

Experience in the hands

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Richard Shusterman, The Director of the Center for Body, Mind and Culture at Florida Atlantic University, has examined aesthetic experience and sought the element of the aesthetic life in his multiple books and articles. As a craftsman I find fascinating that he is interested in expanding aesthetics from the artworld into everyday life.

Art, craft and design are close to each other, but philosophy of art excludes craft. Why hasn't aesthetic theory dealt with craft? According to Richard Shusterman philosophers wanted to separate art sharply from craft to emphasize art as being more valuable or noble because free from the utility and everyday nature of craft. Pragmatist aesthetics has a different approach; it respects the physical experience of making art, not just the spirituality of the completed artwork. According to Shusterman, there is room for craft in the field of aesthetics. Aesthetic experience can be found in the processes of doing crafts. There is a lot more in doing craft than just the aesthetic experience of the completed work.

The pragmatist aesthetics of Richard Shusterman is delightful and inspiring. In his book *Pragmatist Aesthetics: Living Beauty, Rethinking Art*, Shusterman considers that one can find aesthetic experience in the surrounding world - from nature, from happenings or from the pearls of popular culture. He portrays aesthetic experience right in our midst, in the moments we live. The aesthetic life Shusterman sketches is full of possibilities of experience. One can achieve aesthetic experience at any moment.

In Shusterman's experience the body has a significant role. Through his research in pragmatist aesthetics and the idea of the philosophical life he has developed a definition of somaesthetics, a philosophy of mind and body. Somaesthetics aims at an aesthetically valuable life through the well-being of our body and mind. Through our body we live, think, act and gain the experience. Somaesthetics has been practically utilized for example in dance, yoga, and photography.

Enthusiastic about Shusterman's somaesthetics I started to wonder how to adapt somaesthetics to craft. Can somaesthetic awareness be applied to the practices of all artistic working? According to Shusterman it can, for experience is somaesthetic when we gain physical and mental pleasure through our own body.

Craft, doing things by hand, is very much somaesthetic. As all craftspeople know, in working with our hands, our imagination is put in a creative relation with the materials taking shape in our hands, and this gives us overall pleasure. Working with our hands, we dive into a sea of senses. At the same time we transfer to the handwork signs of ourselves, a piece of lived life and honed skills, memories and tradition. As a passionate felt maker, I find somaesthetic experience in my own process of felt making - the aroma of wool and soap, the funny feeling of the surface in fingers and palm of hands, and the change of the material when wool is turning into felt pleasures both the body and the mind.

Somaesthetics awakens our senses. It takes our body closer to materials and makes it possible to be more fully present in the moment. It's easy to fall for somaesthetics, for it defends and honors the skills of doing things by hand. You can practice somaesthetics at home - all you need is a tempting, beautiful ball of yarn, knitting needles, and a moment for yourself.

I met Shusterman when he lectured in Helsinki, March 1st, 2012, at a conference marking the 40th anniversary celebration of the Finnish Society for Aesthetics.