

POPULAR

INQUIRY

The Journal of Kitsch, Camp and Mass Culture

Volume 1 / 2022

**ARNOLD BERLEANT
– MASTER OF THE ART, LIFE
AND PHILOSOPHY**

Aleksandra Łukaszewicz

Academy of Art in Szczecin, Poland

ARNOLD BERLEANT – MASTER OF THE ART, LIFE AND PHILOSOPHY

Aleksandra Łukaszewicz

Abstract

Arnold Berleant is one of our contemporary philosophers: not just scholars in philosophy, a philosopher is a person who, according to the Greek etymology of the term philosophy (*philosophos* meaning “loving knowledge”) loves wisdom. In this definition should be stressed not only *knowledge* or *wisdom* – which used to be in myopic focus in Western reflection, and could be called the ‘Faustian curse’ of pursuing knowledge while overlooking ethical values – the same importance should be recognized in *love*, which entails the emotional and sensory engagement of the whole human being. Being ethical goes hand in hand with being wise or knowledgeable, which is presented throughout all his life in his oeuvre by Arnold Berleant.

Keywords

Wisdom, Pragmatism, Aesthetic Engagement, Mindfulness

I have always looked for masters, for the wise, good, admirable people who would guide me in understanding life and in being a better person. That is why I looked for philosophers and the same reason I am a philosopher, trying to better my stay in the world. To be a philosopher is different from being a scholar in philosophy, though being a scholar inevitably helps in making one’s own path through various worldviews and in knowing how to argue for them. However, nowadays, especially in the Anglo-American world, it is much more common to be a scholar specialized in some concrete branch of philosophy, and it is most useful for one’s career when this branch is applicable to some fields of everyday life, such as is the case with environmental or business ethics.

To be a philosopher, according to the Greek etymology of the term philosophy (*philosophos* meaning “loving knowledge”), is to love wisdom. In this definition should be stressed not only *knowledge* or *wisdom* – which used to be in myopic focus in Western reflection, and could be called the ‘Faustian curse’ of pursuing knowledge while overlooking ethical values – the same importance should be recognized in *love*, which entails the emotional and sensory engagement of the whole human being. To be a philosopher, for me, is to pursue understanding of the world (in whatever way that may be defined) as well as being a person emotionally engaged with the world in which we are bodily present, without such unnecessary division between these two approaches as dualist theories tend to create by separating body and mind, emotions and reason, etc. The knowledge that we possess is strongly influenced by the kind of sensory and emotional experiences we have; reciprocally, the kind

of experiences that we have are structured by our prior beliefs. This kind of approach is presented by Arnold Berleant, one of my masters.

I have been honored to meet along my way a few masters who have guided me on my philosophical journey: from my early years of studies focused on philosophy of language and social philosophy with Jerzy Kochan at the University in Szczecin, during doctoral studies on epistemic function and ontology of photographic image with Alicja Kuczynska at the Warsaw University, while working on my habilitation thesis in transhumanism and in transcultural aesthetics with the late Joseph Margolis at Temple University, during my postdoctoral period in pragmatist aesthetics with Krystyna Wilkoszewska at Jagiellonian University, and with Arnold Berleant – Professor Emeritus at Long Island University.

Krystyna Wilkoszewska introduced the pragmatist approach¹ and openness to interdisciplinarity into Polish philosophical aesthetics, inspiring many scholars in pragmatism by establishing John Dewey Research Center [Ośrodek Badań nad Pragmatyzmem im. Johna Deweya] in 2007. She also put forth a series of translations for *Aesthetics in the World* [Estetyka w Świecie] containing, among others, works by Richard Shusterman² and Arnold Berleant: *Re-thinking Aesthetics. Rogue Essays on Aesthetics and the Arts* from 2004³ and *Sensibility and Sense: The Aesthetic Transformation of the Human World* from 2010.⁴ She introduced transculturalism⁵ and aesthetics of non-European cultures as well, in initiating the series *Aesthetics of the World* [Estetyki Świata], which was published by Universitas and included focus on aesthetics of Aborigines, Africa, China, Indigenous tribes from South America, and Japan. Always up to date with current subjects in aesthetics and art, in 2013 Wilkoszewska, as the Chair of the Polish Society of Aesthetics (of which she is also a founding member) organized the 19th International Congress of Aesthetics, “Aesthetics in Action” which was held in Krakow on the centennial anniversary of the first congress.⁶ There, I met Arnold Berleant for the first time, about which I would like to share an anecdote.

In 2013, I was a PhD student at the University of Warsaw, and a single mother on the PhD stipend. 350 euro for the conference fee was not affordable to me, and my institution was not willing to pay it either. I decided it would be easier to organize a panel and art exhibitions, so I could put my presentation into it and then find funding, than to struggle to pay the fee individually. And so I did, and in hot July, with promotional materials from the local government and banners from a private company, I travelled to Krakow. I had leaflets, the right to use the ICA2013 logo for the panel on “Performativity of images in social context”, and a series of art exhibitions dispersed in a great building of Auditorium Maximum which were an integral part of it.

In Krakow, first I walked into the restaurant at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Krakow (MOCAK). There, my friend Rebecca Farinas straightforwardly introduced me to Arnold Berlant, and asked about my PhD. It choked me. I was sitting next to this philosopher and writer I admire, and I had to – right then and there, just arriving – present substantively the essence of my doctoral research.

I think I did it so poorly, but perhaps not too bad, because during the reception prepared with Rebecca Farinas, in a cute condo in the center of Krakow (thanks to all the heavy banners and the right to use a logo for the set of events I was organizing), I further explained my ideas on the epistemic function of photography to Arnold Berleant while standing at the fridge, for at least an hour. I think Berleant understood and liked my ideas enough to support them, regardless of the quality of my English or proper-enough structure of argumentation, because Berleant is an open-minded person, supporting others' open-mindedness: he is of the opinion that the technical details can always be corrected. His belief in me allowed me to polish my argumentation practice in English written philosophy (with the first paper on “Epistemic Function and Ontology of Analog and Digital Images” published in Vol. 13 (2015) of *Contemporary Aesthetics* – the first open-access online journal in aesthetics, published in the United States of America since mid-2003, which Arnold Berleant edited personally for many years, until the controls were passed to Yuriko Saitoin in 2017) which is notably different from the more essayistic style previously common in Polish philosophical literature.

From this fridge at ICA2013 we went further, initiating many years of acquaintance and building cooperation. One of the products of this was my edition of the monograph issue of the scientific journal *ESPEs*, “Aesthetics between Art and Society. Perspectives of Arnold Berleant’s Postkantian Aesthetics of Engagement” 5(2), 2017, published by the Society for Aesthetics in Slovakia and Institute of Aesthetics and Art Culture at the University of Presov. The journal is on Berleant’s aesthetic perspectives, showing the development of his thought from an essential critique of Kantian perspective in aesthetics, leading to his proposal of aesthetics of engagement (e.g., *Rethinking Aesthetics. Rogue Essays on Aesthetics and the Arts*, 2004), and later to its applications (e.g., *Sensibility and Sense: The Aesthetic Transformation of the Human World*, 2010), and various lines of research inspired by him. It is important to inspire, to show perspectives: this is what Berleant’s philosophy does by combining deep aesthetic sensibility with visionary, inspiratory horizons and strategic movements. It inspires philosophers in many fields: dance (e.g. Lilianna Bieszczad, Katarzyna Nawrocka, David Davies), gardens (e.g. Mateusz Salwa, Beata Frydryczak, Mara Miller), environmentally (e.g. Allen Carlson, John Charles Ryan, Sergey Dzikovich, Cheng Xiangzhan, Madalina Diaconu), urbane (e.g. Jakub Petri, Sanna Lehtine, Vesa Vihanninjoki, Sanna Lehtinen, Max Rynnänen), and in everyday aesthetics (e.g. Yuriko Saito, Thomas Leddy, Adrian Kvokacka, Maria Korusiewicz).

Even our email exchange is very important to me; apart from the essential working element, we always share aesthetic experiences related to nature and the season as well as amusement with the world, which is a balm for my soul. In addition to email exchange and meeting at a few conferences (such as “Challenges at the Intersection of European and American Philosophy” at Fordham University in New York, 2015, which I co-organized with Rebecca Farinas, Leszek Koczanowicz, Philipp Dorstewitz, and Judith Green) I had the pleasure and honor to visit Arnold

Berleant and his wife Riva at their home in Maine. There, I was completely enchanted by the subtlety of manners, modest refinement, and pedantry in the charming cottage overlooking the fjord where one can walk from the garden down to the shore, imbuing oneself with the calm, clear, airy, and uplifting atmosphere. Walking on the gravel, I was the only one making noise in the neighborhood, which makes one mindful of each move, gesture, step, and thought.

Two visits that I paid to Arnold and Riva Berleant allowed me also to better understand the method and objectives of Arnold Berleant's philosophical reflection, especially the parts that are more hidden, or underneath the main current, structuring the flow. I mean here mostly the function of language in culture, which Berleant usually leaves out. The reason for such is not, however, neglecting the function of language for human culture, but is a kind of a strategic move. Berleant expresses that this thread has been frequently discussed and there are poor chances that it will be forgotten;⁷ whereas the sensible aesthetic experience has not received enough attention, and so there is a need to stress it, bringing forth clues from it, influencing in mutual relations also language and culture as such. To this end, Berleant writes about engagement with objects of art or with the environment as about "ecological event or ecological cultural phenomena" (Berleant 2011, 135-136), usually binding the two supposed opposites and showing us not just one side of the coin, but the coin itself.

A perfect harmony of nature, art, and philosophy is the accord that resounds in everyday activities in Berleant's home. Riva Marcel reading Proust's *In Search of Lost Time* while Arnold washes the dishes after the meal can be a metaphor for this combination. Berleant's engagement with the world presents in his life in myriad ways: through his environment, being in gardens, walking the mountains, contemplating the landscape, while also feeling oppressiveness regarding our sense for consumerist capitalism;⁸ with art, while practicing piano in the afternoons, or participating in community musical events (like at the Collins Center for the Arts in Bangor); while reading masterpieces of literature with his wife, or while watching dance performances. In all these ways, he expresses the aesthetic and sensitive part of his personality, while another rational and enlanguaged part argues in a theoretical manner. These parts are compatible and coherent; together they are directed towards a more sensible and just relationship with oneself, others, and the world. This creates the perspective of social aesthetics.

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 2017, 15)

The extreme weight and novelty, in my opinion, lies in this social perspective, especially in how Arnold Berleant approaches the democratization processes and the idea of democracy. Democracy, or its lack, he perceives through the lenses of aesthetic experience and not just as a kind of political formation. The ideal of democracy is played by him in a key of co-inhabiting the same space and

sharing aesthetic everyday experiences. Its lack is visible in unequal distribution of positive and negative aesthetic experiences related to places, air quality, and sound spaces for example – sensibility and the environment need to be minded in thinking about the democratic arrangement of human society (Berleant 2010). In this innovative and important way he continues here the line of other pragmatist thinkers like John Dewey, who stressed that democracy is not “simply and solely a form of government” (Dewey 1968, 246) but a social ideal based on social relations, considering the distribution of franchises leading to formation of an ethical community. Like Dewey and other pragmatists, Berleant connects various lines, perspectives, and approaches in order to come closer to understanding the human condition and the condition of a human cultural world. Aesthetics, philosophy, and social reflection are combined, being oriented to harmonious and fulfilled everyday lives of human beings; together they show us “how to create and live in a human world: how to humanize the world” (Berleant 2017, 15).

It is this delicately balanced connection, mindfulness, and subtlety which characterizes Berleant as a person and a philosopher, and assures ever-growing interest in his works, particularly in the realm of Eastern philosophers (for ex. Chinese thinkers Zeng Fanren⁹ and Cheng Xiangzhan¹⁰ developing eco-aesthetics in reference to environmental aesthetics, and Japanese philosopher Yuriko Saito, who shows extensively how the aesthetic and ethical approach of Berleant’s philosophy is compatible with important aspects of the Japanese worldview, aesthetic, and art practices.)¹¹ Berleant presents a focus on sensible dwelling in the environment, on the art of appreciation, on experience and engagement, connecting Eastern and Western tradition by pushing modern idealistic Western tendencies toward fixing identity into the multiplicity of drives, relationships, and experiences immersed in our densely interconnected world.

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 (...). As an integral part of an environmental field, we both shape and are formed by the multitude of forces that produce the experiential qualities of the universe we inhabit. These qualities constitute the perceptual domain in which we engage in aesthetic experience. (Berleant 2005, 115).

Life is a philosophy, and philosophy is a life – at least for Arnold Berleant – for this he works tirelessly (although he does not overwork) as an editor, until recently, and as a theorist. Confirmation of this can be found in the book he is currently preparing, *Critical Social Aesthetics. Essays in Social Philosophy* to be published by Bloomsbury, which combines into a whole his considerations from the earliest works to the most recent, including issues related to aesthetics of terrorism, aesthetics of violence, and problems with postmodernism. Berleant trespasses wonderfully, as usual, not breaking anything but rather wandering through the garden and traveling new paths.

Of course, I am not the only theorist fascinated with Berleant's thought: others find their inspiration in it too, but I can sincerely say that I *love* his thought, which is an integral part of his person – a good, and very wise person, and a great teacher of life.

I always keep him close to my heart, nevermind how far away he may be.

¹ Here should be paid tribute also to Professor Bohdan Dziemidok, who introduced American aesthetics into Polish philosophy, pragmatism within this. His last book summarizing his research is: Bohdan Dziemidok, *Amerykańska aksjologia i estetyka XX wieku. Wybrane koncepcje* [American axiology and aesthetics in 20th century. Chosen ideas]. (Warszawa: PWN, 2014).

² Richard Shusterman, *Praktyka filozofii, filozofia praktyki: pragmatyzm a życie filozoficzne* [Practicing Philosophy: Pragmatism and the Philosophical Life]. Ed. by K. Wilkoszewska. Transl. to Polish by A. Mitek. (Krakow: Universitas, 2005); Richard Shusterman, *Świadomość ciała. Dociekania z zakresu somaestetyki* [Body Consciousness: A Philosophy of Mindfulness and Somaesthetics]. Ed. by K. Wilkoszewska. Transl. to Polish by W. Małecki, S. Stankiewicz. (Krakow: Universitas, 2016).

³ Arnold Berleant, *Prze-myśleć estetykę. Niepokorne eseje o sztuce* [Re-thinking Aesthetics. Rogue Essays on Aesthetics and the Arts] Ed. by K. Wilkoszewska. Transl. to Polish by M. Korusiewicz, T. Markiewka. (Krakow: Universitas, 2007).

⁴ Arnold Berleant, *Wrażliwość i zmysły. Estetyczna przemiana świata człowieka* [Sensibility and Sense: The Aesthetic Transformation of the Human World]. Ed. by K. Wilkoszewska. Transl. to Polish by S. Stankiewicz. (Krakow: Universitas, 2011).

⁵ Krystyna Wilkoszewska (ed.), *Estetyka transkulturowa*. (Krakow: Universitas, 2004); Krystyna Wilkoszewska (ed.), *Estetyka pośród kultur*. (Krakow: Universitas, 2012).

⁶ From 2019-2022 she was also the First Vice President of the International Association for Aesthetics, of which Arnold Berleant is a former Secretary-General, Past President, and Honorary Life Member.

⁷ See for ex.: Arnold Berleant, "Objects into Persons: The Way to Social Aesthetics". *ESPES* 5(2), 2017.

⁸ Arnold Berleant, "The Subversion of Beauty," Chinese translation by Zhao Yu. (South China Academics, University of Macau, 2018). <http://dx.doi.org/10.17613/M64B2X47X>

⁹ Zeng Fanren, *Introduction to Ecological Aesthetics*. Transl. to English by Wu Lihuan, Chad Austin Meyers. (Beijing, China: Springer, 2019).

¹⁰ Cheng Xiangzhan, *Collected Discourses in the Aesthetics of Living Life: From Literary Aesthetics to Ecological Aesthetics*. (Beijing: People's Press, 2012).

¹¹ Yuriko Saito, "The Ethical Dimensions of Aesthetic Engagement". *ESPES*. Vol. 6/2 (2017): 19-29.

Bibliography

Berleant, Arnold. *Aesthetics and Environment – Variations on a Theme*. Aldershot and Burlington: Ashgate Publishing Company, 2005.

Berleant, Arnold. "Objects into Persons: The Way to Social Aesthetics". *ESPES* 5(2), 2017.

Berleant, Arnold. *Prze-myśleć estetykę. Niepokorne eseje o sztuce* [Re-thinking Aesthetics. Rogue Essays on Aesthetics and the Arts] Ed. by K. Wilkoszewska. Transl. to Polish by M. Korusiewicz, T. Markiewka. Krakow: Universitas, 2007.

Berleant, Arnold. "The Subversion of Beauty." Chinese translation by Zhao Yu. (South China Academics, University of Macau, 2018). <http://dx.doi.org/10.17613/M64B2X47X>

Berleant, Arnold. *Wrażliwość i zmysły. Estetyczna przemiana świata człowieka* [Sensibility and Sense: The Aesthetic Transformation of the Human World]. Ed. by K. Wilkoszewska. Transl. to Polish by S. Stankiewicz. Krakow: Universitas, 2011.

Dewey, John. "Ethics of Democracy" in: *The Early Works, 1882-1898*, vol. 1, ed. by JoAnn Boydston, Varbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1969.

Dziemidok, Bohdan. *Amerykańska aksjologia i estetyka XX wieku. Wybrane koncepcje* [American axiology and aesthetics in 20th century. Chosen ideas]. (Warszawa: PWN, 2014).

Fanren, Zeng. *Introduction to Ecological Aesthetics*. Transl. to English by Wu Lihuan, Chad Austin Meyers. Beijing, China: Springer, 2019.

Saito, Yuriko. "The Ethical Dimensions of Aesthetic Engagement". *ESPES*. Vol. 6/2 (2017): 19-29.

Shusterman, Richard. *Praktyka filozofii, filozofia praktyki: pragmatyzm a życie filozoficzne* [Practicing Philosophy: Pragmatism and the Philosophical Life]. Ed. by K. Wilkoszewska. Transl. to Polish by A. Mitek. Krakow: Universitas, 2005.

Shusterman, Richard. *Świadomość ciała. Dociekania z zakresu somaestetyki* [Body Consciousness: A Philosophy of Mindfulness and Somaesthetics]. Ed. by K. Wilkoszewska. Transl. to Polish by W. Małecki, S. Stankiewicz. Krakow: Universitas, 2016.

Wilkoszewska, Krystyna (ed.). *Estetyka pośród kultur*. Krakow: Universitas, 2012.

Wilkoszewska, Krystyna (ed.). *Estetyka transkulturowa*. Krakow: Universitas, 2004.

Xiangzhan, Cheng. *Collected Discourses in the Aesthetics of Living Life: From Literary Aesthetics to Ecological Aesthetics*. Beijing: People's Press, 2012.