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**ARNOLD BERLEANT – A LIFE FOR
NATURE AND FOR ART**

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Abstract

Arnold Berleant has been, since many years, both a friend and a guide in my work on aesthetics and in the IAA. His congenial approach to nature and his sincere and clear language has contributed to developments in environmental aesthetics and in attracting readers and students to his ideas that also implicate social values. Berleant's engaged concern about values of life and of the world have been pioneering efforts in ecological discourse. Berleant's own engagement with nature and with art gave fruit to his creative work in music, as he has been composing all along his academic career. Contemporary Aesthetics, a high-quality online journal that he created has been an indispensable international forum for all writers and readers of aesthetics

Keywords

Nature, Art, Engagement, Aesthetics, Contemporary-Aesthetics

Arnold Berleant's philosophy of environmental aesthetics has a wide scope covering many issues related to experience, yet I believe his central concerns to be nature and the arts. Two quite opposite realms: one being basically biological and the arts being humanly structured and cultural. Berleant's discourse that is straightforward and engaged sees these two realms related and often deals with both in connected ways that inevitably bring many other concerns into his discussion. Therefore, starting with my meeting Arnold Berleant fifty-two years ago, I will try to explain how I see these issues in his writing.

Arnold Berleant's *The Aesthetic Field – A Phenomenology of Aesthetic Experience*, which I believe was his first book, came out in 1970 while I was a painting student at the Art Center College of Design, also working at the library of the school. Being interested in the arts as well as in philosophy and art criticism, Berleant's book made a great impression on me with its critical stance on formalist and rationalist theories of art and its viewing the art object from the perspective of the artist, the perceiver and of society in general. I believe that today, half a century later, the book is still actual and should be read by art critics. In fact I assign it to my students who take my art theory and environmental aesthetics courses.

After reading the book I made contact with Arnold Berleant and the next time I was in New York I went to Long Island University to meet him. I think we had a congenial understanding and kept up contact and we have been friends ever since. I visited Long Island several times thereafter, even visited Arnold at his home where he was also composing music and playing the piano. It was an old two-story house with apple trees in the garden, visited by deer that came to eat apples. I remember the huge iron stove in the living room, which was scarcely lit even in the winter since Arnold,

even today, cannot tolerate hot weather. Today, reading his book 'The Aesthetics of Environment' I realize the landscape around his home in his poetic descriptions.

In the following years, having become a member of the International Society of Aesthetics, I had many occasions to meet Arnold at symposia and to invite him to Turkey for the international meetings we organized. In the Congress organized in Nottingham by Richard Woodfield, when Arnold Berleant was the president of the Association, Arnold suggested that I join the elections for the position of Secretary General. This membership occupied me with aesthetic issues for many years to come. I must also add that Arnold Berleant with his friendly and sensitive approach has drawn many people to the International Aesthetic Association and has also inspired many people to work on nature's aesthetics.

Arnold's 'The Aesthetic Field' was followed by many books over the years, mostly related to environmental issues and experiences of nature and of the world we live in. These texts on environmental experience, which Arnold sent me, greatly influenced my enthusiasm on the subject. When I returned to my home town Ankara to teach at the Middle East Technical University's faculty of Architecture I started a course on Environmental Aesthetics for architects, which I think was the first course in the world with that title, because I remember many people asking me what the title meant. Arnold Berleant's phenomenological approach to nature and aesthetics made me realize that I had to first introduce students to directly experiencing environmental conditions such as heat, sun, wind, light, coarseness, softness, etc.; many engineers also took the course and later confided that it had changed their approach to the world. Arnold Berleant has to be thanked for making many people aware of the primary values of the world around us.

Berleant's philosophy of aesthetics, mostly concentrated on sensory engagement in the environment or in the perceived object, whether it be art or nature, is elaborated in simple terms without philosophical jargon and involving the reader in a congenial way. Berleant explains how our vision directly connects us to the object we are viewing. As we walk, before we continue on our way, our body makes contact with what we see and extends our bodily apperception forward on the road in front of us. Berleant's theory of engagement reminds one of Merleau-Ponty's¹ theories about the corporeal engagement with space and how it is the body that gives space its coordinates.

Arnold Berleant develops his philosophy of engagement from many perspectives; not least is his strong criticism of political and economic values that are being imposed on society giving priority to immediate material benefits that undermine the intrinsic natural values such as the health of the planet as well as of its residents: animals and humans. In the book *Living in the Landscape* he elaborates on the superficial values of Disneyland and its mushroom copies everywhere in the world, that blind people to natural qualities that are being jeopardized by the soft-kitsch aesthetic created in these environments.² Berleant emphasizes that to appreciate and understand the values inherent in the environment we have to be actively engaged and have to make an effort. However, it is also important that certain activities in nature have to become a habit at a young age, for people to become

naturally aware of natural qualities. Berleant's aesthetic appreciation is open to contrasting values and goes far beyond established cultural prejudices such as the repulsive approach to rats and snakes, to disgusting matter as rotten flesh, etc. But as a deep-thinking phenomenologist, Berleant sees beyond prejudices and is open to the fact that tastes vary from culture to culture.

As a sincere pragmatist, Arnold Berleant's philosophy takes its place within the American Pragmatist approach that has been formulated since Pierce, encompassing scientific, psychological and aesthetic aspects of experience. He claims that our judgments about the qualities of nature are also formed by our moral as well as aesthetic views.³ It is clear that today, ecological concerns and threats to the environment have created new ways of viewing nature. We have come to understand that valuing nature also means valuing life on earth; Berleant's philosophy has prophesized this from very early times. In his 1992 book, *The Aesthetics of Environment*, Berleant emphasizes that we are "like our environment. In fact we are our environment" implying the connection between our body and the earth, or our immediate environment, in many ways, and related not least to our health.⁴ What is special about the aesthetics of the environment is that unlike objects or works of art, the environment is not bounded, its qualities can change, many of its perceptual aspects can change according to our movement, to the light and to many unperceived factors, thus it is difficult to describe or define environmental aesthetics.⁵ Writing about our experience in nature he mentions that nature not only surrounds us but it assimilates us. This is an insight that has rarely been mentioned.⁶

I believe that the pragmatism of Berleant's philosophy goes quite deep even if not philosophically elaborated by Berleant in his texts. Many of Berleant's engaged interests and the ways he tries to find answers to important environmental questions echo the ideas of American pragmatists all the way from Thoreau to Dewey and certainly to the late Joseph Margolis, though neither Margolis nor Berleant mention of each other. Berleant openly affirms relations with Dewey's pragmatist approach, especially in his realism and environmental experience. In his poetic descriptions of landscapes we can find echoes of Thoreau's approach to nature. In his explanations of how we experience the art object, we can find references to Dewey. But, Berleant has always been direct and lucid in his explanations. For him active involvement in any art experience changes the observer, but also the maker of the artwork. In this approach Berleant believes, as Dewey and also as Pierce, in the historicist flux that positions him close to Hegel and contrary to Kant's metaphysics.

In *Art and Engagement* where he deals with different kinds of artistic performance his elaborations on dance and music are especially insightful and confirm his phenomenological relation to art.⁷ In trying to define these two arts that also relate to process and time, and in referring to texts that have forwarded explanations about these arts, Berleant finds difficulties in language, because definitions generally have to use terms like construction or structure that refer to material elements whereas both in these arts, even if there is an instrument that makes the sound or a material body that creates the dance, what we observe and experience is something immaterial. For both arts

Berleant gives historical examples that make diverse interpretations and descriptions possible, conveying the essence of the art in question. In all the arts, Berleant emphasizes the continuity between art and observer, or performer and spectator, which is central to a phenomenological understanding.

Besides nature, Berleant's ideas about aesthetic engagement also concern the urban environment. He says: "*In an insistent way, the aesthetic of the city is an aesthetic of engagement.*"⁸ Although he mentions all the negative and disturbing aspects of urban life, Berleant believes that more than any other environment the urban milieu strongly involves all our sensory perceptions and even if it can also become oppressive, it has in contemporary times the most inspiring effect on cultural creativity. The humanly created qualities of the city turn it into an aesthetic object all by itself, and as all art we get engaged with it in many sensory and mental ways. According to Berleant this aesthetic engagement with the city can weaken the hierarchic political power mechanisms by making people aware of different human values.

In many of his books Berleant talks about the aesthetic experience of music in depth, since he has always been involved in composing and interpreting. As a practicing musician Berleant's understanding of art goes far beyond philosophical conceptualizations; he understands how sounds affect us, as he also writes about sounds and noise in urban experience. In 2007, Arnold Berleant came to Ankara to participate in the International Congress of Aesthetics where he performed playing the piano to one of his compositions. His extremely sensitive approach could be felt through the sounds that he had created and executed, and made the audience feel the naturalness and his having absorbed the qualities of nature that he had all along written about in his books. Berleant's philosophy that shines through his sensitive approach to the world has been an important contribution to the changes that have developed in aesthetic discourse in the last decades.

In his subtle way Berleant has influenced many young people in their understanding of the environment and relation to the earth. One of his contributions that will always be remembered in the realm of aesthetics is his founding the online journal of *Contemporary Aesthetics*. With its multifarious interests in the field of aesthetic experience this Journal that, in a very short time, became a journal of general high-quality reference on aesthetics, gave many young people outside the Western academic institutions the courage to speak their minds and to present examples from the world outside the West. I believe this Journal is a great feat that Berleant approached with success many years ago, without the support of established institutions without which many journals cannot live.

I want to take this opportunity to thank Arnold for his encouragement all along the way and for creating the background for many in the field of aesthetics to believe in the correct human and environmental values.

I wish him many more creative and enjoyable years.

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- ¹ Merleau-Ponty, Maurice, *Phenomenology of Perception*, Milton Park: Routledge, 2014.
² Berleant, Arnold, *Living in the Landscape*, University Press of Kansas, 1997, 41-56
³ Ibid. 63
⁴ Berleant, *The Aesthetics of Environment*, Temple University Press, 1992, 86
⁵ Ibid., 138-144
⁶ Ibid. 169
⁷ Berleant, *Art and Engagement*, Temple University Press, 1991, on music and dance: 132-172
⁸ Berleant, 1992, 97