2023 Bodies of Belief Conference Abstracts

**Presenter**: Dag Svanæs, Norwegian University of Science and Technology, Trondheim, Norway

**Title:** Designing for Somaesthetic Transformation: Lessons learned from Astronauts' Liberating Earth Gaze

**Abstract:** Our embodied beliefs are largely tacit. Shaped by societal interactions and personal experiences, these beliefs often influence our way of being in the world in ways we don't always recognize. While most changes to our embodied beliefs are gradual, certain transformative experiences can instigate rapid and profound shifts. A prime example is "the overview effect"—the profound sensation of awe, unity, and beauty that many astronauts feel when observing Earth from space. This profound experience often reshapes their perceptions of the planet and their connections to all living entities. As cosmonaut Boris Volynov put it: “During a space flight, the psyche of each astronaut is re-shaped; having seen the sun, the stars, and our planet, you become more full of life, softer. You begin to look at all living things with greater trepidation, and you become more kind and patient with the people around you.” What can we learn from the astronauts’ transformative experiences concerning soma’s potential for liberation? Seeing Earth from above involves a very concrete change of perspective. Innovative technologies can offer less dramatic changes of perspective by allowing us to experience our bodies and the world differently. Examples include adopting an artificial human tail, extending our hearing to frequencies audible only to dogs, or perceiving parts of the visual spectrum usually seen only by birds. By "making the body strange" in these ways, our tacit embodied beliefs can be brought to the forefront for reflection, allowing for potential challenge and transformation.

**Presenter:** Mark Tschaepe, Prairie View A & M University, Prairie View, TX

**Title:** Gender Queering and the Somatic Art of Breaking Binary

**Abstract:** Some of the most difficult beliefs to question wholeheartedly are those that have become sedimented and presumed to be common sense. In this presentation, I examine artists whose work interrogates such beliefs, especially regarding gender. Considering artwork through which artists present images of their own bodies as challenges to binary notions of gender identity and embodiment, I examine how these representations supply instruments for engaging in somaesthetic inquiry. Specifically, I discuss how both affinity and discomfort elicited by visual disidentification may be used as affordances for exposing and dismantling rigid beliefs concerning gender. In this presentation, I focus on the work of three artists who queer gender through their self-representation: Claude Cahun, Martine Gutierrez, and Kent Monkman. I propose that applying somaesthetic considerations to viewing their work and that of others enhances one’s qualitative experience and expands concepts of gender identity and embodiment beyond traditional categories.

**Presenter:** Mark Watson, Concordia University, Montreal, Canada

**Title:** Voicing Difference, Dancing Objects: an exploration of Ainu aesthetics as a means of effecting decolonizing action in North American museums

**Abstract:** Taking inspiration from a project proposal I am currently involved in that is looking to bring Indigenous Ainu artists from Japan to work and invent in relation to 2000+ historical Ainu belongings held at four major public institutions in North America, I use this paper to meditate on the value of thinking with ‘voice’ as somatic styling (Shusterman) in the context of participatory research. Collaboration focuses on the joint production of knowledge with community members to facilitate critical understandings of the world actionable by all involved. Whereas ‘voice’ – or ‘voicing’ – is often employed in participatory research as an uncontestable value derived from a simple characterization of it as a freely given activity, this project recognizes that ‘voice’ is *not* a given but rather a social achievement that reminds us of the need to think our words from our bodies again. Drawing on Shusterman, Cavell and others, I examine the intention of Ainu artists to reanimate and reconnect with these displaced objects by “dancing them” as the meeting place of ethics and aesthetics. I ask where it leads if we consider the proposed form of dancing – an individually stylized and impressionistic form of expression inspired by traditional Ainu movements – as somatic self-stylization, an example of confronting the culture with itself, along the lines in which it meets in the individual performer (Cavell). If this search for expression, for somatic style, is where the action is then it reminds us of the need to think our words from our bodies again. However, while the search for a voice illuminates the liberatory qualities of Indigenous artistic expression it also highlights the anxieties of speaking/expressing for oneself, and for others and to others. This is the generative and ethically aesthetic basis upon which the proposed project has structured its action-oriented partnership: to create an original and meaningful space for Ainu to freely work and invent in relation to the objects and to support the development of new, self-transforming voices on Ainu futures.

**Presenter:** Randall E. Auxier, Southern Illinois University, Carbondale, IL

**Title:** "The Body of the Prophet: Heschel, Cassirer, and the Rise of Ethical Religion"

**Abstract:** Why didn't the authorities in Jerusalem simply kill Jeremiah, and the other prophets of the Late Southern Kingdom who made everyone so unhappy? They didn't hesitate later to kill John the Baptist, and for far less provocative pronouncements. I will argue that the body of the prophet was the point of transition from mythic to ethical religion, following an argument made by Cassirer and employed by Heschel in his famous analysis of the prophets. But these transitions are always partial. As modernity sets in, the body of the prophet, such as Mohandas Gandhi or Martin Luther King, Jr., or Malcolm X, becomes an *ethical* kind of martyr in a way that the ancient prophet was not. The thesis that Western religion became ethical with the age of the prophets is controversial, but my analysis will not be a standard philosophical history. I will offer a hermeneutic interpretation of the body of the prophet as the *location* of the ethical duty rather than being a channel for the immanence of the divine. I will show that the ancient taboos associated with “one who has encountered God” begin to be transmuted into ethical obligations during this difficult time in the history of Judah, and over the centuries developed away from the immanence of the divine in the prophet and grow into something closely akin to the inspiration of the poet. A modern prophet is vulnerable to politics in a way that a traditional prophet was not.

**Presenters:** Jane Irish and Crispin Sartwell, Dickinson College, Carlisle, PA

**Title:** Edgar Allan Poe's Materialist Aesthetics of the Cosmos

**Abstract:** In his late essay/poem Eureka (1848), Edgar Allan Poe develops an aesthetic epistemology of science and a naturalistic cosmology of the universe that connects the human body to everything that exists. "Here let the reader pause with me, for a moment, in contemplation of the miraculous – of the ineffable – of the altogether unimaginable complexity of relation involved in the fact that *each atom attracts every other atom. . . .*If I venture to displace, by even the billionth of a part of an inch, the microscopical speck of dust which lies now on the point of my finger, what is the act upon which I have adventured? I have done a deed which shakes the Moon in her path, which causes the Sun to no longer be the Sun, and which alters forever the destiny of the multitudinous myriads of stars that roll and glow in the majestic presence of their Creator." After arguing that the fundamental insights of science are "poetic" and "intuitive," Poe gives (for one thing) what is plausibly held to be the first version of the big bang theory. The painter Jane Irish and the philosopher Crispin Sartwell have engaged for some years in a text-and-image liberatory interpretation of Poe's cosmology, and will present some of the results visually and verbally.

**Presenter:** Chris Voparil, Union Institute and University, Cincinnati, OH

**Title:** Somaesthetics, Foucauldian Aesthetics of Existence, and Living Ethically as White

**Abstract:** This chapter examines the resources available in Foucault’s aesthetics of existence and Shusterman’s somaesthetics for addressing the ethical and epistemic challenges associated with living and being in the world as white. Specifically, it argues that their insights into ethical-aesthetic self-transformation suggest ways to move beyond and transform the ethically-compromised white subjectivity that is sustained and perpetuated by white privilege and white ignorance. In Foucault’s distinctive sense of ethics, white people need to develop a new relationship to themselves – a new *rapport à soi* – as normalized white subjects. Toward this end, the critical and meliorative emphases of somaesthetics offer practices and habits of somatic normativity that circumvent reliance on increased self-knowledge, which white ignorance often renders unavailable. By approaching whiteness as something we do – a somatic style – we can foster a Foucauldian ethics oriented to alternative forms of aesthetic self-stylization and develop a positive program of cultivating new ethical practices of white subjectivity and, ultimately, reconstructing whiteness. Our best hope for promoting ethically-improved white self-transformation resides in conceiving of whiteness as a style of existence and developing practices and habits of alternative embodied styles of living and being as white people.

**Presenter:** Miaolung Shih, University of Texas Medical Branch, Galveston, TX

**Title:** Developing a Smartphone Interface Using the Principles of Humanistic Buddhist Caregiving

**Abstract:** Background: The use of smartphones and other digital devices (such as tablets and smartwatches) is important for the aging population to enhance and optimize communications with caregivers, families, friends, and providers. It also provides a platform for app-based activities to promote mental, physical, spiritual, and social well-being and virtual social connectedness. We, therefore, examined types of digital devices and categories of smartphone functions used by caregivers and care recipients in comparison to those without any caregiving roles.