

"Aesthetics and Environments Reconsidered: Reply to Carlson," in *The British Journal of Aesthetics*, Volume 47, Number 3. (Oxford University Press: July 2007), 315-318.

AESTHETICS AND ENVIRONMENT RECONSIDERED:
A REPLY TO CARLSON

Arnold Berleant

An author cannot help but be gratified by the critical notice Allen Carlson wrote of my *Aesthetics and Environment, Variations on a Theme* (*British Journal of Aesthetics*, 46/4, October 2006, 416-427). Carlson places my book in the context of my work in aesthetics overall and, instead of picking querulously at a string of minor points to dispute, moves through the details to what he considers to be the book's underlying claims. His gaze is penetrating and, in so doing, he has identified some of the central issues in aesthetics and in environmental aesthetics, in particular. This response, then, is not intended as a rebuttal but as a continuation of Carlson's constructive attempt to get at these basic issues. By writing in the same spirit, we may, by this exchange, be seen as agreeing on what those issues are. I also hope to identify what the issues involve, including some of their assumptions, and to consider what alternatives there are.

Carlson has given careful attention, not only to this book, but to my work as a whole. For his is not only a review of my latest book; it is a review of my work overall. Carlson is generous in regarding some of its features as strengths, such as the broad scope of my inquiries, my efforts at theoretical consistency (what he calls the "unified aesthetics requirement"), and my insistence on the inseparability of a normative stance from environmental inquiry. But he finds, inevitably, problems, problems of three sorts that weigh against my work's three strengths. This brief reply can do hardly more than indicate the kind of response I should like to make to these presumed difficulties. Still, I hope to show where it would go. And, in as much as these issues are not peculiar to my own work but occupy a central place in any aesthetics, my response may serve a larger purpose by directing attention to them.

The most serious problem Carlson finds in my aesthetics is what he identifies as the absence of a criterion of the aesthetic itself. Since I have been at pains to disenfranchise

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disinterestedness as the distinctive mark of aesthetic appreciation, he concludes that such appreciation is left without any distinguishing feature. The alternative of aesthetic engagement that I offer cannot, he insists, offer a general criterion of the aesthetic for, he claims, it is neither necessary nor sufficient for aesthetic experience. I do recognize that perceptual engagement is not sufficient for aesthetic appreciation, for we can be experientially engaged in what are clearly non-aesthetic situations, such as in a debate or in pursuing a solution to a mathematical or logical problem. I do claim, however, that perceptual engagement is a necessary characteristic of aesthetic appreciation. While we may disagree on specific examples, it would be more constructive to question the need for such a criterion. The insistence on a particular, specific criterion of the aesthetic rests on an ontology that can be traced back to Aristotle, an ontology in which each kind of thing has a single, specific mark that distinguishes it from other members of the same species. This essentialist metaphysics cannot be simply taken as axiomatic but can, in fact, be questioned. For what I offer in its place is a syndrome of the aesthetic, so to speak, in which engagement is joined with strong perceptual content that itself is shaped by cognitive, cultural, and personal influences. This means that the aesthetic is not restricted to art or to nature but that it pervades virtually all experience, assuming a dominant place in those exemplary situations we agree to call aesthetic. Rather than a disagreement about a logical requirement, we have an ontological difference. And this is an issue of a very different sort.

Carlson follows this claim against my views with a further one, namely that aesthetic engagement is excessively subjective despite my explicit rejection of subjectivism. Nonetheless, he finds subjectivism inherent in my very concept of engagement when that experience is at its fullest as a kind of sensory immersion. And this leads him to mourn the loss of the possibility of objectivity in appreciation and judgment, for these may fluctuate wildly, as he says, from subject to subject. This charge against aesthetic engagement has been made before but it rests, like his first criticism, on an assumption that I do not subscribe to, namely the polar opposition between subject and object, between subjectivity and objectivity. This, again, cannot be refuted in a word, but a world in which these are inconceivable is very much like the realm of appreciative engagement. We have, here, a unity and not a duality, and if this undermines the possibility of "objectivity," it is because such a concept is meaningful only logically, not empirically. In an aesthetic encounter we have a complex situation of interacting and interpenetrating features, not an appreciative subject confronting an aesthetic object. Again, our difference is more metaphysical than aesthetic.

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Finally, Carlson avers that my view cannot distinguish between "superficial" or "easy" aesthetic experience and experience that is "difficult and more serious," to use Hepburn's characterization. Carlson reaches again into one of the most fascinating and important issues in aesthetics, one that every theory must face. Just as universality is a mistaken desideratum, so, too, I think, is an absolute standard for judgments of taste. The distinction between easy and serious beauty, as both Hepburn and Carlson draw it, is actually a difference in cognition between simple resemblance and scientific causality. To base the criterion of seriousness on the latter, indeed on cognitive grounds at all, is again to introduce a non-aesthetic presupposition. I do not deny that cognitive factors influence aesthetic appreciation, but I think that perceptual experience, especially when joined with aesthetic engagement, is central. This, of course, makes objective judgment impossible, but it is, I think, no great loss since such objectivity has never been established on experiential grounds. We are left here, as in the issue of universality, with variable judgments. In my view, "serious beauty" can be identified by a high degree of intensity, complexity, and perceptual engagement. The best judgment here is, as Hume showed, rests on perceptual acuteness, experience, a fine sensibility and knowledge. To these Hume adds the setting aside of prejudice (which I interpret here as presuppositions). While neither absolute nor universal, it is, as the history of taste shows, sufficiently satisfactory.

While obviously not definitive, these comments do identify the central points at issue, matters that clearly are central not only to the views set forth in my book but to any theory of aesthetics. I hope that the direction of this brief response is clear and that its claims reasonable.

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