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OF RELATIONALITY:  
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OF ARNOLD BERLEANT  
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# AESTHETICS AND ETHICS OF RELATIONALITY: PHILOSOPHIES OF ARNOLD BERLEANT AND WATSUJI TETSURŌ COMPARED

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## Abstract

Arnold Berleant's oeuvre spanning half a century is remarkable in its prescience and global reach. One of the most important contributions he makes is to illuminate the relationality that characterizes our aesthetic experience. His notion of aesthetic engagement, extending also to define our mode of being in the world, overcomes the dichotomy between subject and object, a long-held and well-entrenched legacy of Western philosophy. This relational account of human existence is also developed by a twentieth century Japanese philosopher, Watsuji Tetsurō, in his ethics based upon the notion of inbetween-ness. Despite the shared concern to emphasize the interdependent and intertwined relationship with the world as the nature of human existence and aesthetic experience, Watsuji's interest focuses on self-cultivation, without sufficient attention paid to its social and political implications. Berleant, in comparison, develops the notion of negative aesthetics to highlight those aspects of our lives and environments in which our relational existence and aesthetics are damaged and advocates the importance of utilizing aesthetic sensibility as a critical instrument for social improvement.

## Keywords

Berleant, Aesthetic Engagement, Relational Aesthetics, Watsuji Tetsurō, Inbetween-ness, Negative Aesthetics.

## 1. Aesthetic engagement as relational aesthetics

As I was rereading Arnold Berleant's voluminous work that spans over half a century to properly honor his contribution to the field of aesthetics, I was struck by how prescient his work has been. For one, although the discourse on everyday aesthetics is gaining increasing attention in recent years, Berleant was way ahead of those authors who are today associated with this sub-discipline of aesthetics, such as Katya Mandoki, Tom Leddy, Kevin Melchionne, Ossi Naukkarinen, and myself. Berleant's notions of aesthetic field and aesthetic engagement, first concerned with art but has continued to inform environmental aesthetics and social aesthetics, characterize *experience* and, as such, there is no aspect of our life that is excluded from the realm of aesthetics. Although I, along with Mandoki, may have made this ubiquity of aesthetics in our lives prominent with the title, *Everyday Aesthetics*,<sup>1</sup> I consider Berleant to be the true founding father, and John Dewey the founding grandfather, of this discourse. Without using the specific term, everyday aesthetics, their work initiated and established this field of aesthetic inquiry. As I reread his work, I continue to be humbled by the fact that whatever I thought about when developing my own view on everyday aesthetics had already been suggested by Berleant. On one hand, I feel reassured that I am on the right track, grateful for the trail he blazed for later

travellers like myself, but on the other hand I feel intimidated that there is nothing new I can offer! The only new thing I can add is some materials from Japanese philosophy, which I plan to do in this essay.

Another sign of prescience of Berleant's work is the notion of 'relationality,' which has recently been garnering attention in various fields. In ethics, for example, one of the earliest proponents of care ethics, Nel Noddings, changed the subtitle of her seminal work, *Caring*, from *Feminine Approach to Ethics and Moral Education* (1984) to *A Relational Approach to Ethics and Moral Education* (2013) for the second, updated edition, de-emphasizing gender specificity while emphasizing a general human condition.<sup>2</sup> Or, Anton Luis Sevilla invokes the notion of "relational ethics" in his comparative study of bell hooks' engaged pedagogy and the philosophy of Watsuji Tetsurō, one of the most influential twentieth century philosophers in Japan, the subject of my subsequent comparison with Berleant's work.<sup>3</sup> In design discourse, some prominent contemporary designers advocate conceiving design practice as "relational services" in which the designer and the client become participants in co-creating the desired outcome, as an alternative to the conventional model of a designer creating an object which a client receives.<sup>4</sup>

Most pertinent to my purpose here, relationality is also getting attention in aesthetics.<sup>5</sup> The notion of relationality was first made prominent by Nicolas Bourriaud. He coined the term, "relational aesthetics," to specifically account for the relatively new form of art that is comprised of people's everyday life and social interactions, such as Rirkrit Tiravanija's and Liam Gillick's social and participatory art. However, Bourriaud himself admits that art-making has always been relational, first between humans and deity, then humans and objects, and most recently between and among humans.<sup>6</sup> He characterizes this relationality as "transitivity," "encounter," and "dialogue" by pointing out that "at the outset of this, negotiations have to be undertaken, and the Other presupposed ... Any artwork might thus be defined as a relational object."<sup>7</sup> In short, "each particular artwork is a proposal to live in a shared world." There is no finished product, and the so-called art is open-ended and improvisatory, consisting of the relationship that is spontaneously generated between the object of art and its appreciator or, in the case of participatory art, by participants' interactions with each other and their environment.

Berleant's work dating back to 1970 can be characterized as relational aesthetics, more than three decades before Bourriaud articulated this notion in 2002. Except for referring to those contemporary art projects that make this nature of art explicit, I find in his discussion nothing new that Berleant had not already developed. In fact, Berleant's work abounds with terms like relationship, cooperation, reciprocity, dialogue, and collaboration, and aesthetic engagement is often presented as participatory aesthetics. Without specifically calling it such, I consider Berleant's aesthetic engagement to be a model of relational aesthetics.

Although Berleant is best known for establishing the subfields of aesthetics, namely environmental aesthetics and social aesthetics, the fundamental concept of aesthetic engagement underlying

them characterizes the human mode of being in the world. The conventional understanding of aesthetics as the philosophy of art and beauty thus does not capture the richness and wide-ranging concerns of aesthetic engagement, not only in terms of what sort of things should be included for aesthetic inquiry but, more importantly for the purpose of this paper, in terms of how its reach extends to the ethical, social, political, and existential arenas, all of which are integrated and entangled in our lived experience. It is no accident that terms like continuity, inseparability, connectedness, reciprocity, relatedness, and cooperation are the key words that appear frequently in his discussion. These terms describe not only the nature of aesthetic experience but also our living in this world together with others, whether people, nature, or artifacts. We manage our daily life *with* them, always interacting with them to accomplish tasks, develop relationships, dispense care acts, and co-create aesthetic experience. Our existence cannot be separated from the world which we inhabit, and, at the same time, “the world in which humans participate cannot be entirely separated from the human presence”; as such, “there is rather a *reciprocal* relation between people and the things and conditions with which we live.”<sup>8</sup> In short, the world is not made up of discrete entities, such as humans, natural objects, and artifacts, each acting as an independent and separate building block. Instead, relationships, interactions, and entanglements between and among them constitute the world. Aesthetic engagement offers an occasion to make this *relational* account of the way in which we inhabit this world sensible and explicit: “humans’ relation to things is not a relation between discrete and self-sufficient entities. On the contrary, just as people impose themselves on things, so, too, do things exercise an influence on people.”<sup>9</sup>

This inseparability of us and the world characterizing the fundamental mode of human existence challenges the modern Western liberalist view of human beings as autonomous and independent, which still dominates today’s neoliberalism. It promotes human exceptionalism by giving us privilege because of free will, which is thought to entitle us to wield power over others not bestowed with such privilege. The way in which we are affected by the world is minimized in favor of celebrating our capacity to rise above it, providing a recipe for hubris and anthropocentrism. Essentially, Berleant observes, “we constructed a world of discrete objects separated from one another, objects and events that, like Leibniz’s monads, are related only externally.”<sup>10</sup> The independent existence takes priority over relationality, and the key terms Berleant uses in characterizing this conventional worldview are separation, discreteness, division, and isolation.

Berleant’s notion of aesthetic engagement is an attempt to overcome one of the pronounced expressions of this dominant Western philosophical tradition: the dichotomy and separation between a subject and an object. The reach of this dualistic framework, no doubt paralleling other dichotomies such as mind and body, humans and nature, and male and female, has been deep and extensive, including in aesthetics. The persistent paradigm of aesthetics is that there is an object distinguishable and separable from an experiencing agent and that the subject takes in whatever is

provided by the object. As a result, events, situations, atmospheres, and activities that one performs, that is, those aspects of our life experiences that are not directed toward a clearly defined or framed object, become a kind of ‘inconvenient truth’ and they are made to disappear from the aesthetic radar. Furthermore, this model of aesthetics based upon an independent object-hood tends to direct its inquiry toward making a judgment regarding beauty or artistic value. That is, “the underlying presumption is that an objective judgment of beauty must be both possible and desirable, since there is an independent object of appreciation.”<sup>11</sup> Furthermore, the long-held notion of disinterestedness dictates that various life concerns, in particular practical and ethical, are to be suspended when experiencing an object aesthetically. Thus, the conventional model of aesthetic experience is characterized by a series of *disconnect* between the subject and the object, the content of the experience and the judgment, and the aesthetic and other concerns from our management of life. Berleant’s aesthetic engagement proposes to reclaim these connections by characterizing aesthetic experience as being thoroughly integrated with our life. It puts together these parts of our lives, forcibly separated and made disparate for the sake of clarity and distinction, and restores a holistic account of human existence and lived experience.

Berleant characterizes aesthetic experience as a dynamic process that emerges from a collaboration between the object and the subject facilitated by reciprocal responsiveness. It is never a one-way street; that is, it is neither object- nor subject-driven. Instead, the process is like a dialogue between them. As an experiencing agent, I approach the object with an open mind and improvise the most appropriate and effective means of responding to what it offers me, sometimes scrutinizing details while other times taking a sweeping large view, or sometimes sitting back and letting the atmosphere engulf me while other times vigorously moving my body to contribute to an already jovial air. I let the other invite me into its world, speak to me, and work with it. At the same time, I also activate my imagination and fuse it with the sensory experience, thereby creating a rich layer of associations. Unlike what is expected by the disinterested attitude,

every perceiver contributes to the situation, not only through perceptual activity, but with the invisible dimensions of past experience, memory, knowledge, and conditioning. A whole range of personal and cultural factors colors our active sensory experience, whether or not this is intentional or conscious. This structural order of the aesthetic field is colored by the character of particular occasions.<sup>12</sup>

In aesthetic engagement, “there is no separation between components but a continuous exchange in which they act on each other.”<sup>13</sup> Aesthetic experience is an ongoing process of negotiation and collaboration with whatever I am experiencing by entering its world and engaging in a dialogue, with an ample reward for my willingness to dance together. I savor such a process. While making a judgment of the aesthetic value of an object is not anathema to aesthetic engagement, the emphasis is on

the experience which may or may not lead to a judgment. The experience is valued for itself, not as a means to making a judgment.

The terms describing the aesthetic experience facilitated by engagement, namely collaboration, responsiveness, reciprocity, and open mindedness, are decidedly ethical virtues. These virtues are most prominent in social aesthetics, the arena of aesthetics that Berleant established as he continued to expand the aesthetic field, from art to environment. Commenting on this expansion, Berleant points out that it is “both needless and false to restrict environment to its physical aspects,” but it includes “environments of all sorts, including human situations and social relationships.”<sup>14</sup> This movement is characterized by him as “objects into persons: the way to social aesthetics.”<sup>15</sup>

The desiderata of social aesthetics, or “getting along beautifully,”<sup>16</sup> consist of acceptance, respect for the unique singularity of the other party, perceptual acuity, open mindedness, and creative and imaginative engagement. A mechanical transaction that follows a prescribed script, each party doing its own thing without having any traction gained through interaction, is generally not aesthetically fulfilling. In contrast, an aesthetically successful situation is generated collaboratively, interactively, and improvisationally by each party with an open mind that invites and welcomes new discovery, unfamiliar territory, and fresh insight gained not only cognitively but through perceptually.<sup>17</sup> Here, it is difficult to separate the aesthetic from the ethical, “for these settings ... fuse moral and social values with aesthetic ones.”<sup>18</sup> A satisfying social situation and interaction are made possible by the participants’ ethical grounding in virtues such as respect, thoughtfulness, care, responsiveness, and reciprocity, but these are further facilitated by aesthetic sensibility accompanied by perceptual acuity, activation of imagination, and tuning into and adjusting one’s attitude and behavior according to the situation and atmosphere. At the same time, our ethical interactions with others require aesthetic manifestations through oral expressions such as the use of language and its delivery and bodily expressions such as facial expressions, postures, and gestures.

Although the conventional aesthetics’ tendency to focus on art sets the direction from “objects into persons,” it may be the case that the ethically-grounded and aesthetically-directed social interaction lays the ground for the aesthetics regarding objects. This possibility of bidirectional aesthetics, from persons to objects, in addition to from objects to persons, is suggested by Berleant in the following passage:

Aesthetic engagement is an experience of aesthetic appreciation that transforms a physical juxtaposition into a social relationship in which a personal encounter takes place. It projects the aesthetic connection we can experience in the arts into our engagement with other people and with things, as well, turning our encounter with separate, impersonal objects into personal relationships.<sup>19</sup>

What is important is that aesthetic engagement, whether regarding objects, environments, or social interactions, is grounded in the ethical mode of being in, and relating to, the world. At the same time, our ethical relationship with the world can be fulfilling and successful only if it is informed and directed by aesthetic considerations. This inseparability or fusion of the aesthetic and the moral is a recurrent theme in Berleant's aesthetic engagement. In discussing the aesthetic dimension of social life, he claims that "the aesthetics has expanded to include what I call social aesthetics, social values manifested in the relations among people, individually and in groups, and in discussions that recognize *aesthetics and ethics are inextricably intertwined*."<sup>20</sup> Elsewhere, he states that "in the human environment, *the moral, the social and the political are thoroughly interwoven* [...] Our world is first *aesthetic but at the same time moral*."<sup>21</sup> Finally, in his discussion of negative aesthetics brought about by the commercial, political, and industrial co-optation of what he calls perceptual commons, environment that should be free for all, he states that "here the aesthetic and the moral *merge inseparably*."<sup>22</sup> Berleant's overall commitment to restore the *continuity* and *inseparability* of various life concerns and the aesthetic is summarized thus: "The moral and the aesthetic are often symbiotic and, in a world of continuities, nothing is entirely insulated from any part of the whole."<sup>23</sup>

## 2. Watsuji Tetsurō's notion of inbetween-ness

I have mentioned how prescient Berleant's work had been, anticipating more recent developments like everyday aesthetics and relational aesthetics. At the same time, his work is noteworthy for its global relevance, most prominently indicated by the enthusiastic reception by Chinese scholars with whom he has been enjoying a productive exchange.<sup>24</sup> No doubt Chinese scholars found resonance in Berleant's environmental aesthetics, which has a long legacy in the Chinese intellectual and cultural tradition. Here I want to call attention to a significant affinity between Berleant's view of relationality of human existence that underlies aesthetic engagement and the work of one of the most influential philosophers in the twentieth century Japan, Watsuji Tetsurō (1889-1960). The affinity between their views is important to me for two reasons. One is personal. I have always gravitated toward Berleant's work because I felt something awfully familiar to me without being able to put my fingers on exactly what, beyond agreement with his view. At the same time, he has always been open to and appreciative of different cultural traditions, in particular Chinese and Japanese, most clearly indicated in his discussion of gardens. In retrospect, I realize that his view on relationality of human existence shares some important insights with the Japanese cultural ethos that underlies Watsuji's philosophy.

The second reason for my interest in comparing Berleant's work and Watsuji's work is via Gernot Böhme's work on atmosphere. Like Berleant's aesthetic engagement, Böhme attempts to overcome the subject-object dichotomy and judgemental discourse that have dominated Western aesthetics discourse.<sup>25</sup> What is particularly noteworthy for my purpose is that Böhme compares atmosphere, "the prototypical 'between'- phenomenon," to the Japanese notion of "in-between"

(*aidagara* 間柄), the key concept in Watsuji's view of human existence.<sup>26</sup> Analyzing the term, human beings (*ningen* 人間), where the first character signifies "human" and the second "between," Watsuji argues against Western individualism that regards human beings as an independent and discrete entity. Taking various archetypes of humans in the Western tradition, whether *anthrōpos*, *homo sapiens*, or *homo faber*, he claims that they "abstract man from social groups and attempt to grasp man as something self-existing."<sup>27</sup> Various characterizations as "abstraction," "isolated ego or self," or "isolated subjectivity," he claims that "for the problem of human existence, i.e. the problem of practical, behavioral relationships, the ... isolated subjectivity is essentially irrelevant."<sup>28</sup> His particular concern is to account for the ethical dimension of human life. For him, it is not "merely questions of the individual consciousness" but "the place of ethical questions really lies in the *between-ness between men* (人と人との間柄)."<sup>29</sup> By emphasizing relationality, Watsuji is not denying that human beings are individuals, but rather he presents the double nature of human existence by highlighting relationality, or inbetween-ness, because it has been neglected in Western ethics, whether deontology or utilitarianism, which centers its focus on the acting subject as an abstract entity. We exist in a society, Watsuji continues, not as an independent being who happens to be located in its midst but rather we *are* also society; we define society and society defines us. There is interdependence in that neither precedes the other:

[H]uman existence cannot be explained as a situation in which we first have individuals and then the establishment of relationships among them; nor can it be explained as first a society and then the emergence of individuals out of that society. In both of these explanations it is the 'priority' which is the impossibility.<sup>30</sup>

If we try to grasp an individual in our ordinary life as truly individualistic, it comes to nought. As a result, even though our betweenness oriented being subsists between one individual and another, we cannot posit this individual as an individualistic being whose existence precedes the already existing betweenness.<sup>31</sup>

Humans are fundamentally social and communal, and ethics has to do with our relationships with others.

It should be noted that there is an affinity between Watsuji's relational account of human existence and the ethics of care. Although Watsuji's philosophy can hardly be called feminist and there is no direct connection between them, his critique of the ethical paradigm that is based upon an abstract, autonomous, independent subject in favor of the interdependent, relational mode of human existence that gives rise to the ethics of relationality, inbetween-ness, shares an important commitment with care ethics. Erin McCarthy summarizes this affinity thus:

In both Japanese and feminist philosophies we find concepts of self that provide alternatives to the concept of self as the autonomous, isolated individual, and the ethics that results from such a conception of self. When the relational aspect of selfhood is foregrounded, when being



in relation is recognized as an integral part of what it is to be a human being-in-the-world, ... we are moving toward an ethics of care ... one that ... has relationality at its core.<sup>32</sup>

For an ethics of care and Watsuji's philosophy, it is this relation, this basic fact of human being-in-the-world that obliges us to care for the other. Due to the interdependent nature of being human where the other is a part of the self, self-care becomes other care and other care becomes self-care. We can no longer look at the other as something entirely isolated from ourselves and thus, realizing our deep interconnectedness, we cannot ignore the other's pain or suffering as it is also our own.<sup>33</sup>

Relationality both in ethics of care and Watsuji's ethics is focused on the human interactions, but Watsuji is perhaps more vocal about the relationality between humans and environment with all its constituents, as he insists on the *concreteness* of human existence.<sup>34</sup> We exist in a specific environment and historical moment: "the Way of man is realized in various kinds of climatic and historical specific types."<sup>35</sup> This theme receives the most thoroughgoing treatment in his discussion of "climate," the term used to translate his *Fūdo* (風土) published in 1935. The first character indicating wind and the second soil, as well as the translated term, Climate, give the impression that it has to do with nature with a climatic condition, but some scholars believe that it is an unfortunate translation and instead offer an alternative term, such as "human milieu" to make clear that for Watsuji there is a total integration, not a dichotomy, between humans and environment.<sup>36</sup> Watsuji argues for their integration by taking coldness as an example:

Is it that air of a certain temperature, cold, that is, as a physical object, stimulates the sensory organs in our body so that we as psychological subjects experience it as a certain set mental state? If so, it follows that the "cold" and "we" exist as separate and independent entities in such a manner that only when the cold presses upon us from outside is there created an "intentional" or directional relationship by which "we feel the cold"... The "feeling" of "feeling the cold" is not a "point" which establishes a relationship directed at the cold, but it is in itself a relationship in virtue of its "feeling" and it is in this relationship that we discover cold.<sup>37</sup>

But this is only the beginning of his view on how a simple experience of coldness is inseparably entangled with environment and society. He extends one's feeling of cold to sharing the experience with other people, such as when exchanging a greeting with remarks about the season. Furthermore, the character of the cold varies according to the context, such as when a cold, dry wind roaring in late winter or when it blows away cherry blossoms late spring, or when a sudden shower provides a respite from the summer heat. The cold also moves us to act, such by putting on heavier clothes or drawing near to the source of heat. Finally, it determines the kind of houses, clothes, and diets.<sup>38</sup> His point is that my so-called subjective experience of feeling cold does not occur in the abstract, nor does it remain a private, discrete occurrence, but rather happens in an intricate and inseparable

relationship with so many factors, in short, environment. The experience of cold is thus supported by and in turn supports a web of relationships.

Although Watsuji's concern is ethics while Berleant's aesthetics, there is a remarkable degree of shared concern for capturing the relational nature of human existence and experience, instead of abstracting individuals from others, whether people, society, or environment. Interdependence, instead of independence, defines human existence, and the failure to recognize it leads to a mischaracterization of one's ethical life as well as aesthetic experience. Though independent of each other, both Watsuji and Berleant are collectively challenging the view of human beings as autonomous, independent entity, a powerful legacy of Western modern philosophy that shaped the subsequent development of philosophy, including aesthetics, in the West, which was also embraced by the Japanese intellectuals after the rapid and sudden Westernization began in the late nineteenth century.

I have mentioned that Berleant's aesthetic engagement is ethically-grounded. At the same time, Watsuji's ethics based upon the notion of inbetween-ness is aesthetically-informed. Although Watsuji does not offer the following point as pertaining to aesthetic considerations, his discussion of the role of expression in ethics reads very much like Berleant's social aesthetics. He locates the understanding of human existence in "an *immediate* understanding of everyday gestures and dialogue," which constitutes "the practical interconnection of acts prior to their being expressions or an understanding of art, philosophy, and so forth."<sup>39</sup> I interpret "immediate understanding" to be the perceptual experience of the "ways of speaking" that are subtly adjusted to the other party and context, because "human relationships are subtle."<sup>40</sup> Thus, he continues: "a novelist who tries to describe the concrete features of a human life brings subtle human relationships into full relief by appealing to the ways of speaking of the characters in the novel. The way of speaking is more important than its content." He goes further by pointing out that the character of our interaction with the other through speaking is determined by not only the manner of expression (informal and friendly, or formal and polite) but the history of our relationship where we expect a certain manner of expression from this person. So, "If one were to use a polite expression in speaking to an intimate friend, instead of employing a more friendly way of speaking with which one is ordinarily accustomed, this would be a joke, or else we would suppose that something unusual has happened to the relation between the two."<sup>41</sup> Here, Watsuji integrates relationality not only in terms of what is transpiring between the two parties at the time but also the past relationality that gives a context to determining the nature of current expression. Although he is not making an aesthetic point, the manner of speaking with a specific tone, inflection, choice of words, and speed of speaking constitutes an aesthetic matter, and we can interpret that he is showing how relationality determines the nature of social aesthetics.

Watsuji's specifically aesthetic illustration of this relationality between and among human beings is the traditional art form of linked verse, widely practiced in Japan from fifteenth to seventeenth century. Linked verse is a form of parlor game in which a group of people of all social ranks

gather and co-create a series of poetic verses. One person starts with a few lines, followed by the next person who continues the theme or image while adding his own contribution, which is followed by the next person, and so forth. This communal activity goes on for many hours, sometimes all night resulting in as many as ten thousand links.<sup>42</sup> What is critical in the successful linked verse co-creation is to adjust one's contribution to the preceding lines composed by others without sacrificing one's own voice. It is a relational art or participatory art *par excellence*.

Each verse in a linked poem has its own independent existence, yet there is a subtle link that unites these so that one existence evolves into another and there is an order that reaches through the whole. As these developmental links between verse and verse are usually forged by different poets, the coordination of the imaginative power of a single poet is deliberately cast aside and the direction of the development given over to chance.<sup>43</sup>

He calls the spontaneously and collaboratively generated overall harmony as “meeting of feeling” (気合い). The aesthetic experience for the participants is made possible by each participant building upon one another with creativity and imagination, all the while responding to the other participants' contribution. They practice aesthetic engagement as they interact with the other participants and their contributions.

The most eloquent expression of the relationality as an aesthetic organizational guide embodied in physical objects is Japanese garden, according to Watsuji. He contrasts them with European formal gardens organized according to a geometrical order. Japanese garden design without any discernible order is guided by the same “meeting of spirit” he attributes to the art of linked verse, here between rocks of different qualities, rocks and moss, and trees offering different appearances at different seasons.<sup>44</sup> They are arranged to respond to each other. Without any rules to follow, designers use their intuition in arranging these items, and the visitors appreciate the way in which the overall harmony is generated thereby, symbolically presenting how relationship, or inbetween-ness, supports the individual items/beings.

### **3. Berleant and Watsuji compared: political implications**

Today there is a renewed interest and reassessment of Watsuji's philosophy, particularly by focusing on the notion of relationality, which resonates with ethics of care, as I have mentioned. However, this is in response to a series of criticisms lodged against various aspects of his philosophy. First, very few of us accept his rather tortured explanation of the environmental determinism that claims that three “types” of climates, monsoon, desert, and meadow shape the character of culture and arts. Similarly, his tendency toward Japanese exceptionalism, particularly with respect to arts, and a facile contrast between the East and the West is perhaps age-appropriate when it was written but certainly outdated now. Finally, a number of critics point out his philosophy contributed to the nationalistic sentiment in the pre-World War II era, however unintentional.<sup>45</sup>

What I want to develop as a comparison between Watsuji's inbetween-ness and Berleant's engagement is the political dimension of each. As it is often pointed out regarding care ethics, the emphasis on relationality tends to overlook the need for judging the worthiness of developing or maintaining relationship with the other party. For example, does the importance of cultivating care as a mode of relating to the other trump the moral character of the other party? Should I, or is it desirable to, develop a care relationship with a Nazi officer? A rapist? So, even those who are sympathetic to care ethics point out that we still need a justice-centric perspective to determine the worthiness of relationship.<sup>46</sup>

Similarly, Tetsuya Kōno points out a possible problem with Watsuji's notion of relationality, *aidagara*, as the defining mode of human ethical existence for being too optimistic and idealistic. He asks: "In cases where the other party is so far away that we cannot engage in any exchanges or somebody who is unwilling to communicate, developing a relationship, *aidagara*, becomes impossible."<sup>47</sup> Furthermore, sometimes the other party may make an unreasonable or unfair demand, creating a serious conflict regarding what one should do. Kōno points out that the ethics that relies solely on the notion of *aidagara* does not address these all-too-common problems in our lives.<sup>48</sup> Even more importantly, since for Watsuji *aidagara* operates between a human being and environment, including society, there is a danger of supporting an interdependent relationship with a society that may be problematic on the issues regarding justice and human rights. What happens when a society makes unreasonable or unjust demands on its citizens? Kōno observes that Watsuji failed to address such problems and ignored the way in which a society often supports "an unequal power relationship between those who have it and those who don't, creating a conflict between the oppressor and the oppressed, authority and obedience, centralization and marginalization, and inclusivity and exclusion."<sup>49</sup> For example, one of the social problems at the time was the commodification of bodies by prostitutes but, according to Kōno, it is dismissed by Watsuji by his focus on the relationality between the prostitute and the client.<sup>50</sup> Kōno criticizes Watsuji for turning a blind eye to social injustice perpetrated by the relationality between individuals and society, and remaining indifferent to oppression and exploitation. This is why Watsuji is criticized for contributing to the pre-World War II nationalism that was gaining momentum, no matter how unintentional it may have been on the part of Watsuji.

Let me now turn to Berleant's notion of aesthetic engagement. I have argued that it shares with Watsuji's inbetween-ness the importance of relationality as a fundamental mode of human existence. Where they differ, I believe, is that Berleant's 'negative aesthetics,' a subdiscipline of aesthetics that he has been increasingly concerned with, addresses the kind of problem for which Watsuji is criticized. Berleant shares with Katya Mandoki a critique of Western aesthetics which, according to her, has been suffering from what she calls "the Pangloss Syndrome" whereby negative aesthetic experiences are "either only mentioned superficially or swept under the rug."<sup>51</sup> Mandoki calls for aesthetics to pay equal attention to aesthetic poisoning. It includes "the disgusting, the

obscene, the coarse, the insignificant, the banal, the ugly, the sordid” that “our sensibility confronts ... every day.” Berleant, too, cites examples of negative aesthetics most notably experienced in urban life, such as “aesthetic intrusion” of omnipresent unwanted noise; “aesthetic pain” from air pollution; “aesthetic distortion” caused by strident colors of signage and billboards; “aesthetic deprivation” felt by dwellers of cramped urban housing with inadequate exposure to natural light, sun, and wind; and “aesthetic depravity” resulting from exposure to hard porn and vulgar amusement.<sup>52</sup>

These instances of negative aesthetics dull, impoverish, offend, harm, or assault our aesthetic sensibility, and they should be called out for the negative aesthetics that they are, instead of ignoring them in favor of the Pangloss Syndrome or marshalling the theory of disinterested attitude as a way of deriving positive aesthetic experience. I grant that developing a positive aesthetic experience of these objects and phenomena through adopting a disinterested or distanced attitude can sometimes serve as a heuristic strategy to diversify our aesthetic sensibility.<sup>53</sup> However, they are ultimately not a good candidate for aesthetic engagement because, in our lived experience, aesthetic concerns cannot, nor should it, be separated from other life concerns.

These instances of negative aesthetics are not merely aesthetic disamenities, as “we can ... no longer look at any event as exclusively aesthetic, for this only contributes to its isolation.”<sup>54</sup> They shake the foundation of a just, civil, humane, and inclusive society and a fulfilling, satisfying, and productive life. What Berleant calls “perceptual commons” should be accessible to all of us, just as air (and particularly today, with mounting urgency, clean drinking water, liveable environment, and peace and quiet at appropriate places and times) should not be a commodity or a privilege limited to the rich and powerful. As it is becoming increasingly apparent from research in environmental justice and environmental racism, the oppressed, marginalized, and disadvantaged segments of society are subjected to negative aesthetics, ranging from polluted water, mounting garbage, dilapidated and neglected urban areas, incessant noise from various modes of transportation and factory operations, and monotony of housing tracts. These are aesthetic matters insofar as senses are assaulted by eyesores, stenches, untoward noises, as well as dulled and enfeebled by the lack of stimulation.

It is true that such environments can offer opportunities for aesthetic intervention and artistic creativity, such as street art, murals, graffiti, and collaborative art projects with those marginalized populations, as seen in Vik Muniz’s work with the garbage pickers at the largest garbage dump site outside of Rio de Janeiro documented in *Waste Land* (2010) and a French artist JR’s work with various global sites including the people at the US-Mexico border and the California supermax prison populations recorded in *Paper and Glue* (2021). Despite such potentials to offer canvases and opportunities for creative works, however, the fact remains that the negative aesthetics the residents have to contend with is inseparable from the actual harm done to them, affecting their health and well-being. Hence, the problem of exposure to negative aesthetics is not that some dispensable amenities are missing. It reveals a social and political problem of the unjust distribution of the sensible, to borrow Jacques Rancière’s notion.

Aesthetics for Berleant, therefore, is an indispensable instrument of gauging the ethical state of the society and this instrumentality must be embraced and used. He shares this instrumental value of aesthetics with John Dewey: “Contrary to traditional claims that aesthetic value is wholly intrinsic, Dewey insisted that it is also extrinsic.”<sup>55</sup> He also advocates this social and political instrumentality of aesthetics as an argument against the traditional notion of aesthetics as disinterestedness. To dissociate aesthetics from the rest of the life concerns is both a dereliction of duty and a missed opportunity. It is a dereliction of duty because part of the responsibility of aesthetics is to use itself as “a powerful instrument for social criticism” and guard against “the brash and exploitative appropriations of this commons in the political, military, industrial, and commercial co-optations of the perceptual condition of human life.”<sup>56</sup> Not using aesthetics this way is a missed opportunity because it has “still greater power to transform the human world by supplying its standard of fulfilment.”<sup>57</sup> Specifically, “starting with the whole, the whole of natural resources, the whole of perceptual possibilities, we can generate an ethics of care, not conflict; of justice, not privilege. It might be said that perceptual equality precedes and underwrites political equality.”<sup>58</sup>

The comparison between Berleant’s aesthetic relationality and Watsuji’s existential relationality is now quite clear. Watsuji’s primary concern with the existential mode of human beings tends to neglect the critical assessment of the social and political climate which humans inhabit and interact with, a characteristic he shares with noted twentieth century Japanese philosophers, Nishida Kitarō of the so-called Kyoto School being the best-known.<sup>59</sup> Even though they may not have specifically intended to support the then militaristic Japanese government’s promotion of nationalistic unity to prepare citizens for the war effort, their theories left the political implications unaddressed, making them vulnerable to being interpreted and exploited as a possible endorsement for the war.

In comparison, Berleant’s increasingly urgent discussion of negative aesthetics and social and political implications of aesthetics makes clear that the relationality that underlies aesthetic engagement itself deserves a critical assessment, as it is inseparable from its social and political context. Not everything makes an appropriate candidate for aesthetic engagement, and this judgment can only be made by reference to all the other concerns with which we operate for the management of life. He reminds us that aesthetic engagement is socially-situated with serious consequences.

In conclusion, I find it remarkable that seemingly disparate thinkers, Berleant, Watsuji, and care ethicists, share the same insight regarding the fundamentally relational mode of human existence. This, I believe, speaks volumes about the wide reach and relevance of Berleant’s view.

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<sup>1</sup> Katya Mandoki, *Everyday Aesthetics: Prosaics, the Play of Culture and Social Identities* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2007); Yuriko Saito, *Everyday Aesthetics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007).

<sup>2</sup> Nel Noddings, *Caring: Feminine Approach to Ethics and Moral Education* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984); *Caring: A Relational Approach to Ethics and Moral Education* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2013).

<sup>3</sup> Anton Luis Sevilla, “The Ethics of Engaged Pedagogy: A Comparative Study of Watsuji Tetsurō and bell hooks,” *Kritike* 10, no. 1 (June 2016): 124-45. It seems common in the English language Watsuji scholarship, like this one, to keep the Japanese order of a person’s name, which places the family name before the given name. Accordingly, I will keep this

practice throughout my discussion. I should also note that more recent publications reflect the faithful pronunciation of his given name with a diacritic, but older publications don't.

<sup>4</sup> Ezio Manzini and Carla Cipolla, "Relational Services," *Knowledge, Technology & Policy* 22 (2009): 45-50.

<sup>5</sup> For example, a forthcoming anthology edited by Gioia Iannilli is entitled *Co-operative Aesthetics: Models for a Relational Sensibility in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*.

<sup>6</sup> Nicolas Bourriaud, *Relational Aesthetics*, tr. Simon Pleasance and Fronza Woods (Dijon: les presses du reel, 2002), 28.

<sup>7</sup> Bourriaud, *Relational Aesthetics*, 26 and the next passage 22.

<sup>8</sup> Arnold Berleant, "Objects into Persons: The Way to Social Aesthetics," *Espes* 6, no. 2 (2017): 11, emphasis added.

<sup>9</sup> Arnold Berleant, *Aesthetics beyond the Arts: New and Recent Essays* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2012), 85.

<sup>10</sup> Berleant, *Aesthetics beyond the Arts*, 85.

<sup>11</sup> Berleant, *Aesthetics beyond the Arts*, 83.

<sup>12</sup> Berleant, *Aesthetics beyond the Arts*, 89.

<sup>13</sup> Berleant, "Objects into Persons," 10.

<sup>14</sup> Arnold Berleant, *Aesthetics and Environment: Variations on a Theme* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2005), 154; *Living in the Landscape: Toward an Aesthetics of Environment* (Lawrence, Kansas: University Press of Kansas, 1997), 39.

<sup>15</sup> This is the title of his article published in *Espes* (see note 8 above).

<sup>16</sup> "Getting Along Beautifully: Ideas for a Social Aesthetics" is the title of Chap. 14. of *Aesthetics and Environment*.

<sup>17</sup> It is important to note that the agreeable content does not guarantee an aesthetically satisfying experience. The aesthetics of social interactions has to do with the form rather than content. Hence, we can "get along beautifully" while agreeing to disagree on a certain issue.

<sup>18</sup> Berleant, *Aesthetics and Environment*, 155.

<sup>19</sup> Berleant, "Objects into Persons," 15.

<sup>20</sup> Arnold Berleant, *Sensibility and Sense: The Aesthetic Transformation of the Human World* (Exeter: Imprint Academic, 2010), 49, emphasis added.

<sup>21</sup> Berleant, *Aesthetics beyond the Arts*, 190, emphasis added.

<sup>22</sup> Berleant, *Aesthetics beyond the Arts*, 188, emphasis added.

<sup>23</sup> Berleant, *Aesthetics beyond the Arts*, 188.

<sup>24</sup> See Cheng Xiangzhau's "Arnold Berleant's Environmental Aesthetics and Chinese Ecological Aesthetics," Special Volume 9, *Contemporary Aesthetics* (2021), <https://contempaesthetics.org/2021/01/05/arnold-berleants-environmental-aesthetics-and-chinese-ecological-aesthetics/> accessed December 20, 2021.

<sup>25</sup> Gernot Böhme, "Atmosphere as the Fundamental Concept of a New Aesthetics," tr. David Roberts, *Thesis Eleven*, 36 (1993): 113-126; "Atmosphere as an Aesthetic Concept," *Daidalos* 68 (1998): 112-15.

<sup>26</sup> Böhme, "Atmosphere as an Aesthetic Concept," 112.

<sup>27</sup> Watsuji Tetsurō, "The Significance of Ethics. As the Study of Man," tr. David A. Dilworth, *Monumenta Nipponica* 26, no. 3/4 (1971): 399.

<sup>28</sup> Watsuji, "The Significance of Ethics," 395.

<sup>29</sup> Watsuji, "The Significance of Ethics," 396.

<sup>30</sup> Cited by William R. Lafleur in "Buddhist Emptiness in the Ethics and Aesthetics of Watsuji Tetsurō," *Religious Studies* 14, no. 2 (June 1978): 245. Lafleur sees the influence of the Buddhist notion of emptiness and dependent origination in Watsuji's view (244).

<sup>31</sup> Watsuji Tetsurō, *Watsuji Tetsuro's Rinrigaku*, tr. Yamamoto Seisaku and Robert E. Carter (Albany: SUNY Press, 1996), 83. Rinrigaku, the Japanese title, means Ethics and my subsequent reference will use this Japanese title.

<sup>32</sup> Erin McCarthy, *Ethics Embodied: Rethinking Selfhood through Continental, Japanese, and Feminist Philosophies* (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2010), 54. Robert Carter summarizes the Japanese worldview as a "declaration of interdependence," that is, "a recognition that we are not only inextricably intertwined with others but with the entire cosmos." *The Japanese Arts and Self-Discipline* (Albany: SUNY Press, 2008), 5.

<sup>33</sup> McCarthy, *Ethics Embodied*, 58.

<sup>34</sup> Watsuji, "The Significance of Ethics," 405, 406.

<sup>35</sup> Watsuji, "The Significance of Ethics," 412. We should note his reference to "types" here because it contributes to what many critics call his environmental determinism, discussed below.

<sup>36</sup> Yū Inutsuka, "Sensation, Betweenness, Rhythms: Watsuji's Environmental Philosophy and Ethics in Conversation with Heidegger," in *Japanese Environmental Philosophy*, ed. J. Baird Callicott and John McRae (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017), 94.

<sup>37</sup> Watsuji Tetsuro, *A Climate: A Philosophical Study*, tr. Geoffrey Bownas (Tokyo: Printing Bureau, Japanese Government, 1961), 2.

<sup>38</sup> Watsuji, *A Climate*, 2-7.

<sup>39</sup> Watsuji, *Rinrigaku*, 42-3, emphasis added.

<sup>40</sup> Watsuji, *Rinrigaku*, 240. The next passage is also from 240.

<sup>41</sup> Watsuji, *Rinrigaku*, 240. His point here is particularly pertinent in Japan, as the Japanese language has a clearly codified degree of formality and politeness that even determines verbs and the pronouns for "I" and "you."

<sup>42</sup> For specific examples, see Donald Keene's *Japanese Literature: An Introduction for Western Readers* (New York: Grove Press, 1955) and Eiko Ikegami's *Bonds of Civility: Aesthetic Networks and the Political Origins of Japanese Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005): 84-93.

<sup>43</sup> Watsuji, *Rinrigaku*, 196.

<sup>44</sup> Watsuji, *A Climate*, 192.

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<sup>45</sup> For today's assessment of his philosophy, see Robert Carter and Erin McCarthy's the entry on Watsuji Tetsurō in *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (revised Nov. 27, 2019), <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/watsuji-tetsuro/>, accessed December 20, 2021.

<sup>46</sup> See Michele M. Moody-Adams, "Gender and the Complexity of Moral Voices," in *Feminist Ethics*, ed. Claudia Card (Lawrence, Kansas: University Press of Kansas, 1991) and Rosemarie Tong, *Feminine and Feminist Ethics* (Belmont, California: Wadsworth Publishing Company, 1993).

<sup>47</sup> Tetsuya Kōno, "Watsuji Tetsurō to Kea Rinrigaku: Ryōsha wa Kyōdō dekirudarōka" (Watsuji Tetsurō and Care Ethics: Can They Be Made Compatible?), *Journal: Essays in Japanese Philosophy* 8 (2016): 377, my translation.

<sup>48</sup> Kōno, "Watsuji Tetsurō to Kea Rinrigaku," 368.

<sup>49</sup> Kōno, "Watsuji Tetsurō to Kea Rinrigaku," 368.

<sup>50</sup> Kōno, "Watsuji Tetsurō to Kea Rinrigaku," 369.

<sup>51</sup> Mandoki, *Everyday Aesthetics*, 38. The next passage is from the same page.

<sup>52</sup> Berleant, *Aesthetics beyond the Arts*, 198-99. Also see 110.

<sup>53</sup> Thomas Leddy is one of the vocal proponents of the value of this kind of experience. See his *The Extraordinary in the Ordinary: The Aesthetics of Everyday Life* (Peterborough: Broadview Press, 2012) and "The Aesthetics of Junkyards and Roadside Clutter," *Contemporary Aesthetics* 6 (2008), [https://digitalcommons.risd.edu/liberalarts\\_contempaesthetics/vol6/iss1/11/](https://digitalcommons.risd.edu/liberalarts_contempaesthetics/vol6/iss1/11/), accessed December 22, 2021.

<sup>54</sup> Berleant, *Aesthetics beyond the Arts*, 190.

<sup>55</sup> Berleant, *Aesthetics beyond the Arts*, 160.

<sup>56</sup> Berleant, *Aesthetics beyond the Arts*, 188, 190.

<sup>57</sup> Berleant, *Aesthetics beyond the Arts*, 190.

<sup>58</sup> Berleant, *Aesthetics beyond the Arts*, 187.

<sup>59</sup> For the criticism of the Kyoto School, see *Rude Awakenings: Zen, the Kyoto School, and the Question of Nationalism*, eds. James W. Heisig and John Maraldo (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 1995); *Pruning the Bodhi Tree: The Storm over Critical Buddhism*, eds. Jamie Hubbard and Paul L. Swanson (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 1997); and my forthcoming "Ethically-Grounded Nature of Japanese Aesthetic Sensibility," in *Oxford Handbook of Ethics and Art*, ed. James Harold.