An Aesthetics of the Social and Political

An Anthology of Essays by

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1. Ideas for a Social Aesthetics


ABSTRACT

In this chapter I want to sketch out the case for a social aesthetics. Relating the theory of the arts to social thought is not common. Indeed, apart from Schiller's tantalizing insights it has rarely been attempted. True, there have been tangential associations of the aesthetic with the social, as in the growing interest in aesthetic education. And, of course, the intersection of art and morality, pondered increasingly, brings the two together, since morality always implicates human relations. Probing this connection more directly and explicitly may be illuminating in surprising ways. Even more, it might contribute to a philosophy of culture. Let us see how this is possible.

2. Aesthetics and Community

ABSTRACT

What I should like to offer here is a preliminary sketch of a larger project, but one that I hope makes a significant statement about community. Beginning with some observations about individual and community, surely the central factors in social philosophy, I shall propose a convenient schema within which to place many of the endlessly varied instances of human association. This is not an exercise in typology, for the rational, the moral, and the aesthetic communities, the forms I shall use, are not pure nor are they logically exclusive. They do, however, distinguish different kinds of social experience and understanding, and they are useful for grouping actually existing societies. Most important, they represent real alternatives in social choice. Since theoretical ideas and moral criteria underlie every conception of community, and since normative experience is the basis on which we must evaluate social forms, let me begin with some observations about ethics.
3. The Cultural Aesthetics of Environment  DOI: http://dx.doi.org/10.17613/M6XK84P9C
Annals for Aesthetics, Fiftieth Anniversary Issue, Vol. 46B, 39-50. (Presented at the annual conference of the International Association of Environmental Philosophy, Montreal, 7 November 2010.)

ABSTRACT

Common problems invite coordinated solutions. It would greatly assist cooperative action on environmental issues if we shared a similar understanding of the ideas that are central to this situation. Encouraging as the global interest in environment may be, it is nonetheless the case that research on the aesthetics of environment displays significant differences in the meaning of its central ideas. It may therefore help reduce the inconsistencies and confusion in what is meant by the key concepts by clarifying their meanings. In such a spirit, I should like to offer some reflections on how we might bring together the sometimes disjointed thinking on the underlying issues.

4. Objects into Persons: The Way to Social Aesthetics DOI: http://dx.doi.org/10.17613/M6MC6S
Aesthetics Between Art and Society: Perspectives of Arnold Berleant’s Postkantian Aesthetics of Engagement, Espes Vol. 6, No 2 (2017), 9-18. ISSN: 1339-1119

ABSTRACT

This essay traces the steps to a social aesthetics. I begin by affirming the central place of sense experience for aesthetics and its refinement in the perceptual acuity of a developed sensibility. This leads to associating aesthetic appreciation with such perceptual experience. Rejecting the identification of disinterestedness with such appreciation, I propose the full participatory involvement in the experience of appreciation as expressed by the concept of aesthetic engagement. This describes the appreciative situation as an aesthetic field in which the perceptual, creative, focusing, and activating factors are in reciprocal interaction. It characterizes not only appreciation in the arts but occurs as well in appreciating natural, built, and social environments.

Aesthetic engagement in social aesthetics is exemplified by the gaze in the experience of four well-known paintings I shall consider. Following these I shall develop a series of related ideas that lead to the concept of a social aesthetics. Finally, I shall return to the paintings for an enhanced understanding of social aesthetics.

5. The Aesthetic Politics of Environment  DOI: http://dx.doi.org/10.17613/M6SF2MB6B

ABSTRACT
The historical course of the aesthetic and the artistic does not support the idea that the
artistic enterprise is or should be wholly self-directed. On the contrary, the social history
of the arts demonstrates their responsiveness to forces in the human world. Whether as
subject-matter, referent, incentive, or motive, the larger and all-inclusive social world is
immanent in art in diverse and often unpredictable ways. And, conversely, aesthetic
perception, which lies at the heart of art, is immanent and pervasive in the human world.
Exposing the many strands and layers of the influence of the aesthetic reveals as much
about human sociality as it does about art.

Illuminating the pervasiveness and importance of the aesthetic presence was the task of
my recent book, Sensibility and Sense: The Aesthetic Transformation of the Human
World. This essay carries that process still further, particularly into the regions of
political theory. It aims to show that the energies of the aesthetic process invariably
encompass and engage the social world, and that the implications of artistic practice and
aesthetic experience are necessarily political. Let us consider how thoroughly
interwoven are the social, the political, and the aesthetic.

6. Subsidization of art as Social Policy DOI: http://dx.doi.org/10.17613/M63T9D61W

ABSTRACT

The arts have always been integrated into their larger culture, responding to shifts in
taste and fashion and to changes in the social uses to which they have been put, as
much as they have promoted those same changes. Even their alienation reflects a social
influence. When this relation between society and the arts is recognized and affirmed, it
can enhance both by rediscovering the human locus of perceptual meaning and by
encouraging fuller social consciousness. An enlightened and imaginative program of
subsidies would promote cultural evolution. And an inclusive conception of art and its
social role can lead to their distinctive contribution to the physical and social shape of
our environment.

7. The Critical Aesthetics of Disney World DOI: http://dx.doi.org/10.17613/M6028PC9D

ABSTRACT

Disney World collects many themes into one enormous “fantasia,” a composite of
disparate types from various sources--futuristic, ethnic, fantasy, adventure. It is a true
anthology of distinctive environments. In its enormous variety, Disney World might be
considered a microcosm of America's cultural pluralism; on the contemporary scene it
stands as the kitsch of postmodernism. Yet its meanings do not lie wholly on the surface.
Disney World invites a range of interpretations that parallels its postmodern ethos,
making it at the same time an endlessly fertile subject for the subtextual elaborations of deconstruction. Like some of its rides whose sights appear abruptly out of the darkness, the rich significance of Disney World’s environments appears on multiple levels and in strange juxtapositions. By exploring some of its multiple facets through an aesthetic analysis, I hope to uncover some unusual dimensions of Disney World’s character as a postmodern environment. And deconstructing some of its multiple meanings will not only disclose its powerful normative message but inform a moral judgment as well.

8. Designing Outer Space

DOI: http://dx.doi.org/10.17613/M67H1DM4T


ABSTRACT

With the technical ability to control environmental conditions totally in wholly planned communities, determining their spatial characteristics, temperature, humidity, weather, atmospheric pressure, length of day, and gravity, we have the opportunity to fashion experience to a degree that was once inconceivable. There seem to be relatively few technical constraints on designers. Yet should technological and economic considerations alone determine the nature of our environment? Is what we are able to do the only limit on what we should do? Technology offers options without answers, but are there moral requirements that make certain choices preferable? And if aesthetic and ethical factors are unavoidably joined to technological ones, how can we combine their constraints and opportunities into a creative synthesis? The possibility of setting cultural, aesthetic, and ethical goals in advance raises basic questions about their choice. What should serve as a guide? Fundamental philosophical questions arise here in a setting that compels an answer.

9. The Subversion of Beauty

DOI: http://dx.doi.org/10.17613/M64B2X47X

Chinese translation by Zhao Yu, South China Academics (University of Macau), 2018.

ABSTRACT

We can see how an aesthetic analysis of the mechanisms of mass culture can reveal many of the hidden ways in which sensibility is appropriated and controlled. It may not be too far-fetched to recall Aristotle’s definition of a slave as a living tool. How else should we think of a person whose sensibility has been so taken over that one’s very perception of the world is controlled by others. This is more than physical domination, more than thought control; it is control over the very substance of experience. Would it be too strong to call this total enslavement? Through such an analysis as this essay suggests, aesthetics is empowered to become an instrument of emancipation.