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978-1-107-01906-5 - Thinking through the Body: Essays in Somaesthetics

Richard Shusterman

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Thinking through the Body

This book provides a richly rewarding vision of the burgeoning interdisciplinary field of somaesthetics. Composed of fourteen wide-ranging but finely unified essays by Richard Shusterman, originator of the field, *Thinking through the Body* explains the philosophical foundations of somaesthetics and applies its insights to central issues in ethics, education, cultural politics, consciousness studies, sexuality, and the arts. Integrating Western philosophy, cognitive science, and somatic methodologies with classical Asian theories of body, mind, and action, these essays probe the nature of somatic existence and the role of body consciousness in knowledge, memory, and behavior. Deploying somaesthetic perspectives to analyze key aesthetic concepts (such as style and the sublime), Shusterman offers detailed studies of embodiment in drama, dance, architecture, and photography. The book also includes somaesthetic exercise for the classroom and explores the use of *ars erotica* for the art of living.

Richard Shusterman is the Dorothy F. Schmidt Eminent Scholar in the Humanities and Professor of Philosophy at Florida Atlantic University, where he also directs the Center for Body, Mind, and Culture. He is the author of numerous books, including *Body Consciousness: A Philosophy of Mindfulness and Somaesthetics* (Cambridge, 2008), *Performing Live* (2000), and *Pragmatist Aesthetics* (1992, 2nd ed. 2000, and published in fifteen languages).

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For Peng Feng

献给彭锋

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Preface

From our earliest days of life, we are nourished by the pleasures of bodily beauty. Enchanting visions of loving bodies that feed and care for us are deliciously blended with beautiful feelings the body enjoys through its other senses and own inner experiences. My interest in aesthetics emerged, I believe, from such childhood raptures of radiant bodily charms and blissful somatic fulfillment that branded me with a continuous yearning for beauty, long before I knew of any distinction between body and soul. That yearning has always inspired my ideals and my studies, despite philosophy's body-negating tradition and the troubling ways in which bodily beauty and desire have been distorted, exploited, and abused in contemporary culture. Ever present – though often only in sublimated form – this loving enchantment with somatic beauty haunted my philosophical research on other topics until it finally emerged as an explicit theme in the concluding chapters of *Pragmatist Aesthetics: Living Beauty, Rethinking Art* (1992), awakened into full consciousness through renewed engagement with the beauties of dance and through my philosophical conversion to a body-respecting, experience-oriented, melioristic pragmatism.

Adopting pragmatism as my new philosophical direction meant rediscovering the pressing existential issue that first drew me to philosophy and that first defined philosophy in ancient times: the question of how one should live. The idea of philosophy as an art of living aimed at realizing beauty through creative intelligence and critical reflection (involving both aesthetic and ethical sensitivity) thus formed the topic of my subsequent book, *Practicing Philosophy: Pragmatism and the Philosophical Life* (1997), the first English publication in which I proposed the idea of somaesthetics. The project of somaesthetics evolved as the logical consequence of my arguments advocating pragmatist

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aesthetics and the philosophical life. As art cannot be created or appreciated without using our bodily senses, actions, and experience, so our lives must inevitably be lived somatically. If we wish to improve our lives (and not only by improving the arts and aesthetic experience that enrich our lives), then one important way to do so would be to improve our understanding and mastery of our bodies – the fundamental, indispensable instrument or medium through which we perceive, act, and live this life on earth. As there seemed to be no field explicitly designed to develop this improved somatic understanding and mastery, somaesthetics thus emerged for me as an essential project, one to which I have since dedicated most of my research efforts.

Recognizing that a traditional field like philosophy might find the proposal of this new body-centered discipline a condemnable act of arrogant audacity, I first tentatively introduced the notion of somaesthetics in a German book, *Vor der Interpretation* (1996), where I argued for cultivating the body and appreciating its role in nondiscursive forms of understanding that lie beneath our interpretive efforts. Though somaesthetics quickly caught the attention of the influential daily *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* (November 28, 1996), the reviewer savagely ridiculed the project. Betraying the exclusively text-centered bias so typical of philosophy, he misrepresented somaesthetics as a mere method of reading, “as something like whipping oneself while reading Kant, mountain-climbing while reading Nietzsche, and doing breathing exercises while reading Heidegger.” This absurd and hurtful caricature stung me into articulating the somaesthetic project with sufficient detail to combat such distortions.

Fortunately, subsequent reactions to somaesthetics have been far more thoughtful and positive than that shocking first review. Many fine scholars in different fields have developed the somaesthetic project in intriguing and rewarding ways, through penetrating criticism and imaginative application to a variety of disciplines both within and beyond philosophy. Too numerous to mention here, their contributions are listed on the somaesthetics bibliography I maintain at http://www.fau.edu/humanitieschair/Somaesthetics_Bibliography_Others.php.

That first painful newspaper review of somaesthetics taught me an important lesson: the value of trying riskier ideas in international venues and foreign languages where one’s errors, transgressions, or embarrassments are not so clearly exposed to one’s home community, whose continued respect and support for one’s work is especially crucial. That is why I also initiated my practical somaesthetics workshops in Europe, beyond the borders of the Anglo-American academic world I happily call

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home. This greater freedom to experiment in distant lands and foreign languages has a somaesthetic parallel in anatomy. One has more ease and range of movement in distal than proximal body parts; we can move our hands and feet much better than we can move our pelvis or torso.

Exploratory experiments in foreign languages require skilled translation, however, so I here express my gratitude to the many excellent scholars who translated my texts on somaesthetics and from whose penetrating questions and comments I have greatly learned. Among them, I am particularly indebted to Jean-Pierre Cometti, Peng Feng, Wojciech Małecki, Heidi Salaverria, Nicolas Viellescazes, Kim Jinyup, Cheng Xiangzhan, Lee Hyijin, Robin Celikates, Higuchi Satoshi, Giovanni Matteucci, Barbara Formis, Thomas Mondémé, Christophe Hanna, Krystyna Wilkoszewska, Alina Mitek, Aoki Takao, Sebastian Stankiewicz, Emil Visnovsky, Oishi Masashi, and Liliana Coutinho.

Foreign institutions of learning have been wonderfully receptive to somaesthetics. Among them, I should particularly note those universities that officially hosted me as a visiting professor during the years (2005–2011) in which I wrote the texts that form this book: the University of Paris (1 and 3), the University of Lyon, the University of Oslo, the University of Rome, the Technical University of Vienna, Renmin University (Beijing), and Shandong University. I am especially grateful to the Royaumont Foundation's dance research program ("Transforme," directed by Myriam Gourfink) and to Maguy Morin's dance training program at the Centre Chorégraphique National de Rillieux-la-Pape for inviting me to give three-day practical workshops in somaesthetics, and to the University of Paris 1 for inviting me to adapt that workshop for its graduate students and faculty in visual arts. Sibelius Academy in Finland and the University of Copenhagen (kinesiology) were also welcoming in arranging shorter workshops; and I cannot forget the kindness of Paris's École Normale Supérieure and Peking University's Center for Aesthetics and Aesthetic Education for hosting special conferences on somaesthetics, respectively organized (in February and July 2011) by Mathias Girel and Peng Feng.

Several of the book's essays originated in invited keynote lectures at other conferences. "Self-Knowledge and Its Discontents" was the 2007 Kneller Lecture for the Society of Philosophy and Education, while "Somaesthetics at the Limits" opened the annual conference of the Nordic Society for Aesthetics (in Aarhus, 2007). More recently, "Somaesthetics and Architecture: A Critical Option" was first given as a keynote lecture at the 11th International Bauhaus-Kolloquium (Weimar, 2009);

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“Muscle Memory and the Somaesthetic Pathologies of Everyday Life” had a similar role in the annual conference of the Polish Physiotherapy Association (Wrocław, 2010); while “Somatic Style” served that function at two conferences: the 18th International Congress for Aesthetics (Beijing, 2010) and the Kyung Hee Peace Bar Festival (Seoul, 2010). The title paper of this book was prepared for a particularly important occasion in my academic career – my inaugural lecture as the Dorothy F. Schmidt Eminent Scholar in the Humanities at Florida Atlantic University. This extraordinary interdisciplinary position, handsomely endowed through the great generosity of the Schmidt family, has provided me with superb resources for pursuing my somaesthetic research and stimulating that of others through the Center for Body, Mind, and Culture that I direct at FAU. I take this opportunity to express my profound thanks to Dick and Barbara Schmidt for their munificence and vision.

Grants from the Alexander von Humboldt Foundation and from the Japan Society for the Promotion of Science have also supported research for this book, whose essays have often profited from the keen critical eyes of first-rate journal editors. I especially wish to thank Susan Feagin, editor of *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, and Pradeep Dhillon of *The Journal of Aesthetic Education* for being receptive to papers on somaesthetics. Many colleagues offered helpful comments on earlier drafts of individual chapters. Unable to list them all, I should particularly acknowledge Arthur Danto, Roger Ames, Rita Felski, Jacob Lund, Morten Kyndrop, Hans-Peter Krüger, Martin Seel, Susan Laird, David Granger, Shaun Gallagher, John Protevi, Martin Jay, Dom Lopes, Diarmuid Costello, Andrea Kenkmann, Zdravko Radman, Martin Seel, Denis Cercllet, Kari Jormakka, Olaf Pfeiffer, Galen Cranz, Curtis Carter, Aoki Takao, Winfried Fluck, Wolfgang Welsch, Jurgen Streek, Christophe Kihm, Else Marie Bukdahl, Mark Johnson, Mathias Girel, Ken-ichi Sasaki, and David Zerbib.

Special thanks go to Professor Wojciech Małecki, who not only translated two of the book’s essays into Polish but generously read the entire manuscript and suggested many improvements. My research assistants, Megan Fryer and Joel Wilson, were very helpful in preparing the final manuscript and verifying references. Working with Beatrice Rehl of Cambridge University Press has been a continuing pleasure for which I am very grateful. Erica Ando and our daughter Talia Emi have lived with my somaesthetic project for many years, providing exemplary lessons of beauty, critique, and patience to nourish my life and thought. They deserve much more than the thanks I offer here. This book is dedicated to Professor Peng Feng of Peking University, who first introduced the

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project of somaesthetics to China by superbly translating three of my books – *Pragmatist Aesthetics*, *Practicing Philosophy*, and *Performing Live* – and who then ingeniously applied somaesthetics to contemporary art in curating the Chinese Pavilion at the 2011 Venice Biennale. Peng Feng not only made my name in China, he also gave me my Chinese name. For his creative intelligence and his continued friendship, I am profoundly grateful.

Though most of these essays have already appeared in preliminary versions, I have revised all of them, often very substantially, for publication in this volume. I gratefully acknowledge the permission of the original publishers to revise and reprint this material. Here is a list of the original sources: “Thinking Through the Body, Educating for the Humanities: A Plea for Somaesthetics,” *Journal of Aesthetic Education* 40 (2006): 1–21; “Self-Knowledge and Its Discontents: From Socrates to Somaesthetics,” the Kneller Lecture, in *Philosophy and Education Yearbook* (2007): 25–37; “Muscle Memory and the Somaesthetic Pathologies of Everyday Life,” *Human Movement* 12 (2011): 4–15; “Somaesthetics in the Philosophy Classroom: A Practical Approach,” in Andrea Kenkmann (ed.), *Teaching Philosophy* (New York, NY: Continuum Press, 2009): 57–68; “Somaesthetics at the Limits,” *The Nordic Journal of Aesthetics* 35 (2008): 7–23; “Somaesthetics and Burke’s Sublime,” *British Journal of Aesthetics* 45 (2005): 323–341; “Pragmatism and Cultural Politics: From Rortian Textualism to Somaesthetics,” *New Literary History*, 41 (2010), 69–94; “Body Consciousness and Performance: Somaesthetics East and West,” *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 67 (2009) 133–145; “Somaesthetics and Architecture: A Critical Option,” in K. Faschingeder and K. Jormakka et al. (eds.), *Architecture in the Age of Empire: 11th International Bauhaus-Colloquium* (Weimar: Verlag der Bauhaus-Universität Weimar, 2011); “Asian *Ars Erotica* and the Question of Sexual Aesthetics,” *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 65 (2007): 55–68; and “Somatic Style,” *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, 69 (2011), 147–149.