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On Getting Along Beautifully. Ideas for a Social Aesthetics

Arnold Berleant

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www.helsinki.fi/opiskelijakirjasto
opiskelijakirjasto-info@helsinki.fi

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On Getting Along Beautifully: Ideas for a Social Aesthetics

Though it may be his needs which drive man into society, and reason which implants within him the principles of social behavior, beauty alone can confer upon him a *social character*. Taste alone brings harmony into society, because it fosters harmony in the individual. All other forms of perception divide man, because they are founded exclusively either upon the sensuous or upon the spiritual part of his being; only the aesthetic mode of perception makes of him a whole, because both his natures must be in harmony to achieve it.

Friedrich Schiller, *On the Aesthetic Education of Man*¹

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

It may seem rather strange at first to speak of a social aesthetics. After all, aesthetics has long concerned itself with the arts, with the theory of the arts, that is, and with understanding beauty in nature. And that understanding, as Baumgarten, the originator of modern aesthetics, thought of it, lies in the perfection of sensory

awareness. It is easy to see how this can relate to the various arts and to our appreciation of nature. These are preeminently sensory, embracing the full range of perceptual experience in all its modalities, not only by means of the senses but also in the sensory aspects of experiences that are imaginative, that involve recollection, or that may even be predominately cognitive. So understood, perception is broad, indeed, and necessarily so, since it is important to recognize how thoroughly and completely sensation pervades all experience. This domain of perception, especially in the arts, seems to have little to do, at least directly, with the social world. Aesthetics is, then, the province of the arts, in that attempts to understand the arts lead us to aesthetics. Or, more strictly speaking, the arts, and certain aspects of nature, are the province of aesthetics.

This is the heart of the traditional view, essentially true to the course of its long and respectable history. But if aesthetic theory is to reflect the meaning of aesthetics in an unprejudicial fashion, we must be prepared to look further. For the arts and their practices suggest the expansion of aesthetics in both interesting and important ways. To show how this is so, how an aesthetics of the arts leads us beyond the arts, let me start with the customary account of the aesthetic situation.

The distinctive pleasure we associate with the arts involves an aesthetic of objects - of art objects and sometimes of objects in nature. These stand at the theoretical center, and most discussion concerns the distinctiveness of such objects, their properties, qualities, and other features, their form and order, and how they transfigure the world beyond in ways that render it aesthetically enjoyable. Complementing this aesthetics of objects is a distinctive way of appreciating them. Once these art objects have been singled out and identified as paintings, sculptures, musical works, theatrical productions, dance performances, and the like, the need arises for a distinctive response, a way of appreciating them that matches their special character with an equally special kind of reception. Balancing this aesthetics of objects, then, is an attention that is essentially passive and contemplative, a response that delights in those objects for their own sake, without any concomitant application or other purpose - in the usual terminology, disinterestedly.

Curiously enough, this traditional account, this aesthetic of objects and their

passive reception, itself leads to the possibility of a social aesthetics. One can develop a sequence of arts that proceeds from a simple, delimited art object and its correlative response to a condition that transcends that divided order to become, instead, an integral aesthetic-social situation. A painting, as the paradigm of a single, delimited object, can easily be circumscribed by two dimensions. Enclosed by a frame, this art of the surface is clearly set off from what is around it and offers a clear and convenient focus for the appreciative eye. To these two dimensions, the related art of sculpture adds another. Yet sculpture resembles painting only superficially, for it does not simply thicken the surface and bend it around to achieve a third dimension. Depth, which nearly all painting possesses perceptually, is more than thickness. For sculpture incorporates mass, and mass takes its position among other things in the world. Sculpture is unlike painting in still another respect: It not only fills the space as mass but charges the space around it, creating an aura into which the beholder steps in the act of appreciation.

When we turn to architecture, we find this enlarged space extended inward as well as outward. Mass is opened within to enclose space, and this interior volume is both designed for inhabitants and invites them to occupy it. At the same time, architecture reaches out into the surrounding space far beyond the aura of sculpture, incorporating that space into an ensemble with the physical structure. Such an influence may extend beyond the site and adjoining grounds to contiguous or nearby structures. Artists who construct environments that we can enter and inhabit for a brief time render the enlargement of art more explicit yet. Such environments add to the two dimensions of painting and the third dimension of sculptural mass and architectural space a fourth, temporal dimension. For time enters into the art work along with the appreciative observer, who is obliged to become a participant in this art and activate the environment by moving through it.

Despite the theoretical and perceptual constraints of traditional aesthetics, then, we find ourselves well on the way to a social aesthetics, for it is but a short step in this sequence of arts to the social environment. An environment devised by an artist is a fabricated perceptual construct that concentrates features found in every environment. Yet even if a human environment does not originate specifically with an artist, it is a

culturally constructed context. And since people are implicated we end with situated human relationships, that is, with a social environment. Within the structure of traditional theory, then, we can see how an aesthetics of art objects leads to the possibility of a social aesthetics. We arrive at the same point, moreover, if we start from the correlative of the art object, that is, from the appreciator. For appreciative experience is actually not passive at all but demands at the very least attention that is alert and focused. So by introducing a human contribution, aesthetics has indeed acquired a social dimension.

These brief observations certainly need to be elaborated further.² But it is interesting to observe at this point that a traditional aesthetic of circumscribed objects and disinterested appreciators leads eventually to the social domain. When aesthetic theory is developed contextually, however, the social relevance of the aesthetic is more pronounced still. Let us see how this is.

Aesthetics as Contextual

Unlike the traditional account, no single or dominant feature establishes an aesthetic situation in a contextual theory: It has no essence. Instead, a number of factors combine to make it distinctive. A contextual theory integrates these features into an inclusive situation.

acceptance

In the aesthetic encounter, appreciation involves an openness to experience while judgment is suspended. It takes deliberate effort to set aside selective, restricted attention, the tunnel vision of ordinary life, which centers on specific objects and particular goals. This kind of attention is easily transferred to works of art, setting them apart from other objects and activities. Even Kant retains the teleological form of practical interest, but without a practical object, in his famous "purposiveness without purpose."³

Our century has fought for the expansion of art against such a limitation and has largely established its point. Given the appropriate conditions, anything whatever can now become art. At the same time as the realm of art has expanded, so, too, has the range of aesthetic appreciation. Nothing is excluded *a priori* we must be willing to enter into

appreciation with an open mind. This applies to the situation as much as to the object, especially since the art object has proved dispensable and has sometimes been replaced by concepts, programs, found objects, and even philosophy.

perception

Perception is basic in all experience. What makes it important here is its predominance in aesthetic appreciation, Baumgarten established this when he adapted the Greek word *aisthesis*, perception through the senses, as the name of this new discipline, defining aesthetics as the science of sensory knowledge directed toward beauty.⁴ Sensory experience is never pure sensation, however, as the psychology of perception and social psychology have long known. Many factors shape our sensory awareness, from the physiology of the brain and other organic functions, to the formative influences of education and the other cultural institutions and practices that inform our belief system, affect our responses, and contribute to the many-layered complexity of perception. Sensation, nonetheless, lies at the center of this perceptual depth, and it differs from other modes of awareness with other emphases, such as intellectual cognition, mystical bliss, and intense physical activity. Aesthetic perception, ordinarily thought of as peculiar to the arts, has always been at the heart of our appreciation of nature, from small objects of special beauty, such as a blossom or a stone, to monumental ones in the form of a waterfall, a chasm, or an entire landscape. Nothing in the nature of aesthetic perception precludes its appropriateness for other objects and situations. Perceptual experience may also dominate certain social occasions, such as moments of affection between parents and children or between friends or lovers, at times of quarrel or hatred, and in other highly qualitative social settings.

sensuousness

The senses lie at the heart of perceptual experience, and the pleasure they provide gives them special importance here. Traditional aesthetics has been constrained by intellectualist premises from accepting the full scope of sensation. From Plato to Hegel, sight and hearing were declared the sole aesthetic senses, in large part because they are distance receptors and so conform to the contemplative model of knowledge that separates its object and sets it at a distance.⁵ Yet all the senses can provide aesthetic satisfaction, including the proximal receptors of tactual, olfactory, gustatory, and

subcutaneous kinaesthetic perception. Moreover, the common belief that experience flows through separate sensory channels distorts their actual synthesis in perception. In perceptual experience the senses fuse inseparably, a phenomenon called synaesthesia that is especially pronounced in aesthetic appreciation.⁶

discovery

From the central place given perceptual awareness, aesthetic experience is, at least in principle, unconstrained by preconceptions about what can be taken aesthetically. Ordinary experience is guided by signs or cues that reduce its perceptual content to a mere vestige, sufficient only for recognition, and when experience becomes habitual or routine it loses its aesthetic character. In aesthetic experience, however, the usual order of significance is inverted. Perceptual qualities and experienced meanings become the center of attention, and those features that were once unnoticed or ignored become important. This opens the field of aesthetic experience to unexpected objects and events. And because aesthetic perception is focused and selective, novel and creative ideas and relationships may emerge.

uniqueness

Every experience is perceptually unique, different in some respects from every other. This takes on special importance in aesthetic appreciation because of its emphasis on perception. Even repetitive objects or events never actually duplicate each other, since each repetition resonates with its predecessors, while at the same time projecting its influence on the repetitions that follow. These changes may be small and subtle, but aesthetic awareness is nothing if not discerning.

reciprocity

The interplay that develops among the factors in an aesthetic situation is sometimes overlooked, yet this invariably occurs in an intense engagement with art. The experience of an art object is deeply affected by the knowledge and attitude of the person who joins with it.⁷ At the same time the object acts on the beholder and subtly alters the character and quality of awareness. Such reciprocity is highly desirable, for why would we enter the aesthetic if not to engage in such an exchange.

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This interplay between art and its appreciator overlaps with similar exchanges

involving the other active factors in the aesthetic situation or field, such as the artist and the performer. These may sometimes be different persons but at other times simply the recreative, activating attention of the audience. All these factors may contribute information, interpretive judgment, and other kinds of cognitive content, yet in this context they always assume a perceptual mode. The recent emphasis on interactive art makes the dynamic exchange of object, audience, artist, and performer explicit and prominent.

continuity

Not only do these participating factors interact and overlap, but in the living experience of an aesthetic situation they blend into one another. The distinctions we draw from a reflective distance between the constituent elements of the aesthetic field fade away, and the divisions and separations that we impose on experience to help us grasp and control it melt into continuities. This is the primary milieu of aesthetic experience and secures its contextual character.

engagement

The concept of engagement encapsulates these features of a contextual aesthetic. Aesthetic engagement renounces the traditional separations between the appreciator and the art object, between the artist and the viewer, and between the performer and these others. The psychological distance that traditional aesthetics imposes between the appreciator and the object of art is a barrier that obstructs the participatory involvement that art encourages. Similarly, the divisions we are in the habit of making among the other factors introduce constraints and oppositions. In contrast with this, boundaries fade away in aesthetic engagement and we experience continuity directly and intimately. Those who can set aside the preconceptions of aesthetic distance and the dichotomizing metaphysics underlying traditional aesthetic theory may discover that the fullest and most intense experiences of art and natural beauty reveal an intimate absorption in the wonder and vulnerability of the aesthetic.

multiplicity

- 18 Because the aesthetic concerns the character of experience itself and is not confined to a particular kind of object or place, it knows no external or *a priori* restrictions. The occasions on which aesthetic appreciation can develop are unlimited and can involve any

objects whatsoever. Further, aesthetic involvement need not be rare or restricted. It is limited only by our perceptual capabilities and our willingness to participate. At the same time, aesthetic experience does not dominate every situation. Often an aesthetic character is subordinate to other demands and interests, such as religious, practical, technological, or cognitive ones. Sometimes, however, the aesthetic supervenes on our usual expectations, as when *The Bible* is appreciated for its literary art and not its religious significance, or when the design of a sewer facility becomes the opportunity for creating a tidal sculpture, re-creating a habitat for endangered species, and establishing a public-access bay walk, as in Patricia Johanson's 'Endangered Garden' in San Francisco. And the practice of a craft may fuse aesthetic values inseparably with functional needs, as in throwing a clay bowl, building a wooden cabinet, or designing a sailboat or an airplane. In all these ways, aesthetic values pervade the entire range of human culture.

These features of the aesthetic situation both establish and reflect its contextual character. Discussions about art often center on a single trait, most often the art object but sometimes the appreciator or the artist. Yet they err by synecdoche, taking part of the situation as if it were the entire domain. Even when the appreciator and the object are regarded as related to each other in appreciative experience, they are usually still considered basically self-contained. Furthermore, if we do not also include the creative, re-creative, and performative aspects of such experience, the same error of partiality occurs and the account remains fragmentary. For this reason, discussions about expression, representation, formalism, and feeling are likely to misrepresent art. The concept of the aesthetic field is useful here because it reflects in an inclusive and convenient way the interweaving, indeed the fusion, of the objective, perceptual, creative, and performative dimensions of what is actually experienced as integral.⁸

Social Aesthetics

Although this account of the contextual character of the aesthetic considers mainly objects of art and nature, human relations bear a remarkable resemblance to its situational character. At the same time, they reveal the social significance of the aesthetic. How can this be?

Some of the arts suggest that possibility. Consider architecture. To regard

architecture merely as the art of building distorts the way in which it actually organizes an entire environment. The design of a building determines not just its own features; it also affects the site on which the building rests and our perception of the structures that stand nearby. Sometimes, in fact, a building casts its character over an entire neighborhood.

For buildings are not self-sufficient objects but places for human activity, determining, the patterns of movement toward, into, and out of them, as well as within them. This fact transforms architecture from an art of physical structures into an art of complex social and environmental organization.

Theater also embodies a social aesthetic. The heart of theater does not lie in its physical properties, although theater design, sets, and costumes obviously exert a strong influence. But it is in its depiction of social situations and, in particular, of particular human relations, that theater's special contribution emerges most vividly. Because of this, theater creates an environment that is predominately social, and the aesthetics of theater must build on this base. Film and television harrow the same field, though with different textures, for the nature of these media determines and shapes the qualitative character of the experiences they generate. Film genres and styles vary enormously, certainly, yet cinema tends, in general, to focus on personal situations with a visual range and intensity that replace the bodily presence from which so much of theater's special power derives. As the eyes of the mind, the camera becomes a virtuoso performer in its own right, invisibly directing both conscious and subliminal awareness. Television exhibits a similar process, but it tends to work best in small-scale situations, where its proximity to the viewer and frequent close-ups combine with the intimacy of quiet speech to make it possible to create social situations that have their own distinctive quality.

Each of these preeminently situational arts - architecture, theater, film, and television - exemplifies a distinguishable mode of aesthetic engagement. Together they constitute a sequence of aesthetic situations that are essentially social. Each implicates and relies on human participants in a different way, and each contributes to our understanding of how aesthetic perception carries social significance. To give an adequate account of this, the usual categories and principles, especially those that focus on the aesthetic object and its properties, will not do. In their place we need a social aesthetics.

If we enlarge the field of aesthetic experience and change our focus to allow for an aesthetics of the social situation, what will this look like? Perhaps it would resemble the aesthetics of environment, where many contributing factors come together to establish its aesthetic character and give it a distinctive identity: participants, physical setting, social conditions, along with time, history, and the powerful influence of culture and tradition, all joined in the perceptual character of aesthetic experience. Social aesthetics may, in fact, be a kind of environmental aesthetics, for it is both needless and false to restrict environment to its physical aspects. No environment that we can know and speak about is without a human presence; such a thing, in fact, is empirically impossible.⁹

Social aesthetics is, then, an aesthetics of the situation. But what identifies this particular kind of situation? Like every aesthetic order, social aesthetics is contextual. Furthermore, it is highly perceptual, for intense perceptual awareness is the foundation of the aesthetic. At work in social aesthetics are factors similar to those in every aesthetic field, although their specific identity maybe different. While there is no artist, as such, creative processes are at work in its participants, who emphasize and shape the perceptual features, and supply meaning and interpretation. There is no art object here, of course, yet the situation itself becomes the focus of perceptual attention, as it does in conceptual sculpture or in environments. And at the same time as its participants contribute to creating the aesthetic character of the situation, they may recognize with appreciative delight its special qualities, and perhaps work, as a performer would, at increasing and enhancing them. In such a way, a social situation, embodying human relationships, may become aesthetic.

When Schiller attributes the source of social character in human beings to beauty, he finds in that experience the ability to harmonize the disparate qualities that, especially in Western culture, compete and conflict with other. The usual opposition that Schiller identifies as the source of this is psychophysical, "the sensuous [part]" and "the spiritual part of [our] being," as he calls it. Social harmony is achieved through taste, by which he means a developed aesthetic sensibility. This is not just a state of mind: A harmony of the sensuous and the spiritual demands full participation of all aspects of human perception, since the sensuous is as much body as the spiritual is consciousness. A social aesthetic,

then, is full integration, integration equally of the personal and the social, a goal as much social as it is aesthetic.

A social situation, then, displays the characteristics of an aesthetic situation when its perceptual and other characteristic features predominate: full acceptance of the other(s), heightened perception, particularly of sensuous qualities, the freshness and excitement of discovery, recognition of the uniqueness of the person and the situation, mutual responsiveness, an occasion experienced as connected and integrated, the abandonment of separateness for full personal involvement, and the relinquishing of the restrictions and exclusivity that obstruct appreciation.

It is important not to leave this argument in the abstract, for many common social occurrences lend themselves to aesthetic experience and analysis. Each of these invites a fuller discussion of how it may take on a predominately aesthetic character. Nor is that character exclusive, for these settings also fuse moral and social values with aesthetic ones.

Aesthetic Social Situations

Proper etiquette is ordinarily interpreted as rule-governed behavior, as conventions that are devoid of any real content but that serve to facilitate social interaction by establishing regular patterns. Yet there are occasions when the cultivation of such behavior assumes a certain *grace*, when the participants delight in the skills involved and at the same time manage to introduce genuine human content into what is usually empty ritual. When this occurs, discovery, perception, reciprocity, and the other aesthetic features overcome the sterile formalism often associated with etiquette. In much the same way, other rituals, whether religious or social, may turn into aesthetic situations. Religious rituals sometimes become full-fledged theater, and living drama often occurs at other ceremonies, celebrations, and festivals.

There are entire societies that seem to possess the harmony Schiller spoke of. One such culture is the Foi, a tribe living in Papua New Guinea. Foi society is constituted aesthetically, with close connections between language and movement, both in relation to dwelling and to the overall territory. No boundaries exist between mind and body or the being of life and the being of death, a continuity that Foi sung poetry reveals as the basic

conditions of spatial and temporal life. Furthermore, this poetry is fundamental in the discursive life of their communally lived world.¹⁰

Such aesthetically integrated societies are undoubtedly rare, but many kinds of social situations exist in less favored societies that at times exhibit the qualities of an aesthetic situation. Relations with small children, for example, often take on an aesthetic character when our judgment is suspended and perception becomes heightened by a special delight in sensory qualities, qualities of the sort Rubens depicted in the drawing of his son, Nicholas, as a child. On such occasions one can easily discern other aesthetic features: discovery, uniqueness, reciprocity, continuity, engagement, and the possibility of multiple occurrences of the same sort. These traits of an aesthetic situation occur in much the same way in close friendships. As Aristotle noted, perfect friendship rests on mutual trust, provides for each other's good, and is a situation in which the friend's good is inseparable from one's own.¹¹

It may be, however, that the deepest and most intense occasions of a social aesthetic occur in the many forms that love may take. Indeed, Aristotle's account of perfect friendship leaves little to distinguish it from love. 'Love' is an overused word in human relations, but until recently it has been uncommon in philosophy. On the other hand, beauty' is a common term in philosophy but not in describing human relations. Can we pair their rarities and write a philosophy of love about beautiful relationships and, perhaps at the same time, a philosophy of beauty about the relationships of love? For both beauty and love are relational ideas and not formal features of objects. Better still, they are characteristics of a situation.

Of the many ways to pursue their connection, little has been said of how love can be illuminated through the traits of an aesthetic situation.¹² But it is equally important to show how love is at the same time a manifestation of beauty. Although there is much to explore here, let me comment on just a single feature of that situation, perhaps its key feature and the one that implies the others, as well. That is the idea of aesthetic engagement.

Shakespeare is probably the best known but hardly the first to recognize that music may be an aphrodisiac. Long before, Plato had observed its seductive power with

distress.¹³ Yet whether sustenance or stimulus, music - or any art, for that matter - can do more than excite amorous passions. For art goes far beyond being only a cause or an accompaniment here. To treat it in these ways is to think of art as if it were separate from love, related yet distinct and apart. Isn't there a more intimate association that holds among the arts and the passions, more precisely between art and love, a relationship that involves more than the one being simply an occasion or condition of the other?

I think that there is, but it is no thread joining externals, no curious connection of separates. It resembles, rather, a relationship of consanguinity, and one of siblings rather than parent and child. For, I suggest, art and love have in common the characteristics we associate with the aesthetic. What is different is more the participants than the occurrence, more the kind of activity that is involved than the kind of experience we enter into. The one concerns human relationships, although, like Thoreau, a person may love a landscape, a place, a home, or an object.¹⁴ The other involves a fusion of appreciator, object, artist, and activator. Surely some kinds of love reflect a similar experience.

Although art and love show clear differences, their resemblances are striking. Whatever else may be involved in art, dwelling on the features of the object occupies a central place. In the full appreciative engagement of art, what often develops is a sense of personal exchange with the image in the painting or with its pictorial qualities; a sharing of the dynamic progression of the work, as in the unfolding of a musical composition; an intimate involvement in the sequence of movement in a dance and the dramatic raveling and unraveling of a play or a novel; and in theater, the presence of a human situation or condition that may take the form of a momentary awareness or a shocking realization, as in an epiphany, or a feeling of kinship or human empathy.

Yet these are the very signs of love, the common strand in its multitude of forms and instances: a personal exchange, a sharing of dynamic progression, perhaps a sense of dramatic development, the awareness of a rare human situation, a feeling of empathy or kinship. In both art and love we may have a sense of being in place, of a dissolution of barriers and boundaries, of communion. And in both an intimate connection can develop. Such connectedness, such continuity, such engagement lie at the very center of the aesthetic, occurring with great intensity on the most notable occasions, and paler on

the less, more usual ones.

Others have corroborated such a bond. In her essay on Human Personality,' Simone Weil speaks of "a type of attention, converging upon love, that enables the attender to commune with an object (or person) at the level of the impersonal - seeing it with acuity, understanding, and affection." ¹⁵ Communing with an object characterizes aesthetic engagement, while the impersonal here refers to the loss of a discrete, separate sense of self. In an oddly parallel fashion Thoreau likened the aesthetic relation to nature to a loving friendship: "As I love nature, as I love singing birds, and gleaming stubble, and flowing rivers, and morning and evening, and summer and winter, I love thee my Friend" ¹⁶

But most important by far are the general resemblances of love to aesthetic contact, continuity, participation, engagement. These suggest a structural similarity, an isomorphism, so to say, between these two most human of experiences. We might, indeed, describe art and love equally as aesthetic situations. Both involve acceptance without judgment and, at their best, both exhibit free value. After we excise the negative elements of possessiveness, insecurity, egoism, jealousy, and power, much of what is left in human relationships is its aesthetic character. This is found in the many forms that love takes, with friends, with children, with partners. A lesson for morality lies in recognizing the importance of free value, rare and fleeting though it be. ¹⁷ Love and art dwell, too, in the perceptual domains of sense, imagination, and memory, and both are attentive to the sensory qualities of the situation. A rich love relation, like good art, holds new and surprising awareness, cognition, and re-cognition. The peculiar individual features of the art or love object become the focus of attention: It is ultimate particularity. ¹⁸

Further, both art and love evoke mutuality among the factors and forces in the aesthetic situation. The various arts and the different modes of love exhibit reciprocity in ways that are similar, the participating factors coming to blend into each other. ¹⁹ Divisions and separations disappear and are replaced by a sense of empathy. These connections are personal ones, for 25

both art and love evoke a sense of shared living, a certain continuity and oneness, an intimacy in which divisions disappear. Love, indeed, is

a binding force that melts boundaries. Empedocles knew this in the fifth century B.G.E., when he described love as the attracting and unifying force in the universe.²⁰ Finally, both possess uniqueness without exclusivity, for various and diverse occasions and relationships are possible. This is not love of the beautiful or love as the path to the beautiful, which Plato's Socrates learns from Diotima in *The Symposium*. It is rather love as beauty, both of them many and irreducible.²¹

The Politics of Social Aesthetics

This confluence of the aesthetic and the social carries us eventually to that domain in which the social formalizes itself in political patterns. Here a social aesthetics has significant and powerful implications. Schiller again points the way:

No privilege, no autocracy of any kind, is tolerated where taste rules, and the realm of aesthetic semblance expends its sway... In the Aesthetic State everything - even the tool which serves - is a free citizen, having equal rights with the noblest... Here, in the realm of Aesthetic Semblance, we find that ideal of equality fulfilled which the Enthusiast would fain see realized in substance.²²

Is 'the Aesthetic State' merely a metaphor for the aesthetic situation? Does it, in fact, have genuinely political implications? Could it perhaps be both? If it is in some sense political, then what is equal in the aesthetic state? Does the aesthetic suggest a different sense of equality from the many meanings and practices that have been urged since the Stoics and early Christians? There is a special contribution that the aesthetic can make to this most fundamental of ethical and political concepts. We can explore this best by untangling some of the implications that an aesthetic model holds for political order and, in a similar way, for other social institutions.

The social equivalent of the willing acceptance of the object in an aesthetic situation lies in recognizing the intrinsic value of every person. Like the readiness to engage aesthetically in all kinds of experience, the fundamental acceptance of each person is the precondition of a social ethics. No one is excluded *a priori*; No classification stands between a person and his or her inherent worth, not race, religion, ethnicity, private

history, level of cultivation, or any other category by which we lose the person in the generality. This accords with the ethical ideal that holds all people as morally equal, irrespective of other differences.

The aesthetic emphasis on perception suggests that judgments of worth, whether they apply to actions, practices, laws, people, or institutions, be based on the immediacy of the experience to which they lead, on their empirical manifestations and not on rules, principles, or other substitutes for experience. The sensuousness in aesthetic awareness has its parallel in the fact of human embodiment in the political order. People are flesh and blood creatures, not statistics, blocs, classes, districts, or votes. The political equivalent of discovery lies in an openness to new ideas and to change that comes from wide participation in social decision-making. The idea of aesthetic uniqueness provides a special meaning. Equality is not exhausted by the notion of a common moral standing, crucial though this be. It suggests, in addition, that human beings are ultimately never commensurable, and that whatever generic endowments they may exhibit, individual people possess ultimate and irreducible particularity.

Reciprocity lies at the heart of the democratic process, for it takes the essential interplay and fusion that develop in aesthetic experience as a model for social and political order. This means that an aesthetic state must be non-authoritarian and non-hierarchical, and that the imposition of force or power in any form must be rejected in the social dynamic. Genuine reciprocity transforms all parties to the process, as difficult to achieve as it is desirable. Yet how else can true reconciliation and collaboration take place? This turns aesthetic continuity into a social ideal, one that promotes cooperation, not conflict, and it dissolves the class divisions and other such separations that impede continuity. By reconciling oppositions and promoting humane connections within a social group, the social equivalent of aesthetic engagement encourages intimacy in personal relations and rejects formalized structures that separate people and form them into oppositions. And we find in the openness and readiness to enter into multiple aesthetic occasions a basis for the social pluralism to which free association freely leads.

We may ask, finally, what claim the aesthetic can make as a social model. It is easy to dismiss the aesthetic state for being as naive as it is noble. Perhaps it does exceed the grasp

of our faulty institutions and the flawed people who run them. Yet maybe its rarity has more to do with cynicism, narrow purposes, and an ignoble spirit than with impossibility. For such an aesthetic community does in fact exist in more limited forms, imperfectly and impermanently, perhaps, but nonetheless actually, in art, in love, in societies like the Foi, and in many small, intentional groups and communities throughout the world. It may be that a modest scope is the precondition for an aesthetic social order.

However one judges the possibility of attaining it, a social aesthetic remains a distinctive, fresh, and illuminating approach to human relations, whether as friendship, family, or state. It is flexible and adaptable to different kinds of situations. It takes a positive approach to social order, replacing the pattern of conflict - a repressive standard that rests on a social dynamic of power and is really a model of violence, however masked in benign language or pious ideology - with a model of mutuality and support, which is really a model of love. Ultimately and best, in giving new meaning to tolerance, reciprocity, and equality, a social aesthetic offers the basis for a truly humane community. Isn't this what Schiller was leading us to see?

23 December 1997

Notes:

1. Friedrich Schiller, *On the Aesthetic Education of Man*, ed. and transl. E.M. Wilkinson and L.A. Willoughby (Oxford, Clarendon, 1967), p. 125 (27th letter, para. 10).

2. See my *Art and Engagement* (Temple University Press, Philadelphia, 1991).

3. Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgment* (1790), §10.

4. Alexander Gottlieb Baumgarten, *Aesthetica* (Frankfurt a. O., 1750), Vol. I.

5. Hegel follows Plato's restriction of the sensuous aspect of art to the aesthetic (theoretical) senses of sight and hearing, since the work of art is halfway between the directly perceived material object (and thus retains sensuousness) and the ideal universal of pure thought. The aesthetic senses should have no direct physical relation to (connection with) the object. C.W.F. Hegel,

'The Philosophy of Fine Art' in *Philosophies of Art and Beauty*, eds. A. Hofstadter and R. Kuhns (The Modern Library, New York, 1964), p. 409.

6. See, for example, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, transl. Colin Smith (Routledge & Kegan Paul, London, 1962), pp. 233-234.

7. Wolfgang Iser, 'Aesthetics beyond Aesthetics: Toward a New Form of the Discipline' in *Literature and Aesthetics* (October 1997), pp. 17ff.

8. See my *The Aesthetic Field, A Phenomenology of Aesthetic Experience* (C.C Thomas, Springfield, IL, 1970). Ch. 1, 'Surrogate Theories of Art,' is also a critique of partial theories.

9. See my *The Aesthetics of Environment* (Temple University Press, Philadelphia, 1992), esp. Chs. 1 and 3. See also *Living in*

the Landscape: Toward an Aesthetics of Environment (University Press of Kansas, Lawrence, 1997), Ch. 1. Ch. 9, 'The Aesthetics of Community' (pp. 135-155), complements the present essay.

10. James F. Weiner, *The Empty Place: Poetry, Space, and Being among the Foliage of Papua, New Guinea* (Indiana University Press, Bloomington, 1991), p. 8.

11. Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* Bk. VIII, Chs. 4 (1157a) and 5 (1157b).

12. An important exception is Guy Sircello's rich exploration in *Love and Beauty* (Princeton University Press, Princeton, 1989). He and others have illuminated the subject from other perspectives than the one taken here.

13. Plato, *The Republic*, III. 400-403; X. 602-607.

14. Henry David Thoreau, *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers*, ed. Carl F. Hovde et al. (Princeton University Press, Princeton, 1980), p. 285.

15. Simone Weil, 'Human Personality' in *Simone Weil: An Anthology*, ed. Sian Miles (Weidenfeld and Nicolson, New York, 1986).

I am indebted to Prof. Hilde Hein for this reference.

16. See note 12.

17. "Even with Tomas she was obliged to behave lovingly because she needed him. We can never establish with certainty what part of our relations with others is the result of our emotions - love, antipathy, charity, or malice - and what part is predetermined by the constant power play among individuals. True human goodness, in all its purity and freedom, can come to the fore only when its recipient has no power. Mankind's true moral test, its fundamental test (which lies deeply buried from view), consists of its attitude towards those who are at its mercy: animals. And in this respect mankind has suffered a fundamental debacle, a debacle so fundamental that all others stem from it."

Milan Kundera, *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* (Harper & Row, New York, 1984), p. 289.

18 To love everyone is a noble enterprise. Unfortunately it denies one a certain faculty of discrimination." Anita Brookner, *A Family Romance* (Jonathan Cape, London, 1993).

19 If this is true, then one-sided love is a misnomer, much as Fromm interprets self-love as selfishness. Narcissism and subjective self-indulgence fail in the same way. Erich Fromm, *Man for Himself, an Inquiry into the Psychology of Ethics* (Holt, New York, 1947), Ch. IV, 1.

20 Empedocles, 'On Nature' in *Ancilla to the Pre-Socratic Philosophers*, ed. K. Freeman (Blackwell, Oxford, 1952), fragments 18-21.

21. Plato, *Symposium*, 210-212a.

22. Schiller, *On the Aesthetic Education of Man*, para. 11.

23. Josef Chytrý, in *The Aesthetic State* (University of California Press, Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1989), draws his title and much of his inspiration from Schiller. For Chytrý, the "aesthetic state", stand[s] for a social and political community that accords primacy...to the aesthetic dimension in human consciousness and activity..."

24. "Environmental aesthetics does not concern buildings and places alone. It deals with the conditions under which people join as participants in an integrated situation. Because of the central place of the human factor, an aesthetics of environment profoundly affects our moral understanding of human relationships and our social ethics. An environmental aesthetics of engagement suggests deep political changes away from hierarchy and its exercise of power and toward community, where people freely engage in mutually fulfilling activities. It implies a humane family order that relinquishes authoritarian control and encourages cooperation and reciprocity. It leads toward acceptance, friendship, and love that abandon exploitation and possessiveness and promote sharing and mutual empowerment." Arnold Berleant, *The Aesthetics of Environment* (Temple University Press, Philadelphia, 1992), pp. 12-13.