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Soma Holiday: An Interview with Richard Shusterman

SUE SPAID

Sue Spaid: Somatic stems from the Greek word for body (*soma*). Many recall “soma-holiday” from Aldous Huxley’s 1932 novel *Brave New World*. The engaged vantage point necessary for your concept of somaesthetics rather contests his doped-up escape.

Richard Shusterman: You’re not the first person to wonder about the “soma” in somaesthetics. Besides Huxley’s drug connection (and probably inspiring it) is the ancient Sanskrit *soma*, which was an important ritual drink in early Indian culture and frequently praised in Vedic literature for its energizing, intoxicating, divine powers. It was the drink of the gods. I, instead, use the word in its Greek etymological sense to designate the living sentient body rather than the body as mere flesh and bones—which could be inert and lifeless, the body as corpse. For the comprehensive project I envisaged in art, life, philosophy, and social criticism, I needed a different term than “body aesthetics,” since that conjunction of words in our culture seems entirely dominated by superficial notions of external form and consumerist/cosmetic ideals of supermodels, glamour queens, and bodybuilders. Part of the reason for somaesthetics is to highlight values of bodily experience, performance, and beauty that are very different and even opposed to those other dominant ideals. Moreover, I thought a less familiar word like *soma* would be useful since “body” in our dualist culture too often suggests the opposite of mind and spirit. “Somaesthetics” has been immediately understood and enthusiastically adopted already by a good number of philosophers, theorists, educators, and people working in design and the arts, despite its being essentially a neologism that I first introduced in English in 1997, after first using it in a German book of mine in 1996.¹ (I should say, however, that in neurophysiology, the term “somes-thetic” is already quite familiar, designat-

ing the whole body senses—proprioception, feelings of heat and cold, pain, etc., rather than the senses associated with specific sense organs—vision, hearing, taste, smell.) My project of somaesthetics claims that the soma deserves more careful aesthetic attention not only as an object that externally displays beauty, sublimity, grace, and other aesthetic qualities, but also as a subjectivity that experiences aesthetic pleasures through all varieties of sensory perception—kinesthetic, proprioceptive, haptic, gustatory, visual, auditory, etc. The notion of *aesthesis* (perception) that is also incorporated into its name reinforces that somaesthetics is concerned with the sentient perceiving “body-mind,” the soma part defying the body/mind dualism that pervades and tortures so much of our culture.

I should add that the term I chose held particular charm for me, because it mitigated an aesthetic orthographical problem that increasingly perturbed me. Should the disciplinary field traditionally devoted to art and beauty be rendered in English as “aesthetics” or more simply as “esthetics”? Though the matter seems trivial, it is as stubbornly pervasive as the written use of the term (and its cognates). The question of whether *ae* or merely *e* should designate the first vowel sound of this term was even selected by the artist Saul Steinberg as his theme for the poster celebrating the fiftieth anniversary of the American Society of Aesthetics. My analytic philosophical education at Jerusalem and Oxford taught me to use the more sophisticated Greek-styled diphthong *ae*, but after I had begun advocating American pragmatist philosophy, why not adopt the simpler, more streamlined “esthetic” that John Dewey insisted on using, since “aesthetics” and “esthetics” are phonetically and semantically the same? The *ae* was more familiar and more elegant perhaps, but the plain *e* seemed simpler and more economical, and thus more in keeping with pragmatism’s democratic and functional spirit. “Somaesthetics” has the advantage of giving the *a* a real semantic function through its use in “soma,” while at the

same time keeping the inscriptional visibility and pronunciation of “aesthetics” within its longer lexical frame—which also helps to revive the field of aesthetics by highlighting the vital bodily dimension of creating, perceiving, and appreciating things of beauty and art.

Of course, I should remind you that my understanding of aesthetic beauty and art is much broader than the conventional and narrow emphasis of these terms on visual representations or external appearances. For me, beauty and art include also the beauty of feelings and insights and the artistry of skilled performance, mindfully gracious ethical action, creative thinking, and harmonizing communication. I see the ameliorative role of pragmatist aesthetics (including somaesthetics) as aimed at helping us to “feel better” in both senses of that ambiguous phrase (which expresses the ambiguity of aesthetics itself): to make the quality of our experience more rewardingly rich or enjoyable, and to make our awareness of what we experience more acute and perceptive. By being more mindful of our experience, we can—as Montaigne argued—augment our enjoyment of it. And the cultivation of the beauty and art of appreciating, mindfully inhabiting, and shaping our affective lives should not be seen as selfish retreat to the private sphere. By sharpening the acuity of one’s affective perception, one learns how to be more sensitive to others and to the environments that shape one’s feelings, which are not simply the product of private ideas in one’s head but rather of a network of interrelations with one’s environing others, both animate and inanimate. If we are truly attentive, we can never feel ourselves (even our individual bodies) in total isolation. One always feels the ground or chair one is resting on, the force of gravity that gives the body weight, the air one ingests, etc.

SS: In addition to you, philosophers like José Bermúdez and Alva Noë recommend strategies for characterizing aspects of perceptual experience that precede or elude language. How do you explain this recent interest among analytically trained philosophers to consider, let alone tackle, actual situations that

defy philosophy's propositional bias (its exclusion of inexpressible experiences)?

RS: Analytic philosophy, in which I was academically trained, established itself through erecting language rather than experience or ideas as the essential focus for philosophical inquiry. Language (as something obviously shared, public, systematic, and rule-governed) was seen as much more intrinsically objective and rational than mere mental experience or ideas. Analytic philosophy's dominant self-conception as an analysis of concepts naturally made language the limiting focus since language itself is conceptual and discursive. Language was conceived not just as the communicator of meanings but as their essential and indispensable maker. The effective limits of thought and even meaningful experience were thus thought to be the limits of language. For such reasons, even the wonderfully pluralistic Richard Rorty (likewise trained in analytic philosophy) has criticized my somaesthetics as uselessly "kicking up dust" by trying to apply philosophy to a nonlinguistic, non-conceptual realm where he thinks philosophy just cannot or dare not go. The great classic pragmatists William James and John Dewey (just as later the phenomenologist Maurice Merleau-Ponty), however, recognized the importance of nameless feelings in our stream of thought that language does not capture but that philosophy needs to consider. Each of these three thinkers, by the way, took painting very seriously. (James first aspired to be a painter, Dewey was a close friend of Albert Barnes and through him became well acquainted with Matisse, and Merleau-Ponty wrote deeply about Cézanne). It is obvious that the visual and musical and somatic arts are especially important for reminding us of the meaning and value of nonlinguistic experience, even for the structuring and enrichment of language and thought. Contemporary analytic philosophy—through its renewed interest in consciousness and its greater appreciation of some figures in the phenomenological tradition, like Merleau-



Ponty and Husserl—is now coming to a greater recognition of the importance of the nonlinguistic. This is all to the good. However, it still offers virtually nothing in the way of concrete or pragmatic strategies for cultivating more acuity or skill in appreciating and deploying these nonlinguistic dimensions for critically examining the sociopolitical dimensions of bodily experience as well as their cognitive and affective import. In contrast, somaesthetics, as an exercise not only in theory but with distinctively pragmatic and practical dimensions, addresses such issues.

SS: Like Dewey, you fault Immanuel Kant for framing art as purposeless, an end in itself. Do you think Kant would deny art's causal role in provoking imagination, let alone triggering viewers' cognitive access to unfamiliar concepts or forgotten memories? Do the somatic arts comprising somaesthetics fulfill a similar role?

RS: I do, like Dewey, criticize the Kantian emphasis on the absolute disinterestedness and non-conceptual nature of pure aesthetic judgment. But Kant was more careful than many of his followers in rec-

ognizing that art and artistic understanding inevitably involve more than pure aesthetic judgment since they necessarily involve the conceptual by necessarily involving the concept of art. He realized, of course, that art served practical purposes

and cognitive functions but that its aesthetic judgment should not take these functional matters into account. Certainly, some somatic arts (meditation, the Feldenkrais Method) are indeed very useful for highlighting mental functioning and especially perceptual awareness and acuity—matters that can indeed foster greater skills of imagination.

SS: Can somaesthetics achieve "richer and more satisfying" experiences in the absence of thoughtful criticism (peer commentary/participant response)? Who can judge "more satisfying"? Does somaesthetics require specialized critics?

RS: Because of the entrenched philosophical tendency to regard bodily experience as essentially belonging to the private realm, there is a corresponding tendency to think that anything involving cultivation of the body is essentially a private, personal matter that neither requires nor can tolerate nor is enriched by external criticism or critical dialogue. Nothing could be farther from the truth. Not only is the body shaped by the social, it contributes to the social. We can share our bodies and bodily pleasures as much as we share our minds, and they can surely be as public as our thoughts. As I suggested earlier, our bodies (like we ourselves) are not independent, autonomous entities—we depend on, and incorporate, features of the environment for our basic bodily functions and for developing our more complicated bodily habits and skills. Moreover, it is a commonplace that training in the somatic arts requires the help of qualified teachers, trainers, or coaches. As I learned from my own experience in the Zen cloister, even something as apparently solitary and simple as *zazen* (seated meditation) not only needs the guidance of a good teacher, especially in the early stages, but also can be greatly enhanced by

practicing in a group. Though each meditates on his own caution focusing on his own breath and mental concentration, the feeling that one is doing this with others who are striving as oneself strives to focus more intensely, provides one with inspiring motivation and an encouraging spirit of fellowship in shared effort. The very structure of the body—that we cannot see all of one's own body without the use of reflecting or recording devices—makes the feedback of others crucial in developing one's somatic skills. Besides, because many of us have habits of bodily misuse (that we may not be aware of but that can result in various minor pains and postural discomforts or performative impairments) means that one's sense of what is a comfortable posture may not be accurate. What we judge as feeling comfortable is often really what is felt as familiar, even though this familiar feeling will eventually engender discomfort or pain. Many musicians and other artists hold or use their instruments (including their basic bodily instrument) in ways that initially feel comfortable enough to them but that are not mechanically efficient and thus cannot be maintained for the long term without pain or injury. An expert observer can notice this misuse and suggest methods for correcting it.

SS: You consider the art experience's value "directly fulfilling" (and not deferred). Is value immediately recognizable or can it emerge later, as events make their mark. We may consider an event special, but isn't its ultimate value its impact—how it plots our direction, charts a new course, or alters our perspective? Given that aesthetic experience takes time to impinge upon us as it gets filtered through memory and gains comprehension via concepts, can it ever be so immediate?

RS: There is an ambiguity in the notion of immediacy that needs to be unpacked. In agreeing with John Dewey that aesthetic experience is appreciated as directly or immediately fulfilling, I am not in any way denying that this immediate sense of value is not also in some important ways mediated—by culture and history—and that the value of the artwork experienced cannot increase over time with closer observation and study. Obviously,

aesthetic experiences usually take some time, especially the experience of complex works and especially in the temporal arts. So aesthetic experiences are not immediate in the sense of being merely momentary or instantaneous. The point is rather that the value of aesthetic experience is appreciated during the experience of the artwork and not merely deferred to a later occasion—we enjoy the experience itself as we experience, not merely the remote consequences of the experience. With respect to some kinds of labor or efforts of concentration, we do not enjoy the experience per se but only the consequences that derive later as a result of the experience but not in the experience itself—say, one's salary from a disagreeable job. But with aesthetic experience there is enjoyment also during the experience through its intrinsic satisfactions, even if we also may later enjoy further benefits beyond that experience from the consequences of that experience. There is no inconsistency between something having both intrinsic and instrumental value (we can value the experiential taste of a meal but also value the fact that it supplies us with nutrition beyond the experience of eating). In the same way, there is no contradiction between the fact that the aesthetic experience of art requires conceptual and cultural mediation, through the result of prior cultural funding, and the fact that it can be experienced, understood, and relished as immediate. Though it took a long time for English to become a language and for me to learn it, I can still experience many of its poetic meanings with vivid immediacy, as immediately as I enjoy the fragrance of a rose. Likewise, I do not have to wait till the poem or music or art viewing is over to gain my enjoyment, I enjoy the art while it is happening, while I am experiencing it. The value of the experience is immediate in this sense, though, of course, this does not guarantee that the artwork experienced has enduring or unimpeachable value or even that one's experience of the work is an accurate one. By pragmatist, fallibilist lights, the contents of any experience must face the test of future experiences to con-

firm that they are lastingly valuable or cognitively correct. But this does not gainsay the intrinsic value of the appreciated moment. Philosophers have too often and too narrowly focused on eternal values. There is value and meaning in ephemeral things, sometimes especially because they are transient.

SS: Aesthetic theories typically "propositionalize" existing artistic practices. Can you offer examples of theories (other than avant-garde manifestos) that have been truly interventionist, or anticipatory, rather than exemplary of activities already present?

RS: I don't think any art theories can be convincing or even comprehensible if they do not rely to some extent on existing art practices, but to answer your question: I would say that Plato's theory of art was certainly innovational and interventionist in its degradation of art's cognitive and moral worth in mimesis. Wordsworth's theories with regard to poetic content and diction were also influential in simplifying and democratizing these matters. Staying with poetry, the modernist theorizing of Ezra Pound and T.S. Eliot, though based on some nascent artistic practices (and some traditional exemplars such as seventeenth-century metaphysical poetry) was significantly interventionist and anticipatory of new directions. With respect to the visual arts, you are right that manifestos have been the most visible form of interventionist theorizing in modern times. But we should not forget the earlier work of Roger Fry and Clive Bell whose formalist theories largely created the taste for post-impressionist painting in the English-speaking world. Nor should we forget the still earlier work of the likes of Ruskin and William Morris, art theorists who certainly did not see theory's role as simply capturing the artistic status quo in a propositional formula.

*SUE SPAID is adjunct associate professor at Temple University, Philadelphia. RICHARD SHUSTERMAN is Dorothy F. Schmidt Eminent Scholar Chair in the Humanities and Professor of Philosophy, and Director of the Center for Body, Mind, and Culture at Dorothy F. Schmidt College of Arts and Letters, Florida Atlantic University, Boca Raton. NOTES: 1. See Richard Shusterman, *Vor der Interpretation* (Vienna: Passagen, 1996), which is a revised German translation of *Sous l'interprétation* (Paris: L'éclat, 1994).*