

Bodies of Culture: Somaesthetic Explorations

Conference Abstracts

Randall Auxier, Southern Illinois University

The Cultural Creation of the Collective Soma.

This paper argues that the idea of soma, while most powerful when associated with living individuals (not only humans), is susceptible to generalization in ways that do not decrease its concreteness. And equally (perhaps more) concrete soma can be formed by certain highly organized types of cultural activity, corresponding to Cassirer's specific symbolic forms of culture -- history, science, religion, art, economics, law, politics, education, the military, etc. (These are specified from the general symbolic forms of culture, myth, language and objectivating knowledge.) The blending of somaesthetics with Cassirer's broad philosophy of culture is aimed at gaining a broader version of the soma than the origins in aesthetics (broadly construed as the metaphysics of feeling) explicitly includes. As such, it is an elucidation and elaboration of projects and possibilities implicit in the idea of the soma as the energistic, self-organizing process that concretizes in cultural forms.

T. J. Bonnet, Florida State College Jacksonville.

The Soma and the Spatialization of Poetic Feeling

In the Western philosophical tradition, poetry is typically treated as a *text* to be analyzed. Even in the Romantic tradition, poetry is considered an expressive *product* of imagination. The common blindness is to the fact that the soma is necessary to the creation and interpretation of poetry. Indeed, the soma houses the energies and feelings that, when shaped, become the expressive objects we call poetry. In this paper, I argue that this blindness can be sourced in Emerson; and as a result, Emerson sets a pervasive standard for thinking about poetry that underplays the role of the soma. In contrast, I use texts in the Chinese tradition—namely "The Great Preface" 大序 and the *Wenxindiaolong* 文心雕龙—that depict the soma as the medium for the spatialization of poetry. To offset Emerson, I use Emily Dickinson to gesture to an alternative strand in American poetics.

Matt Browning, Clemson University

Bodies, Nature, and the Culture of Exposure

Most people in wealthy countries now spend the better part of their lives indoors, away from natural environments. Over the past forty years a research field has grown to over 10,000 studies asking what that lifestyle, so antithetical to our evolutionary history, now costs us, and advising policy makers and urban designers on how much nature we need for human flourishing.

Yet this research field organizes nearly all of its evidence around a single concept, exposure, a word we borrowed from toxicology, where a person's lungs, skin, or digestive tract are exposed to toxins or pollutants. This choice has made contact with nature countable, legible and useful to health policy. It has also brought a body: a passive vessel that an environment acts upon, with no initiative of its own, agnostic to our cultures and personal experiences. This choice was not based on any research finding or theory. Rather, it was an assumption we inherited with the word exposure. We have never argued for it, nor have we had to defend it. In this conference's terms, the nature and health field has built a body that only receives, and a body that only receives is not a soma.

I draw on three bodies of work from the Virtual Reality and Nature Lab I co-direct at Clemson to frame this problem. First, in several systematic reviews, colleagues and I have asked at what distance from home nature best predicts health. The answer, roughly 300 meters (a few minutes' walk), is exposure thinking at its most literal: a circle drawn around a house. Second, our lab's 10 years of virtual reality experiments are largely experiments in subtraction, stripping the soma of proprioception, thermal transaction, the perception of place and of culture, keeping only sight and sound, and measuring what survives. Third, new work brings birds and birdsong to people in hospital rooms and hospice care, where birds are a stimulus in one sense and an audible interjection of other bodies into built and sterile settings in another.

Clifton Granby, Yale Divinity School

James Baldwin on the Art of Living: Toward a Black Somatic Perfectionism

The ethical and social formation of children, especially black children, lies at the heart of James Baldwin's moral and literary imagination. The well-being of their bodies often anchors his analysis. I examine Baldwin's reflections on two formative influences in his life:

his stepfather, David Baldwin; and his artistic mentor, Beauford Delaney. The art of living well is indistinguishable from the task of developing moral and spiritual maturity. For Baldwin, such an effort significantly depends on the quality of the impassioned forms of self-regard, creativity, resilience, and adaptability that live within our bodies. Given the material and ideological terms of racial domination, various forms of self-contempt, conformity, bitterness, and fatalism must also be resisted. Black somatic perfectionism offers a way to negotiate the possibility of ethical flourishing amid the dreadful realities of racially corrupt institutional designs and practices. It does so by attending to the social, ethical, and cultural formation of vulnerable bodies.

Nóra Horváth, Széchenyi István University, Hungary

The “Forbidden” Aristocratic Woman and “Forbidden” Haute-Bourgeois Elegance in the History of Painting in Socialist Hungary from the 1950s

In socialist Hungary, from the 1950s onward, painters and artistic movements depicting the aristocratic ideal of womanhood or haute-bourgeois elegance faced total ideological, economic, and institutional marginalization. The emerging communist dictatorship labeled these themes as class-alien, decadent, and reactionary, as they stood in sharp contrast to the new female ideal dictated by socialist realism: the female tractor driver, the factory worker, and the militant party member. Women had to be portrayed as muscular, simple workers or peasant women performing heavy manual labor, often wearing headscarves. The canvases of painters could not feature bodies or figures who clearly did not engage in hard physical work, but instead lived their lives in elegant settings or indulged in expensive pastimes. Not only certain painters, but specific themes, postures, and types were blacklisted.

In 1950s Hungary, the system of the "Three Ts" (tolerated, forbidden, supported art) was introduced, resulting in every artist being classified into one of these three categories. Those who were banned had no chance of presenting their art to the public. The depiction of the aristocratic woman was interpreted as an attempt to restore the past. Socialist cultural policy unequivocally placed bourgeois and aristocratic aesthetics into the forbidden category. Loyal party critics (such as N. Aradi) publicly condemned "formalist," "bourgeois," and "decadent" painting, which ruined artists both morally and professionally. The state did not buy paintings depicting refined, high-society ladies, salon interiors, or bourgeois idylls. Oppressed artists were legally and physically denied access to quality canvas, paint, or studios. Previously created works of this theme were relegated to the depths of museum storage rooms. Artists creating or teaching in this style (such as

representatives of the portrait painting trends popular before socialist era) were removed from the Hungarian Academy of Fine Arts.

In my presentation, I will examine, how socialist cultural policy sought to erase certain lifestyles, postures, somatic styles, and forms of entertainment—and thereby their artistic representations—in Hungary. I will also introduce those artists whose lifework did not disappear despite these hardships, and who are featured in major international comparative studies today. It is crucial to reflect on how oppressive power structures can antagonize certain types of women and shape a culture in which even a body, silhouette, and style previously considered desirable and beautiful can become an object of hatred among the public.

Eva Kit Wah Man, School of Arts and Social Sciences, Hong Kong

Ultimate Whiteness: The Aesthetics of the White Female Face in China

Cosmetic and beauty discourses in China overwhelmingly promote white skin, with the notion of “ultimate whiteness” prominently featured in global cosmetic advertisements and urban street campaigns. The pursuit of pale skin, shared by many contemporary Asian women, invites comparative analysis between Eastern and Western ideals of beauty. Global cosmetic brands and the international beauty market not only reflect but actively shape cultural constructions of femininity and aesthetic standards in local contexts.

In China, the valorization of pale skin intersects with issues of gender, race, and class, rooted in ancient discourses that have long assigned social value to bodily color. This study examines the philosophical, cultural, and critical dimensions of whiteness in Chinese beauty ideals. It begins with an exploration of patriarchal treatises on white skin, biological implications, and anthropological perspectives on gender and class. It then traces how universalized ideals of pale skin have interacted with China’s social history and political ideologies—from feudal patriarchy through socialist movements to economic reform and global integration since the 1980s.

By reviewing early texts that extol skin whiteness and analyzing their transformation into contemporary feminine ideals through cosmetics marketing and fashion media, this discussion highlights how the promotion of whiteness resonates with national identity. Ultimately, the study argues that the aesthetics of white skin in China not only perpetuate globalized beauty norms but also echo China’s aspirations to assert its cultural pride and position on the world stage.

Barbara Mutzbauer, Lucerne University of Applied Sciences and Arts (HSLU) & Zurich University of the Arts (ZHdK)

Spatial Sound: From Sacred Space to Somatic Space

What happens to the contemplative potential of a sacred space when the religious culture that produced and sustained it begins to recede? As Christian monasteries and chapels in Europe lose their original communities or open themselves to increasingly diverse and nonreligious publics, their transformation raises a question that extends beyond preservation and adaptive reuse: Can qualities of contemplation, withdrawal, and spiritual attention remain experientially accessible without requiring Christian belief?

This paper approaches that question through spatial sound and somaesthetic theory. It emerges from Ecologies of Sacral Places, an interdisciplinary practice-based research project concerned with the transformation of monastic environments in Central Switzerland. Within this project, I investigate how site-specific octophonic sound installations might activate the atmospheric and contemplative potential of formerly or partially Christian spaces without reconstructing liturgical practice or replacing it with another prescribed spiritual narrative.

Richard Shusterman's somaesthetics provides a central theoretical framework for this inquiry. His conception of the soma as a living, sentient body that perceives both the world and itself suggests another way of approaching sacred space: not primarily through symbolic interpretation, but through cultivated bodily attention. Listening, stillness, orientation, breathing, and spatial awareness can become modes through which a contemplative relation to an environment is produced.

Octophonic sound makes this relationship particularly tangible. Distributed around the listener, sound creates an acoustic field in which the body is no longer positioned in front of an aesthetic object but situated within a spatial whole. Movement, proximity, direction, resonance, and stillness become bodily perceptible. I use the term somatic space to describe this shift: a space constituted not only architecturally or semantically, but through the reciprocal relation between bodily perception and environment.

Drawing on artistic practice and an emerging site-specific octophonic experiment in a monastic chapel, the paper explores spatial sound as both an artistic medium and a method of somaesthetic inquiry. Rather than asking how sacredness might be preserved after religious practice recedes, I ask whether contemplative experience can be

reconfigured through embodied attention. The transition from sacred space to somatic space thus describes not the disappearance of the spiritual, but a possible transformation in how it is sensed, practiced, and culturally shared.

Sanjeewani Rupasinghe, University of Kelaniya

Embodied Marginality: A Somaesthetic Exploration of Plantation Women's Labour, Suffering, and Resistance in Sri Lanka

The bodies of plantation women in Sri Lanka carry the material and historical consequences of displacement, ethnic marginalisation, caste, gender, poverty, and labour exploitation. Originating largely from communities of Indian plantation labourers who experienced marginalisation in colonial India, plantation-origin women encountered new forms of exclusion following their incorporation into the Sri Lankan plantation economy. Yet marginality is not experienced only as a social or political condition; it is lived through the body. This paper explores the plantation woman's body as a site where power, labour, environment, violence, and survival intersect.

Drawing primarily on Richard Shusterman's concept of somaesthetics and informed by Maurice Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology of the lived body, Kimberlé Crenshaw's intersectionality, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's theorisation of subalternity, and Pierre Bourdieu's analysis of embodied power, the paper examines how structural inequalities become materially and phenomenologically embodied. Based on qualitative research with plantation women in Sri Lanka, including interviews and ethnographic observations, the paper examines experiences of physically demanding tea-plucking labour, exposure to sunlight, rain, leeches and insects, inadequate sanitation, occupational injuries and illness, nutritional deprivation, domestic and sexual violence, harassment, and the cumulative bodily consequences of precarious living and working conditions.

The paper argues that the plantation woman's body should not be understood merely as a biological object subjected to exploitation, but as a socially produced and sensing body through which intersecting forms of power are experienced, remembered, and negotiated. Caste, ethnicity, gender, class, colour, and environmental conditions shape the body while labour and survival further transform it. At the same time, the embodied subject is not reducible to victimhood. Everyday endurance, cultural practices, collective solidarity, and forms of resistance demonstrate the body's capacity for agency.

By bringing somaesthetics into conversation with intersectional and subaltern approaches, the paper proposes embodied marginality as a framework for understanding how structural inequalities become lived through the body while also generating embodied forms of knowledge, resilience, and resistance.

Reza Shirmarz, Southern Illinois University

The Migrant Soma: Diasporic Leakage and the Politics of Bodily Legibility

The body does not move across borders as a passive transmitter of culture. It arrives already formed by internalized gestures, conditioned rhythms, habituated sensory expectations, developed vocal habits, practiced postures, and cultivated modes of self-presentation. However, such embodied capabilities do not necessarily translate into stable meanings as they confront new cultural and institutional contexts. This paper elaborates Diasporic Leakage, a migration-specific extension of Somathorybics, which refers to the way that socially cultivated bodily capacities become distinctly perceivable, legible, credible, and recognizable as migrant somas migrate across unequal regimes of interpretation.

The framework diverts attention from adaptation (i.e. a task imposed solely on migrants) and toward the habitual modes of perception and institutional capacities of the settings that encounter them. Utilizing a somaesthetic lens to interpret scholarship on Iranian-American life, the paper considers Tehrangeles as somatic infrastructure, a diffused but materially situated assemblage of music, performance, Persian-language institutions, media, domesticity, commerce, and public representation. What this infrastructure actually does is not simply preserving identity or memory, but making specific embodied capacities repeatable, and therefore, socially usable.

However, Tehrangeles fails to anchor a lasting bodily fit. Its mechanisms of recognition remain partial, unequal and reversible. These process of recognition continues to be constantly reshaped by gendered authority, racialization, language shift, commercial selection, class, and territorial power. This paper, thus, conceptualizes diaspora as unfinished bodily translation, not a failed conversion process through which one whole cultural body is transformed into another but ongoing movement across contexts where the soma cannot be reduced to any single meaning.

The core argument of this piece is not that it matters how migrant bodies adjust but rather whether institutions and host publics are able to absorb unfamiliar bodily difference without translating it into inadequacy, threat, or noise.

Mark Tschaepe, Prairie View A&M University

The Macaroni Body: Adornment, Ridicule, and the Somaesthetics of English Moral Culture

In this essay, I examine the eighteenth-century macaroni as a culturally produced soma shaped, displayed, and condemned through dress, gesture, posture, grooming, movement, and social performance. In 1770s English satire, the macaroni was not merely a fashionable man with extravagant clothing and hair. They were represented as a bodily problem, a figure whose adorned appearance seemed to reveal deeper failures of character, masculinity, national belonging, and moral self-command.

Drawing on *The Macaroni* and *Theatrical Magazine* and related satirical prints, this essay argues that macaroni satire offers a powerful case for somaesthetic analysis because it shows how a culture reads the body as ethical evidence. The macaroni's body was made excessive through artifice: towering hair, elaborate dress, scented accessories, affected manners, exposed stockings, delicate posture, and theatrical movement. These features were treated as signs of foreign refinement, libertine appetite, effeminacy, idleness, and failed English virtue. The magazine's profiles present macaronis as *exempla in malo*, negative examples through which readers learn to identify immoral forms of embodiment. In this satirical archive, bodily style becomes a moral language.

A somaesthetic reading of the macaroni reveals how cultural norms shape the meanings attached to bodily experience. The macaroni's adorned soma unsettled ideals of moderation, masculine utility, national character, and naturalness. By tracing the ridicule directed at this figure, the essay shows how eighteenth-century English culture used discomfort with appearance to police the boundaries of acceptable embodiment. At the same time, the macaroni exposes the instability of those boundaries, revealing how the body is always already culturally fashioned.

Maciej Zdanowicz, Jan Kochanowski University of Kielce

When Is Art Therapy Somaesthetic? A Methodological Framework for Working with the Culturally Shaped Soma

Although somaesthetics has substantially changed philosophical approaches to embodiment, its implications for art therapy have yet to be systematically examined. The central question of this paper is therefore not whether the body is present in an art-therapeutic process, but under what conditions such a process can be called somaesthetic. Drawing on Richard Shusterman's distinction between analytic, pragmatic, and practical somaesthetics, I outline a definition and methodological framework for somaesthetic art therapy.

The proposed model understands the soma as a living, sentient, active, and culturally shaped person. Its specificity is not determined by a particular artistic medium or by the use of several modalities. It lies in the relationship between sensation, habit, gesture, material, form, perception, reflection, and subsequent action. Pressure, rhythm, repetition, resistance, scale, composition, and interruption are approached not as formal effects or illustrations of pre-existing psychological content, but as means of investigating and transforming embodied experience.

The framework relates the experiential, representational, and performative dimensions of the soma to three stages of practice: analytic recognition, pragmatic choice, and practical experimentation. This makes it possible to distinguish somaesthetic art therapy from somatic art therapy, dance and movement therapy, drama-based practices, and the Expressive Therapies Continuum, while also identifying areas of overlap. Melioration is understood here not as normalization, compulsory self-regulation, or adjustment to an ideal of bodily efficiency, but as an expansion of somatic awareness, agency, perceptual flexibility, and the capacity to act.

The discussion is grounded in *Body in Tension*, a pilot protocol developed for art-therapeutic work with people affected by trauma and PTSD in frontline regions of Ukraine, and supplemented by a somaesthetic training workshop conducted in Mongolia. The practices include drawing performed through bodily movement and voice, automatic drawing, repetitive gesture, and drawing used as a score for further embodied action. These examples clarify the model rather than demonstrate clinical effectiveness. The paper concludes by proposing minimum criteria for somaesthetic art therapy and outlining its ethical limits and future research needs.