

BOOK REVIEW

RICHARD SHUSTERMAN (Ed.)

AESTHETIC EXPERIENCE AND SOMAESTHETICS.

Brill, 2018.

Leszek Koczanowicz

SWPS University of Social Sciences and Humanities

lkoczanowicz@swps.edu.pl

Somaesthetics, the conception created by Richard Shusterman, is arguably one of the most promising areas in the humanities and social sciences. There is nothing surprising about this. Somaesthetics is a unique discipline which brings together a plethora of various research fields giving them clear guidance as to directions and aims of their investigations. The reviewed book is a remarkable example of the significance of somaesthetics for contemporary thought. It originated from the conference on somaesthetics organized by Alexander Kremer in Budapest in June 2014. The conference was an important step in the expansion of somaesthetics as it showed its significant potential for the interpretation of works of arts as well as for the cultivation of aesthetic experience.

The book consists of the papers presented at the conference as well as some written especially for the volume. It is the first book published in the Brill series devoted to somaesthetics edited by its founder Richard Shusterman. He has written the first chapter of the book *Introduction: Aesthetic Experience and Somaesthetics* where he writes about the origin of the concept that: "...it derived from pragmatist aesthetics, which emphasizes the importance of aesthetic experience for the philosophy of art but also, more generally, for the philosophy of life." (p.1) However, somaesthetics Shusterman argues has transcended its pragmatist genesis developing into an original domain. Thus, it is defined as "the critical study and meliorative cultivation of the body as the site of sensory appreciation (aesthesia) and creative self-fashioning. A field that seeks to integrate theory and practice, somaesthetics argues that our sensory perceptions (and consequently the feelings and performances based on those perceptions)

can be improved by cultivating one's somatic capacities that include both sensorimotor skills and powers of body consciousness. Somaesthetics, therefore, examines (in theory and through concrete bodily practice) the various methods designed to improve those capacities and their actual expression in experienced feelings, representational appearance, and performative achievement." (p.1)

Departing from these premises Shusterman enumerates various aspects of somaesthetics' interest in aesthetic experience. First, he stresses that somaesthetics in "[i]ts integration of theory and practice, along with its melioristic thrust to improve (rather than merely correctly describe) somatic experience and practice, reflects somaesthetics' roots in pragmatist aesthetics which puts aesthetic experience at the center of its philosophy of art." (p.2) A second important aspect of the relation between aesthetic experience and somaesthetics is "...rooted in the idea of philosophy as an art of living... As the soma is the central and necessary medium through which a philosopher (or anyone) lives, it is therefore important to cultivate it as part of the effort to live a better life." (p.3) Third, he briefly but very interestingly raises the issue of the relationships between somaesthetics, ethics, and politics: "Aesthetic norms are clearly entrenched in our established artistic practices in which we find implicit (and sometimes even explicit) rules or conventions for proper composition or correct performance, along with other normative aesthetic criteria for better and worse. On the other hand, aesthetic experience can sometimes be powerful enough to challenge the existing norms and create room for different sorts of artistic practices involving different norms." (p. 3) It is obvious that political and social order is based on norms so the aesthetic experience can be a vehicle of the emancipatory change. Therefore, somaesthetics has a potential of liberating individuals from the oppression through even small changes in everyday life of individuals.

I have decided to present Shusterman's introduction at length not only because it is very interesting in itself as an elaboration of the relationships between

somaesthetics and art and aesthetic experience but also because these ideas serve as theoretical background for the texts included in the book.

The first part of the book entitled: *Embodiment in Philosophy and Aesthetic Experience* contains three essays which tackle the fundamental questions of somaesthetics in the context of the contemporary philosophy. The first chapter is written by Catherine F. Botha. *Nietzsche on Embodiment: A Proto-somaesthetics?* is an examination of Friedrich Nietzsche's concept of the body. The author corrects Shusterman's reading of Nietzsche that his position on mind-body problem is merely a reversal of Cartesian paradigm. She claims convincingly that: "Nietzsche's work could be argued to be a kind of (proto-) somaesthetic position, because of its affinities to Shusterman's work" (p. 28) and enumerates two aspects of this affinity. First, Nietzsche stresses that the complicated character of various ways of interaction between the body and the mind. Second, he also considers the body as a "locus of creative self-fashioning." The paper is thus an important contribution to the genealogy of somaesthetics showing its rooting in the Western philosophical tradition.

The second article in this part *Experience and Aesthetics* written by Béla Bacsó takes up a crucial topic of reconsidering "a new version of the aesthetic or somatic experience." As the author writes: "It seems to be a very democratic and liberal version of thinking. It has become free from the abstract limitations of theory in the aesthetic field and has made it possible to speak freely and truly about the affective encounters with artworks." (p.36) The author does a very detailed analysis of the concept of aesthetic experience in various traditions and confronts them with that developed by Richard Shusterman. It seems that what Bacsó finds the most interesting in Shusterman's pragmatist notion of aesthetic experience is its connection with the deepest layers of our existence which a new interpretation of an artwork can reveal. "The artwork as already existent and covered by the dust of various interpretations is ready to

open up different ways of interpretation, approaches that do not simply negate the previous ones but actually affect me. These experiences cannot be predicted based on earlier or preliminary meaning-attributions. This is why it is necessary to conceive the artwork as an in-between – known but never utterly experienced. We are only able to accept our own proper existence –that is usually hidden from us – in such changeable, uncertain situations." (p.39)

Alexander Kremer in his paper *Art as Experience: Gadamer and Pragmatist Aesthetics* deals with the comparison of two seemingly distant traditions: that of pragmatism and that of German hermeneutics. He demonstrates very competently how both traditions influenced Shusterman's concept of art and aesthetic experience and consequently he shows that: "They both speak about the same primary features and essences of art and artworks, but with different terminology. Gadamer uses a hermeneutical and Shusterman a pragmatist language, but they both emphasize the importance of a special action or experience in the artwork and hold that that the artwork in some sense presents a truer world; they moreover attribute similar roots to art." (p. 52)

The next part of the book *Somaesthetic Approaches to the Fine Arts* deals with various dimensions of arts. The first chapter in this part, *Art as Embodied and Interdisciplinary Experience*, is a dialogue between the well-known artist Olafur Eliasson and the art historian Else Marie Bukdahl. I think that a key point in this dialogue is Eliasson's recognition of Shusterman's concept of soma as crucial for the interpretation and creation of contemporary art. Eliasson makes it clear stating: "Vision is still the predominant theoretical tool, though once you move into the realm of theatre and performance, this attitude changes. I like Shusterman's idea of connecting the notions of soma and aesthetics. It reflects my view of the body as well. As I understand it, somaesthetics implies that you are not only capable of shaping but that you are also being shaped. The body learns from different layers of experience, both

constituting and being constituted, as we know from phenomenology.” (p. 64) Following this thesis, he develops the concept of felt meaning stressing that meaning is not only a cognitive phenomenon but also it is something we sense “without the conceptual grid or architecture of words to attach to it.” (p. 69) It is clear that somaesthetics is an ideal tool for capturing this aspect of meaning.

The succeeding chapter is written by Yanping Gao. *Winckelmann’s Haptic Gaze: A Somaesthetic Interpretation* contains a revisionist interpretation of the work of the famous German aesthician Johann Joachim Winckelmann with the stress on his haptic engagement which brings him close to somaesthetics. Referring to Winckelmann’s works but also to his biography, she concludes: “Behind this charm, charisma, enthusiasm, and intuitive perception lies Winckelmann’s somaesthetic approach—his deeply embodied way of perceiving art that brings together the different senses and one’s emotional sensibility in the pursuit of understanding and pleasure.” (p. 84) Therefore, we can assume that at the fundamentals of his aesthetics lie in corporeal experiences which are conceptualized into ideas, notions, and so on.

In the following chapter *Rethinking Aesthetics through Architecture?* Bálint Veres discusses aesthetic ambivalences of architecture from a somaesthetic perspective. His intention is not the substitution of somaesthetics and pragmatism for imagination, intimacy, and spirituality but to combine both sets of values. This approach is necessary as according to Veres architecture “...never witnessed the tendency of overcoming sensuality, never acknowledged the interpretation-heavy mentalism of the so-called ‘artworld,’ and never legitimized the suspension of the physical-corporeal reality. On the contrary, architecture mediates between the mental and the corporeal.”(p. 99)

John Golden in the next chapter, *‘The Co-Presence of Something Regular’: Wordsworth’s Aesthetics of Prosody*, examines the role of prosody as a means for harmonizing the text with the rhythms of our bodies. He

writes at the beginning of his article: “Literary texts engage our bodies perhaps most immediately through the sounds of the words they enlist us in saying—or in imagining we say—with our own breath. And of all of literature’s sonic effects, the poetic meter has perhaps the most suggestive connections with the body: both meter and human bodies involve felt pulses and repeated movements.” (p. 101) The author discusses various perspectives on the role of the prosody in the text using William Wordsworth’s poems. Although Golden does not refer directly to somaesthetics, it is clear from his considerations that prosody constitutes a link between the text and corporeal activity and somaesthetics would be a useful tool for examining this relationship. Moreover, the author argues: “...that meter is as pure an expression of the communal dimension of poetry as we can expect to find within the borders of a text.” (p. 118) This aspect of prosody is also significant from the perspective of somaesthetics as it shows the importance of the corporeal dimension for social life.

The last chapter in this part, *Singing, Listening, Proprioceiving: Some Reflections on Vocal Somaesthetics*, is written by Anne Tarvainen and deals with vocal somaesthetics which “[i]n contrast to the traditional research of human vocality...will be interested in the bodily sensations of what it feels like to vocalize and to listen to another person vocalizing. Vocal sound as heard is understood here being only a part of the multimodal experience of vocalizing and listening. Vocal somaesthetic experience is auditive, proprioceptive, aesthetic, motional, affective and intersubjective.” (p. 121) The point of departure for the author is Shusterman’s division between representational, performative, and experiential somaesthetics. Experiential somaesthetics is devoted mainly to the issue of experiencing our bodies and how by various methods we can enrich our experience. Tarvainen concentrates in this context on the proprioceptive vocal experience as a necessary although the often neglected aspect of singing. Such an approach has far-reaching consequences as it leads to “[T]he disappearance of the

clear distinction between subject and object, inside and outside, as well as body and mind..." (p. 129) Moreover, it also confirms the status of somaesthetics as in the conclusions Tarvaines asserts: "The broad aim of vocal somaesthetics is to create a comprehensive understanding of human being as a bodily, sentient and vocal being. It will illuminate the human being's diverse vocal, sensory and aesthetic relations to his/her environment and other people." (p. 138)

The third part of the book *Somaesthetics in the Photographic Arts and the Art of Living* consists of four papers. The first one *Spectral Absence and Bodily Presence: Performative Writings on Photography* is written by Éva Antal. She interprets Shusterman's writings on photography as well as his performative activity opposing them to the perspective on photography developed by Susan Sontag, Roland Barthes, and Jacques Derrida. It seems that Shusterman's consciousness of the body enables him to capture a new sense of photography. "Barthes and Sontag call attention to the loss of the meaningful event that characterized old photography, while Derrida's creative writing on Bonhomme's old-new photos incorporates his philosophical ideas on time, death and writing *mise en abyme*."

Toma and Shusterman try to capture the auratic essence of the subject in their artistic transactional project. Shusterman's essay gets closest to the meaning of performance in photography: not only does the bodily SOMAFLUX project present the performative process itself, but also his performative writing about it displays the features of somaesthetic discourse." (p. 159)

The subsequent chapter *Cosmetic Practices: The Intersection with Aesthetics and Medicine* examines the aesthetic meaning of surgical and cosmetic intervention into the body. Elisabetta Di Stefano shows the importance of artistic practices of the transformation of the body as well as cosmetic practices of the beautification of the body. Somaesthetics "can provide a meeting point between high culture and popular culture, while reconciling the different ways of evaluating

cosmetic practices from the medical and aesthetic perspectives in the light of a rediscovered psychosomatic unity." (p. 163) It enables us to find a harmony behind the excesses of the artistic creations but also helps us to "improving everyday life and experience."

Nóra Horváth's paper *Santayana on Embodiment, the Art of Living, and Sexual Aesthetics* refers to the ideas of George Santayana whose conception is in many aspects parallel to that of the pragmatists. Horváth writes that for Santayana "Aesthetic experience is ... central to his philosophy of life. For him, perfection and beauty are not separable ideas; beauty is an objectified pleasure, and the feeling of pleasure gives the feeling of perfection." (p. 186) This perspective puts him near to Shusterman's notion of the transfiguration of ordinary experience into the more refined experience of self-creation although Shusterman is more suspicious of an excessive aestheticism. Similarly, Santayana claims to refer to Ancient Greece that "...the attraction of sex relies upon the attraction of senses, which suggests that a man with a refined aesthetic sense has a better sexual sense." (p. 190) Shusterman who also is preoccupied with the role sexual desires play in our bodily self-fashioning draws his inspiration mainly from Asian culture.

The last paper in the volume, *Thinking through the Body of Maya: Somaesthetic Frames from Mira Nair's Kamasutra* written by Vinod Balakrishnan and Swathi Elizabeth Kurian, is an interesting exploration of the usefulness of somaesthetics for the interpretation of ancient Indian bodily rituals as presented in the contemporary movie *Kamasutra: A Tale of Love* which is a narrative about two women: the 16th-century courtesan Maya and the princess Tara. They represent two parallel concepts of relation to one's own body. "Tara's perception of her beauty is cosmetic and epidermal. Maya's understanding is more somaesthetic as she believes in an enhancement of beauty by turning the soma into a receptacle of practices and experiences." (p. 204)

Philosophy of science claims that the crucial criterion for the usefulness of a theory is its fruitfulness for posing problems. I am sure that the book is a significant argument for the fruitfulness of somaesthetics. The book shows that somaesthetics can generate in many areas new interpretations that in turn enable the researcher to re-conceptualize a research field. This somaesthetics' ability has been demonstrated in all papers included in the collection. Some of them develop the original insights of somaesthetics, some enter into a dialogue with its underlying assumptions, but all prove that it is a unique conception which opens new ways of research for the humanities and social sciences.