

Somaesthetics and Its Consequences in Contemporary Art

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Abstract: A dominant theme in Western visual art is the naked body. But a painting or sculpture representing a naked body is different from the real naked body. Vanessa Beecroft's performances employ real naked women so that viewers confront the real body instead of its representation. However, the body employed in Beecroft's performances is not what somaesthetics considers to be the true soma, a sentient, purposive body subjectivity. Yann Toma' and Richard Shusterman's photography project of Somaflux shows the body as energetic. But the energized body in the photos is still an object and so not yet soma. The real soma should be both subject and object. The China Pavilion at 54th International Contemporary Art Exhibition of La Biennale di Venezia did not treat body as object but subject. In the Pavilion, visitors did not view bodies as objects or body representations. Instead they experienced themselves as perceptive somas, thus making the China Pavilion a more appropriate example of somaesthetics in contemporary art.

Keywords: somaesthetics, soma, life, flavor, senses, subjectivity.

Contemporary culture persistently privileges mind and spirit. Even art, which was dominated by the naked body in the Western tradition,¹ is becoming more and more abstract. For conceptual art, which still dominates in contemporary art circles, "the most important aspect of the work" is the idea or concept.² However, in this conceptual stage, as Arthur Danto and others have observed, art reaches

1 As François Jullien says, "That nudes appear in sculpture, painting, and photography undeniably denotes the existence of a tradition, for attempts to explore the nude have been continuously relayed not only from one artist or country to another, or from one era to another, but also from one form of artistic expression to another." See François Jullien, *The Impossible Nude: Chinese Art and Western Aesthetics*, Maev de la Guardia trans. (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2007), p.10.

2 Sol LeWitt, "Paragraphs on Conceptual Art," in Sol LeWitt: *A Retrospective*, Gary Garrels ed., (San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, 2000), p. 369.

its end. In order to change the bias against the body in contemporary philosophy and art, the neo-pragmatist Richard Shusterman has been working on the project of somaesthetics, which aims at improving our body consciousness. Shusterman prefers to speak of soma rather than body:

The term “soma” indicates a living, feeling, sentient body rather than a mere physical body that could be devoid of life and sensation, while the “aesthetic” in somaesthetics has the dual role of emphasizing the soma’s perceptual role (whose embodied intentionality contradicts the body/mind dichotomy) and its aesthetic uses both in stylizing one’s self and in appreciating the aesthetic qualities of other selves and things.³

Shusterman expects his project can revive the tradition of practicing philosophy as a way of life, which he finds was very strong in both ancient Greece and China. Even in modern and contemporary philosophy, dominated by an analytic way of thinking, some leading philosophers such as John Dewey, Ludwig Wittgenstein, and Michel Foucault still followed this tradition and devoted themselves to practicing an aesthetics of existence and an art of living. However, what I am interested in are the possible consequences of somaesthetics for contemporary art, even if Shusterman scrupulously prefers not to set foot in this field.

1. The Body as a Painted Representation

At the international conference “Somaesthetics: Contemporary Developments and Asian Traditions” at Peking University, July 2011, the critic Wang Duanting took Italian female artist Vanessa Beecroft’s performance as a consequence of somaesthetics in contemporary art (fig. 1).

³ Richard Shusterman, *Body Consciousness: A Philosophy of Mindfulness and Somaesthetics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), p.1.



1. Vanessa Beecroft. *Un-Titled Project*. 2001 1600+ 740. Photo. Collection.

Since 1994, Beecroft has become known for performances involving live naked women. These naked women stand motionless, unapproachable and regimented in space while viewers watch them. Beecroft's performances normally are recorded through photography and film. We describe them as art since we can find a kind of "family resemblance" between the performances and paintings. As Dave Hickey points out:

Painting remains the touchstone of Beecroft's work, however, and one may usefully regard her ephemeral tableaux vivant as standing in the same relationship to painting that painting does to drawing.... They are not paintings of women, in other words, but they are painted women....So, if there is an argument in these works (and there may not be), it might be construed as demonstrating the subversive consequence of confronting in [real] presence that which we are accustomed to confronting in representation.... Beecroft's tableaux deploy the rhetoric of painting in the space of live performance.⁴

It is well known that western art has a long tradition of nudes. As Jullien says:

In solitary opposition to the "everything changes" of life and thought, the nude stands like an erratic block, as unaffected by progress as it is by the erosion of time: "man" may be dead, but, as we know, his Nude remains very much alive.... European art was fixed on the nude, just as its philosophy was fixed on the true.⁵

4 Dave Hickey, "Vanessa Beecroft's Painted Ladies," in *VB 08-36 : Vanessa Beecroft Performances* (Ostfildern: Hatje Cantz, 2000). See www.vanessabecroft.com/DaveHickey.pdf

5 Jullien, *The Impossible Nude*, 12-13.

Of course, the nude is not the same as nakedness. Jullien deliberately distinguishes nakedness from the nude:

Nakedness implies a diminished state, being stripped, laid bare (“stark naked”); it carries with it a concomitant notion of feeling shame or of cause for pity, whereas no such sense is evoked by the nude – the feeling, on the contrary, is one of plenitude; the nude is total presence, offering itself for contemplation.⁶

To be specific, (1) nakedness is experienced as being in movement, whereas the nude proceeds from a cessation of momentum and a state of fixity; (2) nakedness is me, the nude is the other. In the case of nakedness, the other is looking at me, or I see the other who is seeing me, whereas the opposite occurs with regard to the nude; (3) nakedness is “animal”, something that is experienced, whereas the nude tends towards the Ideal and serves as the “image” for the Idea; (4) nakedness is the flesh without Form, whereas the nude is discovered in the pose for displaying the Form. The nude is art, whereas nakedness is life. The beauty of the nude does not lie in the harmony of its forms or the correct proportions of the parts, but the power of evidence, the exposition of the Being.⁷

According to Jullien’s notions, the women in Beecroft’s performances seem both naked and nude. They are nude since they are posed motionlessly and look like the painted women. They seem naked since they have been stripped and maneuvered as objects. It is impossible for a living person to achieve the status of nude simply by himself or herself. A living person cannot be really fixated into static motionlessness. The best way to transfigure a living person into the nude is photography. Only photography can immobilize the present instant, which exists by itself as an indivisible point from future to past. This transfiguration in photographing does not derive from devices of imitation or re-creation but is based essentially on its ability to create an event.⁸ It means that photography can change any nakedness into the nude. It needn’t put the models into fixed poses. Beecroft’s performances are not a preparation for photography but an imitation or representation of photography.

Perhaps Beecroft’s performances can be interpreted under an inverse representation theory. They are art since they are representations of photos or paintings. Here the key to Beecroft’s performances lies in the concept of representation or imitation. The important thing is not the body itself but the

⁶ Jullien, *The Impossible Nude*, 4.

⁷ Jullien, *The Impossible Nude*, 4-26.

⁸ Jullien, *The Impossible Nude*, 25-26.

body's function, i.e. the posed body as a representation of photos or paintings. However, this interpretation is vulnerable. Normally, as Nelson Goodman pointed out, representation is not reflexive and not symmetric: although "a painting may represent the Duke of Wellington, the Duke doesn't represent the painting."⁹ Therefore, the representation theory cannot support Beecroft's performances.

2. Body with Aura

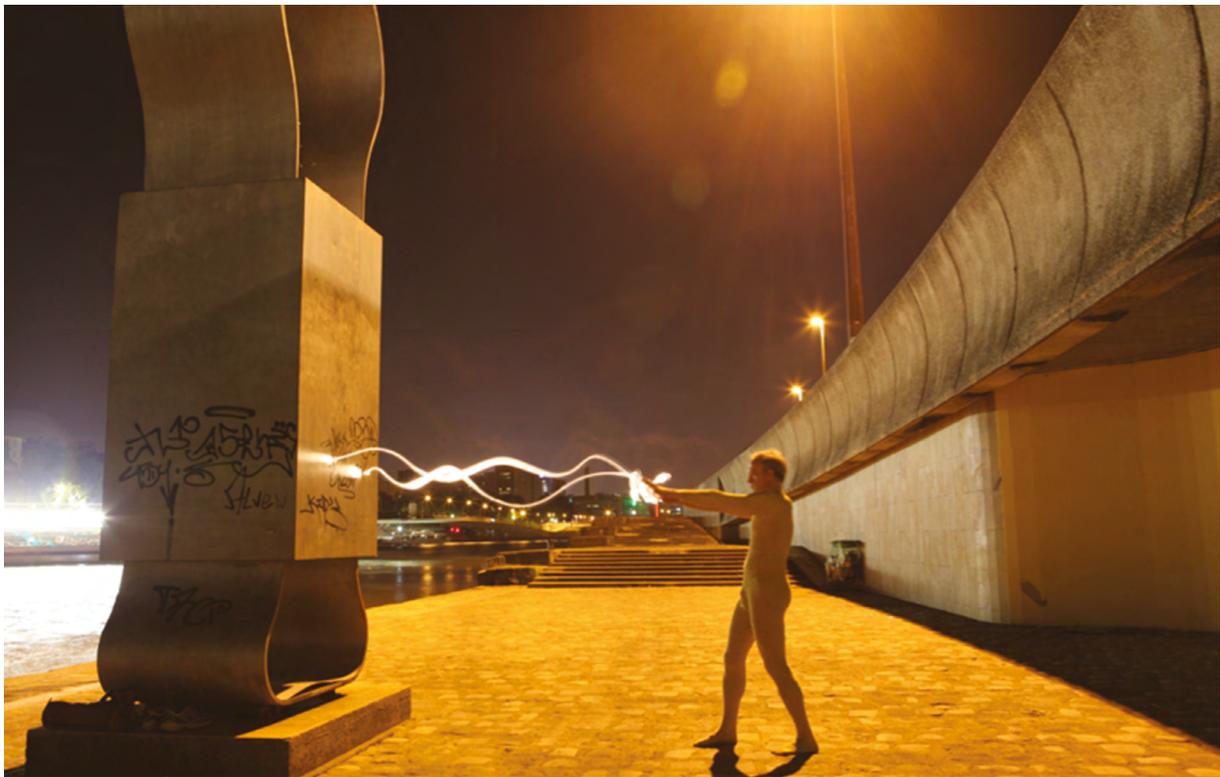
Let's return to the issue of the body. Can somaesthetics support the nude-naked body in Beecroft's performances? Shusterman does not accept both the nude in the paintings and the nude-naked body in Beecroft's performances as the promised consequences of somaesthetics. He even criticizes the cover of his book *Body Consciousness*, i.e. the photo of Ingres' famous painting *Valpinçon Bather*.

The young woman here, passively posed on a luxuriously bedded and curtained interior, is fresh and naked from her bath and thus ready for her required sexual service. She presents a deliciously lovely and luminous backside of flesh. But in her static pose, with her head turned away in darker shadow and her gaze and facial expression invisible, we get no sense of her having any active, thoughtful consciousness at all. She even seems unconscious of the close presence of the implied viewer, who sees her in almost total nakedness, apart from the turban on her bound hair and the sheet wrapped around her arm – both more suggestive of her bondage than of protective covering. Ingres, moreover, intensifies the woman's visual beauty and erotic charge by putting her in a postural constellation of legs, spine, and head that highlights her figure's graceful long limbs and curving lines but that in fact is anatomically far from a posture conducive to comfort, let alone effective action. What a shock to learn that the marketing department had selected this beautiful but painfully misleading image for the cover of my book on body consciousness! As a critic of media culture's deceptive objectifications of the body, but also as a Feldenkrais practitioner sensitive to the strain and suffering of the spine, I voiced my objections but was decisively told that the vast majority of my potential readers would only be attracted to the beauty of the Ingres and never notice its unsightly social and somatic import. If that indeed is true, then this book's arguments are all the more needed to open their eyes to other forms and beauties of body consciousness. Do not judge this book by its cover.¹⁰

9 Nelson Goodman, *Languages of Art* (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1976), 4.

10 Richard Shusterman, *Body Consciousness*, x-xi.

Shusterman criticizes the cover of his *Body Consciousness*, since the nude of Ingres' painting is not soma but body. Taken a step further, we can say in the whole tradition of the nude in western art we see only body not soma. According to Shusterman, soma is different from body. Soma means the living, feeling, sentient, intelligently perceiving and performing body, while body normally highlights its meaty parts and has a highly negative religious connotation. Neither nakedness nor the nude is soma, but body. We never see soma in the nude tradition of western art. Therefore, Shusterman has frequently referred to the Alexander Technique, the Feldenkrais Method, taijiquan, yoga, *zazen*¹¹ and bodybuilding in writing about the practical somaesthetic disciplines. He said very little about specific somaesthetic disciplines involved in visual art until he met Yann Toma, with whom he decided to cooperate in the photographic project *Radiant Flux*, which through their collaboration has evolved into a photography (r a video) project, *Soma Flux* (fig. 2).



2. Yann Toma with Shusterman. SOMAFLUX. *Electric Man*. 2012. Photo.

Shusterman was asked to put on a glittering gold body stocking, which was used by Toma's parents who worked in dance, and so was transfigured into the "Man in Gold." As a photographic object, Shusterman was asked to remain perfectly silent

¹¹ *Zazen* is the Zen Buddhist technique of sitting meditation that promotes improved mental focus and attention while giving feelings of tranquility and peace.

and motionless in a bare, darkened seminar room while Toma swiftly hovered and danced around him with his two small lamps, trying to sense and trace the varying qualities of light and aura he felt from his body. Toma moved quickly so that only the tracing of his lights – and not his body tracing them – would be captured by the camera. Shusterman reported his experience during the shooting:

I felt, moreover, that Yann was fully absorbed in understanding me, in feeling and responding to my energy... A deep sense of mutual understanding was thus created between us through silent, corporeal communication... This common purpose created a palpable atmosphere of shared experience, a lived, dynamic matrix of heightened aesthetic communicative meaning that was neither merely my subjectivity nor Yann's but, rather, a quality of the situation in which we interacted. This shared atmosphere of common exploration, dialogical experimentation and artistic co-creation had its own auratic energy that undoubtedly transformed mine, in a manner analogous to the way the individual soma is always felt through its environment and shaped by it. Thus, as Yann traced my somatic flux he also reshaped it with his own, while conversely reshaping his energy flow through his encounter with mine (fig. 3).¹²



3. Yann Toma with Richard Shusterman. SOMAFLUX. *On Spanish River Beach*. 2012. Photo.

12 Richard Shusterman, "A Philosopher in Darkness and in Light: Practical Somaesthetics and Photographic Art," in Anne-Marie Ninacs (ed.), *Lucidité. Vues de l'intérieur / Lucidity. Inward Views: Le Mois de la Photo à Montréal 2011* (Montreal: Le Mois de la Photo à Montréal, 2011), p.282.

As a photographic object, Shusterman's feeling and experience is totally different from the women in Beecroft's performances. As Thomas Kellein reports, Beecroft "is cool with the women, sometimes coarse. In actual fact she doesn't want to talk with them. She orders them about: 'Shut up, don't talk to me, get naked, get out, stand there, good-bye!'"¹³ "She was unable to develop any friendship towards the girls."¹⁴ She states that "the girls are my plain material."¹⁵ As is often the case, "over the hours their souls work their way imperceptibly out of their bodies. The idea is that the group should be like one single girl – in reality, as time drags on, the group falls apart and disappears before the patient viewer's eyes into a sum of bodies pushed together. At the same time the viewer begins to feel sympathy, presumably prompted by the visible wilting of the participants."¹⁶ "At the end of the performance... the models had to be led out, some almost carried."¹⁷ The case of Shusterman is different. He was treated very friendly. As reports by Shusterman himself:

With my confidence in Yann firmly established, I could let myself fully relax on the floor; and as the hour was late and my eyes were shut, I felt myself sink into a thick cloud of reverie, drifting in and out of sleep, always somehow aware of Yann's caring, attentive movements above my reposing body as I fluttered in and out of consciousness.¹⁸

However, in the ontological sense, as a photographic object, Shusterman is the same as the women in Beecroft's performances. He was also asked to keep still. Shusterman writes:

I began to image myself as a still life object that was being painted with light.... If I seemed a *still* life in being relatively motionless, I was also still *life* in the sense of still being alive, which always implies movement of some sort, at the very least the movement of breathing. It then struck me how odd it is that "still life" is what we use in English to name what the French explicitly designate as *death* by calling it *nature morte*. In any case I felt that, in being alive, I should be *still* life no longer. After so many hours confined to immobility, I craved the freedom of movement outdoors. So when Yann told me the session was over and opened the shutters, I instinctively jumped onto the window ledge

13 Thomas Kellein, "The Secret of Female Intimacy," VB 08-36: *Vanessa Beecroft Performances* (Ostfildern: Hatje Cantz, 2000). See www.vanessabeecroft.com/ThomasKellein.pdf

14 Kellein, "The Secret of Female Intimacy."

15 Kellein, "The Secret of Female Intimacy."

16 Kellein, "The Secret of Female Intimacy."

17 Kellein, "The Secret of Female Intimacy."

18 Shusterman, "A Philosopher in Darkness and in Light," 283.

to gaze out on the sunny midday vista, my hands clutching the bars of the window as if I were a huge gold bug trying to escape from an imprisoning box.¹⁹

Shusterman's somaesthetics does not support "*still* life" which is "relatively motionless", since soma always means "movement of some sort, at the very least the movement of breathing." Toma's photographic project *Radiant Flux* cannot be the proper consequence of somaesthetics since photography inevitably transforms "*still life*" into "*still* life." According to Jullien, photography is art due to its capacity of immobilizing the present instant. Photography as art follows the tradition of the nude. It is different from the tradition of the art of living supported by somaesthetics.

3. Body as the Five Senses

I have been interested in somaesthetics since 2001 when I met Shusterman in Philadelphia for the first time. Even if the readymade in contemporary art is very similar to Shusterman's idea of art of living, I do not find any examples which are the appropriate consequences of somaesthetics. In both the cases of Beecroft's performance and Toma's photography, what we see are only physical bodies. The so-called soma, which means a living, feeling, sentient body seems to be an impossible object of visual art, since it is both subject and object. Only through self-consciousness can the soma be the object of perception, which means that we cannot take soma as the object of art. What we can do is to create an art for the soma or, in Shusterman's words, our awakened, alert body consciousness. For the purpose of awakening body consciousness, art for the nose seems superior to art for the eyes. Although all five senses are part of bodily sensations, nose, tongue and skin are clearly more dependent on or closer to body than seeing and hearing. I had been looking for an opportunity to do an experiment with somaesthetics in contemporary art, which finally arrived when I was appointed to curate the China pavilion at the Venice Biennale in 2011.

The China pavilion was housed in an obsolete warehouse of oil tanks and a piece of lawn at the end of the Arsenal. It is the most difficult and challenging space for an art exhibition. China has used this pavilion since first joining the Venice Biennale in 2005. This important biennale has become something like "chicken ribs" for Chinese artists: it is tasteless to eat but a waste to throw away. Frankly, the China pavilion was not very successful and interesting in the six years before 2011, and there is a mismatch between the China pavilion at Venice and the boom

¹⁹ Shusterman, "A Philosopher in Darkness and in Light," 284.

of contemporary art in China.

Based on my interpretation of the space of the Chinese pavilion and *ILLUMInations*, the title for the 54th International Art Exhibition at Venice Biennale chosen by Bice Curiger, I choose *Pervasion* (of Chinese flavors and fragrances) as the title for the pavilion I was curating. *ILLUMInations* reminds me of the concept of beauty since it is well known that beauty is usually defined by light in western aesthetics. But Chinese aestheticians find a closer relationship between beauty and flavor. The character for beauty in Chinese literally designates a big, fat sheep and, indirectly, the tasty mutton. The illumination of light in western tradition can be understood as the pervasion of flavor in the Chinese. Some critics criticized my proposal for treating art in terms of beauty, since contemporary art has usually regarded beauty as inessential or even a danger to true art. But I don't think this critique is justified. Firstly, contemporary art is an open concept and so anything including beauty should not be inevitably excluded. Secondly, beauty in the Chinese tradition is very different from what it is in the Western tradition. Maybe the latter is too stereotyped to be utilized in contemporary art, but this does not mean that the former should also be excluded. Rather, this is an opportune time for us to enlist the concept of beauty from the Chinese tradition, since it is unfamiliar or "new" for today's art-world. More specifically, based on the concept of beauty in the Chinese tradition we can create an art for the nose and tongue, bringing it closer to soma or the sentient body. In fact, in the contemporary artworld, still dominated by concepts, it is not only "new" but also "big" as James Elkins wrote me in an email: "Combinations of senses, beauty, and especially affect are very big in the art world at the moment. It is very close to the contemporary North American / French interest in 'affect theory': the senses, their combinations, their feelings and moods."

From the idea of "beauty in flavors", I developed the concept of Five Flavors. Benefiting from cultural exchange, the concept of Five Elements is known internationally. Chinese philosophy takes the Five Elements to explain the origin of all things in the world. The Five Elements have many aspects, including Five Directions, Five Colors, Five Sounds, Five Flavors, and so on. Five Flavors means both the basic flavors and all flavors, and implies, metaphorically, the reconciliation of the universal one and diverse, particular multiplicity. I decided to use the flavors or fragrances of green tea, herb medicine, lotus flower, incense, and *baijiu* (a clear grain liquor). They are not representatives of the Five Flavors literally, but their flavors and fragrances are typically Chinese in all periods of Chinese history.

Chinese critics criticized the concept of Five Flavors as outdated, weak,

nationalistic, post-colonialistic, Orientalistic, and so on. I could not accept these criticisms for several reasons. Firstly, I don't think the flavors that I chose for the China pavilion are outdated, since they are still playing important roles in the ordinary life of Chinese people. *Baijiu*, tea, lotus, herb medicine, and incense are very similar to wine, coffee, roses, western medicine, and perfume, respectively. They are the representatives of different life styles. Both sets of flavors are fashionable in our culture. Secondly, my main purpose was not to show the idiosyncrasy of Chinese culture but to make full use of the limited space. Although the concept of Five Flavors has strong cultural resonance, the inspiration for choosing this concept was largely to address a practical problem. The space of the Chinese pavilion is not only lined with rusted oil tanks but also full of the odor of petroleum. I had to do something to change the smell of the space. As Tom Jeffreys points out:

One of the strangest elements of the whole Biennale is how little attention many artists paid to the unique challenges and opportunities of exhibiting in Venice. Inside the Arsenale, the only pavilion to really use the amazing old naval yard to the full, is the Chinese. The exhibition – *Pervasion* – is not an unqualified success, but the use of dry ice creates a sense of excitement, Liang Yuanwei's piece aptly fuses technology with absurdity; and Yang Maoyuan's installation of small pottery vessels works brilliantly against the building's weird old iron silos.²⁰

Furthermore, the olfactory is important for Venice. On the one hand, the city is proud of its good smell of flowers, while on the other, Venice is immersed in the foul smell of its canals, especially in summertime. David Rubin even finds a relationship between smell and the history of Venice, as he wrote me in an email: “[the idea is] so appropriate for Venice, which, I believe, was one of the original sites of perfume production in the West. Given that the city, as home to Marco Polo, was also the prime gateway for Europeans in the importing of Chinese herbs, spices, and medicines, the topic you have chosen, beauty and flavor, seems especially well-conceived.”

I invited five artists to create five installations that had to make use of these already chosen materials such as *Baijiu*, herb, lotus, incense, and tea. They had to be not only smelled but also tasted. On the lawn, artists Cai Zhisong and Yuan Gong installed huge sculptures of clouds and fog respectively, both of which emit the fragrance of green tea. The sculptures also produce the sound of wind chimes

20 Tom Jeffreys, “Venice Biennale – 5 to see,” <http://www.spoonfed.co.uk/spooners/tom-699/venice-biennale-5-to-see-5327/> Accessed 1/20/2012.

Actually the fog is not made from dry ice but water.

(fig. 4). The effect of the clouds and fogs is to make the virgin garden into an Arcadia. As Rachel Spence writes:

Faced with one of the most evocative yet also most challenging spaces in the Venetian Arsenal – a vast medieval warehouse lined with brutal-looking oil tanks – China’s quintet of artists has countered with an exhibition of ephemeral, multi-sensory poetry. With its quirky sculptures, heady aromas and vivacious birdsong, this surreal Arcadia seems an improbable setting for a serious political protest.²¹



4. Cai Zhisong. *Sculptures of clouds* and Yoan Gong. *Fog*. China Pavillon. Venice Art Biennale 2011.

Inside the warehouse of oil tanks, Liang Yuanwei, the only female participant, set her installation *I Plea: Rain*, in which Liang successfully manifests the flavor, the color, the fluidity, and the mystery of *Baijiu*. “The *Baijiu* as rain,” Liang says, “can wash the soul.” (Fig. 5, 6, 7).

21 <http://www.ft.com/cms/s/2/58f2a33c-8d56-11e0-bf23-00144feab49a.html#ixzz1PxJrZ1Mh> Accessed 1/20/2012

Before the opening ceremony on the second of June, almost thirty protestors gathering in the Virgin Garden protested against Chinese government arresting Ai Weiwei.



5. Liang Yuanwei. *I Plea: Rain*. China Pavillon. Venice Art Biennale 2011.



6. Liang Yuanwei. *I Plea: Rain*. China Pavillon. Venice Art Biennale 2011.



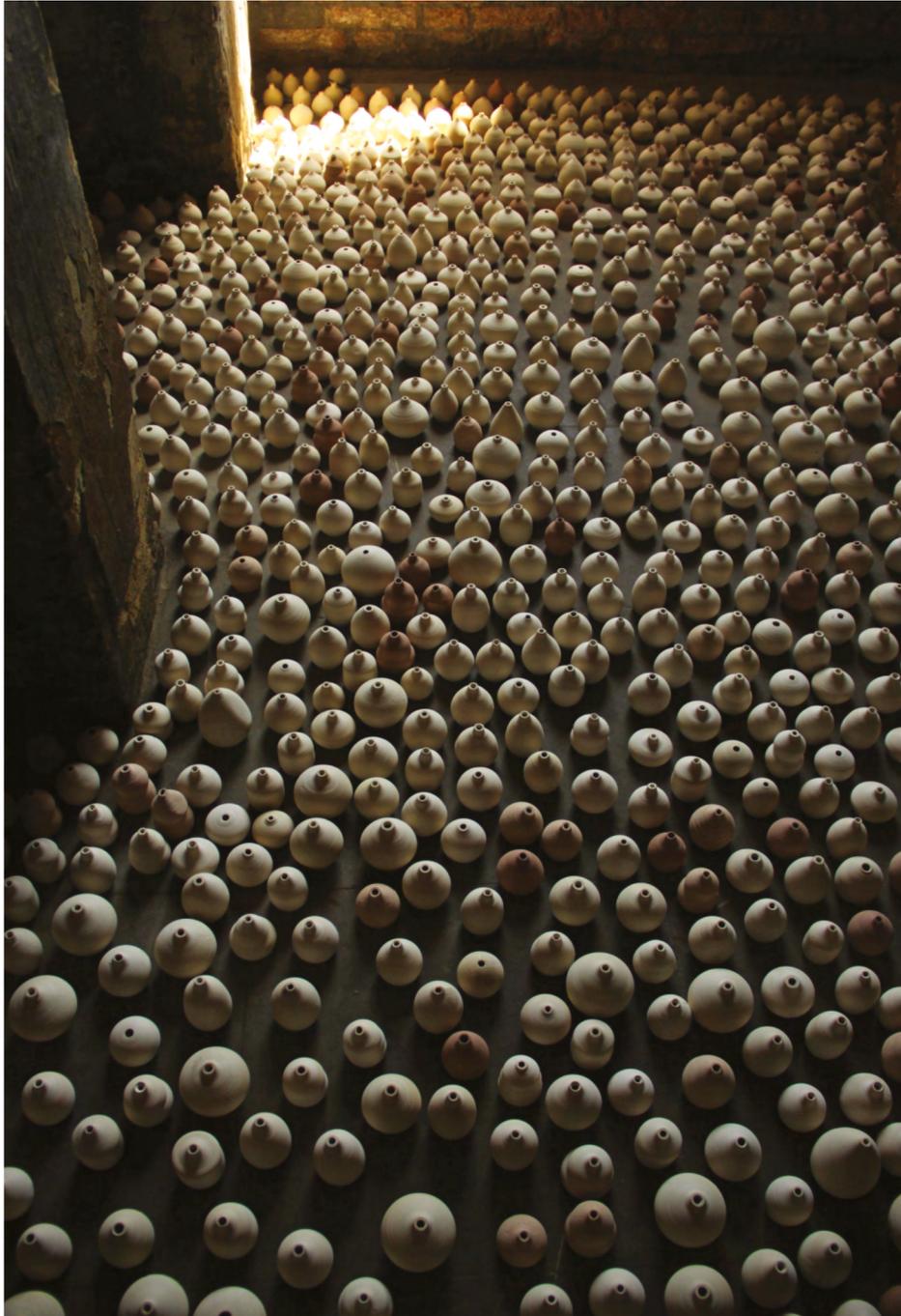
7. Liang Yuanwei. *I Plea: Rain*. China Pavillon. Venice Art Biennale 2011.

When visitors reach the main aisle of the cistern, they can see the installation *Snow Melting into the Lotus* created by Pan Gongkai. Pan is both an ink and water painter and conceptual artist, who has experienced and then more deeply explored the contradictions between the traditional and the contemporary, Chinese and Western culture, which according to Pan's interpretation, can both co-exist and be "harmonious in difference." When visitors go through the installation, they experience the pleasantly cool smell of lotus (fig. 8).



8. Pan Gongkai. *Snow melting in lotus*. China Pavillon. Venice Art Biennale 2011.

On the ground of the tank farm, visitors can see thousands of small ceramic medicine pots. These belong to the installation *All Matters Are Visible* created by Yang Maoyuan (fig. 9).



9. Yang Maoyuan. *All things are visible*. China Pavillon. Venice Art Biennale 2011.

The pots contain only the smells of herbal medicine without the actual medicine. This installation evokes the theory of traditional Chinese medicine and its current situation. “According to the theory of traditional Chinese medicine, all things are visible, including the acupuncture points, meridians and collaterals which do not exist at all to modern science,” Yang says, “however, the theory which makes all things visible is invisible to our common sense today.” (Fig. 10).



10. Yang Maoyuan. *All things are visible*. China Pavillon. Venice Art Biennale 2011.

Lucky visitors can get, by chance, one small pot as a gift. What mysteriously pervades the exhibition space is the installation *Empty Incense* created by Yuan Gong (fig. 11). Visitors can watch the incense fog and listen to the music through MP4 and IPAD, but the incense component of the artwork is hidden to them.



11. Yuan Gong. *Empty sense*. China Pavillon. Venice Art Biennale 2011.

Yuan says, “I hope this installation can catch the Zen-Buddhist soul.” Richard Vine particularly appreciates the installation created by Yuan:

Perhaps the most memorable work in this year’s Chinese pavilion was the least material. Yuan Gong’s dry-ice fog, periodically arising on the lawn and simultaneously filling the interior, recalls the misty space of traditional *shan shui* (mountain water) painting. But it also evokes the subtlety, pliability and, finally, enveloping pervasiveness with which Chinese culture has for millennia absorbed its would-be conquerors.²² (Fig. 12).

22 Richard Vance, “China’s New Normal in Venice,” see <http://www.artinamericamagazine.com/news-opinion/the-market/2011-06-15/china-venice-biennale/print/> Accessed 1/20/2012.



12. Yuan Gong, *Empty sense*. China Pavillon. Venice Art Biennale 2011.

The works exhibited in the Chinese pavilion as a whole, I hope, create a fantastic sensuous world. The works are not only for the eyes, but also for the ears, the nose, the tongue and skin. All five senses can be excited and affected and so a special feeling, emotion and mood – a particular, aesthetic quality or experience -- can be created in the visitors, an aesthetic object that cannot be similarly produced by visual representational techniques. The only way for perceiving and experiencing the works is to present oneself in the Chinese pavilion. What I did is to extend the bounds of art, making an art for the whole body. Unlike Beecroft and Toma, we didn't appropriate the body as object of art; we created art for the living body or soma.

4. An Aesthetic Turn?

The contemporary art world has been dominated by conceptual art and neoconceptual art since the 1970s. The most important aspect of conceptual artworks is not skill or aesthetic property but idea or concept. The result of this conceptual turn or linguistic turn in the contemporary art world is, as Arthur Danto and others have observed, the end of art.

Contemporary conceptual art is losing its power and attractions. Maybe it is time for art to return to the aesthetic. Richard Shusterman gave his *Pragmatist Aesthetics* (1992) the subtitle, “*Living Beauty: Rethinking Art*.” Dave Hickey predicted in 1993 that beauty would be the dominant issue of the next decade.²³ By the same token, Donald Kuspit asked that artists should return art to the studio and aesthetic transcendence. This is not simply a return to the idea of the old master. The new art “is neither traditional nor avant-garde, but a combination of the two. It brings together the spirituality and humanism of the Old masters and the innovation and criticality of the Modern masters. It is a New Old Master.”²⁴ Denis Dutton bluntly criticized contemporary conceptual art as “coming up with concepts that capture the attention of the art market.” “The appreciation of contemporary conceptual art, ...depends not on immediately recognizable skill, but on how the work is situated in today’s intellectual zeitgeist.... Future generations, no longer engaged by our art ‘concepts’ and unable to divine any special skill or emotional expression in the work, may lose interest in it as a medium for financial speculation and relegate it to the realm of historical curiosity.”²⁵

If we can distinguish art from philosophy which is dominated by concepts, in other words, if we would like to save art from reaching its end in philosophy, we should keep art in the area of the aesthetic. Art with “the sensuous in all its glory,” borrowing the wording from Mikel Dufrenne,²⁶ is becoming more important in this cyber age. Shusterman tells a futuristic cyborg parable:

Imagine two visually identical art viewers who offer identical interpretations of the very powerful paintings and poems before them. One is a human who thrills to what he sees and interprets. The other, however, is only a cyborg who, experiencing no qualia, feels no pleasure, indeed no emotion at all, but merely mechanically processes the perceptual and artworld data to deliver his interpretative propositions. We would surely say here that the cyborg, in an important sense, doesn’t really understand these works. He doesn’t, in a big way, get the point of such art, even if he recognizes that some feeling he cannot feel is somehow appropriate. For much of the point is precisely to feel or savor art’s qualia and meaning, not just compute an interpretive output from the work’s signs and artworld context.²⁷

23 Dave Hickey, “Enter the Dragon: On the Vernacular of Beauty,” in *The Invisible Dragon: Four Essays on Beauty* (Los Angeles: Art Issues Press, 1993), 11.

24 Donald Kuspit, *The End of Art* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 182-183.

25 Denis Dutton, “Has Conceptual Art Jumped the Shark Tank?,” *New York Times*, October 16, 2009, A 27.

26 Mikel Dufrenne, “Painting, Forever,” in *In the Presence of the Sensuous* (Atlantic Highlands, NJ: Humanities Press, 1990), 139.

27 Richard Shusterman, *Performing Live: Aesthetic Alternatives for the Ends of Art* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2000), 30-31.

I agree with Shusterman: “Even if the cyborg’s interpretive propositions were descriptively more accurate than the human being’s, we would still say that the human’s general response to art was superior and that the cyborg, since he feels absolutely nothing, does not really grasp what art is all about.”²⁸ But, this claim is only valid with respect to “the very powerful paintings and poems.” As for the case of conceptual art, wouldn’t we be less likely to say that the human’s general response to art is superior to the cyborg’s? Perhaps we could loosely say that “the very powerful paintings and poems” are art for human beings, while conceptual art is art for cyborgs. In other words, “the very powerful paintings and poems” educate us as human beings, while conceptual art educates cyborgs. It seems not too much of an exaggeration to argue that without the aesthetic sensibility embedded in art, we human beings might be transformed into cyborgs.

Endnotes

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²⁸ Shusterman, *Performing Live*, 31.

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