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ARNOLD BERLEANT'S PHILOSOPHY  
AS A NEW UNDERSTANDING  
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# THE AESTHETIC FIELD: ARNOLD BERLEANT'S PHILOSOPHY AS A NEW UNDERSTANDING OF EXPERIENCE

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## Abstract

The essay aims to identify the original matrix of Berleant's aesthetic thought by deepening his initial research on the notion of "field". Berleant analyzes the "aesthetic field" by considering it as a dynamic texture that stands outside the dualisms that have characterized modern philosophy. At the core of this analysis is the fruitful convergence between different traditions from which Berleant draws for laying out his philosophical program. In particular, if phenomenology leads him to thematize the connection between experience and judgment, pragmatism leads him to establish the cornerstone of the experiential (and above all perceptual) character of the aesthetic as such. Thanks to this, the perspective developed by Berleant since the seventies of the twentieth century still proves to be largely vital, as it is capable of delineating an anthropological horizon centered on the analysis of the "environmental" practices of the so-called "aesthetic engagement".

## Keywords

The Aesthetic, Field, Experience, Engagement, Valuation.

## 1. The past and present context of Berleant's research

In the past half century,<sup>1</sup> Arnold Berleant stands as a prominent figure in the landscape of American philosophic aesthetics. *The Aesthetic Field*, first published in 1970, is his first organic contribution on art and aesthetics.<sup>2</sup> Since then, his research has continued in broad and significant continuity with these analyses,<sup>3</sup> exploring theoretical scenarios much prior to their current ubiquity, from *Environmental Aesthetics* to *Everyday Aesthetics*. Yet *The Aesthetic Field* rarely appears in the bibliographies of works retracing salient stages of recent Anglo-American aesthetic reflection. And neither was its 2001<sup>4</sup> reissue successful in changing this state of affairs. The reason for this neglect, however, as will here be argued almost paradoxically, is the trait that makes this author current.

Berleant's first monographic work has its roots in a special terrain. Within it resound phenomenological accents, as its subtitle (*A Phenomenology of Aesthetic Experience*) articulates, as well as pragmatist accents, documented emblematically by Berleant's use of the Deweyan term "transaction" to indicate the actual occurrence of aesthetic experience. What is more is how Berleant manages to harmonize these accents by tuning into frequencies of the analysis of experience; meaning that "experiential aesthetics"<sup>5</sup> programmatically frustrates any attempt to resolve the aesthetic in categorical or linguistic frameworks. The original context of *The Aesthetic Field* is the same context against which the lines of research animating the prevailing character of philosophy at the time were

going, when the takeover of the *linguistic turn* was transforming the aesthetic debate into an analytic philosophy of art. Consequently, aesthetics' focus shifted onto a plane of investigation far from the description of experiential structures found in *The Aesthetic Field*. It is therefore easy to understand why those scholars who have reconstructed these events, starting from this same context,<sup>6</sup> have marginalized, or even pushed beyond their horizon, Berleant's very first crucial and organic work.

However, today the situation has changed. In philosophy, it is not unusual to witness in these last years the re-emergence of instances similar to those promoted by Berleant as part of a comprehensive re-conception of the mind, experience, and language itself. Analogously, in theoretically systematizing the results of the most up-to-date experimental researches, some scholars are moving beyond the empiricism that still thrives in laboratories and on the field. Even the heirs of analytic thought have increasingly shifted their research focus towards experiential structures. Thus, in general, the reasons and strategies that Berleant tried to bring about and to the fore through the notion that entitles this volume, that of "aesthetic field", are corroborated. What stands out is the proximity between Berleant's first work, where we read that aesthetic experience "brings us back to the noncognitive perceptual root of our concepts and our beliefs"<sup>7</sup>, and recent projects aiming at grasping the roots of meaning by focusing "on qualitative and affective dimensions of experience that have usually been regarded as operative mostly in our experience, appreciation, and creation of various arts".<sup>8</sup>

## **2. Between phenomenology and pragmatism: the non-cognitive character of the aesthetic**

The protracted inattention to *The Aesthetic Field* stems from the tendency to neglect a specific line of research. As a student of Marvin Farber, one of Husserl's most significant promoters in the United States, Berleant develops a reading of phenomenology that has since its beginnings dealt with the horizons of pragmatism, at least on the basis of an in-depth study on the issues of "naturalism" and the "naturalization of philosophy". In light of this peculiar revival of Husserlian themes, mainly linked to *Experience and Judgment*, Berleant's original theoretical context appears all but sterile, as well as less elementary or naive than one might think. Presuming that the aesthetic can be resolved as a subclass of the linguistic and/or cognitive is one of the most striking reasons that hindered and hinder the correct reception of Berleant's work. Re-examining the afore mentioned context can therefore aid in the overcoming of such reasons.

The theme around which the general layout of *The Aesthetic Field* revolves is the complex relationship between the holistic and *lebensweltlich* components of human experience, as well as the predicative and evaluative articulation realized on the reflexive plane of the noetic, cognitive, or even theoretical elaboration. It is in looking at this nucleus that the richness of Berleant's text emerges. It belongs to the same plane on which is etched the darker side – so to say – of the perceptual thematized by a philosopher such as Wilfrid Sellars: another great philosophical example stemming from the same phenomenological root grafted by Farber into the American philosophical ecosystem. In fact, as it has been observed:

despite Sellars became renown as one of the fathers of conceptualism, he always held that his own description of the conceptual and normative content of our perceptive abilities should be completed by a theory of their sensory and non-conceptual character, and this distinction, anything but marginal, shows itself right down to his latest works.<sup>9</sup>

With the notion of “aesthetic field” Berleant refers exactly to this problematic junction. The entire research supporting the *The Aesthetic Field* is marked by the intent to subtract the aesthetic from the predicative, and *therefore* from the cognitive, starting from the frank recognition of its sensible-perceptual (but not constative) nature. This “inherently non-discursive experience”<sup>10</sup>, which “takes place on a pre-reflective level, contextual rather than fragmented, and therefore undifferentiated by any conceptual distinctions”<sup>11</sup>, is immediately revealed as an overall horizon of presence, rather than as a single instantaneous datum or collection of data:

To say that aesthetic experience is immediate, then, does not mean that it is fleeting. It is to utter a denial, to assert that there is no intermediary in our encounter with art. As qualitative experience, art is felt with a compelling directness in which detachment, deliberation, and all other intermediate states have no place. Symbol and substitute, therefore, do not yet exist, nor does propositional truth. There is forceful presentation rather than representation. Sensory qualities predominate in their immediacy and directness, and even when experience intensifies to the degree of rapture or awe, sensation is not transcended but lies at its very heart. The experience of art is neither religious nor mystical; it is eminently worldly. Not only are sensory qualities present in the immediacy of aesthetic experience; relations are often there as well. However they are felt rather than cognized in the context of qualitative immediacy which distinguishes the experience of art. The qualitative nature of aesthetic experience, its sensuousness, and its immediacy thus complement one another.<sup>12</sup>

And shortly after:

aesthetic experience, for all its significance and profundity, never substantiates propositions for which we can claim literal truth. Moreover, the powerful sensory presence of aesthetic intuition is alien to the direct apprehension of propositional truth that is the distinctive mark of intellectual intuition.<sup>13</sup>

This highlights how questionable it is to resolve the complex content of experience in a linguistic framework. And this is the point where, in *The Aesthetic Field*, phenomenology meets pragmatism. In fact, for Berleant, the aesthetic modality of experience, precisely because not predicative, embodies salient aspects of the primary interaction between the human organism and the environment, a direct echo of a Deweyan formulation of experience. This experiential mode, and with it art, is “presentational rather than representational, immediate rather than mediate, perceptual rather than conceptual, unique rather than abstract, intuitive and contextual rather than analytic and fragmented, and above all, neither

cognitive, inferential, nor discursive"<sup>14</sup>. The thesis derived from this complex framework establishes the extraneousness of the aesthetic to the dimensions of meaning (denotative), of truth (discursive) and, more generally, of the cognitive in the strict sense; i.e., instead of having or acquiring meaning and truth, the aesthetic is meaningful and manifestative.

However, this does not mean expelling every cognitively determined or determinable content from the horizon of the aesthetic. A cognitive element, despite carrying out its cognitive function, can still possess relevance and significance in the aesthetic field by characterizing its overall density. The aesthetic significance of a symbol, for example, is independent of its symbolizing power, that is, of the cognitive function it performs (vicariousness with respect to an absence). Its import lies in the operative mode it promotes (the aspectual character of a presence). From an aesthetic point of view "artistic symbols do not *do*; they *are*"<sup>15</sup>, or rather, they do not refer to, but manifest. This is made possible by implementing in a phenomenological environment a precise pragmatic lesson: the work of art is understood verbally as a "working"<sup>16</sup>, therefore distinct, in a Deweyan fashion, from the art object. Instead, it is equivalent to the transaction itself in virtue of its experiential endowment:

The work of art in its fullest dimensions is, in the final analysis, the aesthetic transaction in its entirety. It is a transaction that occurs in the context of an environment involving, in minimal terms, an art object and an individual who activates its aesthetic potential.<sup>17</sup>

### **3. Aesthetic experience as perception**

The tension between experience and judgment, characterizing the phenomenological matrix of *The Aesthetic Field*, finds its own catalyst in the acknowledgement of the experiential status of aesthetics in general, and of art in particular.<sup>18</sup> The result is the individuation of the area in which the non-cognitive character of the aesthetic is expressed: the dimension of the perceptual praxis. Complementary to the thesis of the extraneousness of the aesthetic to the cognitive is that related to its perceptual character: "the aesthetic field is a perceptual field."<sup>19</sup> The goal of *The Aesthetic Field* is an analysis of perception capable of rightly emphasizing its performative, interactional and collusive components that vastly exceed perception's subordination to cognitive determination, and further its reduction to a stimulus for ascertaining categorically defined or definable content. If the aesthetic must be rethought as perceptual, perception must be rethought as aesthetic, reconsidered as a praxis of *aesthesis*.<sup>20</sup>

Alongside phenomenological and pragmatist motives, the deliberate resumption of the register of *prehension* described by Whitehead plays a primary role<sup>21</sup>. It expresses the aesthetic root of experience in perceptual terms, as primitive as the logical-cognitive one. On the one hand, prehension coincides in Whitehead with the perceptual praxis of a sensible complex; in its fulfillment this latter enjoys itself, is "self-enjoyment" as an "occasion of experience" by absorbing in its own texture the many aspects in which it manifests itself.<sup>22</sup> On the other hand, within it unfolds the potential that Whitehead explicitly attributes to the aesthetic modality of experience – with respect to the logical mode – as its

distinctive trait. An energetic potential connoting every artistic configuration in virtue of the very same aspectual, and therefore also dynamic, relationship between whole and parts that is in force within it.<sup>23</sup> The conjugation between these theoretical matrices, as already noted, is not exclusive to Berleant's research. Also as regards the further enrichment in perspective in light of reference to Whitehead, a direct precedent can be identified. It consists of yet another overlooked work, mostly in the last few decades, explicitly recalled by Berleant. It concerns *Philosophy of Art* by Virgil Aldrich,<sup>24</sup> published less than a decade before *The Aesthetic Field*. Starting precisely from "aesthetic perception" as "prehension", Aldrich develops a programmatically phenomenological inquiry generally oriented by Dewey's pragmatism,<sup>25</sup> in order to respond to the need, felt later also by Berleant, to escape contemplativism and, more broadly, the Kantian shadow commonly hanging over descriptions of aesthetic experience. The advantage derived from the rereading of such texts – texts that have been generally marginalized in the framework of the debate originating in the twentieth century's last decades – should by now be clear: they help identify possible bases taking leave of the gnoseological constraints of modern aesthetics. The horizon they trace significantly coincides with that of current neo-cognitivist philosophical agendas revising the model of mind, committed as they are to overcoming the dual opposition between mind and world. It is exactly at this crisis and inflection point of modern thought that Aldrich and Berleant converge. Urging the emancipation from formal transcendentalism as well as from classical metaphysics, in it is disclosed the possibility of a description of the "perceptual integrity of aesthetic experience"<sup>26</sup> in a usefully anthropological and material key.

The consequent theoretical turn deriving from these general assumptions deserves further emphasis. The strength in the concept of field adopted by Berleant comes to light when the material density it expresses is recognized. In the field, the various subjectual and objectual<sup>27</sup> vectors manifest in their co-implication. It is therefore not only a question of rejecting specific options in the philosophy of art, such as for instance the spectatorial principle of aesthetic contemplativism. Rather, what emerges is a radical discontinuity with respect to the Cartesian matrix of modern thought, as Berleant expressly declares with a reference precisely to Aldrich<sup>28</sup>. And, of course, leveraging the pre-predicative (instead of cognitive) and interactional status (instead of oppositional) of the field aligns completely in line with turning toward an experiential modality freed from the lapse into knowledge. This is precisely a practice "that solicits an involved, responsive receptivity in the appreciation of art, a genuine participation in an experience of primary, qualitative perception"<sup>29</sup>. It is for this reason, and certainly not for slipping unexpectedly into a form of psychologism, that the phenomenon of the aesthetic field is forcefully directed to dealing with the complex figure of the *perceiver*: a sort of relational functor. His or her sensitive practice has the character of immediacy, not because it instantaneously renders accessible for a subject a perceptively given object. Rather, it coincides with the manifestation of an intricate network of mediations materially informing the complexity of the field, and which – situated in the sensible as the domain of phenomenological categorial intuition – find a reflexive expression in *perceptual*<sup>30</sup> rather than "conceptual or analytic" *categories*.

#### 4. The perceiver's praxis

Now a brief technical remark aimed at emphasizing the centrality and relevance of the notion of "perceiver". One might assume a blunt coincidence between this term and the noun participle "percipient" (from Latin: *percipiens*, present participle of *percipere*), also used in *The Aesthetic Field*. Yet, pausing where "percipient" occurs in Berleant's dictation, shows how this is not the case. Berleant makes use of this latter word only in reporting Bullough's psychological theses<sup>31</sup> or in isolating, for the sake of analysis, the intrasubjective side of experience<sup>32</sup>. Conversely, throughout the rest of the book, the text pivots on the *perceiver*. The perceiver is more than a mere subject who perceives by placing him or herself against a world of already established objects. This is why it is necessary to avoid the reduction of the subjectual pole to the percipient, to prevent the investigation from being relegated to a psychologistic equivocation.<sup>33</sup> This passage is delicate since it coincides with the possibility of focusing on the phenomenological differential between two different approaches to subjectivity, both implicated in the aesthetic field.

Indeed, to find one's self in the position of the perceiver is not the consequence of the purely subjective adoption of an attitude. It is the unfolding experiential relationship that establishes "the manner in which the perceiver functions in the aesthetic field"<sup>34</sup> as he or she corresponds to the related appeals of meaningfulness. That is, this position is defined on the basis of modal constraints constitutive of the correspondence that is carried out in the field as such, based on the specific material qualities configuring the interaction that is taking place<sup>35</sup>. In this way, the aesthetic experience appears different from the effect of psychic activity. If anything, it is the so-called subject that tentatively takes shape for how it is passively constituted, that is to say, it emerges from the particular modalities of environmental relationships in which it is enveloped and engaged. Therefore, the *modal* appraisal of the *perceiver's subjectivity* must be kept separate from the *substantialist* appraisal of the *percipient's subjectivity*. Between them runs the same difference dividing "actor" and "agent". The first is irreducible to the second because incompatible with a Cartesian subject defined by its "intensional" endowment, and it is rather defined by the role it is called upon to play, in how it is asked, is allowed, and is able to participate in the field. Similarly, whilst percipient is only the subject of an act of perception, perceiver is the subjectual condensed nucleus of a perceptual practice whose *ownership pertains to the field itself*.

There is another facet that Berleant exploits to show the modal nuances of the aesthetic field. This facet is the delicate distinction between perceiver and appreciator. The appreciator is aware of the beauty of the aesthetic to a degree that exceeds the perimeter of the mere operative perceptual life, given his or her savouring of the aesthetic as it takes part in his or her experience. More than an aesthetic perceiver, the appreciator is an *aesthetically aware* perceiver, whose evaluative judgments proceed from his or her valuing efforts, which – as will be seen later – characterize and passively constitute the subjectual pole of aesthetic experience. We must surrender to the fact that the introduction of the

concept of field forces the description to insist on complex relational connotations; which are themselves difficult to capture in a theoretic lexicon marked by clear boundaries separating subjectivity and objectivity. We must endure a certain linguistic and conceptual discomfort once we accept the invitation to try a new codification of the components involved in the description of perception.

Moreover, even this last aspect has its roots in the general strategy inspiring *The Aesthetic Field*. The complex phenomenological reality of the perceiver flares up once the consideration of perception as practice is assumed over against perception as act. As an act performed by an agent, perception can almost docilely flow back into the channel of cognitive activity, canonically attributable to the perimeter of a replaced subjectivity. As a practice that stages a procedural field, that is as an enactive-performative dynamic that shapes he or she who is its actor, perception exhibits unavoidable externalist characteristics. It is a correspondence, perhaps even an expressive one, which involves on equal terms the subjectual pole and the objectual pole. It is primarily a relationship, actually an embodied one<sup>36</sup>, irreducible to the designation of isolated juxtaposed contents according to the dualistic subject-object scheme. It is in this sense that Berleant notes the unsuspected complexity of aesthetic perception, since “the art object and its perceiver, to be sure, do function in the aesthetic field, but in ways not explained or even suggested by the usual common-sense account”<sup>37</sup>. In fact, aesthetic perception consists in a “transactional relationship in which perceiver and perceived are functionally inseparable, each becoming what it is on the basis of its intimate dependence on the other”<sup>38</sup>. As a praxis, perception is a path unwinding along a ridge from which related slopes extend. It makes little sense to try to establish whether the ridge belongs *de jure* to this or that side, even in the awareness that the ridge does not represent a further side.

This is why Berleant peremptorily issues a perceptual charter to the aesthetic. Some passages from *The Aesthetic Field* are unequivocal in this regard. For example: “when the experience is direct and immediate, when it is thoroughly qualitative, it remains immersed in the perceptual sphere”<sup>39</sup>; or again: “each art, in its own way, derives from the infinitely fertile matrix of perceptual experience and replenishes its source in an endlessly enriching cycle”<sup>40</sup>. It is thus reiterated how the aesthetic is not a plane or level added to those that intersect in a usual experiential field. The aesthetic experience is the overall mobilization of the field’s vectors based on a qualitative *interrelation* that is carried out as *aisthesis*. Consequently, as Berleant distinguishes the perceiver from the subject who merely performs a perceptual act, so does he, like Dewey, distinguish the art object, an atomic objective content, from the work of art: an objective experiential whole that with the “dynamic character of the aesthetic situation”, of which it is a vector, “includes the active involvement as well as the passive receptivity of the person experiencing art.”<sup>41</sup>

## 5. The operative nature of the aesthetic field

The description of the aesthetic field is therefore more concerned with its operative factors than with isolated thematic vectors – or rather: indeed, with vectors, but only as they are outlined by and within



the peculiar operative character of the field, not *per se*. The goal is the ability to “see the aesthetic qualitatively rather than substantively”<sup>42</sup>, with adjectival and adverbial terms rather than substantive or substantialist terms (cf. also *ibidem*, in footnote). The reader can see what, on the subjectual front, this implies for the various functional nuclei surrounding the perceiver, artist, and critic; and on the objectual front what it implies for the work of art, form, content, media and materials.

In relation to each of these nuclei Berleant strives to remove the aesthetic from the danger of its dissolution brought about by the ossification implicit in substantialist thematizations of its pervasive operativity. These latter lead to define the aesthetic in general on the basis of elements that in some way belong to it yet, once absolutized, inevitably distort it. In so doing, the dynamic tensions that make up the aesthetic in its operativity become fixed juxtapositions between mutually exclusive substantialist principles. And the consequence is not simply that of obscuring factors of complexity in the phenomenon. A far greater fault is to replace the very same phenomenon with a content that no longer serves as a processual moment of the whole, precisely because it tends to render the whole a part of it, its domain, its exemplification. Then, from the dense structure of the field, integrated in its aspects, we move toward a discrete succession of incompatible views: nuclei made fixed because detached from the texture of the field once foundational links are presumed. In so doing, the so-called “surrogate theories” emerge, which *The Aesthetic Field* polemicizes. It is no coincidence that their various determining principles are deduced, not always consciously, from specific conceptions of experience based on extra-aesthetic principles (metaphysical, gnoseological, religious, social, psychological, etc.), as is the case with the dogmas of disinterest or distance in appreciation.

Opposing these forms of substantialist unilateralism, Berleant insists on aesthetic praxis as an overall *engagement* that the perceiver assumes with the field, a collusive and integral transaction *with* the other nuclei that operate therewithin. A commitment, therefore, which implies a properly environmental and immersive surrounding, instead of juxtaposed canonical schemes that generate distance:

Aesthetic experience transcends psychophysical and epistemological dualisms, for it is the condition of an engagement of perceiver and object in a unified relationship that is forcefully immediate and direct. [...] Instead of a fragmented concatenation of independent elements, the aesthetic field reveals a perceptual order and unity. Thus we can properly describe aesthetic experience as integral. It is experience which achieves its own unity when its boundaries can be defined functionally by the way in which the appreciator and the art object combine with the other factors in the aesthetic field to form a unified perceptual environment, an experiential totality.”<sup>43</sup>

In the aesthetic engagement with the environment, activity and passivity, as well as subjectuality and objectuality, continually blur with one another. On the perceiver's side, there is an incessant oscillation between sensible receptivity to the ways in which phenomena manifest themselves and the performativity that stages it. The effusive commitment to the aesthetic experience is therefore the

exercise of skills that enables a non-thematic increase of competence in the praxis of *aisthesis*. It intensifies awareness before generating new knowledge. Certainly not instrumental to the acquisition of thematic knowledge and therefore to the awareness of “what”, the aesthetic engagement remains intertwined with sensory manifestation in a never suspended contact with the awareness of “how”. Working aesthetically, even as creators, means knowing how to proceed by groping<sup>44</sup>; therefore, the aesthetic is in itself *performance*, and can be fully carried out only in new praxes of *aisthesis*, in a progression of aesthetic knowledge that concerns exclusively the way in which the experience unfolds. The engagement remains a direct contact, *awareness*, without ever transfiguring into categorical or propositional knowledge, at least as long as it retains its own aesthetic nature.

The notion of engagement and its close coupling with the environment, inducing one to speak of “ecosystem”<sup>45</sup>, acquired an explicitly growing relevance in Berleant’s subsequent reflections.<sup>46</sup> But its phenomenological-pragmatist, anti-Kantian and anti-Cartesian root, is already fully exhibited in 1970. Here, the emphasis falls on its relational and modal trait, resisting any psychological or merely contextualist characterizations, without excluding both psychological and contextual implications or aftereffects. A point in case is the abandonment of the notion of pleasure, favoring instead the description of gratification provided by the aesthetic engagement. Through the redemption of the “sensuous character” of the aesthetic<sup>47</sup>, Berleant replaces the intellectualized “aesthetic pleasure” with a factor of sensible intensification that does not disdain its own bodily affectivity, confirming the emancipation from modern dualisms. And it is precisely because in *The Aesthetic Field* this engagement reveals a physiognomy characterized by such traits, that its notion contributes to crediting Berleant as an exemplary reference if one is to develop, even today, an aesthetics that proceeds from *material engagement*: that is, from the paradigm of “experience-with”, according to non-Cartesian models of the mind.<sup>48</sup>

The comparison between two theological metaphors which, in opposite contexts, are called to express the peculiarity of the aesthetic, helps express this change of scenery. Arthur Danto, ever since the famous essay initiating his reflections on art, to illustrate the thesis of the *ontological* duplicity of the work of art (supported by the semantic-cognitive character denied in *The Aesthetic Field*) uses the metaphor of the acquisition of celestial citizenship in addition to terrestrial citizenship.<sup>49</sup> Assuming a hiatus as radical as that which separates two ontological levels, he thus separates the aesthetic (or better: the artistic) and the sensible. Instead, Berleant invokes their convergence where he observes that, if anything, “what is needed is a reformation in aesthetic theory that would be achieved by supplanting the priesthood of the surrogate theories by the protestantism of direct communion with experience that art is able to furnish”<sup>50</sup>.

## 6. The value and aspectual articulation of the aesthetic

Bringing the aesthetic back within the horizon of the praxis of *aisthesis* is, however, far from confining it to a perceptual content among others. It means recognizing it as a process of experiential

intensification marked by its overall qualitative relevance to the sensory register, in which it inscribes any subsequent analytically enucleable property or content. One could say the aesthetic consists of a orthogonally perceptual texture with respect to the conceptualization that the cognitive gives rise to. Consequently, although not due to some specific nuclear properties, it remains in principle distinct from experiences which, despite recruiting perceptual contents, move primarily towards other dimensions<sup>51</sup>. And it is based on this configuration that Berleant proposes an original approach to the controversial question of the normative in the aesthetic and therefore of its value.

Although it may serve instrumentally, even if honorifically, in itself, the *recognition* of aesthetic value (an experiential praxis) is independent of the implicit or explicit *attribution* of a determined value (an act of judgment). With respect to the subjectual pole, it is passively constitutive rather than actively constituted. It coincides with the feeling of being engaged in its perceptual praxis, which precisely because it requires such a responsive and collusive engagement, without referring to other dimensions, manifests itself as innervated by the sense of value; it appears of value (*valuable*): in the aesthetic field “the very experience is valuable—value is not something added to it or derived from it”<sup>52</sup>. Therefore, Berleant states that “the field in which each object of art is an element possesses its own experiential qualities, and aesthetically it is its own justification”<sup>53</sup>. The awkwardness we feel when asked to motivate the aesthetic import of an experience is due to the fact that any reasons we adduce express only aspects of it, and not institutive stimuli, nor projected mental contents. It is more an analytic than synthetic nexus. In other words, the field justifies itself for the way in which it manifests. This stands in contrast to a justification based on a material or an ideal that would be attained through it but itself situated outside its perimeter: “such intrinsic experience has a self-sufficiency; it is its own justification. Leading nowhere beyond itself, it never leaves itself behind. Aesthetic perception is essential perception, perception at its fullest and most complete”<sup>54</sup>.

It is especially in the last chapter of *The Aesthetic Field* that Berleant insists on the need to distinguish between the attribution of a value that, as the result of a judicative activity, has propositional content, and the qualitative, non-propositional experience which is of value in that it urges and demands in its fulfilment the experiential absorption of the perceiver, engaging him or her in the participation of the unfolding field.<sup>55</sup> In the second case, there are no explicit or implicit evaluative acts that function as cause for inferentiality or extrinsic justifications, nor is there recourse to norms and criteria of judgment, these latter being determining or reflective. Instead, one experiences the very emergence of the necessary experiential relevance in its peculiar perceptual modality simply by participating in a flow of sensibility *as* it emerges in transactional correspondence. Therefore, the aesthetic field is described as “the context in which art objects are actively and creatively experienced as valuable”<sup>56</sup>, not judged or evaluated as such in advance.

This reflects another conceptual distinction that might be worth focusing on. The praxis of the aesthetic perceiver is considered extraneous to the evaluative paradigm of “evaluation”, and on the

other hand homogeneous with the experiential paradigm of “valuing”. It articulates the value inherent in phenomena in the sense that it expresses it, stages it, and thus contributes to its visibility, which is very different from predicating or in any case, enucleating the value of the phenomena. This makes fatally double, or ambiguous, the aesthetic value, which is “*experienced as intrinsic and judged as extrinsic*”<sup>57</sup>. And if the predicative inherence of the (extrinsic) value can be suspended, the pervasive immanence of the (intrinsic) value is unavoidable. Anything but grafted onto a neutral perceptual fact, the valuative sense operates transversely with respect to the praxis of *aisthesis*. It feeds its development because it prevents simple irrelevance. Furthermore, every experiential modality must possess a criterion of relevance to be experience and not mere occurrence, and the peculiarity of the aesthetic modality is that the criteria which govern the field are intrinsic, and therefore themselves perceptual: independent of otherwise determinable atomic contents (be they axiological, cognitive, metaphysical, etc.). Therefore, any experience of field has aesthetic potential to the extent that it has sensible operativity, although certainly not every sensible experience is appreciated in aesthetic terms.

Precisely this operative texture, showing its ineluctable necessity in the intrasensorial salience of perception, endows with value a field as experienced and not judged, therefore as perceived in its pre-predicativity. And from the moment that the intrinsic value of the field finds expression in “relationships felt in the immediacy” that inhabit it<sup>58</sup> every hypothesis of a subjectivist justification is denied. It is these relationships that shape the subjectual pole, rendering the aesthetic operativity agent of passive syntheses, as such irreducible to an inert sphere of exercise of the faculty of judgment. In the aesthetic experience we are “judged” by beauty, and not vice versa. It is in this form that the tension between experience and judgment that was found at the basis of the phenomenological-pragmatist conception of Berleant<sup>59</sup> is summed *sub specie aethetica*, which he expresses with great clarity where he compares the two roles of the perceiver and the critic: “thus while the perceiver in an aesthetic situation may be said to engage in aesthetic valuing, the critic as critic is concerned with the quite different function of aesthetic evaluation.”<sup>60</sup>.

In line with what we have just seen, what distinguishes aesthetic experience from non-aesthetic experience is for Berleant something far other than some normative element or propositional content. More than a region, “aesthetic” qualifies a modality of experience: “the aesthetic is not a separate kind of experience but rather a mode in which experience may occur”, where it should also be remembered that “the modes of experience are not ontological”<sup>61</sup>.

It is to the complex descriptions of modality, which cannot be hypostatized because operative, that phenomenology must be patiently aimed at, avoiding shortcuts toward some ontology. This is reflected in how Berleant deals with the distinctive marks of the aesthetic. Unlike others who, to avert the danger of taking on definitive tones, spoke of “symptoms” or “indicators” of the aesthetic,<sup>62</sup> Berleant speaks of “characteristics” and “characters”; these obliquely demonstrate an entire operativity according to a modality with no reality other than its own concretizations. The characters

reviewed are then connotations of the whole, similar to those that make a physiognomy familiar even in the absence of precise correspondence between two specimens, allowing at most a “matrix definition” of the aesthetic as a “syndrome” of experience<sup>63</sup>. They are *aspects* of a dense whole, of the “undulating iridescence of an integral experience”<sup>64</sup>, not yet elements of a discrete compound. The entire “static phenomenology” carried out in the third chapter of *The Aesthetic Field*<sup>65</sup> must be read in this light, if we want to do justice to its implications, and its accordance with the subsequent chapter: a sort of “dynamic phenomenology” of the field as regards experiential concreteness, wherein the characteristic aspects unfold their fluidity and transversality, even in their possible interrelation with other experiential modalities.

Therefore, in conclusion, it would be improper to consider the heuristic choice made by Berleant – to start from the survey of the “aesthetic facts” – as an unexpected endorsement of art centrism. If so, there would be a patent contradiction with various programmatic declarations that are introduced in the 1970 text as well as in the development that his complex aesthetic reflection has known in subsequent decades. The “facts” from which Berleant moves have nothing to do with presumed data. They are “statements”, ways to express linguistically, and therefore propositionally, signs of the aesthetic field which are not *per se* propositional<sup>66</sup>. Their theoretical relevance lies in the problematic tension that informs them, the easing of which necessitates that the thematic be returned to the operative. Thus, reanimating in their superficial evaluative propositionality the experiential fabric that is expressed, that is, by travelling back from “facts” to “phenomena”<sup>67</sup>, we come to meet the aesthetic far beyond the cultural enclosure of Western Fine Arts; its historical concretization one among the possible many<sup>68</sup>. And this is definitely a capital ingredient of the perspective outlined by *The Aesthetic Field*, not in the least for this reason still relevant.

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<sup>1</sup> A first development of the contents presented here is in my introductory essay to the Italian translation of *The Aesthetic Field*: Arnold Berleant, *Il campo estetico* (Milan-Udine: Mimesis, 2021), 9-29. I am extremely grateful to Aisha Pagnes for the English translation and to Gioia Laura Iannilli for the final revision.

<sup>2</sup> Arnold Berleant, *The Aesthetic Field. A Phenomenology of Aesthetic Experience* (Springfield: C. C. Thomas, 1970).

<sup>3</sup> As further evidence of this continuity, see the recent recovery of the extremes of the theoretical program exposed in *The Aesthetic Field* found in A. Berleant, “Aesthetic Sensibility”, *Ambiances [Online]* (2015), <http://journals.openedition.org/ambiances/526>; doi: 10.4000/ambiances.526. For a general survey of this perspective, see the contributions collected in two monographic issues dedicated to Berleant's thought: *Espes* 6/2 (2017), and *Contemporary Aesthetics*, Special Volume 9 (2021).

<sup>4</sup> Arnold Berleant, *The Aesthetic Field. A Phenomenology of Aesthetic Experience* (Christchurch (New Zealand): Cybereditions 2001). All the quotations refer to this second edition; the relevant page numbers are provided directly in the text.

<sup>5</sup> Berleant, *The Aesthetic Field*, 121.

<sup>6</sup> To recall only two of the most significant cases, see the contributions reconstructive materials collected in “Aesthetics: Past and Present”, *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 51 (1993), and Jerrold Levinson, “Philosophical Aesthetics: An Overview”, in *The Oxford Handbook of Aesthetics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press 2003), 3-24.

<sup>7</sup> Berleant, *The Aesthetic Field*, 115.

<sup>8</sup> Mark Johnson, *The Aesthetics of Meaning and Thought. The Bodily Roots of Philosophy, Science, Morality, and Art* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2018), 51.

<sup>9</sup> Filippo Sanguettoli, “‘A sympathy laced with disagreement’. Wilfrid Sellars e la fenomenologia”, *Discipline Filosofiche* (1/2020), 245. - For an updated survey of Farber's phenomenology, see in the same issue of *Discipline Filosofiche* the essay by Antonio M. Nunziante “Marvin Farber e il progetto di una naturalizzazione della fenomenologia”, 135-58.

<sup>10</sup> Berleant, *The Aesthetic Field*, 46, 106.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 104.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 101.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 103.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 161.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 114.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 54.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>18</sup> It could also be said that this catalyst involves the divergence of Berleant's program from other phenomenological strategies in aesthetics. First of all it neutralizes that passage to ontology which instead, to give an authoritative example not ignored by Berleant himself, marks Mikel Dufrenne's investigation, as shows the architecture and the development of the second volume of his *Phénoménologie de l'expérience esthétique*; cf. Mikel Dufrenne, *The Phenomenology of Aesthetic Experience*, Engl. ed. (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1973), 335 ff.

<sup>19</sup> Berleant, *The Aesthetic Field*, 71.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 47.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 103-104, 174.

<sup>22</sup> See Alfred N. Whitehead, *Modes of Thought* (New York: Free Press, 1966), 151.

<sup>23</sup> See first of all *ibid.*, 61-2.

<sup>24</sup> Virgil C. Aldrich, *Philosophy of Art* (Englewood Cliffs (NJ): Prentice Hall, 1963).

<sup>25</sup> Without directly mentioning either Husserl or Whitehead, Aldrich reports the aesthetic object to the content of a "prehensive mode of perception" in the context of a description that he defines, in fact, as "phenomenology of art" (see *ibid.*, respectively 23 and 19-20). See also the following programmatic step: "the only philosophy of art that has a chance will dwell upon and among the perceptible phenomena of art without tearing and eventually annihilating their delicate tissues. This sort of scrutiny, and the theory that takes shape in this contagious intimacy with the phenomena, I call phenomenological" (*ibid.*, 4). On the other hand, Aldrich's references to Dewey are frequent and always decisive.

<sup>26</sup> Berleant, *The Aesthetic Field*, 84.

<sup>27</sup> In this context, it is at least worth distinguishing accurately between "subjective" and "subjectual" and, in parallel, between "objective" and "objectual". If "subjective" qualifies an experiential content insofar as it depends on the act performed by a subject, and thus implies a previously constituted "subjectivity", by "subjectual" I aim to indicate those experiential moments that tend to cluster around a "subjectual" pole that is in the process of being constituted; these moments define, that is, a "subjectuality" (not "subjectivity") that does not belong to a subject, since it rather identifies the subject's position within the field. The same applies, *mutatis mutandis*, to the distinction between "objective" and "objectual". In a pragmatist perspective, as well as in a phenomenological one, this distinction cannot be neglected, while, for example, a psychologist position would certainly conflate the subjectual into the subjective. Hence the technicalization of these terms, which makes some passages of the text somewhat laborious to read, and for which I apologize.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 108 (cf. note 98).

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 160.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 131.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 76.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, cf. 54, 80, 94, 142.

<sup>33</sup> Berleant's anti-psychologism seems evident, for example, when he writes: "Proposals for aesthetic disinterestedness, isolation, psychical distance and the like have been put forward as ways of characterizing the aesthetic attitude and setting it off from one that is scientific or cognitive, practical, moral, or religious. While there is no question of the historical importance of these concepts in contributing to the identification of an aesthetic mode of experience, it may be useful to re-examine them in the light of the manner in which the perceiver functions in the aesthetic field. For when these ideas are set against the phenomenology of aesthetic experience, the limitations imposed by their excessive concern with the psychology of attention becomes plain". *Ibid.*, 56.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, 56.

<sup>35</sup> As the examples illustrate: *ibid.*, 55.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, 72.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, 51.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, 139.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, 121.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, 157.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, 54.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, 87.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, 129.

<sup>44</sup> Cf. *Ibid.*, 99.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, 81-82.

<sup>46</sup> In addition to the volume A. Berleant, *Art and Engagement* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1991), see the essay "What is Aesthetic Engagement" (two pages that should be reported in full for their programmatic character and,

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as a whole, emblematic) which opens the thematic forum that appeared in *Contemporary Aesthetics* 11 (2013), [www.contempaesthetics.org/newvolume/pages/journal.php?volume=50](http://www.contempaesthetics.org/newvolume/pages/journal.php?volume=50) A critical comparison between this Berleant's notion and Dewey's perspective comes traced by Thomas Leddy, "A Dialectical Approach to Berleant's Concept of Engagement", *Espes* 6/2 (2017), 72-8.

<sup>47</sup> Berleant, *The Aesthetic Field*, 95 ff.

<sup>48</sup> For the notion of "material engagement" see first of all Lambros Malafouris, *How Things Shape the Mind. A Theory of Material Engagement* (Cambridge (MA) and London: The MIT Press, 2013). For the experience-with paradigm, cf. "Book Forum on Aesthetics and Human Nature" (Questions by S. Chiodo, R. Dreon, S. Gallagher, T. Griffero, J. Levinson, C. Paolucci, R. Shusterman; Replies by G. Matteucci), edited by Gioia Laura Iannilli and Stefano Marino, *Meta: Research in Hermeneutics, Phenomenology, and Practical Philosophy* 12/2 (2020), 593-639, [http://www.metajournal.org/article\\_details.php?id=438](http://www.metajournal.org/article_details.php?id=438). But cf. also Nicola Perullo, "The Experience-with: Steps Towards an Aesthetics from Within", *Reti, Saperi, Linguaggi* 18 (2020), 241-58.

<sup>49</sup> See Arthur C. Danto "The Artworld", *The Journal of Philosophy* 19 (1964), 582.

<sup>50</sup> Berleant, *The Aesthetic Field*, 47.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, 101-103.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, 150.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, 120.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, 122.

<sup>55</sup> In this regard, see also Arnold Berleant, "The Experience and Judgment of Values", *The Journal of Value Inquiry* 1 (1967), 24-37, where this distinction is indicated with extreme clarity: "Specifically, our difficulties in dealing with values follow from the failure to distinguish clearly and effectively between values as characteristic kinds of human experiences and value judgments as statements about such kinds of experiences. The first are the actual occasions of valuing themselves and, like all direct and immediate experience, are non-cognitive. Value judgments, on the other hand, are of a distinctly different order. They are statements which are framed *about* our value experiences; they offer a conceptual formulation and ordering of the valuational mode of experience. This being the case, such statements can be verified by placing them against the value experiences of men, and consequently these statements take on a cognitive character".

<sup>56</sup> Berleant, *The Aesthetic Field*, 50.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*, 157.

<sup>58</sup> Cf. *Ibid.*, 101.

<sup>59</sup> Particularly significant, from this point of view, is the passage in which we read: "valuational experience of art is not identical with evaluative judgment, and such judgment is the product of that experience, not its source." See *ibid.*, 151.. An advantage of phenomenological treatment is that the circularity usually reproached of whom usually describes the operative, non-thematic normativity of the aesthetic is resolved, and dissolved. With the consequent suspicion that this impression of circularity is only the byproduct of theoretical approaches not calibrated on the concreteness of the phenomenon.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*, 140.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*, 87.

<sup>62</sup> See the comparative synopsis of two of these approaches, namely those by Nelson Goodman (who talks about "symptoms") and Ossi Naukkarinen (who talks about "indicators"), carried out by Gioia Laura Iannilli, *The Aesthetics of Experience Design. A Philosophical Essay* (Milan-Udine: Mimesis International, 2020) 16-8.

<sup>63</sup> Cf. *ibid.*, 87-88, 133-134.

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*, 91.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*, 49 ss.

<sup>66</sup> Cf. *ibid.*, 22.

<sup>67</sup> Cf. *ibid.*, 23-24.

<sup>68</sup> Cf. *ibid.*, 31.