

**REVIEW: SHUSTERMAN'S SOMAESTHETICS.
FROM HIP HOP PHILOSOPHY TO POLITICS AND
PERFORMANCE ART**

ed. Jerold J. Abrams

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This book is definitely not the first written work dedicated to Richard Shusterman's somaesthetics. Articles on the topic abound. But for the first time, a book is devoted entirely to the practical and performative dimension of Shustermanian somaesthetics. This is important because the aforementioned dimension is rich and complex, with several ramifications, including the question of performance, the question of popular arts and hip hop in particular, and the political question.

Richard Shusterman coined the neologism of somaesthetics in the late 1990s. It refers to an embodied and sentient philosophy born of phenomenology and above all of pragmatism, which places experience at the center of philosophy and the body at the center of experience. It is then no coincidence that several chapters in the book make detailed and welcome references to Maurice Merleau-Ponty (chap. 1, 2, 3, 5, 6, 11, 14), Edmund Husserl (chap. 1, 11), Charles S. Peirce (chap. 2, 4, 12), William James (chap. 2, 3, 4, 5, 9, 12, 13, 14), Richard Rorty (chap. 1, 2, 5, 7, 13) and, above all, John Dewey (chap. 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 9, 10, 12, 13, 14). The quintessential aim of somaesthetics, like the disciplines whose heritage it claims, is to defend the body against Platonic, Christian and Cartesian condemnations and against any other somatophobic theory that would make the body the site of human weakness and cognitive deficiency, on the grounds that it is a resolutely unreflective body, the antithesis of both reason and cognition.

Right from the book's introduction, Jerold J. Abrams rightly reminds that Richard Shusterman's path to cel-

ebrating "lived embodied experience"¹ is far from anecdotal. The somaesthetician started out in analytic philosophy and ended up with a renewed version of pragmatism in somaesthetics. And it is the experience of an art form, that of dance, that provoked this transition. From this conversional moment at the end of the 1980s, Richard Shusterman's aim became that of tackling the rigidities of analytic philosophy, in particular the erroneous inferences to be found, regarding art, in Danto's Hegelian aesthetics misleadingly decoupled from everyday human life. According to Richard Shusterman, this is what is most explicitly reflected in the elitist vision of the artworld adopted by Arthur Danto in his seminal 1964² article on the topic³. To distance himself from this conceptual historicism and its strong intellectualist charge—which Jerold J. Abrams mentions and analyzes at the beginning of the second part of the book—Richard Shusterman has followed in the footsteps of Richard Rorty, and even more so in those of John Dewey, the author of the renowned work of pragmatist aesthetics: *Art as Experience*⁴. Unlike Richard Rorty, John Dewey is not suspicious of the notion of experience—which is central to the Shustermanian enterprise of revaluing the lived human body—nor does he confine his aesthetics to the literary object, and he makes the artworld depend on the political and socioeconomic factors of human life. Jerold J. Abrams' statement around the tenth page of the introduction is eloquent on this point and aptly captures Richard Shusterman's stance: "Art is everywhere. It pervades all life and society"⁵. He goes on to point out that while the artistic dimension of the lived human body has not been a major topic of discussion in the mainstream

¹ (ed.) Abrams J. J., *Shusterman's Somaesthetics. From Hip Hop Philosophy to Politics and Performance Art*, Boston, Brill, 2022, p. 4.

² The exact same year Arthur Danto encountered Warhol's *Brillo Boxes* at the Stable Gallery in New York.

³ See Danto A., "The Artworld", 1964, *The Journal of Philosophy*, Vol. 61, American Philosophical Association Eastern Division Sixty-First Annual Meeting, pp. 571-584.

⁴ See Dewey J., *Art as Experience*, New York, Capricorn Books, 1934.

⁵ (ed.) Abrams J. J., *Shusterman's Somaesthetics. From Hip Hop Philosophy to Politics and Performance Art*, op. cit., p. 11.

aesthetic tradition, Richard Shusterman is a singular exception, yet part of a certain tradition led by Aristotle, Montaigne, Ralph Waldo Emerson, Friedrich Nietzsche, William James, George Santayana, and John Dewey. Indeed, it was in continuing this tradition that Richard Shusterman placed the body, he redefined as a soma, at the heart of his pragmatist aesthetics, reaching what Jerold J. Abrams calls the “third phase of his thought with ‘somaesthetics’”⁶. This third phase, which follows the analytical phase and then aesthetic pragmatism, culminates in a very special project that makes Richard Shusterman exceed his comfortable academic role of philosopher of art. This project, called *The Adventures of the Man in Gold*, lies at the crossroads of art and life, performance and writing, philosophy and tale, and is the subject matter of the entire second part of the book.

Before that, the first part of the book alternates between critical chapters and chapters that attempt, in different ways and depending on the aim, to situate somaesthetics in a philosophical tradition that helps to explain its validity, to recall its fundamental philosophical principles, and/or to recognize its fruitful applications on an individual, social and political level. In that respect, the book does more than describe somaesthetics, which has been around for over thirty years and whose content has been made explicit on numerous occasions. It also allows its authors to criticize its foundations, open up debates, and/or propose the extension or reform of some of its features, to put forward new theses whose ambition is to advance pragmatism on a general scale. This is clear from the very first chapter written by Stefan Snævarr, who recalls Richard Shusterman’s critical stance towards metaphysics and the ontological enterprise and ends with a seven-point critique of the pragmatist and non-essentialist view of the self-supported by the somaesthetician: it would not be “entirely consistent”⁷ because sufficiently ontological. This critical chap-

ter contrasts with Alexander Kremer’s laudatory chapter that follows, for whom Richard Shusterman’s pragmatism cleverly combines ontology and embodied naturalism while returning philosophy to its first ancient loves (Greek and Confucian) which made it an art of living. In so doing, Richard Shusterman has revitalized philosophy, not just aesthetics. He would also have used his embodied and practical philosophy as a means of action or even emancipation against the forms of individual and social oppression that arise in everyday life. This is what Leszek Koczanowicz points out in the book’s third chapter using the well-chosen concept of “somapower”. It serves him to indicate the necessary relationships to be forged between the body and power within the framework of a “microphysics of emancipation” which is precisely what the interdisciplinary field of somaesthetics is striving to achieve from its everyday somatic practices. Chapter 4, written by Max Ryyänen, brings together the theme of somaesthetics as an art of living presented in Chapter 2 and the socially, culturally and politically liberating dimension of the discipline, as highlighted in Chapter 3. At the junction of these two themes, the author situates hip hop music whose deeply embodied expressive dimension and progressive pedagogical interest Richard Shusterman recognized in “The Fine Art of Rap.” He did so on the basis of what he described as its postmodernist aesthetic, at once “aesthetically challenging, intellectually penetrating, and socially critical”⁸. According to Max Ryyänen, this analysis is “nothing short of revolutionary.” We return to a critical tone in the fifth chapter of the book, where Tonino Griffero suggests to replace the meliorism considered too active—one could possibly say too pragmatist—of somaesthetics with a “pathic-atmospherological aesthetics” of phenomenological type which favors a form of affective passivity on the part of the embodied subject towards what aesthetically surrounds

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 12.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 42.

⁸ (ed.) Abrams J. J., *Shusterman’s Somaesthetics. From Hip Hop Philosophy to Politics and Performance Art*, op. cit., p. 81.

him or her ("the atmospheric feelings"⁹). Eventually, the section ends with a chapter Dorota Koczanowicz wrote to praise the impact of somaesthetics in the context of food studies. Since his 2016 essay entitled "Somaesthetics and the Fine Art of Eating," Richard Shusterman has not only expanded the range of his somaesthetics but also that of philosophy more widely, notably reopening the debate regarding the traditional dualistic vision of culture in which body and mind are split.

It should be added that the goal of this first part of the book entitled "Pragmatism and Somaesthetics" has been achieved since, by the end of it, the reader will have been reminded of the links between somaesthetics and pragmatism. More specifically, and as these general links take shape, the theoretical premises of somaesthetics are also recalled in detail so that the concrete applications of this philosophy, already apparent in the first part of the book and which will become the main focus of a second part, become apparent and gain in legitimacy. These theoretical premises could easily be summarized as follows: on the one hand, the body is a soma insofar as it is a thinking and feeling body, i.e., one that includes both body and mind and is shaped by culture and social forces as well as by nature. On the other hand, and because it is the medium through which we enter and act in the world, the soma deserves constant self-fashioning; this is the normative and meliorist part of Shustermanian somaesthetics which is at work at both the individual and the collective or socio-political level. Lastly, all this helps to explain why the soma possesses an aesthetic charge that makes it particularly effective in an artistic context. Stefan Snaevarr, for example, is right to point out that Richard Shusterman is a "somatist," someone who "thinks that the sentient body is primordial to consciousness and constitutes the ground of our coping with, and cognition of, the world." And Alexander Kremer is well advised to insist on the meliorist dimension of Shuster-

manian pragmatism, "according to which society should be democratized as much as possible."

The artistic dimension of somaesthetics is explored in depth in the book's second part, "Performative Philosophy and the Man in Gold." This is particularly true of the discussions on the aptly named Man in Gold, on whom the part focuses. This shining figure dressed all in gold, crosses the boundaries between reality and fiction. If the figure cannot identify itself purely and simply with Richard Shusterman, it has nonetheless seized the soma of the philosopher of art who came out somehow possessed. As such, the enigmatic figure born around 2010 in France is not easy to present or describe. And this is what the reader is reminded of in many places in the book, as on page 133 by Jerold J. Abrams: "Always attended by the photographer Yann Toma, the Man in Gold is and is not the philosopher Richard Shusterman." In Chapter 9, Yvonne Bezrucka rightly points out that the Man in Gold does without any "philosophical discursive explanation." At the same time, Else Marie Bukdahl observes "why he is the Man in Gold, and how the Man in Gold experiences the world through the philosopher, Shusterman cannot say." Nor will Richard Shusterman break the mystery in the thirteenth chapter where he simply states that the Man in Gold "is very close to [him]."¹⁰ One thing is certain, however: the Man in Gold is the most emblematic implementation of the practical and performative dimension of somaesthetics in the artistic sphere, no less, actually, than in life; for the Man in Gold can be assimilated to an artistic performance as well as a philosophical project, or even a somewhat mad adventure of ordinary life.

Never since *The Adventures of the Man in Gold* was published in 2016 has an essay focused (as much) on the philosophical, artistic and literary interest of the tale as well as the character it portrays. Chapters 7 to 12 consider the multiple forms this interest takes, while attempting to decipher the mysteries of the Man in Gold and the

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 86.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 252.

content of his physical and psychological relationship with his philosopher of art and academic host. In Chapter 7, the floor is once again given to Jerold J. Abrams who mirrors the Man in Gold of the *Adventures* with Philip K. Dick's *The Golden Man*, two speechless golden men whose adventures are highly philosophical. Before doing so, Jerold J. Abrams explains that Richard Shusterman has endured what Arthur Danto would have called –though by making it signify an act of transcendence that must pragmatically be brought down to everyday life– a “transfiguration”¹¹ by becoming, through the photographic Man in Gold, a “gleaming and sparkling work of art”¹². But if the Man in Gold is art, or a living work of art, he can no less take on the garb of a social figure who transcends the fictional barriers of art. In Chapter 8, Diane Richard-Allerdyce presents him as a social self, afraid of rejection, joyfully celebrating (in Jacques Lacan's sense of *jouissance*) human freedom and limits. But the Man in Gold is not merely binary –both a work of art and a social individual embodied in Richard Shusterman's soma. This is what Yvonne Bezrucka aims to show in a ninth chapter in which the Man in Gold also becomes capable of being inhabited by spectators who encounter him and project their own prejudices, values and opinions. The somatic boundaries of the glittering figure are once again expanded, contributing to its mysterious hybridity and enigmatic character as much as to its ethical and pedagogical function on a collective level. Then, the poetically artistic scope of the Man in Gold can be found in Chapter 10, written by one of the *Adventures'* characters, Else Marie Bukdahl. In it, the art historian relates her links with Danish sculptors Claud Ørntoft and Marie Benthe Norheim who also appear in the tale as themselves as well as their mythical counterparts in the Man in Gold's vision. At the same time, the author insists on the interest and importance of the Shustermanian philosophy of photog-

raphy which, in a somaesthetic logic, sees photography as a dynamic and complex performance rather than as an object. This is clearly evident in the radiant flows or “Somaflux” that Yann Toma captures, which cannot be reduced to the two-dimensional, static image embodied by the paper photograph, an idea that Jerold J. Abrams also recalls a few pages later. Before that, Yang Lu, in Chapter 11, does not get away from the topic of art in his analysis of the Man in Gold and the *Adventures*. As evidence of this, he focuses on the magical sculpture known as Wanmei, which appears in the last chapter of the *Adventures* and with which the Man in Gold falls in love, and also on the way in which somaesthetic practice is nourished by the foundations and the wisdom of Daoist philosophy. In the final chapter of Part Two, Jerold J. Abrams reappears for the last time to take a fresh look at another of the Man in Gold's art forms: the film (a moving and silent picture straddling the documentary and the fiction film) that Yann Toma shot about the Man in Gold, entitled *Walk the Golden Night*.

Like the first part of the book, which set itself the general ambition of recalling the links between pragmatism and somaesthetics beyond the diversity of its chapters, the second part also pursues an overhanging goal: to attest to the Shustermanian project of departitioning, i. e. departitioning of the arts (traditional arts vs. performative arts, high art vs. popular arts); departitioning of the traditional dichotomy between body and mind, sensuality and intellectuality; departitioning between verbal language and the non-discursive language of the body; departitioning between disciplines (philosophy, literature and the arts) and thus between practice and theory.

Insofar as the book allows its authors to adopt a critical point of view and open up debates on somaesthetics, and in particular on its practical dimension, it is only logical that a final part of the book should give the floor to the discipline's creator and take the following title: “Shusterman in His Own Words”. It is here, in fact, that Richard Shusterman is given the opportunity to engage

¹¹ See Danto A., *The Transfiguration of the Commonplace*, Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 1981.

¹² (ed.) Abrams J. J., *Shusterman's Somaesthetics. From Hip Hop Philosophy to Politics and Performance Art*, op. cit., p. 133.

in dialogue with the book's contributors and possibly to respond to their kind attacks. He does so in an extensive chapter, Chapter 13, subtitled "Remarks on the Preceding Chapters". The somaesthetician is careful to point out that he is "primarily interested in clarifying misconceptions and exploring interesting questions emerging from the previous chapters, not in winning philosophical arguments"¹³. Right up to the end of the book, then, the debates continue, refining themselves but remaining open, which not only allows the reader to form his or her own opinion on somaesthetics from a perspective of freedom specific to the somaesthetic project, but also lends the work a poetic lightness that counteracts the ordinary dogmatism of theoretical essays. One could even go so far as to say that the book enjoys, in this way and without this being a flaw, that form of vulnerability of which the Man in Gold is repeatedly designated throughout the pages, and which Richard Shusterman also reminds of on page 254: "The Man in Gold's anguish and vulnerability are central to his story"¹⁴. Chapter 13 is also an opportunity for the latter to remind the reader that the eclecticism of somaesthetics is likewise to be found in its reception, which affects the United States as well as Europe, notably France, and Asia, such as China. Links with China, and in particular the reasons why somaesthetics is popular there, are explored in the book's final chapter in which Richard Shusterman and Yanping Gao, Associate Professor at CASS and co-editor of China's journal *Inter-*

national Aesthetics, dialogue. The chapter's interest also lies in the fact that Richard Shusterman refers in several lines to his book *Act and Affect* which to date has only been published in Chinese. Readers who wish to know more about the intimate links between somaesthetics and, more broadly, pragmatism and the question of affects and feelings, will be satiated here.

And so, concludes a book whose reading is undoubtedly experienced as an active, somatic, and affective experience. If Richard Shusterman is, in his own words, "a philosopher of experience," the reader of *Shusterman's Somaesthetics. From Hip Hop Philosophy to Politics and Performance Art* will undoubtedly be, following him, a reader of experience.

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¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 244.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 254.