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EMBODIED CREATION AND PERCEPTION IN VISUAL ART

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On a map of the highways and byways of philosophers and aestheticians, Richard Shusterman’s thought occupies a unique position, as not only is it situated at the crossroads of various, often opposed, traditions (while he is doubtless a representative of pragmatism, his brand of it incorporates various themes and methods from both continental and analytic thought), but it also reaches beyond the confines of academic philosophy. It can be characterized, after Wojciech Malecki, as a form of “embodying pragmatism,” in at least two senses of that phrase. First of all, Shusterman is convinced, after John Dewey, that philosophy must focus on giving practical solutions to practical problems (social, political, ethical, etc.), and he does his best to meet this aim. Secondly, he emphasizes, to a much greater degree than other contemporary pragmatists, the importance of corporeality for all aspects of human existence, including the very activity of philosophizing. Both these senses dovetail in a new interdisciplinary field of studies which Shusterman christened “somaesthetics,” and which is devoted to “the critical study and cultivation of how the living body (or soma) is used as the site of sensory appreciation (aesthesis) and creative self-stylization.”

Before we show how a somaesthetic perspective can be useful in approaching various concrete examples of visual art, we need to stress that somaesthetics constitutes an extension of Shusterman’s general project of reviving John Dewey’s philosophy of art, an enterprise whose origins should be traced to the late 1980s. What Shusterman takes from Dewey is the latter’s conception of art as aesthetic experience, a conception which deems an artwork “a transactional nexus of interacting energies connecting” the art object and the viewer. Importantly, while Shusterman agrees with Dewey on many features of that kind of experience (that the viewer’s role in it is never passive, and that it is an interplay between tradition and innovation, etc.), he abandons the teachings of his mentor in some crucial aspects. For instance, as he states in his comment on the renowned intellectual historian Martin Jay’s essay devoted to the interrelations between somaesthetics and body art, “rather than being limited to experiences of organic unity and wholesome consummation that Dewey urged, somaesthetics can also illuminate artistic expressions of rupture, abjection and disgust, which form a significant part of contemporary visual art.” Shusterman thus draws into his aesthetics a whole
range of important artistic forms of expression which have a very significant place in the art of our time, yet would have to be denied the status of genuine art altogether by Dewey’s theory.

It needs to be stressed once again that such critical remarks about Dewey’s aesthetics on Shusterman’s part are merely corrections of a theory he generally endorses, and which, let us add, he favourably contrasts with the tradition of analytic aesthetics, blaming the latter for being too intellectualist in its “emphasizing art as a symbol system or an object of mere cognitive interpretation, rather than an object of deeply felt experience.” Obviously, he is well aware of the fact that much of contemporary art has openly refused to grant its audience such an experience, but instead of thinking that this refusal justifies the cognitive focus of analytic aesthetics to any extent, he points out that the experiential poverty of today’s art has resulted in its “losing its appeal,” and argues, moreover, that it is also for this reason that stressing “the power and value of aesthetic experience” should be a duty of aestheticians.

In what follows we will analyze a series of artworks which do have a “powerful appeal” and which have provided deeply-felt experiences to many people who do not come into contact with art frequently, and even to those who once turned their backs on it because it had failed to satisfy their experiential needs. But these artworks also visualise major elements of Richard Shusterman’s somaesthetics, in much the same way as these aesthetics can clarify important aspects in the artworks and place them in a new and promising context. These analyses also demonstrate that art can promote somatic consciousness and awareness or meet limit-experiences.

The internationally renowned sculptor Louise Bourgeois (1911–2010) is a prime example of an artist who—as Shusterman expresses it—“thinks through the body.” In her works, the body—both her own and those of her sculptures—become, in a particularly unique way, a means of managing and communicating various affects. As she herself put it, “Since the fears of the past were connected with the functions of the body, they reappear through the body. For me, sculpture is the body. My body is my sculpture.”

Time after time she found that art could dissolve trauma and eliminate anxiety, and that it could function as a liberating force. She expressed this view as follows: “My sculpture allows me to re-experience the fear, to give it physicality, so I am able to hack away at it. Fear becomes a manageable reality.”

A good example of the visualization of this experience can be seen in Bourgeois’ large works in public spaces such as Maman (1999) or the very sensuous sculpture titled Nature Study (1984) (Fig. 1). The former is a nine-meter tall spider, modelled in bronze, which, with its large body, legs, and a sack of eggs, is supposed to communicate to the audience the feeling of being embraced by a protective mother animal.
Fig. 1 Louise Bourgeois, *Maman*, 1999. Bronze, stainless steel and marble, 500 × 333 cm. Kongens Nytorv (King’s Square), Copenhagen, Denmark. Photo: Per Bak Jensen

Fig. 2 Antony Gormley, *Horizon Field Hamburg*, 2012. Steel 355, steel spiral strand cables, stainless steel mesh (safety net) wood floor, screw & PU resin for top surface coating;
The Spider is an ode to my mother. She was my best friend. Like a spider, my mother was a weaver. My family was in the business of tapestry restoration, and my mother was in charge of the workshop. Like spiders, my mother was very clever. Spiders are friendly presences that eat mosquitoes. We know that mosquitoes spread diseases and are therefore unwanted. So, spiders are helpful and protective, just like my mother.9

Nature Study,10 through its six breasts, the dog-like pose and the claws, likewise reveals her preoccupation with motherhood, her anxiety about the welfare of her family, and a desire to defend it at all costs. As she explains: “It is not an image I am seeking. It is not an idea. It is an emotion you want to recreate, an emotion of wanting, of giving, and of destroying.”11 In both artworks the viewer is drawn into the magical sphere of Bourgeois’ art. Her works also demonstrate that the soma—both our actual bodies and the bodies represented in the visual arts—are always shaped by the environments in which they are nested, including the social and biological contexts where females of different species function as mothers.

Antony Gormley interprets his art as “an attempt to materialise the place at the other side of appearance where we all live,”12 and describes his installations in urban and rural environments with terms such as “displacement,” “other places” or “energy fields.” All three of these keywords describe equally well the impressive installation Horizon Field Hamburg (2012) (Fig. 2) which was exhibited in the Deichtorhallen (an enormous contemporary art and photography centre) in Hamburg in 2012, and had been created specifically for one of its great halls with a large window providing spectacular views of the city. Dirk Luckow describes the installation as consisting of

a large, black, reflective, synthetic surface measuring 1200 square meters and which, suspended from a steel structure, horizontally spans almost the entire reach of the Deichtorhallen’s northern hall at a height of 7.4 metres. Rather like a large, lightly oscillating airborne raft, this object, weighing 70 tons, floats in space and can accommodate up to 100 visitors at a time.13

One might interpret Horizon Field Hamburg as aiming at what is also the primary goal of somaesthetics—to contribute to the art of living by enhancing our bodily awareness. In this installation, aesthetic experience involves the whole body and uses it as a living soma in new and startling ways. There is no doubt that “the experience of ascending onto the platform, of experiencing our visual, acoustic and physical impact on it—both
individually and as a group—heightens our awareness ... and reassesses our position in the world. In addition to that, new communities are established among the many people who find themselves on the platform. They dance, talk, enjoy themselves, rest, and are constantly placed in new and surprising situations which can abolish the boundaries between young and old and break down the differences in culture and working life.

Spontaneous joy flows through the crowd, moving freely and at times boldly on the platform, which itself resembles a “a piazza hanging in the sky;” a “dark pool” or a “deep lake frozen overnight.” Yet participants experience fear, anxiety, and thrills as well. For Gormley “plays on people’s fear of the limitless, the infinite, the unbound void: the oscillation of the platform feels as though the earth beneath one’s feet is being pulled away—the steadiness of one’s own body disappears.” The many mirror effects induce in the audience an undefined sense of space, and the mirror image that the ceiling creates on the black reflective surface provides the participants with a thrill, because they feel as if they were stepping into the abyss instead of simply walking on a black mirror. It seems like the “vaulted ceiling space extends beneath our own bodies into sheer infinity,” something which engenders “a floating sensation.”

The experience of most participants on the “dark pool” can be characterised as a contemporary interpretation of Edmund Burke’s portrayal of the “sublime” as a “sentiment or a passion.” He points out that everything the imagination cannot sum up in a single impression—the darkness of night, the wide open space and “infinity”—arouses a sensation of “the sublime.” The very fact that these attempts to synthesize fail abysmally evokes “horror” and “terror.” But this “terror” is mingled with a sensation of “delight” because “the terror-causing threat becomes suspended” and because it reveals new experience and ways of looking at and experiencing things. Lyotard rightly claims that “for Burke the sublime was not a matter of elevation ... but of intensification.”

Intensity is an important keyword in Shusterman’s conception of art in connection with the description of the “limit-experience” which the majority of people experience on the swaying, reactive platform. He characterizes this “intense limit experience” as follows:

The value of these limit-experiences lies not simply in their experiential intensity that seems related to the intense sublimities of aesthetic experience, but in their power to transform us by showing us the limits of our conventional experience and subjectivity and by introducing us to something fascinatingly powerful beyond those limits, an “au delà” of what we are and know.

It is perhaps worth mentioning in this context that Gormley has described the goal of his art as follows: “The best art for me always makes you turn your back on the work and face existence with the ability to see what you didn’t before.” In Horizon Field Hamburg he has fully realised this goal.
The Danish/Norwegian artist Marit Benthe Norheim (b. 1960) is known first and foremost for the many unique sculptures and installations—often on a large scale—which she has created in Norway, Denmark, England, Sweden, Iceland and Greenland. These works reveal new perspectives and communicate new patterns of meaning in the public space. They thus confer a new identity on the locations in which they are situated. Through her works she creates a closer and more personal contact with the audience and local population groups. Like Shusterman, she is interested in how the power of art “can serve individual, social and political reconstruction” and support “the pursuit of perfectionist self-cultivation in the art of living.” In her site-specific projects—in industrial plants, schools and other institutions—she has attempted to improve both the environment and the living quality of the people who live there. She has stimulated their imagination, and added a poetic aspect to a one-dimensional and often cold technological world. Her work seems to be driven not by the impulse to mirror things, but rather by what Shusterman calls “a meliorist goal of making things better … opening thought and life to new and promising options.”

Almost all of Marit Benthe Norheim’s sculptures are modelled directly in cement and depict women. They exude a formal simplicity, a peculiar sensibility, and an intense expressive force. Through her female figures she visualizes her conception of the body, which is similar to that underlying somaesthetics, in that she “treats the body not only as an object of aesthetic value and creation, but also as a crucial sensory medium for enhancing our dealings with all other aesthetic objects and also with matters not standardly aesthetic.” Another important element that her artistic outlook shares with Shusterman’s pragmatist aesthetics is a critical approach toward what Shusterman calls “the hold of object fetishism in contemporary art, aesthetics and culture.” He calls this characteristic the “exaggerated sense of art’s demarcation from the rest of life and its autonomy from wider social and political forces that in fact penetrate even into the very forms of artistic expression.”

In order to intensify the dialogue between art, its surroundings, and people, Marit Benthe Norheim has created moveable sculptures with integrated music which constantly create novel, surprising experiences and are therefore capable of splintering the network of conventions that envelop our encounters with artworks in museums and galleries. These works are examples of vibrantly embodied art. One of the latest and most promising examples of her realization of this ideal is a rolling sculptural installation entitled Five Camping Women (2008) which consists of five large female sculptures which are built on top of five working caravans (Fig. 3). Their interiors are filled partly with sculptures, partly with photographs, and partly with porcelain mosaics.

She introduces us to five sensuous and forceful Camping Women: *The Refugee, Maria Protector/Virgin Mary, The Bride, The Siren* and the *Campingmama*. In the interiors of each of the caravans, one can hear music composed or adapted by the renowned Norwegian composer Geir Johnson which, in a richly expressive manner, highlights the themes that each of the Camping Women symbolizes. For example, the Camping Woman named *Maria Protector* is a symbol of contemporary humanity’s need for care. Geir Johnson has interpreted the tension between the human and the divine aspect in Maria the Protector in his personal adaptation of Gregori Allegri’s work of the 1630’s, *Miserere mei, Deus*. In the interiors of the Camping Women there are also sculptures, e.g. of the dead Jesus, who expresses what the artist perceives as God’s love for humanity.

The Camping Women directly engage the senses and imagination of the audience. They incorporate the viewer in a very active way as she can enter the caravans, sit or lie in their interiors, meditate, listen to music, and discuss or study the photos, sculptures or other works that are inside. In fact, the viewer of these sculptures ceases to be merely a viewer, as her other senses are engaged too. Through their allowing haptic contact, Norheim’s works also challenge one of the most fundamental prohibitions of the museum world—“don’t touch”; not to mention that unlike most sculptures exhibited in such spaces, which can only be appreciated from outside, they invite the audience inside. The many surprising connecting threads which the Camping Women create between visual art, music, the adults’ and children’s worlds are extended in many new and unexpected ways. The Camping Women travel from location to location in search for dialogue with the various people they meet.

In the international art world, the Danish artist Jeppe Hein (born 1974) is mostly famous for his production of experiential art and interactive artworks which are located at the point where art, architecture, and electronic technologies intersect. Notable for their formal simplicity and frequent use of humour, his urban installations often feature surprising and captivating elements which place spectators at the centre of the event. Jeppe Hein focuses on the corporeal experience of the world, trying to uncover new perspectives of how urban installations can communicate with the body. He is also preoccupied with investigating how the installations’ focus on corporeal experience contributes to transforming his audience’s sensual perception of city space. The way his urban installations intervene in the social space—that is, engage the people who walk around them—is meant to inspire new communities and contacts. Jeppe Hein regards his urban installations as “a tool to bring people in a city together, to establish new kinds of social spaces, which create new connections between people and the city.”

In order to realize that goal, in 2005 and the following year, he created what he called *Modified Social Benches*. Ten of them were set up in Aarhus in 2009. All the benches depart in a clear, and often humorous, way from the
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usual concept of a bench: some of them are bent and pulled out of shape; others are too tall or too short. They thus challenge our somatic habits involved in sitting and encourage us to rethink the nature of that bodily activity, something which constitutes an instance of somatic self-reflection advocated by Shusterman’s somaesthetics.

To illustrate this point, let us take one of the *Modified Social Benches*, which is situated in an area of Aarhus where many socially excluded people circulate and where there had never previously been a bench. It is a social bench. The seat curves downwards, as if it were soft and if you sat on it you would slide towards the other person sitting on the bench and a contact would take place (fig. 4). The same goes for the bench that has a lopsided seat which is impossible to sit on, but upon which one can both slide and skate. The encounter with the benches awakens the audience’s ingenuity: sometimes this results in their trying out kinds of bodily movements and comportments that they would normally not exhibit in a public sphere, and it can also lead—occasionally to the accompaniment of liberating laughter—to meeting new acquaintances from different social spheres.

As we have seen, Louise Bourgeois’s, Antony Gormley’s, Marit Benthe Norheim’s and Jeppe Hein’s works visualize some basic points of Shusterman’s somaesthetics, particularly as regards embodied creation and perception, the interactive dialogue with the viewer and the surroundings, and the unification of art and experience, as well as the hope of being able to inspire and benefit life. Our analyses could then be seen as suggesting that somaesthetics can provide artists with a new and stimulating understanding of the body’s role in the arts as a resource for working on the problems of creating and interpreting art and improving the quality of our life and the society as such. It is precisely these essential elements in Shusterman’s conception of art that we hope will be able to provide a great deal of inspiration for the artists of our time.

**NOTES**

1. In his book *Embodying Pragmatism. Richard Shusterman’s Philosophy and Literary Theory* (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 2010), Wojciech Malecki has with both great precision and knowledge, and well-argued criticism, described these dialogues or “maps.” And in this connection he has, in a lucid, independent, and clearly profiled manner, revealed and analyzed Richard Shusterman’s original contribution.


9. Quoted in *Wikipedia.org/wiki/Louise_Bourgeois*.
11. See [http://www.fantasyarts.net/bournature.html](http://www.fantasyarts.net/bournature.html)
16. Luckow, “Unbounded Space,” p. 44.