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INQUIRY

The Journal of Kitsch, Camp and Mass Culture

Volume 1 / 2022

**AN ASYNCHRONOUS DIALOGUE  
ON CORE IDEAS**

**Katya Mandoki**

Metropolitan Autonomous University, Mexico

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## **Abstract**

I had the privilege of enjoying a dialogue with Arnold Berleant as we met during congresses on several occasions and by writing to each other on various questions throughout the years. All of these have been precious to me. On the occasion of his *Festschrift*, a new opportunity opens up in which I revise some of his ideas on aesthetic field, aesthetic disinterest, aesthetic engagement, and negativity along his career. Even if we both have focused on similar subjects and approached them through a pragmatist framework, our common starting point has taken each of us through very different paths. Berleant's utopian views of aesthetics projected into the political somehow echo Frankfurt School's emancipatory demand on the aesthetic, and I do hope he may be right. Although we may dream for a better world, whatever values and directions aesthetics takes requires us to underline its specificity well aware of political and ethical implications in which it is always already entangled with.

## **Keywords**

Aesthetic Field, Aesthetic Disinterest, Aesthetic Engagement.

In his clear, accessible and ordered writing, always illustrated by examples, Arnold Berleant's work is of interest to both specialists and early students of aesthetics. Since the beginning of his prolific trajectory, his critical approach directly confronts controversial subjects opening a door to revise well established credos in mainstream aesthetics such as the Kantian concept of aesthetic disinterest and Bullough's psychical distance.

Berleant<sup>1</sup> attempts to retain what is valuable in the concept of "aesthetic disinterest" and re-invigorate it examining its association to universality, contemplation, objectualism, distancing conditions, traditionally linked to aesthetic attitude (in Stolnitz's term). He criticizes Bullough's notions of "psychical distance" derived from Kant's conception of disinterested delight (as well as from Addison, Hutcheson, Shaftsbury) and proposes to replace it by "situations where experiences occur and which frequently, but not invariably, include identifiable objects."<sup>2</sup> This is an effort to adjust and update aesthetics so that it can account for current artistic phenomena such as conceptual art, performance, installations, mail, land, body and digital art. As I wrote three decades ago:

In a sharp attack on contemporary aesthetics, Arnold Berleant<sup>3</sup> attempts to destroy three predominant myths in works published in this field: 1) that art consists primarily of objects, 2) that works of art have a special status, and 3) that they must be viewed in a special way. His critique stems from contemporary artistic expressions, such as happening, ready-mades and conceptual art that cannot be considered as objects. He denounces the incompatibility of objectualist presuppositions in aesthetic theories with contemporary art. ... Lastly, he

denounces Bullough's notion (1979) of "psychical distance," and Aldrich's "prehension" that derive from Kantian ideas of contemplation and disinterest.<sup>4</sup>

The aesthetic experience is, for Berleant, neither disinterested, nor contemplative, nor detached. Given the immobility of established ideas on traditional aesthetics, Berleant's criticism contributed to the necessity of exploring artistic processes under the light of new production and of including real experience into the conditions of art appreciation, rather than reproducing the idealization of some pure aesthetic state of contemplation. Dewey and Merleau-Ponty are certainly antecedents to his pragmatist and phenomenological framework from which he intends to examine "what remains of value in the traditional approach once its misleading assumptions and claims have been set aside."<sup>5</sup> He points out the three main concepts of Kantian aesthetics: the idea of taste, of disinterestedness and of the beautiful:

Taste in the beautiful is alone a disinterested and free satisfaction; for no interest, either of sense or of reason, here forces our assent ... Taste is the faculty of judging an object or a method of representing it by an entirely disinterested satisfaction or dissatisfaction. The object of such satisfaction is called beautiful.<sup>6</sup>

Note that beauty is for Kant in this specific paragraph of the "Explanation of the beautiful resulting from the first moment" of the *Critique of Judgment*, a name, a category we use to qualify a reaction to an object that produces an emotional effect of satisfaction, not a metaphysical or ontological entity. This definition seems univocal enough as a signifier denoting such reaction despite Kant's other contradictory definitions of beauty. The same can be said of the term "taste" as the faculty of judging disinterested satisfaction extracted from an object we call beautiful demanded by its universality based on *sensus communis*. Taste discriminates between adherent and pure beauty and between the good, the agreeable and the beautiful, as well as between more refined subtleties in the judgment of artworks.

Berleant considers that "we can forgo the requirement of universality with an easy conscience" and I would add moreover that given the fact that such Kantian universality was in fact heavily eurocentric, it is even easier. This does not necessarily take us to purely relativistic aesthetics in all cases: a beautiful well-done necklace can be appreciated among very dissimilar social groups. However, other objects judged as beautiful are culture specific such as tattoos, phosphorescent painted hair, Mursi expanded lower lip, abstract art, barbies, neck lengthening among the Kayan, heavy metal music, piercings etc.

In the Transcendental Aesthetics of the *Critique of Pure Reason*, as the science of the laws of sensibility, Kant followed Baumgarten's concept of aesthetics as inferior gnoseology beginning in sensation and space and time a-priori intuitions as conditions for the development of rational knowledge. By the third Critique, Kant not only disassociated the aesthetic from the cognitive but

contrasted both, therefore renouncing to a fundamental grounding for aesthetics as the theory of *aisthesis*, sense perception, and reorienting the focus upon the beautiful, the sublime and the artistic.

For Kant, an aesthetic judgment is by definition non conceptual. “The judgment of taste is, therefore, not a judgment of knowledge; thus, it is not logical, but aesthetic, if we understand by this that the determining base of which cannot be but subjective.”<sup>7</sup> However, the fact that we are dealing with experience does not necessarily exclude the cognitive as the difference lies in the categories applied to perception.

Experience in itself may not produce rational concepts, but it is a condition to rationality. Starting from experience we form models of the world which can then be abstracted into categories and laws (in what Peirce’s semiotics defined as “secondness” and “thirdness”). Aisthesis as sensibility or perception, “firstness”, the feeling of something as something particular, the qualia, constitutes the dimension that characterizes our discipline, from which beauty and art are derivative, not central. Aesthetics as the study of all processes involved in aisthesis encompasses the whole spectrum from the simplest sensations which are physical processes at neurological terminals, to wider perception and to experience up to very subtle sensitive distinctions biologically and culturally determined.

If aesthetics would deal only with beauty as its primary and foundational object, then it would have to study beauty in all its forms: human beauty, animal beauty, vegetal beauty, mineral beauty, intellectual beauty, cosmic beauty, technological beauty, even conceptual beauty or cellular beauty. Such studies would benefit if the field is defined as “beautology” or “kallology” (to use the Greek root *καλλονή*) rather than “aesthetics” and thus concentrate on this category only. As I have repeatedly argued<sup>8</sup> beauty is one among many categories applied to qualities of perception and experience most of which we have barely begun to explore. This is strictly consistent to Kant’s idea, as in the paragraph quoted, that beauty is a term we use, a semiotic category, and not an entity.

As Eagleton<sup>9</sup> clearly stated, what is implied in the idea of disinterest is basically a disgust with utilitarianism and expresses an idealized image by the bourgeoisie of itself dreaming in leaving aside the vulgarity of practical calculations. In the act of disinterested satisfaction according to Kant one must act not through egoism, advantage or benefit but enjoy the artwork independently of our interest in its existence. However, isn’t the idea of “disinterested delight” an oxymoron since such delight provided by the artwork is exactly the benefit we are interested in?<sup>10</sup> In short, Berleant’s putting the questioning of these two ideas to the fore was a much-needed step.

### **On the aesthetic field**

The relevance of analyzing artworks in their conditions and situations was clear to Berleant already in 1970 when he presents a contextualized approach to aesthetics by the interaction of various factors such as the biological, psychological, material and technological, historical, social and cultural. He proposed the idea of “aesthetic field” composed of four factors: “the creative factor represented primarily

by the artist; the appreciative one by the viewer, listener, or reader; the objective factor by the art object, which is the focus of the experience; and the performative by the activator of the aesthetic occurrence” instead of the psychology or biography of artists as was practiced in art history and criticism.

Even if we may not agree in the factors he suggests, contextualizing is a much-needed approach to understand the aesthetic. Berleant’s “aesthetic field” brings to mind Danto’s concept of the artworld (1964)<sup>11</sup> and Dickie’s (1974)<sup>12</sup> institutional analysis as well as Bourdieu’s “intellectual field,” (1969) later “cultural field”, all probably influenced directly or indirectly by Thomas Kuhn’s concept of “scientific paradigm” in his *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* originally published in 1962.<sup>13</sup> This, too, may have derived from Saussurean concept of language “system” or “paradigm” in semiology, as later termed by Roland Barthes. Arnold Hauser (1951) initiated the contextualization of artistic production in its social environment through his three volumes of *Social Theory of Art* (or rather social history of art). Cultural conventions, professional specialization, specific sites for exhibition and presentation, a system of evaluation and valuation, and of course an economic and social demand are necessary for artistic works to exist and condition their outcomes.

Berleant’s concept of “aesthetic field” can be understood perhaps as a sort of magnetic field at the center of which may lay configurations that attract sensibility. He writes: “On the view taken here, value is inherent in an aesthetic field or situation and is not a feature or quality of any particular part of it, such as the object or the appreciator.”<sup>14</sup> Yet it seems to me that it is precisely the receptivity of the appreciator’s sensibility in that point and moment that enables a situation to become an aesthetic field. A numb person may be present and not notice anything, neutralizing any aesthetic value possible no matter how spectacular (as bored, lumped, and tired tourists even at the Sistine Chapel).

As he defines it: “this I shall call the aesthetic field, the context in which art objects are actively and creatively experienced as valuable.”<sup>15</sup> I would suggest that since it is referred to art objects and not to sensibility in general, it would be more specifically denoted as “artistic field”. On the other hand, as I have proposed in my work, there is a whole aesthetic dimension that is not circumscribed to the artistic although it encompasses it among other phenomena that touch, so to say, our sensibility in delightful or painful, nourishing or poisoning ways. It is not the objects that define what is aesthetic, but as Kant and Baumgarten stated, the subject’s receptivity.

### **On aesthetic engagement**

In common language, an engagement is taken between two persons committing to remain together or making a formal agreement to get married. In Berleant’s work it has been a half a century approach to a new way of defining art appreciation that can encompass also contemporary forms of art. “If there is a distinguishing characteristic of traditional as well as contemporary art, it is their ever-insistent demand for “appreciative involvement.”<sup>16</sup>

He considers that distancing is no longer pursued in contemporary arts, from Grotowski's theater to Nitsch's performances and proposes instead aesthetic engagement to characterize the most fulfilled stage of aesthetic experience: "I call such appreciation 'aesthetic engagement', and when it is achieved most intensely and completely, it fulfills the possibilities of aesthetic experience."<sup>17</sup> Berleant conceives aesthetic engagement as the perceptual experience of a cultural ecological process.<sup>18</sup>

There are problems, however, with the concept of "engagement" and with "situations where experiences occur". First, engagement is not an exclusive concept for aesthetics, as in Webster's various definitions: "an arrangement to meet or be present at a specified time and place a dinner engagement; a job or period of employment especially as a performer; something that engages: pledge; the act of engaging: the state of being engaged; emotional involvement or commitment; betrothal; the state of being in gear; a hostile encounter between military forces."

This exemplifies our struggle with words and the theoretical effort to clear ambiguities into such polysemic terms. The traditional notion of "contemplation" is not exclusively aesthetic either, as it seems to have been borrowed from theology (as the notion of "inspiration" probably derived from theological "revelation"). So is the idea of aesthetic redemption in Frankfurt School aesthetics, particularly Adorno and Benjamin. From religion we too inherited Burke's idea of the sublime, closely related to the biblical sense of exaltation or elevation שגב. We can see that the relation between the religious and the aesthetic is as complex as that between the aesthetic and the ethical and the moral, no less than the political.

My work certainly faces the same problem. I tried to deal with this concept in everyday aesthetics from a phenomenological approach and my proposal was the term of *prendamiento* or *latching-onto* as the drive for sensorial openness and craving for life metaphorically taken from a baby's latching onto the nipple in full sensorial experience. Reconsidering this term fifteen years later, I suspect that it could have carried an ambiguity as the term of *latching-on* may be used for other situations, particularly psychological as in toxic symbiotic relations. What made me propose it then was that *aisthesis* involves (or engages?) an appetite for life, and an openness to feeling and sensation. It is both a receptive activity and active receptivity.

As I am not a native English speaker, I am somewhat deaf to the connotations the term *latching-onto* may have, so I will use *prendamiento* instead. I remember that when my father was hospitalized in his final month, a talented man full of curiosity, originality and a lover of enigmas to solve, my preoccupation was, apart from medical issues, that he must latch onto something significant to him (music, a movie, a book) to overcome being latched-by pain and anxiety. *Prendamiento* is our condition of vitality, our will to live, our sense of gratitude and joy and occurs even without an object to focus on and certainly not exclusively with an artistic object. It means full receptivity, as the term itself denotes, and occurs by just being aware of the moment, of our condition of being alive, of letting our sensibility appear like the sun among the dense clouds of constant thinking. Through Greimas'

semiotic square of contraries and opposites, I discovered other related conditions such as *prendimiento* to refer to the situation of sensibility sequestered by stimuli that requires our closing up from experience too painful to undergo (using Dewey's term). Being engulfed by a problem not in a playful manner but in a desperate one is *prendimiento*, a form of encapsulation or numbness, of obsession or addiction. There is also *desprendimiento*, when one's sensibility is finally liberated from being passively latched-by, and *desprendamiento*, losing the nipple, the object of pleasure falling out of the joyful experience and leaving us with a sense of being lost and disoriented.

Dewey's concept of aesthetic experience, to which Berleant's *engagement* is closely related, struggled to establish that art is not a mere object but a form of experience depending on the activity of the subject as a live creature. He vividly described the wide spectrum of experience as a foundation for the aesthetic and then deviated from this experiential ground to establish the uniqueness of *an experience* circumscribing the aesthetic as artistic experience. Berleant remains close to Dewey's sense in this approach of aesthetic engagement as principally related to the arts, if not only, as he opens up the scope to environmental aesthetics that encompasses both natural and urban environments.

Berleant refers to "situations where experiences occur" mostly in relation to art or beauty and within an aesthetic field, situations in a museum, appreciating a beautiful landscape, a theater performance, a well-designed space etc. In my view, no matter what we do, sensibility is always already involved even if we numb ourselves to protect our senses from aggressive or dull stimuli as a noisy drill in the street or loud cheap music in a restaurant or neighbor. As I have argued in my work, experiences occur in all situations as sensibility is ever present, it is our basic life condition, even when we wrap ourselves within obsessive thoughts. Life itself is experiencing, no matter how dimly, fragmentarily or without conscious awareness of senses involved, as in our dreams during sleep. Life is aesthesis.

Berleant understands such situations as "aesthetic urban ecology": "Thus an aesthetic urban ecology denotes an integrated region with distinctive perceptual features: sounds, smells, textures, movement, rhythm, color; the magnitude and distribution of volumes and masses in relation to the body; light, shadow and darkness, temperature." What he demands is the need to build a more humane, aesthetically friendly urban ecology, an old art that stingy and cold functionalism has stolen from us in exchange for aseptic environments if not simply hostile. I hope his voice will be amply heard by urban planners ... if such a thing really exists given the chaos of city building fully dominated by economic interests.

### **On negativity of aesthetics and aesthetic violence**

The common honorific usage of the term "aesthetic" – as if by itself refers only to a positive value instead of a topic for research – has hindered inquiry on how sensibility can be manipulated and violated. Berleant has been questioning this very serious problem and exposes another side of aesthetics, what he calls "negative aesthetics", an issue in which we both converge.

Quoting Berleant's definitions and descriptions of negative aesthetics as follows: "We can give a name to sensory experience that has no clear positive value, the underside of beauty, so to say, and call it negative aesthetics...when an aesthetic occasion is perceptually distressing, repellent, or painful, or has effects that are harmful or destructive, then understanding the aesthetic obliges us to acknowledge negativity." In other words, "we can speak of negative aesthetic values, of negative aesthetics when, in the primacy of perceptual experience, the experience as a whole is in some sense unsatisfying, distressing, or harmful." "What I want to call negative aesthetics refers to whole domains of sensibility suffused with negative value...works with no redeeming qualities, from those that are trite, baldly unsubtle, overly sentimental or maudlin to those that are sadistic, degrading, or damaging."<sup>19</sup>

Urban conditions can be very violent and aggressive to any person's sensibility, as being daily crushed within a multitude in crowded subway wagons, stressed to overcome traffic to get on time for work, living in utterly sordid spaces in dark, poorly ventilated little boxes, or having to work in over-illuminated offices or visually or acoustically strident malls, streets and restaurants as the many other examples described by Berleant among conditions of aesthetically hostile environments.

Yet there also situations where aesthetics can be pleasurable and yet negative. In order to distinguish the full spectrum of aesthetic negativity, we must separate its immediate emotional effects, moral consequences, religious values, ideologies and sensorial intensity. In my view, the most deleterious of all negative aesthetics is in poisoning lives, often as irreversible as love famined childhoods. In dictatorial regimes, children are often victims of ideological, religious or militaristic indoctrination teaching them to hate and enemy train to murder as an ideal. It may even be fun for kids to play as martyrs and heroes, priming them into hatred from a very early age and so irreversibly affecting their sensibility and who, as those with severe love deprivation, never quite recover.<sup>20</sup> This is not an exclusively psychological problem as it determines their openness or closure to others and to different worlds, their attitude to life, to their own life and its value. Criminal customs like selling girls to old men and other forms of child abuse, parents and school teachers exerting physical violence against children and the monstrous practice of clitoral ablation still practiced around the world with impunity make negative aesthetics seem trivial when in fact they are extreme manifestations precisely of it. It is the victims' sensibility that is at stake here, and destroyed.

As Berleant notes: "Indeed, it is often difficult to distinguish aesthetic negativity clearly from the aesthetically positive, as well as from the different forms that it takes and from moral considerations." There certainly can be conflict between what is legal and what is legitimate, what is moral and what is ethical, what is aesthetic and what is artistic; we could expect aesthetic negativity to be problematic. For Berleant, in the "negative sublime" the aesthetic and the moral are inseparable, and yet I would add that morality is not the rod to measure negative aesthetics but sensibility, because it always implies the vulnerability of the other, it is an assault against life, the ultimate value. Being alive is being with others, not just *Dasein*.



Apart from moral implications, terrorism as negative aesthetic principally attests to the degree of mutilation and rottenness of a human being's sensibility by ideology in the case of the perpetrator to commit such acts, and certainly to the degree of pain, horror, and irreversible damage such terrorist causes to the victims. Even if the systematic cultivation of such mutilation is prevalent and even a motive of pride in different social groups, such catastrophic situation should never be taken as normal or culturally relative.

We must keep in mind that the delicate problem in coping with both the aesthetic and the moral is the moralization of aesthetics or the aesthetization of morality. At the same time, we cannot ignore their imbrication.

### **On a personal note**

My first encounter with Professor Arnold Berleant was through his paper on "The Historicity of Aesthetics". I was surprised and greatly pleased to find such a fresh and critical approach to traditional aesthetics very much in tune with my own concerns. During the 2004 International Congress of Aesthetics at Rio de Janeiro I had a chance to meet him personally and discuss with him several ideas. I mentioned quoting him on my work on everyday aesthetics ten years earlier on a published book in Spanish (1994) and how I appreciated his new approach.

Again, we coincided at several congresses, one of them a meeting in Lahti precisely on the topic of applied and everyday aesthetics. Arnold there presented a paper on the negativity of aesthetics, with which again we coincided. Such negativity, as phrased by Berleant, is precisely what drew me towards the study of aesthetics. To say it very briefly, from a young age, when I learned about the Holocaust, I was impressed by the theatrical and visual display of Nazism and wondered about its power of manipulation for any ends, even genocide. I was interested to find out how this power of aesthetics operates to the degree of mobilizing entire populations and even a continent to support an obvious psychopath with fits of rage. That was part of my Ph.D. dissertation which required also a previous step proving that there is such a thing as non-artistic aesthetics apart from the aesthetics of nature. In other words, in order to approach this dangerous side of aesthetics, I had to argue first that aesthetics has not only a positive value and second that is manifested not only to the artistic but in the everyday, most saliently in the political. The wide array in the social use of aesthetics in everyday life, in official and military displays, in religious and athletic events, in how the belief in occult superstitions is created, in common interactions and presentations of identities, has been neglected in our philosophical field. My first book *Prosaica*, published in Spanish in 1994, was this first step.

Even if I do not converge with Berleant's utopian views of aesthetics projected into the political, which somehow echo Frankfurt School's emancipatory demand on the aesthetic, I hope he may be right. Although we may dream for a better world, whatever values and directions aesthetics takes

in different situations requires first to understand its specificity apart for moral and political considerations with which it is always already entangled with.

I must end by acknowledging how much I appreciate his editorial initiative for stimulating a diversity of positions in *Contemporary Aesthetics* journal, the freedom to open up and generously support non-conventional approaches and most of all his friendship and encouragement. I joyfully join to celebrate with my students and colleagues such a bountiful, didactic, courageous and prolific trajectory.

<sup>1</sup> Berleant, Arnold. 1986. "The Historicity of Aesthetics I & II". *British Journal of Aesthetics* v. 26 #2: 101–11; #3: 195–203

<sup>2</sup> Berleant, 1986, II, 200.

<sup>3</sup> Berleant, 1986, I & II.

<sup>4</sup> Mandoki, Katya. 1994. *Prosaica; introducción a la estética de lo cotidiano*. México: Grijalbo, 35 translated from Spanish. See also Mandoki, Katya. 2007/2017. Routledge. *Everyday aesthetics: prosaics, the play of culture, and social identities*. Aldershot: Ashgate, 21.

<sup>5</sup> Mandoki, 1994.

<sup>6</sup> Mandoki, 1994.

<sup>7</sup> Kant, Immanuel. 1951. *Critique of Judgment*. New York: Hafner Publishing, 1951, §1.

<sup>8</sup> Mandoki, 1994, 2007.

<sup>9</sup> Eagleton, Terry. 1990. *The Ideology of the Aesthetic*. New York: Blackwell, *passim*.

<sup>10</sup> cf. Mandoki 2007: 17–22.

<sup>11</sup> Danto, Arthur. 1964/1987. "The Artworld" *Philosophy Looks at the Arts*. Joseph Margolis (ed.) Philadelphia: Temple University Press.

<sup>12</sup> Dickie, George. 1974. *Art and the Aesthetic: An Institutional Analysis*. New York: Cornell University Press.

<sup>13</sup> Kuhn, S. Thomas. 1962/1970. *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*. Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press.

<sup>14</sup> Berleant, Arnold. 2010. *Sense and Sensibility: The Aesthetic Transformation of the Human World*. Exeter: Imprint Academic: 140.

<sup>15</sup> Berleant, Arnold. 1970/2000. *The Aesthetic Field A Phenomenology Of Aesthetic Experience*, republished by Cybereditions: 50.

<sup>16</sup> Berleant 1986 II: 199; 1991.

<sup>17</sup> Berleant, Arnold. 2010. *Sense and Sensibility: The Aesthetic Transformation of the Human World*. Exeter: Imprint Academic: 87.

<sup>18</sup> Berleant, 2010: 105.

<sup>19</sup> Berleant, 2010: 143.

<sup>20</sup> cf. Mandoki, 2019.

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