

Somaesthetics and Democracy: Dewey and Contemporary Body Art

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Perhaps no twentieth-century philosopher was as favorably inclined towards the role of aesthetic experience in building a democratic culture as was John Dewey, the preeminent public intellectual in America during the first half of the twentieth century. His vision of democracy necessitated a robust commitment not only to an open-ended process of unimpeded free inquiry, which emulated that of the scientific community, but also to the self-realization that came through active participation in the public sphere. The model of that self-realization he saw best expressed in the sensually mediated, organically consummated, formally molded activity that was aesthetic experience. "That which distinguishes an experience as esthetic (sic)," he wrote, "is conversion of resistance and tensions, of excitations that in themselves are temptations to diversions, into movement toward an inclusive and fulfilling close."¹ As such, it was the quintessential exemplar of what is meant when we say we "have *an* experience," rather than merely register an ephemeral sensation. In the words of Thomas Alexander, the foremost commentator on Dewey's aesthetics,

in the idea of art we find the moment in which human alienation is overcome and the need for the experience of meaning and value is satisfied. Through art, in the aesthetic experience, the rift in the world that frustrates our primordial desire for encountering a sense of meaning and value is healed.²

Because aesthetic experience had as its *telos* consummation, closure, fulfillment, and inclusion, it could function as the model of a democratic politics that went beyond a thin proceduralism to a more substantive form of life. "Art is a mode of production," Dewey wrote, "not found in charts and statistics, and it insinuates possibilities of human relations not to be found in rule and precept, admonition and administration."³ Thus, as one of his

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most eminent recent biographers, Robert Westbrook has correctly noted with reference to Dewey's great work of 1934,

Art as Experience was not incidental to the radical politics that absorbed Dewey in the 1930s. Indeed, it was one of the most powerful statements of that politics, for it clearly indicated that his was not a radicalism directed solely to the material well-being of the American people but directed as well to the provision of consummatory experience that could be found only outside the circulation of commodities.⁴

Or as another recent student of Dewey, David Fott, puts it,

For Dewey aesthetic experience is the paradigmatic form of meaningful experience, occurring when the controlling concern in experience is the immediately felt relation of order or fulfillment. That relation may obtain in political matters as well as in any other sort; in fact, we can consider aesthetic experience the goal of our attempts to solve our political problems, which arise when disorder is felt to occur.⁵

For Dewey, the full potential of aesthetic experience and of its political counterpart would be realized only if three fundamental changes were effected. First, art had to leave the elite world of museums and private galleries behind and become part of the everyday life of the masses. Life lived aesthetically would overcome the gap between means and ends and abet the inclusion of the many in the pleasures heretofore enjoyed only by the few. What Peter Bürger has seen as the historical mission of the avant-garde as opposed to that of the modernists, the infusing of life with the redemptive power of art, was thus also shared by Dewey.⁶

Second, aesthetic experience had to wean itself from the Kantian notion that it was inherently contemplative and spectatorial. The claim in the *Critique of Judgment* that disinterestedness was the hallmark of the aesthetic had to be abandoned, and the rights of need, desire, and yearning acknowledged as just as inherent in aesthetic experience as in experience in general. In fact, to the extent that the term "aesthetic" had contemplative connotations, Dewey preferred to speak of artistic experience instead. For whereas the former suggested perception, pleasure, and judgment, and was thus relatively passive in implication, the latter connoted production and action, making rather than merely enjoying or judging what others had made. Both, Dewey argued, should be acknowledged as complementary dimensions of politics as well as art.

Third, aesthetic, or rather artistic, experience involved the whole body and not just the mind and imagination or even the senses as receptors of stimuli from without. Dewey thus resisted the time-honored hierarchy that still subtended contemporary taste, which, so he charged,

tends to reckon as higher the fine arts that reshape material, where the product is enduring rather than fugitive, and is capable of appealing to a wide circle, including the unborn, in contrast with the limitation

of singing, dancing, and oral story-telling to an immediate audience. But all rankings of higher and lower are, ultimately, out of place and stupid. Each medium has its own efficacy and value.⁷

For politics, it was therefore perhaps the performative arts that were even more important than those devoted to building permanent objects for posterity, an insight that anticipated Hannah Arendt's well-known distinction in *The Human Condition* between man as *homo faber* and as political performer.⁸

Although in eclipse for a generation after his death in 1952, pragmatism in general and Dewey in particular have had an extraordinary renaissance of interest in the past two decades. One of reasons for that renewed interest is precisely his theory of aesthetic experience and its larger implications.⁹ Building on Dewey's argument, the contemporary pragmatist philosopher Richard Shusterman has proposed an ambitious project of what he calls "somaesthetics."¹⁰ Hoping to efface the distinction between the fine arts and mere craftsmanship and undermine the exclusivity of art as an autonomous institution, Shusterman praises Dewey for his willingness to "exchange high art's autocratic aura of transcendental authority for a more down-to-earth and democratic glow of enhanced living and enriched community of understanding."¹¹ Noting Dewey's fascination for the body therapeutics of F. Matthias Alexander, whose system of upper torso exercises were designed to enhance breathing, posture and motion, he argues that essential to aesthetic experience is pre-discursive corporeal development.¹² Resisting the recasting of pragmatism in entirely linguistic terms urged by Richard Rorty, Shusterman insists on repairing the breach between mind and body:

The most radical and interesting way for philosophy to engage somatics is to integrate such bodily disciplines into the very practice of philosophy. This means practicing philosophy not simply as a discursive genre, a form of writing, but as a discipline of embodied life.¹³

Looking around for a current example of realized somaesthetics, Shusterman hit on rap and hip-hop music as embodiments of a democratic and inclusive practice that repudiated the purist claims of aesthetic autonomy. "Hip-hop repudiates such purity," he writes. "It wants to be appreciated fully through energetic movement and impassioned dance, not immobile, dispassionate contemplation."¹⁴ The politics of this music, an aggressive burst of outrage and protest against social and racial injustice, belies the stereotype of popular art as inherently conservative and conformist. What its performers call "message" or "knowledge rap" is intended to integrate aesthetic with ethical and political concerns. Shusterman argues,

Though few may know it, ...rap philosophers are really "down with" Dewey, not merely in metaphysics but in a non-compartmentalized aesthetics which highlights social function, process, and embodied experience.¹⁵

Whatever one may think of Shusterman's celebration of rap as a successful realization of the Deweyan ideal (he himself recognizes its distance from the irenic telos of consummation and order), it raises the question of the relation between contemporary artistic practices, broadly defined, and the realization of democracy. Rap and hip-hop are, to be sure, popular phenomena, which have introduced oppositional politics of a sort into the culture industry. At times, however, that politics has expressed itself in blatantly misogynist and homophobic terms, which Shusterman does not fully confront, although he acknowledges its dangerous rhetoric of violence. And to the extent that it has been commercially successful, it has perhaps lost some of its critical impetus.

It might therefore be useful to turn elsewhere for evidence of the plausibility of Dewey's ideas. We do not really have far to look. For a much more explicit attempt to combine somaesthetics with a critique of these impediments to democratic culture has, in fact, been made over the past forty years by artists who are not treated by Shusterman, perhaps because of their still esoteric appeal (if appeal is the right word).¹⁶ I am speaking of a loose international community of performance artists who have experimented in often transgressive and provocative ways with their own bodies. With the recent publication of Tracy Warr and Amelia Jones's lavishly documented and graphically illustrated survey of what they call *The Artist's Body*, we can perhaps see for the first time the full extent and variety of this still vibrant movement.¹⁷

Although anticipations can be found in the performative impulse in Futurism, Dadaism, and Constructivism in the first decades of the last century and Antonin Artaud's Theater of Cruelty — perhaps they can even be spotted as early as the ancient Cynic philosopher Diogenes of Sinope — it was not really until the waning of High Modernism in the 1960s that it could fully develop. Inspired by the action painting identified with Jackson Pollock, which had drawn attention away from the canvas to the vigorous gesture of putting paint on its surface, and taking their cue from the foregrounding of the artist's complicated, often theatrically contrived, identity advanced by Marcel Duchamp, artists in a number of countries in Europe, Asia, and the Americas began to turn attention to their own bodies as sites of artistic expression. Rejecting the high modernist fetish of formal purity — which had still tacitly informed Dewey's aesthetics of consummation¹⁸ — and impatient with the worship of art objects functioning as embodiments of value in both the economic marketplace and canonical history of art, they turned to ephemeral performances, which were site-specific, often outside of the gallery or museum, and designed to leave no permanent residue beyond the recording of their appearance on film, video, or photographs. Hostile to traditional notions of authorial sovereignty, they often worked collaboratively or anonymously, refusing the heroic, normally male-gendered version of

artistic genius still so powerful in modernist movements like abstract expressionism. No less distrustful of conventional notions of beauty or sensual pleasure, they disdained, as had Duchamp, mere “retinal painting” in favor of an art based on ideas, theories, linguistic reflexivity, and social critique, while all the time using their bodies as the material on which these conceptual projects were realized. Or more precisely, they paradoxically realized the de-materializing ambitions of conceptual art through the medium of bodies that were understood in terms of what Bataille would have called “base materialism,” the body as a site of creaturely vulnerability, even abasement and decay, rather than ennobling beautification. In so doing, they intensified the anti-optical theatricalization of the aesthetic experience, that addressing of the body of the beholder in real time that formalist critics like Michael Fried were vigorously, if unsuccessfully, condemning in the Minimalist art of the 1960s.¹⁹

During the earliest phases of body art, there was often an ecstatic sense of release from normal constraints, sexual in particular, which expressed the celebration of polymorphous perversity characteristic of the sixties at their most utopian. Works like Carolee Schneeman’s *Meat Joy* of 1964, described by Warr and Jones as “an orgiastic happening in which male and female performers grappled with one another on a variety of fleshy, messy materials in close proximity to the audience,” sought to liberate the body from the constraints imposed by moral, aesthetic and social conventions.²⁰ That the artist was a woman willing to perform naked in public was itself a radical departure, although male artists like Yves Klein had already used nude female models writhing on a canvas covered in his trademark blue paint to produce what he called “anthropometric” paintings in 1960. The Italian artist Piero Manzoni, whose all-white canvases called *Achromes* registered the exhaustion of painting, had taken the process one step further by eliminating canvases entirely. In 1961, he exhibited what he called *Living Sculpture* in which nude models were signed by the artist and given a certificate of authenticity certifying that henceforth they were to be considered as genuine works of art.

Schneeman and other female performance artists who exhibited their unclothed bodies radicalized these gestures by wresting control of the aesthetic process from male artists. They explicitly sought the reversal of the sublimation of the naked, lust-inspiring body into the elevated nude, which had been a feature of Western art and the ideology of aesthetic disinterestedness for centuries. Following Duchamp, they urged the nude to descend the staircase from her pedestal and reveal herself, as she had done in Duchamp’s final work, his infamous installation *Étant donnés (Given)*, as an explicit object of a voyeuristic gaze. Or rather, they sought to challenge the objectification of women through that gaze by pushing it to its limit and seizing control over the conditions of display and titillation.

Not only the objectification of women's bodies but the reification of their essence came under attack, as body artists anticipated the breakdown of gender boundaries later advocated by queer theorists like Judith Butler. In 1970, the New York artist Vito Acconci performed a piece called *Conversions* in which he pulled at each of his nipples to produce women's breasts, burned off his body hair and hid his penis between his legs in order to subvert his masculinity. The heady capacity to live beyond given gender categories, long a feature of drag queen self-fashioning, had been enacted by Duchamp in his celebrated self-image as Rose Selavy and then imitated by Andy Warhol's "Forged Image" a generation later. It inspired body artists like Paul McCarthy to masquerade both as a female sex object with a blond wig, mascara and black panties and a randy male sailor who has sex with hamburger meat and mayonnaise in a 1975 performance called "Sailor's Meat." A year before, Lynda Benglis photographed herself nude with an immense rubber penis protruding from her body in an advertisement for a gallery that she placed in the art journal *Artforum*, thus ridiculing the imperative to decide whether she was a male or female artist.

From virtually the beginning, however, body art evinced a darker, more troubled side, which went beyond merely calling into question conventional gender categories. It increasingly moved away from the wholesome vision of integrated, consummatory artistic experience defended by Dewey and still informing Shusterman's somaesthetics, a *telos* that perhaps with some license could still be seen underlying the androgynous experiments of artists like Acconci, Benglis, and McCarthy. Take, for example, the trajectory that led from Pollock's hyper-masculinist action paintings with their unavoidable evocation of ejaculatory frenzy to the Fluxus artist Shigeko Kubota's 1965 "Vagina Painting," in which she used a brush tacked on to her panties to smear red, menstrual-like paint on a canvas, to Rachel Lachowicz's "Red Not Blue" of 1992, in which men rather than Klein's women applied the color red, the color of menstrual blood, instead of his signature blue to a canvas via paint on their bodies and lipstick affixed to their penises, and finally to Keith Boadwee's 1995 "Untitled (Purple Squirt)," in which the artist somehow contrived to expel purple paint from his anus while lying on his back, in a gesture that mixed homo-erotic anal-eroticism with excremental aggression. Instead of the heroic expression of the male creative body, whose inspired actions left traces of their presence on canvases that were meant to be hung vertically on museum walls, the results were resolutely horizontal in implication, fully opposed to the elevating sublimation of the raw body, and explicitly hostile to conventional standards of heteronormativity. Those who watched these performances or their video records were thrust into the world of the *informe* — formlessness — and base materiality celebrated by Georges Bataille, rather than the realm of art as cultivation of the senses and elevation of the sensibility.

At the same time as the gender assumptions and formalist purism of high modernism was being challenged by artists like Schneeman, Kubota, Lachowicz and Boadwee, even more transgressive performances with highly charged political and religious implications were mounted by the group calling themselves Actionists in Austria, led by Hermann Nitsch, Günter Brus, Rudolf Schwarzkogler and Otto Mühl.²¹ Here the dominant emotional effect was less lust than disgust, with meat not a source of joy, but of anguish. Nitsch's "Orgies-Mysteries Theater," which took place in the Schloss Prinzdorf,

accommodated large numbers of performers and spectators for a three-day long Dionysiac orgy of blood and gore. Participants could come and go at will: activities included ritual disembowelments of bulls and sheep, stuffing entrails back into hacked-open carcasses, the treading of huge vats of grapes mixed with entrails, blood and wine, blood-letting on to actors representing Christ and Oedipus, and night-time processions around the castle with pigs, goats, sheep, horses, dogs and cattle and actors bearing flaming torches. Finally, buckets of blood, slime and entrails were dropped from helicopters on to military tanks, which then drove away.²²

Contra Nietzsche, this was art as all Dionysus and no Apollo, a far cry from the glittering ornamentalism and precious elitism of the Viennese *fin-de-siècle* then being restored to its previous glory by the art establishment in the Austrian capital. Inevitably it provoked the strong reactions it so desperately sought, both from the state and from a confused and unsettled public, which worried about its dangerous identification with the regressive and nihilistic impulses it brought to the surface. Perhaps the most disturbing moment in the Actionist assault on bourgeois sensibilities, and as it turned out not on them alone, came in 1968 at the University of Vienna when Brus and his colleagues were asked to join a political meeting called "Art and Revolution," devoted to the role of art in late capitalist society. In what became known as "Action 33," Brus, standing naked on a chair, cut his body with a razor blade, urinated into a glass from which he then drank, defecated on the floor and smeared himself with his own excrement, masturbated while singing the Austrian national anthem and the university song "Gaudeamus Igitur," and capped it all off by inducing himself to vomit. Not only did this earn him an arrest by the state, whose still fascist essence he hoped to reveal, and exile to Germany, but also the wrath of the student militants, who thought he was mocking their pretensions to revolution.

However one interprets the highly ritualized spectacles of sacrifice and redemption staged by the Viennese Actionists with their echoes of German Expressionist pathos and violent reversal of everything held sacred in the traditional notion of *Kultur*, they foreshadowed powerful trends in the body art of the next two decades, in which masochistic self-mutilation, loss

of boundaries between the interior and exterior of the artists' body, and a confusion of spectator and participant were all pursued with ferocious ingenuity. What was perhaps missing in the later work, however, was the attempt to create an ecstatic community, a communal festival rather than an alienated spectacle, a utopian goal that was a casualty of the post-sixties turn against redemptive politics and counter-cultural solidarity. What did remain, however, was the emphasis on the body in pain, to use Elaine Scarry's celebrated phrase, not the body in ecstatic pleasure.

Although it is dangerous to generalize about so heterogeneous a range of work, the body artists of the 1980s and 1990s seemed intent on foregrounding and even reveling in trauma, in both its physical and psychological senses, rather than trying to suppress or work it through. Self-abuse ran the gamut, metaphorical to literal, from Vito Acconci's *Seedbed* of 1971, in which he masturbated under a ramp in the Sonnabend gallery in New York, to the self-inflicted cuts to her hands, face and back by the French artist Gina Pane in 1972 or the Yugoslav Marina Abramovic's *Rhythm 0* of 1974, in which she provided instruments of torture to her audience and asked them to use them on her for six hours (after three, apparently, a fight broke out among the torturers, who had done a frighteningly thorough job of hurting and humiliating her, and the ordeal ended). In 1976 and a performance called "Event for Stretched Skin," the Australian artist Stelarc pierced his own back with meat hooks and suspended himself over various sites such as a street in New York or a gallery in Tokyo. In works like her live video operation-performance of 1993 entitled *Omnipresence*, the French artist Orlan showed plastic surgeons cutting into and rearranging her face to conform to traditional Western ideals of feminine pulchritude. Revealing how detachable and malleable the face can actually be in our increasingly post-human world of prostheses and cyberization, she both mocked conventional standards of beauty and compelled the horrified viewer to share her self-inflicted pain. In many of these examples, in fact, the extraordinary discomfort of the audience, scarcely able to look at the horror before them in the face, was deliberately intended, thus evoking in a very different register Dewey's appeal to overcome the distinction between artistic and aesthetic experience.

Whether the intention was highlighting violence to women, the evils of political torture, the plight of the insane, or the ravages of AIDS, these works were meant to shock their audiences out of the anesthetic complacency into which they had fallen. Mobilizing aesthetics against anesthesia restored the original meaning of the term coined by Alexander Baumgarten in the eighteenth century, when it sought to draw philosophy's attention to the body and the senses. But now it was not the sublimated body, the beautiful body, the body of grace and proportion, but rather the abject body, the body of base materiality, the body invaded by technology, ravaged by disease, and unable to maintain its normal boundaries.

Whether or not the results were what can be called “great art” or even “art” by any normal definition of the word is not an issue I want to raise; there are obvious distinctions of quality, originality, and efficacy among the many exemplars of body art that have accumulated over the past forty years. And if we take an institutional approach to the issue of what is or is not art, that pioneered by philosophers like George Dickie and sociologists like Pierre Bourdieu, there can be little doubt that this work has passed the test and is now included in the canon broadly conceived. It is also clear that as in all projects of intended radical transgression, here too there are contradictions that vitiate the intentions of the artists. As I have tried to argue elsewhere in connection with the embrace of abjection as a term of approbation in the 1990s, the impulse to undermine the institution of art and privilege desublimation as an end in itself can court bad faith when it leads to the deliberate creation of abject objects for display in the very museums they are supposed to subvert.²³ Most body artists resisted leaving behind more than photographic records of their ephemeral events, but these too have found their way into the canonical embrace of the all-devouring art machine. It is also not always certain whether or not the willingness to challenge taboos is inherently liberating or simply a kind of acting out that demands ever more radical manifestations, thus duplicating the logic of incessant innovation and search for means to astonish the bored masses that is so much an engine of the capitalist production of desire. Herbert Marcuse may have been an inspiration to the body art of the 1960s, but it is important to recall his warning against what he called “repressive desublimation,” in which apparent liberation produced its opposite.²⁴

What is in any case abundantly clear is that we have moved a long way from Dewey’s sunny vision of an art that presents attractive “possibilities of human relations” prefiguring a utopian form of realized life in the future. Even the hip-hop music extolled by Shusterman as an example of a liberating somaesthetics seems bland in comparison; rapping and sampling are, after all, pretty tame when set against the self-mutilation of an Orlan, Chris Burden, or Bob Flanagan. But it may be nonetheless arguable that the body art of the past generation, for all its remaining outside the mainstream, does have something useful to tell us about democratic culture, or at least the challenges to it. Without wanting to make inflated claims about its importance, let me suggest at least a few possible ways in which it can be understood in these terms.

Most obviously, body art does so by continuing and deepening that long-standing trend to expand the subject matter thought fit for aesthetic appropriation. By overturning any remaining hierarchical residues of aesthetic value and rejecting an organic notion of the integrated artwork, it also works against any residual belief in the body politic as an organic metaphor of naturally legitimated super- and subordination. On questions of gender and sexual identity, body art has clearly been aggressively forcing us to

confront on a visceral level issues that that the most advanced thinkers in these areas have only been able to raise in theoretical terms. Moreover, what Arthur Danto famously called the “transfiguration of the commonplace” has now been extended to those dimensions of human experience that were below all previous thresholds of respectability and suitability, except in the feverish imaginations of the dark writers of the Enlightenment like Sade or their twentieth-century descendents like Bataille.²⁵

But rather than producing a problematic “aestheticization” of what should be confronted in moral or political terms, that danger against which Walter Benjamin famously warned in the case of fascist spectacle, this art refuses to beautify the hideous or sweeten the unpalatable in the service of formal pleasure (with certain exceptions aside like the coldly beautiful photographs of Robert Mapplethorpe, which make their way into the Warr and Jones anthology). Instead, it forces those with the stomachs to watch unflinchingly to realize that art need not transfigure or sublimate everything it touches, but rather can find ways to preserve its raw power and disturbing exigency. This is an art that resolutely resists the contemplative stance of disinterestedness associated with aestheticization at its furthest remove from moral and political problems, an aestheticization which paradoxically can have the anesthetic function of numbing us to the real pain outside. It makes us aware, as Dewey would have hoped it would, that the interests of life break through the frame of art, no matter how fierce the attempt to keep them at bay.

In a less obvious sense, the transgressive body art of the past three decades has also opened important questions about the limits and composition of the public sphere, which is taken to be the site of democratic will-formation. Against the assumption that there is a single public sphere in which citizens come together to argue about the great issues of the day, a modern version of the Athenian agora writ large, it shows us how fragmented and plural public spheres are in contemporary democracies. For there can be no doubt that this is art by and for a minority audience, an art that cannot even pretend to mass appeal. Unlike the rap and hip-hop musicians and wordsmiths celebrated by Shusterman, this is a body art without obvious roots in popular culture and very little ability to make its mark in the commercial market place. Although as shown by the dubious entanglements of the Brooklyn Museum of Art’s infamous “Sensation” exhibition with its business sponsor, body art is not entirely safe from the lure of the marketplace, by and large, most of it has been able to avoid the temptations of commercial cooptation.²⁶

When it does intersect with the more general public sphere, as it did when that show came under fire from the Giuliani administration for its alleged blasphemous implications, it was precisely its challenge to the reigning assumptions about decency, artistic value, and the role of state sponsorship of controversial art that had a democratizing effect. That is, by introducing

ideas and artistic practices that could only have been nurtured in the permissive climate of an enclave public, a public that existed below the radar screen of the mass media, could it bring new issues to the more general public sphere, which could then make a start in sorting out their implications. Democracy, we might say, works best if such enclaves are allowed relative autonomy and allowed to serve as laboratories for unorthodox and even offensive ideas and practices, which can then invigorate, outrage, and provoke the general public, whose pieties need to be challenged from time to time. Although the more general public can easily dismiss what it finds objectionable as self-indulgent and exhibitionist acting out rather than anything worthy of the honorific title of art, and often has, in time, a kind of learning process can take place in which at least some of the provocations produce more general reflections on the cultural and political issues raised by the offenders.

There is also a powerful link between body art, indeed performance art of all kinds, and the fostering of a democratic culture. That is, the very gesture of resisting the reification of art objects and insistence on the transience and site-specificity of body art reminds us that democracy itself is a process, not a state of being, and a perpetually uncompleted project at that. To paraphrase Kant's famous description of the *Aufklärung*, we do not live in a democratic age, but in an age of democratization. Contrary to Dewey's stress on the consummatory quality of artworks, it is precisely the open-ended, unfinished quality of body art, its refusal to leave a fixed residue behind, that best serves democratic culture. If, as Habermas has famously argued, the goal of perfect consensus is an ideal *telos* of intersubjective communication, which is only asymptotically realized, the performativity of body-art, its insistence that even the body is a process, not a fixed object in the world, powerfully instantiates the way in which democracy is always in front of us, never fully achieved. The illocutionary promise of a consensus based on rational deliberation and the victory of the better argument is always just short of being cashed in, even as we may strive to attain it. One might even argue that the confrontational impact of this art pays homage to the agonistic moment in democratic practice which allows, indeed nurtures, creative dissensus rather than forcing a homogenizing consensus.

A similar conclusion follows from the complexity introduced by body art into the time-honored question of representation, which presents, of course, both a political and an aesthetic conundrum. By using the artist's body as a site of aesthetic experimentation, often taking real risks in so doing, the distinction between presence and representation is tacitly called into question. Although at times what seemed real was not — Nitsch and the Viennese Actionists dismembered only dead sheep, not live ones, and the legendary death by self-castration of Rudolf Schwarzkogler was just that, only a legend — at others the knife did really cut flesh and the blood was real. Some body artists did have themselves shot in the arm and did

sleep with corpses and did nail their foreskins to boards. The result has been to undermine the privilege and self-sufficiency of the represented image over the actual activity, thus working against the extraordinary power that images have in the media-saturated mass democracy of the modern world.

Instead of providing a positive representation of the sovereign people, this art reflects the insight of recent political theorists like Claude Lefort and Jean-Luc Nancy that at the center of the political realm there is an absence, a void, a lack, which is filled only at our peril. In resisting sublimation, metaphorization and representation, body art thus helps us avoid trying to construct a mythical embodiment of “the people,” an embodiment that can only be simulacral and deceptive because it covers over the inevitable distinctions, even conflicts, which always subtend it. It reminds us that the “demos” in democracy is only a fictional or counterfactual notion, never perfectly equal to an ontologically real object in the world.

Another way to make this point is to note the foregrounding of trauma in body art, which refuses to sugarcoat the violence that was so much a feature of the terrible twentieth century. It may not be accidental that both Nitsch and Schwarzkogler’s fathers were killed fighting for the Nazis, while Mühl himself fought in the war and was a POW.²⁷ Their ritualistic orgies of mayhem and redemption were, it seems, designed in part to remind Austrians of a past they were not anxious to register. If, as Cathy Caruth has argued, trauma involves a kind of “unclaimed experience” in which the wound does not heal, but remains still festering beneath the scar, then the deeply troubled art we have been discussing expresses the belatedness of a traumatic event or events that have not yet been assimilated or reconciled.²⁸ As such, it brings to the surface those moments of founding violence that even the most democratic polity has difficult fully acknowledging. Much of the body art we have been discussing can thus be called, *pace* Dewey, art as unclaimed experience, in which the temporal fragmentation of belatedness and repetition go hand in hand with the disintegration of spatial integrity and the permeability of boundaries.

Yet another way in which body art might be seen potentially in tandem with democratic impulses is through its explicit resistance to the disciplining and normalization of the docile body — whether through the harsh regulations of factory labor or the soft inducements of mainstream conventions of beauty — of which Foucault has made us all so aware. This hope has recently been expressed in Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri’s provocative new book *Empire*, which explicitly cites body artists like Stelarc as models of a new “posthuman” refashioning of the body.²⁹ Although acknowledging its problematic colonization by mass culture in the service of the status quo, Hardt and Negri also manage to give it a positive potential. They write,

Today's corporeal mutations constitute an *anthropological exodus* and represent an extraordinarily important, but still quite ambiguous, element of the configuration of republicanism "against" imperial civilization. The anthropological exodus is important precisely because here is where the positive, constructive face of the mutation begins to appear: an ontological mutation in action, the concrete invention of a first *new place in the non-place*.³⁰

Whatever one thinks of Hardt and Negri's tentative mobilization of transgressive somaesthetics for positive purposes — Stellarc's performances may perhaps be best seen as instances of ascetic self-discipline rather than expressions of bodily vulnerability — it brings us almost full circle back to John Dewey's *Art as Experience*. But the detour has certainly complicated the assumptions that underlay it. Dewey's aesthetics, it has been often been noted, lacked any sense of the sublime.³¹ It was inspired by a desire to make the world more and more available for sensual appropriation and aesthetic mastery, more and more a home for lives of beauty and meaning, and thus lacked an acknowledgment of the limits to representation presented by the sublime. Although there are, of course, obvious dangers in a politics that is based entirely on the experience of sublime horror and awe, it may be the case that a certain humility when it comes to our power to remake the world in the image of beauty is a valuable dimension of a democratic politics that knows it is perpetually falling short of the absolute realization of its goal. And while there may well be questions raised about the compatibility between the human rights discourse that is now so much a part of democratic culture, a discourse that has one of its foundations the inviolability of the human body, and an art that seems so intent on demonstrating its antithesis, there is sufficient warrant in much — albeit not all — of the work to read it as protesting rather than celebrating the pain it so powerfully evokes. And perhaps in so doing, it serves as a negative instantiation of the more substantive notion of democratic culture that Dewey has contrasted with its thin proceduralist twin. In short, for all its aggression against the mainstream *sensus communis*, for all its willingness to flirt with the violence and irrationality that would seem to be the antithesis of democratic politics, the body art so tenaciously performed in the enclaves of avant-garde culture over the past forty years may be a version of somaesthetics that has something to teach democracy after all.

NOTES

1. John Dewey, *Art as Experience* (New York: Capricorn, 1934), 56.
2. Thomas Alexander, "The Art of Life: Dewey's Aesthetics," in *Reading Dewey: Interpretations for a Postmodern Generation*, ed. Larry A. Hickman (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1998), 4.
3. Dewey cited in Hickman, *Reading Dewey*, 349.

4. Robert B. Westbrook, *John Dewey and American Democracy* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1991), 401-2.
5. David Fott, *John Dewey: America's Philosopher of Democracy* (Lanham, Md.: Rowman and Littlefield, 1998), 109.
6. Peter Bürger, *Theory of the Avant-garde*, trans. Michael Snow (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984).
7. Dewey, *Art as Experience*, 227.
8. Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Garden City, N.Y.: Anchor, 1959).
9. See, for example, Philip W. Jackson, *John Dewey and the Lessons of Art* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998). Perhaps the best general study remains Thomas M. Alexander, *John Dewey's Theory of Art, Experience and Nature* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1987).
10. Richard Shusterman, *Practicing Philosophy: Pragmatism and the Philosophical Life* (New York: Routledge, 1997), 177. See also Richard Shusterman, *Pragmatist Aesthetics: Living Beauty, Rethinking Art* (Cambridge, Mass.: Blackwell, 1992); and Richard Shusterman, *Performing Live: Aesthetic Alternatives for the Ends of Art* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2001).
11. Shusterman, *Pragmatist Aesthetics*, 21.
12. Dewey wrote the introduction to three of Alexander's books, *Man's Supreme Inheritance* (1918), *Constructive Conscious Control of the Individual* (1923) and *The Use of the Self* (1932). He credited the "Alexander Technique" for having relieved his own problems of bad posture and stiffness, even his poor eyesight. Shusterman is himself a practitioner of Feldenkrais therapy, which continues this tradition.
13. Shusterman, *Practicing Philosophy*, 176. For Rorty's rebuttal, see "Response to Richard Shusterman," in *Richard Rorty: Critical Dialogues*, ed. Matthew Festeinstein and Simon Thompson (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2001).
14. Shusterman, *Practicing Philosophy*, 150.
15. Shusterman, *Pragmatist Aesthetics*, 212.
16. In a recent interview, "Self-Styling after the 'End of Art,'" conducted by Chantal Ponbrian and Olivier Asselin in *Parachute*, 105 (2002): 59, Shusterman does mention in passing several of the body artists discussed below. But he understands them as examples of "self-fashioning" and bodily discipline, rather than as challenges to normative notions of the self as active agent and the body as a fashioned aesthetic whole.
17. Tracy Warr and Amelia Jones, *The Artist's Body* (London: Phaidon, 2000). There have, to be sure, been earlier accounts, for example, RoseLee Goldberg, *Performance Art: From Futurism to the Present* (London: Abrams, 1988); Amelia Jones, *Body Art/Performing the Subject* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1998); and Amelia Jones and Andrew Stephenson, eds., *Performing the Body/Performing the Text* (London: Routledge, 1999).
18. Dewey's friendship with the collector Albert Barnes, who was a resolutely anti-contextualist formalist, seems to have influenced his own judgments about the importance of form. For a discussion of Barnes and Dewey, which treats this issue at some length, see Alan Ryan, *John Dewey and the High Tide of American Liberalism* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1995), 252-65.
19. Michael Fried, "Art and Objecthood," (1967) in *Art and Objecthood: Essays and Reviews* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998). In fact, this essay became an inevitable target in many accounts of the genesis of body art, for example see the following articles, all found in Jones, *Body Art/Performing the Subject*: Jones, "Art History / Art Criticism: Performing Meaning," 42-46; Christine Poggi, "Following Acconci / Targeting Vision," 269; and Joanna Lowry, "Performing Vision in the Theatre of the Gaze: The Work of Douglas Gordon," 276.
20. Warr and Jones, *The Artist's Body*, 60.
21. For an analysis see Philip Ursprung, "'Catholic Tastes': Hurting and Healing the Body in Viennese Actionism in the 1960s," in Jones and Stephenson, *Performing the Body/Performing the Text*.

22. Warr and Jones, *The Artist's Body*, 93, here describe the eightieth of these in the 1984 series.
23. Martin Jay, "Abjection Overruled," *Cultural Semantics: Keywords of Our Time* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1998).
24. Herbert Marcuse, *One-Dimensional Man* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1964).
25. Arthur Danto, *The Transfiguration of the Commonplace: A Philosophy of Art* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1981). For similar analyses, see Murray Krieger, *Arts on the Level: The Fall of the Elite Object* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1981) and George J. Leonard, *Into the Light of Things: The Art of the Commonplace from Wordsworth to John Cage* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994).
26. Perhaps one exception is the recent self-marketing of Orlan, who has decided her art is not "body art" but rather "l'art charnel." See her website http://www.cicv.fr/creation_artistique/online/orlan/review4/revue4.html.
27. Ursprung, "'Catholic Tastes,'" 150.
28. Cathy Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and Experience* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996).
29. Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Empire* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2000), 448.
30. *Ibid.*, 215.
31. Fott, *John Dewey*, 118.