

## Somaesthetics and future practices of "Doing" aesthetics

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**Abstract:** *In this contribution, I aim to illustrate how the discipline of Somaesthetics is developed not only theoretically but also from an application and practical standpoint. Indeed, in the examples I provide, we can observe the application of Somaesthetics within three areas: 1. Dwelling, 2. Architectural design and processing within design courses, 3. The concept of urban involvement through the contribution of Man in Gold. My intention is to explore the latest developments in Somaesthetics within the fundamental context of creative action in design and architecture.*

**Keywords:** *Creation, Practice, Discipline, Architecture, Dwelling.*

### 1. Some good methodological premises

I am very pleased to participate in such an engaging and stimulating debate about the methodological approach of Somaesthetics. First, I would like to point out that the moment we delve into the realm of Somaesthetics, we do so as a full-fledged *discipline, rather than merely exploring a theoretical concept* (Shusterman, 2000, 1999).

Already in itself, therefore, Somaesthetics demands the development of its own methodology. In fact, Shusterman takes the systemic programming of aesthetics directly from its theoretical founder, Baumgarten (1750). In this regard, the systemic question of the philosophical discipline of aesthetics, avails itself of a reconstructive quality, which Shusterman wants to add regarding the practical implication:

*“Intriguing as these inquiries are, my prime goals here are reconstructive rather than historical: (1) to revive Baumgarten’s idea of aesthetics as a life-improving cognitive discipline that extends far beyond questions of beauty and fine arts and that involves both theory and practical exercise; (2) to end the neglect of the body that Baumgarten disastrously introduced into aesthetics (a neglect intensified by the great idealist tradition in nineteenth-century aesthetics); (3) to propose an enlarged, somatically centered field, Somaesthetics, that can contribute significantly to many crucial philosophical concerns, thus enabling philosophy to more successfully redeem its original role as an art of living”* (Shusterman, 2000, pp. 266 – 267).

Practical experience is an integral part of Shusterman's disciplinary proposition and is almost always (not always) related to improved quality of life. The fundamental concept is, in my view, the aspect of the three dimensions of Somaesthetics also recalled by Heinrich: 1) Analytical Somaesthetics; 2) Pragmatic Somaesthetics; and 3) Practical Somaesthetics. While the first two types are contextualized in the domains of knowledge and prescription, the last type, the practical one, is inscribed in “... All about actually practicing such care through intelligently disciplined body work aimed at somatic self-improvement” (Shusterman, 2000, p.276). I emphasize "not always," because the realm of "practice" and "experience" is often described or used by Shusterman

in various spheres, such as those of performing arts, music, popular contexts, underground cultures, and notably, what is now called *everyday aesthetics* (Saito, 2007).

I found particularly interesting the proposition of Falk Heinrich about the practice of Somaesthetics: *Philosophical aesthetics normally does not apply empirical methods somehow measuring the perceiving subject. This means that the philosopher actually is investigating their own sensations and perceptions by establishing a reflective stance towards themselves, a kind of introspection with the help of already existing aesthetic theories.*

In fact, there is always a kind of fear in the philosophical world, especially the academic world, in wanting to step out of the box and put into practice the aesthetic theories on which one researches. I must confess, that when I first encountered Somaesthetics, I finally found a dimension that I had been trying to enter as a young researcher for some time. A dimension scientifically proven but with the possibility of "experiencing" what one is working on.

*I first had a similar approach to the world of the contemporary Imaginary and with an author considered not very classical: Gaston Bachelard. Bachelard, in fact, introduces in his philosophical system, two totally opposite lines of thought: the epistemological one and the phenomenological-aesthetic one related to the world of natural elements and reverie (Alison, 2020).*

This almost bipolar view in Bachelard's philosophical method prompted me to recognize the unique possibility in philosophy - that methodology could be enriched based on the preceding theoretical framework. Regarding the practical implication, Bachelard introduces a fundamental concept in his philosophy, that of material imagination. Bachelard, in his extensive theorization of the philosophical dimension of images, first and foremost establishes a clear demarcation between material imagination and formal imagination (Bachelard, 1942). The images he defines as "material" respond to dynamics of combination through which material elements accord. Water, earth, air, and fire represent not only natural elements, but they also find resonance within the realm of the creative imagination. This introduction to material imagination can point out how, in the *production craft*, one can distinguish the dynamic value of matter. The very image of the craftsman inspired by matter refers us to another Bachelardian, that of the pétrisseur, or the one who works the material of dough or the combination of the two elements of earth and water. The so-called *pétrissage* includes the working by hand of the material through a real discernment of reality. Bachelard is a prime example that came to mind, regarding the production of an artifact, which represents a form of knowledge.

Continuing with Heinrich's methodological proposal, another passage for which I totally agree is: "In other words, one methodological challenge lies in incorporating the experiential dimension as an integral part of theory development, not solely when writing at my desk as an act of recalling, but also within the context of practical engagement."

Practical involvement must belong to the apparatus of knowledge, first, to find the objectivity of knowledge but also its concreteness. Somaesthetics, in this regard, is a comprehensive discipline since it insists on multiple aspects without leaving out the application context as fundamental. And in this sense, I echo the sentiments expressed by Max Rynnänen: "By 'rehearsing' and practicing – reading, listening, talking – we learn to improvise in a variety of situations. There are no rules for how to play football or how to play jazz guitar when we go to the top, although it is useful to train different kicks and situations, and, in guitar playing, learn chords, modalities and licks/riffs played by masters. You have to, though, have tekhnē for it (technique, skill,

practice), and poiesis, creativity to go with, but no one can say that there is a clear methodology for successful playing. And for success in philosophy, it is sometimes enough that a colleague says 'that is interesting'".

We live in an Era that, unfortunately, prioritizes skill enhancement over life improvement. The aspect of *poiesis*, which Ryyänen emphasizes, holds a significant place in Somaesthetics. That is free and sensitive creativity, decoupled from the concept of power but connected to the improvement of the quality of the self. And again, about the practical and solipsistic aspect:

*Like said, Falk's main interest is in the field of methodological problems in somaesthetics, which deals with "function and significance of the human body in aesthetic experiences" and has issues with "difficulties regarding the first-person observation of oneself." It is true that to some extent it is messy with subjective and objective points of view, if the main way of discussing phenomena is always one's own sensation, whether witnessing art or e.g., dancing, which is Falk's own take on this. Still, if one thinks of it, it is maybe not always problematic to be the observer and the observed at the same time. If anything, here could be thought of as methodological, it could be the interest in preciseness which has haunted philosophy since its origins. One problem is that philosophy has nearly always aimed too much for universality. (Ryyänen, 2023)*

In fact, the starting point is our body which represents the connection we have with the rest of the world, it is our perceptual "prius" (Merleau-Ponty, 1945), but at the same time, as Shusterman points out, it has considerable facets in the theoretical-philosophical treatment of the first part of the twentieth century (Shusterman, 2008).

In the second chapter of *Body Consciousness. A Philosophy of Mindfulness and Somaesthetics* titled *The Silent, Limping Body of Philosophy: Somatic Attention Deficit in Merleau-Ponty*, Shusterman points out how the father of perception theories uses the body from a uniquely material and non-experiential point of view. This underscores that the somatic aspect of the body implies experience, which is a fundamental aspect of putting somaesthetics into practice. Consequently, it is not enough to use the body as an object of connection to knowledge; instead, the "living body" is integral to the systematic nature of the Somaesthetics discipline. This is precisely why my exploration of the material experience of manual work, concerning material imagination, led me to examine the co-presence of the sentient body of the artisan, as well as that of the designer or architect.

Probably, the practical field is the one that has not only always fascinated me the most, but more importantly, it has always been how I communicate with students in Architecture schools. This is because, in architecture or design students, there is always a desire to search for a theoretical structure on which their creations are based. They are fascinated by the discourse of Somaesthetics because this discipline relates their work to academic stability based on *experience*. In this regard, I can cite an example that I think is important to understand how students need to get into the merits of their design and artistic experiences—that of *storytelling*. The exercises they are often asked to do are always practical, but in the background, they have the input of narrative to focus on the fundamental points of what they are creating. With final-year architecture students, within the Architectural Design workshops, I first propose creating "Phenomenological Maps" or "Drift Maps." They map the spaces of their inspections, which often occur in European suburbs, through their feelings and emotions. This form of storytelling,

which takes its cues from Debord's Situationism, helps them understand how to imagine and design future spaces in already existing spaces. These representational maps record Their emotional experience precisely (Alison, 2020). The experience aspect is not always the easiest to record because finding a similar way for all disciplines is complicated.

On the other hand, Drift Maps represent a small piece of how practical experience can enter the merits of a design dynamic in which the critical aspect is fundamental. In the next three paragraphs, I want to illustrate, instead, the theoretical aspects underlying the predominance of experience and practice within the discipline of Somaesthetics. Here, I have found the contexts of dwelling, architecture, and performativity in cities as helpful cues for creating further examples of recording.

## 2. Aesthetics and Somaesthetics of Dwelling

In May 2022, I had the pleasure of being invited by Max Rynnänen to deliver a lecture at the Aalto “*Space, Body, Objects, Atmosphere, Gender. Dwelling Manifesto*,” where I presented the advancement of my research regarding the aesthetics of dwelling. Indeed, this field of research is very broad, and in the discipline of Somaesthetics, I found several essential methodological insights.

Let's start with a more detailed presentation of the points of my research on living, which starts from a similar conception of the *Art of Living*. I would like to delve into the main points in my lecture. The starting point for the research is precisely the methodology I intend to undertake in this research. The first point is aptly titled: *Philosophical Methodology: Something of Popular - Something like Phenomena*. The references I have begun to use are extremely different as theoretical foundations, but very close as an approach to contextualizing practice or *praxis* in the phenomenological reading of dwelling, that is, of a *dasein* of dwelling. The first reference is Antonio Gramsci, who wrote in the *Prison Notebooks* (Gramsci, 1975), “...For the philosophy of *praxis*, being cannot be separated from thought, man from nature, activity from matter, subject from object. If one makes this *detachment*, one falls into one of the many forms of religion or into meaningless abstraction”.

I have intentionally italicized the two words, *praxis* and *detachment*, because they represent the heart of the problem. The choice to use Gramsci's idea into my research is influenced by Shusterman's use of him in the introduction to the Italian edition of *Pragmatist Aesthetics*: “I would like to recall the extraordinary contribution of Antonio Gramsci. He made to understanding *popular art*, also emphasizing in a penetrating way how such art cannot be confined to a simple demographic niche since the people themselves are not a homogeneous social or cultural group” (Shusterman, 2010, p. 27).

Another reference that plays a pivotal role in the introduction to my research on the aesthetics of living is John Dewey's concept of aesthetic experience as introduced in *Art as experience*: “... Recovering the continuity of esthetic experience with normal processes of living...” (Dewey, 2005, p. 16). The normal process of living would correspond to the “basic vital functions” [as dwelling] (Dewey, Ibidem). A second point in my presentation relates two other methodological concepts: Aesthetics, understood as *aisthesis*, and Neo-Phenomenology. Regarding the Greek term *aisthesis*, Shusterman, as well as Rynnänen, highlights a significant aspect, namely the meeting of *poiesis* and *techne*:

*The so-called Greek arts were not really because they were described as techne and poiesis, the modern conception and practice of art (nor event its Latin root) not yet*

*having been shaped... Experience of beauty and sublimity undoubtedly predate the eighteenth-century birth of aesthetic, but they cannot therefore be reasonably excluded from the domain of aesthetic experience. Indeed, the term "aesthetic" was introduced to account for and structure these prior experiences which were too various in quality to be subsumed under the term's "beauty" and "sublimity", too rich in meaning to be described as mere taste, and obviously too extensive to be circumscribed by the practice of art. (Shusterman, 2000, p. 48).*

Sensitive knowledge lends itself to a further fundamental concept, that of practice. Experience is fundamental when dealing with beauty. It is not enough to approach the sublime solely from a theoretical point of view; it must also be explored from a practical perspective.

When it comes to Neo-Phenomenology, it is imperative to delve deeper into the philosophical theorization of the concept of *Atmosphere*. In fact, Shusterman's reading of Atmospheres theory is often critical because it leaves no room for the soma to express itself practically but only as a proprioceptive subject. But shifting the topic to the methodological use of practice in the cognitive form of Somaesthetics, Neo-Phenomenology can help us have an additional suggestion:

*New Phenomenology, as I have conceived and developed it, aims to make their actual lives comprehensible to humans, that is, to make accessible again spontaneous life experience in continuous contemplation after having cleared artificial ideas prefigured in history. Spontaneous life experience in anything that happens to humans in a felt manner without their having intentionally constructed it. (Schmitz, 2019, p.44)*

*In its empirical humbleness of following up on spontaneous life experience instead of wanting to apodictically deliver ultimate justifications by means transcendental speculation or contemplating essences, New Phenomenology is marked by an openness which other branches of philosophy lack: its utility in the context of applied sciences... New Phenomenology has inspired other disciplines. We should, however, keep in mind that it has not yet had as much influence as it could and should have. Group one: Architecture [theory of dwelling, interior space, urban environments] ... (Schmitz, 2019, p.49).*

The experience of spontaneous living, as Hermann Schmitz points out, can be a useful subject for this methodological reading of ours. And about the methodology of an aesthetics of living, I have concluded: 1) Pragmatist Aesthetics: theorizes the active experience, 2) New Phenomenology: theorizes the passive experience, and 3) Dwelling is in the exact middle being both.

In Neo-Phenomenological passive experience, however, we must remember that there is the experience of spontaneous life, so there is the possibility of using the theory of Atmospheres in the methodological considerations of Somaesthetics as well.

### **3. Somaesthetics and Architecture**

Another area in which I have had the opportunity to practice and theorize somaesthetic methodology based on putting it into *practice* is architecture. Currently, I am working on the Italian translation and edition of an essay by Richard Shusterman entitled: *Somaesthetics and*

*Architecture. A critical option.* This essay was first presented as a lecture at the 11th International Conference of the Bauhaus - *Universität in Weimar* in 2009. A year later, in 2010, it was the subject of an expanded presentation at the *Haute Ecole d'Art et de Design* in Geneva. Later in 2012, it was published as the tenth chapter of the book: *Thinking through the body. Essays in Somaesthetics*.

This paper presents fundamental points for articulating somaesthetic methodology within the context of architecture. Indeed, Shusterman's contribution, in the French version, explicit underscores how critique, is fundamental in the context of improving the quality of life - a position closely aligned to the famous father of Modernism, Le Corbusier. Shusterman, also highlights other instances of critical approaches in the use of methodology, such within the Modern movement or the Bauhaus School, where a critical utopia is constituted (Shusterman, 2010, p. 9).

In discussing the role of criticism, Shusterman introduces the relationship between architecture and Somaesthetics and elucidates how the latter can provide critical input. The presentation of Somaesthetics in this architectural context is as follows:

*“Rooted in a classical pragmatist tradition that considers experience as a crucial philosophical concept for which the body is central, Somaesthetics is to critically study and cultivate, from a meliorative perspective the way we experience and use the living body (or the and use the living body (or soma) as a site of sensory appreciation [aisthesis] and creative self-shaping. Somaesthetics is therefore linked to knowledge, discourses, practices and bodily disciplines that structure or seek to refine such somatic attention. It is in fact a discipline that encompasses both theory and practice”* (Shusterman, 2010, p.16).

I would like to revise the definition of Somaesthetics because, even in the case of critical input, Shusterman reminds us that it is a discipline based on theory and *practice*. Somaesthetics, as Shusterman points out, carries a dual meaning: it emphasizes the perceptual role of the soma and its aesthetic applications in shaping the self and its environment while also serving as a means of evaluating the aesthetic qualities of other people and things (Shusterman, 2010, p.16). Furthermore, he adds that in his pursuit of pragmatist aesthetics, he arrived at the discipline of Somaesthetics to integrate the importance of bodily performance and especially aesthetic practice, not only confined to the field of Fine Arts but extending into different aspects of daily life (Shusterman, 2010, p.17). The experiential characteristic of Somaesthetics, is translated with architecture through the soma, which is the tool par excellence with all spatial articulations, through which to perceive and articulate space.

The soma is the crucial medium through which, architecture is generated and experienced (Shusterman, 2010, p.27). In relation to this dual function of the soma, Shusterman introduces a concept very dear to me, that of *shintai* taken up by architect Tadao Ando:

*A 'place' is not the absolute space of Newtonian physics, that is. a universal space, but a space with meaningful directionality and a heterogeneous density that is born of a relationship to what I choose to call shintai. (Shintai is ordinarily translated as body', but in my use of the word I do not intend to make a clear distinction between mind and body: by shintai I mean a union of spirit and flesh. It acknowledges the world and at the same time acknowledges the self.)* (Tadao Ando, 1995, p.453).

Shintai, deeply rooted in an already experiential theory, focuses its theoretical lens on the body's movement in space, understood as a somatic practice. In this regard, I had the opportunity to edit the Issue of the Journal of Somaesthetics *Body, Space, Architecture* - Vol. 8, No. 22 (2022). This volume featured a diverse array of contributions that resonated with each other, full of many keywords such as city, experience, soma, gesture, relationship, urbanism, built environment, and virtual (Alison, 2022). The common thread that ran through these contributions was the central theme of *practice*, also understood as experience.

#### 4. The Art of Living the City as a Man in Gold

A final example I would like to provide that illustrates the Somaesthetics methodology, is based on the importance of practice, featuring Shusterman's avatar of the Man in Gold. The Man in Gold is a practical representation of what Shusterman understands as the performance of the Somaesthetic discipline. Indeed, in presenting this alter-ego's birth, he introduces its creation's cause. The man in Gold approach comes from numerous requests from artists and attendees of Somaesthetics Workshops for practical examples of how to apply this theory to contemporary art creation (Shusterman, 2016, p.9). A second reason was that always featuring Shusterman as the protagonist within a photography session, in which he takes the photographs, brings him closer to thinking that he would feel more comfortable as the subject of the same pictures. (Shusterman, 2016, p.12). The third decisive cause was an encounter with the artist Yann Toma as part of a project that featured some philosophers chosen by the artist. Each philosopher was filmed presenting one of the key concepts of their work. Shusterman chose that of experience (Shusterman, 2016, p.13). A second opportunity to work with Toma was as part of the "Flux Radiants" project, in which Toma wanted to capture a person's energy through photography. For the occasion, Shusterman wore an outfit offered by Toma: a ballet suit that belonged to his parents, who were dancers at the Opera de Paris. The case was gilded and shiny. After the project shots, Shusterman describes his feelings this way: "I could no longer stay motionless. Some inner force compelled me to quiver and shake with irrepressible energy" (Shusterman, 2016, p.30). The Man in Gold was born spontaneously, like the Avatar that put Shusterman's body into representation. Same thing on the contrary, we cannot say about the Soma, who is invaded by his alter-ego.

Richard Shusterman meets the Man in Gold for the first time on June 12, 2010, in the medieval Abbey of Royaumont. The Man in Gold is expressed through the body's movements and the depth of space. What drives the Man in Gold to exist? Shusterman occasionally wonders about his host: fear and love (Shusterman, 2016, p.52) are the emotions that drive him to trust in someone other than himself. What truly fascinates me is the somatic analysis of his spatial predisposition.

In his experience, The Man in Gold has various experiences in very different cities. Cartagena, Paris, and New York are three of the many settings in which his performances have taken place. And the thing that intrigues me most about The Man in Gold is his ability to establish a "relationship" with each city, somatically experiencing its objects in an unconventional way (Alison, 2023). We can admire The Man in Gold on the top of a wall in a historic city in Colombia, running through the meadows in the South of France or weaving on the dock from which ferries set sail to New Jersey. The positions his body takes and his bodily experience of urban spaces hold profound significance for those researching the practical methodology of Somaesthetics. The Man in Gold embodies the example of Somaesthetics extending into everyday life and among the streets of a city. The Art of Living, an expression Shusterman often

uses, encompasses, above all, the everyday life that intensifies in the city. As a postscript to *Man in Gold*, I am pleased to mention another essay by Shusterman that underscores the practical implications of knowing how to use Somaesthetics.

In *Bodies in the Streets: The Soma, The City, and the Art of Living* (Shusterman, 2019), several insights are worth considering: 1) First, the analogies between the Soma and the City, which Shusterman also re-proposes in the world of architectural design (*Soma and Architecture*), 2) The relationship between "the crowd" and the individual in the streets, 3) The alienation and intoxication from the streets, a point where Shusterman further emphasizes the issue of bodies and their urban experiences, 4) The Self-Fashioning that the city suggests to the soma. Therefore, the intensification of the Soma's enactment also occurs through its surrounding space, which also constitutes it.

*Man in Gold* may represent today, a new methodological approach in its constitutive being. Or even better, it belongs to a putting into practice of Somaesthetics that fits into its methodology. In this regard, I subscribe to the conclusion of Stefano Marino's contribution:

*The methodological pluralism of somaesthetics, combined with its capacity to include in its theory (but also put into practice) certain transgressive, experimental and unmethodical practices, is particularly significant in this context, allowing us to recognize the value of methods in philosophy but at the same time their limits, and thus leading us to acknowledge the delicate dialectics between methodical and unmethodical aspects that is characteristic of philosophy and, in a sense, defines it.* (Marino, 2023)

A methodology that makes use of an experiential-sensitive practicality (dwelling), an embodied practicality in the design domain (architecture), a practicality of somaesthetic performance (*Man in Gold/ City*). A methodology, therefore open to new application scenarios that make their difference their richness.

## 5. Conclusions

This contribution of mine is to demonstrate and give examples of how "praxis" serves as the basis of the discipline of Somaesthetics. Currently, it is the role of researchers like us to thoroughly develop, as much as possible, a methodology capable of being based on cognitive experience.

In this regard, I would like to propose my latest research, which mainly concerns i) the aesthetics of living understood as an experiential form, ii) somatic involvement in the field of architecture, not only from a perceptual point of view but also from a design point of view, iii) considerations regarding a new way of experiencing the city.

These three strands often intersect, especially when we consider dwelling as a somatic activity and not only a theoretical one. Such an approach perfectly embodies the design modes of architecture and urbanism. Not surprisingly, Shusterman's interest lately has often focused on the relationship between public and private space regarding the new practical dimensions of Somaesthetics.

I am sure that this further glimpse into the future methodologies of Somaesthetics has the potential to further enrich the discipline's experiential foundation. I am confident that there is no reserve on the part of the more assiduous theorists but rather an openness to dialogue.



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