

BOOK REVIEW

THE PRESENT STATE OF PRAGMATIST AESTHETICS?

WOJCIECH MAŁECKI (ED.) (2014): *PRACTICING PRAGMATIST AESTHETICS. CRITICAL PERSPECTIVES ON THE ARTS (VALUE INQUIRY BOOK SERIES, VOL. 275)*

New York: Editions Rodopi, 224 pages (cited as *PPA*).

LESZEK KOCZANOWICZ & KATARZYNA LISZKA (EDS.) (2014): *BEAUTY, RESPONSIBILITY, AND POWER. ETHICAL AND POLITICAL CONSEQUENCES OF PRAGMATIST AESTHETICS (VALUE INQUIRY BOOK SERIES, VOL. 277)*

New York: Editions Rodopi, 195 pages (cited as *BRP*).

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I

Every review is supposed to give a definite answer to a simple question: “Would you recommend reading, or even purchasing, the reviewed publication(s)?” When it comes to the two volumes at hand, I’m afraid that I cannot offer more than an ambiguous “yes and no”: Yes, because both essay collections address questions that are of prime importance to anyone who is interested in the basic requirements, implications, and aspirations of pragmatist aesthetics; and no, because an astonishingly large number of essays draw a rather simplistic, sometimes even naïve, picture of pragmatism in general and pragmatist aesthetics in particular. In other words: Both volumes include contributions that are fairly instructive, thought-provoking, and innovative. At the same time, though, they present far too many undifferentiated accounts of pragmatism’s alleged potential for contemporary ethical and aesthetic thought. Pieces of excellence are thus accompanied by highly questionable lines of thought that in some cases even threaten to undermine pragmatism’s reputation in regard to current debates on the nature and scope of aesthetic experience and the relationship between ethics and aesthetics, respectively.

In what follows, I will not provide a critical summary of each contribution to the above mentioned volumes. Instead, I will proceed in a rather selective manner: I will first highlight those themes, ideas, and hypotheses that I believe to be of great value for a deeper understanding of pragmatism’s experiential notion of the aesthetic on the one hand and of the ethico-aesthetic implications of pragmatist thought on the other (section II). In this context, I will pay particular attention to a number of essays that are of great help in exposing some of the most notorious fallacies about pragmatism’s supposed philosophical specificity. I will then focus on those theoretical considerations that I find to be highly debatable (section III). In doing this, most of my attention will be directed towards ideas that are brought forward in recourse to Richard Shusterman’s pragmatist aesthetics.

II

Both volumes are the result of a research project, “Practicing Pragmatist Aesthetics: Art, Politics, Society,” that was funded by the Polish Ministry of Science and Higher Education. It is therefore no coincidence that both editions are supposed to complement each other. In fact, Wojciech Małecki’s edition often operates as a kind of prelude to Leszek Koczanowicz’s and Katarzyna Liszka’s edition. While the former is primarily concerned with the specificity, actuality, and applicability of pragmatist aesthetics, the latter examines the ethical and political consequences of a pragmatist conception of the aesthetic. Małecki’s edition, to be more precise, provides a theoretical foundation for the thematic focus of Koczanowicz’s and Liszka’s edition by delivering a set of ideas and concepts whose scope does indeed go way beyond the sphere of the arts and aesthetics. Those readers who are interested in getting a more thorough impression of the status quo of pragmatist aesthetics and ethics may therefore want to study both anthologies successively or simultaneously (which is not to say that such an approach will necessarily lead to satisfying reading impressions).

It comes as no surprise that most contributions are either directly or indirectly influenced by John Dewey's *Art as Experience* (1934). Not only was Dewey the first and only classical pragmatist who dwelled on the philosophy of art and the notion of aesthetic experience;¹ with his *Art and Experience*, he also published a seminal contribution to the theory of aesthetics that still serves as a major source of inspiration to various contemporary pragmatist aestheticians. As Wojciech Małecki points out in his introduction to *Practicing Pragmatist Aesthetics*, Dewey's aesthetic theory is mainly concerned with two objectives that constitute a decisive centerpiece of any pragmatist understanding of aesthetics: First, Dewey argues for a decidedly *experiential* notion of the aesthetic that is less concerned with *artistic objects* than with the dynamic character of *aesthetic experience* as such. "Experience" is Dewey's aesthetic master term, not the physical "work of art" or classical aesthetic key concepts such as "Beauty" or "the Sublime". Secondly, Dewey's experiential approach towards the aesthetic vigorously opposes the traditional Western dichotomy between art and aesthetics on the one hand and the realm of everyday life and ordinary experience on the other. According to Dewey, the quality of the aesthetic "is implicit in every normal experience" (Dewey 2008c, 18), which is why he believed that the sphere of the aesthetic cannot, and ought not, be limited to the sphere of the fine arts. From a pragmatist point of view, any kind of activity bears the potential to become aesthetic. The question that is of utmost importance to a pragmatist account of aesthetics, then, is how this potential may be effectively realized. Dewey's *Art as Experience* can be read as a first systematic effort in finding a satisfying answer to this question.

¹ Neither Peirce nor James wrote a substantial treatise on the theory of aesthetics, which does not imply that aesthetic considerations were entirely irrelevant for their particular philosophical investigations. For a more detailed description of Dewey's exceptional position in the history of pragmatist aesthetics, see Richard Shusterman's contribution to *Practicing Pragmatist Aesthetics*.

Although both volumes draw on the experiential and anti-dualistic leitmotifs of Dewey's aesthetic theory, most contributions build on the work of another towering figure in the history of pragmatist aesthetics: Richard Shusterman. Indeed, *Practicing Pragmatist Aesthetics* was initially prepared in response to the twentieth anniversary of Shusterman's 1992 *Pragmatist Aesthetics: Living Beauty, Rethinking Art*, which is widely regarded as the most influential publication on pragmatist aesthetics after Dewey's *Art as Experience*. Hence, most parts of Małecki's edition eventually amount to a joint reflection on the singularity and applicability of Shusterman's pragmatist account of aesthetics. This emphasis especially applies to Shusterman's widely known project of somaesthetics, which highlights the fundamental importance of the sentient body for an adequate understanding of aesthetic experience. Being an outcome of the very same research project, an identical observation can be made with regard to Koczanowicz's and Liszka's essay collection, whose indebtedness to Shusterman's philosophy is indeed so vast that its subtitle should actually be read as "Ethical and Political Consequences of Richard Shusterman's Pragmatist Aesthetics."

The fact that each volume begins with an essay written by Shusterman himself is probably the clearest sign of how essential his work is for the respective outlooks of the two essay collections. Shusterman's contribution to *Practicing Pragmatist Aesthetics*, "The Invention of Pragmatist Aesthetics: Genealogy and Reflections on a Notion and a Name," provides a concise description of the origin and career of the term "pragmatist aesthetics." The essay starts with a brief introduction into Peirce's, James's, and Dewey's individual considerations on the theory of aesthetics. Moreover, it explains why Dewey deliberately refrained from using the term "pragmatist aesthetics" in his *Art as Experience*: Alarmed by the fierce criticisms of his previous writings on pragmatism, Dewey was afraid that such a term would only thwart an unbiased reception of his book. As

Shusterman shows, this hope not only proved to be erroneous but also unconvincing, as Dewey's approach towards the notion of aesthetic experience was after all based on a thoroughly pragmatist conception of experience.

If we follow Shusterman's subsequent autobiographical remarks about the genesis and impact of his *Pragmatist Aesthetics*, though, the obvious "pragmatism" in Dewey's aesthetics does not imply that the notion of "pragmatist aesthetics" as a label for an independent branch of aesthetic theorizing is a direct or exclusive corollary of *Art as Experience*. In point of fact, Shusterman is "convinced that the notion of pragmatist aesthetics (though undeniably inspired by Dewey) is essentially the product of neopragmatist thought, and that the term gained wide, international currency only after it began to be employed and promoted systematically through the publication of my book, *Pragmatist Aesthetics* (1992) and other writings (beginning in 1988 and continuing up to the present)" (PPA, 22). Shusterman tries to verify this assertion with the help of statistics: Presenting the findings of a comprehensive data base search (JSTOR, *The Philosopher's Index*, ProQuest), he declares that "there has been a 627 percent increase" in the use of the term "pragmatist aesthetics" or other variants of this phrase "since the year *Pragmatist Aesthetics* was published" (PPA, 28). Shusterman acknowledges that his search was confined to English mentions, but it can be deemed as certain that searches in other languages will lead to similar results. It goes without saying that the label "pragmatist aesthetics" can be attached to the works of many other pragmatist scholars (such as Richard Rorty, Joseph Margolis, or Thomas Alexander, to name but a few). At the same time, though, it is beyond doubt that the notion of "pragmatist aesthetics" as an aesthetic discipline in its own right was first and foremost promoted by *Pragmatist Aesthetics*, whose enormous success is not least mirrored by its subsequent ten translations.

Shusterman's contribution to *Beauty, Responsibility, and Power*, "Somaesthetics and Politics: Incorporating Pragmatist Aesthetics for Social Action," gives a brief sketch of the political and ethical potential of his somaesthetics. Despite its brevity, the essay puts forward a number of ideas and concepts that prove to be of programmatic relevance for many other articles in Koczanowicz's and Liszka's compilation. After defining somaesthetics "as the critical study and meliorative cultivation of the experience and use of one's body as a site of sensory appreciation (*aesthesis*) and creative self-fashioning" (BRP, 5), Shusterman highlights that the task of a decidedly melioristic "somaesthetic cultivation" (BRP, 8) of the self does by no means serve aesthetic purposes only. Following a Wittgensteinian stance according to which ethics and aesthetics form a fundamental unity, Shusterman proclaims that the project of somaesthetics offers "a means of strengthening our somatic capacities [...] so that we are better equipped to engage in social and political struggles" (BRP, 8). More specifically, Shusterman believes that his somaesthetics is able to foster a liberating, emancipatory potential due to its capacity to "explain many of our irrational political enmities", such as "the fanatical kind of hatred that some people have for certain foreign races, cultures, classes, and nations" (BRP, 9).

Shusterman seeks to support this idea by means of a quasi-Jamesian line of argumentation: Just as James (see James 1992, 352), he holds that our bodily actions and expressions play a constitutive role in the formation of our feelings, attitudes, and belief systems. How we feel and think about ourselves and others, Shusterman contends, is neither primarily nor exclusively determined by purely cognitive faculties but rather a product of particular "body politics" and idiosyncratic "somatic styles" (see Shusterman 2012, ch. 14, for a detailed explanation of this idea). Shusterman is therefore convinced that the systematic promotion and advancement of "somaesthetic consciousness-raising"

will eventually provide “a pragmatic remedy” for “issues of racism, sexism, homophobia, and violence” (*BRP*, 10). Seen from this perspective, mere words and logical argumentations do not suffice to overcome such pressing ethical and political problems – what is additionally required for that purpose is a kind of “somatic training” whose focus lies on those (often unconscious) bodily habits and “deep visceral feelings” that both “generate” and “foster” dehumanizing, discriminatory, and excluding patterns of thought, perception, and action (*BRP*, 10).

Critics might argue that Shusterman’s trust in the enlightening power of his somaesthetics represents nothing but an updated version of behaviorism. Although such an accusation does not seem to be totally out of place, it incites us to ignore some undeniably instructive facets of Shusterman’s philosophy of embodiment. On the one hand, it may of course be questioned whether “somatic training” really provides the most effective “remedy” against racism, sexism, homophobia, or other kinds of prejudice. On the other hand, however, the idea that the deliberate provocation of “experiences of *somatic dissonance*” (*BRP*, 12) will eventually stimulate the formation of a more reflective and critical attention to one’s personal somatic style shouldn’t be dismissed too hastily. Why should the “disruption” (*BRP*, 12) of previously unreflected somatic styles and body politics be less productive than rational arguments, especially given that all of the enmities mentioned above are explicitly related to physical aspects (skin color, sexual orientations, styles of clothing, etc.)? After all, Shusterman’s somaesthetics doesn’t differ too much from Pierre Bourdieu’s widely acclaimed “habitus theory,” which does in point of fact demonstrate a considerable programmatic affinity with pragmatism’s traditional interest in the notion of “habit” (see Shusterman 1999). Bourdieu too insisted on the contingent character of our bodily habits and somatic norms. But unlike Shusterman, he seems to have been less optimistic in terms of the possibility to escape the

subjugating power of specific body politics. While Shusterman quite frequently appears to be overtly enthusiastic about the alleged transformative power of his somaesthetics, Bourdieu often describes the “habitus” as if its conservative grip was a sheer blow of fate (see Bourdieu 2000). Against this background, Shusterman’s approach may well be regarded as a promising alternative.

On balance, I don’t think that one needs to share Shusterman’s emphatic trust in the emancipatory potential of somaesthetics in order to be able to grasp and appreciate the productivity of his notion of “somatic dissonance.” As is well known, a primary task of pragmatism consists in revealing ways and means for “break[ing] through the crust of conventionalized and routine consciousness” (Dewey 2008b, 349). Looking out for the conditions under which novel ways of thought and perception may be realized represents a crucial element of pragmatist thought. Against this background, Shusterman’s somaesthetics vividly highlights two important aspects: (i) The modification of conventionalized patterns of thought, action, and perception is not to be seen as a purely intellectual endeavor. Instead, it always involves a unity of mind and body that Shusterman, following Dewey, rightly renders as *irreducible*. (ii) The notion of “somatic dissonance” reinforces the classical pragmatist conviction according to which the formation of novel ways of thought, perception, and action always presupposes the *lived experience* of irritating ruptures, frictions, discontinuities, or instabilities. Novelty never arises out of the blue – it is a cognitive and material *response* to a situation that is *felt* to be confusing and problematic. The process of casting doubt on the validity of a given belief system, including dominant bodily habits or somatic styles, is thus not under the control of an entirely autonomous mind. It is rather the existential corollary of our somatic embeddedness in an ever-changing world that never stops confronting us with thought-*provoking* moments of surprise, contingency, and spontaneity.

Why do I regard these two aspects as highly important?

First, because Shusterman's experiential pragmatism forms an illuminating contrast to Richard Rorty's linguistic pragmatism. Both authors argue for a fundamental unity between ethics and aesthetics. They also privilege the idea of a flexible self that is characterized by a fundamental opposition against the inherent conservatism of conventionalized patterns of thought, perception, and action. Unlike Shusterman, however, Rorty explicitly advocates a "pragmatism without experience" (Bernstein 2010, 128) that is centered around a rather 'disembodied' notion of language. What Rorty's pragmatist aesthetics is primarily concerned with are "final vocabularies," "metaphors," and particular literary narratives that support the idea of a decentered self (see Rorty 1989), whereas issues related to the concept of experience are deemed irrelevant. Ironically enough, Rorty's pragmatic logocentrism prevents him from giving an adequate account of his own progressivism. On the one hand, he never gets tired of championing a quasi-Nietzschean ideal of a constant redescription of the self. On the other hand, by fostering a primacy of language that doesn't even take note of the sensorial dimension of linguistic signs, Rorty's pragmatism proves to be unable to register those experiential factors that ultimately *trigger* the *felt need* for a further modification of existing habits of thought, action, and perception. Rorty's progressivism, in short, is in no way *responsive*. It merely *dictates* the cultivation of a decidedly progressivist attitude without providing a satisfying explanation as to why we ought to be progressivists at all.²

² Unfortunately, Rosa M. Calcaterra does not touch upon this aspect in her essay "The Linguistic World: Rorty's Aesthetic Meliorism" (*BRP*, 91–107). Instead of unfolding the weaknesses and blind spots of Rorty's logocentrism, Calcaterra gives a rather uncritical account of his aesthetic meliorism. To give but one example: Calcaterra affirmatively dwells on the fundamental assumptions of Rorty's idea of "linguistic evolution" (*BRP*, 100) without taking note of the experiential factors that eventually facilitate such an evolution. More particularly, Calcaterra keeps silent about the fact that the creative

Secondly, Shusterman's awareness for the generative potential of dissonant experiences runs parallel with a profound responsiveness for the transformative power of artistic practices and aesthetic experience. Although Dewey – Shusterman's main philosophical hero – was historically wrong when he proclaimed that the "function of art" had "*always*" been associated with the impulse to "break through" the crusts of convention (Dewey 2008b, 249; emphasis added),³ he was definitely right in suggesting that works of art may instigate a thorough "reeducation of the senses" (Dewey 2008c, 324). Not only do works of art often invite for an effective encounter with different modalities of perception, they also bear the potential of making explicit that the germ of novelty and creativity is deeply connected with disrupting experiences of contingency, discontinuity, resistance, or precariousness (see Dewey 2008a, ch. 2). Art, in other words, is capable of illustrating, embodying, and making tangible one of the most fundamental assumptions of pragmatist thought. A particular strength of Shusterman's somaesthetics, and consequently of the essay collections at hand, consists in its explicit consideration of this aspect.

Finally, there is another reason why I find Shusterman's emphasis on the generative potential of dissonant somatic experiences extremely valuable: It challenges current harmonistic interpretations of Dewey's theory of aesthetic experience, such as Scott R. Stroud's contribution to *Practicing Pragmatist Aesthetics*, "The Art of Experience: Dewey on the Aesthetic." In this essay, Stroud postulates an equivalence between

transformation of an established "final vocabulary" is initially a response to a problematic situation that calls for the development of a novel, possibly more fitting, kind of vocabulary.

³ As Andreas Reckwitz recently demonstrated, privileging the new in place of the old is a decidedly modern phenomenon (see Reckwitz 2015). It is precisely modernist art that programmatically challenges conventionalized modes of perception and explicitly refuses to function as an aesthetic means of symbolic representation or a tool for producing "beautiful" objects.

Dewey's famous conception of growth on the one hand and his notion of aesthetic experience on the other. "Growth," Stroud writes, "occurs when an organism feels the resistance the environment offers to its impulses, and when that organism then finds ways to overcome these resisting features through meaningful action" (PPA, 35). Since such a "successful temporal struggle with a recalcitrant environment" may be "described as being aesthetic in felt quality," Stroud adds, "growth" and "aesthetic experience" are supposed to represent nothing more than different designations for one and the same event (PPA, 35). Stroud develops this idea on the basis of Dewey's *Art as Experience*, a book that he is undoubtedly deeply familiar with (see Stroud 2011). However, I'm afraid that Stroud's strong emphasis on the idea of "meaningful unity" (PPA, 36) is in danger of neglecting that the experiential quality of *disunity* marks an equally important category for a Deweyan understanding of growth. Rendering growth as "the reaching of organism-environment equilibrium" (PPA, 35) is, of course, absolutely in line with Dewey's naturalization of the aesthetic. Nevertheless, I believe that Dewey's idea of growth stands for more than the harmonious closure of an activity – it may also be interpreted as an appeal to establish a dynamic, flexible, and progressivist habit of mind that is based on an elaborate responsiveness for the experiential frictions that actually stimulate the deployment of what Dewey famously called "creative intelligence" (see Dewey 1917). Growth, in other words, is not solely an *effect* of particular actions – it is also the goal and outcome of a "pragmatic ethos" which is characterized by a pronounced willingness of being (and staying) susceptible for those experiential qualities that invite for a "serious encounter with what is other, different, and alien" (Bernstein 1992, 328).⁴ Sami Pihlström, in his

brilliant article "'Anything Goes' vs. 'Who Touches this Book Touches a Man': William James and Paul Feyerabend on Metaphysical, Ethical, and Aesthetic 'Abundance'," is therefore absolutely right in reminding us of the fact that pragmatism mainly originated from the determination to "[take] *disharmony* seriously" (BRP, 51).

Although I am critical of Stroud's overemphasis on the aspect of unity, I find his article highly instructive, especially when it comes to grasping the peculiarity of a pragmatist understanding of aesthetic experience. As is well known, a decisive feature of pragmatist thought consists in arguing for a future-oriented kind of philosophizing. Richard Rorty, for instance, emphatically professed that the main idea of pragmatism basically amounted to an "apotheosis of the future" (Rorty 1999, 27). Stroud, in turn, reminds us that pragmatism's forward-looking orientation does by no means go hand in hand with an undermining of the present. Echoing Dewey's conviction according to which experience is nothing but "a future implicated in the present" (Dewey 1917, 9), Stroud points out that a pragmatist theory of aesthetics expressly "values the present situation or object as equal to or greater in worth than remote states of affairs, goals, and so forth" (PPA, 42). For Stroud (just as for so many other aestheticians), aesthetic experience is not a mere means for the achievement of remote ends; it rather amplifies our awareness of the numerous "possibilities that are felt as a possession of what is now and here" (Dewey, as quoted from Stroud in PPA, 43).

According to this position, the pragmatic value of the future is intimately tied to the experiential richness of the present. Glorifying the future *as such*, as Rorty

is deeply inspired by Dewey. Moreover, Bernstein makes absolutely clear that the fallibilist open-mindedness of a "pragmatic ethos" is resting on an elaborated awareness for the productivity of experiential dissonances and ruptures (see Bernstein 2010, ch. 6). Thus, his "pragmatic ethos" may well be regarded as a trigger and prerequisite of growth.

⁴ Bernstein does not refer to Dewey's aesthetics and conception of growth in the quoted passages. It should be noted, however, that his reflections on the "pragmatic ethos" are brought forward in light of a decidedly experiential interpretation of pragmatism that

apparently suggested, would therefore be counterintuitive to a strictly *experiential* account of pragmatism. Hence, Stroud is definitely right in holding that a pragmatic orientation towards future possibilities of experience is first and foremost a corollary of a firm receptiveness to the inherent contingency of the “now and here” of present experiences. Since aesthetic experience is shown to be characterized by an intimate bond with the present, Stroud is also right in contending that Dewey’s theory of aesthetics can be read as an instruction as to how such a receptivity may be cultivated. Consequently, Stroud’s further claim (*PPA*, 39–44) that Dewey’s *Art as Experience* eventually leads to an aesthetics of existence whose main objective consist in embodying a decidedly pragmatist idea of the “artful life” (an idea which marks an essential cornerstone of Shusterman’s somaesthetics as well), definitely deserves particular attention.

Against this background, Emil Višňovský’s essay “Making the Pragmatist Art of Living Explicit” proves to be a perfect complement to Stroud’s article. Višňovský argues for an “existential pragmatism” that renders pragmatism as “a successor to Sophists, Socrates, Stoicism, and Epicureanism” (*BRP*, 141). Pragmatism, Višňovský writes, “is a distinctive philosophy of life” (*BRP*, 137) insofar as it “provide[s] an understanding of the human condition that corresponds with its transformation” (*BRP*, 141). Accordingly, pragmatism is also labeled as a “philosophy of transformation” (*BRP*, 141). Seen from this perspective, the philosophical peculiarity of pragmatist thought is deeply associated with the acknowledgement of the fundamental precariousness of the human condition. Echoing Peirce’s law of tychism, James’s views on the constant flux of experience, and Dewey’s ideas on the relationship between experience and nature, Višňovský writes:

“Life experience has shown that change which is beyond our control is the greatest danger to life and, based on this, humans have come up with an initiative for permanently extending the limits

of their control. [...] experience has also shown that there is, and can be, no absolute human control over nature such that would eliminate any kind of change.” (*BRP*, 142)

The most defining starting point of pragmatist thought, Višňovský contends, is provided by the inevitability of change. Indeed, Peirce’s unlimited semiosis, James’s meliorism, or Dewey’s notion of growth are all reminiscent of this fact. The same goes for fallibilism, experimentalism, and many other pragmatist key concepts: They all share an existential origin that points to the inescapability of change. Rorty was therefore wrong in identifying pragmatism with a fundamental attack and resolute jettisoning of *any kind of metaphysics*. It is of course true that the classical pragmatists were all critical of the metaphysical tradition. At the same time, though, they still rested their particular philosophical investigations on a firm metaphysical basis. Furthermore, as Višňovský (just as Pihlström) shows, this basis was also always inextricably linked with ethical considerations. Especially James and Dewey were fully aware of the fact that the inevitability of change is mirrored by an inescapability of responsive modifications of the world. It is plainly impossible *not* to respond to an experience of resistance, uncertainty, or precariousness. Thus, a primary task of a pragmatist “creative intelligence” consists in making sure that our material responses to the experience of change eventually lead to a “betterment of life and the human condition” (*BRP*, 145). If this ethico-existential interpretation of pragmatism is plausible (which I think it is), it does not suffice to identify pragmatism as a *philosophy of transformation* – it should also be understood as a *philosophy of responsibility*.

Višňovský’s article suggests that the idea of meliorism should be placed at the center of an existential account of pragmatism that both acknowledges and embraces the transformative power of experience. In doing this, he (unwillingly) unveils a set of inconsistencies that can be found in the two volumes under review. Else Marie

Bukdahl, for instance, in her essay “Embodied Creation and Perception in Visual Art,” seems to argue for a perfectionist interpretation of meliorism. In reference to the work of the Danish/Norwegian artist Marit Benthe Norheim, Bukdahl affirmatively quotes Richard Shusterman in order to promote the idea that artistic practices are capable of supporting “the pursuit of perfectionist self-creation in the art of living” (Shusterman, as quoted from Bekdahl in *PPA*, 148). This statement clearly complies with the meliorist stance of Shusterman’s somaesthetics, whose intention “to enhance the understanding, efficacy, and beauty” (Shusterman 2012, 27) of our bodily actions and “to correct the functional performance of the senses by cultivating improved somatic awareness and self-use” (Shusterman 2012, 34) does in fact hint at a strong affinity with the idea of perfectionism.⁵ Although Višňovský explicitly supports Shusterman’s integration of ethics and aesthetics, his own remarks about the ethical purport of meliorism wouldn’t allow for a perfectionist reading of the term. “Pragmatist meliorism,” Višňovský writes, “is not perfectionism” (*BRP*, 145) – and I think that he is absolutely right in highlighting this point. A perfectionist is never content with a given situation; she seeks to improve a situation irrespective of its present state. Perfectionism, in other words, is not related to the effort of *meeting the challenge of inescapable change*, which forms an integral element of meliorism. Instead, it constantly seeks to *initiate change*. Perfectionism is not characterized by the impulse to better a particular *situation*; it is rather concerned with the idea of *betterment* as such. In short: While meliorism is responsive, perfectionism is actionistic. In highlighting this fundamental difference, I do not intend to imply that Shusterman’s aesthetic meliorism is necessarily irresponsive or actionistic. In fact, my affirmative discussion of the notion of somatic dissonance signals that I believe that his pragmatist aesthetics does *not*

amount to such an orientation. Nevertheless, I am indeed afraid that his project of somaesthetics at least implicitly paves the way for a perfectionist understanding of meliorism that is barely reconcilable with Višňovský’s existential interpretation of pragmatism – an interpretation, I should add, that seems to be perfectly in line with the ethical intentions and implications of classical pragmatism.

III

Even though I rate Višňovský’s “Making the Pragmatist Art of Living” as one of the most instructive contributions to recent pragmatist scholarship, I would like to begin the critical section of this review with some further reflections on his essay. First, it find it surprising that Višňovský makes absolutely no mention of Cornel West’s prophetic pragmatism (see West 1989). On the one hand, Višňovský refers to Sidney Hook’s depiction of pragmatism as a philosophy that expressly acknowledges “the tragic sense of life as a feature of human experience” (Hook, as quoted from Višňovský in *BRP*, 142) in order to promote his idea of an existential pragmatism. On the other hand, he doesn’t seem to consider that West might function as a perfect ally in support of this idea. More than any other contemporary pragmatist, West has incorporated Hook’s “sense of the tragic” as an essential cornerstone of his pragmatist thought (see West 1993). Since West pays particular attention to the ethical and political implications of a pragmatist “sense of the tragic,” Višňovský’s reflections on the “pragmatist art of living” would undoubtedly have profited a lot from a serious engagement with West’s decidedly existentialist interpretation of pragmatism.

Secondly, Višňovský postulates a programmatic contiguity between pragmatist aesthetics and the particular aesthetic programs of Nietzsche and Foucault (*BRP*, 147). In doing this, he is of course echoing an idea that is widely shared among pragmatist scholars

⁵ This affinity is probably most explicit in Shusterman’s discussion of Stanley Cavell’s reflections on “Emersonian perfectionism” (see Shusterman 1997, 99–110).

(including Shusterman, to which Višňovský refers in this context). At first sight, the drawing of such a parallel does in fact seem quite reasonable. Just as pragmatist aesthetics, be it in the vein of Dewey or in Shusterman's fashion, strives for an expansion of the aesthetic to everyday life, so do Nietzsche and Foucault seek to demonstrate that "life itself, not only objects, can become the subject matter of art" (BRP, 147). However, this obvious similarity should not prevent us from noticing some profound differences between the respective aesthetic principles and ambitions. Despite Rorty's fascination for Nietzsche's aesthetic meliorism, we should be aware that its overall structure is hardly compatible with the deep democratic orientation of pragmatist aesthetics. Indeed, Nietzsche's passionate inclination towards the unconventional and novel basically follows an ideal of social distinction. Nietzsche's "aesthetic self" looks out for alternative ways of thought and perception for the sake of escaping the "mediocrity" of the "common man" (see, e.g., Nietzsche 2001). Difference, not communication or an interest in the shared experience of thought-provoking moments of surprise, chance, and incertitude, functions as a decisive leitmotiv of Nietzsche's aesthetic thought. Again, novelty is not seen as a (meliorist) response to the experience of frictions and ruptures but rather as an end in itself. Unfortunately, neither Višňovský nor other contributors to the essay collections at hand – such as Rosa M. Calcaterra, who entirely follows Rorty's questionable usurpation of Nietzsche in her essay "The Linguistic World: Rorty's Aesthetic Meliorism" (BRP, 91–107) – critically touch upon that matter.

A similar observation can be made with regard to Foucault. On the one hand, it goes without saying that pragmatists can easily identify with Foucault's genealogical disclosure of the historical contingency of social conventions, moral ideals, cultural norms, or forms of subjectivity. It is also obvious that Foucault's writings and statements about the ethical value of an aesthetics of existence exhibit certain commonalities

with Deweyan accounts of the artful life. But equally striking, on the other hand, are the agonal, even revolting ethico-political conclusions Foucault draws in light of his insights into the historical ubiquity of contingency. Foucault does not contend himself with providing an anti-necessitarian understanding of the human condition; especially in his many interviews on the idea of an aesthetics of existence, he additionally calls for the cultivation of an "agonal ethics of thinking otherwise" that seeks to prevent any resurgence of the familiar and conventional (see Schmid 2000) – thus Foucault's general suspicion against the conserving character of social and political institutions (see, e.g., Foucault 1982). At least I, for one, believe that such a suspicion is alien to an experiential account of pragmatism. I do not doubt, of course, that Foucault's genealogical project paves the way for a philosophy of transformation. However, it is one thing to transform a particular socio-cultural constellation *in response to a specific problem or conflict* that is compelling us to modify a given set of beliefs and habits; and it is quite another thing to transform conventionalized patterns of thought, action, and perception *in consequence of one's knowledge* about their inherent contingency. Taking contingency seriously, both on a personal ethical and on a broader political level, implies the acknowledgement of the fact that every existing socio-cultural constellation may be different and that it is therefore open for revision and modification. It does not imply, however, that what *might or could* be different also *ought* to be different.

These critical remarks are rather marginal as compared to my more fundamental reservations about various aspects of the two essay collections. To begin with, I think that both volumes would have profited enormously from the inclusion of less contributions in order to provide space for a more thorough elaboration of certain ideas, themes, and hypotheses. Krystyna Wilkoszewska, for instance, in her essay "John Dewey and 20th Century Art," unfolds an illuminating art-

historical reading of Dewey's *Art as Experience* according to which the programmatic aesthetic outlook of this book had been "ahead of its time" (PPA, 88). Wilkoszewska argues that *Art as Experience*, though it mainly referred to impressionist works of art, may be read as a philosophical forerunner of the particular aesthetic programs of avant-garde and neo avant-garde art. A book published in 1934, and written by an author who died in 1952, in other words, is supposed to have anticipated the specific outlook of an aesthetic movement that came up in the second half of the 20th century. Given that Dewey and the (neo) avant-gardists did in fact both highlight "the process of experiencing" instead of the "what' of experience" (PPA, 87), Wilkoszewska's diagnosis appears to be more than plausible. Dewey's and the (neo) avant-garde's reservations against a "museum conception of art" (Dewey 2008c, 12) as well as their attempts at "abolish[ing] the boundaries between art and everyday life" (PPA, 87) just add to the validity of Wilkoszewska's thesis. Unfortunately, though, Wilkoszewska does not give her thesis further support by means of a detailed comparative analysis. Instead of spelling out the extent to which Dewey articulated a proto-avant-gardistic theory aesthetics, she just hints at apparent contiguities. Nor does she dwell on the significant theoretical consequences that follow from her (neo) avant-gardistic reading of Dewey's aesthetics. Indeed, to focus on the "processual character" of aesthetic experience, and to appreciate works of art as "events rather than things" (PPA, 88), represents a decisive element of recent aesthetic thought. Rendering *Art as Experience* as an anticipation of (neo) avant-garde art thus implies attributing Dewey's aesthetics an exceptional actuality for contemporary aesthetics. Against this background, it is surprising to see that Wilkoszewska's essay does not dwell on the eventual affinities that might be identified between Dewey's aesthetics and recent contributions to the notion of "transformative aesthetics," to give but one reasonable example (see, e.g., Fischer-Lichte 2008). Wilkoszewska even keeps silent about other classical

aestheticians who also argued for an experiential account of aesthetics in which art is primarily conceived of as a school of perception (see, e.g., Merleau-Ponty 2002).

Such blind spots, I'm afraid, are quite representative for the two essay collections. Only a few authors, such as Alexander Kremer, who writes about pragmatism's closeness to the hermeneutics of Gadamer and Heidegger in his essay "Understanding, Interpretation, Art, and Neopragmatism" (PPA, 63–80), look out for complementary relations between pragmatism and other schools of thought. In point of fact, most essays display a rather hermetic involvement with particular aspects of pragmatist aesthetics. Since both essay collections clearly label themselves as contributions to the current debate on pragmatist aesthetics, such a bias is of course legitimate. In order to reinforce pragmatism's relevance to contemporary ethics and aesthetics, however, I think it would have been much more productive to put the notion of pragmatist aesthetics in critical dialogue with other prominent theoretical programs. To give but two examples: Why does no one give a detailed account of pragmatism's and phenomenology's shared interest in the *lived quality* of (aesthetic) experience in *Practicing Pragmatist Aesthetics*? And why does no one contrast Richard Shusterman's somaesthetics with Judith Butler's critical reflections on the deep impact of particular body politics in *Beauty, Responsibility, and Power*? Shusterman himself always devoted a lot of his philosophical attention to the comparative study of non-pragmatist authors in order to demonstrate the validity and productivity of his ideas on experience and the soma. Unfortunately, both volumes barely follow this example.

Let me conclude this review with some critical remarks on the reception of Richard Shusterman's pragmatist aesthetics in both editions. Two aspects strike me as odd in this context: First, readers unfamiliar with the present state of pragmatist scholarship might be tempted to

believe that there is only one promising contemporary account of pragmatist aesthetics available at the moment, namely Richard Shusterman's somaesthetics. Although I believe that Shusterman's theory of aesthetics should by no means be underestimated, I think it important to acknowledge the achievements of other accounts of pragmatist aesthetics as well. Monika Bakke, for instance, in her essay "Practicing Aesthetics among Nonhuman Somas in the Age of Biotech" (*PPA*, 153–168), brings forward a thought-provoking plea for an ecological interpretation of experience that seeks to expand Shusterman's notion of the soma to our dealings with nonhuman entities. In this context, she especially highlights the moral responsibilities that follow from our interactions with nonhuman somas. What she does not take note of, however, is the fact that Thomas M. Alexander, one of the most renowned scholars in pragmatism, has already written extensively on the idea of an aesthetics of existence which is based on an ecological theory of experience (see Alexander 2013). I don't want to suggest that Bakke left Alexander's work unmentioned on purpose. What I do believe, though, is that many contributions to the two essay collections hint at a rather limited awareness of what recent pragmatist scholarship has to offer. The fact that Alexander's work is hardly mentioned in both editions provides the most pressing example in support of this impression.

The second aspect that strikes me as odd in regard to the reception of Shusterman's work contributed most to my mixed feelings about the two essay collections. In my opinion, both editions provide far too much space for highly questionable and even naïve interpretations of Shusterman's approach. It may be true, for instance, that a "practical somaesthetics" eventually leads to the "cultivation of a stronger, healthier, better performing body," as Satoshi Higuchi claims by means of a quotation taken from one of Shusterman's numerous publications on this subject (*PPA*, 207). However, I think that Higuchi errs when he additionally states that a practical somaesthetics will ultimately "culminat[e] in a greater

joy of life" (*PPA*, 211). The burden of a weak, unhealthy, and badly performing body may indeed be an obstacle to the human pursuit of happiness, but from this it does not follow that somatic strength, health, and efficiency function as a *necessary* precondition for the fulfillment of the ethical dream of the good life. Whoever claims the opposite confuses the pragmatist quest for meliorism with a perfectionist cult of self-optimization that I think is incompatible with the particular existential *responsivity* of a truly experiential account of pragmatism (see section II above).

Some authors, I'm afraid, expect too much from pragmatist aesthetics. In his essay "Somaesthetic Encounter with Oneself and the Other" (the only article, by the way, that pays at least some attention to Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology of perception), Robert Dobrowolski carries Shusterman's trust in the emancipatory potential of somaesthetics to an annoying extreme. Just like Shusterman and many other contributors to the two essay collections, Dobrowolski conceives of somaesthetics as an effective remedy against the most pressing social pathologies of our time. In this context, he calls for the promotion of "a project of common somaesthetic education, which would not only facilitate an increase in our bodily awareness, but also help develop our abilities of aesthetic and ethical self-cultivation, for the sake of ourselves and for the Other" (*BRP*, 131). Dobrowolski is firmly convinced that the establishment of somaesthetics as an integral component of our educational system will eventually contribute to the formation of a social environment that is characterized by mutual respect and benevolence. At first sight, Dobrowolski's initiative for the institutionalization of a somaesthetic education appears to be anything but contestable. However, a closer inspection of his argumentation uncovers that his meliorist expectations are far too high. In explaining "the need to promote somaesthetics appropriate for an everyman," Dobrowolski writes:

“Perhaps we should begin as early as at school, providing children, who acquire social identities, with ample opportunities for positive, cathartic confrontation with sensual prejudices. And by that I do not mean any perverted happenings, like those of Viennese actionists. What I mean is rather a meeting with, for example, a disabled person, so that one could literally touch him/her and, thus, stop being scared of him/her.” (*BRP*, 132–133)

I’m afraid that the last sentence of this quotation cannot be called otherwise than naïve. I understand that we need more than mere “verbal declarations” in order to recognize “the Other’s alterity” (*BRP*, 129), but I do not see why I should “literally” touch the Other in order to recognize his/her personal singularity and dignity. It is absurd to believe that recognition is an immediate corollary of somatic closeness. The torturers of Abu Ghraib prison, for instance, “literally” touched the bodies of their Iraqi inmates for the ugly sake of humiliating, debasing, and dehumanizing a particular notion of otherness (namely, the values of a predominantly Islamic culture). I do not question that Dobrowolski’s initiative is striving for a good cause. But I refuse to accept a “Somaesthetics of Otherness” (*PPA*, 129) that – even if unintentionally – invites us to ask a member of the White Pride movement to run his fingers through the hair of a black fellow being in order to overcome his feelings of hatred and racism. Such a blissful optimism represents nothing but a caricature of pragmatism’s traditional democratic meliorism and utopianism. To avoid any misunderstandings: I am not skeptical of the ethical and political potential of pragmatist aesthetics in general and Shusterman’s somaesthetics in particular. What I do doubt, however, is that the two essay collections under review represent the best that recent pragmatist scholarship has to offer on this matter.

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