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A handful of takes on the body

Max Ryyänen

In 2019, 20 years after the publication of “Somaesthetics: A Disciplinary Proposal”, one can say that somaesthetics has become *the* low-threshold platform for discussing the philosophy of the body. It has likewise become the most multicultural philosophical discourse on the soma when one thinks about its roots, where no philosophical traditions are absent.

I keep on meeting people who criticise the somaesthetics discussion for lacking philosophical rigour and depth. As rigour and depth for many professionals of philosophy mean that the discussion craves heavy background studies, and that all discourse has to come with long footnotes on the history of philosophy, I have started to think that the “lack of rigour and depth” is the strength of the discussion. It provides a window into philosophies of the body for those who are not that deep into the discipline. In this way, it has also become an interdisciplinary platform.

What I conceive as the philosophical ground of the debate, i.e. John Dewey’s philosophy of the body and experience, and Richard Shusterman’s contemporary reading and application of it, does have rigour and depth, anyway. Interestingly I often find that discussions on somaesthetics somehow lack a connection to this base, which could reward more attention.

The problem is also visible in the fresh *Aesthetic Experience and Somaesthetics* (ed. Richard Shusterman), where 13 authors discuss somaesthetics and the progenitor of the theoretical movement, Richard Shusterman, comments on the texts in the introduction. The book is based on a four-day conference held in Budapest in June 2014, but has been expanded later with new authors.

Shusterman, in his introduction for the book, addresses somaesthetics to be “the critical study and meliorative cultivation of the body as the site of sensory appreciation (aesthesis) and creative self-fashioning. A field that seeks to integrate theory and practice, somaesthetics argues that our sensory perceptions (...) can be improved by cultivating one’s somatic capacities that include both sensorimotor skills and powers of body consciousness.” (p. 1) He accentuates that behind the whole debate and practice we find the philosophical analysis of aesthetic experience.

Most art has a somatic side, but Olafur Eliasson’s art is definitely a special case with its optic (use of glass and colours), ambience-based nature. Else Marie Bukdahl, the artist’s former teacher, interviews Eliasson in “Olafur Eliasson, Art as Embodied and Interdisciplinary Experience”. It is sheer enjoyment to read the dialogue, especially the parts where the two discuss for example ice blocks or the praxis of art as concrete learning and doing (pp. 68-69). The discussion about passive consuming and the way artists have wanted to activate the audience (p. 62) also includes many fresh takes, although I must say, that I myself am for a “leave the audience alone too” type of approach, as the majority of artists today, at least in my territory, want to “wake up” and

“activate” people.

There are, though, passages which made me raise my eyebrows, and which I hope the two could go back to rethink. At one point (p. 64), Eliasson says that the body has not been much discussed in the art world. I am astonished. I hear and see body talk everywhere, not just when I work with dancers and choreographers, but also when I meet people from the visual arts. Where does Eliasson’s experience come from? Is it real, or is it an echo of an art world which we have already surpassed? Are Eliasson’s networks and the scenes where he works so different?

When the two discuss the issue of experience economy versus art’s “lost and found” attitude (p. 67), by hierarchically putting the experience economy below art, my own note would be that Eliasson’s career partly stems from the way in which his work also functions well in the experience economy. One can digest his work with all the might of sensitivity, attitude and focus gained from artistic education, but most “fans” probably seek an “Erlebnis” or something to post on Instagram/Facebook. The selfie success of Aarhus’ Art Museum (AROS), where Eliasson has worked out a colourful glass corridor on the roof, shows this. Could one use the term “bilateral art” (Ted Cohen) here, as might work well in both contexts?

Yanping Gao’s unorthodox text on the Central European founder of European antiquity, Johann Winckelmann, takes the body into a discourse about gazing and glancing. Gao points out that Winckelmann clearly made a difference between glancing, which is more of an eye-thing, and the gaze (p. 72), where the eyes become “quiet”, and the encountered aesthetic object overcomes the ego (this reminds me of Indian *rasa* theory where the bliss of art overcomes the ego through the strong senses of sight and sound).

According to Gao, Winckelmann attended the lectures of Baumgarten, the founder of the discipline of aesthetics. Gao claims, though, that Baumgarten was antisomatic, and this is a passage I have a hard time digesting, as Baumgarten worked so much on the optic, instrumental side of how we can and should approach art. As Winckelmann’s somaesthetic passages are an issue even in the manifesto of the discussion, “Somaesthetics: A Disciplinary Proposal”, I think Gao should have somehow explained his view.

The news is anyway grand: the fact that Winckelmann was actually working on a somatic framework in his discourse on the gaze, as this way of looking, he thought, engages the whole body. Herder wrote (according to Gao, p. 77) that eye turned into hand in Winckelmann’s work, and Winckelmann himself wrote of some statues, like the *Apollo*, that they are “tactile” (78), so actually overcoming the visual. Gao also makes interesting notes on the way Winckelmann writes about sensuality, for example hair in statues (81-82). Here one could have asked, could a small leap into Dewey’s and Shusterman’s thoughts on engagement have provided a theoretical framework for Gao? I.e. was Winckelmann’s gaze a form of Deweyan engagement, and if so, in what way? And, what is the cash value of gazing in Winckelmann’s way?

Elisabetta Di Stefano, who is one of the foremost philosophers of the everyday in Europe today, discusses cosmetic practices, neatly following the problematics Gao touches upon in her article. She studies well the strain of philosophical notes classical authors in Central and Southern Europe have been making on the issue. In “Cosmetic Practices: The Intersection with Aesthetics and Medicine”, beautification becomes an idea of historical matters.

The text starts, though, with a take on seminal contemporary artists such as Mona Hatoum, Stelarc and Orlan. Why? I am not sure if this in the end helps in understanding the very everyday-centred notions on looks Di Stefano works out in her article. Could it have been more productive to pick up experimental everyday pioneers like the human Barbies and Kens, to

pinpoint the weight of the historical journey Di Stefano lays out?

Di Stefano's approach is fresh, and it shows how we often do not think enough of the historical depth of surface matters. Makeup and hair from Xenophon to contemporary times is also a textual issue. Di Stefano presents an interesting historical work, Trotula de Ruggiero's *Women's Cosmetics* (11th century), the first cosmetic treatise, and I will definitely at some point opt for reading it. She also writes about the way popular culture focuses a great deal on the body as a locus of self-fashioning. Philosophically speaking I am lacking, in Di Stefano's concluding remarks, the philosophical spearhead of what we learned from the classics and how to continue on the chosen path so wittily examined by this Palermo-based philosopher. And thinking about Dewey/Shusterman, and the theme of aesthetic experience, one could have asked, could a paragraph on aesthetic experience and its pragmatist theory been a helpful aid for grasping the issue when we anyway experience both when we beautify ourselves and when we see others beautified?

Éva Antal's "Spectral Absence and Bodily Presence: Performative Writings on Photography" discusses, for example, Jacques Derrida's book *Demeure, Athènes*. In the book Derrida wrestles with the moment of taking a photo, the theme of death and photography, and the way in which the remains of everyday life continue their life in photos. She continues by discussing the role of being and becoming an object/subject in photos, touching of course also on Shusterman's work with Yann Thoma, where the philosopher adventures in a golden suit in a performative manner. As experience was the topic of the book, I was again wondering whether Dewey's thoughts would have helped here. Are moments when photos are taken or looked at moments of fulfilment? Does the endless flood of photos today, where we (philosophers and non-philosophers) are often subjects and objects at the same time (selfies), just add to the fragmentation of experience? What is needed to gather our fragmented field of experience today? And is this something which happens in a more reflective performative act like Shusterman's?

Anne Tarvainen presents an interesting practice of singing and reflecting on it from a body-philosophical point of view in her text "Singing, Listening, Proprioceiving: Some Reflections on Vocal Somaesthetics". The end, which claims that there could be a lot to learn just when one discusses talking as a bodily activity, is just stunning, but otherwise I cannot but think that Tarvainen's way of carefully analysing in pornographic detail a practice like singing is definitely one bright future for the somaesthetics discussion. Still, I would ask: could a stronger reflection on the Deweyan framework of experience have been helpful here? As Dewey was himself a practitioner of Alexander Technique, I am sure it would have been possible to conduct an analysis from that perspective. Singing, for sure, channels organic energies. What could we learn from it in connection to Dewey?

Alexander Kremer's work on Gadamer and his relationship to somaesthetic thoughts and experience (related to pragmatism) is a great exegetic work. Truth and scientific method were at odds with each other for Gadamer, and thinking of him as a "philosophical relative" to Dewey is a good topic for understanding the history of the 20th century philosophy of art and culture. Béla Bacsó's "Experience and Aesthetics" also does good basic work in mapping out ideas on experience in relationship to the Deweyan approach, picking up themes such as the openness of art and how it gets finished in interpretation. These historical texts on ideas balance the book well with basic philosophical matters.

Vinod Balakrishnan and Swathi Elizabeth Kurian write in length about Mira Nair's in tantric circles already classical *Kamasutra* (1996). "Thinking Through the Body of Maya: Somaesthetic Frames from Mira Nair's *Kamasutra*" is quite a pedantic reading of what happens in Nair's film

from massage to sexual education. As the film is situated in a world not yet inhabited by the Central European art system, which through colonisation and diaspora overshadowed the *kala* system and the broad variety of aesthetic practices of India, I myself started thinking that it could have been interesting to ask how differently all these practices of *ars erotica* (Shusterman's ongoing writing project) would have been framed (as this word was even used) in the system which now no longer exists. It is anyway a fact that many practices were developed in another kind of context, and that theories of aesthetic experience were also developed in a context differing from today's postcolonial one. For example, theories of *rasa* could have given insight here, not just for the practices discussed, but also for the filmic interpretation of the story. *Ars erotica* also had a role in the *kala* system. At the end of the article I was also asking for an outcome of the analysis. Maybe one could reframe it: what could one learn from a movie focusing on someone's aesthetic and erotic education?

All in all, *Aesthetics and Somaesthetics* is an engaging, well-written and well-edited book. (I am not discussing all of the texts, but have concentrated on what has *touched me*.) While its variety of approaches show the broad nature of the discussion on somaesthetics, one feels, though, even more now, inclined to think that the connection to the basis of the discussion (Dewey's and Shusterman's theories of aesthetic experience) must somehow be re-established. As the theories seem to still hang around as regulative horizons for thinking – no one is really working out an alternative – this could probably be the next step. Following Dewey's thinking, the book, for me, offered moments when the fragmented energies of my body, my memories, my skills acquired in differing contexts, and my intellect came, from time to time, together, and made me enter "an experience". Like a beaver building a dam, which in the end just picks branches and moves them around a bit, I was left touching the pages and sniffing the book (it smelled like glue as it was fresh), finishing my fulfilment as somatically as I could. I can recommend the book to anyone interested in the philosophy of the body, not just somaesthetics. Here, somaesthetics has anyway showed its potential for being *the* philosophical discourse of the body for a long time to come.

Richard Shusterman (ed), *Aesthetic Experience and Somaesthetics* (Leiden – Boston: Brill, 2018). Incl. texts by Richard Shusterman, Catherine F. Botha, Béla Bacsó, Alexander Kremer, Else Marie Bukdahl, Yanping Gao, Bálint Veres, John Golden, Anne Tarvainen, Éva Antal, Elisabetta Di Stefano, Nóra Horváth, Vinod Balakrishnan and Swathi Elizabeth Kurian.