Arnold Berleant

Re-thinking Aesthetics

Re-considering Philosophy and Aesthetics

The theme of this congress, »Aesthetics as Philosophy,« offers a rich opportunity for reflection on the meanings and uses of both aesthetics and philosophy. With the challenge of contemporary developments in the arts and the recognition of the diversity and uniqueness of human cultures, many different interpretations will surely emerge in the days to follow. Moreover, the timing of this congress at the end of the millennium, while hardly a cosmic occurrence, still offers an unusual opportunity for profound reassessment of both aesthetics and philosophy. I shall only begin a process here that will surely continue in the days that follow.

Aesthetics is often thought of as one branch of philosophy, sometimes, indeed, a secondary branch of little significance for the broad reaches of philosophic thought. This is somewhat odd, since Kant, who is generally regarded as a founding figure in modern philosophy, took the aesthetic as his epistemological foundation and then developed a theory of the aesthetic as the systematic unifier of knowledge and morality. And at a gathering of aestheticians from all parts of the world, it requires little argument to dismiss the low repute of aesthetics and acknowledge its philosophical significance. Because of Kant's enormous historical importance, however, it may be more difficult to reconsider his dominant influence on the discipline of aesthetics. Yet that is precisely what I should like to propose here. For what could be more in keeping with both the critical tradition of philosophical thought and the openness of aesthetic perception than to re-think the foundations of our discipline.

In the spirit of »aesthetics as philosophy,« then, I propose a radical re-examination of the foundations of modern aesthetics. This kind of exploration is at the same time a profoundly philosophical act, for philosophical premises lie at the very foundation of modern aesthetics. Exploring these premises, indeed challenging them, can lead us to a new basis for aesthetics derived from *aesthetic* inquiry and not as an afterthought of a philosophical tradition whose origins were quite independent of the aesthetic domain. Conversely, re-thinking aesthetics may suggest new ways of doing philosophy.

The Radical Critique of Aesthetics

In recent years aesthetics has had something of a revival and is slowly emerging from its philosophical eclipse. At the same time, it has been the subject of serious criticism and fundamental reconsideration. Let me mention two very different examples.

In *The Ideology of the Aesthetic*, Terry Eagleton develops a politico-social critique of aesthetics, placing it »at the heart of the middle class's struggle for political hegemony.«[1] Despite its protestations of autonomy, Eagleton sees the aesthetic in its historical complexity as a window into cultural and political changes. From this perspective, the very autonomy claimed for the aesthetic serves a larger political purpose as a model for bourgeois individualism, that is, of its own claims to autonomy. Thus the aesthetic is two-edged: It represents the political aspirations to self-determination of the middle class and provides an unconstrained locus for sensibility and imagination. At the same time, however, the aesthetic serves to internalize social power, rendering it, through its transformation into subjectivity, all the more effective a repressive force.[2] In a larger sense, then, aesthetic autonomy is specious, for the aesthetic is not autonomous at all but is harnessed to a larger, political, purpose. Perhaps this might be called, with apologies to Kant, purpose without purposiveness – a utilitarian goal masquerading under the guise of being self-contained.

Unlike Eagleton's subsumption of aesthetics under historical and political purposes, Wolfgang Welsch centers his critique on the aesthetic, itself. He finds that the aesthetic not only pervades the whole of modern life but lies at the heart of philosophical thought. The aesthetic concerns not just art but human culture *en tout*, and it spreads out to inform the very fabric of meaning, truth, and reality. Thus contemporary aestheticization processes cover the surface of our world and reach beyond to shape social as well as material reality, affecting the form of individuals' existence, of social interaction, and the very shape of culture, itself.[3] More provocative still is Welsch's argument for epistemological aestheticization, in which »truth, knowledge, and reality have increasingly assumed aesthetic contours.«[4] All this leads him to an »aesthetics beyond aesthetics,« which takes three principal directions: expanding aesthetic perception to the full range of *aisthesis*, enlarging the range of art to include both the multiplicity of its inner

[1] Terry Eagleton, *The Ideology of the Aesthetic* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1990), p. 3.
[2] *The Ideology of the Aesthetic*, pp. 23, 28.
[3] Wolfgang Welsch, *Undoing Aesthetics* (London: Sage, 1997), pp. 5-7.
[4] *Undoing Aesthetics*, p. 23.

aspects and the many ways in which art pervades the whole of culture, and finally, extending aesthetics beyond art to society and the life-world.[5]

I find these critiques of aesthetics both important and convincing. They herald a new stage in philosophical development, one that recognizes the fundamental place of aesthetics in both the criticism and construction of contemporary culture and of our very grasp of reality. Yet for all their broad thrust, I believe that they do not go quite deep enough. Eagleton encloses aesthetics in its political and historical context, while Welsch expands the aesthetic into a powerful cultural force. Neither centers his critique on the aesthetic, itself.

Yet the aesthetic theory they work with stands square in the center of the very philosophic tradition they question. And until the defects in this tradition are exposed and replaced, any critique of aesthetics merely snaps at the heels of a sluggish though still powerful beast. The domain of aesthetics needs to be invaded by a Trojan horse, by a critique from within the theory. In the pluralistic spirit of postmodernism, then, I believe that still more can be said, and this from the standpoint not of culture or of history but of the aesthetic itself. There are artistic grounds for a critique of aesthetics, and there are philosophical grounds, as well. Above all, there are experiential grounds. None of these is independent of historical and cultural forces, but at the same time they cannot be reduced to these forces. The critique of aesthetics must take place on many levels and in many forms.

Difficulties in Traditional Aesthetics

Western aesthetics has been formed through two major influences – first classical Greek, and then Enlightenment thought, particularly as it was formulated by Kant. Of course, these are closely related. Yet new strands of thought emerging since the eighteenth century suggest sharply different ways of conceiving aesthetics. If I can characterize the dominant tradition in aesthetics as Kantian, what we need to explore are the possibilities of a non-Kantian aesthetics or, better yet, a post-Kantian aesthetics, and to consider the characteristics such a radically different aesthetics might display. I would like to take the occasion of this congress, and its provocative theme, to examine some of these possibilities and to suggest a new and different course that aesthetics might follow.

The beginnings of movement away from Kant can be traced back to

[5] *Undoing Aesthetics*, pp. 95-99.

the middle of the last century. With his penetrating eye and directness of expression, Nietzsche recognized the fundamental difficulty with traditional aesthetics: »Kant had thought he was doing a honor to art when, among the predicates of beauty, he gave prominence to those which flatter the intellect, i.e., impersonality and universality.... Kant, like all philosophers, instead of viewing the esthetic issue from the side of the artist, envisaged art and beauty solely from the 'spectator's' point of view, and so, without himself realizing it, smuggled the 'spectator' into the concept of beauty.... [W]e have got from these philosophers of beauty definitions which, like Kant's famous definition of beauty, are marred by a complete lack of esthetic sensibility. 'That is beautiful,' Kant proclaims, 'which gives us disinterested pleasure.' Disinterested!«[6]

But it is not only the artist for whom disinterestedness is not appropriate. If the appreciator abandons the objectifying, analytic stance of the scholar or critic, the kind of personal participation that he or she engages in is closer to that of the artist than to the »philosopher of beauty« of whom Nietzsche spoke so disparagingly. I like to call this active appreciative participation »aesthetic engagement,« for it best characterizes the kind of powerful personal involvement that we have in our most fulfilled aesthetic experience. There are other reasons for wanting to discard the notion of disinterestedness. The attitude it enjoins leads to distancing the art object and to circumscribing it with clear boundaries that isolate it from the rest of the human world. In the eighteenth century when the fine arts were being identified, separated from the other arts, and given a distinctive status, an aesthetics that institutionalized this process and conferred a special prominence on those arts had its value. With widespread acceptance of the identity and importance of the arts, such a need no longer exists. To eternalize an idea whose significance is now largely historical both exaggerates its place and hinders aesthetic inquiry. And it misdirects and obstructs appreciative experience.[7]

Disinterestedness is not the only one of Kant's bequests that can be challenged. Eighteenth century aesthetics is very much a product of the thinking of the times. It places in full view both its reliance on faculty psychology and the essentializing and universalizing philosophy of the Enlightenment. Furthermore, it imposes a scientific model on aesthetic understanding, a model that proceeds by objectification, dissection, and analysis. Thus the conceptual structure that we have inherited from Kant

[6] Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Genealogy of Morals*, Third Essay, 6.

[7] I have developed a constructive critique of disinterestedness in »Beyond Disinterestedness,« *British Journal of Aesthetics*, 34/3 (July 1994).

identifies distinct and separate modalities of perception and conception, beginning with that famous distinction itself. To separate percept and concept produces a problem some aestheticians continue to grapple with: the place of knowledge in the perceptual experience of art. There are other problematic oppositions in the eighteenth century aesthetic, such as those between sense and reason, interest and disinterest, and illusion or imagination and reality. In the context of Enlightenment rationalism, these distinctions were illuminating and liberating. Today they provide a false clarity and a deceptive order, and they enthrall both understanding and experience. Serious questions can be raised about whether we can speak either of reason or of sense without the one including the other, questions supported both by psychological research and later philosophical developments. Similarly, the purity of disinterestedness is difficult to defend, especially as both the motivation and the consumption of art have been absorbed into the commodification of culture.[8] And the theoretical force of existential phenomenology, hermeneutics, deconstruction, and philosophical pragmatism have undermined claims to objectivity, the reduction of complex wholes to simple constituents, and the hegemony of scientific cognition.

We need different theoretical tools for capturing the special character of aesthetic appreciation, special even though it need not be unique or unconnected with other domains of human culture. Furthermore, what is especially striking about both the intellectual and technological developments of our own time is the extent to which the notion of reality has been enlarged and multiplied. Hermeneutics and deconstruction have provided grounds for coexistent interpretations, and these have generated a plurality of truths. From a different direction, philosophical pragmatism and related approaches, such as Buchler's principle of ontological parity, have laid the theoretical grounds for a metaphysics of multiple realities.[9] The very objectivity of both history and science has been undermined by our recognition of the constitutive influence of social, cultural, and historical forces, and this has begun to be codified in the social sciences. Finally, contemporary industrial societies inhabit the virtual world of film, television,

[8] I have developed a critique of Kantian aesthetics in »The Historicity of Aesthetics I,« *The British Journal of Aesthetics*, Vol. 26, No. 2 (Spring 1986), 101-111; »The Historicity of Aesthetics II,« *The British Journal of Aesthetics*, Vol. 26, No. 3 (Summer 1986), 195-203.

[9] See, in particular, William James, *Essays in Radical Empiricism* (Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 1996); William James, *A Pluralistic Universe* (Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 1996); and Justus Buchler, *Metaphysics of Natural Complexes* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1966). 2nd edition (State University of New York Press, 1990). I have carried aesthetic theory in a similar direction in *Art and Engagement*, (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1991).

and cyberspace, »media-reality,« as Welsch calls it,[10] a reality we have created that, ironically enough, strangely resembles the African Bushmen's belief in creation as a dream dreaming us.[11]

One of the lessons of post-modernism, a lesson post-modernism did not invent, is that cultural traditions and social influences shape our perceptual experience so thoroughly that there is no such thing as pure perception, and that to discuss it, even as a theoretical category, is greatly misleading. But Kantian aesthetics is built upon the conceptual structure of eighteenth century psychology that considers reason, sense, imagination, and feeling as faculties of the mind. Formed in the interest of rationalizing and universalizing knowledge, these vastly simplify the complex contextual character of human experience. To take them separately and treat them as distinct and independent faculties or capacities creates divisions that we then are faced with reconciling. Think of the vast amount of attention devoted to defending imagination against reason, isolating unique aesthetic qualities, and reconciling expression with form.

The conclusion to which all this leads, whether or not it is comfortable or desirable, is inescapable. The idea of a rational universe, of an objective, systematic order, must be relegated to a display case in a museum of the history of ideas. Philosophy has constructed opposing forces that it is then faced with reconciling, a contrived process that is rarely successful. We need to re-think these ideas, not with the intent of clarifying them by sharpening their differences, but exactly the opposite – by showing their interpenetration, their continuity, and at times even their fusion, perhaps with the hope of achieving a kind of Spinozistic unity that sees them as aspects of a common substance.

A New Direction for Aesthetics

What is left of aesthetics if we turn away from the Kantian tradition? What would a new aesthetics, a post-Kantian aesthetic, look like? If we discard the categories of faculty psychology – sense, imagination, feeling, memory, reason, taste; if we forego the classical thrust of philosophy to universalize and dismiss the puzzles over emotion, expression, representation, and the like that arise from the fragmentation of the world of art into spectator, artist, and work of art; what then is left? If we literally re-think aesthetics, what kind of intellectual creation will emerge, what kind of creature will be born?

[10] Welsch, *op. cit.*, p. 86.

[11] Lawrence van der Post, *The Lost World of the Kalahari* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1977).

Let me take this occasion to suggest a program for the different sort of thinking that I believe must guide our inquiry in aesthetics in a new and different direction:

1. Relinquish the substantive categories we have inherited from eighteenth century psychology and replace them with adjectival and adverbial forms of such phenomena. 'Sensation' then becomes 'sensory,' 'perception' becomes 'perceptual,' 'cognition' 'cognitive,' etc.
2. Replace universalization with a pluralistic account and explore to what extent there are certain common phenomena that appear in different artistic and aesthetic cultures. From this we can learn what degrees of generality can be discerned and whether these are helpful and illuminating or, on the contrary, whether they obscure important differences that require recognition.
3. Related to this, give a primary place to varying cultural traditions in aesthetics, and to the ongoing histories of thought and of experience that they reflect. Not only do the different arts have their own histories; they are interrelated in different ways in different cultural traditions. Examining these will not only encourage a degree of humility in both the scholar and the appreciator; at the same time it will enrich our capacities for aesthetic perception and enlarge its range and content.
4. Resist the tendency of essentialist thinking to identify single forces and factors to illuminate the aesthetic process, such as emotion, expression, or meaning, and look instead for complexities, for characteristic groupings of influences, for interrelationships, for appropriate and varying contexts.
5. Consider aesthetics not as the special domain of a value sharply distinct from other kinds of values, including moral, practical, social, and political ones, but look for the special contribution aesthetic value can make to the normative complexity that pervades and is inseparable from every region of the human realm. Aesthetic value can be distinctive without being separate, uniquely valuable without being singular, important without being pure, and occupy a critical place in human culture without being isolated.
6. Develop the grounds for an aesthetic-based criticism, not only of the arts but of culture and knowledge, for these too have their aesthetic dimensions. Such criticism should be directed not only at their content but, even more important, toward their presuppositions.

Nowhere is criticism more needed, however, than of aesthetic theory itself. For philosophical influences on theory have come, not from an investigation of aesthetic sensibility, but largely from the ontological and

epistemological framework of the Western philosophical tradition that moves from classical sources, through its appropriation by Enlightenment thinkers, into the present. It is a tradition that has extolled contemplative reason and has been suspicious of the body and the full range of human sensibility. As a consequence, we are presented with an array of issues that have a philosophical rather than an aesthetic source. Among these we can cite such divisive oppositions as those between surface (as in aesthetic qualities) and substance, form and content, illusion and reality, spectator and work of art (that is, subject and object), and beauty and use (that is, intrinsic and instrumental values). These have assumed ontological status and misdirect aesthetic inquiry in a fragmentary and oppositional direction. All of these derive from the undue influence of this philosophical tradition on aesthetic theory, in particular from its cognitive model.

Aesthetic Engagement, an Aesthetics of Context and Continuity

My own view favors a pluralistic aesthetic that allows for the fullest range of creative making in all the human arts and in all their diverse cultural manifestations. We need not be so concerned with hierarchy, with invidious rankings, but rather with studying how these arts function in society and in experience – what needs they fulfill, what purposes they serve, what satisfactions they offer, and how they extend human capacities to perceive and understand. Such an aesthetic, moreover, extends beyond the arts to the world in which we live, to the natural environment, to the built environment, to community, to personal relations. These, neglected until recently, beg for scholarly and scientific attention so that they can add not only to the range of knowledge but so that they can clarify and enlarge regions of experience often unattended to and hidden.

Such an aesthetic sensibility, one that recognizes its integration in the life of human cultures, is an aesthetics of context and continuity. Not set apart in grand but lonely isolation, the aesthetic domain of experience infuses the many and varied activities in which we engage, from daily tasks to popular culture. It also retains its significance for those arts that focus on and distill the most intense and profound moments of experience, the so-called fine arts. But these, too, influence and enter into the wide range of human experience. We must surrender the myth of purity along with the myth of exclusivity.

I call this »aesthetic engagement,« for it not only recognizes and extends the connections of aesthetic experience but invites our total involvement as

active participants. Aesthetic engagement is more a descriptive theory than a prescriptive one: It reflects the activity of the artist, the performer, and the appreciator as these combine in aesthetic experience. And it is a theory that reflects the world we participate in, not the illusory splendor of a philosophical fantasy.

* * *

I realize that these are iconoclastic proposals and that they challenge many of the strongest supports and firmest convictions of modern aesthetics. But whether or not you agree with me, I hope you will take these proposals as an incentive to reconsider the axioms of aesthetics, and work to shape theory to the facts of art and experience. To begin this process, no opportunity is better than these days in Ljubljana. *Bonne chance!*[12]

[12] I have developed aspects of this critique in many places. These include: *Living in the Landscape: Toward an Aesthetics of Environment* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1997); *The Aesthetic Field: A Phenomenology of Aesthetic Experience* (Springfield, Ill.: C. C. Thomas, 1970); in *Art and Engagement*; and in a number of recent papers.