

INTRODUCTION:

AESTHETIC EXPERIENCE AND SOMAESTHETICS

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It is beyond question that one of the most important topics of aesthetics is the problem formalized in the question „What is art?“ If we look at our interpretive framework, it is obvious that without an absolute Archimedean point in a metaphysical sense nobody can give an ultimate definition of art. Our world is inevitably relative and relational, and we eagerly need strong points of reference in this kind of relative situation. This is, I think, one of the reasons why Richard Shusterman (1949–) also defends the central role of experience in aesthetics. As it is well-known, Shusterman is one of the main figures of contemporary neopragmatism. His general theoretical standpoint can be described as a philosophical aestheticism saturated with democratic political intentions. In his case it is manifested in a naturalistic somaesthetics, tinted by the meliorist strive of pragmatism to democratize society as much as possible.

Shusterman emphasizes that one of the possibilities to define art is the “wrapper model of theory,”¹ which is dominant mostly in analytic philosophy. Philosophers try to cover here the whole domain of works of art: no less and no more, only the artworks. Although, according to Shusterman, Danto’s theory “best realizes the dual goals of wrapper definitions: accurate reflection and compartmental differentiation that set art apart from the rest of life” (TTB 137), these goals do not satisfy him. Namely, “if all substantive decisions as to what counts as art are left to the internal decisions of the artworld as recorded by art history, then what useful purpose does simply reflecting those decisions in a philosophical formula serve, apart from appeasing the old

philosophical urge for theory as mirroring reflection of the real?” (Ibid.) This could be regarded as valuable philosophical effort if reality could be held to be a fixed and necessary essence, but reality and the works of art especially seem to be different. Not only is everything relative and relational, but also radically temporal, historical and thus contingent. As Shusterman says: “if art’s realities are the empirical and changing contingencies of art’s historical career, then the reflective model seems pointless” (Ibid.). What is more, it is not enough to describe the changing history of art, since it is in countless cases only a conservative reinforcement of the status quo, but – from the pragmatist point of view – theory of art should commit interventions: “so pragmatism also rethinks the roles and limits of aesthetic theory and philosophy” (TTB 138.). If philosophy is indeed (as Shusterman holds it) an embodied way of life (rather than simply a mere theoretical achievement), then its “ultimate aim is to benefit human life rather than serving pure truth for truth’s sake” (Ibid.).

As Shusterman confesses it, he turned from analytic philosophy to pragmatism for such reasons, while also enlisted “insights from hermeneutics, critical theory, and post-structuralism that challenge in different ways some of the problematic assumptions and limits of analytic aesthetics” (TTB 139). Disregarding these problems here, I would like to emphasize here only that Shusterman, starting from his philosophical turn at around the end of the 80s, regarded the analytic wrapper definitions of art as *demarcational* ones and preferred the pragmatist *transformational* definition of *art as experience* (cf. TTB 139). This is why he followed Dewey’s naturalist pragmatist aesthetics, rather than his analytic fellows’ aesthetics. Although it was clear for him that Dewey’s definition of art as experience is hopelessly inaccurate from the wrapper definitions’ point of view, he argued (already in *Pragmatist Aesthetics*, 1992) that “it was nonetheless useful as a transformational theory” (TTB 139). Dewey’s definition, namely „emphasizing aesthetic experience could not only help break the hold of object

¹ Shusterman, Richard, 2012. *Thinking through the Body. Essays in Somaesthetics*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2012, p. 134. (Further: TTB)

fetishism in contemporary art, aesthetics, and culture; it could also be used to help acquire artistic legitimacy for popular arts (such as rap music) that provided powerful aesthetic experience but were not yet granted genuine aesthetic or artistic status" (TTB 139). What is more, despite being aware of the fact that Dewey „disliked the notion of 'pragmatist aesthetics'",² he developed somaesthetics as his own project of an explicitly pragmatist theory of art.

I had a dream and it came true when I had the opportunity to organize the first somaesthetic conference in Hungary with Professor Richard Shusterman as our keynote speaker. The conference took place in Budapest between June 2-5th, 2014, and we chose *Aesthetic Experience and Somaesthetics* as its title. Its venue was located at the Faculty of Arts, ELTE. The conference was organized and supported by the Hungarian Philosophical Association, Eötvös Loránd University, the University of Szeged, the Central European Pragmatist Forum (CEPF) and the Pro Philosophia Szegediensi Foundation.

Shusterman offered me generously to take a survey of some of the most important questions of his philosophy before our conference. I think this conversation serves as the best philosophical introduction to this collection of aesthetic texts.

The bouquet of the lectures was really rich and colorful (we had more than thirty), but here we publish only some of the best papers. Realizing such a diversity of topics, I have decided only to divide the selected papers into a few bigger sections. This way, we end up with three main chapters. The first chapter („John Dewey and Somaesthetics") contains three papers which show how Dewey thought about art and experience and set out to find connections between his aesthetics and Shusterman's somaesthetics. The second chapter („A Historical Angle") contains six lectures which approach aesthetic experience from very different points of view beginning with the oldest history of mankind, through traditional East Asian aesthetics, Del Biondo and Nietzsche, to Heidegger's, Gadamer's and Gumbrecht's views. Finally, the third chapter's papers („Some Applications of Somaesthetics") try to show some of the occasions where the application of somaesthetics can be useful and can help to enhance our sensory perceptions, understanding and interpretation, thus improving our life.

I launch this new issue of *Pragmatism Today* with a hope that these papers will not only bring the Deweyan way of thinking about art as experience closer to the readers, but they will also help us recognize the novel features of Shusterman's somaesthetics and the importance of the central role of experience in art..

² Shusterman, Richard, "The Intervention of Pragmatist Aesthetics: Genealogical Reflections on a Notion and a Name", in: *Practicing Pragmatist Aesthetics: Critical Perspectives on the Arts* (Value Inquiry Book Series), Amsterdam, New York: Rodopi, 2014, p. 14.