



PROJECT MUSE®

---

*Aesthetic Experience and Somaesthetics: Embodied  
Perspectives in Philosophy, the Arts and the Human Sciences*  
ed. by Richard Shusterman (review)

Krystyna Wilkoszewska

The Journal of Aesthetic Education, Volume 54, Number 3, Fall 2020, pp.  
108-123 (Review)

Published by University of Illinois Press



➔ For additional information about this article  
<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/760819>

## Essay Review

---

### Performing Somaesthetics in Philosophy, Art, and Life

AESTHETIC EXPERIENCE AND SOMAESTHETICS: EMBODIED PERSPECTIVES IN PHILOSOPHY, THE ARTS AND THE HUMAN SCIENCES, ed. Richard Shusterman. Leiden: Brill, 2018. 220 pp. \$57.00.

***Abstract.** In my essay review “Performing Somaesthetics in Philosophy, Art and Life,” the problems presented in the book *Aesthetic Experience and Somaesthetics*, edited by Richard Shusterman and published as the first volume of the Brill series “Studies in Somaesthetics” (2018) are considered. The essays collected in the book represent a broad range of problems connected, first of all, with philosophy and art, centered on the concept of aesthetic experience and described from the point of view of somaesthetics. There are the following problems: the relationship between somaesthetics and pragmatist thought; the conceptions of experience and embodiment found in the European philosophical tradition of Nietzsche, Heidegger, Gadamer, and others; the presence of somaesthetics in the fine arts; and the relation of somaesthetics and theory of art. The authors of essays come from various countries and represent different specializations: the group consists of aestheticians, philosophers of art—of literature, music, dance, architecture, and photography, as well as interpreters of works of art and artists. Their contribution gives testimony that somaesthetics not only allows for a better understanding of new phenomena present in the contemporary world but that it also enables us to read anew texts created in the past.*

The book *Aesthetic Experience and Somaesthetics*, edited by Richard Shusterman, was published as the first volume of the Brill series “Studies in Somaesthetics.”<sup>1</sup> It includes papers prepared on the basis of lectures delivered by the participants of the international conference that took place in Budapest in June 2014 (some of these papers have been first published in the journal *Pragmatism Today*, edited by Alexander Kremer; others have not been

published before), as well as articles written by scholars who did not take part in the conference but were invited to participate in the publication. The authors come from various countries, among others from Hungary, Denmark, Italy, Finland, the United States, China, India, and the Republic of South Africa, and represent a broad range of specializations: aestheticians, philosophers of art—of literature, music, dance, architecture, and photography, as well as interpreters of works of art and artists. The carefully selected team of authors gives testimony to the interdisciplinary and intercultural nature characteristic of somaesthetic studies.

In the “Introduction,” Richard Shusterman indicates that his conception of pragmatist aesthetics (inspired by John Dewey’s philosophy and aesthetics), unlike analytic aesthetics, recognizes aesthetic experience as its central concept. This also regards somaesthetics, rooted in pragmatist aesthetics, which is emphasized in the title of the book.

There are statements common to both aesthetics mentioned above. Apart from the importance of the experience of the artist as well as the recipient, we should point out the connection of theory and practice. To understand the specific character of this connection, we have to stress that here is a significant transgression beyond the traditionally understood theory: since it is directed not at the mere description of the actual state of things but also at its improvement, it means not only to understand better what an aesthetic experience is but to learn what actions can be taken to improve it and therefore evoke improvement of our quality of life.

Thus, what lies at the base of the connection between theory and practice is the idea taken from pragmatism, namely, the idea of meliorism with its core concept of improvement. Shusterman is right to query the basis for evaluation that concludes with recognizing something as better. Although there is no simple answer to this question, we can use an example of art that is based on certain norms, but these norms are always transgressed in the creative work of an artist in order to open new perspectives. Art teaches that our experiences can only be ameliorated through a complete opening to changes in recognition of what is better. Therefore, Shusterman focuses his attention on philosophy as the art of living.

Although the idea of meliorism is present both in pragmatist aesthetics and in somaesthetics, in the latter it assumes particular meaning. “Somaesthetics can be roughly defined as the critical study in meliorative cultivation of the body,” Shusterman writes.<sup>2</sup> It should be emphasized that body is not used here with the meaning that it has assumed in the major trends of Western philosophical thought, in particular within the Cartesian dualism. Critically reviewing this tradition, Shusterman equips the name of his discipline with the prefix “soma,” which is pivotal to his conception of aesthetic experience as an embodied experience, in which both the artist and the recipient engage their bodies and senses in order to work, perceive, and

respond affectively to works of art. The concept of soma was intended as a transgression of dualism, because the body is not only opposite to mind but is also conscious, which is discussed in length in Shusterman's leading work in somaesthetics, *Body Consciousness: A Philosophy of Mindfulness and Somaesthetics*.<sup>3</sup>

*Aesthetic Experience and Somaesthetics* consists of twelve papers that have been divided into three parts: 1. Embodiment in Philosophy and Aesthetic Experience; 2. Somaesthetic Approaches to the Fine Arts; and 3. Somaesthetics in the Photographic Arts and the Art of Living.

Three essays in Part 1 are devoted to searching for the relationship between the somaesthetic and pragmatist thought and the conceptions of experience and embodiment found in the European philosophical tradition of Nietzsche, Gadamer, and others.

In "Nietzsche on Embodiment: A Proto-Somaesthetics?" Catherine Botha polemizes with Shusterman who believes that the German philosopher preserved or even reinforced the body-mind dualism and that his criticism of the philosophical tradition disregarding the body led to a simple reversal consisting in glorification of the body at the cost of the soul ("hyperbolic somaticism").<sup>4</sup> The author claims that Shusterman founded his views on mere fragments selected from Nietzsche's thought and that they not only allowed for the quoted interpretation but also induced the builder of somaesthetics to appreciate more the turn toward the bodily dimension performed by the phenomenologist Maurice Merleau-Ponty. She is convinced that referring to works by Nietzsche in which he writes about the singing and dancing body allows us to treat them as proto-phenomenology and proto-somaesthetics.

Botha discusses the criticism of Cartesian dualism presented in phenomenology by Heidegger (the conception of *Dasein*) and by Merleau-Ponty, to state that overcoming of dualism can be found in Nietzsche's work as well. Although in Nietzsche's works we can find numerous fragments emphasizing superiority of body over mind, in the light of the deeper and more detailed study of his output, Shusterman's attitude is impossible to maintain.

According to Botha, using the meaning that Nietzsche imposed on the concept of playfulness, we can reach the conception of the body that possesses not only the features assigned to it by Descartes (extension, weight) but also other more important properties. Following Eric Blondel's strain of mind, the author claims that Nietzsche understands the body as dynamic, as a "system of capacities," the capacities that are intentional in their nature (desires, aims, sensations), which Descartes only ascribed to the mind. In German terminology, the body understood in this way is not *Körper*, but *Leib*, and as such it characterizes the "whole human being." Reflecting Nietzsche's thought, Botha writes, "There is no 'essential self,' no independent rational

mind or soul that can be freed from our bodily existence. We are simply a plurality of moods and instincts held together by a will."<sup>5</sup>

Nietzsche could hardly be accused of mind–body dualism, but neither could we recognize his approach to the issue of the body as “hyperbolic somaticism.” The author concludes that, despite obvious differences, it would be fairly justified to treat Nietzsche’s thought as anticipation of both phenomenology and somaesthetics.

In turn, in his essay “Experience and Aesthetics,” Béla Bascó points at the presently growing role of aesthetic experience.<sup>6</sup> At the same time, he emphasizes that, in the aesthetic tradition, the experience of art, conceived as disengaged and disembodied, is isolated from life experiences. The author is convinced that we should “proceed differently”; therefore, he defines the goal of his studies in the following way: “The main point I would like to reconsider is the new version of aesthetic or somatic experience,”<sup>7</sup> the experience that is not limited to the sphere of purely aesthetic pleasure but involves the whole sensuous being and is connected with other life experiences. Bascó refers to Heidegger, according to whom the contact with a work of art opens us to the unknown, new experiences, and to his disciple Gadamer, who emphasized in his conception of the extended experience that an encounter with a work of art evokes in us the need for reformulation of past convictions and forms the ability to know ourselves better. Bascó compares the views on art and aesthetic experience proclaimed by the German philosophers representing existentialism and phenomenology with the pragmatist thought of Dewey and Shusterman, indicating how they converge in the effort of connecting aesthetic experience with life, filling the gap between art and life and combining the aesthetic with cognitive and practical elements.

Analyzing the aesthetic experience as the one engaging the the human being somatically, emotionally, cognitively, and practically, Bascó emphasizes that it constitutes a challenge for humans, since it often leads us to an uncertain situation, into the sphere of *inter-esse* or *in-between*, when we acquire a certain distance to ourselves and, simultaneously, come closer to ourselves. Thus, we ascend to a higher level, which signifies improvement of our life, the fact that is so strongly underlined in pragmatism as well as in somaesthetics.

A comparative analysis of Gadamer’s hermeneutic aesthetics with pragmatist aesthetics was carried out in depth in Alexander Kremer’s essay “Art as Experience: Gadamer and Pragmatist Aesthetics.”<sup>8</sup> The title of a book by Dewey, the father of pragmatist aesthetics later developed by Shusterman, was taken as the first part of the title of this essay. Pragmatist aesthetics (to a lesser extent, somaesthetics) and the conception of the author of *Truth and Method* determine the area of study for comparative analyses. According to Kremer, although philosophical hermeneutics and pragmatism differ significantly, there are also important similarities between them, in particular

in their understanding of art and aesthetic experience. The author focuses his attention on these similarities.

I shall mention a few selected threads from the comparative analysis included in Kremer's essay. Reconstructing Gadamer's thought, Kremer emphasizes that experience is an important concept in all his hermeneutic philosophy, since it prevents being trapped by dogmas that are obviously remote from life. That is why Gadamer turned to art, because the experience of art either is not or is not only discursive; it engages senses and having immediate character it leads to a specific understanding that is not necessarily conceptual. A work of art is not simply an object posed against the subject, but, in its reciprocal interaction, a work of art becomes an experience transforming the one who experiences it. According to the author, experience is a central concept of Gadamer's theory of art because in experience we understand what a work of art is, that is, the fact that its mode of existence consists in its functioning. An object given in perception (called the work of art) is merely a possibility of its full coming into existence as a work of art, which is completed in an understanding and appreciating experience.

Kremer compares Gadamer's views on art and aesthetic experience with the pragmatist philosophy of art by Dewey—for whom art is an experience and the thing produced by an artist is merely a possibility of its occurrence as a work of art—and with Shusterman's pragmatist aesthetics whose pivotal concept is aesthetic experience consisting in a specific interaction ("art is dramatization") that is not isolated from the world but takes place in a relationally complex contextual entanglement. Despite certain differences, Kremer notices significant similarities between pragmatist aesthetics and Gadamer's thought: "For Shusterman, as for Dewey and Gadamer, what is most important is not the physical object that we call the artwork but the experiences that that object provides to those who experience it with understanding, even when that understanding is not expressed in verbal interpretation."<sup>9</sup>

Part II includes considerations concerning the presence of somaesthetics in the fine arts. It starts with an interview with a world-famous artist, Olafur Eliasson, conducted by Else Marie Bukdahl, a well-known scholar in history of art and a co-editor of *The Journal of Somaesthetics*.<sup>10</sup> In the short introduction to the interview that took place in the artist's studio in Copenhagen in 2014, Bukdahl writes, "Over the past 15 years Olafur Eliasson has become an increasingly central figure in the contemporary art world. His interest in perception, movement, embodied experience, and feelings of self drive his art. He strives to make the concerns of art relevant to society at large. Art, for him, is a crucial means for turning thinking into doing in the world."<sup>11</sup> Even these four short sentences explain why this artist is included in the book on pragmatist aesthetics and somaesthetics, on experience and art. Mentioning some of his works of art,<sup>12</sup> the author of the introduction stresses

their innovative creativity: the works are purposefully intended to evoke a somatic experience activating the whole body of the recipient; they are addressed not so much to the perceiver as to an agent participating, together with the work of art, in creation of the experience; and they refer to sciences, philosophy, new technologies, and social studies as well as to areas of art (architecture).

Thanks to this interview, we learn what the artist thinks about his art. Bukdahl formulates the questions in the context of pragmatist aesthetics and somaesthetics; the questions refer to the active role of the perceiver in the perception of art, body-consciousness transgressing the mind-body dualism, as well as the art's ability to express what is inexpressible in words.

Eliasson emphasizes that, for his generation, the concept of an active perceiver is a kind of discovery; for him, it is an inspiration to consider the process of perceiving in and of itself, which allows him to formulate certain important conclusions: that, in fact, the perceiver has always been active but not recognized as such, that the process of perceiving allows the perceiver to be both the participant and the appreciating observer, and that this appreciation is an integral part of experience, thus making us responsible for its quality. What is more, the artist states (treating it as a thought experiment) that the work of art experiences being perceived, that it is active in the experience and, therefore, is an object possessing intentionality.

Although Eliasson is identified as a representative of visual arts, he goes beyond them and even comments critically on the dominance of visuality still prevalent in the artworld. His art is addressed to all senses, to the whole human body. That is why he values Shusterman's somaesthetics, whose ideas fully correspond with his own way of thinking: "When we talk about the body, we tend to refer to it more as a container, whereas somaesthetics, for me, has more to do with the activity in or around the container. In my work, the idea that every experience is colored by what is already cultivated, by what is stored in the soma, is essential."<sup>13</sup>

Eliasson admits that, in his work, he involves the experiences of his own body, and he speaks of his art as of "creating a kind of choreography," thus emphasizing the importance of space and movement. In the work *Your Rainbow Panorama*, the contact with the work of art and its experience require constant movement, walking, this "primary activity." Walking is also important in a museum when we move from one painting to another and our body is fully engaged.

The idea of "art as experience," pivotal for pragmatist aesthetics, is close to Eliasson. The work of art reaches its full existence in the actual experience, which means that, in his project of a work of art, the artist should take into account the experience that it may evoke. Moreover, the experience of a work of art is not autonomous; therefore, the context in which it takes place, for example, the arrangement of the museum, is also important. The

aesthetic experience is not a face-to-face meeting with the work of art; it possesses all possible aspects—social, ethical, even practical ones, and as such, it is also an experience of the world. It should be emphasized here that, in the experience of the work of art, we have to do with the meaning described by Eliasson as “felt meaning,” which cannot be verbalized. Anyway, there is no such need; just the contrary, we should trust the language of art: its power lies in the fact that it opens us to the dimensions of the world that are inaccessible to conceptual cognition.

In the interview, Eliasson states that “somaesthetic experience should also play a major role in the conception of architecture.”<sup>14</sup> This gives us a chance to move on to the essay “Rethinking Aesthetics through Architecture?” by Bálint Veres, thus changing the sequence of texts in the book.<sup>15</sup> The author claims that, in classical aesthetics, architecture was treated as an “embryonal” form of art, and its status, lower than that of other fine arts, was caused by the fact that its works were viewed as manifesting superiority of matter over spirituality, as well as lack of autonomy due to its performing practical roles, which ultimately indicated its inability to offer a fully disinterested and contemplative aesthetic experience.

In the theory of architecture and aesthetics, there sometimes occurs attempts at “valorization” of works of architecture indicating that it is possible to assume an aesthetic approach toward them and, applying contemplative attention, reach those properties of the building hidden from ordinary everyday perception. Veres recognizes these attempts at elevating architecture to the rank of art as insufficient, since we have a far more important issue. The lower status of architecture as compared to the fine arts was caused (in the author’s opinion, based on the views of Paul Oscar Kristeller) by the prevalence of the modern system of arts based on literature, in particular, poetry. The aesthetic criteria and principles developed for them were applied for other arts; especially in the case of architecture, this proved highly unfavorable. We should be aware, however, that modern aesthetics with its way of conceiving what art is, separating art from life and obscuring differences between kinds of art, is a historical phenomenon. Due to the changes in culture and art that have been occurring for several decades, the time has come to assume a critical attitude to the modern model of aesthetics. The effort, described by Veres as the need for “rethinking aesthetics,” has been undertaken by numerous aestheticians and brought about various projects of transforming aesthetics so that it could face the challenges of contemporary art and culture.

In Veres’s opinion, one of these revisited aesthetics is offered by Richard Shusterman in his pragmatist aesthetics and somaesthetics. John Dewey placed the aesthetic experience at the center of aesthetics and, at the same time, stressed its connections with ordinary, everyday experiences. This Deweyan thought lies at the base of Shusterman’s aesthetics, which becomes



the reference point of Veres's considerations. He accepts the conception of experience as a complex interaction between the embodied and engaged subject and its environment: "Today, we expect the arts to strike a balance between the intellectually challenging and the emotionally engaging, the reflected and the immersive, the exciting and the relieving. . . . I believe it is architecture that can be held as a model in negotiating these opposing factors."<sup>16</sup>

For Veres, the multisensory architecture becomes a paradigm of aesthetic experience, first of all, because the experience of architecture fully engages one both bodily and mentally. It is immersive, directed at all senses, kinaesthetic and proprioceptive; it requires movement and changes of perspective; it is performative, spatial, and temporal. At the same time, it stimulates emotions and imagination, evokes mood, dreams, and desires. As a building does not separate itself from its surroundings, so its experience does not take place in isolation from everyday life. Nevertheless, as Veres emphasizes in Dewey's spirit, it becomes a distinguishable complex situation endowed with a unifying quality. We experience this quality immediately, but it would be hard to express it on the language level. Similar content is characteristic of the concept of atmosphere introduced by Shusterman to underline the level of primary experience while the conceptual division into a subject and an object were not yet executed.

The features that were decisive for the low rank of architecture in modern aesthetics, its setting in the area of everyday life, its multisensory character (including not only distance senses but also contact ones called lower senses), and its focusing on an embodied active perceiver these days turn out to be advantages that allow architecture to exist fully in the new conceptions of aesthetics and even play a paradigmatic role.

While Bálint Veres points to the place and role of architecture in somatic aesthetics, Anne Tarvainen writes about the possibility of constructing vocal somaesthetics, focused on the somatic experience including both production of sounds (singing, speech, as well as other vocal forms) and listening to them.<sup>17</sup> In her opinion, traditional aesthetics of music was interested mostly in auditive aspects of sound, though sometimes there appeared views that music and voice are not addressed only to the sense of hearing but to all other senses as well. Vocal somaesthetics would deal with the sense perceptions of all the body occurring either while singing or listening to the voice produced by another person. The author focuses, though not exclusively, on proprioceptive sensations because, in her view, they are the most essential in the vocal experience. Hitherto, studies on proprioception have not been (at least not sufficiently) performed in aesthetics, but they constitute an integral part of somaesthetics. Using Shusterman's considerations, the author refers to the vocal experience developing the issue of inner-body perceptions, that is, experiencing the body, either at rest or in motion, "from inside."

The information produced by the proprioceptive senses are frequently not conscious; Shusterman points out the need for recognizing them, introducing the term “body consciousness.” Emphasizing that “proprioception and body awareness are essential factors in the formation of an aesthetic vocal experience,” Tarvainen performs detailed analyses of the inner-body perceptions in reference to singing and listening to another person.<sup>18</sup>

Discussion of these analyses goes beyond this review; therefore, we shall only stress certain conclusions reached by the author. Although it had been stated that proprioception is private since it refers only to one’s own body, the author is convinced that the perceived internal states of our body remain in relationship with the external reality. She refers to Shusterman, who claims that the somatic consciousness involves not only the body but also its environmental context. What is more, she claims that proprioception and external objects become unity in experience and that the division into the subject and the object, the internal and the external, which is so strongly present on the conceptual level, gets blurred: “In my opinion, these kinds of ‘blurred’ experiences can be aesthetic to the greatest extent.”<sup>19</sup>

In the experience (in vocalizing as well as in listening), the subjective dimension and the objective one are intertwined. We listen not only with our ears but with the whole body, and this means that we are focused not only on the voice coming from the outside but also on our own body. It could be said that, while listening to somebody’s singing, we are also “listening” to our own body. We understand the artist’s expression carried in his voice, gestures, and movement because we can refer them to our body experiences.

Finally, emphasizing that Shusterman’s somaesthetics expands the field of aesthetic experience to the areas not belonging to the domain of fine arts, Tarvainen recognizes this possibility also in reference to vocal somaesthetics, which should not be limited to the recognized vocal arts but include all vocal practice, the voices from beyond the language and beyond music. All kinds of vocalization seem to potentially possess their aesthetic dimension.

Part II includes two more essays regarding the theories of fine arts (poetry and sculpture), the theories worked out in the time when modern aesthetics was dominant.

In the chapter “Co-Presence of Something Regular: Wordsworth’s Aesthetics of Prosody,” John Golden refers to the debate on poetry that took place in Great Britain in the nineteenth century, which emphasized the importance of the concept “meter” indicating its various semantic aspects, including—what might seem paradoxical—its embodiment and its abstraction.<sup>20</sup> The author refers mostly to the text that preceded the debate, namely, to the influential Preface to *Lyrical Ballads* (1800) by William Wordsworth. Seeing a chance of reading this preface anew, Golden emphasizes that the question about the significance of meter in poetry is directed not so much at the text itself (a poem) as at its influence on the reader’s body. Wordsworth’s

prosodic thinking “forces us to confront meter as a force never quite at home in the text, or as an element that only registers something beyond the text’s boundaries—the sound, that is, of its reader’s body.”<sup>21</sup> A poem engages the reader’s body not only when it is recited but also during quiet reading (affecting breathing) and through its rhythm. According to Golden, Wordsworth’s theory of prosody suggests that communication occurs between the poet’s body and those of his readers and that “if meter involves regulation of readers’ bodies by the text, it equally involves the expansion of the text’s possibilities by those bodies.”<sup>22</sup> This influence of meter on bodies may remain in harmony with the meanings of words in the poem, but it can also be exerted independently of conceptual meanings, offering its own ones of nonverbal nature. Both these issues and several others Golden discusses in detail, while reporting the famous debate between Wordsworth and Coleridge.

In the essay “Winkelmann’s Haptic Gaze: A Somaesthetic Interpretation,” Yangping Gao follows the somaesthetic threads in the considerations by Winkelmann, an eighteenth-century historian of art and aesthete, disciple of A. G. Baumgarten.<sup>23</sup> He indicates that, even in the scholar’s biography, it is possible to find reasons for his interest in carnality: he studied medicine, in particular human anatomy; he was aware of his own body, which shows in the letters he exchanged with his friends; his homosexual orientation made him particularly sensitive to the beauty of young male bodies where visual sensations were intertwined with the desire to touch them. No wonder that these somatic threads appeared in his aesthetic considerations concerning antique sculpture. Nevertheless, although his theory was commonly known and appreciated, it was rather its rationalistic and idealistic character that was emphasized, while the somatic aspect was overlooked, not to say ignored. The author of the essay is convinced that the somaesthetic attitude pervades both Winkelmann’s theory of visual arts and his art criticism.

Gao starts his considerations with the distinction of the concepts: glance and gaze. The former signifies an ordinary passing look at some object. But with the progressing process of perception, we reach another level of seeing that involves imagination and contemplation. A change takes place in the perceiver’s attitude, as well as in the way of seeing, which gets described as contemplative gaze (*Betrachtung*). Glance and gaze function in different ways: “glance operates in a centering and focusing optic mode, whereas gaze operates in a more fluid and decentering way.”<sup>24</sup> In a glance, the object of vision is given as stable and still, while in a contemplative gaze, it appears as undulant, revealing its parts and details. In the glance, we have the look of a Cartesian subject at the object; in the gaze, the distance diminishes and the rational ego weakens. Winkelmann’s gaze is imaginative and has even a mystical dimension. Nevertheless, the expert on antique art provides us

also with the conception of gaze that could be described as haptic. In Winkelmann's descriptions of antique sculpture, visual qualities and tactile ones are intertwined (sometimes the latter prevail), the sight and the touch are not separated, and the eye and the hand cooperate with each other. Gao cites Herder's opinions, claiming that "Winkelmann's engaged viewing was a kind of touching."<sup>25</sup> Although, obviously, the hand is present here on the level of imagination, the need for tactile qualities is real and transforms both the seeing and its results. Since touch is a contact sense (while vision is among distance ones), haptic gaze does not stop on the appearance of sculpture but penetrates it to the depth. According to the author, Winkelmann anticipates the conception of multisensory perception constituting the core of somaesthetics.

Winkelmann's haptic gaze, combining visual sensations with tactile ones, influenced his art criticism and way of appreciating artworks in terms of their beauty and aesthetic experience of pleasure. Gao analyses in detail selected fragments of the German scholar's writings that testify to his somaesthetic sensitivity.

The essay finishes with some additional statements. Winkelmann studied not only Greek antique sculptures but also Egyptian and Etruscan ones to claim finally that, unlike in Greece, sculptures in these other cultures were of visual and not tactile nature. He drew the same conclusion from a comparison of Greek antique sculptures with modern ones, directed to the eye rather than to touch.

Although we usually conceive modern aesthetics as dominated by visuality, Gao perceives Winkelmann's contribution in a broader context, as belonging to the trend manifesting interest in the sense of touch, as well as cooperation of all senses in perception, which emerged in the eighteenth century and involved young Goethe, Diderot, Condillac, Burke, and others.

The essays comprising Part III refer to the presence of somaesthetic experience in the areas of art that had never fully belonged to the domain of fine arts. This regards areas like photography, film, and the art of living.

In "Spectral Absence and Bodily Presence: Performative Writings on Photography," Éva Antal cites the classics of philosophical thought on photography—Roland Barthes, Susan Sontag, Jacques Derrida, and Walter Benjamin, indicating certain threads pervading their theories, including death, reification, and time.<sup>26</sup> The connection of photography and death is probably stressed most distinctly. At the very beginning, the author quotes Barthes, who claimed that, in photography, "I am neither subject nor object, but the subject who feels he is becoming an object: I then experience a micro-version of death (of parenthesis): I am truly becoming a specter. . . . Death is the *eidós* of that Photograph."<sup>27</sup>

Death directs us unavoidably to the concept of time and its passing. Antal refers to a series of black-and-white photographs taken for fifteen years in

Athens by the French photographer Jean-François Bonhomme, which fascinated Derrida so much that he devoted a separate study to them. In Derrida's interpretation, Athens presented in the photos evoke the thoughts of a city-tomb. The author focuses not so much on Derrida's work but on the photos themselves, performing her own interpretation of them, based on somaesthetics and leading the thought toward life rather than death.

Antal is convinced that, in his somaesthetic considerations on photography, Shusterman remains in opposition to the quoted philosophers, since he treats photography as a performative process in which it reveals its vital aspects. Thus, the author of somaesthetics draws attention to what is happening between the photographer and the photographed and manifests a wholly different attitude toward posing than does Barthes for whom the process of posing was inauthentic in itself. While Barthes hated being photographed, Shusterman is bold enough to serve as a photographic subject, and the project SomaFlux executed in cooperation with the photographer Toma is an interactive experiment that becomes art. He writes that their common experience "had its own auratic quality of aesthetic co-creation that transformed us both."<sup>28</sup> For Shusterman—the author claims—photography is a lively performative process, just like his writing about photography.

The author of a subsequent essay, "Cosmetic Practices: The Intersection with Aesthetics and Medicine," Elisabetta Di Stefano, clearly formulates her research goals, including an analysis of artistic practices involving the body and medical surgery, situated within the high culture; reflection over cosmetic practices connected with medicine and present in popular culture; and a historical overview of cosmetic practices oscillating between the concern for health and striving for beauty.<sup>29</sup>

In the first part of her chapter, the author cites the artistic practice of Stelarc, his performative works *Third Arm* and *Ear on Arm*, requiring involvement of both surgery and electronic media. She analyses the performances of ORLAN, the artist who turned plastic surgery performed on her body (face) into a form of art. In both cases, the artists allow for far-reaching medical interference in their bodies, and their artistic achievements are of strictly philosophical character: Stelarc addresses issues of the relation between mind and body, pointing at their unity, possibilities of expanding the body (prostheses) since the "old" natural body is no longer sufficient; he studies possibilities of controlling another person's body with the use of the Internet connection by numerous other people scattered all over the world; he penetrates the sphere of perception. ORLAN works for freeing stereotypes, including those in the sphere of beauty, and challenges the prevailing notions of femininity leading to depersonalization and loss of identity. Her plastic surgeries are not aimed at embellishing but at opposing the models of beauty that dominate Western culture and often contribute to enslavement. This group was joined by Mona Hatoum, whose body-art videos are

not connected with transformation of the body like in the two previously mentioned artists, but rather with its exhibition, though from the inside, thanks to application of endoscopy, colonoscopy, ultrasound, and other medical techniques. In the case of all three artists, their performances work to enhance and improve awareness of the body, which, in fact, is the main goal of somaesthetics. Nevertheless, the range of influence of this experimental art belonging to high culture is not big; it is on purpose that somaesthetics has a more democratic character.

In the second part, the author reports a significant increase of interest in the body and dramatic growth of the beauty industry that is supposed to serve beautifying the appearance, allegedly guaranteeing happiness and success. She cites the distinction introduced by Shusterman dividing somaesthetics into its representational and experiential forms. The former focuses on the appearance, while the latter, on the in-depth experience leading to improvement of life quality. Nevertheless, somaesthetics that does not separate the body and the spirit treats both these forms as complementary, increasing the awareness of the body, and it only indicates and criticizes the cases in which striving for embellishment of the body goes to the extreme.

A large part of the essay is devoted to the history of cosmetic practices, which hide a certain duality in serving both health and beauty. If we remember the dualistic attitude traditionally dominant in Western culture, which separated the body and the soul as well as placing of beauty in the spiritual domain, it is understandable that makeup practices were frequently regarded with suspicion. But it was not always so: "In the Renaissance, the aesthetic paradigm frequently matched the medical paradigm,"<sup>30</sup> we are told, and the external beauty was treated as a manifestation of the internal beauty.

An important idea of somaesthetics consists in emphasizing the role of aesthetic experience in formation of the art of living. This thread is followed by Nóra Horváth in "Santayana on Embodiment, the Art of Living and Sexual Aesthetics."<sup>31</sup> In her opinion, Santayana, just like Shusterman, was not a great supporter of academic philosophy isolated from life. He was rather inclined to support the antique way of practicing philosophy as the art of life. Emphasizing the importance of aesthetic sensitivity in making life choices, he strongly opposed the attempts at separating aesthetic qualities from other values, especially ethical ones. He understood beauty in the spirit of the antique *kalokagathia*, and in this sense, he linked it with the notion of perfection. In *The Sense of Beauty*, he writes, "Beauty . . . seems to be the clearest manifestation of perfection, and the best evidence of its possibility."<sup>32</sup> He was convinced that beauty is experience and does not require any verbal explanation. Horváth comments: "With this ecstatic feeling towards beauty Santayana created the basis of an aesthetic ontology with perfection in its center. Our human welfare is guaranteed by our aesthetic capacities."<sup>33</sup>

Horváth refers Santayana's philosophy of life to Shusterman's somaesthetics, emphasizing the similarities (aesthetic sensitivity including increased perceptual abilities and leading to improvement of the quality of life) but also the differences (Santayana did not stress carnality). She also refers to the thought of Michel Foucault, whose conception of the art of living is also—like that of Santayana—rooted in ancient Greece. Moreover, Santayana, like Foucault, was interested in sexual experience in the context of aesthetic formation of life, though not as intensely and not in the same way as the French philosopher. It seems that, in Santayana, we have to do with the idealization of sexuality, which, in its sublime form, is, for him, the source of energy and forces stimulating creativity both in art and in the aesthetic formation of life.

In his somaesthetics, Shusterman also paid attention to sexual experience, yet it was not the thought of ancient Greece but Asian culture that proved more inspiring for his conception of its aesthetic dimension. Horváth writes, "Shusterman argues that the aesthetic character of *ars erotica* is more vividly descriptive in Indian theories of sexuality"<sup>34</sup> since they focus their attention on practical knowledge and therefore contribute to possible shaping and improving of erotic and sexual behavior.

These remarks may be an introduction to the essay concluding the book: "Thinking through the Body of Maya: Somaesthetic Frames from Mira Nair's *Kamasutra*" by Vinold Balakrishnan and Swathi Elizabeth Kurian.<sup>35</sup> It contains a detailed analysis of several frames from Nair's film, which presents the life path of a courtesan Maya, described by the authors of the essay as a "somaesthetic journey." The heroine goes through subsequent stages of sexual education focused on cultivation of the body as well as the improvement of aesthetic and ethical consciousness, leading to spiritual enlightenment. Interpreting Maya's progress from a courtesan concentrated on seducing men to her final ascension to the position of a teacher and sage, the authors of the article quote from several books by Shusterman that are fundamental to somaesthetics, thus testifying to efficiency of somaesthetic concepts and statements as instruments of analysis of both art and life.

The essays collected in the book *Aesthetic Experience and Somaesthetics* represent a broad range of problems connected, first of all, with philosophy and art, centered on the concept of aesthetic experience and described from the point of view of somaesthetics. The results of comparative studies allows for recognition of threads of somaesthetic thought present in some philosophical conceptions preceding the formulation of somaesthetics, thus indicating their antecedent character. It must be stated, however, that, when they came into being, these threads were not fully recognized, so they did not play an important role. It was only the "somatic turn," in which Shusterman's somaesthetics is of major importance, that allows them to come into light and be interpreted as akin to somaesthetic thought. The same can be said about the theory of art. While the aesthetic experience understood in a somaesthetic

way has always accompanied art, the theory of art stressed, first of all, its other aspects: involving just two distance senses, lack of embodied subject, isolation from the context, disinterested attitude, contemplation, and distance. Somaesthetics not only allows for a better understanding of new phenomena present in the contemporary world, but it also enables us to read anew texts created in the past.

Krystyna Wilkoszewska

*The Jagiellonian University, Cracow*

## Notes

1. Richard Shusterman, ed., *Aesthetic Experience and Somaesthetics* (Leiden: Brill, 2018).
2. Shusterman, *Aesthetic Experience and Somaesthetics*, 1.
3. Richard Shusterman, *Body Consciousness: A Philosophy of Mindfulness and Somaesthetics* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008).
4. Catherine F. Botha, "Nietzsche on Embodiment: A Proto-Somaesthetics?" in *Aesthetic Experience and Somaesthetics*, 17–33.
5. Botha, "Nietzsche on Embodiment," 25.
6. Béla Bascó, "Experience and Aesthetics," in *Aesthetic Experience and Somaesthetics*, 34–42.
7. Bascó, "Experience and Aesthetics," 36.
8. Alexander Kremer, "Art as Experience: Gadamer and Pragmatist Aesthetics," in *Aesthetic Experience and Somaesthetics*, 43–55.
9. Kremer, "Art as Experience," 50.
10. Else Marie Bukdahl, "Olafur Eliasson, Art as Embodied and Interdisciplinary Experience: In Dialogue with Else Marie Bukdahl," in *Aesthetic Experience and Somaesthetics*, 59–70.
11. Bukdahl, "Olafur Eliasson," 59.
12. New York City Waterfalls (2008), The Weather Projekt (2003), Your Rainbow Panorama (2011).
13. Bukdahl, "Olafur Eliasson," 64.
14. Bukdahl, "Olafur Eliasson," 65.
15. Bálint Veres, "Rethinking Aesthetics through Architecture?" in *Aesthetic Experience and Somaesthetics*, 87–100.
16. Veres, "Rethinking Aesthetics through Architecture?" 92.
17. Anne Tarvainen, "Singing, Listening, Proprioceiving: Some Reflections on Vocal Somaesthetics," in *Aesthetic Experience and Somaesthetics*, 120–42.
18. Tarvainen, "Singing, Listening, Proprioceiving," 125.
19. Tarvainen, "Singing, Listening, Proprioceiving," 129.
20. John Golden, "Co-Presence of Something Regular: Wordsworth's Aesthetics of Prosody," in *Aesthetic Experience and Somaesthetics*, 101–19.
21. Golden, "Co-Presence of Something Regular," 103.
22. Golden, "Co-Presence of Something Regular," 103.
23. Yangping Gao, "Winkelmann's Haptic Gaze: A Somaesthetic Interpretation," in *Aesthetic Experience and Somaesthetics*, 71–86.
24. Gao, "Winkelmann's Haptic Gaze," 73.
25. Gao, "Winkelmann's Haptic Gaze," 77.
26. Éva Antal, "Spectral Absence and Bodily Presence: Performative Writings on Photography," in *Aesthetic Experience and Somaesthetics*, 145–61.



27. Antal, "Spectral Absence and Bodily Presence," 145.
28. Antal, "Spectral Absence and Bodily Presence," 158.
29. Elisabetta Di Stefano, "Cosmetic Practices: The Intersection with Aesthetics and Medicine," in *Aesthetic Experience and Somaesthetics*, 162–79.
30. Stefano, "Cosmetic Practices," 171.
31. Nóra Horváth, "Santayana on Embodiment, the Art of Living and Sexual Aesthetics," in *Aesthetic Experience and Somaesthetics*, 180–96.
32. Santanaya, *The Sense of Beauty*, cited in Horváth, "Santayana on Embodiment," 187.
33. Horváth, "Santayana on Embodiment," 187.
34. Horváth, "Santayana on Embodiment," 190.
35. Vinold Balakrishnan and Swathi Elizabeth Kurian, "Thinking through the Body of Maya: Somaesthetic Frames from Mira Nair's *Kamasutra*," in *Aesthetic Experience and Somaesthetics*, 197–216.

UNIVERSITY OF ILLINOIS PRESS

# VISUAL ARTS RESEARCH

Edited by Laura Hetrick and Jorge Lucero

*Visual Arts Research (VAR)* provides a forum for historical, critical, cultural, psychological, educational, and conceptual research in visual arts and aesthetic education. Unusual in its length and breadth, *VAR* typically publishes 9–12 scholarly papers per issue and remains committed to its original mission to provide a venue for both longstanding research questions and traditions alongside emerging interests and methodologies.

Subscriptions start at \$50.00 for individuals  
and \$74.00 for institutions.

For more information, please visit:  
<http://www.press.uillinois.edu/journals/var.html>

[www.press.uillinois.edu](http://www.press.uillinois.edu) • (217) 244-0626 • [journals@uillinois.edu](mailto:journals@uillinois.edu)