

*Sensibility and Sense: the aesthetic transformation of the human world* by Arnold Berleant 2010, St Andrews Studies in Philosophy and Public Affairs series, Exeter: Imprint Academia, Reviewed for *British Journal of Aesthetics* 2010.

The subject matter and the many insights in this text make it a significant book for the new century. It raises the questions that need to be asked of the academic discipline of aesthetics. Moreover, it indicates the scope of the task before us if we are to take the social role of aesthetics seriously. As a book it is somewhat hampered by some lack of cohesion between its parts. It still bears the traces of being constructed with the use of separate essays: these make up six of its twelve chapters. This introduces a loosening of the narrative thread and overall argument and, in places, both repetition of a point and even seeming contradictions. This is unfortunate because what it does have to say is fresh, true, and tremendously important.

Chapter one discusses philosophical method and introduces the reader to the particular components that will be brought to bear in the discussion: phenomenology, an understanding of aesthetics that is related to the immediacy of perceptual experience, and a form of pragmatism that requires consideration of the consequences of one's practices. In chapter two the aim and ambitious scope of the book is explained:

As a domain of normative experience, the aesthetic has a powerful and pervasive presence in the human world. This book's central purpose is to reveal that presence and to explore how the aesthetic is incorporated in the texture of the world. Further, by recognizing the profound implications and the transformative possibilities of the aesthetic, we can help shape that world to make our place in it more generous and fulfilling. (p.31)

Thus the book cannot be faulted on a failure of ambition or social relevance. It sets out to begin a task that aesthetics, as a field of endeavour, needs to take on and it does so admirably.

In chapter two the claim that aesthetics is centrally about perceptual experience is unpacked in detail. Two shibboleths are dispensed with early on: that aesthetics is just about the fine arts and beauty of nature, and that to call something aesthetic is to "honor" it. These misconceptions as Berleant says: ... "unnecessarily restrict the applicability [of] the aesthetic, diminish its vitality, and largely divest it of its profound normative power" (p. 32). Broadening the scope of the aesthetic is carried out by a focus on experience and experience is broadened to all perceptual experiencing – not just vision and hearing. Here, and in other chapters, the emphasis is on all the senses and their working together in an embodied and socially, and environmentally embedded experience. Thus Berleant emphasises the immediacy of experiencing, but it is not the illusory immediacy of theoretical sense experience, it is always the *perception* of a culturally and socially embedded human being. And, as elsewhere in the book, we are reminded why this aspect of aesthetics needs foregrounding at the present time with a neat summary of the assault on the senses that figures in our everyday urban experience.

There is not a sense modality that remains unscathed in the urban environment, from the cacophony of the roar of traffic and the blaring of loud speakers in public places to the soporific blanket of canned music and intrusive private conversations over cell phones. In the gaudy, intense colors of advertising circulars and the bath of

all the commercial impingements on our sensibility, hardly a sense survives unoffended. (p. 46.)

One could re-describe the urban experience depicted here in terms of vitality and exciting energy; a welcome submersion in the social and new. But even if we do there is still a sense that vitality and energy can be better invoked with more discriminating choices in urban planning and social inventiveness. For example, pedestrianisation, skilled buskers instead of canned music, mobile phones used to organise flash mobs, variety from non-commercial spaces punctuating the business of opportunities, and so on. And for Berleant this is exactly the point. Aesthetics is also in the business of making value judgements and these are the kind of value judgements, based on the experiences that shape our everyday lives, that it should be at the forefront of making. How we arrive at those discriminations as individuals is explored in some detail, but exactly how we could arrive at them in the social realm of decision making is not explored fully.

What Berleant does go on to do is to set out in chapter three the aesthetic argument and it is here that the philosophical resources for that social decision making seem to be laid down. The aesthetic argument makes aesthetic perception foundational to epistemology, at least in terms of knowledge about the human realm and our striving for lives that are meaningful. Here the immediacy aspect of aesthetic perception gives way to one of aesthetic development, of getting beneath the immediate, of questioning one's responses, and developing a critical stance that can question both beliefs and the aesthetic qualities of the world we appear to have made for ourselves (p.62). It is in bringing about that transformation of one's aesthetic responses that art has a role to play.

In chapter four Berleant uncovers more of what he means by experiencing – Dewey comes into play here - and his attempt to escape the linguistic force and custom of dualism is reiterated. Thus chapters one to four are there to reposition the aesthetic as the instrument with which we can 'rediscover and reconstruct the human world' (p. 81).

The four chapters that make up part two of the book are all adapted from previous papers and this leads to a rather patchy presentation. There is a common thread, but it does not come through as easily as this reader would like. That said, chapter five – 'a rose by any other name' – has important things to say and emphasises the role of this book as a kind of manifesto for the reorientation of aesthetics as a discipline. If we take it as a manifesto, what is it saying? Something like the following nine points.

1. Aesthetics is a foundational discipline because aesthetic experience is temporally and heuristically prior to anything else or certainly anything else that is normative.

2. Aesthetics should be about aesthetic experience using its full sensory range rather than limiting it to just those senses that are easily transformed into states of mind.

3. The previous focus on concepts like disinterestedness have illegitimately led to an exclusion of objects and practices that have a functional purpose, these need to be brought into the remit of aesthetic consideration.

4. The active participation of the person engaged in aesthetic appreciation is to be encouraged.

5. We need to recognise that the domain of potential aesthetic value extends to all areas of life including the social.
6. We need to focus our attention less on objects and more on the “aesthetic field”: the experiential situation.
7. We need to examine more fully the fact of, and the impact of, negative aesthetic perception.
8. We should draw on relevant expertise from other disciplines (for example, to answer what are empirical questions) rather than pursue our own lines of thought in ignorance of relevant material.
9. When we put the previous points together it is clear that aesthetics has an important role to play in domains such urban design and indeed all forms of social organization, not as an ornament but as a foundational starting point.

If this looks like something other than aesthetics as we know it this is because, Berleant maintains, we have been caught up in false problems, as he says:

Unfortunately, however, aesthetics has been burdened with many so-called “problems” that are either contrived or misdirected. ... Indeed, such problems often rest on theoretical assumptions originating in cultural belief systems, or on premises that derive from quite different philosophical sources. We may therefore want to regard some of these problems as false issues in aesthetics, all the more unfortunate in their tendency to deflect us from larger concerns and more productive directions (p. 91).

His examples of false problems are things like “the definition of art, the boundaries of art, and the proper designation of beauty” (p. 84). Here and elsewhere in the book he seems to be not so much accusing aestheticians of wasting time as engaging in a philosophical version of the ‘physics envy’ that dogs those in the ‘softer’ sciences. For aestheticians I guess it would be something like logic envy or metaphysics envy. Thus instead of developing a distinctive field that rests on its own form of rigour and seeks help from other relevant disciplines when necessary it chooses problems that can emulate what is seen as rigour in other areas of philosophy.

It is for this reason, this call to think afresh about the power and substance of an aesthetics that focuses on an embodied and socially embedded aesthetic experience, that I would maintain this is an important book.

The book then proceeds to develop some lines of enquiry and raise the significant questions that such a reorientation of the discipline will involve. Thus we have chapters on the aesthetics of urbanism and a chapter that takes a very careful look at negative aesthetic experiences and particularly their pervasiveness in the everyday. Another chapter looks at terrorism, but I think here the inclusion of a paper that was previously self-contained again breaks up something of the continuity of the argument. I would have preferred to see the careful work on the urban and everyday developed more thoroughly and feed straight into the last chapters on aesthetics in politics. Perhaps the careful observational work on advertising as an infringement of the “perceptual commons” could have been taken through those later sections to show explicitly

how such a problem, once identified and brought to public consciousness, could be tackled through an aesthetically informed social process.

Perhaps that is too much to ask of what, I think, could be a founding text. It is the role of this book to raise questions and show why they are real questions that it should be the business of aestheticians to tackle. The rest is for the readers to take on, if they are persuaded.

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