricably intertwined*" (Berleant 2010, p. 49); "*many common social occurrences* […] *also fuse moral and social values with aesthetic ones*" (Berleant 2005, p. 155); "*Indeed, in the human environment, the moral, the social and the political are thoroughly interwoven* […] *Our world is first aesthetic but at the same time moral*" (Berleant 2012, p. 190).

Social aesthetic sensibility is not grasped conceptually but rather cultivated through practice. And this practice is guided by the engagement of one's entire being, body and mind, perception, sensibility, emotion, and imagination, as well as intellect. As advocated by Friedrich Schiller, moral education is inseparable from aesthetic education, and Berleant's social aesthetics also provides a foundation for moral education. The requirements of successful aesthetic engagement are also the requirements for a successful moral engagement with the world. The sensibility required for aesthetic engagement must be cultivated and developed for civil, respectful, and humane interactions with others, without which a civil society cannot exist.

Negative Aesthetics

There is one final layer of the ethical dimension of aesthetic engagement. So far I have been focusing on the ethical responsibility placed on me as an experiencing agent when aesthetically engaged with the other, whether a work of art or another person. But what happens if my effort for co-creating a satisfying aesthetic experience is not reciprocated by the other? Clearly, in the case of a human interaction, the result is a failure. When the other with which I try to engage aesthetically is art, a satisfying aesthetic experience cannot occur unless the work of art meets me half way. That is, my willingness and effort to engage in a collaborative experience has to be rewarded with certain qualities of the object. If the object is a case of what Kupfer calls "cheap" or "vulgar" art, it "*dulls the sensibility, inhibits imagination, and disposes toward intransigence*" (Kupfer 1983, p. 68), because it merely presents a world all-too-familiar and all-too-comfortable to me and exacerbates my complacency and lethargy. Murdoch also condemns bad art for providing forms that are "*the recognizable and familiar rat-runs of selfish day-dream*" (Murdoch 1970, p. 84). Or the work of art may be too esoteric, elitist, or idiosyncratic to be capable of inviting me to enter its world. As a result, my readiness to be engaged with the object is not responded to and I have to decide that it is not worth the effort.

In cases of built environments and artifacts, the responsibility of ensuring successful aesthetic engagement is weighted more heavily toward the designers and creators. I think I am justified in expecting that these objects meet my needs, whether they be functionality, comfort, or pure delight. I don't think I am responsible for exerting the same kind and degree of effort I make when interacting with other people or works of art. Unfortunately, the world we inhabit is not an aesthetic utopia and it is populated by things that cause negative aesthetic experiences, ranging from shoddily-designed artifacts and user-unfriendly products to banal streetscapes with cheap commercialization and mindless muzak piped into shopping malls. Berleant calls attention to these and many other examples of "negative aesthetics" and urges us to

recognize their presence in our lives and societies because aesthetics is the best tool we have to expose what harms our sensibility, experience, and ultimately our well-being.[14]

Professional aesthetic workers are largely responsible for creating these instances of negative aesthetics. Does this mean that I am a victim and thus exempt from any responsibility? Even in these cases, I think all of us are still participants in the world-making project because we need to sharpen our aesthetic literacy and sensibility to highlight these pockets of negative aesthetics in our lives and society and work toward improvement, even if indirectly. Our participation in mitigating, reducing, or eliminating negative aesthetics can take many forms: organizing a communal resistance to a proposal that would destroy the ambiance of a townscape; boycotting companies that produce products that are poorly-made and cheap-looking; appealing to lawmakers to pass an environmental regulation to guarantee a minimum standard of aesthetic decency for all citizens; encouraging school officials to include aesthetic education beyond art education in their curriculum. The point is that a failure of a satisfying aesthetic engagement, even if it is not a fault of my own, should inspire me to expose negative aesthetics for what it is and to encourage those professional aesthetic workers to improve the quality of life in society.

Aesthetics is thus an indispensable means by which we can evaluate and improve our quality of life. It is not sufficient for a society to have just laws, a good political system, and other social amenities, such as educational and economic opportunities, guaranteed health care, and the like, unless they are grounded in and accompanied by what Yrjö Sepänmaa calls "aesthetic welfare" (Sepänmaa 1995, p. 15). We should be able to enjoy aesthetically fulfilling experiences, whether through engagement with artifacts and environments or human interactions. Hence, contrary to the unfortunately widespread view of aesthetics as merely an icing on the cake or trivial fluff, aesthetics provides the very foundation of a good life. Berleant's aesthetic engagement, social aesthetics, and negative aesthetics together propel aesthetics toward a long overdue re-engagement with life and the world.

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