

Arnold Berleant

Aesthetics beyond the Arts. New and Recent Essays.

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Arnold Berleant has long been one of the most influential figures in environmental aesthetics; his understanding of aesthetic appreciation as a form of engagement has formed one of the central theoretical frameworks of that discipline. This collection brings together eighteen of Berleant's essays, some of which appear for the first time. He describes the essays as "self-contained" (viii), and it is indeed not necessary for the reader to go through all of the book's articles in order to engage properly with an individual essay. A downside of this structure is that certain ideas are repeated in the book rather often and the individual essays do not build on one another all that systematically.

The book's essays are divided into three parts: 1) The Arts as Experience, 2) Environmental Aesthetics, and 3) Implications. The second part of the collection is the most unified, and Berleant has wisely written a new essay on the development of environmental aesthetics to preface it. Some of the topics Berleant discusses in the essays—e.g., the notion of the aesthetic field—are familiar from his earlier work. He also further promotes his account of the environment as a dynamic organism that has no definitive boundaries. In the book, Berleant provides some new insight to his conception of the environment from the perspective of the science of ecology. What Berleant finds fruitful in ecological ways of thinking is that they involve the same kind of understanding of the environment as a dynamic 'system of interacting, interdependent participating factors' as his own engagement model of the experience of one's environment (121). The ecological concept of the environment, in other words, finds an 'experiential analogue in aesthetic engagement' (124).

Kant's aesthetic theory has always been the main critical target of Berleant's views and he again launches a heavy attack against it. According to Berleant, the Kantian notion of aesthetic appreciation as essentially disinterested implies a highly impoverished view of aesthetic experience, which Berleant tries to dethrone with his phenomenological-pragmatist-inspired understanding of aesthetic engagement. It seems that Berleant finds nothing worth saving in Kantian aesthetics, for he calls it a monument of 'lifeless and anachronistic stone that misconstrues aesthetic attention and artistic effort, supplanting perception and activity with hard structure' (155).

Berleant's dislike for Kantian aesthetics is well-known and one can legitimately ask whether it was necessary for him to give as much space for repeating the rebuttal as is done in the book. When developing his views on environment and aesthetic experience, Berleant has a habit of contrasting his engagement model to a position he terms 'the traditional' view of environment appreciation by which he refers to a conception in which the relationship between the appreciator and environment is conceived in terms of a detached subject contemplating a stable and framed object. For Berleant, the Kantian idea of disinterestedness is the main source of this conception.

However, it is debatable whether Kantian aesthetics, at least as Berleant understands it, really any longer holds the kind of bind on aesthetic theory as his criticism seems to assume and whether that view can be considered traditional in any strong sense of the term. Perhaps it is a sign of the impact of Berleant's ideas on the current practice of environmental aesthetics that his own conception of the aesthetic appreciation of environment as a form of engagement seems almost more traditional than the Kantian view that Berleant finds a great obstacle to a proper understanding of the aesthetics of environment. In the preface to the book, Berleant notes pessimistically that despite the changes which have occurred in the arts and in the ways environments are used, aesthetic theory proceeds 'as if nothing has changed' (vii). But this is arguably an overstatement. As Berleant observes in the other parts of the book, environmental aesthetics has developed immensely in the past few decades, indeed, it has become a global phenomenon. What is more, no current major position in the field seems to be heavily built on the kind of Kantian view Berleant criticizes. A more specific analysis of where the Kantian understanding of the aesthetic is still present would perhaps help to make the critical content of Berleant's account more accurate. Otherwise, the space and energy he uses for condemning the Kantian position seems a bit exaggerated.

Besides going through some familiar terrain, the book also contains essays on topics that Berleant has not looked into in more depth before, such as the aesthetics of Chinese gardens. Berleant not only gives a sensitive investigation of the typical features of these gardens, but also argues that the place sketched for the human subject in them serves as an exemplary model of how she can be made an integral part of environments.

In some of the essays included in the book, Berleant joins in a discussion that has received increasing interest in environmental aesthetics, having to do with the ways in which different values are connected in environments. Berleant argues that no value can occupy a superseding position in environments. Instead, he emphasizes the importance of finding a suitable balance between the different interests one can perceive with regard to the use of environments. Berleant nicely illustrates his points with the example of forestry. Given the fundamental effect aesthetics has on our experience of environments, aesthetic considerations should in Berleant's view be given an equal standing alongside other values in environments.

From the traditional arts, music receives the most systematic treatment from Berleant in the book. But even here, the context of environment is not left behind: in the two essays on music included in the collection, Berleant promotes a view of the experience of music as 'environmental experience' (23) as well as an understanding of the art of music 'as a social-environmental art' (30). Music includes different performance practices, which have developed in the course of history, and musical events gather people in a ritualistic-like fashion. Music can moreover be played in different environments. According to Berleant, all of these social, historical, and environmental factors can have an effect on the experience of music. Hence, the idea of music as an essentially environmental art.

In the first section of the collection, the two essays on music are paired with an article with a piece on judging architecture. In the latter, Berleant argues that an appropriate assessment of a building's value requires an intimate engagement with it in the form of moving around in the

building and reflecting on how the different phases of this engagement add up. As perceptive as Berleant's analysis of judging architecture is, the first part of the book feels rather artificially compiled. An analysis of the aesthetic appreciation of concert halls and how their architectural features can contribute to the experience of a concert could perhaps have nicely connected the piece on architecture with the essays on music.

The book also includes an interesting piece on John Dewey. Dewey's view of aesthetic experience as a transactional, developing, and heightened form of experience has served as a central inspiration for Berleant's account of aesthetic engagement. While acknowledging his debt to Dewey, Berleant also tries to distance his aesthetic views from Dewey's by raising certain critical points regarding the latter's work. Dewey found a closing fulfilment to be one of the distinctive features of aesthetic experience. Berleant argues that this view is hard to reconcile with many works of contemporary art, which, far from offering fulfilment, leave the viewer in a state of bewilderment or even shock. According to Berleant, Dewey's aesthetic theory has equal problems accommodating aesthetic instances of 'momentary events' and 'specific details' (164), which do not involve the kind of developmental character Dewey finds essential to aesthetic experience.

These critical pointers raise genuine troubles when it comes to Dewey's aesthetics, but it is unclear whether Berleant's own account of aesthetic experience as a form of engagement manages to evade the problems he detects in Dewey's aesthetics as easily as Berleant seems to assume, for some other essays of the book seem to be very much rooted in Deweyan soil. For example, in one of the essays Berleant argues that by giving us the best model for 'the standard of fulfilment' in experience (190), the aesthetic should serve as a fundamental concept in attempts to shape a better world. This claim sounds highly Deweyan. However, if Dewey's notion of aesthetic experience is plagued by the sorts of problems Berleant says it is, and if such experiences characterize only a limited range of our aesthetic lives, then it remains unclear whether Berleant takes sufficiently into account the significance for his own position of the drawbacks he attaches to Dewey's views.

The informal style of *Aesthetics beyond the Arts* makes it enjoyable to read and its essays contain many rich descriptions on different types of environment, though this is sometimes done at the cost of theoretical content. The book should interest a wide range of readers. Not only those wanting a well-informed look at the main issues of environmental aesthetics, but readers who wish to get a glimpse on some of its emerging trends will find interesting reading in this book.

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