

Richard Shusterman

Interview with Prof. Shusterman

Richard Shusterman was interviewed by Eva Maria Stadler und Thomas Trummer at the Wittgenstein symposium in Kirchberg/Wechsel, Austria, in August 1995.

1. *What is your definition of the "subject"?*

I don't like talking about "the subject" because it's a very overtheoretized word that has too many strange associations. But I don't mind talking about the self which is an ordinary counterpart of the subject and I prefer to talk in ordinary language because I am an ordinary language philosopher and most of our problems are in the ordinary language and concepts and experience that we have. One of my purposes as a philosopher and particularly in aesthetics is to try to reclaim and redeem but also improve the quality of ordinary life, ordinary experience and the ordinary popular expression of our lives.

2. *How important is the making for the constitution of this self?*

The self I can only define in terms of the environment in which the self is. I don't think of the self as something totally autonomous. Even physically we can't clearly define the self separate from its environment. As long as the self lives, drinks, breaths and eats, it will always be part of the environment that it's in. Even when we breathe we're taking in air and exhaling air, so we can't define even the physical body apart from its environment. I also have a sense of the self that's not something fixed and given. The self involves interaction and growth in and through the environment, and therefore one of the means of developing the self is not by shrinking into a narrow concentration on who we think we are but rather to enrich the self by seeing how the self functions in the environment and trying to improve the environment that the self is in, and thereby also improving the self. This has political consequences and ethical consequences because part of the environment is the social environment in which you're in. It also has ecological consequences because part of the environment is not merely an environment of other people but an environment of nature, and we can have much richer and more attractive selves if we can live in a much more attractive and enriching environment. People who live a life of incredible poverty, mechanical living, over-run by brutal industry and brutal life conditions cannot make a beautiful self. We all have that experience: If we've been in traffic, in a traffic jam, if we spent all our life, driving a taxi in horrible conditions or working in a supermarket where we have a lot of pressure or in a factory. Those aren't conditions where it's very easy to develop our selves and make our selves in a nice way, in an attractive way. So I think one thing that we have to worry about in worrying about making the self is worrying about the environment in which the self is made. The self is basically a bundle of habits – habits and processes. And the making of the self comes already from natural reactions to the environment. We develop habits which then are developed further, and who we are is a combination of different habits, inclinations, desires that we've developed. When we talk about someone having a characteristic way of speaking – speech is also a habit – you get used to speaking in a certain way that becomes part of your self identity. You get used to walking in a certain way that becomes part of your identity. And so self making is something that can be understood on two levels: On one level it's something that we automatically do simply by reacting to our environment and struggling to survive – we develop our selves. One example might be the habit of running away from things that have given us a bad experience. So much of self making is a result of chance. The fact that you were born in a certain place, the fact that you had a bad teacher for mathematics in 3rd grade will make you have a habit of not liking mathematics and not consent the course for you in a particular direction. A lot of self making is simply making the best of contingencies, of chance and of accident. But the difference between us humans and artists and the self making that is also available in the animal and natural world is that we can consciously construct and re-construct our selves. On the lower level of self making also trees and plants make themselves. Their roots go towards where the water is; they move towards the sun – so the shape of a tree or a plant will be partly a reaction to its environment. Not every plant will be the same. It will develop itself; the same thing with animals: they will also react. You can tell if you handle a cat whether the cat comes from like a loving home or from the cruel streets because it has made its self in reaction to the experience that it has. This isn't simply instinctual because the actual instincts that we have are very very small in number. Animal and especially human behavior is that of developed habits. We have those habits and one reason why we often have personal problems with other people is that we've been made – selfmade in certain ways – and then we automatically without thinking live these habits out and then we are surprised that people don't understand us or don't like us or that always we have the same problem. They can be romantic problems: Why do these romances always go wrong? Well, because I always do the wrong thing and this is because I have these kind of habits. So the self in this way is automatically made through reactions that we have, that get re-inforced because habits are always re-inforced – that's what a habit is: you do it, you do it again – the more you do it, the harder it is to do it differently. But self making on the higher level is when you try to develop new habits or to critically correct the habits that you have. Here you're consciously creating yourself, you're trying to consciously control and shape your

reactions. You can develop also a habit to break habits. You can decide: My Life is too boring, I'm always doing the same thing, let me decide in the next few weeks to try to do things differently. Nietzsche once said that he likes short habits. Long habits are too boring and they bring you into a life of deadening stagnancy where you don't develop. Things that are too brief and ephemeral are not interesting because they don't have very much meaning because you don't have a chance to really experience that. What's good are short habits and that's the sense that it's long enough that you can develop it to actually try something but it's not something that has to stay with you throughout your life.

3. *What is specific about the artistic approach, then?*

The idea – for me – of artistic self making is to try to build on the lower level of habits and develop the higher level of self construction. You can't avoid the lower level because before we're thinking planning creatures we're already reacting creatures. It's good for us that we don't always think. If we had to think on every matter we couldn't survive. This is why we have habits. We have habits to allow us to do things without thinking and we've our thinking time for special problems. So the idea of self-made in this artistic level is to build on the lower level of self making and have a kind of more attractive, more interesting higher level of self- construction where you can reflectively and critically examine habits and self making of the lower level. To make the best of the habits that you have and try to develop better ones; make the best of the contingencies you have and try to fit them together into a more attractive form.

4. *Do you think the banal has to be taken seriously and how important is the banal for popular culture?*

The question of the banal is linked with the problem of self stylization. How can we talk about pop styles as self stylization? Doesn't the self just evaporate because you just become a stereotype? We have to talk about the dialectic of self expression and social recognition – *SOZIALE ANERKENNUNG* – that without a background of social community it would make no sense to have a self – we wouldn't have a self – and there would be no sense to express the self because no one would understand us. If we were so perfectly unique we wouldn't be able to be understood and we want to express our individuality in a way that can be meaningful to other people. Otherwise we couldn't even understand ourselves. We are here in Wittgenstein's land and you know one of Wittgenstein's important points was the impossibility of a *PRIVATSPRACHE*. We can only make sense to ourselves in a language, and this language we only learn through social interaction. So the idea of expressing your self in a way that's so unique that wouldn't be understandable to others is a contradiction. The other point I wanted to make is that I guess a lot of what we see as the banal and stereotypical and uncreative in popular life styles comes from not looking into the details. Sometimes it looks to us exactly the same what people wear, right? Take rap artists and rap fans. They all have this baseball cap, mostly worn backwards, they all maybe have gold chains, they all either have a certain brand of sneakers or now Timberland boots. But if you look into the details you can see that there can be fine shades of differential expression. Which kind of baseball cap do you wear? What angle do you wear it on? It can have a different meaning that particular angle that you have and among certain groups or gangs if you wear it in the wrong angle you can be recognized as an enemy. I had my own example: When I wanted to sort of play with the stereotype that all people associated with rap are macho and hard on women I wore a black baseball hat but what it had on it was an Agnes B. insignia, – i. e. a Parisian women's fashion logo with the name Agnes B. – clearly a woman's name and this is kind of like a joke on the idea that rap has to be macho. So a) there are different fine shades of meaning, and what seems to be more banality, b) you couldn't make sense of individuality without social commonality, and part of the banality is an expression of a desire for shared community – *GEMEINSCHAFT*. In art and in life the most powerful experiences are the experiences that we share together. You can, of course, have a beautiful experience alone – you can be alone watching a sunset – but you always then wish that you could share it with someone. Artists normally create for others not just for themselves, even if it's an imagined audience that isn't with them but only something imagined. So for me banality is what happens when the desire for community of appearance loses its power and becomes simply an empty form that is common. What people are looking for is meaningful connection, shared experience. Experience is usually more powerful and beautiful because it's shared. Art is one example of shared experience; love is a shared experience and these things again can be called banal but I don't think they are. I think the common things – this is important to me – aesthetically that there is a great deal of value in what is commonly beautiful and it's only a kind of late modernist. This is a product of modernity and the avantgarde that we think that things to be beautiful and artistic have to be completely unique and super-extraordinary. Montaigne thought that the most beautiful lives are lives that conform to the common pattern. You can try to be accentric and distinctive, you can torture your self, you can go around shooting people. This is more distinctive than growing up enjoying the ordinary beautiful things in life but it isn't necessarily better. The problem is that we've lost an appreciation of the common partly because – and this goes back to another theme – a lot of the common situations in life have been reduced to pure instrumentality and then we don't have the conditions to enjoy them. So much of the common becomes the banal because we treat them as mere unimportant things, then the work place becomes something we don't care about, how it is aesthetically. The shopping place becomes not a place that we think about how to make it more of an aesthetic experience and then the day to day

- ALLTÄGLICH - becomes simply a race of pressure and that can not be a common beautiful life because the conditions don't allow it. This is why I think to do aesthetics in the full way you have to think more than on the individual self; you have to think about the society. I am very lucky that I'm privileged to be able to have so much free time. But when I think about the social world that I live in, people are so stressed and unhappy that they make the environment unhappy. You can't have good living together when half the population is suffering from conditions where they can't think about making themselves in a nice way. So for me it's partly contradictory to think that I can make myself a nice self-made life in New York without thinking about the homeless people. That is being blind because those homeless people are part of my visual landscape. I see their suffering. If I don't think about doing something for them - either directly or indirectly - then the stability of the beauty of my self-made life is very fragile. They're always coming into my screen. I can't zapp them out of my picture. Therefore to be honest as a self-made hedonistic ÄSTHETIKER I must also have a social dimension in my thought, so a lot of my work in aesthetics has this social dimension. This is another reason why I take rap seriously as an art form that is concerned not only with having a great time dancing and singing but with a social PRAXIS that wants to make a better world.

5. *So, what are the consequences of your proposition for the art?*

Well, it depends on what you mean by the definition of art. Art can have no real meaning for the daily life when it's conceived in a way that it's shut away from the daily life and individuals. So for me it's very important to integrate art into life. Popular art is a way of doing that. Through popular art people can for me, also come to understand high art traditions. It was very important that my book didn't only discuss popular art (I don't only deal with popular arts in my life and I also go to the opera and not only to rock concerts) and so in my book it was important to have a poem by T.S. Elliot as well as rap. My idea is not to have a very strong division between past high art tradition and popular art. We can learn a lot from the past art but it's important to integrate the popular art into our consciousness as art because if we don't do that we will lose the old art because the younger people are educated through popular art. School is now something that forms the smallest part of our education. We're at school only a bit. Our parents have completely lost control. We are educated by the media, in all its different ways. And if we don't realize that popular media arts are now art, then art becomes shut out of the lives of most people. I consider mass-media to be art, and my goal is to make them better art forms because I'm not satisfied with the way they are. This is why my position is called melioristic. The media has to be made better but they can only be made better if they get enough respect to be taken seriously.

Diller + Scofidio

Property Lines

The home is a volatile terrain on which war is constantly being waged: between privacy and publicity, between male and female, between pleasure and pain, between the normal and the pathological, between order and daily chaos. Domestic space is primarily defined as a matter of property. In the acquisition of land, property lines on a paper deed inscribe precise legal codes onto undifferentiated soil. Within those property lines, space continues to be subdivided into micro-parcels according to codes of propriety, that is, social codes of conduct. The words "property" and "propriety" are etymologically linked.

The interdisciplinary practice of Diller + Scofidio looks closely at everyday spatial conventions ... assumptions so inbred that their logic has become obscured by their familiarity ... conventions within structures of power, gender and class.

Véronique Ellena

Some Notes on my Work

I use this project (the series "Supermarchés" and "Recettes de cuisine") to try and make people aware of the poetry which radiates from ordinary or if you like "normal" folk – both from their outward appearance and from the movements and gestures they perform day in, day out.

To bring this out clearly I organise my photographs with the utmost precision. I start by producing a series of sketches, which I then use as the basis for the staging of my shots. This "theatricalisation" enables me to arrange a "scene" so as to bring out the full significance of a gesture.

Using a large format camera (and therefore large format negatives) likewise contributes to this precision. Between me and my sitters there exists a special relationship: they are friends and members of my family. Arising out of this there is a profound mutual sense of trust, and an enormous willingness. This situation allows me to avoid caricature and to represent emotions as authentically as possible.

I select subjects for my work according to their potential for symbolism.

For me, for example, the supermarket is a symbol of today's consumer society. It is both attractive and repellent. It is dehumanised, but at the same time it is incapable of destroying the human element. On the contrary: humanity manages to preserve its dignity even in the supermarket, thanks to man's amazing adaptability and also to a certain naivety – and does so in spite of the unsatisfactory ambience, the dreary, artificial and glaring atmosphere.

The series "Recettes de cuisine" deal with the same subject-matter.

I took the idea for it from women's magazines. Everything in these magazines is artificial and unreal.

What I am trying to show here is how human beings are quite unlike these mask-like models which are being held up as patterns to be conformed to. I am also very interested in the symbolic messages connected with food-stuffs and meals, and the emotions that crystallise out as a result.

I don't want to pass value-judgements on the people of today; rather, I want to represent their life, so as to capture the durability of their sensations, their movements and their emotions.

I regard humour (but not irony) and poetry as essential aspects of these series.

Véronique ELLENA, August 1994