

Somaesthetics: Methodological Solipsism or Truthfulness?

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Keywords: *Hermeneutics, Somaesthetics, Method, Situation, Performativity.*

Somaesthetics explores the function and significance of the human body in aesthetic experiences. It extends beyond the realm of art and considers the relevance of the human body in aesthetic encounters across various fields and domains. The experiencing body can be described from both a first-person and a third-person perspective. The third-person perspective typically provides insights into the bodies and bodily experiences of individuals other than the observer. In contrast, the first-person perspective describes and analyzes one's own experiences, which are inherently embodied. This brief article contemplates the methodological challenges associated with observing oneself from a first-person perspective.

The foundational methodological paradigm of Western science is observation. Scientific observation is understood as and operationalized by inserting a distinction between the observer (the subject or agent) and the observed (the passive object). Furthermore, the scientific object is also created by inserting distinctions between what is captured and what lies outside the applied method of observation. This paradigmatic axiom of observation does not allow for simultaneous awareness of the observer and the observed. The observer and their observation are blind spots that can only be illuminated by another observation. In this case, the observer tries to observe their own observation. However, as Merleau-Ponty (2002) asserted, this is difficult because every observation is always of something, and an observation of an observation will immediately attempt to return to the primary observation of that something. Normally, the third-person approach is methodologically uncontested, as long as the investigation specifies precisely what is observed and how. Third-person investigations can be accomplished using qualitative and quantitative methods or blended approaches.

Allow me to be more specific: My research interest lies within the field of movements in general and specifically in dance. I am interested in the performative dimensions and aesthetic experiences of movement. A third-person perspective investigation of the aesthetics of movement requires, or rather forms, an external object; this might be observed or measured movements of other individuals, such as dancers or athletes, or experiences of individuals in motion. I could select a distinct group of informants and formulate a well-defined topic for my investigation. Based on this, I can apply qualitative or quantitative methods. For instance, I can choose to conduct interviews, posing specific questions to my informants. Alternatively, it might be more appropriate to create a survey targeting a larger number of informants. As an investigator, I can also apply ethnographic research methods and observe the informants through notes, video, photos, and so on. I can also use quantitative methods to measure particular properties of the informants' movements. These measurements can include the movements' extension in space, their velocity and acceleration, and the amount of muscle power used, among other factors. This type of data might provide insights into the aesthetics of movement when observed. Dance choreographies take these features into consideration when designing movements with distinct aesthetic appeals.

Another way of studying aesthetic experiences is by measuring physical responses during such experiences, such as changes in heart rate, sweat production, and other indicators of

arousal. More advanced technologies can measure brain activity using BCI (brain-computer interface) technologies, such as EEG or other neuroimaging techniques, which track fluctuations in activities in different brain areas. Analyses of this data can provide information about which cognitive functions are involved in aesthetic experiences, such as the sensation of beauty. However, the drawback of these technologies is that the experiencing subject is confined to clinical test settings that only allow for measuring the perception of certain forms of aesthetic expression that require a motionless body, mostly visual perception of images or auditory perception of sound and music.

The soundness of these approaches depends, in part, on the visible reflectivity of the observer and the observation itself; black spots are created when data production is not described and critically assessed. At least since the advent of quantum physics, there is no doubt that the investigator and the setup of the measurement have a determining influence on the outcome of the investigation. For instance, the seemingly simple method of conducting an interview (though it is by no means a simple task) depends not only on the quality and precision of the interviewees' recollection and their ability to express aesthetic experiences with words but also on the interviewer's capacity to create a conducive setting and atmosphere. Especially in the case of interviews and phenomenology-based surveys, these are third-person approaches to first-person experiences. Academic validity seems to arise from the evaluative and reflective stance of the researcher rather than from the firsthand experience of the informant. This often results in first-person experiences being conveyed in the second person (Petitmengin, 2006).

However, the aim of this short paper is not to discuss these types of academic investigations as examples of scientific methodology based on observation. I mention these types solely as background information for a discussion of first-person approaches and their challenging status as academic methodology. In aesthetics, first-person observation involves investigating one's own aesthetic experiences. Academically, this is generally not accepted or, at least, is frowned upon because this method appears to blur the clear distinction between the observer and the observed. The observing subject becomes the object of observation. I claim, however, that philosophical aesthetics is historically based on precisely this methodology. Its academic trick is to render the observer invisible. This is achieved by focusing on the object of observation, such as an artwork, design artifact, or performative expressions like dance and theatre. This type of observation is presented as an analysis of the aesthetic features of an external object. It should not come as a surprise that especially analytical aesthetics is preoccupied with identifying and discussing the aesthetic properties of objects. At the very least, aesthetic properties of external objects provide a basis for aesthetic experiences and sentiments that appears to be consistent for everyone.

Yet, aesthetics as an academic discipline was launched as the study of sensory cognition. Most continental Western philosophy acknowledges the perceiving subject as the producer of aesthetic sentiments, such as the sentiment of beauty. This led to the introduction of subjective taste and aesthetic judgment during the 18th century. According to this theoretical position, an object is aesthetically perceived, contemplated, and judged (e.g., Hume, 2000; Hutcheson, 1726; Kant, 2007). Academic investigations of aesthetic perceptions, therefore, involve studying subjects as they experience objects aesthetically, be it art, nature, or design. Philosophical aesthetics typically does not employ empirical methods to measure the perceiving subject. This means that the philosopher is, in fact, investigating their own sensations and perceptions by adopting a reflective stance towards themselves, a form of introspection guided by existing aesthetic theories.

Baumgarten's notion of aesthetics, however, includes a pragmatic and practical ambition: to exercise the faculty of sense-perception and the capacity to create aesthetic artifacts (Baumgarten, 1750), primarily through texts in his case. Somaesthetics shares similar ambitions but with an extended focus on the sentient body, the soma (Shusterman, 1999). Somaesthetics regards the soma as the integration of the body and mind or, more accurately, it does not accept the observational distinction between the body (as the material means of observation) and the mind (as the agent of observation) but proposes the soma as an operational entity capable of perception and action. One thing is clear: Baumgarten's and somaesthetics' practical ambitions challenge and complicate the scientific paradigms of observation, which involve the insertion of distinctions and a focus on the object.

As mentioned earlier, I can observe and analyze other people's aesthetic experiences and practices by applying various academic methodologies presented earlier. Most papers and books that advance aesthetics empirically are based on observations of others. The academic observer appears to be in the clear because they do not compromise the data and findings with their (messy and irrational) subjectivity; instead, they scrutinize the rationalities and irrationalities of the observed experiencer. Clearly, this is a valid approach that can lead to new insights into the nature and different functions of aesthetic perception.

However, investigating one's own aesthetic perception and practice opens a completely different field where unmediated sensory experiences play the most important role. The downside is that the focus on one's practice, which I consider an essential dimension of aesthetics, complicates and blurs the lines of academic observation. In this case, the observer is also the observed, and the subject-object distinction as a theoretical and methodological anchor is lost because the object (in my case, my own movement) seems to merge with the experiencing subject. According to this paradigm, the agential subject cannot simultaneously be an experiencing subject and an experienced object. On the other hand, to fully experience and appreciate my own movements, there must be some form of objectivization¹ of my movements because any form of awareness is based on the insertion of observational distinctions that generate objectivizations.² What would such objectivization of one's own movements in the moment of action look like?

Shusterman (1999) describes the foundation of somaesthetics as consisting of three pillars: analysis, pragmatics, and practice, indicating that practice is an important part of (philosophical) aesthetics. However, in his writings, there is a missing epistemological link between analysis (theory) and practice (action). Both appear to contribute to each other, but how? One could be satisfied with the assertion that the fields of abstraction (theory) and concrete particularity (practice) are distinct fields that inform each other by being each other's experiential and conceptual background. This seems to be an acceptable explanation when the objects of analysis and perceptual practice are different, and when I am not investigating my own practice. But when we want to analyze the aesthetic experience of myself as an agent (a dancer, an actor, a

1 I use the term objectivisation to mark a difference to objectification as a psychological projection onto external objects. In my context, objectivisation is the creation of the possibility of an inner awareness of ongoing actions and perceptions.

2 For instance, Luhmann's system theory claims that any system operates by overserving its surroundings, which means drawing a distinction between inside and outside. Furthermore, every system observes by means of an inherent code. This generalized code enables system operations by detecting what is important for precisely the type of system in question. Before Luhmann, Kant and later Plessner pointed to the importance of the distinction between the inner and the outer. For Kant, internal (transcendental) rules of perception (understanding) that create external objects (objectivity) are the precondition for self-consciousness. Plessner, on the other hand, conceptualizes the different ways living beings handle the border between themselves and their environment as the self-positioning of the being, which is seen as the determinate characteristic for living beings and their developmental status. Modern neuroscience claims the existence of high-level neural centers that monitor (and modify, if necessary) the body's metabolism, which is dependent on both inner and outer conditions.

participant in interactive art, or just in everyday actions), then the object of perception and analysis is one's own actions. In this case, the linkage between analysis and practice must be direct: theory must emerge from practice, and, I would like to add, practice must incorporate theory. The danger of this methodological approach is epistemic solipsism. The promise is a break with the Cartesian observational split that has haunted Western discourse for a long time.

In my opinion, it is necessary to methodologically support this aesthetic reintegration, even if it appears to sacrifice academic clarity, which, conversely, often requires simplifications. One's own experiences are inherently complex, blurring the line between the observed object and the observing, reflective subject, as well as the distinction between materiality and imagination. Dewey has previously discussed this idea, wherein aesthetic experience combines the "meanings imaginatively summoned" (Dewey, 1980: 274) with the material essence of the artwork (in my case, the physicality of movement) and the tangible presence of the observer. This aspect constitutes the exceptional nature of aesthetic experience and poses a thought-provoking challenge, particularly to systematic philosophical thinking (Dewey, 1980). Dewey's critique of the intertwined unity of the materiality of artwork and the imagination of the perceiver as a criticism of philosophical discourse remains relevant. In philosophical aesthetics, artifacts are often merely employed as sporadic examples to support a philosophical argument; artifacts are not the experiential foundation for theoretical arguments.

However, the background of Dewey's criticism still revolves around an ontological differentiation between the experiencer and the artwork. According to him, the external artwork enables us to have aesthetic experiences and facilitates communal understanding. In an aesthetics of one's own actions, on the other hand, the subject's actions become the objects of inquiry. This realm of practice presents an additional challenge to academic conceptualizations and underlying methodological axioms.

Clearly, every academic exploration of aesthetic experiences necessitates the consideration and discussion of existing concepts, propositions, and fragments of already established aesthetic theories. However, when it comes to investigating the aesthetics of one's own actions, the selection of these abstract concepts can only be grounded in one's own personal experiences (which, again, are influenced by one's knowledge of aesthetics theories). In other words, one methodological challenge lies in incorporating the experiential dimension as an integral part of theory development, not solely when writing at one's desk as an act of recalling, but also within the context of practical engagement. An (aesthetic) theory must be seen as a framework for perceiving and understanding the world, not merely as a collection of more or less normative propositions and values. In the case of man-made artifacts and situations, aesthetic theories also frame potential actions toward the perceived object or situation. For instance, knowledge about the aesthetics of dance frames not only our experience of dance performances but also provides us with a means to create dance sequences ourselves. Needless to say, dancing or instructing dancers also requires many other competences. My assertion necessarily implies that any aesthetic experience inherently contains and triggers theoretical elements. My theoretical undertaking must be linked to concrete and specific concepts derived from my direct aesthetic experiences, both in the realms of action and writing. In this regard, it is essential to provide more concrete and practical explanations.

As already mentioned, my field of investigation is dance, for instance, embraced couple dance such as waltz, tango, rumba, and many more. Every dancer, whether professional or not, must be able to differentiate the diverse features and facets that together make up a particular dance. The dancer needs to somatically feel and understand this dance's distinct musical features

(rhythmic and melodic forms) and its distinct style of moving together. A style is made up of discrete qualities, such as the characteristic embrace of many social dances, which is made up of different positions of the right and left arms, how the bodies relate to each other, and the varying distances between the dancers, the somatic interaction between the dancers made up of tension and release phases. The distinct elements of a body technique elicit a dance's specific feeling. These traits must be understood as both body postures and concepts. The concept of an embrace derives from the somatic feeling of physically enclosing an object or another being and, conversely, of being enclosed by another and perhaps being one agential entity. We understand the characteristic features of these dances through concepts. They also help us learn to dance. Yet we dance and sense postures and movement sequences, not concepts. Thus, our experiences must be understood as integrations of bodily actions and cognitive concepts. Dewey refers to James, who suggested that the term "experience" is a "double-barreled" one:

"It is "double-barreled" in that it recognizes, in its primary integrity, no division between act and material, subject and object, but contains them both in an unanalyzed totality. "Thing" and "thought," as James says in the same connection, are single-barreled; they refer to products discriminated by reflection out of primary experience." (Dewey, 1998: 8)

Concepts primarily structure the empirical world of dance as fields of action and reaction, not as detached descriptions. In other words, we sense basic concepts. Noë asserts:

"But just as there is no sharp line between the personal and the subpersonal, so there is no sharp line between the conceptual and the nonconceptual. Indeed, it may be that sensorimotor skills deserve to be thought of as primitive conceptual skills, even if, as is frequently the case, they are subpersonal." (Noë, 2004: 31)

Sensorimotor skills are not solely motor skills but also awareness skills, whether at a personal or subpersonal level. Concretely, I not only need to comprehend the structure and style of a specific dance, but while dancing, I must also analyze what is going on with my partner's, my own, and all the other dancers' movements to be able to initiate and complete the next move. Here, analyzing in action means making potential selections that create action possibilities. Selections are not yet actions but ongoing assessments of the situation in the light of known and incorporated dance moves in terms of their possible initiation as the next step. Analysis as potential action selections is very concrete, yet it already entails a categorial ordering in types of moves. This applies primarily to improvised dance, but also choreographed dancing is not only automatized operations because the dancers must be aware of their partner and adjust the quality of their movement to each other. The same applies, for instance, also to classical music. Here, awareness does not mean the selection of possible melodic actions, but rather the alignment of the pre-given action (playing a distinct tone) to the present situation in terms of timbre, rhythm, expression, etc. For the audience, the perception of music and dance entails ongoing expectation of the next move, tone, or harmony to come. Enjoying performative arts is not solely a passive perception; perception is always active because the seen and heard is a neurological re-enactment that includes triggered expectation (e.g., Freedberg & Gallese, 2007; Gallese, 2018).

Analyzing at this level is not an intellectual exercise, but rather an awareness deeply rooted in the perception of movement characteristics. These features include a movement's energy,

direction, pace, and rhythm. I claim that perceived movement characteristics are already proto-theoretical concepts, enabling the dancer to comprehend the situation and respond accordingly. The act of observing and selecting movements represents the conceptual realm of the dance, facilitating the identification of potential actions in a given scenario. In other words, the dancer's conceptual understanding is influenced by their sensorimotor skills. "If sensorimotor skills are a kind of simple concept, then perceptual experience depends on conceptual understanding, albeit of a special and primitive sort" (Noë, 2004: 184). Awareness, including potential next actions, is the source for both action and theorization.

Here, I do not want to elaborate further on Noë's interesting contention³ (which is surely influenced by Gallese & Lakoff, 2005, and Lakoff & Johnson, 1999). Instead, I want to focus on the notion of awareness. I assume that not many within the academic community would negate the assertion that awareness is necessary for both theorization and action. Indeed, scientific observation is one means of creating awareness (in the form of knowledge). This also entails the awareness of things and processes that cannot be sensed directly with our sense organs. Scientists invent apparatuses that can make us aware of unsensible objects, particles, and mechanisms. But when it comes to aesthetics, which is intrinsically bound to our sensing body and sensory perception, the perfection of this apparatus of awareness (the soma) is disapproved of but simply taken as a naturally given (as long as we are healthy). Even the fact that one of art's (or rather art museum's) pedagogical functions is to create a framework for individual sensibilization, understood as the exercise of our sensory capacities, must be taken as an argument for the necessity of practice for philosophical aesthetics. Sensory practice seems to be implied in the act of doing philosophy.

This is precisely my concern: one of the methodological consequences of my elaborations is that practice must be an inherent and recognized part of aesthetics. This must be evident when the object of the investigation is the experience of one's own actions. However, each type of aesthetic experience has its own type of practice that somatically involves the perceiving agent as a sensing and acting being. Philosophical aesthetics must acknowledge this. Obviously, one can write about activities or objects without being a practitioner of that activity. One must not necessarily be an actor to investigate theater, a painter to write about painting, or a gardener to ponder the aesthetics of nature. Nonetheless, experienced practice should not be a menace to academic quality; on the contrary, it should enhance it. There will always be a practical and somatic relationship and entanglement with the investigated activity or object, and this should always be a reflected part of the investigation. Writing about the aesthetics of nature, one must be out there, in the wild nature or in the designed nature of gardens. Being in the wild nature means hiking, skiing, or biking; otherwise, one is just a tourist looking at it from a distance but not grasping its sensory bearing. An aesthetic investigation of designed gardens must somehow include the practice of gardening as a source of pleasure, experience, and knowledge. Doing philosophical aesthetics should always mean being aware of oneself as an integrated part of the subject under investigation.

This short paper is a praise for practice-based academic investigations. I can, of course, analyze the dance of others, but my analysis is much more comprehensive when it incorporates my somatic awareness and experiences of dancing. Doing aesthetics means being somatically engaged in the world as a source of sentient experiences. Dance should not be a commodity in

³ Enactivism, a specific approach in cognitive science, tries to precisely prove this because their theories are based on the naturalism of dynamic system theory that at its core has the interdependence of living entities and their surroundings (e.g., Maturana, Varela, Gibson). Every cognition is an act of securing the living system.

the experience economy to be perceived at a distance like spectacular landscapes viewed only to be documented as the background for selfies. For me, dancing is a practice in somatic awareness that intersects concepts with actions.

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