

A Dialectical Approach to Berleant's Concept of Engagement.

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Abstract: Arnold Berleant shares much in common with John Dewey. His notion of aesthetic engagement, which is central to his philosophy of art, is, like Dewey's concept of "an experience," an attack on dualistic notions of aesthetic experience. To the extent that Berleant and I are both Deweyans, we agree that we need to turn from the art object to art experience. Art is what it does in experience. Yet appreciative experience of art cannot happen without, at some point, focusing on the art object as such, and this means bracketing context. Engagement is important, but so too are contemplation, disinterestedness and distance. Contemplation, for example, is a moment both in the creative process and in the process of appreciation. Moreover, following Brand and Gracyk, it will be argued in the present paper that only through toggling between contemplation and engagement can we obtain a full experience of art, nature, or of the everyday.

Keywords: Arnold Berleant, engagement, John Dewey, contemplation, imagination, aura, Petty Brand, Ted Gracyk.

Arnold Berleant shares much in common with John Dewey. His notion of aesthetic engagement, which is central to his philosophy of art, is, like Dewey's concept of "an experience," an attack on dualistic notions of aesthetic experience (Dewey 1934). To the extent that Berleant and I are both Deweyans we agree that, as he puts it, we need to turn "*away from a focus on the art object, which came to be called by the assumptive term 'artwork,' and to the appreciative experience of art*" (Berleant 2013, Par. #2). Art is what it does in experience. Yet Berleant and I perceive experience in different ways. For one thing, I do not believe that appreciative experience of art can happen without at some point focusing on the art object as such, and this means bracketing context, at least at some point. For another, I do not look as harshly on the related concepts of contemplation, disinterestedness and distance. Yet I agree with the stress Berleant places on engagement. How can that be? For me, contemplation is a moment both in the creative process and in the process of appreciation. Its value should not be erased by recognition of the value of engagement, but should be seen as equal to it. Moreover, only through toggling between contemplation and engagement can we obtain a full experience of art, nature, or of the everyday. This point will be developed later in the paper.

Berleant's great contribution to aesthetics has been his systematic advocacy of the importance of engagement. Engagement was not recognized by previous philosophers who overemphasized disinterestedness. Berleant's commitment was partly inspired by an intense fascination with engagement in the avant-garde art of the second half of the 20th century, and his aesthetic theory is a great example of what philosophy can gain from reflecting on innovative artwork. Berleant speaks of innovative practices that "*gave rise to new perceptual features in the arts, breaking out of the frame of the canvas and extruding from its flat surface, descending from the proscenium stage into the audience, and other such modifications of appreciative experience that discarded the traditional separation of audience and art object*" (Berleant 2013, Par. #1), and it can be agreed that these were good things. Yet, unlike him, I believe rejection of the traditional separation of audience and art object left an opening for new forms of distancing, contemplation and disinterestedness that are not susceptible to criticisms of the older forms.

Berleant and I also have somewhat different views of the history of aesthetics, particularly with regards to Kant's Critique of Judgment. He stresses "The Analytic of the Beautiful" with its talk of disinterestedness. But this is to neglect Kant's actual discussion of art, which only appears formally in „The Analytic of the Sublime.“ Berleant says Kantian aesthetics *“treats aesthetic experience as the subjective appreciation of a beautiful object”* (Berleant 2013, Par. #3). This is right up to a point, and yet the center of art for Kant is less subjective appreciation of a beautiful object than the creation of a beautiful object by an artistic genius. After all, one cannot create except through being engaged, i.e. with materials and subject matter. Kant's thought is of course infected by the dualism he inherited from Cartesian rationalism, but the act of the artistic genius is one of creating a world out of the materials of our world, and, in a way, nothing can be more engaged than that.

The idea that *“aesthetic engagement emphasizes the holistic, contextual character of aesthetic appreciation”* (Berleant 2013, Par. #3) exemplifies Berleant's position. That position is no longer as radical as it once seemed, for contextualism can be seen as the dominant position today: formalism, disinterestedness, and contemplation all seem to be part of a distant past. Contextualism, though, is not the whole story of our proper experience of art. Nor is it the whole story about our proper experience of nature or of everyday life. To be sure, when I appreciate a painting, I love knowing more about the artist, the culture, and the history behind it. There is, however, also something to be said for the formalist insistence that I must focus on the work itself: that to fully experience the work, I need to bracket all of the background information and just be with the work; that is, let it speak to me directly. Too much contextual information can deaden experience, can make it seem as though we think we know the object when we really only know how to relate and relate to the information about it. The object becomes too familiar, too easy to categorize. To contextualize is to put in a box, even though that box can seem quite rich. Contextualism, by itself, can lead to smug knowingness. Moreover, with all this emphasis on context we can lose sight of the imagination. There is a sense of “imagination” or “seeing with imagination” which involves seeing something as going beyond itself, as having what can be termed an “aura.” I have argued elsewhere that this kind of experience is essential to, even defining of, aesthetic experience (Leddy 2012). Contextualism can easily fall prey to determinism; and the freedom of the imagination, for interpreter as well as artist, is lost. In short, contextualism by itself is as false as formalism by itself.

Berleant writes that *“[a]esthetic engagement [...] returns aesthetics to its etymological origins by stressing the primacy of sense perception, of sensible experience. Perception itself is reconfigured to recognize the mutual activity of all the sense modalities, including kinesthetic and somatic sensibility more generally”* (Berleant 2013, par. #3). I mostly agree, yet am worried about the limitedness entailed by the phrase “primacy of sense perception.”

I put the core of aesthetics in another idea, not in the root of the word as it was invented by Baumgarten or as it was used originally by Kant in the ‘Critique of Pure Reason’, but in Kant's notion of aesthetic ideas as it appears in the ‘Critique of Judgment’, specifically in Paragraph 49 (Kant 1952, pp. 175-182). Aesthetic ideas are certainly connected with sensory perception, but they also go beyond sensory perception. You could say that, for Kant, the primacy is not in sensory perception but in what he calls the productive imagination, particularly in its free play. Sensory perception plays a role, and Kant, notoriously, under-rates that role: for example in understanding color as mere charm. But to place the center of aesthetics in sensory perception is to forget the centrality of imaginative engagement with the world of sense, i.e. to forget experience in the broader sense than mere sensory perception. I favor and applaud the way in which Berleant stresses the sensory perception aspect of experience, and the way in which the artists he favors do this as well. Yet this approach is limited in ways I find problematic. The aesthetic idea, as Kant

describes it, is basically the sensuously perceived object as symbol. It relates in important ways to his notion that, although the transcendent or supersensible realm cannot be approached by reason, it can be approached via aesthetic experience. I do not follow Kant in his continued belief in a transcendent realm, but I do favor a dialectic (to follow Hegel for a moment) in which the position of Berleant is sublated: in which the thesis is formalism (Kant misunderstood), the antithesis engagement theory and contextualism, and the new synthesis a return to Kant, but Kant properly understood in terms of the centrality of the aesthetic ideas, those ideas providing the closest thing we will ever get to a transcendent realm.

How does the synthesis work? Here is an example. In the aesthetics of nature, Berleant encourages us to descend “*from the contemplative distance of a scenic outlook to tramping along a woodland trail or paddling a meandering stream*” (Berleant 2013, par. #5). I agree that tramping and paddling were neglected and now are rightly emphasized. Yet I still want to enjoy the contemplative distance of the scenic outlook. Not only that: I think there is a contemplative dimension of my experience of nature through tamping and paddling. I also think there is an engaged aspect of my scenic observation. The scenic observation can include aspects of the experience that is continuous with the paddling part of the day.

Some of our disagreement is just a matter of preferences. I like to keep the word “contemplation,” but have no problem perceiving it as more engaged: so that contemplation of dance may include somatic dimensions that might not have been included in previous views of contemplation. Berleant and I again are both Deweyans in that we see humans not as dualistic paradoxes but as live creatures interacting with the environment.

Berleant attacks the concept of disinterestedness and its relatives at many points in his writings. He writes approvingly of an expansion of aesthetic experience that has entailed rejecting disinterestedness both because of its psychologism and because it unduly restricts aesthetic appreciation to exclude functional or practical objects (Berleant 2012). While I agree with including functional objects, I do not see this as requiring a choice between disinterested and interested perception since such objects may be perceived in a disinterested way where the functionality is de-emphasized or bracketed. As argued above, I believe that the concept of disinterestedness, along with such related ideas as distancing and the aesthetic attitude, should play a role in aesthetics, although perhaps a less exalted one than previously. I am inspired in this by two articles, one by Peggy Brand and the other by Ted Gracyk, where a role for disinterestedness is allowed even in the context of concern for larger social issues (Brand 1998 and Gracyk 2011). My own view is that disinterestedness is a moment or aspect of aesthetic experience, to be taken as equally important to the moment of engagement so well advocated by Berleant. Again, allowing for disinterested perception in this way (and not as exclusively defining of aesthetic experience) is not inconsistent with the aesthetics of engagement, if taken broadly. Taken broadly means that engagement includes the imaginative as well as the sensuous and the physical.

One could even argue that disinterested perception can contribute to engagement with an aesthetic object. How can this be? Brand and Gracyk have suggested that taking a disinterested stance can open one up to new perspectives. It can reduce the way in which prejudices blind us to certain ways of looking at things. To this I add that it allows for a freer operation of the imagination than is allowed in an approach that focuses exclusively, as Berleant does, on sensibility. Brand holds that if you can see the work of the controversial performance-artist ORLAN as aesthetically valuable from a disinterested perspective then perhaps you can consider its deeper feminist meaning when contextualized. Similarly, Gracyk holds that disinterested pleasure taken in popular music can allow for a deeper understanding when one discovers that the musician is, for example, promoting a gay perspective. For Gracyk, disinterested attention can

work together with interested attention. It is not an either/or proposition. As he notes, popular music is made to reward listening through disinterested attention.

Berleant complains that Kant's idea of disinterestedness rests on his „*distinction between objective and subjective sensation, and on excluding the aesthetic from all but humans,*” and that this involves “*imposing external strictures* [by which Berleant means rationalistic and system-generated preconceptions] *on experience*” (Berleant 2012, pp. 150-151). He insists, contra Kant, that function plays an important role in, for example, architecture.

Function does play such a role. However, Kant himself recognized this with his idea that there is such a thing as dependent beauty, architecture being a key example. This can be taken to mean that one can see a church both in formalist terms (focusing on our immediate response to design features and the look of purposiveness) and, alternatively, in functionalist terms. Thus, regardless of what Kant actually thought, architecture can be seen both in a disinterested and in an interested way when these alternate. Moreover, to only see architecture in one of these ways is to miss out on a lot. The other arts, as well as nature and everyday aesthetics, also have these two moments, although perhaps less obviously, since we cannot think long about architecture without paying attention to function. To draw on personal experience, the best way to view an aesthetic object is to toggle (following Brand's term, which Gracyk and I have adopted) between disinterested and interested. I grant that overemphasis given to disinterested attention is guilty of the charges Berleant places against it. However, once disinterestedness is restrained and balanced against interested attention, it can be seen as having great importance. It is not clear that using disinterestedness in this way commits us to rationalistic preconceptions. Nor is it required to see humans as radically different from animals in order to give disinterestedness this role. Disinterestedness, as a moment in the aesthetic process, allows us to bracket issues of existence, morality, and knowledge (as Kant observed), in perceiving an aesthetic object, thus allowing us to break away from certain prejudices and preconceptions, to see things in a fresh way, and to allow imagination to do its best work.

Brand and Gracyk allow the return of the concept of disinterestedness only as instrumental to a deeper interested perspective. This is not the direction I take here, although disinterestedness can certainly serve this purpose. Rather, disinterestedness can be viewed as a necessary element in aesthetic experience generally. Agreement can be found with Brand that it is valuable to toggle back and forth between interested and disinterested perspectives. However, the disinterested attention can frame the subject in broader ways that actually take in things commonly associated with interested attention, thus allowing for an almost paradoxical fusion of the two, for example in distancing oneself from, and contemplating, contextual aspects of the work as well as its functional achievements. Nonetheless, and to repeat, one can agree with Berleant that disinterestedness has been overemphasized in the history of aesthetics.

Berleant writes that Kant fails to account for beauty that derives from what he calls perfect functioning, as is found in sport, religious art, and civic art (Berleant 2012, p. 154). Presumably, he thinks that perception of perfect functioning can, in these cases, be sufficient for legitimate aesthetic appreciation. What is troubling here is the idea of “the beauty of perfect functioning.” Although perception of perfect functioning can give rise to experiences of beauty, things can function perfectly and be perceived to do so without being beautiful. There is nothing beautiful, at least to me, in the seemingly perfect functioning of the program I use to play solitaire on my computer. More importantly, the idea of perfect functioning leaves out the component of the free play of the imagination which Kant correctly saw as necessary for aesthetic experience.

Part of the disagreement between Berleant and I might stem from differing ideas about how to define aesthetics itself. As we have seen, Berleant favors seeing aesthetics in Baumgarten's sense, as a science of sensory knowledge. As he puts it, the "*aesthetic begins and ends in sense experience*" (Berleant 2010, p. 27). At the same time, he recognizes that there is no such thing as pure perception, and acknowledges the role of culture and meaning in aesthetic experience. Thus, what experience, then, is excluded from the domain of aesthetics? If no experience is excluded then the concept of the sensory as distinct from the experiential becomes meaningless. Moreover, if all experience begins and ends in sense experience, then sense experience alone cannot define aesthetics. In short, aesthetics cannot have the same extension as sense perception. We need to know what distinguishes aesthetic from non-aesthetic perception. Perhaps Berleant's answer is that non-aesthetic perception is any perception where the "sensory base" is obscured (Berleant 2010, p. 29). I have no problem with this, but this formulation does not characterize disinterested perception in all its forms (although it does for Kant's version) and that's the point at issue.

In arguing for identity between aesthetic experience and sensory perception, Berleant appeals to the meaning of "aesthesis." Yet Baumgarten's own understanding of aesthetics was not fully determined by the original meaning for "aesthesis." As Berleant himself observes, Baumgarten also associated "aesthetics" strongly with the concept of beauty and with the appreciation of the arts. Neither of these ideas is included in the concept of sense experience. Moreover, this three-way association of Baumgarten's, i.e. between sense perception, beauty and art appreciation, continues with us today, as shown by its common presence in dictionary definitions of aesthetics. However, unlike Baumgarten, Berleant does not give the concept of beauty a significant role in his own account of the nature of aesthetics, for he drops it in favor of simply talking about sense experience. This has the effect not only of excluding disinterestedness insofar as it is associated with the concept of beauty but also of downplaying the central role of imagination in aesthetic experience, since, on my view, a certain kind of imagination (that associated with the experience of what I call "aura") is essential to the experience of beauty. Although Berleant does talk about imagination, he does so to distinguish imaginative from actual perception, thus failing to recognize any imaginative dimension to actual perception especially of the aesthetic sort (Berleant 2010, p. 37). Furthermore, he allows imagination a limited role in our aesthetic appreciation of the heavens as long as this is consistent with science (Berleant 2010, p. 44), and often speaks of imagination as contributing to the fund of meaning content passed on by a culture, neither of these uses allow imagination much role in the act of appreciation.

If the domain of aesthetics and that of sense perception are taken as equivalent, as he wants, then Berleant is inconsistent when he also says (correctly, I believe) that "aesthetic experience seems to transcend the barriers that ordinarily separate ourselves from the things we encounter in the world" (Berleant 2010, p. 29). In this case, aesthetic experience is a special kind of perceptual experience. The second position would, therefore, lead more in the direction of my own emphasis on imagination as equal in importance to sensibility. Berleant also talks of aesthetic experience in terms of "feelings of uplift and wonder," mentioning "the shiver of delight" from "mysterious contact" with a great work of art, "wonder at the beauty of nature," and awareness of "delights of ordinary life" (Berleant 2010, p. 36), all of which goes far beyond the flat idea of the aesthetic as equivalent to perceptual experience. He even refers to aesthetics as the "capacity for distinctive perceptual experience," which would not make sense if aesthetic experience were simply the same as perceptual experience. If we use "beauty" to symbolize the factors just mentioned, then we should recognize that this concept is as central to our understanding of aesthetic experience as is that of immediate perception.

There is one important advantage to retaining the concept of disinterestedness even if it is no longer the sole defining notion of aesthetics. Berleant is quite ready to classify certain kinds of objects as ugly or aesthetically wrong without considering the possibility that these objects can, too, be experienced as beautiful under certain circumstances. He has a very large category of what he considers “unqualifiedly negative” in urban experience, for example. He says, “[t]here is not a sense modality that remains unscathed in the urban environment, from the cacophony of the roar of traffic and the blaring of loudspeakers in public places to the soporific blanket of canned music and intrusive private conversations over cell phones” (Berleant 2010, p. 46). It is true that all of these things can be very upsetting and aesthetically negative. How, then, can someone who, like Berleant, believes that there is no pure aesthetic experience, who believes that aesthetic experience is always mediated by culture (Berleant 2010, p. 45), and who is willing to entertain value even in Hummel figurines, be so sure of his unqualified negative judgments of these everyday urban phenomena? Doesn’t their evaluation depend just as much on personality and culture as that of a Hummel figurine? When Berleant declaims against “gaudy, intense colors of advertising circulars” (Berleant 2010, p. 46) one can only think that, to use the words of Robert Venturi, Denise Scott Brown and Steven Izenour he is unable to “learn from Las Vegas” (Venturi, Brown and Izenour 1977). These architects were able to see beauty in gaudy electronic billboards, but Berleant cannot. Thus he speaks of “the profuse vulgarity of the commercial landscapes of industrialism, from the shopping mall to the commercial strip, the trailer park, and the slag heap” (Berleant 2012, p. 206). It cannot be denied that these things can be vulgar, but it also strikes me that all of them can also be experienced aesthetically in a positive way. How can we do this? Well, one needs to avail oneself of an ability which has been variously described as aesthetic contemplation, disinterestedness, distancing, and taking the aesthetic attitude. Although Berleant excludes this move in the name of contemporary art as an art of engagement, it is noteworthy that contemporary artists themselves commonly use these very strategies to render otherwise ugly, crude and disgusting subject-matters sources of inspiration and delight – Robert Rauschenberg’s combines are just one example. Much of ordinary life in our culture is empty and crass. However, the phenomena Berleant describes do not present just one face.

So how can disinterestedness play a role in appreciation of nature or everyday aesthetic phenomena? As we move through a landscape, whether urban or rural, we can and should, if we want a rich and full experience, toggle between contemplative perception of what we perceive and perception that takes into account various contextual and relational matters. In the contemplative mode, we become more aware of the formal relations and also the sensuous surfaces of what we see. (Kant failed to emphasize the second of these). Moreover, (and this is an important addition) we are aware of these things in a way that can allow an experience of what, I have called “aura,” to emerge, or, to use Berleant’s language, to allow wonderment. Similarly, when switching to the engaged model of appreciation, we become aware of such things as how the look of something fits its function or how cultural meaning is incorporated. The richest experience of art toggles between the two. Imagination in the sense of metaphorical seeing plays an important role in this dialectic. There is neither time nor space here to develop this notion further, but the suggestion can be made that metaphorical seeing or seeing charged by the imagination plays a role both in interested and in disinterested attention and that the main role that disinterestedness plays is simply as a method for highlighting certain sensuous and formal features and freeing up the imagination from the dominance of historical features, allowing for actualizations of the aesthetic object in new ways.

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