INTERVIEW WITH ARNOLD BERLEANT

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Arnold Berleant has, since the early seventies, been one of the leading voices in the field of environmental aesthetics, and from these early days he has continued to develop his distinctly phenomenological approach to aesthetics that has made his voice so unique and influential. His theory of the aesthetics of engagement and the concept of the aesthetic field have opened up the understanding of the aesthetic and how it is integral to all aspects of our living, as well as showing how understanding the aesthetic can open paths to new ontologies and epistemologies. I met with Berleant in a few online video sessions during the spring of 2024, and the following is a transcript of our conversation.

G: A notion that had a strong effect on me when I read your book *Sensibility and Sense: The Aesthetic Transformation of the Human World,*[1] was your idea of aesthetics as first philosophy, that the aesthetic is the basis for everything; the basis for knowledge, values, meaning; everything, every aspect of our lives. Do you think this broad notion of the aesthetic is acknowledged widely enough?

A: I think what comes to most people's minds when you talk about the aesthetic is the arts, and that's quite understandable. I love the arts, myself. I've learned so much from experiencing the arts. But at the same time, they're not a separate thing. The experience of the arts is experience of life. It's just a different perspective, a different dimension. So aesthetics shouldn't be confined to the arts and no place else. The aesthetic is fundamental in experience, including the arts, including everyday life, including human relationships. I think it's a fundamental fact that everything is rooted in the aesthetic.

G: Are we moving closer or further away from taking the fundamental role of the aesthetic seriously by applying it in practice? How do you see the role of philosophers of aesthetics in that context?

A: There are, of course, aesthetic professionals—designers, architects, planners, artists of every sort and medium, and their role

is essential and may be transformative. But there's also the amateur, the liver of everyday life, who can embody an aesthetic sensibility and an aesthetic perspective in ordinary places and activities. This is the venue of folk art, of amateur artists, of people who invent tunes and words to express their own perceptions and feelings. Art is making, creative making. It's not always original or great but rather a human expressive activity that is personal and profoundly significant. A positive development in design and planning is the present tendency to bring the user, the resident, into the decision-making process. This should not be a politically-motivated practice but the desire to include a relevant perspective. It would be beneficial and instructive to bring both artists and aestheticians into the decision-making process as well.

G: Well-designed environments that invite us into interaction can have much impact on us and, at their best, even become our teachers. Are there environments that have influenced you on your path? What was your childhood environment?

A: My childhood environment was aesthetically mundane. It was through some caring and gifted teachers in elementary and high school that I gradually began to develop an aesthetic awareness. I grew up in an industrial city in New York State by the name of Buffalo. Buffalo was in retrospect, not a bad place. It had an unusually fine small art museum, and it had other museums that were very good for a small city. It also had Humboldt Parkway designed by the famous landscape architect Fredrik Law Olmsted, who also designed Central Park in New York City. The parkway, named after the visionary naturalist and explorer, Alexander von Humboldt (that since then has been corrupted by highway and other construction), connected two sections of the city. At one end was the park area, with a zoo, great lawns and spaces, an artificial lake, the historical museum and the art museum. At the other end of it was the science museum and park. As a boy, I often walked the length of this parkway, whose full length was then lined by great elm trees. Elms are quite wonderful, with a very distinctive arching, umbrella-like profile. They are a shade tree that has since then mostly disappeared in the US from a parasitic infection called Dutch elm disease. The Parkway was populated by these elms along its full length and, as a boy, I often walked its length, which was a wonderful experience. And I became well-acquainted with the Art Museum. It was not enormous as

many museums are, but it was fairly comprehensive and of very high quality. I gained enormously from visiting that museum.

G: Perhaps the parkway with its elm trees and these museums were your teachers in a way?

A: Profoundly so! It's hard to estimate the force of the different influences that have shaped me as a person, but surely what I was doing as a boy was entirely intuitive. I came from a family of first-generation Americans who were entirely oblivious of the fine arts. So I had to find my own way. And it's interesting to think that by simply acting intuitively, just being drawn by these different experiences became an important factor in my boyhood and, in retrospect, enormously influential. I never thought of where I would be going professionally, but it has all come together. I used to love to go out exploring in rural areas and things like that.

G: Were there any specific areas or landscapes that influenced you?

A: Yes. There was an abandoned quarry in one of the parks I mentioned that had become overgrown and which I loved to climb around in. And there was a semi-wild spot on the outskirts of the city which I loved to "explore" that has since become a suburban shopping plaza. I didn't know this until many years later, but Buffalo had an extensive park system designed by Frederick Law Olmsted. As a boy and later as a student I visited many of these park areas frequently and they had a profound influence in forming my landscape sensibilities. The parks just called for exploration and encouraged an immersive presence. This was my direct experience in those years and, many decades later, I recognize the influence as profound, a happy turn of fate.

G: How did these places shape your thinking?

A: These places constituted my world, my everyday world. I had no idea how privileged I was to have these places and opportunities right at hand. Since they were part of my everyday world, they did not seem unusual or extraordinary. In retrospect, I was the blind, untutored beneficiary of some wise city planners and civic leaders to whom I'm deeply grateful, as well as to Olmstead's vision and artistry.

G: Can you now, looking back at your career, identify any other circumstances or events in your formative years that may have shaped your philosophical thinking?

A: Like every graduate student I was influenced by the chance circumstances of my formal studies and teachers, especially two professors both of whom had studied with Husserl but had taken very different directions: Marvin Farber and Fritz Kaufmann. Farber's naturalistic phenomenology had a powerful influence that manifested itself in idiosyncratic ways.

A most significant development was the idea of the aesthetic field, that was central in my first book and provided its title.[2] The concept actually came out of puzzling over music, out of my attempt to understand music and the experience of music. I guess you might say I was philosophizing about music long before I became a philosopher. And the understanding that I was groping toward at that time has remained central to me ever since, which is, I think, quite surprising because it contains some things that at the time were not even thought of. People never talked about the role of the performer and the idea of the appreciator contributing to aesthetic experiences. It was all the dualistic model of object and receiver. So that was, you might say a decisive intellectual event that has remained central.

G: So, you were thinking out of your own experience in music.

A: Yes. I remember puzzling over aesthetic questions connected with music, for example, the basis for aesthetic judgment, and whether there was any objectivity in judgment. Those questions became clarified when I began to see the context in which music was experienced. And because I was also, and still am, an amateur player, I thought of performance as part of the process and that, even if you're not literally playing an instrument, you are, you might say, vicariously involved in the production of the sound. So those factors were present from the beginning. That book was published in 1970 when I had just received my PhD in philosophy. It was not my dissertation, but it followed from my dissertation. My major professor, Marvin Farber, edited a publication series and invited me to contribute, which is why I wrote that book.

G: So, music was an influence for your first moving into aesthetics. Were there elements from the other arts that also influenced how you would think about aesthetic experience?

A: As I mentioned before, there was an excellent art museum in Buffalo, the Albright Museum of Art (later re-named the Albright-Knox Museum of Art) and I gained valuable experience of classical and contemporary art from visiting that museum. I just found it fascinating. I had no instruction. I never had a course in art history but developed my understanding by visiting museums and reading. Over the years I gained an understanding of the experience of appreciating visual art and then moved into other arts like architecture, landscape, and sculpture. Over the years I also became very interested in classical ballet. When we lived on Long Island, near New York City, we began to attend the New York City Ballet, and this was an introduction to a whole new art that I had never known before. It was wonderful discovery. So, dance became important in my second book, *Art and Engagement*,[3] which deals with different arts, including dance, painting and landscape. In that book I began to apply the aesthetic field concept to those different arts.

G: For readers who are new to your work, can you tell me how that idea of the aesthetic field came to you and how it has developed over the years? From what you have said, it seems that thinking from your direct experience of music and the other arts, as well as the phenomenological context that Marvin Farber introduced to you, greatly influenced your path within aesthetics. Could you say more about these influences?

A: As I mentioned earlier, I first developed the idea in reflecting on the experience of music. It was suggested by Kurt Lewin's field theory in social psychology, which I had studied as part of my graduate work. The idea of an aesthetic field in which the principal factors are the artist, the art object, the performer, and the listener seemed to constitute the main factors in the musical situation. Not only did this cover the experience of music but it could be adapted to the other arts equally well. At the same time, the aesthetic field gave prominence to factors that, at that time, were not customarily included as central to the appreciative experience of the arts, such as the performer and the artist. It became a concept that was capable of generalization and was remarkably illuminating. One factor in the aesthetic field that is

often overlooked is performance. The aesthetic field suggested that there is a performative factor on all aesthetic occasions. In the visual arts, for example, one could say that the viewer "performs" the work in the sense of activating the interplay of its perceptual elements and features, while in the overtly performing arts, the body of the audience becomes an empathetic performer. Similarly with the functional role of the artist in creating the occasion, the viewer or listener does something of the same thing in sympathetic emulation of the artist. While none of this is actual, there is a functional parallel in active appreciation.

G: So, in *Art and Engagement* you were dealing with the aesthetics of different art forms. When does environment come in?

A: Well, you might say it is always there. The aesthetic field is really an environment. I think it was in my third book called *The Aesthetics of Environment*[4] that I began to focus on an environment as an aesthetic center and all these applications of the aesthetic field were very influential because they expanded my conception of aesthetics. That's why I think of aesthetics as first philosophy. This is because, in a sense, it is foundational; it's the ground on which everything else must be constructed. I can't cite any specific event or example of environment that led me to focus so heavily on environment except my recognition that this was basic, that all experience is contextual, that is, in a sense, environmental. Also, other experiences that are not centering on the aesthetic are contextual, i.e. environmental, as well. Everything is contextual. Things don't stand in isolation.

When I was living and teaching on Long Island, I became acquainted with an extraordinary philosopher by the name of Justus Buchler, a metaphysician who had taught for many years at Columbia University and later at SUNY Stony Brook. I met him through some colleagues and attended several informal seminars in which Buchler participated. He had a fundamental concept which he called a natural complex. Everything is a complex, he insisted. There are no simples. The book in which he elaborated this basic position is called *The Metaphysics of Natural Complexes*.[5] I think this is a brilliant metaphysical insight and I still think he's absolutely right. Much of the tradition of Western philosophy has been misdirected because it's been influenced by Platonic thought with its subjectivism, dualism, and reductionism, and various other features that

misconstrue experience, that misunderstand the nature of the world. And so, if you take the wrong step, then everything in that direction goes wrong. I think the idea of everything being a complex is a brilliantly illuminating idea. I became aware of this after I wrote my first book and after I had developed the concept of the aesthetic field. But it all fits because the aesthetic field is actually a complex and its fundamentally complex. I highly recommend that book. I've recommended it to people from other traditions, but I'm afraid they don't always seem to recognize its brilliance and originality. In my judgment I think it's one of the major books in philosophy. Every philosopher has his influences and his ideals, but I grasped Buchler's book with great understanding and strong approval.

G: Yes, it's so wonderful to find someone else's writings that resonate so strongly with you. Would you then say that in a way environment was always there from the start, in the form of the aesthetic field?

A: Yes. One might, indeed, think of environment as an aesthetic field. In fact, I am presently elaborating more fully on the understanding of environment, an understanding that goes well beyond deep ecology and the Chinese fascination with 'ecoaesthetics.'

G: And you were from the beginning working on extending the aesthetic as a musician grappling with questions that were not being discussed within aesthetics at the time about the role of the performer and the audience. You felt this need to expand the aesthetic so that it fits with your experience of how we contribute to aesthetic experiences as performers and appreciators.

A: Exactly.

G: And then you extend this still further through your idea of aesthetic engagement, where the focus moves even more toward the appreciator?

A: Yes, I came to emphasize the participation of the appreciator, whereas the tradition, of course, sees the appreciator as a receiver, a passive recipient. Of course I think that's completely mistaken, for, if you experience the arts, you are necessarily active. You're not only attentive; you're doing things, cognitively and perceptually, and mnemonically. You're remembering things,

you're bringing in all sorts of associations, you are contributing by bringing in your life experience to the art that you're engaged with. Later developments in the arts have made this much more explicit, like participatory performance art, where the audience participates in the artistic activity, and reader-response criticism, where the emphasis is on how the reader contributes something to the text. It's a reciprocal process that is made more explicit in these innovative practices. There's a great deal of this that has developed in the last half century that, I think, has corroborated my earlier insights.

G: In these participatory art forms that exist today, it has become very obvious that the perceiver/audience is participating, but your point is that the perceivers are always participating in some sense, even when they are not being offered to directly participate. By extending aesthetics in this way, to emphasize the agency of the perceiver, you are also contributing in my mind to making the art world more open and accessible to the many people that tend to think that you need to have the right kind of knowledge to be able to really understand and appreciate art. Your theory highlights how we only need to be people with experiences; with bodies that allow us to experience, to be able to grasp the meaning of art because each one of us participates and contributes to creating that meaning. There isn't one fixed objective meaning.

A: Exactly. Of course, this doesn't mean that one can make an artwork into anything one wishes or give it any meaning one desires. The perceiver's contribution is an essential component of the aesthetic process, but only one among several. There are implications here for art education. Art is not a sculpture standing, untouchable, on a pedestal. And art is not the painting alone on a wall. It's the experience we have engaging with these, the living connection. And we have to know how to experience this. For example, if one wants to experience a sculpture, you can't just stand and look at it. You've got to walk around it. You've got to look at it intimately, going close to it, and standing back and moving around it, grasping its presence in relation to your body. This also holds for painting. I've discovered that in representational painting one often has to move very close to the surface of the canvas to see what's going on in the painting, so that the space of the painting opens up from your body and it's no longer just a flat surface with an illusion of distance. You

create the experience of space just by how you position your body in relation to the painting. So the word 'engagement,' a general term, encompasses many different things and actions.

G: This term really does expand aesthetic experience. Your expansion of the aesthetic has helped address layers of our aesthetic world that aesthetic theories confined to art and art criticism were not touching, for example, the layers of our everyday experiences.

A: Well, Yuriko Saito is a close friend and collaborator, and in the preface to her book *Everyday Aesthetics,*[6] she acknowledges my influence. She agrees with this understanding that the aesthetic is pervasive and, of course, being originally Japanese, she comes from a culture that appreciates the aesthetic more broadly. She has helped establish this strong movement of the aesthetics of everyday life and I think some of my writing has influenced people working in that area. Lately I have been thinking that there's something we could call an everyday aesthetics of nature, too. Aesthetics of nature is not just about beautiful landscapes and sunsets. We can have aesthetic experiences of nature in the most un-dramatic and modest circumstances. A few years ago I did a little piece called "Shadows on the Snow,"[7] I was just looking out of my window and seeing our large oak tree without any leaves but casting intricate shadows broadly across the snow-covered grass. And I thought, well, it's not just the profile of tree with its bare limbs, but it's the shadows that are interesting. And they were! They were fascinating against the unmarked white snow. And then, as the sun moved across the sky, the shadows changed. This was a whole new dimension of perceptual environmental experience that I had never paid much attention to because we usually dismiss things like shadows as being ephemeral, negative, and thus unimportant. Our attention is to what's brightly illuminated, to light and not shadow. But shadows are interesting! So, I think, here's the beginning of a whole new approach to nature, so to speak: the everyday aesthetics of natural environments. In fact, I'm beginning to collect images to show that aesthetic satisfaction doesn't have to be dramatic sunsets or spectacular scenes. Everywhere you look, there are things to be noticed--all the spaces, textures, colours. The world is an aesthetic gold mine, to put it crudely. It's just that I've come to feel that way all the time. I'm fortunate to live in a beautiful region. I look out of a window and there's nothing spectacular– the lawns and the trees and the colors and the textures, the

branches, and the water in the distance, and the hills. At the time I'm speaking now, the grass is beginning to turn green by infinitesimal degrees. Every day it's a little bit greener, just a little bit. And today, since we had a lot of rain yesterday, it's more than slightly greener than before. The process is really interesting. It's the little details, the small things that are part of everyday nature that take on significance. It's not the sunset, which is obvious, or the sunrise or the full moon in the sky, or something that is dramatic. Everybody appreciates those and for good reason. But the little things, the spring flower appearing in purity among the dead leaves and branches on the floor of the woods: these are things to marvel at. The world is a fascinating place; it offers a very rich aesthetic feast. Open your eyes to consume it. Consume it with your eyes.

G: Yes, this is really the core issue. Opening our eyes to enjoy the feast–this open and receptive mode of perceiving is so important in all aspects of life. I'm wondering, in relation to this, do you think your ideas, for example the idea of aesthetic engagement, can help people open their eyes to the feast?

A: Well, our lives are made up of experiences and in whatever ways our experiences can expand and develop and become more finetuned, the richer our lives are. I think that's the strong ethical element in all this because, at bottom, we have nothing but our perceptual experiences. And yet we're blocked by many intrusive ideas that prevent us from seeing and noticing and living. One example is the idea of landscape and how it has been interpreted in a way that results in people thinking of landscape as a noun, a substantive, as some thing. But landscape was actually the way of looking that developed among painters in Holland in the 16th century. It was a view of the land and so it was a relation and an experience. It wasn't a thing or a place. That is so very important. But we turned landscape into a thing: landscape as a thing! This is how many of our experiences have become codified and rigidified as things. I think that's an unhappy bequest of Platonism. I've become clearer and clearer in my thinking of how misdirected subjectivism has been in philosophy. As I mentioned, it was a wrong move from the beginning; one has to take pains to avoid slipping into it because it's familiar and comfortable, but it's basically mistaken, and it puts us in the wrong direction. Trying to understand the world that he lived in, Plato made the disastrous error of attributing ontological status to these

abstract ideas. It is my view that his world of forms was just an invention. This subjectivism that has its roots in Platonism has been with us since then. Its importance has been maintained throughout the history of philosophy, with Kant being the most prominent latter-day proponent of that kind of thinking. But what we really have is experience and ways of trying to understand that experience.

G: You have written extensively on the concept of environment, and how that has been rigidified *into* an object, just like the concept of landscape. How do you understand the relation between these two concepts, landscape and environment?

A: Well, it is not a simple matter to answer this question. Basically, I would say that landscape has to do with the participation of someone viewing it. It's not a thing. It's not a place. It's an aspect. Environment on the other hand is more general, environment literally is surroundings, it's everything, the medium in which we live. This is very hard to explain because environment is one of those words that has been objectified and turned into a place, but environment is rather the active functioning context of life. I've been thinking about this, how we take these concepts, and we give them an independent ontological status.

Environment is a prime example. There's no such thing, no such object or place as environment. Environment is processes; it's settings and contexts and interactions, and there's no beginning or end. I have often used the example of how people think of environment as what's out there around us. But then you have to ask, where is it? For example, if air is part of our environment, what happens when we breathe it in? Has it then become less environment since it is now part of our bodies? The same thing applies to the food we eat. It is out there "in" an environment, but when we ingest it, environment is not out there. It's here. We are a part it. So, environment is a complex, confused idea. That's basically the difference between environment and landscape. Landscape is inherently relational, always in relation to a viewer, both etymologically and practically. If a painter paints a landscape, the painter is painting what she sees and positions herself to be able to see it in a certain way. Rendering that successfully captures certain qualities and visual values.

G: This reminds me of Joachim Ritter's definition of landscape as environment perceived aesthetically, which relates to the question, When do we call an environment a landscape? If I'm building a factory, I call the land a construction site. If I'm grazing my horses, I call it a pasture. But if I'm perceiving it just to perceive it, then I call it a landscape.

A: Well, yes, it relates it to some viewer. Many years ago, I wrote an essay called "The Viewer in the Landscape"[8] in which I was kind of groping since, at that point, I hadn't developed my thinking on this issue very far. But it just struck me that landscape is always in relation to a viewer. And that still is the case. The title of one of my earlier books is *Living in the Landscape,*[9] but this was thirty years ago, and I hadn't developed my thinking so much at that point, but I was intuitively working in this direction.

G: Another aspect I wanted to explore in relation to landscape brings us back to what we touched on before, the idea that we need to make more people aware of the aesthetic dimension and activate it somehow more widely in other fields than philosophical aesthetics. I wonder whether the concept of landscape could provide us with a path there, since it is already used in decision-making processes. Most people perhaps intuitively relate the idea of landscape to perception, whereas the concept of the aesthetic sometimes only invokes the idea of surface prettiness and pleasure. Landscape, on the other hand, might not have those connotations.

A: I think you're right. I believe it would be an effective way of leading people into aesthetic awareness because they begin with a sense of what landscape is, and a sense of its having aesthetic and perceptual value.

G: If we think a bit further of the place of the aesthetic within other fields of study, one thing that I have been noticing in theoretical discussions are all the different attempts to move away from the dualistic way of thinking that has its roots in Platonism, like you mentioned before. We have this, of course, within phenomenology, but also within more recent theoretical developments like those of object-oriented ontology, new materialism, and post-humanism. What these have in common is that they are all exploring the idea that there are no boundaries between us and environment. All is intertwined and entangled in interaction.

Now many of these theories talk a lot about art and what art can teach us about this entangled existence we are in. But they don't talk about the aesthetic dimension in the way that we have been discussing it here. Within phenomenology there is also a very strong move towards paying attention to our lived experience, but again, this dimension of lived experience and felt meaning is not often discussed *as* the aesthetic dimension. To me it seems very important to talk about these dimensions of our lived, entangled experience as aesthetic? How do you see this?

A: I think of the aesthetic as perception. Lived experience is aesthetic, it is perception, it is seeing and hearing and noticing and discriminating fine differences. As I mentioned before, I have been thinking recently about the everyday aesthetics of nature as an important component of our life experience, except that we don't notice it. There are so many small perceptual features of environment that we just don't take in because we don't think they're significant, but everything is notable, everything is worthy. I think it's important to open your perceptual eyes, so to speak, to the small details of experience. But I think I could easily be misunderstood as reducing everything to the aesthetic. I'm not reducing it to the aesthetic; I'm finding the aesthetic that's in everything. The aesthetic can be discerned in everything: it is at the ground of all our human life experience. The important thing is to identify it, to recognize that it's there, and to articulate it, because it is the substance of our lives.

G: I'm curious about how you think about the practice of philosophy in relation to the notion of aesthetics as first philosophy? In philosophy, we seldomly talk about how we do philosophy, how we practice thinking philosophically. In this context, I'm also thinking of the relation between the practice of philosophy and the practice of art. Being both a musician and a philosopher, how do you think about the practice of philosophy and its relation to the practice of art? If the aesthetic is in everything, how do you see the role of the aesthetic in philosophical thinking?

A: In some ways philosophy is the most abstract *cognitive* discipline and music the most abstract art. You're dealing with sounds that are self-sufficient, so to speak. They have no referent, and so, in writing music, you're shaping sounds in time, being guided by your sense of what's right, of what goes, what follows from what you have written. And there's a little bit of that in philosophical

thinking, too, I think. The most abstract intellectual discipline and the most abstract art, they are both guided by an intuitive sense of what must follow rather than a calculated logical sequence, so I think they're very similar in that respect. For me, in my experience, I seem to employ the same sense of what feels right, of what should follow. This is not a deliberate act but an intuitive one of working through, of living through, so to speak, the progression of sounds or ideas. We live in a qualitative world. Not to speak absolutely but rather heuristically, we do, in fact, begin with perception, with the aesthetic, so in that sense the aesthetic is the ground, the foundation, of everything. This doesn't ensure its validity but rather its primacy, and the aesthetic must then become the touchstone for any inference or judgment that follows.

G: In your paper, "The Art in Knowing a Landscape," you refer to Bergson's account of "knowing from the inside" and how it "resembles the inarticulable body knowledge of the athlete, the dancer, and the musician who "knows" when something is "right" because it "feels" right through sensing it with one's body, with one's full being".[10] Do you see a relation between this type of aesthetic knowing from the inside and the "intuitive sense of what must follow" that you mentioned before?

A: This is an excellent question and embraces an astute observation. Yes, there seems to be a *prima facie* resemblance, not a proof but a remarkable similarity.

G: You mentioned to me once that pragmatism has influenced how you think of and work with philosophical ideas. John Dewey spoke of "qualitative thought" and how all thought and meaning have their roots in sensing a "quality of a situation as a whole," and William James also coined the term "stream of consciousness." Are pragmatist notions like these relevant to how you see the similarities between the practice of philosophy and music?

A: I've been thinking recently of how pragmatism has influenced my thinking, and I believe that it's in the activist character of aesthetic engagement. It's participatory, not contemplative but intensely vital. James spoke of the history of philosophy as being, to a large extent, a clash of human temperaments. This doesn't reduce philosophy to psychology but recognizes its organic origins. There's an ever-present danger of being too

cerebral, of reducing the human process to a computer ideal. What I find always refreshing about the pragmatic way of doing philosophy is that its human component can never be bypassed.

I readily acknowledge that one of the influences on my thinking has been American pragmatism and the very fundamental impulse of pragmatism that ideas have consequences in practice. They are not just intellectual constructions, but they are born out and tested in experience. I find that I constantly think of what the consequences in experience are for some of the ideas that I work with. It seems to be an essential test. I don't understand philosophical problems just as problems, as puzzles. I get impatient with that kind of philosophy. It's not productive and its certainly not satisfying for me.

In the last few years I have worked with two graduate students, and in both cases they took my ideas and put them into practice in psychological research. The point is that my ideas are not just ideas, mental constructs; they are ideas that have meaning in practice, in application, and I'm pleased that the pragmatic dimension was embedded in the work that I was doing with those students. One of them is a psychotherapist interested in how being alone in nature could be psychologically beneficial and healing. Being alone in nature means being open to experience, direct experience, perceptual experience, and he based his research on my ideas of direct perceptual experience and on interviews with a variety of people who deal with the direct experience of nature. The other student is a singer who has been working with groups and leading them to form a community through singing and moving together. She has shown through her research how their reservations drop away, and people connect and open up, forming what I have called an aesthetic community. So here again, the idea of an aesthetic community has consequences. This shows how ideas are not just intellectual constructs. They have applications and they have consequences. That's a very important and fundamental pragmatic principle that I've always subscribed to. I've been attracted to that aspect of pragmatism, and I don't have patience with pure ratiocination or puzzling for the sake of abstract thinking, alone. I don't have patience with that and I don't have patience with reiterating the past, as is the case of The Society for the Advancement of American Philosophy, that doesn't advance pragmatism very much but just goes over the old stuff again and again. I've lost

patience with them, because they don't go beyond the past, as I see it. There is this pragmatic side to my thinking: it makes a difference what you think. This can for instance be seen in the way I keep rethinking the concept of environment. Environment is a concept, but a concept that doesn't hold purely in the abstract. It has implications; it has consequences. This represents the influence of pragmatism on my thinking.

G: In this vein, you see our role as philosophers to pay attention to what we could also call the agency of the concepts that we philosophize, that is to their potential practical applications and consequences?

A: Definitely. For example, I don't like to talk about *the* environment because *the* environment objectifies environment. Environment is not a thing. It's not an object. It's a relationship. It's context. And I'm going to say something very similar about landscape. I was reading about an artist just recently, an Asian artist, who sees his work not as objects. He's a sculptor, primarily, and he sees his artworks not as objects but as objects in relation to the viewer and in relation to what's around the object, to where it's placed. It's not just a self-standing, self-sufficient work of art. It has to do with relationships. I thought that was a very meaningful and significant way of thinking.

The same thing is true of our experience of art. I could talk about landscape painting. Landscape to me is another example of an art that most people think of as static pictures on a plane within a frame. But I believe that landscape painting is the enclosure of a space *into* which the viewer can enter and participate. And this is a different way of thinking about a painting. So you can see why this artist attracted me when he spoke of the sculpture's relationship with the viewer and with the surroundings.

G: So, your philosophical way of thinking of environment has consequences. It can change how a person who really takes in and understands your idea of environment experiences the world?

A: Definitely, yes, if they understand what I'm trying to say.

G: I must say, that from my own experience of reading your work, as well as from how my students have responded to your writings, that this is certainly true. Through your writings you are able to

bring your reader into a position of shifting their perspective and experience of environment. This means that the purpose of what we do in philosophy, diving into ideas about the world and our experience and explicating them, is not just to clarify them by abstraction, but rather to make these ideas capable of moving people and changing the way we experience the world.

A: Yes.

G: Is there a relation between this way of thinking about the practice of philosophy from this pragmatist perspective and your idea of aesthetics as "first philosophy"?

A: Yes. This explains how aesthetics is foundational, and that is what first philosophy is and does. When I think of aesthetics as first philosophy, I think of it as thinking without preconceptions. It's thinking as the forming of ideas rather than the manipulation of prefabricated ideas. It's also being sensitive to the things in experience in the world, the experience which one has in responding to them, forming ideas from that point. Instead of bringing your ideas to experience, it's getting your ideas from experience, to put it rather crudely. But that's the basic stage and it's first philosophy because it comes first in the cognitive process. It's the first thing; it is the initial intellectual endeavour. When ideas are based on the materials of thought, then it's first because it deals with the beginnings of thought, the emergence of thought. Am I making sense?

G: Yes, you are making very much sense to me. As I mentioned at the outset, your notion of the aesthetic as being at the core of all our knowledge and values made a profound impact on me. You might say that your idea has had real consequences for how I experience the world. In recent years the path that your idea helped guide me towards has led me to a place where I'm participating in research on embodied critical thinking, and the freedom to make sense that lies in embodied practices of philosophical thinking.[11] I have for a long time sensed, without articulating it, that there is a clear link between your philosophy and the foundational ideas behind this research on embodied thinking, and you just made that link clear to me: Aesthetics is at its core about the dimension of felt meaning that arises from direct sense experience and it is this from which thoughts emerge. When we have extended the notion of the aesthetic *as* you do,

then it really is this basic, felt dimension of meaning, and that is how it is first philosophy.

A: Going back to sense experience: that's the origin of thought before it's worked over and translated and codified. It's implicated in direct sense experience.

G: I wonder how common this very important understanding of the aesthetic is, in general. What is your feeling about that? Do people generally understand the aesthetic as the perceptual substance of our lives and our thinking processes, or do they understand it as something more trivial?

A: In general I think it's the latter. The aesthetic is not something that most people have thought about. That's why it's so important for people like us to articulate the aesthetic and reveal its richness and its depth, its perceptual depth, so to speak. And while I think it's so apparent to us who have developed this awareness and sensitivity, it's not apparent to most people for whom the aesthetic is just superficial surface prettiness.

G: But do you feel that this project of expanding aesthetics to help make people aware of the depth of their perceptual experiences has gained more attention in recent years?

A: Well, this is a good question. Of course I can only give you my impression. Lately we have been compiling statistics about the use of the journal I started twenty-three years ago, *Contemporary Aesthetics*. Evey year we compile a list of the ten most popular papers, not only from that year but from all the twenty-three years. Around ten years ago I wrote a short paper called "What Is Aesthetic Engagement?" and this year it was on the top ten list for the first time. I was delighted for it meant that people are recognizing the idea and searching for it. So I think things may be changing. I'm pleased that the idea is taking hold and that people are searching for and referring to it it even if they don't recognize its origins.

G: Perhaps there is something in the way that our experiential realm has expanded through technology that calls for more attention to your ideas of the expanded aesthetics of engagement? Perhaps we need even more emphasis on the aesthetic dimension and aesthetic education in the perceptual world of today than ever before.

A: Well, there is an area of inquiry called aesthetic education, and maybe that's what's necessary to develop and emphasize. You are lucky to begin to develop a generalized sensitivity to aesthetic qualities and experience, but I think that maybe most people don't go beyond the direct example of the painting or the novel or some such thing. Perhaps people pick up this kind of sensitivity through exposure to the arts, which is good, but it's more indirect. I was thinking that this discussion we're having now through online communication is an example of the extraordinary development in human communication that has been taking place. Today we are even able to attend events we would otherwise not been able to experience, like conferences, funerals, classes, all of which I have done because I can no longer travel. I find this marvellously empowering. Such technological developments in communication change things dramatically. This changes our perception of space and our human connections. I think this is a wonderful development, in spite of all the efforts to commercialize it.

G: Yes, you might say these technologies are extending our perceptual world. We can perceive environments that we are not inhabiting bodily but we are still somehow present.

A: Yes, exactly. We are in it perceptually, and this enlarges our perceptual capacity enormously.

G: And this touches on what you also mention here, how all of these new technologies that we have been piling up in the last decades have the potential to bring so many positive developments, but they can also have negative consequences. Perhaps, this lack of awareness of the aesthetic dimension we have been discussing is important also in that context. Do you think that an awareness of the aesthetic dimension has a role to play in our finding a way to let technology be a positive factor in our lives rather than negative?

A: The new technologies of communication certainly have transformed social interaction. This is certainly part of their attraction, and I think in asking the question, you know the answer. It is for me a deep sorrow that socially, human beings have not evolved beyond a very primitive stage, and that the enormous capacities we have for human good are are being subverted by the thirst for power, by distorted ideas, and by greed. Our world

is still a world of battling tribes that have enormous difficulty extricating themselves from primitive motives and responses. In my country the economic God is capitalism, and capitalism is another word for institutionalized selfishness. Yet we have seen people who go outside of capitalism, who are also able to give of themselves without any thought of personal benefit, all out of good will and human generosity. But we have this official doctrine of institutionalized selfishness, which is incredibly subversive and destructive. The first response that many people have to a new development is, how can I exploit it? If you look at all the scams and other criminal activities that go on around and through the Internet, it is just astonishing. And of course, the criminal activity is at the expense of innocent people. We live in an age of moral barbarism. The thing is that we should know better. We should. We need a leadership that is enlightened and can get beyond these habitual patterns of self-interest. Because what's happening is that the world's becoming uninhabitable, and that's what we're facing now, the consequences of this unbridled greed, exploitation, and self-aggrandizement without regard for consequences. Well, this is my private complaint. It's very sad.

G: Yes, it is. One of the reasons why I think that the aesthetic dimension is so important is its connection with ethical knowledge. You said we should know better, and we do know better, in a cognitive way, perhaps. I wonder if what is needed are environments that are good teachers, environments that allow us to aesthetically sense from the inside that selfishness and greed are not the way forward for our species? If it is not enough to know better cognitively, don't we also need to sense what we know as bodies in environments?

A: This is very perceptive. I think environmental experience can help correct these imbalances because it's so direct. Environment is immediately and directly experienced, and we can see beyond these limitations of circumstance and response, which is the prerequisite for change. But things are in a sad state and they're getting worse because technology empowers the evil as well as the good. But I do think that grasping and perceptually experiencing this state of affairs is part of the humanizing possibilities of aesthetics.

G: Yes, and to activate these humanizing possibilities of aesthetics, perhaps we need to create more awareness of the aesthetic dimension in our leaders who have a profound influence on our societal environment. These environments we live in, that are created by societal systems and structures, feed into how we sense our situatedness in the world, and they can make us feel we are all connected and responsible to each other, or they can tell us that we are individuals and we just have to take care of ourselves alone. From this perspective, there is an urgent need to bring the aesthetic dimension into awareness outside of academia.

A: Yes, I agree. Isn't it wonderful that we can communicate so well here, and yet we come from such different places, backgrounds and cultural experiences. Aesthetic awareness and the awareness of the aesthetic is what we share.

G: It certainly is, and hopefully our conversation can be an inspiration to others to spread the message of the importance of the aesthetic more widely into our societal structures. You have made such a great contribution to thinking about the social and relating it to the aesthetic that we don't have space to cover here, so I recommend to the readers to take a look at your latest book *The Social Aesthetics of Human Environments: Critical Themes* that came out in 2023. Thank you so much for sharing your thoughts with me and the readers of the *Nordic Journal of Aesthetics*. Hopefully we will see more engagement here in the Nordic region with your important work in the future.

1 Arnold Berleant, *Sensibility and Sense: The Aesthetic Transformation of the Human World* (Imprint Academic, 2010).
2 Arnold Berleant, *The Aesthetic Field* (C.C. Thomas, 1970).
3 Arnold Berleant, *Art and Engagement* (Temple University Press, 1991).
4 Arnold Berleant, *The Aesthetics of Environment* (Temple University Press, 1991/1992).
5 Justus Buchler, *The Metaphysics of Natural Complexes* (Columbia University Press, 1966).
6 Yuriko Saito, *Everyday Aesthetics* (Oxford University Press, 2007).
7 Arnold Berleant, ("Shadows on the Snow") "Unlocking the Potential of Nature's Beauty," *IAI News*, February 18, 2022, https://iai.tv/articles/unlocking-the-potential-of-natures-beauty-auid-2055?_auid=2020
8 Arnold Berleant, "The Viewer in the Landscape," in *Art and Engagement* (Temple University Press, 1991).
9 Arnold Berleant, *Living in the Landscape* (University Press of Kansas, 1997).
10 Arnold Berleant, "The Art in Knowing a Landscape," *Diogenes* 59, vol.1-2 (2012): 60.
11 See: https://makesense.hi.is