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MAKING THE WORLD BIGGER

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Abstract

The careers of academics are typically evaluated in respect to their own publications, the number of citations their works receive, awards, positions, their students' achievements, and sometimes their ability to raise funding. However, they may also have other kinds of interests and activities. I will focus on Arnold Berleant's role as the founder and long-time editor-in-chief of the journal *Contemporary Aesthetics* and emphasize his importance as an "enabler" who has opened possibilities for numerous others to broaden the field of aesthetics.

Keywords

Berleant, *Contemporary Aesthetics*

The careers of academics, if not their whole lives, are typically evaluated in respect to their publications, the originality of their ideas, the number of citations their works receive, awards, positions, their students' achievements, and sometimes their ability to raise funding. Quite understandable. All these, among several other issues, are relevant when considering how important and impactful a scholar is. Successful academics excel in most or all of these areas, and so has Arnold Berleant done over his long career. That is admirable, and not everyone achieves the same level.

However, there is at least one strand in Arnold's many-faceted career that is not mentioned in the list above: his role as the founder and long-time editor-in-chief of the journal *Contemporary Aesthetics*. Arnold and CA have created something extraordinary; something that makes the world feel bigger and brighter for us fellow aestheticians.

The first issue of the journal came out in 2003. Arnold told me about his plan earlier in the same year at one of the environmental aesthetics conferences organized by Yrjö Sepänmaa – another open-minded colleague – in Lepaa, Finland. The concept must have started to bubble up in his mind much earlier, of course. I congratulated him for his excellent idea to broaden the field of aesthetics through a new journal that would operate in a different manner compared to its more traditional predecessors. However, even if the plan sounded vaguely good, back then I didn't quite realize how important the step really was. Now, when more and more publications are open-access e-books and journals, and many research and funding organizations even require openness, it is easy to see that CA was a forerunner in something that has later become mainstream in many respects.

This is important. For good reason, it is typically the written and spoken ideas and concepts of scholars that are discussed and debated and that build the foundation of their long-perspective reputation, their legacy – at least in philosophy. There are exceptions who are also known for their other kinds of achievements, for their deeds, such as John Dewey for his educational activities. As Dewey and other early pragmatists pointed out, ideas can also be developed and made real in non-

or more-than-verbal practices, and this is exactly what *Contemporary Aesthetics* also does: it is a philosophy of aesthetics realized as an e-journal, through editorial practices. It is *contemporary* not only because contemporary philosophical themes are addressed in the essays published in it, but because it is also contemporary in its practices. This underlines the overall philosophy behind it: to understand the world around you, you must be engaged in and with it on several levels and in many ways. Don't just think, talk, read, and write, but do, make, experiment, test, play, show. Dare. Like it or not, in the contemporary world, a lot happens via digital media, and Arnold started to take this into account earlier than many others. However, this did not and does not mean that he would have forgotten the more tangible and bodily aspects of our lives, a theme that has been addressed repeatedly in his own texts and in CA. The digital and material merge, forming their own kind of whole that can be approached from a pragmatist, phenomenological, analytic, or some other point of view, and CA shows one way in which it can happen.

Arnold was the first editor-in-chief for 2003-2017 and it is impossible to overestimate his efforts. There was no ready model to apply or imitate, but he needed to create the whole concept and practices out of scratch. What should the publication policy be to make sure the journal would have its own character and role in the field? What should be said and done? There was no point in doing the same thing that others had been perfecting for decades. How should one manage the ever-changing technical issues? And what does it mean if the journal operates on this technical platform rather than on some other? Tools and regulations will not remain the same for long and all of them have their ethical and aesthetic implications. How do algorithms guide the writing process and who owns and controls servers? Technologies are worldviews. Where does one get the funds if there are no subscription fees? And how much is needed, after all? What is the political message of open-access publishing? Perhaps most importantly: how does one encourage colleagues to submit articles to a journal that does not yet have a reputation and does not directly help them to prove merit in their careers in the extremely competitive and conservative academia? How does one make the overall philosophy of the journal visible, understandable, and tempting? This, all this and more, is what it means to put philosophy in practice. Starting something completely new is much more demanding than sticking to old, well-established practices (without questioning their importance), but little by little everything was figured out.

I was not involved in developing the journal over the first years although I did happen to introduce the idea of and guest-edit the first special volume of CA (on aesthetics and mobility) in 2005. I have no idea how much Arnold discussed with other colleagues and what he did and pondered on his own, but be that as it may, I take it for granted that his role was fundamental. Without his vision and effort, the journal would not have been born, grown, and found its identity.

For its readers and authors, it quite soon became clear that the journal is something else. I am by no means saying that the more traditional journals don't have their place, but it was also quite

evident that there was an urgent need for an alternative. There was a niche – or Arnold created this niche – for a publication that has a more open, diverse, curious, and positively relaxed attitude than others. It simply felt like fresh air, and it was saying “yes”, instead of “no.” “Yes” to all kinds of themes and approaches – without compromising quality. It was meant for sharing carefully developed thoughts about the world around us, not for showing off that you know how academic games are played and that you have studied exactly the same classics and fashionable names as everyone else. In a way, this was not a surprise, given Arnold’s own articles and books that show the same kind of spirit. But it is still one thing to make it real in one’s own texts and another to open the same possibility for others and encourage them to take the jump. I was and still am as impressed and influenced by Arnold’s publications as many others are, but I’m equally excited about his role as the founder and main engine of CA.

Currently, I have the pleasure and honor to be a member of the editorial board of CA – now chief-edited by Yuriko Saito – and I would say that even if all the questions mentioned above still require constant attention and the journal is never ready, Arnold managed to lay a solid foundation for it. Its role and policy are clear: it offers a channel for texts in (and near) aesthetics that don’t necessarily follow the most traditional practices of many other journals as regards the themes addressed and the style of writing. It is forward-looking rather than backward-looking. It does a lot to cover the field of aesthetics very broadly, thematically, methodologically, geographically, and to some extent even language-wise. It allows variations and is inclusive, both for readers and authors. To use concepts Arnold also favors: *Contemporary Aesthetics* is a conceptual and intellectual virtual environment that offers plenty of possibilities to be engaged in and with.

One could maybe try to describe Arnold’s role in creating this environment as one of a publisher. But it is not only that. Arnold is a scholar himself, a musician, teacher, and whatnot. More than a standard publisher. His different roles interlace and support each other, and even though there is no one word that would describe his role especially as the primus motor of CA, what he has done especially through and with it has to do with making things possible for others and for the whole field. If “enabler” didn’t have negative connotations, it might be the word.

I appreciate and admire “enablers” of Arnold’s type a great deal. They make others better, make it possible for others to shine, to grow. In team sports, there are always the big stars who score goals and points and receive the biggest headlines and most attention. They are admirable, of course. But often there are more silent team-mates without whom the whole team, stars included, could not excel, even if their crucial role is not necessarily noticed by as many. I believe it is safe to say that in his role as an author, Arnold is a star himself. But he also has his role as an enabling team-mate, especially through CA.

He has created a context where experiments are welcome. Where – I think we can admit this – not every experiment is quite excellent but where we can also “fail” and learn from that. Where

diversity of thinking is welcome. This requires plenty of hard work. It is easy to come up with ideas of all kinds of journals and events, but it is quite a different matter to build them up and keep them running in practice. But this is what great enablers do. Through this, their impact can be even more wide-ranging than through their own works, and certainly different. This is by no means saying that Arnold's publications would not have great impact. But on top of that, his influence is affecting and his legacy is constantly growing in this way.

I would like to congratulate Arnold for his long career and great achievements – which will continue to prosper in CA for the years to come, as a many-layered practical philosophy of aesthetics.