

**BODY CONSCIOUSNESS AND PHILOSOPHY**  
**— AN INTERVIEW WITH RICHARD SHUSTERMAN**

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Richard Shusterman (1949) is the Dorothy F. Schmidt Eminent Scholar Chair in the Humanities at Florida Atlantic University. He was the keynote speaker of the conference “The Soma as the Core of Aesthetics, Ethics and Politics” that was organized in Szeged in 2017. This gave me the idea of conducting an interview with Prof. Shusterman; his widely translated research encompasses philosophy, art theory, and questions of embodiment, which, being a Master of Arts student in Aesthetics, I find truly intriguing. I asked him about somaesthetics—the vibrant and interdisciplinary discourse around the manifold relations between the body, philosophy, and art—which was initiated by his works.

The neo-pragmatist Shusterman regards philosophy as an art of living – this idea had a crucial role in the formation of the somaesthetic project which regards the “lived, sentient, intelligent human body”, i.e. the soma, “as a locus of sensory-aesthetic appreciation (aesthesis) and creative self-fashioning”. As a discipline of both theoretical and practical dimensions, its aim can be described as “the critical meliorative study of the experience and use of one's body”.

*KL: Dear Richard, probably the most fascinating aspect of somaesthetics is the way it comprises both theory and practice. While the body as a subject matter of philosophy or theory has become widely accepted, you recounted many incidents where you were criticized or not taken seriously by academic philosophers because of somaesthetics' essential practical dimension. According to your experience, has this “Platonic–Cartesian–Idealistic” bias and disregard for somatic cultivation changed since you first introduced the idea to the academic community? Did the proliferation of theoretical writings on the body bring about a change in prejudice against somatic self-cultivation?*

RS: The answer to your question is not a definitive and clear one. There has been some change toward greater openness, but not as much as I had hoped for; and the overcoming of the prejudice against somatic self-cultivation in academic settings has, in my experience, been achieved in some disciplines more than others. Most of the practical somaesthetics workshops I have been invited to give in academic settings have been for teachers and students in the arts (music, dance, painting, architecture, and performance) and in technological design. Occasionally, I have done such work for anthropologists and people in sports science. Philosophy still seems to be largely resistant, although I know of a few colleagues who are now experimenting with introducing somatic exercises in their philosophy classrooms (usually exercises relating to yoga or mindfulness meditation). I have also occasionally included some exercises in somatic awareness in my philosophy classes, but I don't do much philosophy teaching in recent years, and the courses I do teach nowadays (doctoral courses in the philosophy of culture) are not focused on somaesthetics. I believe my students more urgently need other topics of instruction, and I am a bit reluctant to give the impression that I am using the classroom to proselytize for somaesthetics.

*KL: From the point of view of practitioners of different disciplines promoting heightened body-mind attunement—hatha yoga, for instance—to what extent is philosophy, i. e., the analytic branch of somaesthetics, part of your body consciousness workshops? In what ways is a somaesthetic training session different from other types of somatic trainings?*

RS: My workshops are usually given in academic contexts and are sponsored by academic institutions other than my own. The participants in the workshops are students who volunteer for the workshop experience because of their interest. I include no more than twenty-five students in a workshop, and I usually preface such a workshop by a theoretical lecture about somaesthetics that is given the night before the workshop begins and

that is open to the larger university community. During the workshop, I also give mini-lectures of between 5–15 minutes to the workshop participants in order to explain some of the philosophical and physiological principles of somaesthetics that underlie and guide the workshop exercises and to explain how the exercises serve to promote the somaesthetic aims of the workshop as a whole. These mini-lectures are informal talks that arise out of the experiences of the exercises – and they are not given in an academic style full of references to famous philosophers. The exercises in body consciousness and mindful movement that I give in the workshops are largely based on the Feldenkrais Method (in which I am professionally certified) but I also use a number of other exercises in mindful movement and somatic awareness that I have discovered in the many years I've studied somatic methods.

Perhaps I should also explain that I do not give these workshops at my own home institution because my teaching obligations need to be met through more traditional kinds of instruction and because I am reluctant to use the “bully pulpit” of my own seminar room to promote my own theoretical projects. The academic semesters in the United States are too short to cover all the theoretical material I would like to include in my seminars, so that is another reason why I don't take the time to introduce practical somaesthetic training into my classroom.

I also would not want to oblige my students to perform such training, if they do not want to do so; and if I made that training part of my seminar, they would be forced to engage in such training, which is not what they could reasonably expect to be required to practice in pursuit of their academic degree.

*KL: You have been asked many times to describe the genealogy of somaesthetics. You have always emphasized the importance of the fact that you started your career as a “hardcore” analytic philosopher—which still bears importance regarding your style of*

*argumentation—and that by the end of the 1980s you turned to pragmatism, greatly inspired by John Dewey's works, and started to view philosophy as an art of living. You have also highlighted the significant impact East-Asian philosophy had on your thought.*

*It has been twenty years since in Practicing Philosophy: Pragmatism and the Philosophical Life,<sup>1</sup> you coined the term somaesthetics. In what ways have your idea of somaesthetics changed since then? You labelled Body Consciousness<sup>2</sup> as a rather philosophic interpretation, and Thinking through the Body<sup>3</sup> as being more concerned with somaesthetics' diversified applications to daily life and the arts. Does this show a shift of interest from the analytic to the pragmatic and practical branches of somaesthetics?*

RS: Somaesthetics emerged for me as a natural consequence of my turn to pragmatism. It derived from two main pragmatist ideas: first, the idea of pragmatist aesthetics that both the creation and experience of art involve somatic activity and engagement – including our emotional reaction to artworks (as all our emotions involve the body). If the body is so important to aesthetic experience, it then seems logical to cultivate its powers of perception and performance in order to improve our aesthetic experience.

Second, the pragmatist idea of philosophy as an art of living clearly suggests the argument that since the soma is the inevitable and necessary medium through which we live our philosophical lives, then by cultivating the soma we can enrich our capacities for our philosophical art of living. Analytic philosophy had very little to do with the basic idea of somaesthetics, but as you rightly remark, the basic analytic style of thinking has informed my writing and critical style of argumentation

<sup>1</sup> Richard Shusterman: *Practicing Philosophy: Pragmatism and the Philosophical Life*. Routledge, London, 1997.

<sup>2</sup> Richard Shusterman: *Body Consciousness*. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2008.

<sup>3</sup> Richard Shusterman: *Thinking through the Body. Essays in Somaesthetics*. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2012.

in critically interpreting the somatic theories of other thinkers and in defending my own somaesthetic views.

In one way, my conception of somaesthetics has significantly changed from when I introduced it twenty years ago. Initially I considered it would be a sub-discipline of philosophical aesthetics or more generally a sub-discipline of philosophy. But because somaesthetics has been fruitfully adopted and developed by researchers in other fields: political theory, cultural and gender studies, health education, and technological design, I now recognize that it is an interdisciplinary field that has its roots in philosophy but that transcends the limits of its origins.

I have not, however, lost any of my interest in the philosophical issues of somaesthetics. In fact, the first few essays of *Thinking through the Body* are focused on philosophical issues before I move on to more detailed studies of somaesthetics in the arts and everyday life. After my book, *Body Consciousness*, which was devoted essentially to issues in philosophy of mind and action, along with somatic dimensions of ethics and politics but without any sustained discussion of distinctively aesthetic questions, I felt the need to demonstrate the fruitful use of somaesthetics for study of the arts and aesthetic experience. In the same way, because the body has long been associated with low carnal interests, I devoted my first full book on somaesthetics to the more meditative dimensions of somaesthetics, hence the title *Body Consciousness: A Philosophy of Mindfulness and Somaesthetics*. I wanted initially to distance myself from the stereotype carnal interests of food and sex that could discredit the whole project of somaesthetics. But once that book established the cognitive legitimacy and spiritual dimension of somaesthetics, I later turned to the somaesthetic study of eroticism and eating, not only in *Thinking through the Body*, but in later texts.

KL: *Somaesthetics also endeavors to unite art and philosophy. Your latest book, The Adventures of the Man in Gold,<sup>4</sup> focuses on this transgression and many other forms of hybridity, ambiguity, and liminal experience, such as gender construction. Could you tell me about the relation between somaesthetics and gender?*

RS: Yes, *The Adventures of the Man in Gold* or in its French title, *Les Aventures de l'homme en or* is certainly a hybrid. The book, which is based on my work in performance art with the Parisian artist Yann Toma, is bilingual and composed of text and image (namely, color illustrations from my performances as the Man in Gold), fact and fantasy, and as you note – philosophy and art (both visual and literary).

Some scholars might think that writing such a book involving my work in performance art signals a departure from my philosophical work, but this sort of engagement in artistic production is a logical consequence of my pragmatist approach of integrating art, philosophy, and life. A philosopher of art can learn a great deal about art by adopting the perspective and experiences of a creative artist, a perspective that is different from that of the observing art consumer or interpreting critic.

The philosophical tale was an influential genre in the eighteenth century (with writers like Voltaire and Diderot), and there is probably as much philosophy in the story of the Man in Gold as in my other books of philosophy. Storytelling allows you to suggestively condense many rich and complicated ideas into symbolic actions, characters, and metaphors. Because the Man in Gold capers around in the skin of a shiny gold lycra body stocking, the sort of garment that so-called real men would be too embarrassed to wear, he has encountered many negative remarks about the strange sort of gender he embodies – a man in gold with a deep appreciation of feminine qualities that he seeks to some extent to

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<sup>4</sup> Richard Shusterman: *The Adventures of the Man in Gold – Paths Between Art and Life / Les Aventures de L'Homme en Or – Passages Entre L'Art et la Vie*. (English/Français) Hermann, Paris, 2016.

embody, just as the Daoist sages did. And I'm sure you noticed that Laozi, the legendary founder of Daoism, who advocated and privileged the feminine principle, is the only philosopher cited in the book. In fact, because I insisted in including the Chinese version of those quotations, the book actually contains three languages.

As to your specific question, there is a close relationship between the fields of somaesthetics and gender studies. In recent years, there have been a number of useful and influential somaesthetic texts by feminist writers on gender. Somaesthetics has an essentially pluralistic approach to somatic subjectivity. It criticizes the typical approach of fundamental phenomenology that assumes that all human beings in the world have the same basic somatic subjectivity and experience, defined by the fundamental human ontological condition. My view is that different people living in different circumstances, with different kinds of bodies or bodily experiences, could well have significantly different somatic subjectivities that need to be addressed philosophically but also in terms of practical care. This is one reason why my book *Body Consciousness* devoted a chapter to the somatic subjectivity of women and the elderly, whose somatic differences have often been used to marginalize them socially and economically. That chapter works closely through the ideas of Simone de Beauvoir but also engages with more contemporary feminists.

Human bodies are obviously physically sexed bodies, but somaesthetics affirms that one's soma is also largely shaped by sociocultural forces and experiences. A person's soma is already being shaped before birth, in the mother's womb, by the food that she eats and the activities and environment she engages in. From childhood, a society's established gender roles further shape the somatic behavior and appearance of a person. People are quickly taught to imitate the somatic behavior and appearance that define their gender roles, but sometimes this does not fit with their inner sense of themselves. Recognizing this lack of fit is a matter of

somatic consciousness.

The further step of making the somatic adjustments to relieve this discomfort is also a somatic task – of learning to adopt different, more satisfying habits of behavior and learning to become more comfortable with different feelings. In short, since gender is always felt and expressed somatically, there is a close relationship between somaesthetics and gender studies. My own work in this area has been very limited compared to that of other writers. Somaesthetics, as I've always insisted, is not my own personal theoretical possession but a research field (of theory and practice) that requires and now involves many thinkers.

*KL: You repeatedly criticize the tradition of philosophical aesthetics, including Alexander Baumgarten, founder of aesthetics as a discipline, and Kant, Schopenhauer etc., for largely neglecting the body's role in aesthetic appreciation and falling short of acknowledging the crucial importance of somatic cultivation. However, you make truly intriguing historical discoveries, i. e., reinterpretations of classic philosophers as pioneers of somaesthetics. Such is the case with Edmund Burke, whose "recognition of the crucial bodily dimensions of aesthetic experience needs to be taken more seriously".<sup>5</sup> Do you think other philosophers of "taste"—from Italian and Spanish courtly theoreticians to British thinkers of the unfolding civic culture—could also be reinterpreted this way? Taste, their key notion, inherently involves the idea of its meliorative cultivation, and great emphasis is put on the representational dimension of the body, which is acquired through awareness in action: gestures, posture, etc.*

RS: Yes, I think there are many figures in the history of aesthetics who have important somaesthetic aspects to their thought and who have useful somaesthetic insights to offer to today's theorists. You are right to identify early theorists of taste as an excellent source for a

<sup>5</sup> Shusterman 2012, 146–147.

somaesthetic reinterpretation of past aesthetic thought. Besides Burke, there were other eighteenth-century figures who were concerned with taste and our somatic senses: Hume, Voltaire, and Diderot, for example. One can find fascinating somaesthetic ideas also in another eighteenth-century aesthete, Johann Joachim Winckelmann, often celebrated as the father of art history and who is usually associated with German rationalism. This year marks the 300<sup>th</sup> anniversary of his birth in 1717, and in March I gave a paper on his somaesthetic approach to sculpture at an international conference on his work in Naples. You are also correct in thinking that courtly theory in the Renaissance, such as Castiglione's *Art of the Courtier*, contains fascinating discussions concerning somatic training for proper behavior and appearance in pursuing a somaesthetic art of living.

*KL: When you were a PhD student in Oxford, your main focus, as an analytic aesthete, was the philosophy of literature – your first two books addressed this topic. How can somaesthetics and literature be related? As a theoretician and practitioner of somaesthetics, you argue that the body is central in the creation and appreciation of art, and therefore, if we improve our senses, our bodily performance, our experience of art will thusly improve. One would think that literature, the branch of art that is least tied to the physical—the “most unrestricted of the arts”,<sup>6</sup> according to Hegelian hierarchy of art—would depend less on bodily consciousness than dancing, for instance.*

RS: You are certainly correct to note that Hegel privileged literature as the highest of the arts because it seems to be the most ideal or least physical and to remark that literature seems rather distant from somaesthetics' focus on the body and its sensory perceptions and performance, while these matters are

instead central to music, dance, and the visual arts. It is also true that far less has been written about the somaesthetics of literature than about the somaesthetics of other arts.

This does not mean, however, that somaesthetics has no significant role to play in the study and practice of literature. Let me just briefly outline some directions of research for literary somaesthetics. Apart from the study of somatic metaphors in poetry and fiction, there are a number of other topics worth exploring. Literature, as I argued in my very first publication when I was a student at Oxford,<sup>7</sup> is an art that is both oral and written. The oral character of poetry – expressive tone, meter, and rhythm – are very much somatic matters that relate to breathing and voice. Oral performances of literature also involve gesture and posture. This is even clearer when the oral performance of literature takes dramatic form; we should not forget that theater is a literary art.

Moreover, there are somaesthetic dimensions to be discovered also in the written or printed form of literature: there are, for example, proprioceptive and kinesthetic dimensions of reading when our eyes must follow the lines of text across a page or down a page; there are visual dimensions of different fonts and line-spacing; and an imaginative poet or printer can play with these dimensions in creating an aesthetic experience for the reader. Moreover, as there is no emotion without the body, the understanding of the emotions we read about and experience in reading literature could perhaps be better understood through more developed body consciousness.

*KL: It might be said that postmodernism, however varied its definitions and interpretations may be, is very often connected to the transcending of binary oppositions, of false dichotomies such as mind/body, subject/object, self/world, activity/passivity. You do not very often use the term “postmodern”. For example, it only appears*

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<sup>6</sup> Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel: *Aesthetics. Lectures on Fine Art*, trans. T.M. Knox. Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1975, vol. II: 626.

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<sup>7</sup> Richard Shusterman: „The Anomalous Nature of Literature”. *The British Journal of Aesthetics*, 18/4 (1978), 317–329.

*once in your book Body Consciousness. And, it seemed to me, even that one mention expresses your wish to keep your distance from the concept. Is that so?*

RS: In *Pragmatist Aesthetics*,<sup>8</sup> published at the beginning of the 1990s, I made significant use of the term “postmodern,” describing and analyzing hip hop as a postmodern art and cultural form but also describing contemporary ethics as taking an aestheticized postmodern turn. Like some other American theorists who had used the concept of postmodern (Richard Rorty, for example), I came to see that its use became so widespread, variable, contested, and confused that it was no longer very useful in communicating my ideas. Many earlier ways of thinking (Deweyan pragmatism but also ancient Chinese theories of complementarity) also powerfully opposed dichotomous thinking, so it was neither necessary nor useful to continue to invoke the very ambiguous and contested notion of postmodernism. In some serious intellectual circles in which I worked (for example that of Pierre Bourdieu), the trendy, relativist, superficial side of postmodernism was very much distrusted, and I did not want somaesthetics (already a vulnerably provocative idea) to be rejected by associating it with superficial trendiness and transgression – for example, of a simple transgressive reversal of the dualistic hierarchy of mind versus body.

*KL: You refute criticism of somaesthetics that argue that body consciousness practices completely withdraw one’s attention from the outside world and get one absorbed in their bodily feelings, thus generating melancholia and hypochondria. Might it be the case that somaesthetics can actually help us overcome those distressing experiences of not being able to stop thinking about our otherwise automatic bodily processes such as breathing or blinking – just to mention some less severe disorders?*

RS: Yes, one of my crucial points is that sensitive body

consciousness is always also a conscious of the world beyond your body. The soma is in constant and essential transactional engagement with the world. Strictly speaking, you cannot ever feel your body alone. If you close your eyes to ignore the world and try to feel only your body, you will (if you are at all sensitive) also feel the chair you are sitting on, the bed you are lying on, the floor you are standing or walking on, the water in which you are swimming, the air that impacts your skin and that enters your respiratory system. One’s will power of mind and attention is ultimately a somatic affair so you are right that we can develop our powers of attention and mental control through disciplines involving somatic consciousness and training, and that such training can also help us prevent an excessive, uncontrollable, morbidly hypochondriac focus on our bodily feelings and health.

*KL: Judging by the title of the conference in Szeged, “The Soma as the Core of Aesthetics, Ethics and Politics”, it aims to put more emphasis on somaesthetics’ link to our socio-political environment. You contend that the practice of somaesthetics is not merely a selfish act of the isolated individual, and you regard engagement in somatic cultivation as a means of self-liberation from bodily habits imposed on us by hierarchies of power. Could you explain more how we should conceive of somaesthetics’ ethical dimension?*

RS: I could begin my response by continuing the line of thinking from my previous answer. Because the soma is always in transactional engagement with its environment, our achieving a higher level of somaesthetic awareness makes us more sensitive and appreciative of our environment, an environment that is social as well as material or natural. Somaesthetics thus should lead to an improved environmental consciousness that promotes better environmental and social ethics.

<sup>8</sup> Richard Shusterman: *Pragmatist Aesthetics: Living Beauty, Rethinking Art*. Blackwell, Oxford, 1992.

We perceive and understand other people through our own somatic perception of their somatic appearance and behavior. We do not need to know the language of a person to understand from his somatic behavior – his facial, gestural, and postural expression – that that person is in pain or distress. We can understand and empathize with people through our somaesthetic powers of perception and feeling. Similarly, without the bodily strength or ability to perform certain actions (such as swimming to rescue a drowning child), we cannot perform ethically virtuous acts of caring for others. Moreover, because somaesthetic training can develop will power and greater resources of physical strength and endurance, it can give people the energy, discipline, and confidence to engage more effectively in ethical and political action in order to combat injustice and oppression that are typically imposed on and felt through the body.

Let me conclude this interview with another example of the ethical and political potential of somaesthetics that has obvious relevance in a Europe increasingly pervaded by foreign bodies, many of which are fleeing severe dangers and bringing with them a real sense of those dangers; dangers that threaten to disrupt the established harmonies of the diverse European communities to which these foreign bodies come. How to avoid punishing them further through racial and ethnic prejudice?

As I explain in detail in *Body Consciousness*, our racial and ethnic prejudices are often the unconscious products of unpleasant but largely unnoticed somatic feelings produced by our encounters with others whose bodily appearance (in sight, hearing, or smell) is somehow disturbingly different. We often don't even realize or admit to having those somatically generated prejudices because they work viscerally beneath the level of consciousness. We cannot control them or transform them without first recognizing them in ourselves, and we cannot do that without a better somaesthetic awareness.

I should close this interview, however, by recalling an important point that I've often made but is too often forgotten. My advocacy of somaesthetics is not an assertion that the somaesthetic approach in itself can provide a solution to our ethical, social, and political problems or even to the problems of aesthetics. Life and art very complex affairs that require a very large toolbox with many tools, methods, or orientations. Somaesthetics, in my opinion, provides some very useful and much neglected tools but it needs to be complemented by other forms of inquiry and action.