



# Journal of Somaesthetics

Volume 1, No 1, 2015

## Somaesthetics and Visual Art

[somaesthetics.aau.dk](http://somaesthetics.aau.dk)

## **Editorial Board**

### **Editors**

Stahl Stenslie (Denmark)

Richard Shusterman (US)

Else Marie Bukdahl (Denmark)

### **Associate editor**

Russell Pryba (US)

### **Assistant editor**

Carsten Friberg (Denmark)

## **Editorial Board**

Fred Maus (US)

Paul Taylor (US)

Martin Jay (US)

Mark Johnson (US)

ORLAN (France)

Bryan Turner (US/Australia)

### **Published by**

Aalborg University Press

### **Journal website**

somaesthetics.aau.dk

### **Journal design**

Zane Cerpina

### **With the generous support of**

The Obel Family Foundation and The Schmidt Family Foundation

© The Journal of Somaesthetics (JOS) 2015

© Individual contributors. The moral right of the authors has been asserted.

Art & Technology, Aalborg University

Rendsburggade 14, 9000 Denmark

Contact: somaestheticsjournal@gmail.com

ISBN: 978-87-7112-243-5

ISSN: 2246-8498

## Contents

Introduction to the Journal of Somaesthetics	4
Introduction to Issue Number 1: Somaesthetics and Visual Art	7
<b>Dialogues:</b>	
<b>Olafur Eliasson:</b> Interdisciplinary Approaches and their Interplay with his Art	8
<b>Stelarc:</b> On the Body as an Artistic Material	20
<b>Pan Gongkai:</b> Dialogue with Richard Shusterman on Philosophy, Art, and Life	42
<b>Articles:</b>	
<b>Peng Feng:</b> Somaesthetics and Its Consequences in Contemporary Art	86
<b>Max Rynnänen:</b> Throwing the Body Into the Fight: The Body as an Instrument in Political Art	108
<b>Eva Kit Wah MAN:</b> Metaphysics, Corporeality and Visuality: A Developmental and Comparative Review of the Discourses on Chinese Ink Painting	122
<b>Zhou Xian:</b> Representation and Visual Politics of the Extreme Body	144
<b>Else Marie Bukdahl :</b> Embodied Creation and Perception in Olafur Eliasson's and Carsten Höller's Projects	160
<b>Notes on Contributors</b>	182

# Introduction to the Journal of Somaesthetics

*Somaesthetics* is an interdisciplinary research project devoted to the critical study and meliorative cultivation of the experience and use of the living body (or soma) as a site of sensory appreciation (aesthesia) and creative self-stylization. An ameliorative discipline of both theory and practice, somaesthetics seeks to enrich not only our discursive knowledge of the body but also our lived somatic experience and performance; it aims to improve the meaning, understanding, efficacy, and beauty of our movements and of the environments to which our actions contribute and from which they also derive their energies and significance. To pursue these aims, somaesthetics is concerned with a wide diversity of knowledge forms, discourses, social practices and institutions, cultural traditions and values, and bodily disciplines that structure (or could improve) such somatic understanding and cultivation, and it is therefore an interdisciplinary project, in which theory and practice are closely connected and reciprocally nourish each other. It is not limited to one theoretical field, academic or professional vocabulary, cultural ideology, or particular set of bodily disciplines. Rather it aims to provide an overarching theoretical structure and a set of basic and versatile conceptual tools to enable a more fruitful interaction and integration of the very diverse forms of somatic knowledge currently being practiced and pursued. There is an impressive, even overwhelming abundance of discourse about the body in many disciplines of contemporary theory and commercial enterprise. But such somatic discourse typically lacks two important features. First, a structuring overview or architectonic that could integrate their very different discourses into a more productively coherent or interrelated field. It would be useful to have a broad framework (which does not mean a unified, highly consistent system) that could connect, for example, the discourse of biopolitics to the therapies of bioenergetics, the neuroscience of hand gestures to their aesthetic meaning in Nō theatre. The second feature lacking in most academic discourse on embodiment is a clear pragmatic orientation — something that the individual can clearly employ or apply to his or her life in terms of disciplines of improved somatic practice. Somaesthetics offers a way to address both these deficiencies.

As an interdisciplinary project, somaesthetic research cannot fit neatly into the standard disciplinary journals of academic scholarship. It therefore requires a journal of its own in which somaesthetic research on different topics and from diverse disciplines can come together and find a common readership

for productive, critical dialogue that will advance the somaesthetic project. The journal will begin by publishing two issues a year with each issue focusing on a specific topic. We have chosen an online format because this allows more freedom in the use of visual images and audiovisual clips. This first issue of the Journal of Somaesthetics deploys this freedom in its focus on Somaesthetics and the Visual Arts. Reflecting somaesthetics deep concern for practice and for a transcultural global perspective, this issue of the Journal includes dialogues with three important contemporary artists whose practice is internationally renowned and who stem from three different continents.

We hope you enjoy this first issue of the Journal. We are grateful to Aalborg University Press for hosting the Journal. If you are interested in participating further in the somaesthetics research project, you may wish to join the Somaesthetics Google group. To do so write to [bodymindculture@fau.edu](mailto:bodymindculture@fau.edu)



## **Introduction to Issue Number 1: Somaesthetics and Visual Art**

The body has long been an important theme in art, but in recent years somaesthetics has increasingly emerged not only as a way of understanding contemporary art forms (especially body art, performance, installation) but also as a perspective for enriching art-historical discourse and criticism in both Western and Asian cultures. By providing important insights into the embodied creative process and interaction between the viewer and artwork, somaesthetics can illuminate aspects of our artistic tradition whether of the Renaissance and Baroque periods or the classical Asian forms of calligraphy and inkwash painting. When somaesthetics is introduced into the world of art and art scholarship, it opens up “the golden cage of autonomous art,” providing room for a wide and dynamic range of interdisciplinary perspectives and research approaches. Many fine contributions have already discussed the somaesthetics of visual art (which somaesthetics shows to be more than merely visual), but there remain many important topics that require more study. This first issue of the *Journal of Somaesthetics* seeks to make a useful step in the systematic and collaborative study of the soma’s role in visual art. We hope that this will stimulate further contributions in this Journal and elsewhere.

# Olafur Eliasson

## Interdisciplinary Approaches and their Interplay with his Art

*In dialogue with Else Marie Bukdahl*

*“It is necessary to unlearn space in order to embody space.  
It is necessary to unlearn how we see in order to see with our bodies.  
It is necessary to unlearn knowledge of our body in three dimensions in  
order to recover the real dimensionality of our body.”*

*Olafur Eliasson, Unlearning Space – Spacing Unlearning.<sup>1</sup>*



1. Olafur Eliasson. Film still. *Your embodied garden*. 2013.<sup>2</sup>

---

1 Quoted in *Topology at Tate Modern*, November 2011 - June 2012, [http://ernahecey.com/files/FINAL\\_TOPOLOGY\\_PROGRAMME.pdf](http://ernahecey.com/files/FINAL_TOPOLOGY_PROGRAMME.pdf)

2 This film arose from a trip made by Olafur Eliasson to the Chinese scholar's gardens of Suzhou, China, with writer Hu Fang and gallerist Zhang Wei, choreographer Steen Koerner, organisers Lu Jia and Anna Engberg-Pedersen, graphic designers Huang Shan and Huang He, artists Julian Charriere and Thilo Frank, documentarist Tomas Gislason and landscape architect Günther Vogt.

## Introduction

This dialogue between Olafur Eliasson and Else Marie Bukdahl took place on the evening of November 24, 2014 at Eliasson's impressive studio in Copenhagen, which previously was the residence of the well-known Danish symbolist painter J. F. Willumsen. Thus even his studio shows an interplay between the local and the global and between tradition and innovation. Olafur Eliasson has always taken an interdisciplinary approach to his work – incorporating elements from fine art and aesthetics to science and social studies. Installation art has been very essential to him in that it takes the viewer's entire sensory experience into consideration. Overall, Eliasson's work seems to assert that contemporary art is activating more than the brain. It has progressed to affect the entire body of the viewer. That is why there are many parallels between his art projects and mind - body problems in philosophy, aesthetics, and especially in somaesthetics.

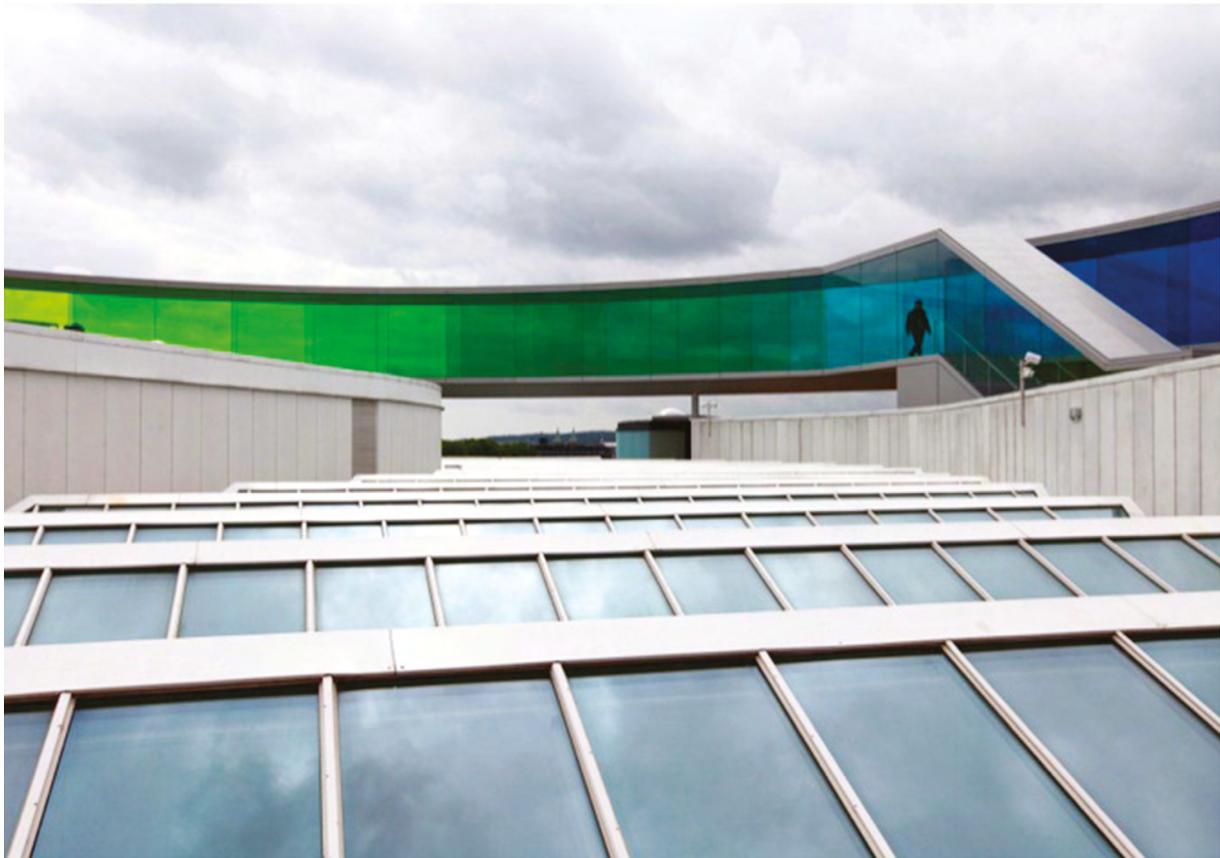
The following dialogue with Olafur Eliasson investigates his own interpretations of how he has merged the fields of art, architecture, science, and philosophy and has been sculpting a new interface between humanity and nature.

Else Marie Bukdahl

## The Dialogue

*The viewer's active role in the perception of art - a central concept in somaesthetics.*

**Marie Else Bukdahl (B):** *You have called one of your projects Your rainbow panorama (fig. 1). With the word "your" you want to stimulate the viewers' own experience and active participation.*



2. Olafur Eliasson. *Your rainbow panorama*. ARoS. Museum of Modern Art, Aarhus, Denmark 2006–2011.

**B:** *An important point in somaesthetics is the interaction between the individual (artist or viewer) and the environment that he or she engages. Aesthetic experience is therefore never passive, thus an artwork is not complete until the viewer has experienced and interpreted its particular qualities. Is this point of view also one of the main themes in your projects and in your conception of art as such?*

**Eliasson:** Yes, I have even sometimes been criticized for emphasizing this idea to the extent that it seems to suggest that people in earlier times were passive. Others

of my generation, who were also interested in phenomenology, were convinced that the notion of an active viewer was a discovery. I think that we need to emphasize two things: first, that the idea of the active viewer implies that we have to go back and discuss the role of the viewer and what enables a viewer to be an active viewer. That is why I consider not only the viewer, but also the viewing process itself, to be key. Instead of saying that there used to be passive viewers and now there are active viewers, it is important to point out that viewers have always been active; we just never really thought of them that way. The second thing is more contemporary: it is about considering the viewing process as a resource that would allow the viewer to be part of the viewing process and to evaluate the nature of it at the same time – an evaluation that happens as part of the experience. In this case, construction and deconstruction co-produce each other. It is stimulating to think about this in relation to my use of ‘your’ in the titles of artworks; it suggests on the one hand that it is you who is generating your experience and also that it is your responsibility to reflect upon the quality of the experience critically or with self-reflection. Also, when I say ‘your’, I am thinking of the artwork’s ability to hold you. It is not only about the awareness of yourself; it is also about the not-yet verbalized emotion within you. In that sense, it would be an interesting thought experiment to think about the artwork as something that is able to experience being viewed and also to experience itself as something that can evaluate the quality of being viewed. So it is not only the viewer who is active. The artwork takes an active stance because the object also has intentionality.

### ***Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology of perception.***

**B:** *Merleau-Ponty has explored the paradox that the human body “simultaneously sees and is seen. That which looks at all things can also look at itself.” This is why so many painters - such as Paul Klee - have said that things look at them: “In a forest, I have felt many times over that it was not I who looked at the forest. Some days I felt that the trees were looking at me, were speaking to me... I was there, listening ... I think that the painter must be penetrated by the universe and not want to penetrate it.”*<sup>3</sup> *You have discussed this theme in the book At se sig selv sans: Samtaler med Olafur Eliasson (2004). Is this concept still an important part of your concept of perception and in your art?*

---

<sup>3</sup> Maurice Merleau-Ponty, “Eye and Mind”, in *The Primacy of Perception*, Northwestern University Press, 1964, p. 162 and p. 167.

**Eliasson:** It is interesting that Klee's quote actually reflects what I just said. In the 90s I was studying a more phenomenological approach to sensing. I was interested in what conditions make us feel not just present here and now but also interdependent. If I make a drawing on a piece of paper, what consequences does that have? Can those consequences be read, in one way or another, within the drawing? This means that I consider the drawing in a more systematic way, as part of a network. I am also interested in the related question: what is the next stage after the drawing? As to Klee and the idea of creativity, I think there was a tendency at the time when he was working to think of creativity as happening within a single moment, where time and space were disregarded. Instead of focusing on creativity as a moment, I see it as movement. Before the drawing, there was an idea, and before the idea, maybe there was an intuition. And then it forms into an idea and becomes a sketch; the sketch becomes a drawing and maybe a painting, a sculpture, or a model. Then maybe it can be turned into a larger sculpture or even a house or a city or something bigger. In this process, creativity is not necessarily located at solitary points on this line of evolution; rather, each point has connections to what has gone on before and will happen afterwards, and to the time period in which it took place. Creativity lies in its context, its surroundings, which means it is also outside the drawing, because while the drawing itself might not necessarily be very creative, the way it impacts the world makes it creative.

***Body consciousness - an important term in contemporary aesthetics dealing with the body-mind problems.***

**B:** *Body consciousness, in the view of somaesthetics, has profound importance for our experience, perception, and action. Somatic awareness is an essential means for self-cultivation. "The body also works to unify space by serving as a bridge between the spaces of inner self and outer nature, and between physical and mental events."*

<sup>4</sup> *Does body consciousness or more directly - your own body consciousness - play an important role when you are exploring space, time, and memory and working with your large projects?*

**Eliasson:** Yes, it is important to me, and it is amazing that the role of the body is very rarely discussed in the art world. Vision is still the predominant theoretical tool, though once you move into the realm of theatre and performance this attitude changes. I like Shusterman's idea of connecting the notions of *soma* and *aesthetics*.

---

4 Richard Shusterman, *Body Consciousness. A philosophy of Mindfulness and Somaesthetics*, 2008, p. 145.

It reflects my view of the body as well. As I understand it, somaesthetics implies that you are not only capable of shaping but that you are also being shaped. The body learns from different layers of experience, both constituting and being constituted, as we know from phenomenology. When we talk about the body, we tend to refer to it more as a container, whereas somaesthetics, for me, has more to do with the activity in or around the container. In my work, the idea that every experience is colored by what is already cultivated, by what is stored in the soma, is essential. We often believe that thinking about an experience replaces that experience for us, that it is possible, for example, to know what it feels like to walk around inside my installation at *ARoS [Your rainbow panorama, 2006–11]* if you just think about it, if you describe it very well. And from this, we make the mistake of thinking that the description can be the work of art itself.

Actually I made the rainbow circular because I wanted to show that you can keep on walking and that there is no end to the narrative; unlike in a square, where you would be interested in the corners, the circle suggests that the walking itself is the primary activity. It might even indicate that in the galleries below, inside the museum, the sequence of walking from one painting to another also carries significance in terms of memory and expectations and the production of experience. This means that somaesthetic experience should also play a major role in the conception of architecture. But architects often underestimate this today, because their sense of temporality is very weak, and they don't understand how to organize movement and the body in space.

In my work, I feel I can always use experiences of my body. Lately, I have been working in London with the choreographer Wayne McGregor.<sup>5</sup> We are making a project together where I am building the stage and he is dancing. Through seeing a choreographer at work, I have realized that I have been almost choreographing when I make my work of art, I am also engaged in creating a kind of choreography – although not always and not as according to a systematic approach. But in the spaces I work with, the sense of movement through those spaces is a constitutive element. The result is that the viewer or the user is the architectural pivot.

---

5 “He is the Artistic Director of Wayne McGregor Random Dance, Resident Company at Sadler’s Wells Theatre in London and the Resident Choreographer of The Royal Ballet, appointed 2006. He is Professor of Choreography at Trinity Laban Conservatoire of Music and Dance and holds an honorary doctor of science degree from Plymouth University. He was the government’s first Youth Dance Champion, appointed 2008. In 2004 McGregor was a Research Fellow in the Department of Experimental Psychology, University of Cambridge. His work continues to explore the relationship between movement and brain science.” (Wikipedia, the Free Encyclopedia).



3. Olafur Eliasson. Video still from *Movement microscope*. 2011.

In my youth, I actually danced a lot. I was very active as a breakdancer, and I became very conscious of where my limbs end and the space around me begins.<sup>6</sup>

***Art as experience - a core concept in pragmatist aesthetics.***

***B:*** *Art and experience and art as an experiential process are central themes in somaesthetics, which emerged from a pragmatist aesthetics that recognized the body as the experiential core of perception and action. Experience as such forms - says Shusterman - "the generating core of my pragmatic (somaesthetic) philosophy, in theory and in practice. Most of my philosophical views derive from experiences outside the library. (...) Experience, for me, implies experimentation, creative exploration and involvement rather than mere passive reception, mechanical habit or distanced observation."*<sup>7</sup> *Is art as experience a central issue in your art projects?*

<sup>6</sup> Olafur Eliasson considers his breakdancing during the mid-1980s to be his first artworks. see Joachim Bessing, "Experiencing Space," 032c issue 8 (Winter 2004/05).

<sup>7</sup> Richard Shusterman, "A Philosopher in Darkness and Light Practical Somaesthetics and Photographic Art" and in French translation, "Un Philosophe en ombre et en lumière," in *Lucidité: Vues de l'intérieur/Lucidity: Inward Views*, ed. Anne-Marie Ninacs (Montreal: Le Mois de la Photo à Montréal, 2011, p. 280.

**Eliasson:** Yes, absolutely. As the years have passed, my articulation of experience has changed. I never follow a general rule, yet one concept has become very important to me: experience has something to do with trust, in the sense that people should trust the situation and themselves. I have long been interested in the experiences that lead up to encountering a work of art and those that come afterward. I am thinking, for example, of how we approach and arrive at the place where art is shown – it might be at a museum, but it could also be a street performance. The welcoming ritual has a profound impact on the quality of the experience of the artworks, and the whole sequence is part of, and inseparable from, the actual experience of the artwork. The experience of an artwork is part of the experience of the world and not autonomous. Ideally, stepping into a work of art means taking a step closer to the world, rather than stepping away from the world.

The same could be said about the studio and the museum. This is why I have always been interested in the issue of trust. It seems to me that audiences are most powerfully touched by aesthetic experiences when museums trust them and trust themselves. When museums are very insecure, there is a tendency for them to over-interpret the art. Without trust, a museum does not work on behalf of the viewer but at the viewer's expense. Occasionally you are made to feel that you are not good enough to be in a certain museum. It is often because the museum does not trust itself to exercise hospitality. So the experience of going to a museum is actually not only part of a highly intimate and incredibly potent sequence of moments; it also has a lot to do with trust, inclusion, exclusion, self-confidence, and the strong tendency for elitism in the art world.

There are two types of experience industries. One is called the “experience economy,” and generally when you meet it, you lose yourself. It gives you the feeling of losing control, the rules, the tools for navigation and orientation. It is like the funhouse at Tivoli.<sup>8</sup> You not only lose yourself, but you also lose your body.

The other type of experience is one in which you are lost but then find yourself again. You feel that you have gone blind. You misjudge the distance of objects and the length of your limbs. It is very interesting that if we lose some of our senses, it has an impact on our whole orientation system. But actually what very often happens is that we recalibrate; we reorient ourselves and discover new sensory principles. If an artwork is successful, it celebrates these new senses. In a work like *Din blinde passager* (2010), for example, we realize after five or more seconds that we have not actually gone blind, as we anticipated. This contrasts greatly with

---

8 The *Fun House* in the Tivoli Gardens - a famous amusement park in Copenhagen - is a different and challenging playground for everyone. There are weird staircases, treadmills, rope bridges and slides. It features lots of activities that are fun and that can be used to train your climbing skills too.

what happens in the experience economy. It allows us to reverse the experience, to evaluate the senses that generated the experience in the first place, and it reveals to us that what we perceive is not natural and unalterable, but culturally determined. It turns out that reality is relative. Through such works, our senses and reality are reconstructed. This process, verbalizable or not, has therapeutic qualities.

***The ethical and critical function of art.***

**B:** *You have emphasized that you have always been “looking for the felt feeling that can shed values without being dogmatic or normative. I think this is what art can be about.”<sup>9</sup> Art projects sometimes also contain a visualization of the experience of what Shusterman has called “the critical study and ameliorative cultivation of one’s experience and use of one’s body as a site of sensory appreciation and creative self-fashioning.”<sup>10</sup> What are the ethical and social implications of your artistic projects? You have e.g. mentioned your focus on the interaction between ecosystems and society.*

**Eliasson:** I am convinced that the aesthetic and the ethical cannot be disconnected. Everything in experience that is important enough to theorize about systematically, I believe, should also be examined in terms of its ethical, socio-ethical, and political dimensions. On the other hand, there is a danger, in art as elsewhere, of always insisting that things have explicit ethical resonance. For me, as an artist, it is sometimes important to be absolutely non-ethical. It is not the primary function of art to be ethical, because art is just art and it can never, ever be anything else. This does not mean that art does not have an ethical aspect, but it should never be prescriptive.

***Art’s ability to communicate things that words cannot express or capture.***

**B:** *When I look at your projects, I think you are very much aware that concepts and verbal language never perfectly coincides with the language of art. In some of your projects one can clearly see that you, through the language of form, have been able to reveal perspectives and significances that cannot be mediated by verbal language in the same intense way and sometimes cannot be grasped with its tools alone. Do you agree with this?*

---

9 Dream Boys: “A Conversation between Olafur Eliasson and Kevin Kelly.” See <http://032c.com/2012/dream-boys-conversation-between-olafur-eliasson-and-kevin-kelly/>

10 Shusterman, “A Philosopher in Darkness and Light,” and in French translation, “Un Philosophe en ombre et en lumière,” in *Lucidité: Vues de l’intérieur/Lucidity: Inward Views*, ed. Anne-Marie Ninacs (Montreal: Le Mois de la Photo à Montréal, 2011, p. 280.

**Eliasson:** Absolutely. I think it has to do with trusting the language of art because art is very resourceful, and it is also incredibly strong. I am very interested in its ability to create a statement that, by definition, is not verbalizable, because if it were verbalized, it would be something else.

Of course, sometimes it can be necessary to verbalize during the work process; for instance, when I want to involve a scientist, and I must explain to the scientist what, why, and how. But it might go from there back into a non-verbalized state. I really think we need to celebrate this capacity. It is almost as if we as artists underestimate how incredible this potential actually is, especially because in the rest of the world, the relationship between thinking and doing is relatively weak. The financial sector is very difficult to understand, and the political sector polarizes thinking and doing. It's only in the cultural sector that there is a tendency to acknowledge the importance of the connection between the two. Where the political and financial sectors fail, the cultural sector proves to be very strong when properly integrated into society.

Another question is: how can we, as non-specialists, understand something like the IPCC climate change report? The climate specialists came out with this report at the end of October 2014. In relation to this report, geologist Minik Rosing and I did a project, *Ice Watch*, using inland ice taken from Greenland. We brought some big ice blocks from a fjord outside Nuuk to City Hall Square in Copenhagen. An official from the municipality, who was helping us realize this project, remarked that if people do not understand the academic report, they just have to come to the square for five minutes and then they understand everything. It is about learning by doing; by bringing thinking into experience.

People nowadays (including media pundits) think that we can jump from merely thinking about something to 'having done' it. Art is very much about all the mistakes, all the troubles you go through in making the work; sometimes it entails suffering and sometimes it is a celebration. But so much of it is experience that is strongly felt. It is not just how I personally feel about the artwork; it is also about what the feeling feels like. This brings me back to what I mentioned at the beginning: that we have the ability to reflect upon our own feelings and sensations while we are having them. I think the concept of somaesthetic reflection is based on this ability. I have also used the phrase "felt meaning," because the feeling dimension is still expressive of our more primitive animal nature. A felt meaning is something we sense without the conceptual grid or architecture or words to attach to it. I believe there is great potential for art if we are daring enough to get hold of the felt meaning, without having to justify it in words in order to give it a place in

society. Our society's obsession with quantifiability and words too often robs the felt meaning of the value it actually has.

## Endnotes

**Photo credits:** Olafur Eliasson Studio (1, 2, 3).

***Abstract:** This dialogue with Olafur Eliasson investigates his interpretations of how he has merged the fields of art, architecture, science, and philosophy and has been sculpting a new interface between humanity and nature.*

***Keywords:** somaesthetics, cross-disciplinary installation, active participation, art of living.*

### **Contact:**

Olafur Eliasson  
studio@olafureliasson.net

Else Marie Bukdahl  
mail@em-bukdahl.dk



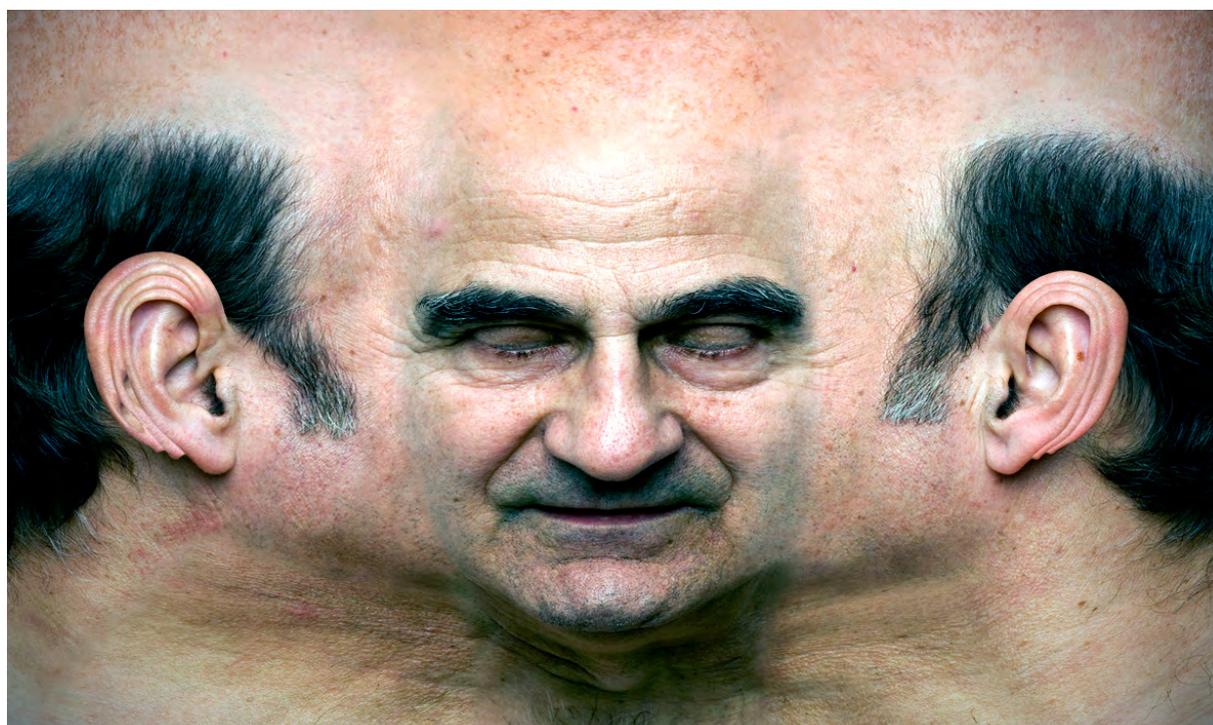
## Stelarc

# On the Body as an Artistic Material

*Interview with Stahl Stenslie in August - September 2014*

### Introduction

The Australian artist Stelarc is one of the most remarkable performance artists around. For more than five decades he has employed his own body as the centerpiece in a wide range of artworks. He is known for artworks such as the *Third Arm*, a cybernetic device and body extension in the form of an arm; body suspension performances in which he hangs from cranes thirty meters above the ground; performance works involving the public's remote control of his body through electric muscle stimulation via the Internet; body invasive works involving electronic sculpture placed inside his stomach and a functional electronic ear transplanted onto and into his arm.



1. *Stretched Skin*. Photographer: Graham Baring.

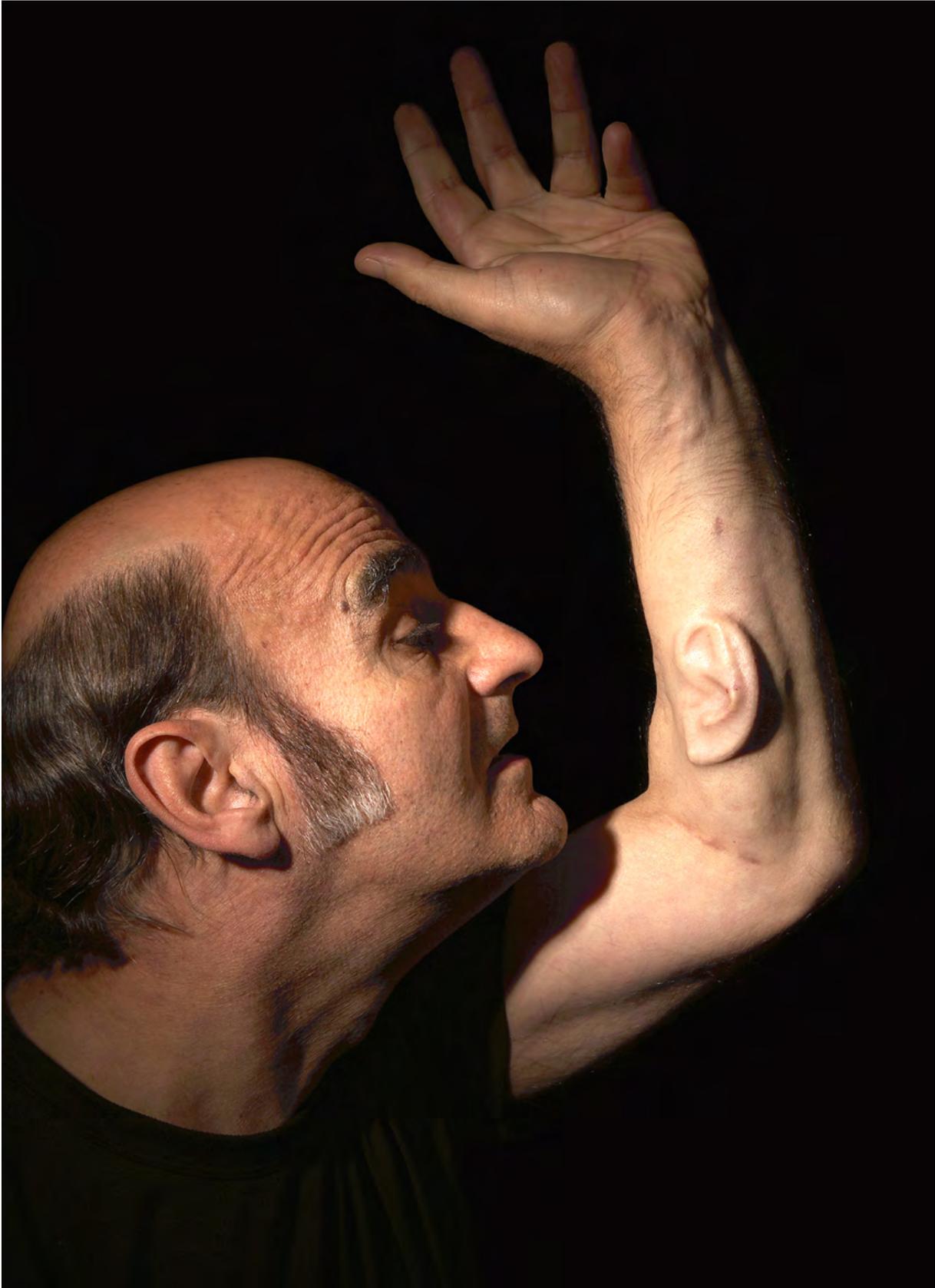
His wide range of performance-based works has extended our understanding of how the body can be used as a living material in art and technology. Although this art often expresses his concept that the natural human body is obsolete by extending the body's capabilities by incorporating cyborg-like devices, Stelarc's core investigations can also be seen as centered on how the soma can be used as a medium or material for aesthetic experience and knowledge building. This makes him a very interesting figure for the connections of art with somaesthetics, because he is clearly using his "body as a locus of sensory-aesthetic appreciation (aesthesia) and creative self-fashioning" and doing so in a deliberate and critically reflective way.

The following dialogue with Stelarc, which took place during two Skype conversations in August - September 2014, explores his understanding of these themes and how they relate to his artistic project and strategies:

## The Dialogue

*Stahl Stenslie (S): How far do you see the body as artistic material? How do you evaluate its role?*

**Stelarc:** The body has always been considered as a component of an installation. The body is a sculpture of stretched skin in the suspension performances. The premise has always been that if you adjust the architecture of the body you might adjust its operation and awareness in the world. Having an extra ear, a third hand, an extended arm, translating human bipedal into a six-legged insect like locomotion with the Exoskeleton robot are some of the projects that alter the evolutionary architecture of the body. On a social level, the body's meaningfulness is only in relationship to other bodies, artifacts and institutions. As a particular person I can express certain feelings, but it can be argued that our desires and affect are social and cultural constructs.



2. *Ear On Arm*. Photographer: Nina Sellars.

*S: In terms of your own famous performance works employing the body, I remember seeing a video of your Copenhagen piece, where you were pulled up by a crane.*

**Stelarc:** Yes, it was just the naked body hoisted up a large crane, about 30 meters high, shuttled to the end of the crane arm, rotated around several times and then lowered back down to street level. It was above the Royal Theatre in the city center.

*S: You were held up by those strings or cords, and you could hover over the city. It was not simply your body that was put up on display, but the body's vulnerability, the fear of skin being ripped off, of falling to your death. And yet, there was also the almost angel-like image of a person hovering above the city. It was really fantastic.*

**Stelarc:** My problem was my fear of heights ha, ha. There was the option the day before to ascend up the crane to check out the situation. But I decided not to, in case that dissuaded me to do the performance. It's interesting that the Copenhagen performance was only the second really public suspension performance. The other one was in New York but that was only four stories high. But in neither instance did I plan or feel the fear of putting the body at risk. I had done many suspensions before those ones and for me if it was safe to suspend the body one meter off a gallery floor, it was safe enough much higher. Having said that cables instead of cords were used. Previously the body had been suspended by the seaside or counterbalanced by a ring of rocks. What was important was this image of the body suspended in space - whether it was in a gallery just above the floor or whether outdoors and very high. Copenhagen was different from New York, where I could hear the sounds from street level, people shouting, police cars arriving. Being so high in Copenhagen meant all I could hear was the whooshing of the wind, the whirring of the crane motors and the creaking of the stretching skin. Although you cannot see that in the video, my body was actually shaking from the wind. Above the level of the buildings, unprotected, there was a reasonably strong wind and it was literally vibrating my skin. That was unexpected, unplanned, we did not know whether it was going to be windy or not that day. But those suspension performances were the only ones in public spaces.

*S: Do you recall your feelings while being held up by the crane, beyond those sounds?*

**Stelarc:** The performances are done in what I call a posture of indifference. By that I mean allowing the performance to unfold in its own time and with its own

rhythm. There's a point in time when the planning is over, the thinking needs to stop and to allow the act to begin. Yes, I looked down and around whilst suspended, visually framing the body in its surrounds. But this indifference that erases affect allows the idea to be enacted. What was felt was only the physical. A concern with the structural and operational aspects of the performance. What's important is not what this body felt, but what the performance expressed. A distinction should also be made between affect and sensation. In fact, the suspensions should be seen as spectacles of bodily sensation, expressed in different spaces and in diverse situations. They are not actions for interpretation, nor require any explanation. They are not meant to generate any meaning. Rather they are sites of indifference and states of erasure. The body is empty, absent to its own agency and obsolete.



3. *Ear On Arm Suspension*. Photographer- Poli Papapetrou.

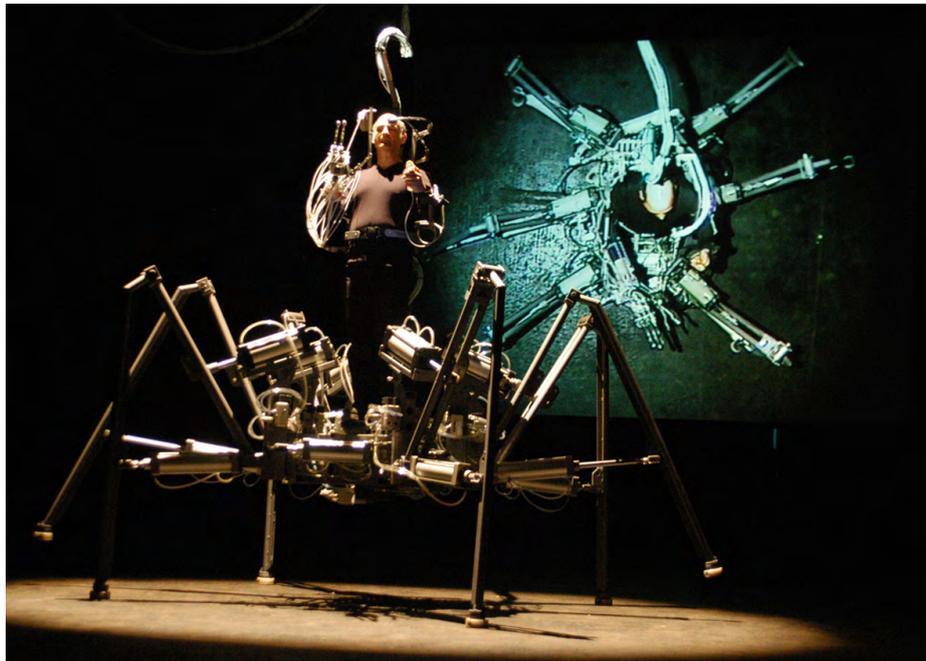
**S:** *That brings us back to my first question. Do you see the body as some kind of material that in certain degree can be depersonalized?*

**Stelarc:** These performances are not about an insight into the psycho-social status of the body. Rather the body is seen as a structure, as a sculptural medium, not as a site for social inscription. The body is this structure of skeletal support, draped musculature, with a collection of organs and circulatory systems of nerves and

blood – all bounded by a bag of skin. But this structure also includes empty spaces. Having made 3 endoscopic films of the inside of my body in the early seventies this realization of a body of empty spaces led to the stomach sculpture project, where an artwork is designed not for a public space, but rather for a private physiological space. The body has always been seen as a sculptural medium, and as a structure with empty spaces.

**S:** *One of the things I like about your work and that makes it distinctive is that you not only conceive these projects, you also perform them yourself. I do not really see, for example, people trying to recreate the Copenhagen performance.*

**Stelarc:** That's an interesting observation. But why would anyone want to recreate that performance? There was never an impulse to recreate a suspension performance whilst with the *Exoskeleton* walking robot performance, that's been performed multiple times. These are very different approaches. With *Exoskeleton* it's about taking the robot for a walk. Although the performance is structured it is not scripted. Although I'm performing with a robot, each walk is a different one. Each choreography of movement and the resulting cacophony and composition of sound is actually different. I have only performed with this large robot about twelve times and I am still discovering what I can do with it. So with *Exoskeleton* it is rather learning new ways of performing with the robot. But with suspension performances, they have always been one off.



4. *Exoskeleton*. Photographer: Igor Skafar.

In 2012 I was invited to Oslo to participate in a SusCon, an event held by the body modification and suspension community. Initially, Havve Fjell, one of the organizers suggested that perhaps they could re-create one of my past suspensions to commemorate my being there. I suggested that it would be better to come up with an original suspension idea. I had always been interested in realizing a multiple suspension. But when I was actively doing body suspensions it was difficult to find anyone else to participate. Anyway, five people – two male and three females – participated in the performance which was titled *Spinning / Breathing: Event for Multiple Suspensions*. They were suspended upright, one female body counterbalancing one male body and the other male body counterbalancing the other two female bodies. The bodies turned around each other and also spun on their axis. Their breathing was amplified by small microphones stapled to their cheeks. The performance was terminated after about twenty minutes when a male body passed out. But it was a beautiful performance with the multiple bodies rhythmically amplifying the suspension. As I had recently done a suspension of my own - *The Ear on Arm* suspension in 2012, where I suspended my body above the four-meter long sculpture of the ear on my arm, I decided not to be a participant, but rather a designer and the person who documented the performance.

When I got to Dallas in 2013 for another SusCon, and again with Havve Fjell's collaboration, we designed a performance for six bodies arranged in hexagonal configuration. These bodies would be suspended and would be spinning, with the sound of the structure amplified. This performance lasted for about 20 minutes. They were slowly hoisted up and lowered down whilst spinning, and the documentation of this performance was enhanced with the positioning of cameras above and below the spinning bodies. The interesting thing about this performance was the projection of the shadow of these rotating bodies on the screen. In fact, it has become known as the *Shadow Suspension*. This mass of suspended bodies collapsed onto a wall as a shadow. That was a surprising outcome. The shadow becomes the image that encapsulated the performance, a kind of inversion of the Platonic idea of shadows in the cave.

**S:** *Your body is your medium and plays a key role in your practice, but, if the Exoskeleton is in some way a structure beyond your own body, could other people enter it and perform the Robot? Would it not still be Stelarc, by which I mean Stelarc's purposive, experiential body or soma, within the machinery.*

**Stelarc:** Yes, someone else can perform with the robot, someone else can learn to operate the third hand, someone else can be suspended. And that is fine. In the end

it's not about this particular person. It is the act of walking with six legs, extending a body with an extra hand, of becoming a landscape of stretched skin. What this person does is contextualize these performances as artworks. And in that case it is about a particular and peculiar sensibility.

*S: How would you describe the difference between your sensibilities as an artist versus those of other people doing suspensions?*

**Stelarc:** Oh, they are very different contexts. For example, when I went to Dallas there was only one suspension group that performed in galleries. Everyone else was doing it in the context of being part of the body modification and suspension community. It appeared they were interested in the experience as a kind of brutal act, as a purely physical act and others as a personal challenge or perhaps a pseudo-spiritual act. There was no framing of the performance with any particular artistic sensibility. This is not belittling suspensions done in the body modification and suspension community. This is a response to a question and providing a plausible response. This would not ordinarily be of concern to me. But there is a fundamental physiological outcome that occurs when you do such an extreme act. The physical act justifies itself. But going back to the distinction you were concerned with, I guess it's like the difference between someone just splashing paint on a canvas as a mere physical act and Willem de Kooning splashing paint on the canvas. He would be doing that with a particular sensibility, conditioned and colored within a particular art historical context.



5. *Spinning / Breathing: Event for Multiple Suspensions*. Shown at SusCon, Oslo 2012. Photographer: Stahl Stenslie.

*S: Context, or course, is crucial. When I saw your suspension sculpture back in Oslo, 2012, it was an amazing spectacle. For me the beauty of the installation was not just the experience of the final suspension, but also the preparation process: all the bodies being prepared, all the buildup, all these people coming together in this beautiful composition. This process of bodies being organized and ritually sacrificed in a way. It was very complex installation where the actual suspension at the top of the sculpture completed, yet was only a small segment of complex process. To be a part of the audience was indeed breathtaking.*

**Stelarc:** Oh, it is excellent to get feedback from you in particular about the performance from someone who was there watching it all unfold. I'm sure Havve would be pleased to hear that too. The process did expose the duration and the difficulty of preparing for the performance. And for this artist there is no definitive start nor end but rather an unfolding towards something remarkable, something transgressive, and then a returning to the mundane, everyday body. It's interesting that with both the Oslo and Dallas performances in which other people were suspended, there were problems about having completely naked bodies in suspension – and these problems were raised both by the people participating and by the venue organizers. I always think of a suspended body as a naked body, a body whose nakedness is harshly visible because of the stretched skin and the hooks visibly embedded into the skin. There is a distinctive aesthetic of this landscape of stretched skin. But in the suspension community most of the people who do suspensions do them partially clothed. They might take their shirt off but they would be wearing trousers or they would be wearing underwear. I always found this a little strange, because in terms of how one frames the sensibility of that sort of performance, nakedness is part of what it's all about, at least for this artist. A person who wanted to participate in that performance, decided to pull out after she found out that it would involve complete nudity. She was willing to be suspended from hooks into her skin, but she was not willing to do it with her clothes off. I found this interesting in a contradictory way. If you are exhibiting your body as a physical body, why not to show it in its full physicality even if it means revealing pubic hair - or hanging genitalia.

*S: Morally this attitude is also puzzling; because in conventional terms, in most people's moral outlook, putting hooks through your skin to stretch and extend it, is morally just as questionable as showing your naked body.*

**Stelarc:** I had a discussion with her about that, but I do understand her modesty, especially since the performance was also a very public one. It has to be said that we were almost unable to do the performance in Dallas, because the organizers had a hard time finding a venue that would allow full nudity in the performance. There were a lot of venues that would allow the suspensions, but not the full nudity. Of course the United States can be quite a moralistic country, but this was also a problem in Oslo.

*S: The multiple body suspension in the Oslo performance was really, artistically speaking, a spectacular thing. Do you have any plans to do those beautiful body sculptures in a museum context to try to contextualize it artistically even more?*

**Stelarc:** No there are no plans to perform these multiple body suspensions in galleries or museums. But I am open to possibilities. If any such performances occurred it would not be about replicating these particular ones. As with my own suspensions I did twenty-seven over a period of thirteen years in multiple positions, in varying situations and in different locations until I felt I had aesthetically exhausted the possibilities. Further iterations with multiple bodies though present new challenges ha, ha. With both Oslo and Dallas it just happened, it unfolded in a very normal sense. There was a community of people who were willing participants, comfortable about being suspended and I was interested in pursuing suspensions with multiple bodies even when this did not include my body. But I am not pursuing possibilities. It could happen again. In fact there was a multiple body suspension event planned in Mexico in October 2013 but unfortunately it could not be funded. It is not easy to get funding for such performances. I am not really interested in doing performances that are not challenging.

*S: In the public's perception the body suspension pieces seem to be very painful events.*

**Stelarc:** I never conceived them as actions for generating pain. Instead these works are envisaged in terms of certain ideas whose actualizations are physically challenging and even physically difficult. Of course, there is pain as an inevitable outcome. The suspensions were extreme physical actions, and in every one of these events there was always a fine line between doing them and not doing them. In other words, doing one did not make it easier to do a second one; and doing two did not make it easier to do a third. Each time I knew what was going to happen: fourteen to eighteen hooks were going to be inserted into my skin, with no anesthetic, no medication. I had to endure each of those hook insertions, and

that was only the first stage of the physical difficulty. The second stage is when everything is put under tension; and then finally the most extreme stage is when the body lifts off the ground. Everything is stretched as much as it can be, and then the body is suspended. And later when you touch down again, the skin sucks back into place, which is also a painful moment. Finally, of course, extracting the hooks is irritating; and if that is not done carefully it could generate even more discomfort.

Here it is useful to comment that even though the strategy of such a performance was not about generating pain, there is important insight that the pain brings to you. In such a painful situation you collapse the distinction between mind and body. You are one painful body absorbed by the power of the extreme discomfort experienced. You cannot mentally detach and become reflective. In other words you collapse that convenient Cartesian distinction between mind and body. You are just this one throbbing experience. This is the extreme, immersive and collapsed condition you become when you experience intense pain. I guess this is what is so seductive about sado-masochistic pursuits, fueled by desires of control and power.

Physiologically though pain is an early alert warning system that something wrong is happening with the body. That care must be taken with receiving treatment for this painful condition. If an athlete becomes injured pain is felt that indicates the seriousness of the problem. To block the pain with anesthetics and continue competing might result in more serious injury. But a person dying of lung cancer will experience pain when it would be better that the body no longer generates it. So pain is a problematic condition to evaluate whether conceptually, medically or culturally.



6. *Split Body: Voltage In / Voltage Out*. Photographer: Igor Andjelic.

*S: Could you tell us about your background and how you evolved into an artist and into the kind of artist that you are?*

**Stelarc:** I was born in Cyprus, both my parents are Greek. We immigrated to Australia when I was about four years old. I grew up in Melbourne and did my art education there, but after three years I was not allowed to continue at art school (essentially informed I'd be better off leaving), so I do not even have a degree. At the time I was interested in sculpture, but I was making helmets and goggles that you wore and that altered your visual perception. They split your binocular vision, so what you saw were two unrelated, constantly changing but superimposed images. I also constructed a three-meter diameter immersive kinetic compartment that generated fragmented images and electronic sounds. I guess the art school thought that, because I was not casting, not carving and not welding, I was not doing any sculpture at all. This was the late sixties which might have been a progressively experimental in some places, but art training was still pretty conservative in Australia. It was very disappointing for me, because there were some contemporary artists that I admired who taught me, but there was only one person in my first year at art school, Ken Scarlett, who encouraged and supported me. After a year of thinking what to do, I decided to go somewhere else. Having grown up in Australia with Greek parents, my culture was entirely Western, having studied western art and read western philosophy. I thought it would be interesting to go to an Asian country to experience an oriental culture. To me the only country in Asia that was interesting, and that was also Hi-Tech, was Japan. I went thinking I would stay there for a year, but I stayed for 19 years. I arrived in 1970 when the most interesting performance art of the Gutai group that were very active in the sixties had essentially died out. I liked the people and the culture in Japan, because it was all interesting and new to me. Then I got a job teaching art at an international school, so I just continued living there. I met some gallery directors and one of them, Noburo Yamagishi, the director of the Maki, Tamura and Komai Galleries, was very supportive of my work. But in Japan at that time, if you wanted to have an exhibition at a gallery, you basically had to rent the space (except for a few select galleries). Of course, it was very expensive to rent a gallery even though exhibitions in Tokyo only lasted for a week. Fortunately, I was doing performance work that would only require a gallery for a day. So the day between the change over between one exhibition and the next, which was typically on Sunday, I could get the gallery for a few hours before the other artists moved in, and I could do a performance there. Sometimes, the incoming artist canceled

at the last minute because they couldn't come up with the funding or something or had not completed their artworks. Yamagishi-san would then call me to say that the gallery was free for the next week and that I could do something in it without paying for the rent of the space. That accounts for the longer durational performances I did in Japan. Other galleries became available to me too. Things just happened; I was kind of a silent guy who would hang out in the gallery and could not speak much Japanese and did not fully understand what was going on. But somehow, without knowing how, I would get invited to participate in group shows without my having to push or hustle to be included. Some of the artists found my work interesting and wanted to include me in their group exhibitions. And of course I was the esoteric gaijin inclusion in their group exhibitions.

*S: How do you explain that shift from making helmets, goggles, and strange perceptual experiments to using your body as your medium?*

**Stelarc:** Well, I was always interested in the body as an evolutionary architecture and the body's perceptual and cognitive capabilities. The wearable helmets, goggles and immersive installation were an outcome of those general concerns. The idea of the body itself as an artwork. This particular body becomes a convenient body to use. I did not have to worry about problems of causing harm to someone else's body or about the ethical issues involved. For example, inserting a sculpture inside this particular body as opposed to inserting it into someone else's body, male or female, is a totally different act ethically, aesthetically, and in terms of safety. You can see how my practice evolved. When I was making helmets and goggles I was splitting my binocular vision, I was altering optically what my body saw, what my body experienced. Then the suspension performances were the end of a long series of performances exploring the physical and psychological parameters of my body. For example, I did sensory deprivation performances over 3-4 years leading up to the first suspension event. For example, I stitched my lips and eyelids shut with surgical thread and I was tethered to the gallery wall with two hooks into my skin connecting with cables bolted to the wall. I stayed there for one week, not speaking, not drinking, not seeing. I could only hear people coming in and out of the gallery, and I could understand that it was night when there was no sound. The gallery space was illuminated all during that week, so I could not make out any changes in the light in the space. That was the performance immediately before the first suspension event.

**S:** *That is pretty hardcore, a radical transition from making helmets. Was that a Japanese influence?*

**Stelarc:** I have to say, quite honestly, there was no Japanese influence as such until I initiated the third hand project. Then, of course, Japan was the place where high tech robotics was happening and I could get good advice there and see other excellent examples of state-of-the-art robotics at Waseda University (prosthetics and humanoid robots) and at Tokyo Institute of Technology (insect and animal like robots). But in Japan the sort of physical body performances like those earlier done by the Gutai group were no longer being performed, so my work was not reviewed in art journals, but more in popular tabloids and magazines, or, when I started with the third hand project, in science-oriented publications. Although I was exhibiting in Japan from the early 70s, I was not really acknowledged as part of the arts community until the mid 80s. And my artist friends would remind me of a Japanese saying- “high tech, low art” ha, ha.



7. *Handwriting*. Photographer- Keisuke Oki.

*S: Even as early as your days in art school, you clearly had your own way of doing things. What inspirations gave you your direction? Was there a special source or some people around you that directed you to use your body that way for art?*

**Stelarc:** I guess there were several impulses to go in that direction. First, I was very interested in the evolutionary architecture of the human body and comparative anatomy, looking at insects and animals to see how they move and manipulate things and comparing them to how our human body operates. I was reading about things such as how dogs only see in black and white, how bats navigate with ultrasound, snakes sense through heat. I realized that my philosophy of the world is very much determined by my physiology, not only by my five senses but also, because of the images I see and the information that is generated through technology. Our instruments and machines contour and condition our experience of the world. The scale shifts from macro to micro. In other words, our realm of operation becomes this abstract realm of the unseen, the unheard, the unfelt. This is what happens when you look into microscopes, peer into telescopes and use various forms of computational data visualization systems. In other words we are now clothed in a skin of virtuality. A second skin that mediates your sensory or direct experience of the world. Another significant impulse in this body-oriented direction was that from the outset of my performance work I was always envious of gymnasts, of dancers and singers who use their own bodies as a means of expression but also for experiencing. The expression and the experience are tightly coupled. If you are a painter, there is a kind of disconnect between the input and output. What you paint (that is, content that goes beyond the medium it is employing) is not what you physically experience. Of course if you are Jackson Pollock, the actual dripping and dribbling and moving your body, and splashing the paint around, then there is more of a coupling of the input and the output. But if you are a painter in the conventionally accepted sense, you are dealing with images and ideas that are more abstract, so you don't have to take the physical consequences of what you paint. If you paint a suspended body it is very different from performing a suspended body. Reading about yoga is not actually doing yoga.

*S: You have developed your work in a remarkably unique way. You seem to be a human cyborg, with a third arm, an ear on the arm, and you've done all these radical experiences. Could you also call yourself a body artist, a performance artist, a living artwork? How would you name or identify your art practice after all these years?*

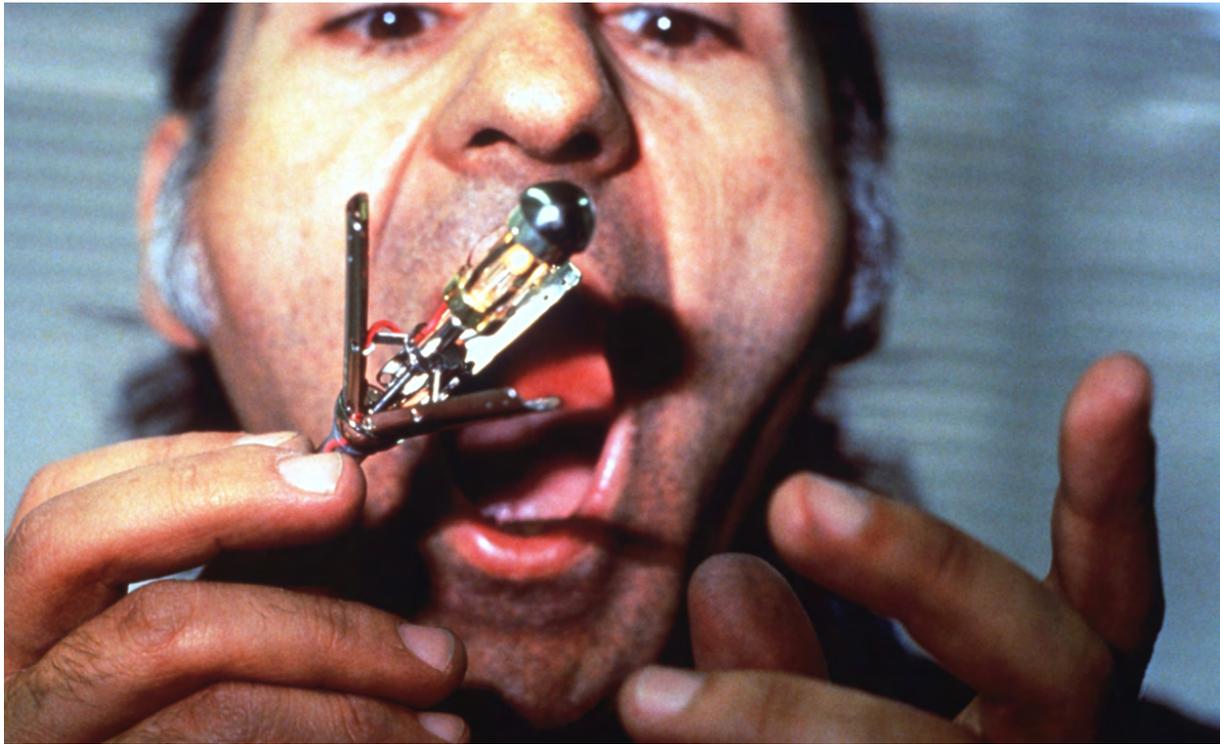
**Stelarc:** There has also been an interesting evolution in the names or genre of

categories of art and artists in past half century. In the 60s as a younger artist, I was familiar with the events and happenings of Allan Kaprow, the performances of Robert Rauschenberg, Pop art, Andy Warhol and The Garage, and the installation work of Edward Keinholz, and other artists in that genre. Initially I wanted to describe what I did as events, because the word *performance* had a theatrical coloring. When we talk about performance, we think of it in that kind of context. At the time I tried to avoid using the word *performance*. If I did not use the word *event*, I used the word *action*, referencing (in art-historical terms) the Austrian performance work of Viennese Actionism from the fifties and sixties. The word *performance* was more a category that came out of the United States. For example, you may remember the performances of the Kipper Kids, a West coast spaghetti and tomato sauce performance pair. Quite kitsch, very messy, quite theatrical. Similarly with the fake operations done by Paul McCarthy at that time. Those performances were much more playful than the more austere and harsh interrogation of the body typical of European body art. Having said that, this cannot be said of the potent performances of Vito Acconci, Chris Burden and Tehching Hsieh. So some of the early performance artists from the USA, were about the psychology of the body, the physicality and about performing dangerous acts. And then, of course, in Europe there was raw physicality, for of Ulay and Marina Abramovic and Stuart Brisley in the UK whose work also involved using shit and body excrements. I was not interested in performances that were deliberately trying to be extreme. For me, there were these ideas some of which were physically difficult to realize and you had to take the physical consequences of trying to actualize those ideas. As a performance artist it was actualizing the idea that was important. Actualizing the idea meant that I could directly experience it and therefore have something meaningful to articulate. I have never been an academic complicit with a particular discourse. Performance Art became a commonly accepted name because of magazines like Flash Art and other USA magazines. I just accepted that term. I did not title or describe my early works as performances though. Take for example *Seaside Suspension*, the subtitle of which is *Event for Wind and Waves*. A lot of performances have that kind of description. The notion of event denoted for me a singular, one-time action.

**S:** *Your work in cyborg aesthetics and body extension like The Third Arm is very well known. Yet I think of you as very much human; not a mechanical robot, but alive, curious and sensitive. What about the dangers and crossover effects of your work? It is quite extreme to extend your body in the ways you have been doing. How do you perceive the use of your living, sentient body, or 'soma' as we like to call it in*

*somaesthetic discourse ?*

**Stelarc:** When we speak about the body in this way, as if I, who owns this body, am using this body, we are entangled in language problems. We can rephrase what we are trying to express by saying this body performs this suspension in this particular location and has these kinds of experiences which resulted from these kinds of ideas and then we do not have to be nostalgic for a body with a separate and individual agency that is responsible for how its body acts. This body interaction is the result of this person being inserted in a particular place at a certain time, with a certain cultural conditioning within social institutions, constraining it or allowing it to perform in particular and sometimes peculiar ways – at this point in time in our history. Yes, it is a particular body that is realizing this suspension process, but it is not a single agency that determines what is going to happen when it is going to happen and what the outcome will be. How we talk about the body and its agency depends how you frame it. If we frame it in a very limited way, at this point in time, for in this particular place, then this body can say: “I picked this bottle of water up, I drink this water, I put this bottle down.” What has resulted in this action is not just me simplistically thinking that I initiated all that, that I just did all that. Firstly, this bottle has been sitting here since yesterday, I filled it up outside in this building, because several weeks ago my partner Nina said: “You do not drink enough water. You should drink more water every day.” In actuality there is an infinite number of causal events that resulted in this moment where I can say: “I lift this bottle of water up”. Yes it is convenient to say now that I want to drink water or I am thirsty but what does thirsty mean? If I see a water bottle within reach maybe that is why I feel thirsty. I just want to problematize this simplistic idea of an individual agency that we commonly, popularly believe in. To go further I would agree with Wittgenstein that this person who speaks as an “I” is the body whose lips move, it is not because of a mind inside a head. And with Nietzsche who asserts that there is no being without the doing, it is the act itself that is the reality.



8. *Stomach Sculpture*. Photographer: Anthony Figallo.

*S: Bodies move, act, and also feel pain. I return to the question of pain because your performances appear painful. But if I understand you correctly, pain does not have a specific functionality in your work beyond it being a byproduct of the artistic idea you want to express.*

**Stelarc:** As indicated before, what you describe as extreme acts that generate pain can occur only because the artist performs them with a posture of indifference. You allow things to happen. You trust in your thinking and planning and your assistants. If you want to insert a sculpture inside your body, you have to consider the consequences and plan accordingly. You have to design and have engineered an object that can close into a form that can be inserted down through your esophagus. When it is inside your stomach it will open and close and emit a flashing light and a beeping sound. It is a machine choreography, a simple robot inside your stomach, actuated by a servo motor and a logic circuit. You have to allow that to happen, allow that to unfold. It was a very uncomfortable experience to have both the control cable of the sculpture (8mm in diameter) and the endoscope (10cm in diameter) both being pushed down your throat. My throat had to be sprayed with anesthetic to stop me gagging. And it took six insertions over a period of two days to film about fifteen minutes of video. The endoscopist who was assisting called

the procedure to a halt when scraping the esophagus produced some bleeding. Unless you are prepared to have these things happen, to experience that physical difficulty, then you will not be able to actualize the idea. Again, there comes a point in time with an artistic performance or in any other action when thinking stops, when it has to stop, and the physical act begins. It is with that kind of mentality that I approach my work. You just have to do it. But, of course, the consequences follow.

*S: Since you mentioned the Viennese actionists and since we're discussing the body and pain, I can't help thinking of Rudolf Schwarzkogler, one of the Viennese actionists, who died from cutting off his own penis. That was certainly extreme.*

**Stelarc:** Yes, the Viennese actionists were extreme body artists, and they certainly explored the body's materiality. Hurting the body, cutting the skin, bleeding, all those sorts of things which have become more familiar and almost part of the body-modification community and body-performance community these days. What I find especially interesting about art and about performance artists, beyond the impulse to experiment, is how that performance is structured or allowed to unfold in its own way, how structured but unscripted it is, whether it is repeatable or not repeatable. For example, many of Marina Abramovic performances were not imagined as repeatable performances or as performances done by others. But in New York when Marina had that retrospective at MoMa in 2010, some of her performances were recreated, re-performed by people other than herself. This concerns the problematic of how to exhibit performance work. Do you exhibit it only as visual traces, as photographs or as videos, or do you exhibit it by re-performing them by other bodies? Can the context, intensity, bodily presence or historical moment be captured by doing it again with other performers? It's a contestable approach to exhibiting body art. To re-create the *Sitting / Swaying: Event for Rock Suspension* with any fidelity you would need to perform it in a similar size space, using a body the same kind of rocks counterbalancing a similar weighing body. Certainly a body could physically be suspended in this way. But how much importance do we need to place on the other related details in replicating this as an artwork. The performance was stopped when the telephone rang in the gallery. For the artist this was a significant moment in the unfolding and the concluding of the performance. Not something that can be meaningfully replicated.

*S: Our bodies have a certain lifespan, averaging around 70 -80 years. How has your body evolved as a medium or even material for performance over the years? How do you see the process of aging in terms of your art?*

**Stelarc:** Certainly, an aging body is going to deteriorate, increasingly malfunction and its physical endurance and stamina is going to wane. It is going to have problems with its internal organs or body condition that might not be medically treatable. Body parts might be replaced by artificial components. We see this already today, including some of the most important organs with heart transplants. In fact technology continues to radically interrogate what it means to be human. The turbine heart, a smaller more robust artificial heart circulates the blood in the body continuously without pulsing. So you might rest your head on your loved ones chest, she is warm to the touch, she is breathing, she is certainly alive – but she has no heartbeat!

Because we are living longer, we are experiencing more fully and deeply what it means to deteriorate and malfunction and perhaps lose our memory. Of course, there is interesting research in cell senescence, in studying how cells age. That might result in some increased longevity. But fundamentally, in radical terms, the body is inadequate in the technological terrain in which it now inhabits. The body is empty, alien to its own agency and profoundly obsolete. It is a system that is kept alive by bodily functions that not only guarantee its existence but guarantee its death. We have a sense that there are only a certain number of heartbeats, only a certain amount of breaths we can take. Unless something radically changes with our genetic interventions, we are going to be increasingly experiencing ourselves as aging and malfunctioning bodies. In fact we will no longer die biological deaths, we will die when we switch our life-support systems off.

For most artists, for most philosophers, for most poets, for most academics, remaining in prime physical condition is not a necessity - as long as they can see, as long as they can hear, as long as they can type. But in performance, things are different. If you think of the performing body, if you are a dancer, your body is no longer flexible and coordinated after a certain age, if you are gymnast, after your teenage years you no longer have a body best equipped to adequately perform. Even a singer's voice will eventually deteriorate. This is just a harsh reality of what happens, but we are developing prosthetic attachments and body implants that extend our operational capabilities.

*S: What about internal body feelings, inner bodily perceptions. I see this as evolving with age. I was a part of the Extravagant Bodies exhibit in Zagreb in 2013. It was devoted to the body in old age. Somatic experience changes with age, but not necessarily for loss. If we are somaesthetically attentive, we learn how sense memories accumulate through years of experience. How do you see this idea of an evolving body consciousness with age and what it might mean for you in terms of your performance?*

**Stelarc:** There is no clear and simple answer. Undoubtedly there can be some somatic melioration through the experience of age, but there is also malfunction and loss of coordination of body skills and body parts and numbing of certain sensitivities. Sometimes these can be minimized with technologies that repair or replace. I think we should not be nostalgic about the biological body. Undoubtedly embodiment is fundamental in lived experience. One can argue that the best time to procreate is in your teenage years not in your 30s or 40s, so we can freeze our sperm and eggs until we are ready to have children. If we wait till we are older to have children in the old-fashioned way (with older sperm and eggs), we may be acting irresponsibly we're likely to give birth to children with genetic problems and physical handicaps. Severe operational handicaps can be overcome though. Think of a body like Stephen Hawking's and how it can be technologically equipped for him to continue creative activities. The point I wish to make here is that I am not concerned about the change. We always have to manage these malfunctions. An aging body can still make useful contributions. Fundamentally, to be alive is to be a performative body. If you are concerned about my body's performance, then you only have to worry about it when I am dead ha, ha.

*S: Concerning your transgressive, performance based works, what role has beauty played in them?*

**Stelarc:** Oh, I would assert none! But my projects and performances are situated in the context of art history, so one must accept the consequences of that and the inevitable association that can be made. In framing these projects and performances as art we become complicit in the realm of aesthetics and notions of design and beauty. Certainly there is no deliberate pursuit of a particular aesthetic. I guess one can make associations with the nude body and with a certain form follows function approach to design. But this is not about the beauty of the body, nor the beauty of an object or an installation. Beauty is like Truth - seemingly universal but in actuality somewhat arbitrary. These notions are cultural constructs that are in fact relative, highly contestable and arguably subjective.



9. *Blender*: Stelarc / Nina Sellars. Photographer: Stelarc.

## Endnotes

**Abstract:** *In this dialogue with Stahl Stenslie, Stelarc discusses his use of the body as an artistic material. He explains his own experience from the inside his own performance based artworks, disclosing a unique insight into somaesthetical matters representative of body-based performance art.*

**Keywords:** *body, art, obsolescence, suspension, soma, performance, somaesthetics, pain, exoskeleton, age.*

**Contact:**

Stelarc  
stelarc@stelarc.org

Stahl Stenslie  
Stenslie@gmail.com

# Pan Gongkai

## *Dialogue with Richard Shusterman on Philosophy, Art, and Life*

Preface by Else Marie Bukdahl

*This dialogue between Richard Shusterman and Pan Gongkai took place the evening of March 24, 2013 in Beijing. The dialogue was transcribed by Xu Jia and then translated by her with the help of Hu Ying.*

The Chinese artist *Pan Gongkai* has made a significant impact on the international art world. He has not only been very successful not only in the fields of painting, installation, and video art but also in education and administration. From 2001-2014 he was president of the Central Academy of Fine Arts in Beijing, and he has also served as vice-president of the Chinese Artists Association. In 2011, he contributed to the Venice Biennale with four other Chinese artists. Richard Shusterman commented on these contributions in an interview with the Chinese curator Peng Feng.<sup>1</sup> Shusterman stresses that Pan Gongkai's installation, as well as the other contributions "highlight the soma's role as transmodal perceiving subjectivity by also engaging the pleasures of other bodily senses."<sup>2</sup>

Like Shusterman, Gongkai is convinced that all art is created and perceived through the body. He knows that body consciousness plays an important role in contemporary Chinese painting. This commitment to the role of somatic consciousness in art is also evident in his impressive video installation *Snow Melting in Lotus* from the Venice Biennale 2011 (fig. 1).<sup>3</sup>

---

1 See the conversation between Peng Feng and Richard Shusterman regarding Cai Zhisong, Liang Yuanwei, Pan Gongkai, Yang Maoyuan, Yuan Gong in *Artpress supplément Venice 2011, Pavillions nationaux*.

2 Richard Shusterman "Somaesthetics. Thinking Through the Body and Designing for Interactive Experience," in *Interaction Design Foundation*, [www.interactiondesign.org/encyclopedia/somaesthetics.html](http://www.interactiondesign.org/encyclopedia/somaesthetics.html), p.7.

3 A photo of this project is also shown by Peng Feng in his article "Somaesthetics and Its Consequences in Contemporary Art" in *Journal of Somaesthetics* Vol.1, No.1 p. 43 (this issue).



1. Pan Gongkai. *Snow Melting in Lotus*. Large-scale video installation. Venice Biennale. China pavilion. 2011.

It is a long, constructed corridor through which one walks, and it transports you into a magical space. “Both sides of the temporary corridor are covered with Chinese ink wash paintings of lotuses, onto which an animation of falling snow is projected. Three air conditioners help keep the temperature of the corridor much cooler than the rest of the building.”<sup>4</sup> The temperature never rises above 10° C. In this work, Pan Gongkai juxtaposes the traditional subject of the lotus and the traditional technique of ink painting with the use of modern computer technology to create elements of falling text in video, falling like snowflakes. On the ground beneath it are actual cut out white letters, which appear to have fallen down from the wall. The text is an English translation of his essay on modern Western art and art theory. Gongkai has described this project as follows: “It is an attempt to create a poetic and vacant space that fits in with the traditional Chinese culture.”<sup>5</sup>

Gongkai’s ink paintings have a contemplative intensity and invite a surrender of self. They are characterized by bold renewal and reinterpretation of the ancient Chinese art form. From the simple elements of water and ink emerge artworks of intimate subtlety and overwhelming emotional power (fig. 2).

---

4 Zhang Zixuan, “Let there be smell”, *China Daily*, 15th June 2011. See [http://europe.chinadaily.com.cn/epaper/2011-07/15/content\\_12910425.html](http://europe.chinadaily.com.cn/epaper/2011-07/15/content_12910425.html)

5 Zhang Zixuan, *op. cit.*



2. Pan Gongkai. *Light Moon* Chinese lotus flower. 2013. Ink painting. Private collection.

Gongkai also uses the language of art to express human values and to open up new dialogues between the local and the global. In these works, viewers also encounter a visual dialogue between tradition and innovation. The artist has expressed himself with all his power and so personally that his work achieves general significance.

Shusterman emphasizes that Gongkai is “equally accomplished as an erudite theorist and we have spent many hours in Beijing in philosophical dialogues about art, some of which have been published in Chinese art journals.” It was only when Shusterman met with Chinese philosophers and artists - Gongkai in particular - that he was really introduced to the “rich resources in the classical Confucian notion of an ethics of harmony in which ethical education rests on the twin aesthetic pillars of art and ritual.” Gongkai is especially important in this regard as he is a specialist in Confucianism. Another key focus of Shusterman’s discussions with Gongkai concerned “the relationship between art and life, including the pragmatist idea of the ethical art of living.”<sup>6</sup>

Gongkai developed this theme in an article that was published in the catalogue for the exhibition *Zaoxing*, which was shown in September 2010 at the Central Academy of Fine Art in Beijing, with Gongkai at its head. In this essay, Gongkai ties aesthetics closely with life and practice and to improving the

---

6 I quote from Richard Shusterman’s catalog essay for the art show *Aesthetic Transactions. Pragmatist Philosophy through Art and Life*, curated by Richard Shusterman, Galerie Michel Journiac, May 24 through June 6, 2012, p. 21.

quality of our life and society. These attempts are the heartbeat of Shusterman's somaesthetics and are probably directly inspired by them. Gongkai has expressed these artistic and aesthetic goals as follows:

Artistic training, traditions and their advancement, is a foundation of human civilization and a motivating force for evolution. Music helped cultivate our aural sensitivity, and artistic works cultivated our appreciation of the beauty of forms while simultaneously trained the most ingenious hands and insightful minds. The easel arts are similar to music in that over the course of time they became inadvertently responsible for the training that elevated humankind's latent ability to strive for accuracy and to perceive.<sup>7</sup>

He hopes that these goals will start to characterize the Chinese teaching system in the Academies, as well as Chinese culture and society to a greater degree. Gongkai wants these goals to become connected to both aspects of Daoism and also somaesthetics in the future, which Gongkai is very interested in. He describes this hope for the future as follows:

The elevation of human perceptual capabilities, the overall human development and conceiving of humanities' intrinsic qualities is still the ultimate goal. Despite the fact that "technique" is on the same level as "talent" in Chinese culture, the maturity and exquisite alliance between eyes, hands and hearts, could possibly elevate mere "technique" to the level of concepts like 'Dao' - transcending the level of human consciousness.<sup>8</sup>

Shusterman is convinced that in Gongkai's projects "West and East coexist in active harmony and moving beauty, without an isolating separation, but also without coercive fusion."<sup>9</sup> The same goes for the interplay between traditional techniques and contemporary technology.

Else Marie Bukdahl

---

7 See "Pan Gongkai on "Zaoxing": <http://www.alivenotdead.com/sinopop/Pan-Gongkai-on-8220-Zaoxing-8221--profile-1080162.html>

8 Ibid.

9 *Aesthetic Transactions*, *op. cit.*, p. 22.

## The Dialogue

3月24日晚

中关村新园酒店

24.03.2013, Beijing

**Pan Gongkai (P):** 潘公凯

Pan Gongkai

**Richard Shusterman (R):** 理查德·舒斯特曼

Richard Shusterman

**P:** 舒斯特曼先生，你多次谈到在巴黎及其他地方街头进行的行为艺术，你曾给我看过作品的摄影记录，我觉得很有意思。你能谈谈作品背后的概念吗？

Mr. Shusterman, you have mentioned several times your performance art in the streets of Paris and elsewhere. You showed me some photographic testimony of that work, and I find it very interesting. Can you talk about the concept behind this work?

**R:** 我从2010年开始与巴黎艺术家杨·托马斯合作。这个系列作品开始仅止于摄影作品，随后发展为行为艺术表演和录像艺术作品。这个系列由我穿着同样的金色紧身衣完成，试图展现我 L'homme en Or (金衣人) 这一身份。这套服装是由与我合作的艺术家提供的，他的父母在巴黎芭蕾舞团工作，所以服装事实上来自于巴黎芭蕾舞团，是为舞蹈演员设计的（穿着这套服装或许是我另一种维度的疯狂）。这套服装是金闪闪的，所以我给你看过的我在巴黎策展的展览画册（TRANSACTION）封面也用了金色（这次展览也包括了“金衣人”系列中的一些作品）。巴黎的这次展览对我来说是一种探索，这一探索所呈现的与艺术家的合作如何改变了我对美学的思考，这种合作既包括与艺术家的对话，也包括合作进行的艺术创作。所以我在这次展览里所邀请的艺术家都是与我合作过的，也包括你，潘先生。这是我试图拉近艺术与哲学的一种方式，并以此展示哲学和艺术是可以联合起来共同创作的，而不是哲学仅能以远观和批判的方式介入艺术。将艺术创作和哲学思考整合在同一个体的行为之中，这是我喜欢中国文人传统的一个原因，即艺术创作与智性思考相互结合，以达到滋养与丰富对方的目的，进而使得将这两种实践结合起来的个体获得进步。

Since 2010, I have been collaborating with a Parisian artist Yann Toma. It started

with still photography and then progressed to performance and video works. They form a series of works unified by my wearing the same tight golden spandex body stocking and expressing my identity as *L'homme en Or* (The Man in Gold). The suit in shining gold comes from the artist photographer with whom I collaborate. His parents worked in the Paris Ballet, so the suit comes from Paris Ballet, a suit for dancers. (Performing in this suit is just another dimension of my craziness perhaps) (fig. 3).



3. Yann Thoma with Richard Shusterman. *Darsonvalisation*. Photo 2010.

The art show was a way of exploring how my philosophical thinking in aesthetics changed through my working with artists – either in dialogues or in creation together; so all the artists in the show are people I worked with, you included Mr. Pan. This is my way of trying to bring Art and Philosophy closer together, to show that they can be combined to create together, instead of having philosophy look at art simply from a position of distance and in judgment. This integration of making art and doing philosophy together, in the performance of the same individual, is one reason I like the Wen Ren(文人) tradition in China—the intellectual thinking and the making of art are brought together to nourish and enrich each other so that the individual who combines these practices is improved.

**P:** 你说的将艺术与哲学结合在一起，指的是将哲学中的某种观念或理念与艺术结合在一起吗？那么是哪种哲学理念呢？能不能更具体谈谈这个结合是哲学中哪个部分和艺术中哪个部分的结合？

*You mentioned bringing art and philosophy together. You mean you bring some philosophical ideas together with art? What kind of philosophical ideas? Could you be more specific? You bring which part of philosophy together with which part of art?*

**R:** 对我来说，二者结合的要点在于将哲学践行为一种致力于使生活更智性，更具吸引力，更有意义及更有益的生活艺术。在我最近的作品中，我试图将艺术实践为一种在身体美学领域的哲学探索，以此将艺术与哲学结合起来。我通过艺术实践丰富我在哲学层面对艺术的理解，同时也因此更加靠近艺术创作的实践。以摄影艺术为例，摄影理论家（既包括哲学家，也包括其他艺术理论家，即使像罗兰·巴特和苏珊·桑塔格这样伟大的理论家也不能例外）通常会将艺术摄影完全等同于照片本身。但从我的艺术实践经验来说，我认为摄影远不仅止于这些，在摄影艺术中还有很大一部分令人愉悦的美学经验超越了单纯凝视最后作为照片存在的影像。摄影是一门更加综合的艺术，它包括设置、摆放和摄像这样一个完整的行为过程。而在拍摄人这一主体时存在一种人际沟通的艺术，这种沟通艺术往往靠的不是语言，而是身体性的理解与技巧，既包括摄影师的艺术，如怎样找到正确的位置，怎样使他拍摄的主体自在、自信；也包括被摄主体的艺术，如怎样将自身呈现为具有吸引力的主体，而不显得太做作。因此，在摄影中存在一种人际沟通的艺术，这种艺术能够使得摄影在审美经验领域更丰富，更有意思，不仅止于单纯观看最终的摄影作品或数字影像。在我与杨·托马斯共同完成的摄影和录像艺术作品中，我们在运动和姿势方面使用了一种很成熟的即兴沟通，这种沟通在美学经验层面是很有成效的。摄影经验就像即兴创作舞蹈作品，他跟随我的运动，而我也对他的运动在合适的方向上做出回应。意义丰富且具有审美性的共同运动所带来的审美经验本身就令人愉快，所以我甚至并不在乎最终的影像作品；当然如果我们知道摄像机中根本没有胶片，那么我们的行为也就不会有同样的意义了。回到你的问题，将艺术与哲学结合起来的一种方式就是运用艺术性的实践去更好的理解什么是艺术，不是从观者的角度（典型的哲学家角度），而是从创作者的角度。

For me the essential point is practicing philosophy as an art of living dedicated to making life more intelligent, attractive, meaningful, and rewarding. In my recent work I try to put art and philosophy together by practicing art as a way of exploring my philosophical ideas in somaesthetics. I enrich my philosophical understanding of art by performing an art practice and thus being closer to the practice of artistic

creation. Take the example of my work with photography. Normally, theorists of photography (both philosophers and other art theorists, even great ones like Roland Barthes and Susan Sontag) identify the art of photography entirely with the photograph. But from my experience in the practice of making photographic art, I saw that much more is involved in this art and there is a great deal of enjoyable aesthetic experience that is not about looking at the final photographic image. Photography is a more comprehensive art involving a performative process of setting up, posing, and shooting the shot. In photographing human subjects there is an art of interpersonal communication that is often without words but through somatic understanding and skill. There is, for example, the somatic and imaginative artistry used by the photographer to get into right position, to make the person he is photographing, comfortable and confident; then there is art of the subject or person being photographed -- how to present herself or himself to the camera in an attractive way that is not too forced, embarrassed, or artificial, how to understand what the photographer is after and to imaginatively propose other poses by spontaneously taking those poses. So there is an art of interpersonal communication in taking a picture that can be richer and more interesting in aesthetic experience than simply looking at the final photographic print or digital image. In the photographic and video work I do with the Paris artist Yann Toma, we have a very developed improvisational communication of movement and gesture that is very rewarding in terms of aesthetic experience. The experience of shooting is like an improvisational creative dance; I decide to move or pose one way, and he follows me; he moves his body one way and I react by taking another pose or move in a suitable direction. The aesthetic experience of moving together meaningfully and aesthetically in this way is enjoyable in itself, so I did not even care so much about the final image; though of course our activity would not have had the same meaning if we knew that the camera was empty of film. So to go back to your question: one way of bringing together art and philosophy is to use artistic practice to get a better understanding of what art is, not just from the viewer's point of view (the typical philosopher's point of view) but from the creator's point of view (fig. 4).<sup>10</sup>

---

10 More detailed description of the collaborating work between Richard Shusterman and Yann Toma can be found in: Richard Shusterman, "A Philosopher in Darkness and Light," and in French translation, "Un Philosophe en ombre et en lumière," in *Lucidité: Vues de l'intérieur/Lucidity: Inward Views*, ed. Anne-Marie Ninacs (Montreal: Le Mois de la Photo à Montréal, 2011).



4. Yann Toma with Richard Shusterman. *Somaflux*,. 2010. Photo.

另一个方式，就是艺术也像哲学一样，拓展人的思维界限。艺术不仅是再现世界和自身的方式，也是一种探索自身的方式。通过艺术创作，个体表达自身，而这种自我表达有助于更好的理解自身，这样就能够使个体进步并更好的陶冶自身，这种进步和修养并不仅是为了自身，也是为了家庭和整个社会。如果回到我的身体美学和中国哲学传统，也包括古希腊哲学传统所共有的特点，即认为哲学是生活的艺术（art of living），那么我们就可以看到，认识自身的目的其实是提高自身。苏格拉底式的对“认识你自己”的探求激发了整个希腊哲学关注怎样更好的观照自身。中国哲学中存在相似的观念，即“省身”（自我反省）和“修身”（自我修养）。孔子的《论语》中说“一日三省吾身”，《大学》中说“修身”。艺术是一种自我检验和自我陶冶的方式。在我的作品，如“金衣人”中，当我套上紧身衣进行表演的时候，我探索并检验普通自我的界限，我看到了我心理上的局限，也看到我创造性上的局限，还有我运动的习惯；也看到我的“气”（即能量）的层次。所以说这是我认识自身、发展自身的一个方式，也是个很具体的方式。这是我将哲学与艺术结合起来的两种简单方式，也许过于简单，但对我来说行之有效。

A second way is that, I think art like philosophy, extends the range of one's thinking. Art is a way of exploration of oneself, not just representation of the world or of oneself. In making art one expresses oneself, and this self-expression helps you better to know yourself so you can improve yourself or cultivate yourself better, not simply for yourself but for your family, your university, your community. If we

go back to the idea of philosophy as an art of living that I share with the Chinese tradition, and that also appears in the ancient Greek tradition, we see this goal of knowing oneself to improve oneself. Greek philosophy was inspired by the Socratic quest to “know thyself” to better care for oneself. In China we have the similar idea of *xing shen* (省身), self-examination and *xiu shen*(修身), self-cultivation. In the Confucian *Analects*, you learn to examine yourself three times a day. In *The Great Learning*, we are urged to cultivate ourselves (*xiu shen*). Art is a form of self-cultivation and self-examination. In my work as *The Man in Gold*, when I put on that suit and perform, I explore and test the limits of my normal self; I see my psychological limits, I see my creative limits, my habits of movement; I see my level of energy or *qi*. So it is a way that I come to know myself and also to develop myself. So these are two simple ways that I bring art and philosophy together. Perhaps they are too simple, but they have been very helpful to me.

**P:** 但是我听下来呢，我觉得是你作为一个哲学家，进入艺术，是一个哲学家和艺术的结合，而不是哲学本身与艺术的结合。我觉得是你这个人 and 艺术结合了。

But it sounds more like a philosopher who joins in art. It is like bringing a philosopher together with art, rather than bringing philosophy itself with art. I feel you as a person are combining with art?

**R:** 是的，我同意。对我来说，如果哲学是一种生活艺术，它必须经由作为具体的人的哲学家来表达。很多哲学，即使是非常抽象的那些，也包括某种形式的个体表达，尽管在哲学一些最抽象的形式，如逻辑中，个体维度是极其有限的。所以，我确实没有将这个哲学以其理论表达的方式与艺术连接起来。取而代之的是，我将哲学和艺术通过个体和实践结合起来，因为哲学作为一种生活艺术包括个体实践；同时更宽泛地说，没有任何一种哲学或艺术能够不经由创作和思考它的个体而存在。个体性从某种程度上说是不可避免的，但同时也带来了很多问题，尤其是对哲学。这也是我在策展 *Aesthetic Transactions*（巴黎，2012年5月—六月）项目时最焦虑的一点。这个展览是关于哲学是如何通过与艺术的相遇和与艺术家的合作来改变自身的。我以自己为例，因为我的哲学确实通过与艺术的交换发生了改变。所以我用个人经历作为范例，但我担心人们会说我只是做了一个关于自己的展览。比如说，展览中的一幅画作是由一位意大利油画家完成的，他主要进行肖像创作，特别是学者的肖像。但这次，他说因为我是一个身体哲学家，所以他想画我的裸体，而不是仅一个头像。但是我不想那样做，因为我觉得不太合适，最后我们达成共识，只画上半身的裸体，而不

包括下半身。即使这样，我也感到很不安，因为我担心人们会觉得我是个自大狂，想展示自己。但这件事使我检视自身，并发现了我对暴露自己这个想法的界限。一个人怎么能够检视自身而不揭露自身呢？如果不能知道那些审视自己的人的反应，一个人是无法了解自己的，正如你可以通过别人的眼睛看到自己一样。（通过这种方式，你自己的眼睛成为了镜子）。所以，为了了解自身，你必须将自己暴露给他人。

Yes, I agree. For me, if philosophy is an art of living, it must be expressed through the person of the philosopher. Most philosophy, even when it is more abstract, involves some form of personal expression, though in philosophy's most abstract forms like logic the personal dimension is very minimal. So it is true that my work is not taking the whole of philosophy in its theoretical expression and connecting it to art. Instead I am bringing philosophy and art together through a person and through a practice, because philosophy as an art of living involves personal practice; and I think more generally, there is no art and no philosophy without a person who is creating and thinking. The personal is in some way inevitable but it is also problematic – especially for philosophy. This is the problem I worried about in doing my art show *Aesthetic Transactions* (Paris, May-June 2012). The show was about how philosophy can change its ways of thinking through closer encounters with art and close collaborations with artists. I used myself as an example, since my philosophy really did change through its artistic transactions. So I use my personal story as an example, but I did worry that people would think that I am simply making a show about myself. For instance, one of the paintings was by an Italian oil painter who does portraits, especially portraits of intellectuals. But this time he said instead of a normal head portrait, he should do one of the whole naked body because I am a body philosopher. I did not want to do that because I did not think it was proper, so we compromised and just did a naked torso without the lower body and genitals. Even this made me feel uncomfortable, because I worried that people would think I am a big egotist and want to show myself. But the point was to examine myself and learn the limits of my willingness to expose myself. How can you examine yourself without revealing yourself? You cannot know yourself without knowing the reaction of the people who look at you, just like you can see yourself from other people's eyes (in which your own eyes are mirrored). So, to know yourself you have to expose yourself to the others.

**P:** 我觉得你谈的这个事跟王瑞芸比较接近，她也一直通过艺术在做修炼，她的修炼后面也是有理论的，她的理论主要是禅宗。

I feel you should talk with Wang Ruiyun. She is also developing self-cultivation

through art, and she has a theoretical background for this self-cultivation, mostly Zen.

**R:** 对我来说，我接近禅宗的路径更为实践化，而不是理论化。所以我在日本道馆跟禅师学禅的时候从来没挨过打，尽管很多在那里学习的人都被他打过，以作为教学的一部分。他为什么没有打过我呢？因为我从来不问关于理论的问题。那里的学生挨打通常是因为禅师（日语是Roshi）认为他们问了愚蠢的问题或者说了愚蠢的话。绝大多数愚蠢的问题都是关于禅的理论或形而上学问题的。我从不问那种问题，原因有两个：我进行禅宗修炼的主要兴趣在于实践而非理论。我想学习打坐和其他形式禅宗冥想的方法。我意识到对禅的真正理解并不是以语言为形式的。另一个原因是我的日语还没有好到能够表达一个复杂的理论问题，并理解一个复杂的回答。所以我只是谦卑地专注于实践，只有当我遇到一个实践上的困难，或不确定怎么做时才问几个简单的问题。作为一个成长于实用主义传统的哲学家，我尊重技巧的知识和力量。当然，作为一个哲学家，我也对话语感兴趣，并知道如何使用它们。有些人甚至说我是一个优秀的作家；当然我是尽力让自己的文字作品更有吸引力，所以我花费很多时间修改我的文章。但同时，我也相信超越语言之上的经验所具有的力量与真理性，有些经验只有通过切实的体验才能了解，只是听别人谈起是不够的。做一件事情与谈论一件事情之间有重要的区别，实际表演一段舞蹈和单纯描述也有很大区别。表演需要技巧上的精通，而这一点往往比掌握语言更难。我是从一个舞者身上学会如何欣赏这一点的，我曾与这个舞者共同生活了将近两年，她曾是我的女朋友，并教会了我身体美学的许多重要方面，其中包括实践和技巧的重要性。我曾长时间伏案写作身体修行的价值与乐趣，而她则在一旁，边做瑜伽的伸展练习边嘲笑我，因为我只是在写作身体修行和技巧而不是真正实践它们。她说对于身体性的理解和健康来说，与她一起做瑜伽练习可比单纯在电脑上写作好得多。她还说，写作让很多事情看起来更简单。为自己的画作写一个标签和题目并不难，但实际创作一幅笔触细腻的画作却并不是那么容易。她说服了我一个事实，那就是作为一个好的身体哲学家，我应当至少发展一项身体专长。这就是为什么我在纽约完成了为期四年的专业身体训练，并获得了费尔登奎司法的专业资格证书，这是一个西方版本的身体教育和身体治疗方法。尽管我的职业是大学教授，我也同时从事身体教学和身体治疗的专业工作，治疗多种身体性病症，比如肩背疼痛，走路或转身时的身体平衡困难等。我并不接诊太多病人，因为每个病人都是一种巨大的责任，而且我也忙于学术工作和与此相关的旅行。同时我也不喜欢这一工作的商业性质（比如治疗费用）；我是一个学者而非商人。

For me, my approach to Zen is more practical than theoretical. That is why I never got hit when I studied Zen with a Zen Master in his Dojo in Japan, though many of the other people training there were hit by him as part of the teaching. Why did he not hit me? Because I never asked questions or made comments about theory! Trainees were hit usually because they asked something or said something that the Master (Roshi in Japanese) considered foolish. Many of those “foolish” questions were theoretical or metaphysical questions about Zen. I did not ask any questions like that for two reasons. My interest in training with Roshi was practical not theoretical. I wanted to learn the techniques of sitting meditation and other forms of Zen meditation. I realized that the real Zen understanding is not in the form of language. The second reason was that my Japanese was not good enough to ask a complicated theoretical question and to understand its complicated answer. So I just focused humbly on practice and asked only a few questions about technique when I had a practical problem or uncertainty. As a philosopher in the pragmatist tradition, I respect the knowledge and power of techniques. Of course, as a philosopher I am also interested in words and I know how to use them. Some people even say that I am a good writer; I certainly try my best to write attractively, so I spend much time rewriting my texts to make them better. But I also believe in the power and truth of experiences that go beyond language; experiences that one can understand only by living through them and not just hearing about them. There is an important difference between doing something and talking about it; performing a dance and describing it. To perform you need to master technique, and that is often much harder than mastering language. I learned to appreciate this from a dancer with whom I lived for almost two years; she was my girlfriend and she taught me many important things about somaesthetics, including the importance of technique and practice. I would sit long hours at my desk to write about the value and pleasures of somatic training, and she would lie down near my desk doing yoga stretches and laughing at me, because I was writing about body training and technique instead of doing it. She said it would be better for my somatic understanding and my health to lie down and stretch with her than to write out words on the computer. She said that writing makes many things seem much easier than they really are. It is easy to give your paintings a title or a label in words, but it is not easy at all to do the kind of painting that you do, with all its fine qualities of brushstrokes. She convinced me that to be a good body philosopher I should develop at least one somatic expertise. That’s why I went through a four-year professional body-training course in New York City. I trained and became professionally certified in the Feldenkrais Method, a western form of

somatic education and therapy. Although my main job is a university professor, I also work professionally as a somatic teacher and therapist, treating people with various problems such as back and neck aches, difficulties in balance or in walking or turning, etc. I do not take on many patients, because a patient is a great responsibility and I am too busy with my academic work and related travel to be available for many patients. I also don't like the "business" aspect of such work (such as charging fees); I am a scholar not a businessman.

**P:** 我能够理解你通过身体训练获得愉悦的感受，但这好像和哲学没什么关系？

I could understand you enjoy yourself through body practices, but it can hardly be connected with philosophy?

**R:** 我很乐于帮助他人，减轻他们的痛楚，这给予了我一种演讲和写作无法完成的很特殊成就感。但这一身体性的工作至少在两个方面是与我的哲学相关的。首先，我的临床经验提供了许多范例，使我认识到人们会因为身体意识的缺乏而系统性的误用身体，同时人们也能够通过增强身体意识来改善他们的经验和外在行为。我在我的《身体意识》一书和其他文章中使用过这些例子。如果我没有这些实际的身体训练和专业实践经验，我是无法获得这些有用的范例，也无法获得它们所带来的哲学洞见的。

另外，正是由于我有了很好的身体意识，我能够清楚地知道何时适于进行清晰冷静的哲学思考。同时我也知道如何平静我的能量，以使我能够更好地及更长时间的思考，因为人们使用身体来思考的，而不是飘浮在外的心灵。身体性的训练也有助于哲学演讲，我知道如何控制我的呼吸以使我的演讲更为清晰，也知道如何控制我的身体以使我能够更好地用肢体语言与听众沟通。当然，我的技巧还需要进一步的提高。

I enjoy helping people and relieving their pain. It gives a very special satisfaction, a kind that giving a lecture or writing a book cannot give. But this body work connects with my philosophy in at least two important ways. First, my clinical practice gives me many examples about how people systematically misuse their bodies because their somatic awareness is deficient and also how the same people can develop better somatic awareness to improve their experience and performance. I use such examples in my book *Body Consciousness* (身体意识) and in other philosophy texts I have written. I would have never encountered these useful examples or the philosophical insights they gave me if I did not have my actual experiences of body training and professional practice.

A second way that my body training helps my philosophical work is that, because I have developed a good level of body consciousness, I know when I am in the right condition for doing philosophical work and when my energy is not good for clear and calm philosophical thinking. I also have learned ways to calm my energy so that I can think better and longer; because a person thinks with the Shenti(身体) not with a disembodied mind. Somatic training also helps me in giving philosophical lectures at conferences, so that I know how to control my breath to make my speech clearer and to give my body the right postures and gestures to make better contact with the audience. Of course, my skills still need much improvement.

**P:** 这点我有同感，我作画的时候也必须让手、笔与精神情绪配合无间。I know what you mean. I also have to have my hand, brush, and mind work with each other in doing my painting.

**R:** 我知道，你将自己的心、灵魂、身体和思维都投入到作品中，我能明白你是多么努力和投入地工作，这种努力和投入并不仅是为了你的作品，也是为了你的教育使命。你的作品就像一种召唤，不仅是一份工作。我非常欣赏这一点，因为我在哲学工作中也有同样的感受。

Yes, I know that you put your heart and soul and body and mind all together in your work. I can see how hard you work and how dedicated you are not only to your art but to your educational mission. Your work like a calling, it is something more than a job. I appreciate that very much, because that is also how I feel about my philosophical work.

**P:** 在中国传统文化中，并没有西方传统里那种独立和纯粹的哲学。更准确的讲，中国有的是思想史或观念史，而不单纯是哲学史。中国对思想的理解比之哲学相对宽泛一些。哲学是纯粹概念性的，而中国的思想不仅研究真理的问题、存在的问题，同时研究道德的问题、社会政治的问题，甚至审美问题。所以在中国，思想这一概念具有更宽泛的意义。比如孔子的《论语》，在我看来就不是一部严格意义上的哲学著作，而是一种思想。

In traditional Chinese culture, we don't have the kind of independent and pure philosophy like in Western tradition. To be more specific, China has only a history of thought or an intellectual history rather than a history of philosophy. The Chinese idea of thought is much wider than "philosophy". Philosophy is purely conceptual, while the Chinese idea of thought focuses not only on "truth", but is equally interested in "ethics" and sometimes also in "aesthetics". Thus the notion

of thought has a much wider sense. For example, the Analects of Confucius, in my opinion is not a philosophical work in the strict sense; it is rather a work of thought.

**R:** 我认为你所说的“思想”在西方被称为“智慧”。智慧与事实真理或科学知识是不同的，且在某种程度上说比今天在学术语境下讨论的哲学意义更为广泛，因为学术语境下的哲学本质上是被视为知识的。当然在西方，我们有关真理、知识和语言的纯粹哲学形式，但西方哲学更多的起源于对智慧而非知识的论述——希腊语中哲学的意思是爱智慧，而不是仅仅热爱真理或知识。这种哲学在古代是作为一种生活艺术的。苏格拉底从没写过任何著作，许多古代和文艺复兴时期的哲学家无一例外都辩称，自己的哲学是帮助人们更好生活的手段。今天，因为大学里所教授的哲学在很大程度上是纯粹的学术理论研究，已与生活脱节，哲学对西方文化的影响在下降。对于大多数人来说，单纯的概念性知识并不一定是丰富且有用的。所以我认为应该重构哲学以使其与人们的日常生活更为紧密的联系起来。正因为没有这种向生活哲学的转向，我们发现有许多其他作家在替补这一空缺。这些作家并没有经过哲学训练，也不是优秀或深刻的思想者，所以他们的著作只是一些很表面化的流行哲学，告诉人们如何生活。但是，很多人阅读这些书，或者听从电影明星和摇滚明星关于如何生活的建议，因为这些明星们大多长相漂亮又十分富有，所以人们就认为他们一定知道正确的生活方式。哲学家很难与他们竞争，因为哲学家们通常长的并不是很好看，也并不富有或出名。事实上，对于很多哲学家来说，他们并不在意外表或自己的著作是否易读。他们乐于将自己的著作写的很晦涩，这样就只有同样从事哲学工作的人才能够阅读了。但是，如果著作不易读的话，我们怎么能期望有更多的人阅读哲学呢？我的目的之一就是通过将哲学与生活联系起来而使其更有魅力。我在实现这一目的方面并不是非常成功，但我尽全力这样做。让哲学更有魅力不仅包括写作，也包括有魅力的行为举止和风格。如果哲学家不能展现他们在实际生活中的价值，人们又凭什么相信他们的观点呢？因此，我也注意自己的个人风格和行为举止，以此使哲学更有魅力。演讲时，我会认真考虑“我应该穿什么衣服”和我应该在演讲台上如何表现，而不是只考虑我演讲的语言和概念。因为最后，人们是凭借整体印象对你所说的进行理解和判断的。所以宣扬身体美学包括多方面的责任：我必须操心我穿什么，我的行为，我如何走路，我的姿势。我必须确保自己还能穿上那件金色紧身衣进行艺术表演。我还要担心跟随我学习身体美学的学生如何呈现自己，如果我的学生行为举止都很难看，就会发出这样一个信号，那就是身体美学并不那么有用。你还记得那个2011年参与我们讨论的东京学生吗？她是个好学生，理由很多，

但其中一个就是她是身体美学的优秀代表，她举止优雅智慧，穿着配饰很有品位，行为迷人，有亲和力。她的这些身体美学的品质有助于使这个理论更诱人，也更让人信服。

I think that what you are describing as “thought” is often called “wisdom” in the west. Wisdom is different from factual truth or scientific knowledge, and it is in some way broader than philosophy as normally practiced today in academic contexts, where it is seen essentially in terms of knowledge. Of course in the West, we have pure forms of philosophy focused on truth and knowledge and discourse; but philosophy in the West began with the notion of wisdom rather than truth – *philosophia* in Greek means the love of wisdom rather than loving mere truth or knowledge. It was practiced in ancient times as an art of living. Socrates did not write any books; many ancient and Renaissance philosophers who wrote books nonetheless defined their writing as instruments to help us live better lives. Today, because the philosophy of universities is in large part a purely academic theoretical exercise that is separated from life, the influence of philosophy in Western culture is declining. The pure conceptual knowledge is not meaningful or useful to many people. So I think philosophy needs reconstruction to connect more with people’s lives. Without this turn to living philosophy, we find other authors filling this vacuum. These authors are not trained in philosophy and are not very good or deep thinkers, so they write very superficial books of popular philosophy on how to live one’s life. Nonetheless, many people read these books or listen to movie stars and rock stars for guidance in how to live, because these star celebrities are usually very good looking and rich, so people think they must know the right way to live. It is hard for philosophers to compete because they are not usually good looking, rich, or famous. In fact, for the most part they do not try their best to write in an attractive way or to look attractive. They are happy to make their writing difficult so that only their colleagues can read it. But why should we expect many people to read philosophy if it is not attractively written? One of my aims is to try to make philosophy more attractive by relating it to life. I am not especially successful in realizing this aim but I try my best. Making philosophy attractive includes more than mere writing. It includes attractive behavior and style. Why should a person believe a philosopher’s views if he does not demonstrate their value in actual life? I therefore try to make philosophy more attractive by also working on my personal style and behavior. So on many occasions in giving lectures I think seriously about “what I should wear” and how I should act at the podium rather than just thinking of the words and ideas of my lecture. Because in the end people base their understanding and judgment on the whole impression that

one gives. That's why advocating somaesthetics involves a complex responsibility: I have to think about what I wear, about my manners, about how I walk and gesture. I have to make sure I am still slim enough to fit into that golden suit to do my artistic work; and I also have to worry a bit about how my students of somaesthetics present themselves. If my students all behave or present themselves in an unattractive way, that could signal that the somaesthetic philosophy itself is not effective. Do you remember the student from Tokyo that participated in our dialogue in July 2011? She is very good student for many reasons; but one reason is that she is an excellent representative of somaesthetic philosophy through her elegant, intelligent behavior, her attractively tasteful style and grooming, and her charming, perceptive manners. Her somaesthetic qualities help make the theory more appealing and convincing.

**P:** 中国画的实践跟你的行为艺术作品有一些共通性，但也有很大差别。在中国画中，身体动作是十分微妙的，只是手和几根手指的微小动作，而不是大的舞蹈。对于这种艺术形式来说，我在水墨画中的动作已经算是最大的运动了。

In Chinese painting practice, there is something in common with your performance but with a lot of differences. In Chinese painting, the action is very subtle, only very small movements with one hand, or a few fingers, not like big dancing. The action of movement in my ink painting is almost the biggest kind of movement in this artistic form.

**R:** 是的，我同意。事实上，我在我的身体意识工作室教学时关注了微小的运动。它们与我在相机前的工作有很大不同，当我在相机前工作时，运动必须更具有表达性。这也与整个环境的气有很大关系。因为当我在公众面前穿上紧身衣时，我不能低调或害羞，我必修像能量一样辐射到四周。但我的身体工作全都是关于微运动的。运动的幅度很小也很慢。因为当你快速运动时，就无法注意到自己的运动，也会因运动过快而无法掌控。所以在教授身体意识时，缓慢微小的运动十分重要，如果运动的慢，就很容易停下来。每个动作，即便是很慢的那种，都有不太平滑的部分。只有在平滑的运动中才能控制好身体，每个人都能学习对身体的控制。

Yes, I agree. Actually what I teach in my body consciousness workshops focuses on very small movements. It is altogether different than what I do for the camera when I move as *The Man in Gold*. For the camera in that context, my movements are large to be more visibly expressive, and also to respond to the *qi* (气) of the whole situation. Because when I wear the suit in public, I cannot act small and shy, I need

to radiate power and confidence through large forceful movements (perhaps partly to overcome the vulnerability of embarrassment in dressing in that strange way). But actually my body workshop is all about micro movement, very small, slow movement. Because if you move fast, you don't notice your movement as clearly as when you move slowly; also fast movements are usually much more difficult to control or adjust. So it is very important in the teaching of body consciousness to use small, slow movements. By examining one's movements when one does a small movement and does it slowly, we can more easily see where the movement is not smooth and then we can try to make it smoother or more effective. That way we can gain better body control and better mastery of movement, which can then be extended also to larger movements and movements done spontaneously without explicit efforts to control.

**P:** 在中国画的笔墨运动中，有一个特征，就是对运动的感觉非常细微。比如王羲之的兰亭序，他在一张小小的纸上创作的书法，被公认为一两千年中最好的，千千万万个人去研习这件书法作品。在临摹的经验过程中，他们一遍又一遍地体味着这里面非常细微的变化。

In ink painting practices in China, the experience of action is extremely small and subtle. Consider, for example, the Lan Ting Xu by Wang Xizhi (《兰亭序》，王羲之). His calligraphy on such a small piece of paper is believed to be the best in the last 1000 to 2000 years; thousands of people have studied it. In the experiential process of copying from it, they too experience the very subtle actions and changes in his writing.

**R:** 是的，在使技巧成熟的运动中，通常我们必须先了解正确的运动感觉起来怎样，随后才是不断完善运动的技巧。

Yes, in matters of skilled movement we often first need to learn what the right movement feels like before we can do that movement consistently and skillfully.

**P:** 在学习书法的过程中，当然要把字学像，但同时，临摹者也尝试体验王羲之写字时候的感觉，其实临摹的目的就是为了体会王羲之在创作书法时候的感觉，因为原创者创作的整个过程是充满节奏和韵律的，即使在非常微小的动作中，也充满了张弛之间的对立互补关系。所以书法是中国文化中非常精微和高雅的部分。

In the process of learning calligraphy, of course one is trying to copy the character in an exact way. However, one is also trying to experience the actions of Wang Xizhi. The purpose of copying is to feel how Wang Xizhi feels in writing this work.

Because the total action of the original writing is full of rhythm, in very subtle actions, it is full of complementary, oppositional relations between control and lack of control (or a balance between control and release). So this is a very subtle and superior part in Chinese culture.

所以，我认为你的身体美学就艺术方面来说，在西方的语境中有一大块事情可以做，同时，在东方的文脉里也有一大块事情可以做。我觉得这里有一个很关键的差异。在大动作的行为表演如你的作品“金衣人”中，是一种比较直接的身体体验，而在中国的书画动作当中，更多的是一种“微体验”。这些“微体验”通过身体的同构性模拟实现并放大。

So I feel in your somaesthetics, with respect to art, there are some important things that could be done in your Western context; and at the same time, some different things could be done in the Eastern context. I could see a key difference in this. In the big action performances like your work as *The Man in Gold*, it is a direct body experience, while in Chinese calligraphy and painting actions, we have more of a micro-experience of the body. This micro-experience is realized and enlarged by a heterogeneous isomorphism in one's body.

**R:** 我明白，而且我认为更广义地说，不同文化和传统有着不同的身体运动风格。在一个人成为艺术家之前就能发现这些不同。我记得当我去日本进行为期一年的研究时，我女儿一岁（美国式的年龄计算方法），她已经表现出不同于日本孩子的行动方式了。她在大的和比较自由的运动方式上很熟练，比如攀爬、跳跃和跑动；同时她也最喜欢这些运动。但是日本的孩子大部分时间在进行小幅度的运动——比如将小东西放进小洞中——他们在这方面比我的女儿更有优势，我女儿并不擅长把小东西放进小洞中，她更习惯于大幅度的运动。这里就存在文化上的差异，也包括个人自身的。我之前一直接受军事训练，这种训练侧重大幅度的、快速的和力量型的运动，所以我之后必须学习如何进行微小的运动。我的那个舞者女友曾坚持让我学习太极，她说因为我运动得太快，所以我需要学习如何缓慢运动，以及如何让我的运动更加细致和微妙。这并不意味着大幅度的运动就是无用的。最好是能够学习这两种运动方式。生活是复杂的，包括很多变化和不同的情况，所以一个人需要累积多种技能。

I understand your point, and I think more generally there are different styles of bodily movement in different cultures and traditions. You can see this already long before someone becomes an artist. I remember when I went to Japan to spend a year of research, my daughter was one year old (in the American way of counting age), and she already moved very differently from Japanese children. She was very

skillful at big and free body movements such as climbing and jumping and running; and she liked those movements most. But the Japanese children spent most of their time with fine motors skills of small movement – for instance putting small objects into small holes – and they were much better at those fine precise movements than my daughter, who had trouble putting those objects into the very narrow hole because she was more accustomed to big movements. There are real cultural differences and personal ones too. I was trained as a soldier where one must often make big, rapid, and strong movements, so I had to learn later on how to make also small movements. My girlfriend who was a dancer insisted that I learn Taiji, because she said I moved too fast and strong, so I needed to learn to slow down and also make my movements smaller and more subtle. This does not mean that big movements are useless. It is best to learn to know both kinds of movement. Life is very complicated, involving many changes and different situations, so you need a toolbox with a lot of different tools.

**P:** 我想问一个我特别关心的问题：当你与摄影师合作行为艺术表演时，他拍摄的是穿着特殊服装的你，你是以哲学家的身份体验或创作艺术。但是如果没有摄影师，也不穿这件紧身衣，如果你是穿着日常的衣服进行日常的工作和生活，你会把生活中的某个特殊部分当做艺术作品吗？

I have a question: when you do this performance art with a photographer who photographs and films you in your special suit, you are experiencing or making art as a philosopher. But if there is no photographer and there is no special suit of The Man in Gold, if you are just in your ordinary everyday clothes of everyday work and daily life, can you see any particular part of your life as an artwork?

**R:** 肯定不是博物馆意义上的艺术。我想你是在重提我们之间的一个老问题，而我也想感谢你，你使我对这个问题的认识更加清晰了，也使我意识到我必须更加谨慎的思考这个问题。我指的是“生活艺术”（art of living）和“艺术界艺术”，或者说博物馆和画廊中的艺术之间的关系问题。我同意在“艺术界艺术”和使个人生活艺术化之间存在着不同，但其中也有很多重叠。因为如果没有生活和创造性的“生活艺术”，没有由美学风格和形态启发及引导的生活，那么“艺术界艺术”将失去它的大部分能量、创造性、激情，甚至一部分素材（因为艺术作品通常描绘的是我们具有创造性的生活风格，包括我们如何运用音乐、时尚、烹调及化妆等方式丰富我们的生活。）所以如何清楚地使“生活艺术”和“艺术界艺术”之间的关系理论化就成为一个很重要的工作。这对于实用主义美学来说是一个很重要的问题，但广义地说，这是一个很有趣的理论问题，也是值得

我探索的一个理论问题。自我们2011年得谈话后，这个问题的重要性对我就愈发明显。

Not in the museum sense of art. I think you are raising here an old question you raised in an earlier discussion between us, and I want to thank you for making it clearer to me, for making me see that I have to think through this question more carefully. I mean the question of the relationship between “the art of living”, and “the art of the artworld”, in other words the art of museum, galleries, etc. I agree that there is a difference between “artworld art” and the artistic shaping of one’s life, a difference between “artworld art” and “the art of living”, but there are important overlaps. Because if there is no life and no creative “art of living,” no life inspired or guided by the idea of aesthetic style and shaping, then “artworld art” would be deprived of much of its energy, creativity, passion, and even of some of its material (since artwork art often portrays our creative styles of living including the ways we use arts of music, fashion, cuisine, cosmetics, etc. to enrich our lives). So one important task is to theorize in a clearer way this relationship between “the art of living” and the “artworld art.” It is a very important question for pragmatist aesthetics but it is an interesting theoretical question more generally, and one that I should explore. Its importance became clear to me when we had our 2011 discussion.

**P:** 当时我们讨论的是你的行为艺术表演。你表演的这个作品完全符合我“错构”的艺术理论（你建议我也可以用英语中的“变形”艺术理论来描述，因为这一理论将艺术的关键解释为本质上是通过与生活的疏离进行创作的）。如果从“错构”理论来理解，我认为你的行为演出如“金衣人”是一件艺术作品。但我们不能将日常生活视为艺术，所以在西方语境下，生活艺术似乎并不能被看作是艺术，因为它是生活本身，而不是对生活的错构。所以对我来说，你所谈论的生活艺术似乎只能作为形容词被理解为艺术，而不是名词。我们说这个将军非常会打仗，我们可以说，他的指挥很有艺术性，但我们不能说这个将军指挥的这场战争是艺术，我们只能说它有艺术性。

We discussed your performance work at that time. Your performance art perfectly illustrates my Misconstruction theory of art (which you suggest I could also describe in English as a “deformational” theory of art, since this theory explains art as created through an essential departure from life). If understood through my Misconstruction theory of art, your performance work as *The Man in Gold* is an artwork. But we cannot view normal life as art, so in the Western context, the art of living does not seem that it could be considered as an artwork, because it is life

and not a misconstruction or deformation of it. So to me it seems that when you speak of the art of living, it can be art only in the sense of an adjective rather than a noun. For example, when we say, a captain of the army is very capable on the war, we could say, his command is very artistic or he is a military artist. But we would not say the battle under his command is art; instead, we can only say it is artistic.

**R:** 我同意我们不能在艺术界的意义上将一场战争称为艺术；我们只能在延伸意义上或比喻意义上将其称为艺术，以赞扬指挥官的智慧。但基于你对生活艺术和艺术界艺术之间的正确区分，我认为更有意义的问题是他们的重叠和联系。比如说，生活艺术如何启发和滋养了艺术界艺术，以及艺术界艺术中对美、形式、戏剧等的理念和范本如何反过来影响生活艺术。

I agree that we would not call a battle a work of art in the artworld sense; we could only describe it as a work of art in an extended or metaphorical sense of praising the genius of the commander. But given the distinction you rightly make between artworld art and the art of living, I think the interesting question is their overlap and interrelation. How, for instance the art of living inspires and nourishes artworld art and how “the art of living” is reciprocally shaped by ideas or exemplars of beauty, form, drama, etc. that we find in artworld art?

**P:** 在我看来，艺术在艺术作品和生活的艺术性中的区别可以这样描述：对于艺术作品中的艺术，能指和所指之间是一个实际的指涉关系；但如果我们说生活有艺术性，生活和艺术之间是比喻关系。

I feel the differences between “art” in an artworld artwork and “art” in the “artistry of life” can be described in the following way: For “art” in an artwork, there is an actual referential relationship between the signifier and the signified; but if we say that life has artistry, the reference between life and art is a metaphoric relationship.

**R:** 我明白你的意思，但我认为，有时生活艺术中包括比比喻性的艺术客体更多的东西。比如组成生活艺术的服装和食物中的艺术性；通常我们不会将美妙的服装和食物视为艺术界意义上的艺术品，但它们却被理解为（不仅是比喻意义上的）审美性的或艺术性的创造。它们是审美客体，展现了艺术性的意图、创造性以及基于审美或艺术标准的批判性选择，同时他们以真实世界客体的方式在场，人们能够将其作为客体感知和欣赏，尽管他们也被作为功能性的物品使用。在我看来，一件物品的功用性并不包括其作为艺术品存在的方面，即使对于美术（fine art）来说也是一样。事实上，在西方文化中，“艺术”一词原本指涉的是比美术更为宽泛的概念，包括多种技巧与技术，正如中国古典概念中的艺术（如“六艺”）也包括

我们无法称之为艺术的东西，如射和御。尽管我对生活艺术的概念不同于艺术界艺术，但我认为生活艺术与艺术界艺术在关键的美学目的上有很多相似之处，如丰富我们在美与意义上的经验，引发审美欣赏和感性刺激。对于我来说，生活艺术是否在惯常意义上被视为艺术根本地讲并不是那么重要。更重要的是我们在生活中能够创造性的、意义丰富的以及审美地生产美，这种生活之美包括伦理、美德、礼仪和善意。我认为生活艺术这一提法是有用的，因为它能够帮助人们将自己的生活设想为艺术家创作艺术作品的过程，这样就能使生活本身更有魅力，也更有意义。因此，正如艺术界艺术所发现的美与深刻的意义启发和丰富了生活艺术一样，生活艺术所蕴含的能量也滋养和启发了艺术界艺术——不管这种艺术是由谁实现的，艺术家或诗人，军事英雄或政治领袖，甚至是花花公子和情人。我认为决定一件物品是否为艺术界艺术的关键特征是，这件物品的材料是否已被艺术界艺术接受为艺术材料。当然，新的材料经由艺术家和艺术机构在艺术中对其的明显使用能够成为整个艺术界材料的一部分。摄影就是很好的例子。你可以发现艺术界艺术和生活艺术的关系这一主题对我来说是很有意义，且很有挑战性的。更清楚地解释这一问题需要更多的研究工作。把这个解释做成图表会更有帮助，但这个图表可能会很复杂，且我真的需要更认真地思考这一问题。

I understand your point, but I think that in what I call the art of living there is more than merely metaphorical art objects. Consider the artistry in clothes and food that form part of an art of living; beautiful clothes and food are not normally artworld artworks, but they are understood (and not merely metaphorically) as aesthetic and artistic creations. They are different than the battles you mentioned earlier. They are aesthetic objects that demonstrate artistic intentions, creativity, critical choices based on aesthetic or artistic criteria – and they present real world objects that people can perceive and appreciate as objects, even if they use these objects functionally. In my view, an object's functionality does not exclude its being art, even fine art. In fact, in Western culture the term “art” originally designated something far broader than the fine arts. It included all kinds of skills and techniques, just like the classical Chinese concept of art (I am thinking of the Liu Yi or six arts) included things we would not call fine art: for example archery or charioteering. Although my notion of the “art of living” is different from “art world art”, I think it shares some of the key aesthetic aims of much artworld art: for example, making our experience richer in beauty and in meaning, and provoking appreciative thought and sensory stimulation. For me, ultimately, it is not so important whether the art of living is recognized as really an “art” in the conventional sense. More important is that we live creatively, meaningfully, aesthetically to produce beauty

in our own lives and the lives of others, where it is understood that such beauty of living includes the beauty of ethical behavior, virtue, courtesy, and kindness. I think the term “art of living” is useful because it helps people think of their lives as something they can shape the way an artist shapes an artwork, to make it more attractive and meaningful. Thus, just as the art of living is inspired and enriched by the great exemplars of beauty and deep meaning found in artworld art, so artworld art is nourished and inspired by the energy and exemplars of the art of living – whether that art is practiced by artists or poets, military heroes or political leaders, or even dandies and lovers. I think one of the key features determining whether the artistic shaping of an object counts as artworld art is whether the object uses media that are already accepted as the established media of artworld art. Of course, new media can become part of the repertoire of established artworld media through their use in a distinctively artistic way by artists and institutions in the artworld. Photographic media provide an example of this process. You can see, Mr. Pan, that this topic of the relationship between artworld art and the art of living is one that I find very interesting and challenging. To articulate this relationship more clearly requires more work. Perhaps a diagram could help, but it might be very complicated, and I anyway need to think the matter through more carefully.

**P:** 我觉得你已有的研究很有意义的，其意义就在于，你将美学与身体、行为、运动、自然身体经验，以及个体的身体知觉和由行为激发的个体意识联系起来。之前的美学家并没有如此认真关注过这类关于感觉的认知研究，所以我想你在研究中一定会遇到很多新的问题。

I feel the research you have so far developed is very significant; it is significant because of the ways you connect aesthetics to the factors of body, action, movement, somatic experience in nature, and one’s own body awareness and self-consciousness generated from action. This sort of perceptual research about feelings has not really been treated so much by previous aestheticians, so I think you must confront many new problems in your research.

**R:** 是的，我确实遇到了很多问题。宽泛地说，直到我研究的方式是，不是关注最流行和最传统的问题，而是关注那些需要更多注意和我最擅长讨论的问题。同时作为专业的艺术哲学家和专业的身体教育者及临床学家的人并不是很多，特别是考虑到还同时作为一个行为艺术家，就我所知，没有人是这样的。作为这种种活动的集合体，我可能被认为是个怪人，这些不是通常讲的哲学活动。但我觉得我应当很好地利用这些特别的实践经验和技巧，从而成为一个连接这些不同领域的桥梁：哲学、身体学和艺术。

身体美学就是这一桥梁的基本构架。

Yes, I do. One method that guides my research in general is to try to focus not on what is most popular or conventional but on topics that need more attention and to which I am especially qualified to contribute. There are not many people who are both professional philosophers of art and professional body educators and therapists. I do not know any others, especially if we add the fact of my recently becoming also something of a performance artist. I may be something of a freak in this combination of activities. It is not the normal combination of activities in philosophy. But I feel I should make use of this unusual combination of practices and skills to make a bridge between these different fields: philosophy, somatics, and art. Somaesthetics is the structure of this bridge.

**P:** 我还有一个问题，在你的身体实践过程中，这一实践和审美意义上的美有什么关系？换句话说，你研究的身体实践是否能够帮助你更清晰地经验什么是美或美的本质是什么？

I have one more question, in your body practices, what is the relationship between this practice and beauty in aesthetic sense? Or in another word, have the body practices you study helped you to develop or experience, more clearly, your sense of beauty or that which is the essence of beauty?

**R:** 是的。其中一个例子就是《艺术与宗教》那篇文章，这篇文章有中文版（《诗书画》中）。其中，我讲述了自己在日本的打坐训练，经由打坐冥想，我能够看到之前视而不见甚至丑陋的东西中的美。我举的例子是两个装油的锈桶。日本人称之为drum cans。它们就放在禅院的开阔地带中，从禅院可以看到美丽的海景。我开始认为它们很丑，还干扰了美丽的海景。我很奇怪为什么禅师就这么让它们立在那里，旁边还放着一个木桩，可以坐在上面欣赏大海。我决定坐上那个木桩冥想。经过大约二十分钟的冥想，我能够感受到这两个生锈的油桶是多么美丽。这次关于美的经验非常强烈，让我充满喜悦。

Yes, I think so. One example of this is in the article on Art and Religion which was published also in Chinese (in the journal *Poetry, Calligraphy, Painting*).<sup>11</sup> I describe how my zazen training in Japan enabled me through the experiences of meditation to see beauty in objects that previously seemed to me uninteresting or even ugly. The example I describe was with two old rusty metal barrels of the kind that are used for storing oil. The Japanese call them drum cans. They were standing in an open area of the Zen dojo that had a beautiful view of the sea. I thought they

<sup>11</sup> "Art and Religion" (in Chinese), in *Poetry Calligraphy Painting* 4 (2012): 161-170. Originally published as "Art and Religion," *Journal of Aesthetic Education* 42.3 (Fall 2008): 1-18.

were very ugly and that they spoiled the beautiful view of the sea. I wondered why the Roshi let them remain in there, together with a little round log of wood that you could sit on next to the barrels so that you could sit there and look at the sea. I decided I would sit on that wooden log and meditate. After around twenty minutes of meditation, I could suddenly perceive how those barrels were really beautiful. It was a very powerful experience of beauty; it filled me with happiness.



5. *The drum cans*. Tadanoumi, Japan. 2003. Photo.

**P:** 我还有一个小问题，你说你突然在铁桶上看到了美，具体来说看到了什么美？或者说这种美是什么样的？这是个关键细节。打坐前，你并没有觉得油桶美，经过打坐冥想，一下子看到美了，是什么促成了这一转变？你视觉上的变化又是什么呢？

One more small question: you said you suddenly saw beauty in the barrel, what kind of beauty did you see? What was the beauty like? This is a key detail. As you did not feel the barrels beautiful before your sitting meditation, then after a while of meditating, you suddenly saw the beauty? What happened to make the change?

What is the change in your visual experience?

**R:** 我认为通过这一冥想经验，传统的思维定式和直觉及联想习惯中从我的眼睛和心灵中清除了。所以我突然能够以一种新的方式审视这些油桶，并发现蕴涵于其中的丰富的美——视觉上我能够欣赏锈迹的不同颜色，棕色、红色和绿色，还有它们的多样性，以及金属在不同的锈蚀阶段呈现出的纹理。但更重要的是，我想强调我的这种审美欣赏并不仅限于视觉——而是落实于整个身体。我们一度忘记了我们不仅是通过眼睛在看，也是通过作为整体的身体在看——因为我们的姿势、身体性感觉、运动和反应都包涵在凝视时的审美张力之中了。我不仅将油桶作为色彩和形式的对象欣赏，而是感知它们存在意义上的整体在场性所带来的强烈冲击。在今天的演讲中，我们的朋友彭峰曾提到了直接在场的概念，这一概念是我的美学经验理念的核心。正因为我通过冥想清空了心灵，我才能够突然感受到那些油桶的在场所具有的强烈的直接性，这一直接性给与了它们一种辐射性的生存之美，而大海（我从前一直认为大海美于这些油桶）现在看起来则如此遥远与不真实——大海没有油桶一般能被直接知觉的生存性的在场之美，因而其美也就显得模糊与微弱了。

I think that through the experience of meditation my mind and eyes were cleansed of their conventional mental prejudices and habits of perception and association. So I could suddenly see the barrels in a new way and see their rich beauty. In visual terms, I could suddenly appreciate their complex rusty colors of brown, red, and green and also the diverse, interesting textures of the metal in different stages of rusting. But it is important to emphasize that my appreciation of the beauty was more than merely visual – it was fully embodied. We forget that we see not just with our eyes but with the body as a whole – since our posture, our bodily feelings, movements, and reactions are involved in looking at something with the intensity of appreciating its beauty. I appreciated the beauty of those barrels not just as mere color and form but as the powerful attraction of an existential presence fully felt. In his lecture today, our friend Peng Feng talked about the notion of immediate presence which is central to my idea of aesthetic experience. With the cleansing of my mind through meditation, I could suddenly feel the presence of those barrels with powerful immediacy that gave them a radiant existential beauty of powerfully perceived presence, while the sea (which I always saw before as much more beautiful than the barrels) now seemed very remote or unreal – without that beauty of freshly perceived existential presence and thus with only a vague, weaker beauty.

**P:** 你这个例子太棒了！这个就是我所说的“转念”。

That is a great example! This is what I called “transformation of mind.”

**R:** 对，美包括一种心灵和知觉的转换。我曾与阿瑟·丹托讨论过这一点，他曾在“变容”这一他的艺术理论框架下讨论过我的这个故事。正如你所知，他的理论和我的不同。丹托认为美对于艺术来说根本不重要，而且欣赏美也不需要任何智性的努力（而艺术则需要，因为艺术永远与解释相联系）。丹托认为对美的感知是自然的，自发的和无意识的，因为我们或多或少地在基因或生理层面被设计去感知美。因而对美的感知无需智性努力。我则认为美对于艺术来说很重要，而且即使对艺术的知觉是直接和下意识的，一个人也需要有准备的头脑才能对美有所感知，而这一准备过程需要时间和智性努力。在丹托对我的故事的友好回应中，他将故事中生锈的油桶与理查德·塞拉（Richard Serra）用柯尔顿钢做的雕塑做对比，因为这位艺术家之所以选择这种钢是因为这种材料暴露在空气中时会形成稳定的类似锈迹的表面。

That's right. The beauty involves a transformation of mind and perception. I had a discussion about this experience with Arthur Danto, who reacted to my story by writing about it in terms of his theory of art as transfiguration.<sup>12</sup> His theory is, as you know, different from mine. Danto thinks beauty is not at all important for art and it does not require any mental effort to appreciate (while art does because it always involves interpretation). Danto thinks beauty is perceived naturally, spontaneously, and automatically because we are more or less genetically or biologically programmed to perceive beauty. It does not require special mental effort. I believe that beauty is important for art and that even if beauty can often be seen immediately and spontaneously, a person needs to have his mind prepared to perceive that beauty and sometimes that preparation requires time and mental effort. In his friendly response to my story, Danto compared my rusty barrels to Richard Serra's works in Corten steel, because Serra has often chosen this kind of steel for his sculptures since it forms a stable rust-like appearance when exposed to weather.

---

12 Arthur Danto, “Replies to Essays,” in Mark Rollins (ed.), *Danto and his Critics*, 2nd edition, 308-310. Danto is responding to a different essay of mine (“Art as Religion: Transfigurations of Danto's Dao”) that also includes the barrel story and that appears in the edited volume on Danto mentioned above, 251-266.



6. Richard Serra, *Double Torqued Ellipses IV*, 1999. Installation view of the exhibition Richard Serra Forty Years, MOMA, New York, June 3, 2007 through September 10, 2007.

**P:** 对于铁桶这个故事，丹托先生的观点显然是不对的。丹托也没有理解这个故事的重要性。

In terms of this rusty barrel story, Danto is obviously not right. He didn't realize the important meaning of this story.

**R:** 是的，我也不同意丹托。他喜欢这个故事，而且认为我突然欣赏到了铁桶的视觉特点，且我本可以随后将其解释为一种装置艺术的。但我不认为他真正理解了，对我的知觉经验来说（再重申一下，这不是单纯的视觉或解释性的经验），冥想为什么以及如何必要；在能够看到油桶的美之前，我为什么以及需要怎样的冥想。对于这一问题，我和丹托秉持不同的观点，我们也在生活与艺术关系领域的其他问题上有不同的见解。但他是一位我非常敬佩的哲学家。

Yes. He liked the story very much and recognized that it was experientially important in that I suddenly appreciated the visual qualities of the barrels and that I could then interpret them as something like an installation artwork. But I do not think he properly realized why and how the meditation was necessary for my perceptual experience (which again was not simply a visual or interpretive experience); why and how I needed to meditate before I could see the beauty of the barrels. Danto and I have different views here and also on other questions of the relations of art and life. But he is a philosopher I very much admire.

**P:** 你有关铁桶的故事正好证明了我说的“转念”。你的故事里有一个关键点就是“清空”，清空是转念的关键。所以你今天晚上讲的两个故事，一个是“金衣人”的行为艺术表演，一个是铁桶。前者在我的理论里就是错构，后者在我的理论里就是转念。

当我说“生活就是艺术”时，指的不是你刚才说的生活艺术，或者说“生活的艺术性”。我指的是你后面这个铁桶故事中的“清空”。所以这是对审美问题两种不同语境或看法。第一个故事是基于西方美学的；第二个故事，铁桶的故事，对审美的看法属于东方框架下的美学。在第一个故事中，你的观察对象是一件艺术品，一件“错构”的作品。

Your barrel story happens to perfectly illustrate my idea of “Transformation of Mind”. In your story, there is a key issue, that is “cleaning”. Cleaning is key for “Transformation of Mind”. You told two stories tonight: one is about your Man in Gold performances, the other is about the barrels. The former exemplifies what my theory sees as art by “Misconstruction” (or deformation). The second story exemplifies what my theory calls art by “Transformation of Mind”. When I say “art is life,” I do not mean what you mean as the art of living, or the “artistry of life.” What I mean refers to the “cleaning” in your barrel story. So we see two different basic contexts or frameworks in aesthetics. The first story is based on the context of Western aesthetics, while the second story exemplifies an Asian framework of aesthetics. In the first story, the object of your observation is an artwork, a Misconstruction piece.

**R:** 你现在所表达的观点对我来说极有意思。原因之一是它引发了那些铁桶是不是艺术作品这个问题。它们不属于艺术界，所以很难称之为艺术界艺术意义上的装置。另一方面，他们似乎并不是偶然放在那的。禅师是否将这一装置作为他自己生活艺术的一部分，以教授真正的艺术性呢，是否是他安排了这一艺术性十足的方法以帮助我们看到日常事务之中的美，并帮助我们在自己的生活艺术中提升感知能力，来经验更为深层的美呢？

The ideas you are expressing now are extremely interesting to me. One reason is the intriguing question of whether those barrels were a work of art. They did not belong to the art world and so it is hard to call them an installation piece of art world art. On the other hand, they did not seem to be placed there by accident, but rather intentionally arranged for viewing purposes. Did the Zen master make this installation as part of his art of living as a teacher of fine artistry by arranging this artful way to understand to see beauty in ordinary things and to help us in our own art of living to experience greater beauty through better perception?

**P:** 第二个故事中说明了我的“转念”理论，转念的关键就是在心灵上清空自己，所有的打坐，所有的禅修，最终都是为了清空自己，一旦清空自己以后，不仅是铁桶变成了艺术作品，整个生活都成为了艺术作品，海、云、沙滩、你坐的地方、空气，都成了艺术作品。为什么？它们成为艺术作品不是人为的，没有人能将它们制作成艺术品。真正的改变发生在你的眼中，你的观察方法改变了。一旦你的观察方法改变了，你的整个生活就成为了艺术。

The second story illustrates my theory of “Transformation of mind”; the key of “Transformation of mind” is cleaning oneself mentally, all the practices of zazen and similar forms of meditation are ultimately serving to clean oneself. When you have cleaned yourself, it is not simply the barrel that becomes an artwork, but all life becomes an artwork: everything -- including the sea, clouds, beach, the place you sit, the air; it all becomes an artwork. Why? Not because there is an artificial fabrication. There is no person who makes it or fabricates it to be an artwork. What has changed is your eyes, your observation method. Once your observation changes, the whole of your life becomes art.

**R:** 我明白你的意思，我觉得这与我关于生活艺术的理念在很多方面有重合——至少在我乐于实践这一艺术方面是重合的。但我想在这里提示的是，正如你所说，清空自己心灵的方式有很多，我的行为表演，你将其描述为错构，我认为也许也可成为清空心灵（我更愿意称之为soma——身体心灵的结合）的一种方式，一种与禅的冥想不同的方式。行为艺术表演如何能够清空我的心灵？因为当我进行这个表演时，当我成为“金衣人”时，我的日常心灵和自我消失了（正如我的身体换上的一套不同的视觉形式和行为方式）。我不再是作为老师、父亲、儿子、丈夫等的平常的有着日常观念的感知能力自己。通过这种方法，我从日常自我（或至少是其中的很大一部分）中摆脱出来，这样，我就能够自由地以不同的方式感知了。它是一种自我解放，也在某种程度上是通过新的感知丰富自身的过程。这也是为什么我并不是很在意最终拍摄结果的原因。穿金色紧身衣前，我需要脱掉日常的衣服，这一过程使我感到不同的能量，随着这些日常服装的离去，与其相连的日常习惯和观念也相应消失了。这件紧身衣就像一个清洁剂。我不能裸体，但这件紧身衣也是一种清空。可能甚至比裸体的效果更好——因为裸体也与一些常规的看法相联系，这些常规的看法通常并不能够清空一个人。

I understand the point you are making, and I think it overlaps in some ways with my idea of the art of living – at least in the ways I like to practice that art. But what I would like to suggest here is that there are, as you say, different methods

to clear your mind, and perhaps doing my performance work that you describe as Misconstruction is also a way of cleaning my mind or as I would say my soma (body-mind), but a very different way than Zen meditation. How is this performance a cleaning of myself? Because when I do the performance, when I am The Man in Gold, my ordinary mind or self goes away (just as my body takes on a different visual form and behavior). I am not my conventional self as teacher, father, son, husband, etc. with all of my ordinary ideas and perceptions. In this way I am cleansed from my ordinary self (or at least much of it) and thus I am free to perceive differently. This is one reason why I enjoy the performance work so much. It is a liberation of self that is also, in some ways, a self-enrichment through new perceptions. That is why I do not care so much about whether the camera will make an aesthetically pleasing shot. Wearing the suit, I feel different energy by shedding my normal clothes and the conventional habits and ideas connected with them. The suit is like a cleanser. I cannot shed my conventional self in public by taking off my clothes and walking around naked, but the golden suit acts like a cleansing removal of my conventional way of being. Maybe it is even better than being naked – since nakedness also has its familiar associations and these are often far from cleansing ones.

**P:** 今天晚上这两个故事非常重要！因为在讨论中，我们分清了两种不同文脉中的对于审美问题的不同看法和不同操作方式。

The two stories tonight are very important. It is so important because in our discussion of these two stories, we are clarifying the different visions and operations of aesthetics in different cultural contexts or frameworks.

**R:** 同意！我们的谈话需要继续，我总是能从我们的谈话中学到很多。谢谢你邀请我来中国参加你的展览，这一展览令人印象非常深刻。但我还想说，我来中国的重要原因也是能够跟你讨论艺术和哲学。我很少碰到能像你一样深入了解我的人，也很少碰见能够启发我思考自身理论中存在的问题的人。能与想法不同——不同的文化框架、不同的概念以及不同的专业领域——却又有很大共通性的人一起思考美学问题令我很开心。这种跨文化、跨学科的对话是令人愉快，且很有价值的一种交流形式，对我来说弥足珍贵。

I agree. I think we should continue our conversation on another occasion. I always learn from our dialogues. I thank you for inviting me to China to see your exhibition, which was very impressive. But I should also say that I was excited to come to China also for the chance of talking to you about art and philosophy. I

do not meet many people who understand me as deeply as you do and who can help me to advance my thinking by exploring those aspects of my theory that are problematic and need more work. It is very exciting for me to be able to think about aesthetic issues with someone who in some way thinks very different from me – with a different cultural framework and different concepts and a different professional discipline -- but who also in many important ways thinks like I do. This kind of dialogue across cultures and disciplines is a very exciting and valuable form of communication, and for me it is very rare.

**P:** 我也很有同感。与你讨论很开心，因为能够讨论得很深入。我可以把我们刚才说的关键，再重复一遍。第一个故事，就是你穿着紧身衣的表演。你为什么要穿上紧身衣？在我的错构理论里，关键就是要切断和原来的生活之网及日常逻辑的关联。如果你穿着普通的衣服走在街上，你是在整个生活的正常逻辑之网中活动，当你穿着紧身衣走在街上时，你打断了日常生活的普通逻辑。紧身衣将你的行为与整个街区的语境分离开来。

I feel the same. It is very exciting to talk with you, because we could develop our thoughts to a very deep level together. I would like to recapitulate what we have been through. The first story about your performance art in the golden suit: Why did you put yourself in this suit? In my theory of art as Misconstruction, the key issue is to cut the original, established connection with the web of ordinary life and ordinary logic. If you are wearing ordinary daily clothes when you walk on street, then you are acting within the logical net of normal life. When you put yourself in that shiny golden body suit and then appear on the street, you break the ordinary logic of everyday life. The suit separates your action from the whole scene (or context) of the street.

**R:** 是的。紧身衣的作用就是通过凸显与我和街上其他人日常外表的不同，而将我作为艺术行为的外表与日常生活区分出来。

That's right. The suit functions as a way of distinguishing my appearance as art by its sharp contrast both to my ordinary appearance in life and to the ordinary appearance of others on the street.

**P:** 不仅将艺术从生活中区分出来，而且把你的心态从日常心态中分离出来，所以你就觉得你是演员，你在表演，你在创作艺术作品，因此就跟周围路过的汽车、走过的人没有关系了。

Not only does it distinguish art from life, but it also allows you to cut yourself off from your everyday mentality, so that you believe you are a performer, that you are

performing, that you are making art; and therefore that the cars passing by or the other walkers on the street are irrelevant.

**R:** 也是也不是。即使穿着紧身衣，我也不能完全忘掉自己，因为我自身的一些更深的层面是紧身衣无法完全改变的。某些身体习惯和感觉依然存在，包括一些残留的窘迫感。有时，当我穿上紧身衣走在街上时，周围有很多陌生人盯着我看，特别是当他们做出令人不好意思的评论时，我还是感受到自我意识的某种羞怯感。

Yes, but also in some way no. Even in the suit, I cannot totally forget myself because there are deeper layers of myself that the suit cannot completely change. Certain bodily habits and feelings remain, including some residual embarrassment. Sometimes when I am wearing the suit and there are lots of strange people staring at me on the street and especially when those people make loud or embarrassing comments, then I feel a certain shyness of self-consciousness.

**P:** 因为你的身份改变了，就有了自由的感觉。如果你不改变这个身份，就不能够自由释放。但身份改变得还不够彻底，所以会不好意思。如果再戴上面具，也许就能更自由些。

Because your identity changes, you are released to be free. If you did not change identity, you cannot be released to be free. But the identity change is not fully done, therefore you feel embarrassed. If you also put on a mask, there might be much more feeling of freedom.

**R:** 也许，但是面具仅能遮住我的眼睛和脸。我还是能够感受到他人评判的眼神或嘲笑。对我来说，新身份所带来的自由感和意识到这一新身份仍然与作为探索艺术和身体美学的哲学家这一自我相联系——这一新的创造性延展依旧是基于我的日常自我的——这两种感觉之间的张力也部分地构成了这一表演的有趣之处。我还想说，在这个语境中，不仅紧身衣很重要，镜头和摄影师的在场也很重要。它们也有助于脱离日常生活，日常生活中不会有一个摄影师跟着你拍摄。镜头还展现了与我共在的街上的人群，这一点也将我从日常生活中分离出来，使我觉得自己在创作艺术。即使摄像机里没有胶卷，镜头的在场依旧传达了这样一个讯息，即我们是与日常生活相脱离的。

Perhaps. But the mask would just cover my eyes or face. I would still feel the eyes of others looking critically or laughingly at me. Also part of the interest of this performance work for me is the tension between the freedom of a new identity and

the recognition that that new identity is still connected to myself; it serves as a new creative extension based also on my ordinary self – a philosopher exploring art and somaesthetics. I should also say in this context that not only is the golden suit important but also the presence of the camera and the cameraman is important. This presence helps make the break with ordinary life, because in ordinary life I am not followed by a cameraman who is filming me. The camera also indicates to other people on the street that I am involved in an action that is cut off from ordinary everyday life, that I am involved in making art. Even if there were no film in the camera, the presence of the camera and cameraman would have the effect of signaling that we are making a break from ordinary life.

**P:** 这样你自己就进入了自己的作品当中，别人也把你的行为看成艺术作品。

这里有几个细节：紧身衣、镜头、摄影师、你的难为情，这几个细节是你错构的标记，证明你这个行为已经跟逻辑之网切断了。所以第一个故事是典型的错构。再深一步讲，错构的行为和错构的存在为什么可以引起审美愉悦？因为在跟现实生活切断关系以后，现实生活成了中国称之为的“滚滚红尘”...

In this way, you put yourself into an artwork, but also other people see your action as artwork.

Here we have several details: the suit, the camera, the cameraman, your embarrassment. All these details mark your work as an art of misconstruction, because these marks prove your action is already cut off from ordinary network of logic. So the first story is a typical misconstruction. If we go further, we can ask why the action of misconstruction and the existence of misconstruction could create aesthetic pleasure? Because, when you are cut off from real life, the idea of real life in Chinese is also described as “Rolling World...”

**R:** 与现实的脱离意味着自由吗？

Does this cutting off mean being free?

**P:** 对！切断与逻辑之网的联系是获得自由的开始。因为整个逻辑之网是束缚人的，是对人的规导。在逻辑之网中，你走在街上，是不能裸体的，即使你穿着紧身衣，大家也怪异于你的怪异。所以你的行为、你的错构，切断了逻辑之网对你的束缚而使你更自由。你获得的这种自由使你能够清空自己的心灵，于是真正的审美心态开始发生。这就是我们应该如何理解第一个故事。

Yes, cutting oneself off from the net of logic is the beginning of freedom; because the whole net of logic is for binding people, for disciplining people. Within this logic net, when you walk on the street, you cannot be nude; and even if you wear the golden suit, people will feel strange that you are strange. Therefore your action, your misconstruction, cuts you off from the binds of the logic net and makes you more free. This freedom of being cut off enables you to clean your mind so that a truly aesthetic mentality can start. That is how we should understand the first story.

第二个故事就是铁桶的故事。一开始你看到铁桶，没有感觉铁桶是美的。然后你打坐了二十分钟。在二十分钟之前，你为什么没有在看出铁桶上的美？是因为心灵还没有被清空。

The second story, the barrel story was that when you first saw the two barrels, you did not feel they were beautiful. Then you did zazen for 20 minutes. During these 20 minutes, why did you not see beauty in either of the barrels? Because your mind was not yet cleaned.

**R:** 是的，在更深入的程度，之前我甚至并没很好地注视那个铁桶。我看到的更多的是一种对铁桶的模糊印象，而不是他们具体的直接的在场。我只是将它们认同或归类为铁桶，而不是真正的注意它们。我将它们仅仅视为符号或类别，而非其丰富具体的在场实在性。因为我没有用清晰的眼睛观看他们，我不仅没有看到它们的美，甚至没有真正完整地注视它们。

That's right. And in a deeper sense I could also say that I never even properly saw the barrels before the 20 minutes of meditation. What I saw was more the perception of the vague idea of the barrel rather than either of the barrels in their concrete immediacy of presence. I perceived the barrels only to identify or classify them as such rather than closely attending to them. I saw them more as symbols or categories rather than as the richly concrete realities of presence they later revealed themselves to be. Because I did not see them with clean eyes, I not only did not see their beauty but I also did not really see them in a full and proper way.

**P:** 对，这个细节也很重要！就是在这个二十分钟中，你没有意识到这个铁桶是需要凝视和关注的，因为常态的逻辑之网还在你的脑子里，你将它们视为不重要的东西，不值得仔细观看。就常态来说，认真欣赏一个铁桶是没有意义的。为什么不值得认真欣赏？因为常态的逻辑之网还在你的脑子里，你依据常态经验在作判断。

This detail is very important also! During these 20 minutes, you did not realize

that the barrels deserved or required seeing and attention. Because the normal logic net was still in your mind, so you take it as an unnecessary thing to look closely and attentively at the barrels. In the normal logic net, it is nonsense to have a barrel there to serve as an object for careful visual appreciation. Why did you not think that the barrels could be worth seeing closely? Because the normal logic net was still existing in your mind; you were judging according to normal experience.

**R:** 是的，常态的判断和日常逻辑下，观念之间的联系。

That's right. I was following the network of normal judgments and the logic of normal association of ideas.

**P:** 是的，常态的社会评价和日常判断标准。但是打坐二十分钟以后，因为你是有过多打坐训练的，有一种控制心灵的能力，心灵的转变导致了知觉的转变。我称之为“转念”。这个转念及其带来的全新的知觉是瞬间完成的，是以清空心灵为主要前提的，在很快的一刹那间，突然觉得这个东西很好看。其实在突然看到这个“好看”的同时，在转念的同时，你把逻辑之网忘却了。忘却就是清空，就是切断与日常逻辑之网的联系，脑子里已经没有那些因果关联与日常判断的规导，而是完全专注到眼前这个景象。

Yes, you followed the normal judgments and social standards of evaluation. But after 20 minutes of sitting meditation, because you have the proper training in this and could therefore control your mind, there was a change in your mind that led to a change of perception. I call this “Transformation of mind”. A “Transformation of mind” and its fresh perception can happen within a second, with the cleanness of mind as its prime condition. Within an instant, you suddenly feel something so beautiful. At the same moment you perceive the “beauty” of something, at that same moment of “Transformation of mind,” you forget the logic net. The forgetting is a cleaning, a cutting free from the logic net. Now, in your mind, there no longer exists any cause-and-effect connections and the disciplining limits of ordinary judgments. You are already totally focused on the scene in front of you.

**R:** 我想这是个更好的描述，并不是我忘了，而是我专注到这上面，这样我就能完全被可直接感受到的实在性的直接在场所吸引（通过这种方法，我也忘了日常逻辑之网的判断准则）。我被在场的美所深深吸引，所以不再考虑其他事情，包括日常对铁桶的分类和判断。

I think in some way this second description is better; not so much that I forget but that I *focus*, that I become totally absorbed in the immediate presence of

directly perceived reality (so in this way I also forget the judgments of the logic net). I became so absorbed with the beauty of presence that I no longer thought of anything else, including the ordinary categories and judgments of barrels.

**P:** 对！注意力转移了，所以叫“转念”。这个专注非常重要，是个关键时刻。我称之为凝视。凝视的结果是眼前的景象发生了变化。在这种凝视下，你看到的整个景象都是美。如果这时候你面前不是一个铁桶，而是一块木头，你也会觉得这块木头很美。

Yes, your attention is displaced, so I call it “Transformation of mind.” This focus is very important, it is a key moment. I call this focus “gazing.” The result of “gazing” is that the scene in front of you is changed. Under this gaze, whatever you see is beautiful. If, what was in front of you at the time were not a barrel but a piece of wood, you would feel the wood beautiful as well.

**R:** 可能会是这样，但我不知道我会不会感到同样的美。我倾向于凭经验和比较作判断的。我是实验型的思考者。

I think you are probably right, but I don't know if I would feel exactly the same kind of beauty. I'd like to judge by having that experience and comparing. I'm an experiential thinker.

**P:** 所以这两个故事的差别非常大。第一个故事是改变了存在物，第二个故事是改变了你的心灵，所以第二个故事叫做转念。在整个东方的文脉中，审美视野的本质落实于改变自己的头脑和眼睛，不是像西方文脉中落实于改变具体的对象。当然，西方文脉与东方文脉的差异是相对的，它们有很多共通性。我只是强调其中的不同。所以我把这两个故事所体现的内在审美结构对应起来，一个叫错构，一个叫转念。我觉得这两个故事非常重要。

So the two stories are very different from each other. The first story, the object changed. The second story, it is your mind that changed. So the second story, I call “Transformation of mind.” In the Asian context, the essence of the aesthetic perspective is based on a particular change of mind and eyes rather than a particular kind of object which is how aesthetics is mostly defined in the Western framework. Of course the differences between Western and Eastern frameworks are matters of degree; they always share some things. But I just focus here more on the differences. So I put the inner aesthetic logic of the two stories in contrast: Misconstruction versus “Transformation of mind.” I feel both stories are very important.

**R:** 我同意，我为铁桶的故事专门写过一篇文章《艺术与宗教》。如果我觉得不重要，是不会专门写文章讲的。

I agree, I would not write about these examples if I did not think they were important.

**P:** 在禅宗里面，有一个非常重要的偈语，“第一层境界，见山是山，见水是水，第二层境界，见山不是山，见水不是水，第三层境界，见山仍是山，见水仍是水。”你在第一层境界看到的是铁桶，第三层境界看到的也是铁桶，但是第三层境界看到的铁桶是美的，第一层境界看到的铁桶无所谓美和不美。

In Zen, we have a very well known parable, “the first stage, you see the mountain as mountain, and see the river as river; the second stage, you see the mountain not as mountain, and see the river not as river; and in the third stage, you see the mountain again as mountain and see river again as river.” You see the barrel as barrel in the first stage, you see it also as barrel in the third stage; but the barrel in the third stage is beautiful, the barrel in the first stage has nothing to do with “beauty”.

**R:** 是的，我知道这个偈语。我认为我的美学与禅宗相联系，因为我认为美学“变容”可以是本质的。所以在第三层境界，我们遭遇的是一个真正的铁桶或真正的山，但有人不这么认为。铁桶并不是突然变成另一种实体论范畴中的超越之物，存在于另一个世界——像是艺术界或天堂。对于丹托来说，一件日常物品被放置进博物馆中就“变容”为另一种现实。它不再是一件真实的东西而成为了艺术品。我引入我的铁桶的故事就是为了挑战丹托的观念，他认为美学“变容”必须包含实体论的转变——客体的转变。我则认为这一转变可以仅仅是感知上的转变。我也想挑战另一种意见，即将艺术的“变容”视为纵向的——直接上升为一种与现实不同的、更高的层级，像拉斐尔将基督的变容描画成从人间向天堂的跃升。丹托经常提到这幅画，因为“变容”是他理论的核心。黑格尔和尼采也谈论过这幅画。丹托的“变容”概念基于基督教概念和黑格尔对于艺术的理念主义观点，即将艺术视为绝对精神的更高现实，这种观念也发源于基督教文化和西方框架。这里，绝对精神或者说神来自于比物质现实更高的领域，这一领域实际上与高于日常存在的神圣世界或天堂世界是一致的——艺术世界或天国。我的观点是，在我们日常的物质世界中，也可以发现“变容”、超越性和精神性的美，只要知道如何发现这个美。第三个境界中的山是美的，但它依然是山，而不是天堂里的山。它并不是另一个世界中理想的精神性的山，而是真实的，物质性的山，你只是用另一种方式观照它。

Yes, I know that parable. I link my aesthetics to Zen because I think that artistic transfigurations can be immanent, so that in the third stage we are dealing with a real barrel or real mountain but one sees it with a new vision. The barrel does not suddenly become a transcendental object with a different ontological category, something in a different world – like the artworld or the world of heaven. For Danto, an ordinary object when put in a museum becomes transfigured into a different reality. It is no longer a real thing but an artwork. I introduced my story of the barrels to challenge Danto's idea that aesthetic transfigurations must involve an ontological change – a change of object. I think that they can simply involve a perceptual change. I also challenge the suggestion that art's transfigurations are "vertical" – a going up to a different, higher level of reality, a transcendence like that Raphael portrays in Jesus's transfiguration as an elevation from the earth toward heaven. Danto often mentions this painting of Raphael, since transfiguration is the central concept of his art theory.

Hegel and Nietzsche also talked about this painting. Danto's notion of transfiguration is based on the Christian notion and on Hegel's idealist view of art as a higher reality of Absolute Spirit, a view that also emerges from the Christian culture of the Western framework. Here spirit or Shen (神) belongs to a realm higher than that of material reality, a realm implicitly identified with the divine or heavenly that is above us in a world beyond ordinary existence – either the artworld or the kingdom of heaven. My view is that transfiguration, transcendence, and spiritual beauty can be found here in our ordinary material world, if know how to see it. The third vision of the mountain is beautiful, but it is still a mountain, it is not like a mountain in heaven. It is not like an ideal spiritual mountain in a different world. It is real, material mountain, you just see it differently (fig. 4).



7. Raphael. *The Transfiguration*. 1518-1520. Oil painting on wood panel. Pinacoteca Apostolica, Vatican, Rome.

**P:** 如果按照丹托的解释，是铁桶从不美的状态变成美的状态，原因是一个艺术界的人对他做出了艺术性的解释（这里你就是艺术界中的一员）。

If we interpret your story through Arthur Danto's theory of art, it is the barrel that changed its status from "not beautiful" to "beautiful" because of an artistic interpretation based on the judgment of qualified people of the artworld (and here you would be one of those people).

**R:** 丹托可能不会用“美”这个字，因为在他的艺术理论中，“美”不重要。对他来说，最重要的问题是，某物是否为一件艺术品，而作品本身是否具有美或者甚至试图具有美对他来说并不重要。因为他认为许多伟大的作品并无关乎美。对他来说，关键问题是什么是艺术品，以及艺术品如何区别于普通事物。

I think Danto might not say “beautiful,” because beauty is not important for his theory of art. For him the important question is whether something is an artwork or not; whether or not the work has any beauty or even tries to have beauty is not important for him, because he thinks many great artworks have nothing to do with beauty. For him, the key issue is what is an artwork and how it is different from real things?

**P:** 不说“美”也可以，丹托会说，这个铁桶会被艺术评论家在特定的语境下认定为“艺术作品”。

You are right, Danto would say, the barrel is defined as “artwork” by the art critics in the given context.

**R:** 是的，丹托会说，铁桶之所以是艺术品是因为我将它诠释为一件艺术品——我的禅师创作的一件装置作品。但是对我来说，丹托的问题不重要。重要的是从对象身上看到美，并理解我如何能够看到这个美，和为什么能够看到。我们的讨论帮助我了解了这些问题，非常感谢你。

Yes, Danto would probably explain the barrel as an artwork, because I interpreted it as artwork – an installation work produced by my Zen master. For me, that question of art status or of artworld status is not so important. The important thing is to see the beauty in the object and to understand how and why I could perceive that beauty. Our discussion has helped me with that. Thank you very much.

## Endnotes

### Bibliography

1. “Art and Religion” (in Chinese), in *Poetry Calligraphy Painting 4* (2012): 161-170. Originally published as “Art and Religion,” *Journal of Aesthetic Education* 42.3 (Fall 2008): 1-18

2. Arthur Danto, “Replies to Essays,” in Mark Rollins (ed.), *Danto and his Critics*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition, 308-310. Danto is responding to a different essay of mine (“Art as Religion: Transfigurations of Danto’s Dao”) that also includes the barrel story and that appears in the edited volume on Danto mentioned above, 251-266.

**Photo credits:** Pan Gongkai (1,2), Shusterman / Yann Toma (3,4), Shusterman (5), Photo Scala Florence (6,7).

**Abstract:** *In this dialogue with Richard Shusterman, Pan Gongkai discusses the relations of art and philosophy, while elaborating his theories of art as “Misconstruction” and “Transformation of Mind” by applying these two theories to the recent artistic work and aesthetic ideas that Shusterman has been presenting in China.*

**Keywords:** *transformation of mind, somaesthetics, transfiguration, philosophy, art of living, Confucius, misconstruction, transcendence.*

**Contact:**

Xu Jia

xujia1001@qq.com

Richard Shusterman

richard.shusterman@gmail.com

# Somaesthetics and Its Consequences in Contemporary Art

*Peng Feng*

*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 54<sup>th</sup> 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,<sup>1</sup> 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.<sup>2</sup> 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.<sup>3</sup>

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).

---

<sup>3</sup> 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.<sup>4</sup>

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.<sup>5</sup>

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](http://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.<sup>6</sup>

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.<sup>7</sup>

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.<sup>8</sup> 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

---

<sup>6</sup> Jullien, *The Impossible Nude*, 4.

<sup>7</sup> Jullien, *The Impossible Nude*, 4-26.

<sup>8</sup> 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."<sup>9</sup> 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*.

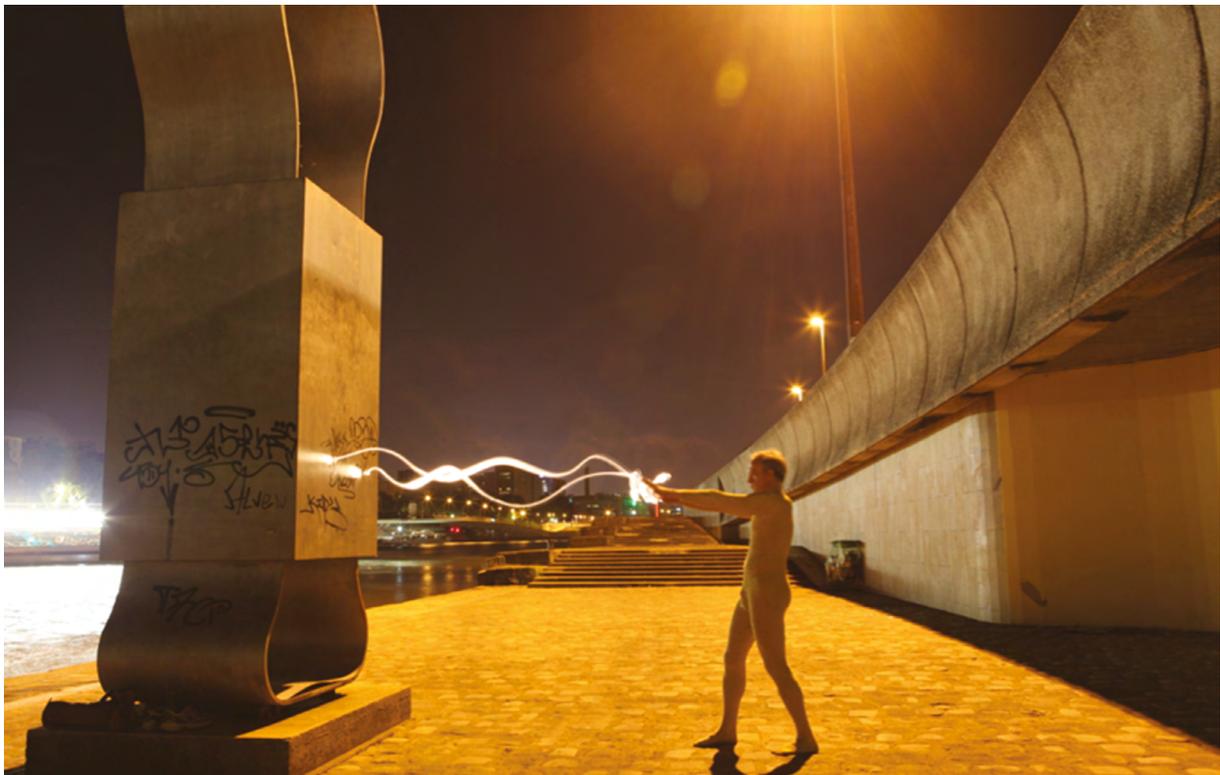
The young woman here, passively posed on a luxuriously bedded and curtained interior, is fresh and naked from her bath and thus ready for her required sexual service. She presents a deliciously lovely and luminous backside of flesh. But in her static pose, with her head turned away in darker shadow and 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.<sup>10</sup>

---

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*<sup>11</sup> 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

<sup>11</sup> *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).<sup>12</sup>



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!'"<sup>13</sup> "She was unable to develop any friendship towards the girls."<sup>14</sup> She states that "the girls are my plain material."<sup>15</sup> 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."<sup>16</sup> "At the end of the performance... the models had to be led out, some almost carried."<sup>17</sup> 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.<sup>18</sup>

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](http://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.<sup>19</sup>

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

---

<sup>19</sup> 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 54<sup>th</sup> 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.<sup>20</sup>

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.<sup>21</sup>



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.<sup>22</sup> (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.<sup>23</sup> 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.”<sup>24</sup> 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.”<sup>25</sup>

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,<sup>26</sup> 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.<sup>27</sup>

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.”<sup>28</sup> 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

### Bibliography

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

Goodman, Nelson. *Languages of art: an approach to a theory of symbols*. Indianapolis: Hackett, 1976.

Jullien, François. *The Impossible Nude: Chinese Art and Western Aesthetics*, Maev de la Guardia trans. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2007.

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

Kuspit, Donald. *The End of Art*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2004.

LeWitt, Sol. “Paragraphs on Conceptual Art,” in *Sol LeWitt: A Retrospective*. Gary Garrels ed.: San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, 2000.

Shusterman, Richard. *Body Consciousness: A Philosophy of Mindfulness and Somaesthetics*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008.

----- “A Philosopher in Darkness and in Light. Practical Somaesthetics and

---

<sup>28</sup> Shusterman, *Performing Live*, 31.

Photographic Art,” in *Lucidity. Inward Views : Le Mois de la Photo à Montréal 2011*. Anne-Marie Ninacs (ed.) Montreal : Le Mois de la Photo à Montréal, 2011.

----- *Performing Live: Aesthetic Alternatives for the Ends of Art*. Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2000.

**Photo credits:** Vanessa Beecroft (1)(permission information will come), Richard Shusterman and Yann Toma (2, 3), Peng Feng (4-12).

**Contact:**

Peng Feng  
pengf@pku.edu.cn

# Throwing the Body Into the Fight: The Body as an Instrument in Political Art

*Max Ryyänen*

*Abstract: Thinking about the body in contemporary art leads easily to an exaggerated focus on extremities and excess. Beginning from Pier Paolo Pasolini's violently radical life, and ending up in Martin Jay's critique of Richard Shusterman's somaesthetics, the first part of this article discusses different conceptions regarding the role of the body in art. I aspire to show the need to rearticulate the role of the body in contemporary art. In the second part of the article I will turn the focus to rather small or moderate acts of political art, where artists put themselves and their bodies at stake. My aspiration is to bridge somaesthetics to one of the major trends in contemporary art, the practice of political and social work. Through its interest in the golden mean and everyday life, somaesthetics provides a resonate philosophical frame for discussing performances and events typical for e.g. community art and political activist art, where the body, I claim, has an important, though quite unnoticed role.*

*Keywords: Pasolini, body art, political art, performance, art theory.*

## 1

From time to time, Pier Paolo Pasolini's poetic expression "I want to express myself by throwing my body into the fight" finds its way back to art talk. As an excerpt from the posthumously published poem *Poeta delle Ceneri* (1966), it has inspired artists and art theorists already for decades.<sup>1</sup> Pasolini himself was a poet, filmmaker, playwright and theorist whose art always had a political agenda. He

<sup>1</sup> See e.g. Patrick Steffen in his and Alma Ruiz's interview with Lynda Benglish in *Flash Art International* November-December 2011 ("Lynda Benglish"). The most famous artist to use Pasolini's expression has been Raimund Hoghe. Hoghe has used it as a one-sentence manifesto in performances where he exhibits his physically challenged body and 'writes' (as he says) with it by e.g. performing static gestures. See <http://www.raimundhoghe.com/>.

kept his distance from political trends, though. Fascists were an obvious target for any Italian intellectual of the 1960s and 1970s, but Pasolini attacked the left, as well, for its intolerance towards sexual minorities. He criticized student revolutionaries of bourgeois origin for their arrogance towards the police force that consisted of ‘boys from poor families.’ And he attacked the school system for its alliance with television in the destruction of dialects and cultural diversity – which is something he claimed Mussolini’s fascist regime never managed to accomplish.<sup>2</sup>

And the body? It was always there. It was an object of a sadistic political allegory in the scandalous film *Salò, or the 120 days of Sodom* (1975) and a virile agent of experimental sexuality in *The Trilogy of Life* (1971-1974).<sup>3</sup> But Pasolini also risked and sacrificed his own body by exploring and displaying openly the boundaries of life, art and politics. His queer life, which he celebrated in poems, essays and films, provoked dangerously conservative catholic moralists. And as one of his last artistic acts Pasolini accused powerful politicians for having connections to organized crime. In Venice, during his last visit to the film festival, he was attacked by people who were later to become members of the Red Brigades.

Five months before his death Pasolini participated in Fabio Mauri’s body art performance.<sup>4</sup> For him it was just one new way to work with the body and to debate the role of the body in art and politics. With his body and his cinematic and poetic explorations of bodily life he had already provoked all sides. Though it came as a shock, it was logical that Pasolini was, in the end, murdered. His dead body was found lying on a beach in Ostia (Rome) November 2, 1976. The fight was over, and it still remains a mystery who murdered him.

Though one must admire Pasolini’s fanatic criticism of Italian and Western society, the extremist tenets of his life need not to be celebrated. Especially young male artists attach themselves easily to mythical (male) figures with a dark side to them. The work and life of Yukio Mishima, Antonin Artaud and Jean Genet cannot but be found fascinating, but as the role of the self-destructive ‘outlaw’ too often becomes over-accentuated, one might ask if aestheticians and art theorists should

---

2 For a good presentation of Pasolini’s life and work, see e.g. the chapter on Pasolini in Christian Braad-Thomsen’s *De uforsonlige* (Copenhagen: Amadeus, 1988) or Enzo Siciliano’s book *Vita di Pasolini* (Milano: Rizzoli, 1978).

3 In *Salò*, Pasolini provoked disgust in the audience by showing torture and humiliation. The film was an allegorical interpretation of Marquis de Sade’s libertine novel *120 days of Sodom*, which, here, portrayed the horrors of fascism. The film was attacked by fascists, who even physically attacked people outside the movie theaters that were showing it. The three films of the trilogy, *Il Decameron* (1971), *Canterbury Tales* (1972) and *Il fiore delle mille e una notte* (1974) expressed, on the other hand, Pasolini’s idealistic aspiration to produce a ‘vulgar’ type of erotic, bodily film. Sadly, the films became sucked into the maelstrom of the video porn wave, and so they are not often taken as seriously as they would have deserved. See Braad-Thomsen 1988 for more on these themes.

4 Stefano Casi. “Pasolini, il corpo intellettuale.” In Alessandro Guidi & Pierluigi Sasseti (eds), *L’eredità di Pier Paolo Pasolini*. Milano: Mimesis Edizioni, 2009. Pp. 39-48. (Performance note on page 47.) .

give a helping hand to the less sensational artists to rise from their shadows.<sup>5</sup>

Besides extreme lives, extreme works of art leave a mark in history more easily than moderate ones. By changing the narrative or the interpretation of art history, or, by bringing in something visibly new to it – by e.g. crossing a boundary – one connects to the aspirations of aestheticians, art theorists and art historians, who textually map out what art is.<sup>6</sup> The theoretical aspiration to describe boundaries leads easily to accentuating the margins at the cost of forgetting that most artists are not interested in producing anything new nor are they into breaking boundaries.

Stories about works of art that test human and cultural limits have a sensational value too. This makes them a seductive topic for not just the mass media. They also provide material for the mythologies of the art world, which often reproduce media scandals quite uncritically. Therefore one way to speed up the career of an artist is to make his/her work an object of a scandal. Like in rock music or film, ‘fans’ and critics like to discuss ‘nasty’, weird, scary or extreme stories.

We often think that the role of art is to provoke public discussion. But when art gets discussed publicly in the mass media, which most of us conceive of as our contemporary agora, it is mostly just following its scandalous value. Late ‘hits’ in the Northern European art sphere (where I am based) include the publication of pictures of prophet Muhammad in Sweden, dragging a giant vagina on wheels in Helsinki, surprising St. Petersburg police officers with a kiss (then getting beaten) and organizing a punk performance in an Orthodox church which led to the artists’ imprisonment.

The artists behind the aforementioned acts, Lars Vilks, Mimosa Pale, and the groups Voina and Pussy Riot are intellectual, critical and interesting. It is, therefore, not that ‘bad artists’ would get the attention. It just seems that public discussion sees art interesting only as a source for scandals. Art here, though, does not suffer from anything else than the common logic of media. In Northern Europe, for example, we get news from Africa or South America only when there is negative news like wars to report on, and the same destiny seems to haunt art.

But back to body limits: Though I admire Werner Herzog and Stuart Brisley, Herzog’s winter walk from Munich to Paris (see the book *Vom Gehen im Eis*, 1978)

---

5 Another typical niche of contemporary art discussed in theoretical and philosophical literature – more typical for academic aesthetics – is the line of classics in conceptual art and pop art, extending from Duchamp to Warhol and then e.g. Rauschenberg. I will return to this later in my article.

6 As this article focuses on bringing in new thoughts concerning Richard Shusterman’s work, one could say that his critique of ‘wrapper definitions’ and way of offering Deweyan experience-centered thinking as an alternative way to think about art, has been a witty and important contribution to the Anglo-American debates concerning the nature of art. See *Pragmatist Aesthetics: Rethinking Beauty, Living Art*, especially chapter 2, “Art and Theory between Experience and Practice”, 39-40 (Second Edition, Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2000).

and Brisley's ten day (two hours a day) bathtub marathon in putrefied matter (*And for Today, Nothing*, 1972) do not for me represent the most interesting side of the dialogue of contemporary art and the body, however much these works stimulate reflection on my own boundaries. And though I cannot but be touched by Yang Zhichao's (Yáng Zhìchào, 楊志超) performance *Planting Grass* (2000), where he gets grass planted in his back (the act is famously featured in Alison Klayman's documentary *Ai Weiwei: Never Sorry*, 2012) and so cuts deep in a variety of themes central for humanity, from biopolitics to the relationship of culture and nature, I think the discourse on contemporary arts deals too much with excess.

Seminal books on contemporary art, like Claire Bishop's *Artificial Hells* (2012) and Brian O'Doherty's *Inside the White Cube* (1999),<sup>7</sup> offer broad and heterogeneous historical narratives on the development of participatory art and experimentation with gallery space (where exhibiting the (often naked) body has for long been a standard provocation). Aesthetics and art theory, though, maybe following their interest to define the boundaries of art, humanity and culture, and, so to verbally map out and then question their boundaries and milestones, have been more keen to discuss shocks, endurance tests and other borderline issues in arts. The good effect of this tendency, which can clearly be seen in classics like Gilles Deleuze's essay on Henry Bacon's paintings (*Francis Bacon: Logique de la Sensation*, 1981) and later works like Mario Perniola's *L'arte e la sua ombra* (2000), is the fact that it creates equilibrium in the field of the philosophy of art by establishing a counterpart to the analysis of the line Marcel Duchamp – Andy Warhol, which (especially Anglo-American and Northern European) philosophers have fancied for decades.<sup>8</sup>

It probably comes as no surprise that the type of art – the role of which I have been critically framing here – is also central for Martin Jay's article "Somaesthetics and Democracy: Dewey and Contemporary Body Art" (2002),<sup>9</sup> where Jay first shows favorable respect for Richard Shusterman's somaesthetics, but then criticizes Shusterman for not taking body art sufficiently into account.<sup>10</sup>

7 Bishop, Claire. *Artificial Hells*. London: Verso, 2012. O'Doherty, Brian. *Inside the White Cube. The Ideology of the Gallery Space*. Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1999.

8 Deleuze, Gilles \*\*\*. Perniola, Mario. *L'arte e la sua ombra*. Torino: Einaudi, 2000. A difference to this dominant tendency to discuss abject art (Perniola) or the Duchamp-Warhol line has, though, been made in discussions on environmental aesthetics and everyday aesthetics, where often moderate works of art with a harmonizing or ameliorating touch are used as examples. Not coincidentally, these topics are quite dominantly Deweyan.

9 Jay, Martin. "Somaesthetics and Democracy: Dewey and Contemporary Body Art." *Journal of Aesthetic Education*, Vol. 36, No. 4, Winter 2002. Pp. 55-69.

10 Jay's use of Dewey as an adherent for body art is highly problematic, not following the fact that contemporary conceptions of art and body art were not yet a commonplace in Dewey's time, but because Dewey seems to be highly suspicious towards highbrow art, where he is not able to really differentiate experimental, marginal and alternative art from the public sphere of art dominated by museums and other art services. Applying his thinking to radical artistic practices would call for a more sensitive articulation, as Dewey in the end is quite moderate in his 'taste'.

Jay's highbrow reading of Shusterman's work leads us neatly to the core issue. He claims misleadingly that Shusterman's interest in lowbrow and somaesthetics would be two sides of the same project.<sup>11</sup> To show why Shusterman should turn to highbrow art, instead of popular culture, Jay attacks rap music, which was one of the topics Shusterman rode to fame with at the beginning of the 1990s.<sup>12</sup> Jay says that rap music is often misogynic and homophobic. Though Jay is originally a New Yorker (now famously a Berkeley thinker), he does not remind us about the unequal, bourgeois and capitalist logics of greedy collectors, the posh 5<sup>th</sup> Avenue Galleries and the conservative bourgeois culture supporting the 'high arts'.<sup>13</sup>

As I work in the arts, I am often surprised how idealistically philosophers look at the world of art, but the truth might be that they actually mostly know about it by reading books or by visiting the 'main street shop windows' or 'final disposal sites' of art, i.e. public art services like big museums. Public art services build their pedagogical programs with care, so that few would get offended and so that the institutional problems of art would not get highlighted too much.<sup>14</sup> This way the visitors can rather have a possibility to get rid of old prejudices than to adopt new ones. Most professionals and enthusiasts in the scene where I work go to alternative galleries (which are the mainstream ones for professionals), screenings and openings at grass root exhibition spaces, and virtually never to museums or fancy sales galleries, so one could say that the artworld today is quite divided (one end being very critical towards the other).

The same polarization has been a commonplace in rap music as well, and it is weird that Jay does not take notice of Shusterman's well-chosen examples. By discussing groups like Gang Starr and Public Enemy, which were political acts, though quite mainstream at the turn of the 1990s, Shusterman clearly shows his sympathy for the more critically orientated side of the music industry. These groups show interest in bodily issues as well, touching on topics like (the ethics

---

11 Jay 2002, 57-58. Shusterman himself criticizes Jay for this in "Somaesthetics and the Revival of Aesthetics", *Filozovski Vestnik* Vol. XXXVIII, 2007: 2, 135-149 (p. 7).

12 See e.g. chapter 7 "Form and Funk: The Aesthetic Challenge of Popular Art" (published originally in *British Journal of Aesthetics* 33 (1991): 203-213) and chapter 8 "The Fine Art of Rap" (*New Literary History* 22, 1991, 613-622) in *Pragmatist Aesthetics*.

13 New York, I believe, is the capital of this type of an art world, which forms quite an oppositional example to e.g. Berlin. I present 'high art' in quotation marks in my text because I think the concept is in the need of a careful rethinking. It might be better to think about the concept as referring to cultivated bourgeois culture, as popular museums, middlebrow opera houses and book fairs are far away from most 'avant-garde' art circles at the same time as mass culture is not. The connection between middlebrow and high culture ideals should be analyzed in depth. This bourgeois sphere of art stands as well for a high vs. low attitude, which can be hard to find in a discussion in the Berlin Biennale or in an art journal (where Lady Gaga is a commonplace).

14 There are, of course, museums that have a constructive role in the professional sphere as well. I have here been referring to the mainstream of museum work in the arts, which, still, as I will show in the end of the text, has a great value also to the topic of this article.

of) vegetarianism and the danger and inferiority that the white American middle class associates with the body marked by a darker skin. Rap music is here not the beef, though. Jay's critique shows how the metaphysics of high and low still affects scholars, but more importantly, after this, and building on it, Jay claims that body art, rather than popular culture, should become an object of discussion in somaesthetics.

The tradition of body art is very broad and strong in today's art world, but Jay's examples seem to lead to the kind of art I discussed earlier as suitable for scandals. They are interesting per se and their role in art history cannot be contested, but still: why the following choices? Jay rolls out the carpet for 'abject artists'.<sup>15</sup> One is Carolee Schneeman, who's *Meat Joy* (1964), "an orgiastic happening in which male and female performers grappled with one another and a variety of fleshy, messy materials", might, for sure, have increased our understanding of our moral, aesthetic and social cage. Then we have Vito Acconci who "pulled at each of his nipples to produce women's breasts, burned off his body hair and hid his penis between legs in order to subvert his masculinity." Like this would not be enough, we find Jay celebrating Stelarc and Orlan – experimental aesthetic surgery and body piercing – and, in the end, the Vienna Actionists, who's "Orgies-Mysteries Theater" at Schloss Prinzdorf "accommodated large numbers of performers and spectators for a three-day long Dionysiac orgy of blood and gore. (...) Activities included ritual disembowelment of bulls and sheep, stuffing entrails back into hacked-open carcasses, the treading of huge vats of grapes mixed with entrails, blood and wine, blood-letting on to actors representing Christ and Oedipus, and nighttime processions around the castle with pigs, goats, sheep, horses, dogs and cattle and actors bearing flaming torches."<sup>16</sup>

I am not criticizing explorations of this kind. Our relation to Western sexual metaphysics and Austria's dark history might have been in the need of them. The works cited are also neither kitsch nor infiltrated with easy populism, and they might have had an important role in raising awareness of the possibility to discuss and analyze political issues with the help of art. But I believe that it is important to point out that body art or the body in art is a much broader enterprise than it looks like when one narrows the gaze in a sensationalist manner. The use of the body has a key role in many moderate works of art which have significance for both the art world and our (political) everyday life, even if the concept of body art would not, usually, be used to refer to them. My interest here is to discuss works of art where artists perform as examples, models for political action. But to get the most

15 See Perniola 2000.

16 Jay 2002, 59-61.

out of the analysis of this phenomena we need to turn to Shusterman's thinking on the philosophy of life, somaesthetics, and then some illuminative examples of everyday political art. It is also fruitful to turn back to Pasolini.

## 2

In an essay published in *Practicing Philosophy* (1997),<sup>17</sup> Shusterman ventures into the (lives and) philosophies of life of Michel Foucault, Ludwig Wittgenstein and John Dewey. Here, some of the seeds of somaesthetics can already be found. Shusterman criticizes Western philosophy for romanticizing the lives of 'geniuses'. I believe this is somewhat analogous to what I just hinted at as a romanticization of the lives of artists. Foucault and Wittgenstein embody the properties of the myth (of the genius) by being sexually marginalized, complex and challenging personalities, males – of course – and somehow 'virtuosos' in their own fields of expertise.<sup>18</sup> In Dewey's case, Shusterman notes, his life actually provides us with a better *example*. It is so much more useful to think about Dewey than, for example, the overtly neurotic and eccentric Wittgenstein, when we search for a model for developing our own lives. Dewey lived a moderate life, and he lived it holistically, harmonically and moderately (as much as we know) – the way most of us like to live, however much we would fantasize about transgression and adventure. One does not need to venture into sadomasochist sex like Foucault to understand more about one's own bodily identity. As Shusterman claims, it can be transgressive to try to hug one's father for the first time,<sup>19</sup> and this shift to everyday issues is far more than welcome in the philosophical discourse.

Somaesthetics is a series of leaps into the same subject (life), but with an emphasis on the relationship of body and mind. The manifesto-like root article, "Somaesthetics: A Disciplinary Proposal" (1999), which was originally published in *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*,<sup>20</sup> but is today mostly read as the last chapter of the second edition of *Pragmatist Aesthetics: Living Art, Rethinking Beauty* (2000, first edition 1992), has produced a following in a variety of books and article publications, ending up in the 2012 *Thinking Through the Body: Essays in Somaesthetics*, which recollects the debate so far and adds texts on Eastern thinking, cognitive issues and hands-on exercises to the corpus. Now, here the

17 See the first chapter in *Practicing Philosophy: Pragmatism and the Philosophical Life*. New York: Routledge, 1997.

18 Christine Battersby's *Gender and Genius. Towards a Feminist Aesthetics* (London: The Women's Press, 1989) analyzes sharply the properties associated with genius throughout history.

19 This example was a key trigger for good discussion on Shusterman's lectures at Helsinki University in 1998.

20 Shusterman, Richard. "Somaesthetics: A Disciplinary Proposal", *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 1999 Vol 57, 03 Summer, 299-313.

main *example* has been Shusterman himself.

Although the extremities of contemporary art could, together with extreme sports or excessive drug use, teach us a (dangerous) lesson or two about our body-mind set, moderate practices like good nutrition, yoga or meditation are far more rewarding for living, having safe long-term effects on our bodies and bodily thinking. By discussing the history of the relationship of philosophy and the body, by experimenting with what it means to get these two to interact in a fruitful way, and most importantly by stressing the moderate over the excessive, Shusterman's project has marked a new beginning for applied aesthetics, which here shakes hands with perennial body traditions. It is not just about applying aesthetic theory to the (bodily) everyday life. It is about changing our mind and body mindset for the better. The agenda is meliorist.

The most radical idea here is that the connection of body, mind and culture can be studied with the help of philosophy, and that the dialogue between practical exercises and philosophical analysis can benefit both polarities when developed systematically. And Shusterman the philosopher has used his own body for experimentation, exploration and presentation of ideas, to be an *example*. We don't need only standpoint theorists, but people who – like Foucault or Walter Benjamin<sup>21</sup> – use themselves and their body as instruments for exploring and embodying philosophical issues. As his predecessors, Shusterman has described and analyzed intimate procedures. His contributions to the tradition where philosophy is built upon and developed out from descriptions of personal experience have included presentations on the (somatic) deconstruction of his body trained to be a machine in the Israeli army and the learning process leading to the mastery of Feldenkrais technique.<sup>22</sup>

The project is distantly analogous to the way many contemporary artists use their body. And tiny, thoughtful and moderate political acts which are executed in or with the help of the framework of contemporary art are for me the most interesting side of the use of the body in arts today – not the extreme examples mentioned earlier. I would say that the body is often needed as an *example*, the living artist as a model for thinking and action. Together with a good documentation and discourse on the experiments this helps us to grab the political problem or

---

21 Benjamin's experimental attitude is famous. He went to screenings to understand the film culture of the people, he tested cannabis together with jazz (and thought the effect was against his upbringing) and he roamed on the streets to understand the change of urban life in modernity. See especially texts in the unfinished *The Arcades Project* (1927-1940). Ed. Rolf Tiedemann. Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 2002.

22 Shusterman's philosophical self-descriptions have been analyzed in detail by Wojciech Małecki in his "Challenging the Taboo of the Autobiographical", in Wojciech Małecki's and Dorota Koczanowicz (eds) *Shusterman's Pragmatism. Between Literature and Somaesthetics* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2012). See also *Embodying Pragmatism. Richard Shusterman's Philosophy and Literary Theory* (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 2010).

perspective at stake, and to learn from it.

When a Swiss Afro-European artist (Sasha Huber) climbs the Alpine peak Agassizhorn (3946 meters high), named after a local, racist 19<sup>th</sup> century character (Louis Agassiz), and drags her own flag to the top, thereby giving the peak a new name after a Congolese-born slave Renty (so transforming it to *Rentyhorn*, 2008), this gives the conceptual idea weight and depth. As only an idea the political point would embody only words, and so not be very effective – if not written into a literary form by a splendid writer.

In the 1990s Minna Heikinaho offered free breakfast for strangers – many of them homeless people or addicts – in her *Push Firma Beige*, a gallery in the then still shady housing area of Kallio in Helsinki. One can easily imagine the physical presence, performance and social skills (starting from body language) needed in this practice. A robot, even one controlled by an artist, could never give these political and ethical acts the ‘depth’ and ‘weight’ needed to make them interesting and meaningful for us. A robot could, though, be used for social work or dragging a flag up on the top of a mountain, but not to evoke the associations, memories and feelings needed in these art works.

Artists traveling to problem suburbs to work out a window performance with the inhabitants (so bringing them together, making them a community), helping people to claim their legal rights (filling in forms) and, to take up a classic, the social work in N.Y.C. conducted by the Living Theatre (the whole theater was, in Antonin Artaud’s spirit, a tool for enhancing community life as an alternative to competitive culture) – these all need the artist and his/her body to not just make a difference in the society, but to concretize the political idea and spirit in our minds.<sup>23</sup>

The type of works cited is not aesthetic by nature. A ‘dry’ documentation of the acts is usually the only form of dramatization included the works. Art here means that these acts are not just acts of humanity and small scale political activism, but *presentations* of an idea, *performances* executed with care by using the realm of art as a site and instrument for communication. The artists here produce not merely symbolical acts, but also examples that can raise thinking and action regarding what one can do in society. And the body really needs to be there. By giving an example, and by presenting not just a thought but an act, a presence, a real life and body (not fiction), the conceptual turns into flesh. This is why I started by talking about ‘throwing the body into fight’.

---

23 I have here been referring to the work of many great artists, but as the most inspiring examples which have led to these thoughts I’d like to thank the artists Ange Taggart, Anne Salmela and Anna Turunen for their highly original and illuminative work.

We need to return to Pasolini. It is hard to miss his idea on exemplification:

Vorrei esprimermi con gli esempi. Gettare il mio corpo nella lotta.

The exact meaning of this in English is (philosophical (not poetic) translation): ‘I want to express myself with examples. To throw my body into the fight.’ As a part of a long poem which tells the story of the author, his artistic work as much as his private life, this cannot but mark an appreciation of lived life – and the production of examples, food for thought.<sup>24</sup> To make ideas live one needs to get things done, not just imagined, and this is a lot to be said by a poet, although in Pasolini’s case we know that he threw himself into challenging situations often and with force. The classical idea that you ought to live as you preach is connected to this issue. Deep talk about humanity goes all down the drain if the person talking for it treats people in a cold and calculating manner. Mahatma Gandhi and Nelson Mandela have been important for many people because they embodied their own spiritual and political beliefs in their lives.

Working with political art, one can find that the broad public might not be very interested in what the artist does, but still, why would affecting 300 gallery visitors with new models on how to act for the better not be meaningful? Most of us cannot and do not want to live the life of Nelson Mandela, but we can (do a performance or) change our societal habits.

After this discourse on the nature of these political works of art where the body is needed to connect the idea deep into our mind, we might still want to ask: what is this ‘weight’ and ‘depth’ which I claim that art gains from the way artists put themselves and their bodies at stake? Weight and depth are maybe not central features of (aesthetic) experience. But sometimes we feel that a work is too ‘light’ or that it lacks ‘depth.’ Often we associate the terms with the quality of the work. But here we could think of a cluster of factors backing up the experience of the type of works of art we are thinking about. There is, for sure, often something close to kinesthetic response at stake. We witness artistic acts (where the body is at stake) emphatically and we mirror ourselves (and our bodies) to the performing subjects (and their bodies). The fact that we know that an artist and his/her body is or has been ‘out there’ might also produce an experience of ‘authenticity.’ The concept of authenticity has become problematic especially in cultural studies, but here it does not have to refer to something as being original, ‘roots-based’ or existentially ‘right.’ It could here plainly refer to the more serious way we relate

---

24 Casi (2009, 46) sees the body of the poem as a body where poetry acts, but I am more here stressing the philosophical and political sides of it. “Poetry in action” (poesia in azione) is one expression Casi uses as well wittily to describe Pasolini’s way of working (ibid.).

to real stories (nothing Lacanian about this). ‘Weight’ and ‘depth’ could here, all and all, mark the essential difference we experience when we witness real and not imagined / fictional events. Besides the way we feel disgust and grief when we face artists challenging themselves in horrifying and transgressive ways, we get the philosophical and political implications of their work more strongly when we encounter a well-embodied execution. So, if Montaigne was interested in the “aesthetic functioning” of the body, “its potential for beauty,”<sup>25</sup> we can here say that we are discussing the ‘artistic functioning’ of the body, its potential to embody artistic and political ideas.

The field of art I am discussing here can easily also bring to mind the work of Michel Foucault, which is mentioned in “Somaesthetics: A Disciplinary Proposal”:

Michel Foucault’s seminal vision of the body as a docile, malleable site for inscribing social power reveals the crucial role somatics can play for political philosophy. Together with self-styling and dance this is a form of representational somaesthetic practice, where the body is in the center of the action.<sup>26</sup>

The central role of the body in the political order, presented to us by Foucault in *Discipline and Punish* (*Surveiller et punir*, 1975) and *The History of Sexuality* (*Histoire de la sexualité*, vol. 1-3, 1976-1984), finds its active, artistic response and critical following in the use of the body in political art. (Contemporary artists are often well read in and inspired by Foucault’s work.)

To get back to Jay’s text, it includes a great comment on Dewey’s philosophy:

His vision of democracy necessitated a robust commitment not only to an open-ended process of unimpeded free inquiry, which emulated that of the scientific community, but also to the self-realization that came through active participation in the public sphere. The model of that self-realization he saw best expressed in the sensually mediated, organically consummated, formally molded activity that was aesthetic experience.<sup>27</sup>

Dewey’s (like Shusterman’s) idea of (aesthetic) experience covers all sides of life from cleaning to hunting, but Jay is definitely right in his claim that pragmatism must not forget the importance of self-realization through active participation in the public sphere. And this is definitely something that community artists aspire to fuel and accomplish. Jay’s (and Dewey’s) dream really becomes embodied in contemporary art.

25 Shusterman 2000, 262.

26 Ibid. 270.

27 Jay 2000, 55.

But I'd go even further and claim that contemporary art might in the end be more in the need of pragmatist aesthetics than the other way around. Like Jay, I am fascinated by obscure and rogue French philosophers and authors from Georges Bataille to Maurice Blanchot and Gilles Deleuze who dominate the discourse in contemporary art today. But the work of these names has not yet provided an initiative for scholars and artists to take enough note of the value of moderate acts. Pragmatist aesthetics, following its interest in meliorism, democracy, everyday life and our possibility to change (societal) habits – a track opened by Dewey and followed by holistic philosophers like Joseph Kupfer, Arnold Berleant and, here most importantly Shusterman – might offer a theoretical mirror which contemporary arts can yet only dream of, and where theory is not that much anchored to boundaries and excess. Throwing the body into fight might, in a more pragmatist future of art talk, thus, refer to fulfilling one of the most important roles an artist can have in today's society: to be an applicable model of political and societal action – not necessarily a role model, but illuminative exemplification of a critical citizen testing the limits of orders, experimenting with crossing tracks and performing societal patterns reflectively. Contemporary artist Dan Graham has said: "All artists are alike. They dream of doing something that's more social, more collaborative, and more real than art."<sup>28</sup> I would say that this happens, from time to time, and when it does, the ideas have been executed with a good embodiment. After taking part in the performances of the Barcelona-based community artist Mireia Saladrigues' acts, which force the audience to face themes like depression, nutrition and our need for a community, I have found it easier to change my eating habits. A carnivalist artist performing as a nurse, who insists that her audience eats raw chocolate because it is healthier than ordinary chocolate and because it has a good impact on mental health might be banal, but it still works better than most of the pedagogy offered by professionals in health care. As contemporary art seems to float more and more into the everyday, and the trend to teach artistic methods (like performance) to people who are not professional artists, this practice will, I hope, become even broader, stronger and more anchored to scientific knowledge and expertise.

Philosophy and the contemporary, conscious use of the body mix here with a long tradition where artists have systematically been using themselves and their bodies to debate, to provide perspectives and to show models for the production of new habits and action. Since the 1960s, community artists and performance artists have been actively systematizing their social work. Today this aspiration gets

---

<sup>28</sup> In Bishop 2012, 1.

more and more embodied and developed in the relatively new and still evolving discipline of artistic research. Artistic research has been widely misunderstood as an “anything goes” practice where art and theory meet. I cannot go into details on the pros and cons of this discipline, but I will mention what is most interesting for me in it. It is a good question to ask (and one which is central for many working in this territory of art and theory) how we can more systematically use artistic methods to produce knowledge, deepen our understanding of, discuss and analyze issues. Philosophy traditionally works through words, and artists experiment, but in artistic research at its best these two sides are combined and in balance, and I believe pragmatist aesthetics, when it does not just provide an escape tunnel for disillusioned analytic philosophers or an overtly academic enterprise, can be one of the best partners for future development in this respect.

We might have to ask, though, if philosophy (in Shusterman’s case) and contemporary art are productive and fruitful ways to test and embody ideas on issues like health, society and politics, and if they are, why – and to what extent? The answer to these questions lies outside of the scope of this paper, and creating one would require a new text. But if nothing else, contemporary art (philosophy sadly not) already has quite a broad audience consisting not just of people working or educated in arts, but, thanks to art education in museums, ‘common people’ who are interested, in one way or another, in what artists do. They are not just open for new ideas. The reason why they come to see contemporary art and to meet contemporary artists is often motivated precisely by a hunger for a change of perspectives. This is one of the reasons why political art is effective. In the end all this talk is meaningful only if we believe that the role of art and philosophy is not just to exhibit and analyze, but to change society. There is no need to argue for this in contemporary art, where political activism is ‘mainstream’, and besides the feminist and Marxist sections of philosophy, the same applies to pragmatist aesthetics.<sup>29</sup>

Pragmatist aesthetics does not offer a dramatization of the everyday through a provocative literary transgression typical for many of today’s trendy philosophers, so if one is in the need of escapism – this is what I think many readings of French theory (including my own) are about – it does not reward the reader. As Shusterman says in his answer to Richard Rorty’s critique, which connects somaesthetics to “the body practices championed by Foucault, Bataille,

---

<sup>29</sup> Most English language discourse on pragmatism is text-based and often just endless analysis on how analytic philosophers could rethink their relation to classical boundaries of their school of philosophy. What strikes as different is the way pragmatist *aesthetics*, most radically through Shusterman’s work, has taken steps towards systematic engagement with e.g. the body. On somaesthetics and feminist theory from this point of view (interaction of theory and practice), see Monica Bokinić’s article “Somaesthetics and Feminism”, in Małecki and Koczanowicz 2012, pp. 163-172.

and Deleuze that celebrate irrational Dionysian access”: somaesthetics provides “precisely a critique and an alternative to such philosophies that reduce the value of somatic experience to irrational extremes of passion and pleasure.”<sup>30</sup> Together with its pragmatic (meliorist) agenda of changing the world this makes pragmatism a powerhouse in rethinking and working for a better society, where the most, as in art, happens between the extreme ends. If it worked hand in hand with contemporary art I believe it could be even more effective. Together with the artistic tools, experience, experiential impact and the well-educated and open-minded audience of contemporary art, somaesthetics could find new ways to embody philosophical ideas and problems, new escape routes from the intellectual slums of philistine academics. I have here provided an initiative to develop this dialogue. Let’s hope it is just the beginning of a beautiful friendship.

**Contact:**

Max Ryyänen

max.ryynanen@aalto.fi

---

30 Shusterman 2007, 147. I wouldn’t myself say that the work of these French philosophers would reduce the thinking of the body, but rather talk about the way the body gets thought of in a certain way following their choices of perspectives, even more the way their followers have been interpreting them. About escapism: I believe that many readings of philosophy are escapist, but this does not necessarily mean that the readings in question would be unintellectual or that they couldn’t be philosophically productive – just think about Heidegger’s readings of Greek classics, which have often quite a fantasmatic role in his work.

# Metaphysics, Corporeality and Visuality: A Developmental and Comparative Review of the Discourses on Chinese Ink Painting

*Eva Kit Wah MAN*

*Abstract: This paper will address two main questions: How should we understand modern Chinese ink art and its many possibilities, when we agree that this has a great bearing on how the traditional medium of ink is being internationally recognized? Is there anything essential about ink art? The discussion begins with a recent ink art exhibition entitled, "New Ink Art: Innovation and Beyond", which shapes new ink art under its various social and cultural contexts. With the controversies on the modernization issues of ink painting, this paper is devoted to reviewing some of the essentialist views of ink painting discussed in the Chinese tradition, and the observations on new ink art from some developmental perspectives, with particular regard to the problems of technique, visuality and metaphysics. The aesthetical references in the Confucian and the Taoist contexts will be revisited, with the example of the theories and the work of Shih Tao, the great Chinese ink painter. The discussion will then be compared and contrasted with the Western Kantian model and Merleau-Ponty's aesthetics. The metaphysical beliefs will be emphasized in the comparative revelation when the focus is on the understanding of art, visuality and corporeality implied in the media.*

*Keywords: new ink art, technique, visuality, metaphysics, Confucian, Taoist.*

## Introduction: New Ink Art and the Question of “What is Ink Painting”?

How should we understand modern ink art and its many possibilities, when we agree that this has a great bearing on how the traditional medium of ink is being internationally recognized? Is there anything essential about ink art? Or should we see it in an open form or in something like Wittgenstein’s notion of “family resemblance”? It should be revealing to review the developing art form in the context of technovisuality and cultural re-enhancement.

In an exhibition at the Hong Kong Museum of Art in the Fall of 2008 entitled “*New Ink Art: Innovation and Beyond*”, the curator, King, quoted the Tang Dynasty literati Wang Wei’s words on ink painting in her foreword:

In the art of painting,  
Works in ink surpass all.  
They stem from nature,  
And fulfill the functions of the universe.

(Ng, Chow, Mac & Richard 2008, 14)

It has been emphasized that traditional Chinese ink painting, from its ancient beginnings in decorating Neolithic pots, has evolved and flourished in the hands of great masters from different dynasties, and has been shaped by the social, economic and cultural values of the times. It has come full circle as some artists have sought to expand beyond the two-dimensional confines of ink on paper or silk, and the continuous re-interpretation links ink art to our present-day society and keeps it alive (Ng, Chow, Mac & Richard 2008, 14).

This exhibition is a good point of departure for the above discussion, as it aims at raising the question of how ink art, with over 3000 years of history, has evolved through time in terms of artistic form and language to become an art form that corresponds to contemporary cultural issues. The modifications involved are innovative departures from its traditional form and constraints. The curator, as many contemporary ink art exhibition curators have done, claims “to understand “ink” in its broadest sense, seeing it not merely as a selected medium but rather a necessary reference central to Chinese culture” (Ng, Chow, Mac & Richard 2008, 14).

To better understand the different facets of ink art, the exhibits are divided into several themes, though at the same time, the categorizations seem to be in excess. It exhibits a few masterpieces of Hong Kong forerunners like Lui Shou-kwan and Luis Chan. It explores modern interpretations of traditional subject matter such as the landscape paintings by other Hong Kong painters Liu Guosong and Wucius Wong. It demonstrates the attempts of contemporary Chinese artists like Gu Wenda who deconstructed and reconstructed Chinese calligraphy in innovative ways. It shows daring artists like another local painter Kwok Mang-ho who freely transcend the traditional boundaries of ink art to develop their own visual vocabulary. It even refers to artworks that seemingly have nothing to do with the ink brush tradition, but utilize media such as organic installation, acrylic on canvas, and digital art. Some of the exhibited new ink art presents Hong Kong artists' views of the city with a focus on social and cultural concerns intertwined with urban references. (Ng, Chow, Mac & Richard 2008, 15-16)

It is interesting to see in the following discussion how Hong Kong has become a center for the development of new ink painting in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century when China was under its Socialist regime, and how it is the first city in the region to emerge as a center of new ink art. It is noted that for political reasons, it was only much later when such creative leaps of imagination took place in the Mainland towards the end of the 1970s. The rapid development of the art form leads to the final question raised at the exhibition: Is it ink art?

One would confront this question easily when stepping out of the exhibition exit, when one sees the installation of the tree branches in Ming Fay's 2006 lyrical organic, three-dimensional installation "Floating Reeds," which is an artificial landscape of images with brush painting (fig. 1).



1. FEI Mingjie (Ming Fay). *Floating Reeds*. 2006. Installation. Mixed media. Variable size.

Its content is about life, growth, decay, order, and spontaneity (Ng, Chow, Mac & Richard 2008, 17). It can be agreed that this exhibition and others of its type suggests the timeliness of ink art that always speaks to the living conditions through changes and developments in style and artistic language.

The curator Liu Xiaochun of the new ink exhibition *Shuimo Today* held in Beijing's new art space Songzhuang in 2006 did not refer the term contemporary ink painting to a concept of time, but to artistic conceptions similar to "experimental" and "verge," meaning marginal. Its contemporary relevance is related to the new ink works' rebellion against Chinese ink tradition and the related criticism. (Liu 2006, 7) According to the group of new ink artists in the Mainland, contemporary *Shuimo* (meaning ink art), is a kind of art phenomenon affected by Western modern and contemporary art, and the Western trends of thought adapted by innovative Chinese painters Xu Beihong and Lin Fengmian in the early 20th Century. Liu argues that:

every artist is seeking for combination with tradition unconsciously, so the essence of the Western trend is that the east combines with the west and utilizes the west to strengthen itself... in the Western main-stream art's opinion, Chinese contemporary *Shuimo* art is not really contemporary, because it has no modern significance, and in Chinese main-stream's opinion, Chinese contemporary *Shuimo* art is following the West, and hence there is a lack of cultural independence. Therefore Chinese contemporary *Shuimo* art is doubly exiled, at the edge of both traditions (Liu 2006, 7).

He further points out that since ink painting has a close relation with Daoist metaphysics, it is the most outstanding representative of Chinese visual culture, and so it is not for the Western art circle to comment, as it is a special issue in the development of Chinese contemporary art. The concern is thus to show the new vitality and creativity of ink painting, and to turn it into an important part of Chinese contemporary art. (Liu 2006, 7)

With all these hopes and wishes for cultural identities, and the simultaneous controversies on the modernization issues of ink painting, it should be revealing to review some of the essentialist fervors of ink painting discussed in the tradition, and the related observations on new ink art from some developmental perspectives, with particular regards to the problems of technique, visuality and metaphysics. Here I would like to turn to Shih Tao, a great Chinese ink painter, for the discussion.

## Traditional Discourse on Ink Painting: The Case of “Oneness” of Stroke Suggested by Shih Tao

Shih Tao (1642- 1707), the influential painter in the late Ming and early Qing period, is not only well known as an ink painter, but also as a prominent art theorist. His surviving notes on ink painting, *Hua-pu (Treatise on the Philosophy of Painting)*, is regarded as one of the most important Daoist philosophical reflections on the art form.

The treatise begins with the concept of the “Oneness of Brush Strokes.” Shih writes:

In remote, ancient days there were no principles. The primordial *p’ò* (or state of uncarved block) had not been dispersed. As soon as the primordial *p’ò* was dispersed, principles emerged. How did these principles emerge? They were founded upon the oneness of strokes. This oneness of strokes is the origin of all beings, the root of myriad forms. It is revealed through spiritual reality, and is innate in man (Coleman 1978, 35-36).

The Oneness obviously refers to the Daoist meaning of Nature and the ultimate reality. It is important to reach at the realm of the Dao, to access the artistic creativity and the aesthetic experience. The Daoists believe that the metaphysical realm of the Dao is the origin of the truth, beauty and goodness, and it is the ideal state of art. It will be helpful to understand the Daoist notion of aesthetic experience through a discussion of the neo-Confucian scholars who addressed the subject, and from there to grasp Shih Tao’s discourse on the aesthetics of ink painting.

Despite a general comment made by scholars who work on comparative philosophy that systematic aesthetics is absent in traditional Confucian and Daoist philosophies, neo-Confucian scholars have reconstructed theories of human primal experience according to traditional Confucianism and Daoism that allude to aesthetic experience. For example, the late writings of Mou Zongzan (1909-1995), the prominent neo-Confucian philosopher who resided in Hong Kong since 1950s, argues that Daoist theory is aesthetic in nature. Firstly, he points out that the “subjective principle” of Daoism is “wu wei” (no action), which refers to the effort of the human subject’s mind to transcend all kinds of human epistemological functions and move towards the realm of a more metaphysical Dao (Mou 1974, 208-211). Daoist philosophy promotes the annulments of subjective activity and knowledge to recover the presentation of nature in itself which has been hidden and distorted by the self’s understanding, perception and conception. According to Daoism, to know is to be “not knowing,” to be wise is to be ignorant, so that only

the so called fools are able to grasp the truth of nature.

Mou said in the realm of the Dao, when the human mind has stopped “knowing” and travels with the basic universal element *Chi*, it is able to perceive things in their original nature. These are not “phenomena” in the Kantian sense of epistemology, but the original nature of things which can only be understood after the abolition of the dominant scheme of subject-object relations exerted by the knowing subject. It is said that the state of “intellectual intuition” of the mind in the Daoist sense corresponds with the “calmness of mind” described by Zhuangzi’s “*Xin Jai*” as described by the representing and original Daoist:

Do not be the master of knowledge (to manipulate things). Personally realize the infinite to the highest degree and travel in the realm of which there is no sign. Exercise fully what you have received from Nature without any subjective viewpoint. In one word, be absolutely vacuous (*hsu*). The mind of the perfect man is like a mirror. It does not lean forward or backward in its response to things. It responds to things but conceals nothing of its own. Therefore it is able to deal with things without injury to (its reality) (Chan 1963, 207).

With “calmness of mind,” there are no differentiations of mind and body, form and matter, or subject and object but the emergence of all things (including the mind) in themselves. They are juxtaposed with each other without being known. It is thus a disinterested, non-intentional and non-regulative state, and is therefore, aesthetic in nature. Mou’s elaboration of the state is as follows:

The state of mind of *xin jai* is the termination, tranquility, emptiness, and nothingness that follow the abolition of the quest and dependency on learning and knowing. The *wu wei* of the above necessarily implies a certain kind of creativity, whose form is so special that it can be named as negative creativity...that in the light of the tranquil state..., things present themselves in the way that they are...not as an object, but as an ideal state...and this is the static ‘intellectual intuition’ (Mou 1974, 208-211).

In the transcendental realm of the Dao, a thing is not an object but an “ideal state,” a form in itself, appreciation of which is capable only with Daoist wisdom, in which the sense of beauty and aesthetic pleasure, the real form of freedom, spring up in tranquility. Achievement of this state requires an effort of transcendence of all human epistemological constraints or judgments, as Kant’s aesthetics prescribes, and engagement in the metaphysical realm of the Dao. This explains the criteria and aesthetic categories in Daoist aesthetics, e.g. Lao Tze’s “*chi*,” “*wei*,” “*miao*” and

“*xu*,” which refer to the activities and characters of the realm and are applied in the evaluation of Chinese ink painting and calligraphy.

According to neo-Confucian scholars, objectification of the mind takes place only after the primal experience has happened in the realm of the Dao from which comes the division of subject and object. Functions and activities including epistemological and artistic ones then begin to exert their influences and judgments, or manifesting the metaphysical experiences through artistic media. (Tang 1987, 187) Activities can be divided into those that are related to the cognitive (the truth), the perceptive or the aesthetic (the beautiful) and the willful (the good) and are undertaken according to the subject’s state of mind. Yet the origin of aesthetic experience is in the transcendental state. This explains Shih Tao’s saying that the art of painting is a manifestation of truth. As he writes in *Hua Pu*:

With regard to the delicate arrangement of mountains, streams, and human figures, or the natural characteristics of birds, animals, grass, and trees, or the proportions of ponds, pavilions, towers, and terraces, if one’s mind cannot deeply penetrate into their reality and subtly express their appearance, one has not yet understood the fundamental meaning of the oneness of strokes. . . Hence, oneness of strokes embraces all strokes before their differentiation. Myriad brush strokes and ink wash all derive and diminish here. Merely rely upon the grasp of men. A single stroke which identifies with universality can clearly reveal the idea of man and fully penetrate all things (Coleman 1978, 37-38).

In this sense, does the transcendence of the mind mean total cancellation of bodily perception? What is the place for corporeality and visuality if the ideal ink painting is to manifest the aesthetic experience in the realm of the Dao, which only the pure mind can grasp? One can easily argue that it is the visuality of the mind that “sees” the truth, ultimate beauty and goodness, but it is also the artistic manifestation of the vision via the eye that requires a certain kind of sensibility and visuality. The functions and the meanings of the physical techniques including those conducted by the hands and the eye of the painter and the relation between them and the origin of art (“the oneness of stroke”) as suggested by Shih Tao require more attention and discussion.

## The Oneness of Stroke and the Meaning of Technology in Traditional Ink Painting

Shih Tao's saying that the "oneness of strokes embraces all strokes before their differentiation" reminds us of Heidegger's discussion of the essence of technology in his work *The Question Concerning Technology* (Heidegger 1977). It is more meaningful to turn our attention from technique to Heidegger's discussion of technology as he said we shall never experience our relationship to the essence of technology if we merely conceive and put forward the technological. Technology is not mere means or instrument but is that whereby something is effected and thus attained (Heidegger 1977, 4). He laid out the cause and effect relation and referred to the four causes in the Aristotelian doctrine when he discusses the instrumentality of technology, while his question is actually about what unites these causes from the beginning and the primal meaning of causality. Technology, according to Heidegger's sayings, is basically responsible for letting something come forth or bring forth into presencing (An-wesen) and into its complete arrival. Heidegger asked, "how does bringing-forth happen, be it in nature or in handwork and art?" (Heidegger 1977, 8-11).

Shih Tao did not inquire about the cause and effect relation nor the question of bringing forth, but he did point out that the one stroke grasped by the ink painter was the origin of art. His saying that the single stroke "which identifies with universality can clearly reveal the idea of man and fully penetrate all things" presupposes the artist's reach to and understanding of the metaphysical realm. Heidegger further elaborates that technology is about bringing-forth, "brings out of concealment into unconcealment" and that the essence of technology is to arrive at revealing everything. He refers this to "truth" and understands it as "correctness of representation." He said:

The possibility of all productive manufacturing lies in revealing. Technology is therefore no mere means. Technology is a way of revealing. If we give heed to this, then another whole realm for the essence of technology will open itself up to us. It is the realm of revealing, i.e., of truth. ... that *technē* is the name not only for the activities and skills of the craftsman, but also for the arts of the mind and the fine arts. *Technē* belongs to bringing-forth, to *poiēsis*, it is something poetic (Heidegger 1977, 12-13).

I will agree here to some parallel readings between Shih Tao and Heidegger. The meaning of the "one stroke" suggested by Shih Tao may refer to what Heidegger describes as the "utmost importance" to think of bringing-forth in its full scope. It

is the origin of art and the truth and it happens before the many strokes that come after for artistic representation. His sayings echo that of Heidegger:

The art of painting is a manifestation of truth. With regard to the delicate arrangement of mountains, streams, and human figures, or the natural characteristics of birds, animals, grass, and trees, or the proportions of ponds, pavilions, towers, and terraces, if one's mind cannot deeply penetrate into their reality and subtly express their appearance, one has not yet understood the fundamental meaning of the oneness of strokes" (Coleman 1978, 37).

Heidegger said that the bringing-forth is not only handicraft manufacture, artistic and poetical bringing into appearance and concrete imagery. The artistic techniques, skills and visuality in all the freedom and constraints of the physical movements of an artist happen in the bringing-forth process in which the growing things of nature, as well as whatever is completed through the crafts and the arts, come at any given time to their appearance, and this coming or revealing rests and moves freely (Heidegger 1977, 10-11). This reminds one of Mou's saying that when one's being is engaged in the realm of the metaphysical Dao, "things present themselves in the way that they are...not as an object, but as an ideal state" (Mou 1974, 208-211). One finds more resemblances when trying to differentiate the metaphysical implications of the Dao in traditional Chinese philosophy from the ontological meaning of Heidegger's reading.

When the essence of the technological part of art is understood through the Heideggerian notions of truth and revealing of "everything" (Heidegger 1977, 12), a question is raised here of how the artistic process leads the painter to an awareness of the self, and what one would find in the intersection with Nature, as the Daoists emphasize, as well as the meaning of the term technovisuality, which is suggested to be understood in the Heideggerian sense of the essence of technology instead of the "technological."

## **Visuality: The Case of Merleau-Ponty**

I want to argue that the new ink works are traces of the painter's awareness of a whole of visibility that is essential to the painter's own sense of self as present and actual. After reviewing Heidegger's suggestion of the essence of technology as a process of bringing-forth and truth revealing, it would be appropriate to turn to the theory of another phenomenologist, Merleau-Ponty, for comparison and discussion.

At a preliminary level, it can be agreed that ink painters must take notice of paper or silk as a *visible whole* in order to make a brush stroke, and also to make artistic judgment. Merleau-Ponty's notion of the 'flesh of the world' has provided this a contemporary discussion, as he has shown how the painter enters a visible space where the self and nature intersect in his work *The Visible and the Invisible*. Merleau-Ponty used the term "visibility" to name a corporeal element of the painter's own body which experiences objects in Nature and which is aware of the whole of the visible where the self meets Nature (Merleau-Ponty 1968, 245). We may say that when a painter continually suspends the visual experience of natural objects and appearances during the process for transcendental request, greater intimacy and closeness with Nature in the realm of the Dao is actually achieved as neo-Confucian scholars implied. It is at this point that, not only the barrier of conception is absent, but the painter's own self will become part of Nature, and Nature will become part of the painter's self.

Merleau-Ponty has also focused on the intersection of the nature of the body and its senses but at a different level. This must be differentiated from Kantian epistemology as well. Kant suggests governance of sensation by the a priori conceptual scheme of the understanding, while Merleau-Ponty stresses that the painter is aware of an intersection with Nature through what is given by sensibility *before* sensibility is conceptualized and experienced in the form of appearances or objects (Merleau-Ponty 1968, 217). Let's remember that for Merleau-Ponty, perception is primary, whereas for Kant, reason and cognition are primary.

The revelation of Merleau-Ponty's discussion of gestalt psychology is that when a painter produces a line, it must be on the paper as a visible space that is the context for all possible lines (Merleau-Ponty 1968, 207-208). One may compare this reading with the implication in Shih Tao's remarks on "one stroke" painting when he says that:

when the wrist seizes reality, it moves the brush with a revolving movement enriches the strokes by rolling the brush hairs, and leaves them unbounded by any limitations... all of these movements...are natural and are free from the slightest artificiality. All of these actions possess a lively spirit and their methods are always integrated. All things become real and their manner is vividly and fully expressed. This is because when...the principle of oneness of strokes emerged, ten thousand things were manifested (Coleman 1978, 39-40).

For Shih Tao, the "one-stroke" in ink painting should be both a visible event and a metaphysical concept. He does not deny that the ink painter contemplates and

looks intently at the visible silk or paper during the process of making a stroke, though he has not elaborated on this. In fact, this might have been assumed in his theory of the “one stroke” painting, as it is the point of departure towards the metaphysical intersection of self and Nature. One can find numerous evidences in *Hua Po* in which he stresses the transcendental origin of aesthetic experience when he mentions that the art of painting is a manifestation of truth, and with regard to all the things represented, one’s mind has to deeply penetrate into their reality to understand the fundamental meaning of “the oneness of strokes” (Coleman 1978, 37).

The penetration into the Dao or the metaphysical Nature requires a transcendental leap, which may take continuing efforts, both spiritually and physically, as he said:

To both travel far and ascend heights, one’s step begins with a single inch near at hand...A single stroke which identifies with universality can clearly reveal the idea of man and fully penetrate all things...Thus the wrist seizes reality (Coleman 1978, 38).

Yet the emphasizing point is still the spiritual capacity of the “one stroke” as he said the splashing of the ink onto the brush is to done with spirit (Coleman 1978, 56). But the corporeal act and visuality are necessary for artistic manifestation, as Shih described that the substance and function, forms and power, bowing and standing, squatting and leaping of ink strokes fully reveal the spirituality of things (Coleman 1978, 59). They attribute to continuing artistic and physical practices, as he said:

the vitality of the ink depends upon catching the absolute moment; the action of grasping the moment requires continuity of execution. Among those who know how to control movement, their brush work is inwardly real and outwardly transparent (Coleman 1978, 79).

One is reminded here of the famous Daoist story of butcher Ding in Zhuangzi’s writing. It was said that when the butcher moves his knife through the body of a cow, it was as if he were dancing. The act and the interaction along with the animal body and going right through its physical form and structure, lead to the butcher’s experience of Nature, where all things travel together and encounter one another. The butcher’s departure from his corporeality, and the visibility of both his act and the object of his act, including his grasp of the cow’s physical nature when he dismembers the cow, is just like an ink painter departing from the visible whole of his strokes on the paper. The painter enters into the metaphysical realm and

executes from there. Shih said:

When he grasps the brush, it is as if he were doing nothing (Coleman 1978, 102).

In *The Visible and the Invisible*, Merleau-Ponty uses the terms “flesh” and “visible” to designate an inward element of corporeality that has not been named in preceding philosophies. He suggests that the inwardness of the individual person includes an element of flesh that is composed of “the visible” and “the tangible” parts which cannot be placed over the other (Merleau- Ponty 1968, 134). As he puts it:

Since the same body sees and touches, visible and tangible belong to the same world... There is double and crossed situating of the visible in the tangible and of the tangible in the visible; the two maps are complete, and yet they do not merge into one. The two parts are total parts and yet are not superposable...It is that the thickness of flesh between the seer and the thing is constitutive for the thing of its visibility as for the seer of his corporeity; it is not an obstacle between them, it is their means of communication (Merleau- Ponty 1968, 134-135).

With the term the “total visible,” Merleau-Ponty refers inwardly to the individual painter’s own corporeal context, which is a sustaining whole and stable pivot for all the experiencing, and the vital part of the revealing or the bringing-forth process discussed above. This may supplement the presupposition of the corporeal departure of Shih Tao’s “One stroke” painting that enters into the intersection of the self with Nature. Shih said it all:

the vitality of the ink depends upon catching the absolute moment; the action of grasping the moment requires continuity of execution. Among those who know how to control movement, their brush work is inwardly real and outwardly transparent... Therefore, the ancients hit the proper measure between emptiness and reality; inwardly and outwardly there was fit control; their method of painting was completely perfected... Without flaws or defects, they obtained the spirit of evasive concealment and the spirit of movement... With regard to those who face a wall, dust covered and obstructed by things, how can they avoid hatred from the creator (nature)? (Coleman 1978, 79-80).

Here one may need to note the difference between Merleau-Ponty’s reading and that of Shih Tao. The obstruction suggested by Shih may refer to the Kantian notion of cognition, where the subject and the object dichotomy is operating. Merleau-Ponty has also suggested that the term “visible” may be used to name the sensible context within which cognitive thinking temporarily discriminates particular

forms (Merleau-Ponty 1968, 130). He adds that there is never a complete merging of vision and this porous visible context; for if there were then vision would vanish due to the “disappearance of the seer or of the visible” (Merleau-Ponty 1968, 131). One can see here that Merleau-Ponty is still discussing empirical vision, while Shih refers this kind of vision to a form of metaphysical departure, for the real artistic scene should only spring up after the disappearance of the seer or the sensible subject, who is replaced by a transcendental subject. In brief, the ink painting subject will absorb the empirical vision and reach the transcendental vision, while the process of the entrance to and the exit from the transcendental realm is the dancing of the ink strokes on paper.

On the other hand, Merleau-Ponty’s notions of the “flesh” or the “visible” also has a strong metaphysical flavor, as they designate a non-objective domain of corporeality, which refers to an inward dimension of the body and cannot be experienced as an object or material condition that conforms to empirically determined laws of scientific knowledge, though visibility is also an element essential to our own sense of corporeality (Merleau-Ponty 1968, 205-206). According to Merleau-Ponty, the “pure” artistic subject is not traveling in any metaphysical realm, but is a suspending self or an innate whole of visibility free from cognitive judgments. In this way, this contemporary development of the reading of artistic process cannot be translated into the traditional Chinese discourse on ink painting like that of Shih Tao, for there exist two different paradigms of metaphysical beliefs. The importance of pointing out the differences between the two modalities is to suggest the proper way of reading Shih Tao’s theory of ink painting as a representing Daoist aesthetics, and to avoid misunderstanding initiated by an easy adoption of a Western model. This will also explain the different positions of visuality implied. Merleau-Ponty says that the painter switches from judge to pupil, as the seeing painter stays within the innate corporeal element of the whole of the visible and repeats and affirms what is seen in the manifestation process. This is the way Merleau-Ponty reads Cezanne’s saying that “Nature is on the inside” (Merleau-Ponty 1968, 125). The traditional Chinese ink painters believe in traveling in the metaphysical Nature and that the artistic bodily act is an automatic execution or manifestation of that experience, like Shih Tao’s suggestion of the “One Stroke.” This is clearly implied in this Shih’s words:

because men grasp the power of evasive concealment and vitality, mountains, streams and the myriad things offer their spirit to man. If it is not the case, how could one enable brush strokes and ink washes, within the ink, to create embryonic and structured forms, openness and closeness? (Coleman 1978, 58).

The painter is thus an “enlightened” wise man, as he said:

Because he (the painter) is wise, he transforms; because he is enlightened, he is free. When confronted by things, he is undisturbed. When he deals with forms, he leaves no traces...When he moves the ink, it is as if the work were already finished...When he grasps the brush, it is as if he were doing nothing (Coleman 1978, 101-102).

Merleau-Ponty’s painters are interested in the sensible whole of visibility that is an inward root of embodiment within nature, and it is in this sense that the painter is closer to nature. Though this contemporary interpretation of innate corporeality cannot explain the Daoist metaphysical claims as it does not presuppose the metaphysical realm of the Dao, it may still become a good reference of what the new ink painters are doing now and what ink painting has developed into. The suggestion also returns to the argument stated at the beginning of this section that the new ink works are traces of the painter’s awareness of a whole of visibility that is essential to the painter’s own sense of self as present and actual. To be enriched by Heidegger’s suggestion, the technovisuality in the sense of the essence of technology and the visual experience involved, is an unconcealment and a bringing-forth of the truth of one’s total existence.

## **The “Expansion” of New Ink Art**

In contemporary discourses of visuality, it is said that there is no innocent perceiving eye or ideal observer (Hurley 1985, 54-97). Visuality is always contextual, social, cultural and political. The visual is extending and transforming indigenous cultural forms of seeing and looking. This is especially true of Chinese Modernity, in which modernity is seen as spectacle, and that the excessiveness of spectacle captivated modern Chinese subjects to the extent that they are actively involved in it, as suggested by Pang Laikwan. Pang suggests that through visuality, modern Chinese subjects face not only the passing of the past and the looking forward to a pluralistic future, but they also have come to terms with their own modern selves and new identities. Chinese modernity is in fact constantly renewed through the interactions between subjects and their rapidly changing cultural environment (Pang, 2007).

The New Ink movement in Hong Kong in the 1960s, for instance, has demonstrated the quest for cultural and artistic identities. Pioneers like Lui Shou-kwan have explicitly extended their concerns from artistic tradition to existential situation; that is, from metaphysical encounter to social concerns. The New Ink

Art exhibition mentioned at the beginning of this paper has selected Lui's works as exhibits, showing the changes and concerns. Lui promoted modernization of traditional ink painting and related it to Hong Kong cultural identity. His ink paintings addressed an existential crisis in the British colony – a crisis that became more serious when political tension finally grew into riots and street demonstrations in 1967 as Hong Kong's leftists protested against British colonial rule. During the riot, the radical political tensions that emerged between the British government and Chinese leftists in the colony in the 60's were initiated by a group of factory workers on strike in San Po Kong. Thousands of workers joined in the riot which led to injuries. The riot was read as a local rebellion against the colonial government. After the riot, localization policies were promoted by the colonial government to build up a sense of belonging and local awareness among Hong Kong citizens (T. Lui & Chiu 1999, 105). Lui then absorbed Western ideas into Chinese tradition in his ink work to meet the quest for a new cultural identity.

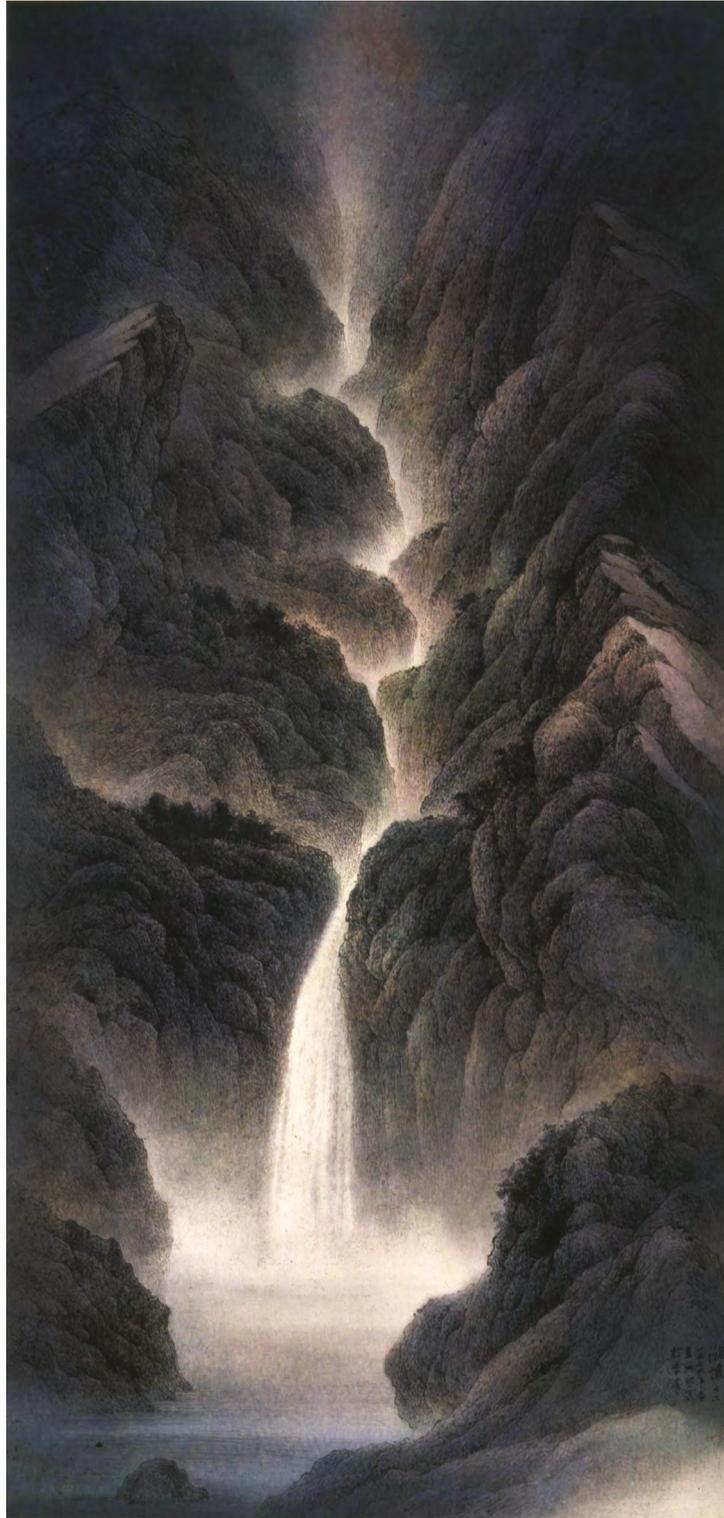
Lui's desire for individual expression caused him to become an experimentalist in what may be termed "Chinese art with a Western approach" (Lee 1963, 14). Lui mixed his experimental ideas with ink painting, which eventually led him to *Zen* painting, the style for which he was most famous in his later development.



2. Lui Shou-Kwan. Zen Painting I. 1974. Ink and color on paper. H. 70 x W. 139 cm.

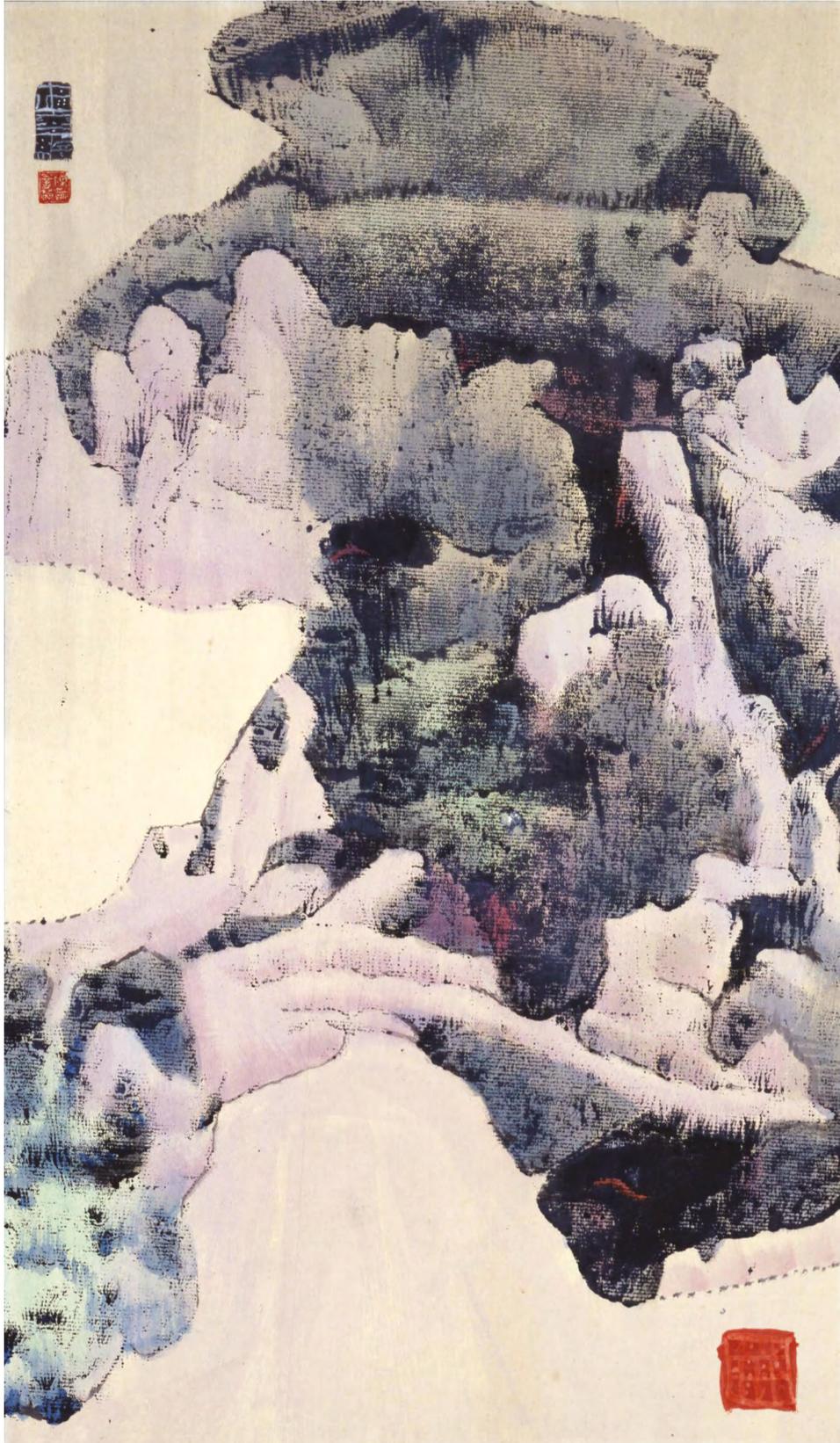
On the one hand, he thought that the spirit of New Ink painting offered a mental balance to people living in a colony that was overrun with material and technological advancements. It is note worthy that the international art community was more interested in a new genre of work that grew out of local cultural innovations, though Lui and his followers are not after an international income stream. He was more interested in demonstrating or bring-forth his existential situation and adaptability of living in a colonial city as an ink painter through innovative ideas of art.

Lui further classified modern ideas combined with tradition as “adaptation” which should not be separated from the “root” or foundation, which, in traditional Chinese aesthetics, is the spiritual cultivation of the artist (Lui 1972, 31-33). Lui drew on these teachings to urge artists to return to the “root” – that is, to the inner self – and to nourish it, to find the wisdom to incorporate new forms of painting. By returning to the root, painters could find their own style which would reveal their own personality and ways of existence. Lui’s views on “adaptation” were reflected in the work of young artists who mixed ink with fluorescent colors or printing oil and utilized ink with concepts of Western design, while leaving their return to the “root” as an enigma. Lui’s follower, Wucius Wong, succeeds in combining ink with Western design ideas and produces landscape in distinguished style.



3. Wucius Wong. *Purification. No.2*. 1979. Ink and color on paper. H 183.4 x W 89.2 cm.

Lui's contemporary, Luis Chan, is famous in using ink to develop liberal, imaginative and free style modern painting.



4. Luis Chan, *Landscape*. 1970. Ink and color on paper. H 75 x W 43.5 cm.

The recent experiments in ink painting in Mainland China are also telling their stories. In the exhibition notes on contemporary Chinese ink experiments, Sun Xiaofeng, an active art critic in China, argued that as contemporary art is strongly expanding its range of expression, the mingling of all kinds of techniques and media must nevertheless follow certain concepts and is subject to the recent cultural pertinence, strategy and speculation, and this applies equally to Chinese ink painting. Sun Xiaofeng is typical of contemporary ink art curators:

The unique spirit and the specific cultural connotations of Chinese ink painting that were formerly concealed by the contemporary may now be implemented as a kind of accessory or special flavor of the contemporary and thus compromise with current aesthetics. To define its position within a pluralist and multicultural context, we have to introduce Western artistic grammar into the context of ink painting, with a strategy that aims at producing diversified models of a contemporary quality. Only through such a process of continuous exchange can the factors participating in it successfully participate in cultural negotiations. ...one of the tasks of the contemporary ink experiment is to rediscover the cultural functions and spiritual implications of ink and to revive ink as an artistic language, as well as for the actual grammar and rhetoric of this particular language (Sun 2007, 10, original version in English).

It is clear that new ink painting has to fulfill a number of functions: as spiritual revival and as functional as culturally identifier. That is why the curator raised such a question: “Is it correct to say ink makes a sacrifice to obtain a contemporary identity?” (Sun 2007, 10). We are reminded to avoid the illusion of the existence of a privileged domain of ink, and that there is neither a definite conclusion nor the declaration of the establishment of other norms for ink painting. It is said that there are only possibilities of ink painting as inspired by new experiments (Sun 2007, 11). The contribution of the ink experiment lies in the fact that it preserves a text of the practice of the evolution of the concepts in the field of contemporary art and culture; and it provides a valuable experience in what concerns the appropriate strategy of an autochthonous culture effected by the drive of globalization.

But what about metaphysics, if even “spiritual resonance” as the first principal of painting in the Chinese tradition was now only regarded as an act for mental balance in the life of an international city? The relevance of Shih Tao’s writing remains as an echo informing contemporary ink painters:

Those who know the subtle manifestation, but forget the origin of the fundamental principle of oneness of brush strokes, are like children who forget their ancestors If one

knows that ancient and modern works never perish, yet forgets that their achievement of merit is not limited to men, this is the same as the ten thousand things losing what is given by nature. Heaven can give man a method, but cannot give him skill... ancient and modern works of calligraphy and painting originated from heaven and were completed by man (Coleman 1978, 104- 105).

One may detect technology from the term “method” that Shih Tao suggested in his treatise on ink painting. Yet it is the “skill” of bringing-forth or unconcealment of truth or the essence of technology that he implied in his philosophy of art.

## **Endnotes:**

### **Acknowledgment**

The author would like to give acknowledgment to Professor Helen Grace who gave editorial advice and English editing to this article.

### **Work Cited:**

V. Ng et al., *New Ink Art: Innovation and Beyond* (Hong Kong: HKU SPACE, 2008).

Xiaochun Liu, “Contemporary Shuimo Art Being at the Edge of Art,” in *Shuimo Today*. ed., Liu Xiaochun (Beijing: Shuimo Union of Songzhuang, 2006). (English translation provided in the article originally).

Earle J. Coleman, *Philosophy of Painting by Shih T'ao* (The Hague: Mouton Publishers, 1978).

Zongzan Mou, *Intellectual Intuition and Chinese Philosophy* (Taipei: Commercial Press, 1974).

Wing-tsit Chan (trans. and compiled), *A Source Book in Chinese Philosophy* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1963).

Chun- I Tang, *Spiritual Values of Chinese Culture* (Taipei: Ching Chung, 1987).

Martin Heidegger, *The Question Concerning Technology and Other Essays*, trans. Lovitt, W (New York: Harper & Row, Publishers, Inc., 1977).

M. Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1968).

S.L. Hurley, “Objectivity and Disagreement.” in *Morality and Objectivity*, ed. Ted

Honderich (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1985).

Laikwan Pang, *The Distorting Mirror: Visual Modernity in China* (Hawaii: University of Hawaii Press, 2007).

Tai-Lok Lui and Stephen W. K. Chiu, "Social Movements and Public Discourse on Politics," in *Hong Kong's History: State and Society Under Colonial Rule*, ed. Ngo, Tak-Wing (London and New York: Routledge, 1999).

Ying Ho Lee (ed.), *Modern Edition*, Hong Kong: Hong Kong Modern Literature and Art Association, No.4. (1963).

Shou-kwan Lui, *Sui Mo Hua Jiang* (Hong Kong: notes of Lui's lectures recorded by a group of his students and published by them, 1972).

Xiaofeng Sun, *Infiltration-Idylls and visions* (He Bei: He Bei Mei Shu Chu Ban She, 2007).

**Photo credits:** *Hong Kong Museum of Art* (1, 2, 3, 4).

**Contact:**

Eva Kit Wah MAN  
evaman@hkbu.edu.hk

# Representation and Visual Politics of the Extreme Body

*Zhou Xian*

*Abstract: The beautiful human body has perennially occupied a central space in art. Both art and aesthetics maintain the beauty of the human body as the focal point of artistic expression and philosophical thought. However, modern art has thoroughly overturned the idea of the beautiful body and the aesthetic principles of its expression, creating a completely new form of representing the body—the extreme body. The extreme body has become a mainstream image eagerly embraced by modern artists. Transgressed representations, visual discomfort, and the body becoming a goal in and of itself, has dramatically altered the paradigm of the body in modern art.*

*Keywords: body, beautiful body, extreme body, modern art, aesthetics.*

Art is always tied to the human beings residing at the heart of artistic expression. Therefore, the human body has always been a center of expression in terms of visual art. Especially today, a highly developed visual culture has already pushed the body to the forefront of the cultural stage; not only does aesthetic and art theory deal heavily with the body, but philosophy, sociology, literature, history, and anthropology all consider questions of the body. Some sociologists feel that “the rise of a body society” necessitates that all important political and spiritual questions be explained through the body. Sociologists have suggested an assortment of different body forms to consider, such as the “five bodies” proposed by O’Neill: the world’s body, social bodies, the body politic, consumer bodies, and medical bodies.<sup>1</sup> Shilling proposes yet another method of categorization: classical bodies, contemporary bodies, working bodies, sporting bodies, musical bodies, sociable

---

<sup>1</sup> John O’Neill, *Five Bodies: Re-Figuring Relationships* (London: Sage, 2004).

bodies, and technological bodies.<sup>2</sup> The body has also become a popular topic in the field of aesthetics. Richard Shusterman goes so far as to suggest a branch of aesthetics called “somaesthetics.” He writes:

For the moment, we can briefly describe somaesthetics as concerned with the critical study and meliorative cultivation of how we experience and use the living body (or soma) as a site of sensory appreciation (aesthesia) and creative self-fashioning. Somaesthetics is thus a discipline that comprises both theory and practice (the latter clearly implied in its idea of meliorative cultivation). 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.<sup>3</sup>

Shusterman’s statement focuses on the significance of the body in aesthetics, which has positive implications for contemporary body studies. In my opinion, using the body as an approach to the examination of art can be a unique and productive perspective. Through the body, we can see the evolution of various methods of artistic representation and their paradigms, gain a better sense of the development of artistic thought on the human body through different historical periods, and even gain a deeper understanding of different artists’ unique views on the body. This paper attempts to combine visual culture, social theory, and aesthetics into a “fusion of horizons.” It will examine the evolution of paradigms of artistic representation regarding the body from traditional art to modernist art, and then proceed to analyze how the body, as a cultural issue, has changed along with society.

## **The Presentation of the Body: From Beauty to Extreme**

By using the divide between traditional and modern, we can separate art’s long history into the two general categories of “traditional” and “modern” art, where “modern” primarily refers to “modernism.” The art of these two periods have markedly different paradigms in their depictions of the body. Here, I use Roman Jakobson’s concept of “the dominant” to define the difference in paradigm of the

---

<sup>2</sup> Chris Shilling, *Body in Culture, Technology and Society* (London: Sage, 2005).

<sup>3</sup> Richard Shusterman, *Body Consciousness: A Philosophy of Mindfulness and Somaesthetics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 1.

body between traditional and modernist art. As a champion of Russian Formalism, Jakobson defines the “concept of the dominant” as the “focusing component of a work of art: it rules, determines, and transforms the remaining components. It is the dominant which guarantees the integrity of the structure.” The dominant “specifies the work.”<sup>4</sup> He further notes the historical significance of the “concept of the dominant” and suggests that changes in the dominant determine the changes in artistic style during different periods. Jakobson argues that a dominant is “not only in the poetic work of an individual artist and not only in the poetic canon, the set of norms of a given poetic school, but also in the art of a particular epoch, viewed as a particular whole.” For example, during the Renaissance, the “visual arts” were dominant and accordingly shaped the poetry of the period. On the other hand, “Romantic poetry oriented itself toward music: its verse is musically focused; its verse intonation imitates musical melody.”<sup>5</sup> Examining different paradigms of the body in the history of art from this perspective, it is not difficult to see that traditional and modernist art each has its own body forms.

Considering art history from the perspective of the dominant, we have reason to believe that beauty is the dominant in traditional art’s representation and paradigm of the body, and beauty is naturally the core category of traditional aesthetics.<sup>6</sup> Other categories of aesthetics (such as the sublime, the ugly, the grotesque) clearly fall below the beautiful in terms of significance. Thus it can be said that traditional art and aesthetics keep the beautiful body at the center of its artistic representation and thought; the beautiful body is thus the dominant in traditional art. For example, in traditional Chinese painting, there is much discourse on the creation of beauty including a great deal of methods, rules, and theories regarding the depiction of human bodies. There is a large body of classical Chinese paintings of people from Buddhist images to court ladies to monarchs to scholars. Examples such as Gu Hongzhong’s *Night Revels of Han Xizai*, Wu Daozi’s *Presentation of Buddha*, Zhou Fang’s *Court Ladies Adorning Their Hair with Flowers*, and the cave paintings at Dunhuang have many features modeled after the ideal of Buddhist saints and fairies.

In the West, the traditional paradigm of human beauty is rooted in models of the nude. Due to Western scientific and rational enquiry, there are numerous experiments and studies of human body-beauty: from the proportion in Ancient Greece, through the Renaissance application of the golden ratio to human figures,

---

4 Roman Jakobson, *Poetry of Grammar and Grammar of Poetry* (The Hague: Mouton, 1981), 751.

5 Ibid., 752.

6 The traditional art and classical art mentioned here reflects a broad concept of periodization referring to the art before the mid-nineteenth century whereas art following this period will be referred to as modernist art.

to contemporary scientific aesthetic studies and experiments on face-beauty. Throughout the history of Western art, artists have not only been enamored with the beauty of the real human body but have pursued even further a kind of ideal beauty. Kenneth Clark writes that the concept of beauty, from the Ancient Greek tradition to the Renaissance down to the modern era, is a myth as well as a model. He says: “It is no accident that the formalized body of the ‘perfect man’ became the supreme symbol of European belief.”<sup>7</sup> If one but looks at Western art history, one sees that the beautiful body is the most basic subject of Western painting and sculpture. From Greek sculptures such as *Hermes and the Infant Dionysus* or the *Venus de Milo*; to the works of the three Renaissance masters such as Da Vinci’s *Mona Lisa* and the *Virgin of the Rocks*, Michaelangelo’s *Creation of Adam* and *David*, and Raphael’s *Three Graces* and *Sistine Madonna*; to the period of neoclassicism and formalism with works such as Ingres’ *The Source* and *La Grande Odalisque* as well as Courbet’s *The Source* and *Woman with a Parrot*—it is not difficult to find the expression of and the quest for the ideal of human beauty running through these works.

Since the mid-nineteenth century, however, with the rise of modernism, representation of the body in art has radically shifted. The “first principle” of art, expressing the beauty of the body, was challenged and paradigms of the human form underwent dramatic changes. Modernist artists started experimenting with new paradigms of the body: the strange, the alien, the vague and revolutionary body. This was a completely new image of the body and the evolution of this style continues to this day. If we wish to encapsulate this concept in one word, we can call it the “extreme body.” This is a form of the body that is not beautiful, opposed to beauty, and overturns beauty. Abandoning the beautiful body for the extreme body has become the dominant of modernist representations of the body, becoming deeply and widely distributed among different fields such as painting, sculpture, installation art, and performance art. Although ugly and grotesque bodies existed long before modernist art, the latter has made the extreme body its dominant, and the extreme body has now become the basic form of representing the body. A traditional style dominated by beauty has been gradually replaced by a radical, modernist style in which the concept of the unbeautiful and anti-beautiful is the mainstream. This trend is consistent with the general trend of modern art that rejects and disdains beauty.<sup>8</sup> Nevertheless, one point that must be especially noted is that the extreme body is not ugly; unbeautiful and anti-beautiful do not mean ugly. Some scholars of aesthetics like to divide beauty and ugliness into binary opposites

7 Kenneth Clark, *The Nude: A Study in Ideal Form* (New York: Doubleday Anchor, 1959), 54.

8 See Wendy Steiner, *Venus in Exile: The Rejection of Beauty in 20<sup>th</sup>-Century Art* (New York: Free, 2001).

to explain art, but this approach is problematic when one attempts to explain the historical shifts in styles of depicting the body. One cannot simplistically say that traditional art has the beautiful body as its dominant while modernist art has the ugly body as its dominant. The extreme body and its meanings are more complex than that of the ugly body; it is also different from the aesthetic categories of the grotesque and the absurd.

As new artistic discourse developed to explain modern art's creation of the extreme body image, modernist aesthetics has surpassed traditional aesthetics on a central paradigm by transitioning to a more open, varied, and complex interpretation.

## Iconology of the Extreme Body

The extreme body is a concept difficult to define; inherent in its definition is a bias toward a certain body type in modernist art. Although the image of the body in modernist art is varied and complex, one finds that this body image abandons traditional art's method of representing the beautiful body, overturns the aesthetic principles of traditional visual art, and portrays a body with which we are not familiar. The Spanish philosopher José Ortega y Gasset discovered after the First World War that there was a tendency toward "dehumanization" among the neo-art in Western countries. In Ortega y Gasset's writings on the "dehumanization," he notes that contemporary youths can fall in love with the *Mona Lisa* but not Picasso's *Girl before a Mirror*. What exactly is the great change that has taken place here? From the *Mona Lisa* to the *Girl before a Mirror* one can see the transition from the humanized to the dehumanized in the representation of the body. According to Ortega y Gasset, dehumanization works through distortion and abstraction, turning what is familiar into that which is strange, turning the human body into an unrecognizable entity. He writes: "By divesting them of their aspect of 'lived' reality the artist has blown up the bridge and burned the ships that could have taken us back to our daily world. He leaves us locked up in an abstruse universe, surrounded by objects with which human dealings are inconceivable, and thus compels us to improvise other forms of intercourse completely distinct from our ordinary ways with things. We must invent unheard-of gestures to fit those singular figures."<sup>9</sup>

The extreme body in modernist art is, to a certain degree, a "dehumanization" of the body. Of course, this dehumanization is not merely the abstraction and distortion noted by Ortega y Gasset but is much more complex. If we must define

---

<sup>9</sup> José Ortega y Gasset, "The Dehumanization of Art," in *Criticism: The Major Texts*, ed. Walter J. Bate (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1970), 662.

the extreme body, then we can say that it is a kind of unfamiliar, strange, deviant, and novel representation of the body. Here it would be helpful to consider what Jean-François Lyotard said concerning the avant-garde. He wrote: “Modern painters discover that they have to form images that photography cannot present ... Avant-garde paintings escape *ex hypothesi* from the aesthetics of the beautiful, its works do not call for the ‘common sense’ of a shared pleasure. These works appear to the public of taste to be ‘monsters’, ‘formless’ objects, purely ‘negative’ entities.”<sup>10</sup>

An overall survey of modernist art will find a varied range of extreme body types. From perspective of iconology, I can summarize them into at least the few kinds of extreme body representation paradigms outlined below.

## The Strange Body

The strange body is clearly a form of the dehumanized body. It deviates from the human figure or hints at the human form, but is completely different from a regular body. Examples of this include Salvador Dalí’s *Soft Construction with Boiled Beans (Premonition of Civil War)* in which heads and arms relocate and recombine in a fantastical way (fig. 1); Francis Bacon’s *Painting* with its monstrous, phantom-like human shape; and Willem de Kooning’s *Woman I*, a painting that is shocking to viewers.



1. Salvador Dalí. *Soft Construction with Boiled Beans (Premonition of Civil War)*. 1936. Philadelphia Museum of Art.

<sup>10</sup> Jean-François Lyotard, *The Inhuman: Reflections on Time* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1991), 124-25.

The strange body either departs from the human form or dramatically alters and rearranges it. It deliberately exaggerates certain body parts or dismantles them into bizarre, new, fragmentary arrangements. The strange body wavers between the human and the inhuman, giving people an entirely new construct of the human body. The tension clearly contained therein gives the body a “negative” and “explosive” visual effect. The appearance of various kinds of strange bodies in modernist art has taken experiments in body image to great heights. To some extent, these experiments delve into the frailty of the human body, revealing two aspects of the body. First, the body’s complex relationship with society serves as a symbol. The body cannot withstand the harsh blows of a great society and the powers of nature; its weakness is readily apparent. Second, the strange body reveals various hidden desires of the body, even its dark side. In Bacon’s *Painting*, for instance, the blood-stained figure and the butchered animal in the background comprise a relationship that betokens the darkness which drives man to start wars and destroy lives.<sup>11</sup>

The strange body poses an antithesis to beauty. It shows through form and style a rejection of all rules. The beautiful body is an embodiment of rules and standards. Whether adhering to the golden ratio or some other principle, representation of the beautiful body is based on the rules. The strange body, however, represents a different path, reacting against every rule and standard of beauty. In this respect, it is somewhat akin to Kant’s analysis of the sublime as the formless.<sup>12</sup> If one considers the beautiful body as leaning toward a standard pattern of beauty, then one could say that the strange body is formless, thus retaining limitless possibilities of form. From this perspective, the legitimization of the strange body in the art world can be seen as a sort of liberation of artistic expression. Because of this we encounter all kinds of experiments and innovations in the representation of the body in modernist art where it can be said that nothing is too bizarre.

On matters of composition, the paradigm of representing the strange body is often a combination of elements with characteristics; it combines unrelated elements of an image in fantastical ways, thereby creating a unique and strange figure form. This is especially prominent in Dalí’s *Premonition of Civil War* (fig.1). Chimerical arms and bodies assemble together with a face contorted in pain, the

---

11 Kleiner points out that “*Painting* by British artist Francis Bacon (1910–1992) is an indictment of humanity and a reflection of war’s butchery. The painting is a compelling and revolting image of a powerful, stocky man with a gaping mouth and a vivid red stain on his upper lip, as if he were a carnivore devouring the raw meat sitting on the railing surrounding him. ... [A]n attempt to remake the violence of reality itself,” as Bacon often described his art, based on what he referred to as “the brutality of fact.” See Fred S. Kleiner, *Gardner’s Art through the Ages* (Boston: Wadsworth, 2010), 747.

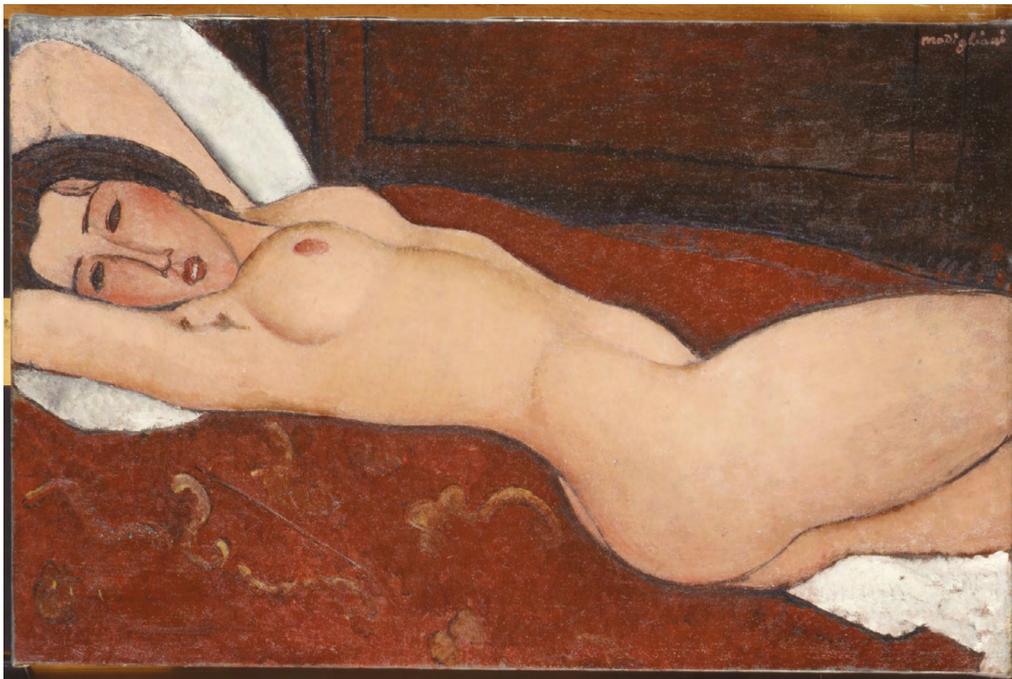
12 See Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgment* (New York: Hafner, 1951), 82-105.

resulting image bursting with imagination, giving viewers a strong visual assault.

## The Deformed Body

If the strange body is a complete overturning of the body's image, then the deformed body is a transformation of it, with the exaggeration of regular human features into abnormal features as its primary characteristic. Although deformation as an artistic technique existed before, as seen in El Greco's many religious paintings featuring elongated figures, it was only after the post-impressionists (van Gogh, Cézanne) that modernist art saw the widespread, deliberate use of deformation. Later, art historians would say, "There is a tendency toward deformation in modern art which is essentially negative. The artist deforms an object not in order to reveal it but to deny the normal and to disappoint expectations."<sup>13</sup>

Deformation of the body has great allure for artists because it is a bold exploration and experiment of the plasticity of the human form. There are many convincing examples of this, including Amedeo Modigliani's *Reclining Nude*, which stretches the human figure beyond normal proportions, creating a peculiar image (fig. 2).



2. Amedeo Modigliani: *Reclining Nude*. 1917. The Metropolitan of Art.

Some art historians have pointed out that in the Neoclassical painter Jean Auguste

<sup>13</sup> Karsten Harries, *Meaning of Modern Art* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1968), 63.

Dominique Ingres's *La Grande Odalisque*, he elongates the figure to express the graceful slenderness of the female back and was castigated for violating the principles of realistic portrayal. In Modigliani's rendering of the deformed figure, however, there is another interpretation, the interpretation of body deformation as a new method of representation. Because deformation had become the new aesthetic principle in modernist art, not only would it avoid criticism but would receive significant attention from artists and critics alike. Alberto Giacometti's *Man Pointing* is even more dramatic, elongating the body completely out of proportion. The lanky, emaciated figure is extremely symbolic, producing a vivid example of the existentialist view of contemporary life. While Modigliani's and Giacometti's portrayal of the human figure is a deformation toward the vertical and slender, Picasso's *Women Running on the Beach* exaggerates in the opposite direction, horizontally stretching the human figure, making it thick and solid. Awkward and thick bodies and limbs run blindly along the beach, illustrating the body's inexhaustible energy. Attempting to interpret these deformed bodies, one can sense complex internal meanings. Perhaps Giacometti's and Picasso's completely opposite representations of the body can be seen as a sort of symbol of modern human existence. Giacometti's long, thin bodies represent the weak, lonely state of modern man while Picasso's robust images are a parable of the obesity epidemic brought by modern consumer lifestyles.

In my opinion, deformation of body is not so much a change in the state of the subject as it is a shift in the way the artist observes the body. In the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, the French painter Maurice Denis proposed the theory of "double deformation" of artistic expression. He believed that there existed two kinds of deformation in modern art: subjective deformation of nature seen through a temperament and objective deformation to make their imagination comply with the eternal laws of decor.<sup>14</sup> In reality both these kinds of deformation comply with artists' perceptions of humans. Deformation signifies that the traditional concept of expressing the body as it originally is has become ineffective. Replacing the traditional are various new ways of looking at the body. Modern art's exploration of body deformation shows an imagination of the body's possibilities. Just as Einstein's Theory of Relativity shows that space and time can be bent, so can any body in the experimental space of modernism become deformed in previously unimaginable ways. Through deformation, artists express the body's most minute and intricate meanings.

---

14 Maurice Denis, "Subjective and Objective Deformation," in *Theories of Modern Art: A Source Book by Artists and Critics*, eds. Herschel B. Chipp and Peter H. Selz (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1968), 106.

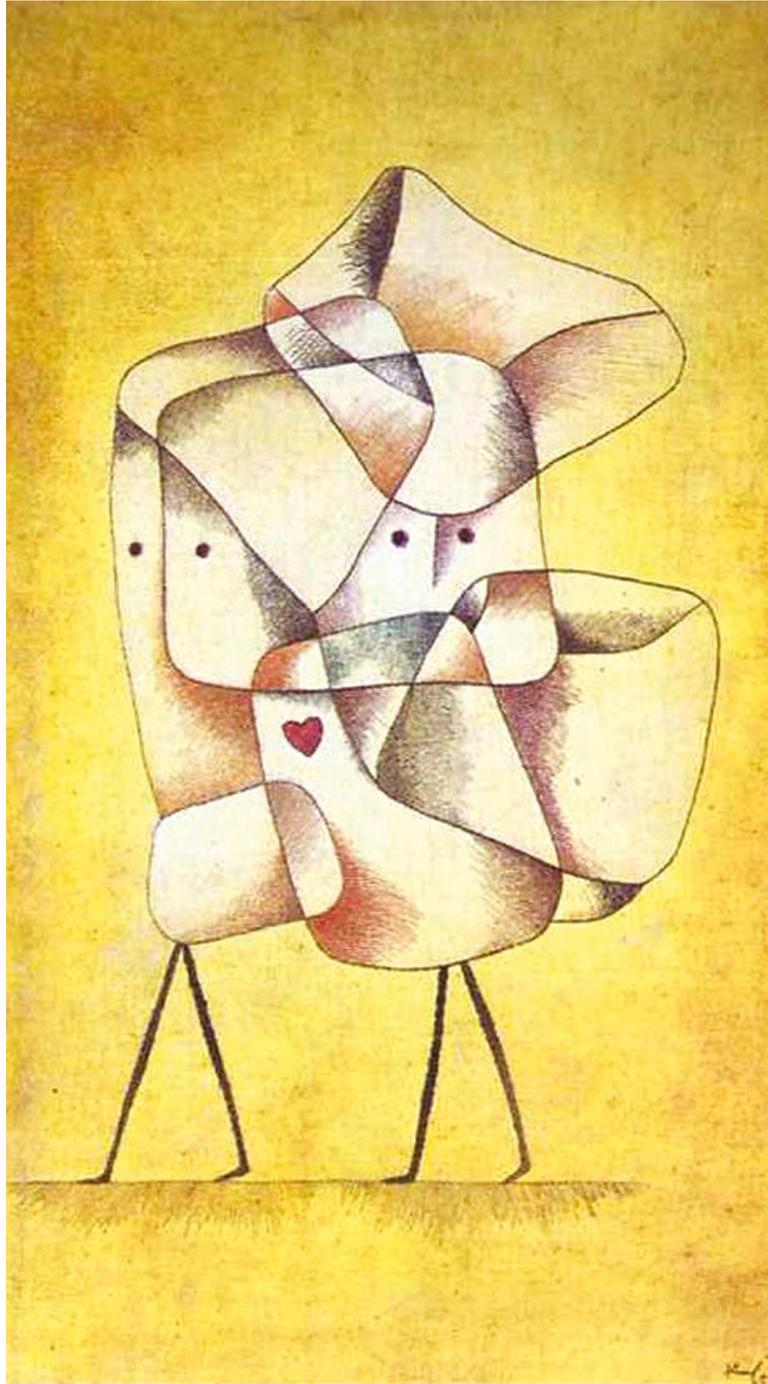
## The Abstract Body

Abstract art is one of the great inventions of modernism. Both European abstract artists (such as Kandinsky, Malevich, and Picasso) and American abstract artists (such as Pollock and de Kooning) represent modernist art's tremendous change in methods of visual representation. In Clement Greenberg's opinion as summarized by Timothy Quiqley, "Modernism reasserts the two-dimensionality of the picture surface. It forces the viewer to see the painting first as a painted surface, and only later as a picture."<sup>15</sup> In other words, modernist painting returns to the two-dimensional flatness of the picture surface through abstraction, allowing the art to be criticized for itself.<sup>16</sup> Abstract art traces its origins to the Post-Impressionist painter Paul Cézanne's abstract landscapes, and later developed into the abstract treatment of the human figure in the Cubism of Georges Braque and Pablo Picasso. Abstract techniques have thoroughly changed the world with which we are familiar, with abstract bodies becoming a hallmark of modern art. Cubism turns the human figure into an abstract conglomeration of geometric shapes, changing the concrete and identifiable into the unrecognizable and abstract, thus "dehumanizing" the familiar people and objects of daily life. Picasso's *Three Musicians* features no concrete human figures but rather creates new bodies from various geometric shapes. Paul Klee's *Brother and Sister* uses a group of intersecting lines to form two connected images (fig. 3).

---

15 ([http://timothyquigley.net/vcs/greenberg-mp\\_sum.pdf](http://timothyquigley.net/vcs/greenberg-mp_sum.pdf))

16 Clement Greenberg, "Modernist Painting," in *Art in Theory 1900-2000: An Anthology of Changing Ideas*, eds. Charles Harrison and Paul Wood (Oxford: Blackwell, 2003), 773-779.



3. Paul Klee. Brother and Sister. 1930.

Braque's *Female Figure* reduces the human body into even simpler geometric shapes and lines.

Abstract art is a method of observing and representing the body. Its appearance stems from deep social and cultural reasons. Some art historians believe that abstract art is uniquely modern in the sense that it represents the particular acceptances and rejections of men living under the conditions of modern

times.<sup>17</sup> According to a popular view, modernism is a movement that pursues the autonomy of art, so abstract art and the flatness of painting are the inevitable result of such a pursuit, which is to say that de-emphasizing the people and objects one sees in daily life can give prominence to artistic media, form, and style.<sup>18</sup> Simply stated, this downplays *what* is expressed to emphasize *how* it is expressed. I think, however, in terms of the artistic representation of the body, there seems to be even more complex reasons behind abstract art. Making the body artistically abstract gives artists the chance to bid farewell to traditional, imitative renderings of the body and provides a new path of exploring the body as artistic expressions of the subject. In abstract art, the human body can be changed and transformed. As abstract depictions of the body hide the familiar, it recreates an unfamiliar body; as it remolds viewers' visual understanding, it manifests the oft-ignored features of the normal body.

Furthermore, the abstract body reveals artists' rich imaginations as well as how they have visually transformed the concrete world. This transformation of the body reflects the deep influence of Machine Age science and technology on art, and also serves as a metaphor for external societal forces molding the body, signifying how disciplining the body is not only possible but also realistic. Various contemporary societal powers collude with body knowledge, disciplining diverse body types into a mechanical, cold, stiff image, into the type of body society needs, what Michel Foucault called the "docile body." Interestingly, while Cubism enjoyed its height from 1907 to 1914, some people ascribe its abrupt conclusion to the effects of World War I. The use of new weapons and technology inflicted unprecedented damage on mankind, destroying artists' awe for technology and machines in but a moment, extinguishing the desire to geometrize the abstract body. Thus, Cubism, which employed abstract imagery as its basic technique, met its end.<sup>19</sup>

Through the above three types of extreme bodies, we have discussed how this modernist invention has undermined the traditional beautiful body, its principles of expression, and concepts, as well as how modernist artists bursting with imagination are wildly experimenting the extreme body. In short, the human body in modernist art is like an opened Pandora's Box; to many modernist artists, only representations of the extreme body have allure.

---

17 Robert Motherwell, "What Abstract Art Means to Me," in *Theories of Modern Art*, ed. Herschell B. Chipp, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1968), 563.

18 See Clement Greenberg, "Modernist Painting," Charles Harrison and Paul Wood, eds., *Art in Theory 1900-2000* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2003).

19 See Geoff Dyer, ed., *John Berger: Selected Essays* (London: Bloomsbury, 2001), 77-78.

## The Visual Politics of Representation of the Extreme Body

As the dominant of modernist art, the extreme body thoroughly transformed the state of the body in art. At the very least, the extreme body has posed a serious challenge to aesthetics in the three following ways.

First, the appearance of the extreme body was a type of “transgressed representation.”

For many centuries, the beautiful body historically occupied a key space in Chinese and Western art, developing many aesthetic principles and paradigms of representation. The beautiful body was an idol revered and adored in art. The extreme body favored in modernist art, to some extent, fostered a movement of fierce “de-idolization”; as it abandoned the principles of the beautiful body, it created a series of transgressed representations of the extreme body. As noted earlier, representation of the extreme body has no form and is formless. It is an overturning of all rules (especially the rules of classical beauty). Lack of rules and opposition to rules are its rule, for this is what makes possible the creation of various kinds of extraordinary bodies. In classical paintings, perspectives and body positions must be formulaic and structured to achieve the standard of perfection; as seen in Chinese paintings of courtly ladies or Western paintings of nude goddesses, these must all follow a prescribed pattern of production. Modernist art, on the other hand, radically transforms the shape of the human body, imposing no limits on the body’s shape, lines, tones, or poses, but rather tends toward the strange, dramatic, and extreme. Not only has the principle of beautiful bodies been broken, but even more principles of classical beauty have lost their influence. In terms of visual perspective, portrait art typically uses either an eye level or low angle. A level view conveys a sense of equality and intimacy while a low angle view reflects a reverent or even awed perspective. In modernist art, however, even these principles of perspective have been overturned, making all kinds of visual angles and relationships possible. Not only is modernist Western art like this, but Chinese contemporary art is also this way. For example, in the contemporary Chinese artist Mao Yan’s *My Poet*, the perspective is that of one looking down at the subject, a view not often seen in traditional portraiture. From the angle of social relationships, looking down when examining the subject conveys a feeling of condescension for the artist or viewer. It distances the viewer from the subject of the portrait, emphasizing the superiority of the artist and viewer while placing the subject in a passive state of being looked at, judged, and diminished. Another example is the contemporary Chinese artist Yue Minjun’s repetitive large-mouthed, laughing man, which completely goes against the rules of portraiture. Somewhere

between poster, advertisement, and portrait the same limitlessly repeatable image is structurally arranged, creating a startling visual effect on viewers. Clearly, the body in modernist and contemporary art has broken away from traditional principles of aesthetic expression. Their creation now adopts the philosophy of “anything goes.”

Second, representation of the extreme body has led to “visual discomfort” (or “visual offense”).

While the former characteristic concentrates on the relationship between the artist and the representation of the body, the latter focuses on the relation between the representation of the extreme body and viewers’ visual psychology. As the representation of deviant bodies discards the beautiful figure, it leads to the appearance of various forms of the extreme body. When viewers look at the extreme body, they feel a sense of strangeness, novelty, and alienation. Also present might be a feeling of “visual discomfort,” “visual unpleasantness,” or even “visual offense.” This is completely different from the experience of viewing classical paintings of body beauty. When admiring the splendid masterpieces of the human figure, the viewer often sinks into contemplation, forgetting oneself before the beautiful object, the distance between viewer and artwork seemingly vanished. Viewing the extreme bodies of modernist art, by contrast, is often joyless, accompanied by a feeling of rejection and despair. In the words of Walter Benjamin, the visual effect of the extreme body is “shock” in which viewers are not drawn to the artwork but rather distanced from it. The beautiful body allows the viewer to forget the self while the extreme body strengthens the viewer’s sense of self along with a sense of visual shock. Therefore we can conclude that the beautiful figure represents the characteristic of normalcy, without revealing the peculiarity or inner meaning of the body discovered by and interesting to the artist. Today, artists are captivated by the idiosyncratic and extreme representations of the body.

From an aesthetic perspective, the beautiful body and its expressions allow viewers to forget themselves in delight while immersing in the artwork while the visual discomfort, joylessness, and even offensiveness of the extreme body stirs one’s emotions and stimulates introspection. In this regard, the ability of the extreme body to visually shock and touch people is perhaps more deeply penetrating and thought-provoking than the visual longing induced by the beautiful body, just as we try to diagnose our symptoms when our bodies are feeling ill but tend to ignore our bodies when we are feeling fine. It is the extreme body and its representation that distinguishes the hidden and turns viewers from the familiar and uninteresting to that which shocks the senses. Contemporary Chinese artist Zhang Xiaogang,

when explaining his works, writes: what looks like a drawing of a photograph is actually a deliberate “hand-drawn ‘sense of deviation’ to create a feeling of illusory, detached coldness and distance.”<sup>20</sup> It is precisely this sense of “coldness” and “distance” that pushes people to reflect upon the bodily issues they usually ignore.

Lastly, the extreme body makes the body the ultimate goal of artistic representation.

In traditional art, the beautiful body often serves as a utilitarian symbol through which established concepts and ideals of beauty are conveyed, thus making it difficult to prevent the beautiful from becoming typical and common. Modernist art strives for an unbeautiful and anti-beautiful image, leading to a deep shift that turns the body from a means into an end in and of itself. Here, it is helpful to borrow a saying of Jacques Derrida which states, “[A]s if with the help of a new optical device one could finally see sight, could not only view the natural landscape, the city, the bridge, and the abyss, but could ‘view’ viewing.”<sup>21</sup> What Derrida means is that, with the help of some device, we could not only see an object, but we could see sight itself. Similarly we can say here that the beautiful body, because it pleases viewers and allows them to submerge themselves in a state of static admiration, easily eliminates viewers’ desire to reflect and probe their thoughts. The extreme body, by contrast, often creates a sense of discomfort and distance for the viewer, using unconventional or even extreme methods to illustrate the body, thus distinguishing the body’s essence and stimulating viewers’ thoughts and questions. In other words, the commonly occurring beautiful body obstructs viewers’ contemplations about the body itself whereas the extreme body, like a kind of device that allows one to view viewing itself, lets viewers see “the body itself.” If the beautiful body is meant to evoke people’s admiration, reverence, and yearning, then the extreme body is meant to help people reflect, explore, and question. Therefore, unlike traditional artists who hold the body in sacred reverence, modernist artists view the body as an object that needs reconstruction and deformation to push the limits; this passes through the beautiful body’s outward appearance to directly reach the body’s most basic level. Perhaps we have reason to say that the beautiful body is self-explanatory, clear, and natural while the extreme body is always a formless, obscure, unknown, and uncertain world of possibility. It is precisely this characteristic uncertainty that draws artists to explore this direction. Thus, unlike the categorical, stiff, and standardized beautiful body; the extreme body tends toward diversity and singularity, thereby approaching the

20 Huang Zhuan and Zhang Xiaogang, “Experience, identity, and cultural judgments—An interview.”

Accessed February 27, 2014. <[http://www.china001.com/show\\_hdr.php?xname=PPDDMV0&dname=8P2Q541&xpos=56](http://www.china001.com/show_hdr.php?xname=PPDDMV0&dname=8P2Q541&xpos=56)>

21 Jacques Derrida, *Eyes of the University: Right to Philosophy* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2004), 154.

authenticity of the body which—along with identifying markers such as gender, ethnicity, and class—reflects different ways to look at the body.

## **Endnotes**

**Photo credits:** Salvador Dalí, Gala-Salvador Dali Foundation/[billedkunst.dk](http://billedkunst.dk) 2014 (1), Metropolitan of Art (2), permission free (3).

**Contact:**

Zhou Xian

zhouxian@nju.edu.cn

# Embodied Creation and Perception in Olafur Eliasson's and Carsten Höller's Projects

*Else Marie Bukdahl*

*"A work of art which did not begin in emotion is not art."*

Cézanne

*Abstract: This paper examines the relationship between somaesthetics and several art projects by Olafur Eliasson and Carsten Höller. Involving an embodied, perceptual, and interactive dialogue between artist, viewer, and the environmental surroundings, these artworks aim not only to enhance our aesthetic experience and to increase our awareness of the body in space and in action, but also, through their artistic means of enhancing embodied and environmental awareness, to benefit life more generally.*

*Keywords: somaesthetics, cross-disciplinary installation, active participation, art of living.*

The purpose of this paper is to focus on the relationship between somaesthetics and several art projects by two prominent artists: Olafur Eliasson and Carsten Höller. Their projects visualize basic elements of somaesthetics, particularly with regard to embodied creation and perception, the interactive dialogue with the viewer and the surroundings, the unification of art and experience as well as the hope of being able to benefit life. *Olafur Eliasson* replaces the static perfection of perspective with a bodily experience. According to him spaces are - and ought to be - experienced via our movement through those spaces over time. Only then does a true sense of spatiality arise. Viewers become involved in the artistic process which gives rise to an awareness of their own presence and their relationship with the environment. *Carsten Höller* creates cross-disciplinary installations, often allowing exhibition visitors to experiment on themselves, and inviting viewers to be active participants.

He has established a new bridge between art, real life and praxis and challenged our somatic habits and contribute to the art of living.

Visual art and natural science are two independent fields of knowledge, which leave different traces and directions in our cultural environment. But a closer study of the long cultural history of Western Europe reveals the visual arts as the art form with the closest correlation to the natural sciences and technology. Many visual artists have sharpened and broadened their perception by assimilating and adapting scientific researchers' discoveries of new concepts and conditions for our view of nature. Observation, experience and experimentation are the starting point for the endeavors of both artists and scientists to attain new insight. Even though they are entirely different in character, a central focus of the artistic and scientific working process is a direct approach to the surrounding world, matter and space.

In our era, it is the science of chaos in particular that reveals common areas of cognition between art and science. First and foremost the preoccupation with time, change, the specific event, lines of demarcation, the concept of the interdisciplinary, a new view of nature and the concept of form.<sup>1</sup> Or, as the Nobel Prize winner in chemistry, Ilya Prigogine expresses it:

Scientific knowledge, which we have removed from an inspiring or supernatural dream of revelation, can today reveal itself as 'poetic listening' to nature and its processes, a means that is available for production and invention in an open, productive and creative world. The time has come for new pacts with nature - pacts which we have entered into with nature since heathen times, but have since forgotten - pacts between human history, society, knowledge and their adventurous investigation of nature.<sup>2</sup>

The many new digital tools and other new technologies, which constantly create dramatic changes in our society, have conquered the art world increasingly over the past 50 years. One of the art forms to have been developed in numerous and unexpected ways in the last 30 years is installation art. It often combines video and computer graphics with other artistic strategies to create a space for experience that has a richly expressive power and many layers of meaning. This art form can develop a sense of free spaciousness, in that it relates to a multifaceted network of relationships to both a variety of artistic and scientific discourses as well as to

---

1 Else Marie Bukdahl, "The Relation between Art and Science - Hundred Views of Mount Fuji", in *Art and Science. Architecture's and Art's Site-Specific Projects*. The Royal Danish Academy of Fine Arts, Copenhagen, 2006, pp. 17-24.

2 Ilya Prigogine and Isabelle Stengers, *Order out of Chaos. Man's new dialogue with nature*, New York. But the quotation can only be found in the enlarged version of *Order out of Chaos*, translated into Danish by J. Witt-Hansen and L. Lauritsen. The title is *Den nye pagt mellem mennesket og universet*, Ask, 1985, p. 386.

institutions and different media.

Many artists have also created new art forms based on a reshaping of new technologies with a focus on embodied creation and perception. Their works can be seen as visual parallels to, or directly inspired by, Richard Shusterman's somaesthetics, which is - as he has remarked -

A natural extension of my work in pragmatist aesthetics. Bringing aesthetics closer to the realm of life and practice, I realized, entails bringing the body more centrally into aesthetic focus, since all life and practice - all perception, cognition and action - is crucially performed through the body.<sup>3</sup>

Two essential messages of somaesthetics are embodied transactional experience and experimentation. He defines this as follows:

Experience forms the generating core of my pragmatist philosophy, in theory and in practice. Most of my philosophical views derive from experiences outside the library, seminar room and the philosophical texts I have read. (--). Experience for me, implies experimentation, creative exploration and involvement.<sup>4</sup>

Shusterman has a vital focus on lived experience and its influence on self-knowledge. The experience is never "passive reception, mechanical habit or distanced observation."<sup>5</sup> Thus an artwork is never complete until the viewer has experienced and interpreted its particular qualities. This is why there is always an interaction between the artwork, the viewer, and the viewing experience. As Shusterman writes:

"So conceived experience can be a helpful notion for appreciating the varieties of energy, value, meaning, knowledge, and behavior that extend beneath and beyond the realm of intellectual thought."<sup>6</sup> In both philosophy and art, he aims for the realization of "the aesthetic experience of collaborative creation, and even the cognitive gains from exploring new practices that provoke new sensations, spur new energies and attitudes, and thus probe one's current limits and perhaps transcend them to transform the self."<sup>7</sup> Another "key and distinctive pragmatist

3 Shusterman, "Somaesthetics at the Limit", *The Nordic Journal of Aesthetics*, no 35, 2008, p. 18.

4 Richard Shusterman, "A Philosopher in Darkness and Light. Practical Somaesthetics and Photographic Art" and in French translation, "Un Philosophe en ombre et en lumière" in *Lucidité: Vues de l'intérieur/Lucidity: Inward Views*, ed. Anne-Marie Ninacs (Montreal: Le Mois de la Photo à Montréal, 2011, p. 280.

5 Richard Shusterman, *op. cit.*, p. 280.

6 Shusterman, "Intellectualism and the Field of Aesthetics: The Return of the Repressed", *Revue Internationale de Philosophie*, 220, 202, p. 331. See also Wojciech Malecki, *Embodying Pragmatism. Richard Shusterman's Philosophie and Literary Theory*, Berlin, p. 25.

7 See the catalogue for the exhibition *Aesthetic Transactions. Pragmatist Philosophy through Art and Life*, curated by Richard

orientation is the meliorist goal of making things better (...) deconstructing or circumventing various obstacles and opening thought and life to new and promising options.”<sup>8</sup>

I will be highlighting a series of projects created by two outstanding artists whose works, in different ways, contain visualizations of the basic themes in Shusterman’s somaesthetics. Their projects are based on various forms of technology - including new technologies - which seek, from a series of perspectives, to improve the quality of life of the individual or society’s aesthetic values whilst also addressing environmental objectives. Through their works they draw us out of the fixed framework of everyday life and provide space for new experiences and insights and thus have a liberating function. But finally these works also establish in many surprising and unexpected ways, new connections between art and architecture and are thus able to create new orientations and new perspectives in the society.

A new version of these themes is visualized with an original and surprising use of color technologies and artificially produced fog in the installations created by the forceful Danish-Icelandic artist Olafur Eliasson in, for example, *Your Uncertain Shadow* (Berlin, 2011) *Feelings are Facts* (Beijing, 2010) and *The Weather Project* (Tate Modern, London, 2003) (fig. 1). In the latter project he employed a:

semi-circular disc made up of hundreds of monochromatic lamps which radiated yellow light. The ceiling in the big hall in Tate Modern was covered with a huge mirror, in which visitors could see themselves as tiny black shadows against a mass of orange light.<sup>9</sup>

---

Shusterman, Galerie Michel Journiac. Paris, May 24 through June 6, 2012, p. 29.

8 Richard Shusterman, “What Pragmatism Means to Me, Ten Principles”, *Revue française d'études américaines*, no. 124, 2e trimestre 2010, p. 64.

9 *Wikipedia* - [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Olafur\\_Eliasson](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Olafur_Eliasson), p.3.



1. Olafur Eliasson. *The Weather Project*. Tate Modern, London, 2003.

The visitor's active participation is of vital importance in this project and evoked a powerful sensory experience. Many visitors responded to the exhibition by lying on their backs and waving their arms and legs. In this project Susan May discovered a

phenomenological approach of 'stepping out' in order to 'see ourselves seeing' echoing the theories of the French philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty. He asserted that in order fully to understand the nature of perception, we must take a step back from it so that we no longer view objects in the world through the lens of perception but make perception itself an object of consciousness.<sup>10</sup>

---

<sup>10</sup> May, Susan, "Meteorologica." in *Olafur Eliasson: The Weather Project*. Edited by Susan May. Exhibition catalogue. London: Tate Publishing, 2003: 15-28.

Olafur Eliasson received his degree from the Royal Danish Academy of Fine Arts in 1995 and is a former student of mine. Over the past 15 years he has become an increasingly central figure in the contemporary art world. He established *Studio Olafur Eliasson* in Berlin in 1995. It is now connected with his professorship in the Academy and is a laboratory for spatial research. The relationship between man, urban space, and nature is one of his main interests both in his art as well as his teaching. He has participated in a very great number of exhibitions in the East and the West including the Guggenheim Museum, New York, MoMA, and museums in San Francisco, Sydney, Los Angeles, Madrid, Paris, Berlin, Barcelona, Beijing, Copenhagen and London.

Olafur Eliasson was commissioned by *The Public Art Fund* and New York City to create four man-made waterfalls called the *New York City Waterfalls* (fig. 2). They were placed in the historic New York Harbor (the gateway to America for nearly four centuries) and highlighted New York's natural environment alongside the City's industrial and commercial landscape. The installation ran from June 26 through October 13, 2008. "The *New York City Waterfalls* were constructed using building elements that are ubiquitous throughout New York: scaffolding is the backbone of the structures, and pumps bring water from the East River to the top; the water then falls from heights of 90 to 120 feet back into the river." But "fish and aquatic life are protected by filtering the water through intake pools suspended in the river." To build the *Waterfalls*, *The Public Art Fund* partnered with *Tishman Construction Corporation* that engaged a team of design, engineering and construction professionals.<sup>11</sup> The project also highlights the recent renaissance of the City's waterfront.

I have tried to work with today's complex notion of public spaces," says Eliasson. "The *Waterfalls* appear in the midst of the dense social, environmental, and political tissue that makes up the heart of New York City. They will give people the possibility to reconsider their relationships to these spectacular surroundings, and I hope they will evoke individual experiences and enhance a sense of collectivity.

He hoped that when New Yorkers encountered the *Waterfalls*, forgotten memories will surface and that new aspects of the harbor, which they had not noticed before, would be revealed. Or as Eliasson expresses it: "You take the water around Manhattan for granted." To help restore our sense of engagement with that landscape, he wants "to make water explicit." It is a phrase he employs often. "Falling water, it makes a sound, it engages a whole different range of senses. You see gravity. To make it

<sup>11</sup> See *New York City Waterfall* <http://www.nyfalls.com/nycwaterfalls.html>.

explicit is to take it, hold it up, and let it fall.”<sup>12</sup> The *Public Fund*, New York, who financed the waterfalls, highlight the fact that they draw nature into the city and stimulate us to find new answers to problems that are raised in the encounter with art, history, ethics and ecology.

Eliasson explained that the first waterfall, which was located under Brooklyn Bridge (fig. 2) is “about the history of the city and how it is used” - both at night as well as during the daytime. Jerry Salz emphasizes that this waterfall “is especially captivating and seems to appear out of nowhere like a portal from another dimension.”<sup>13</sup>



2. Olafur Eliasson. *Waterfall under Brooklyn Bridge*. New York City. 2008.

---

12 All the quotes come from interviews that Eliasson has given in connection with the “Inauguration of the Waterfalls.”

13 Jerry Saltz, “Take me to the river”, *New York Magazine*, July 2008.

The second waterfall was at “Brooklyn Heights, which is the classic place where one” - as Eliasson remarks - “looks out at the city’s skyline (fig. 3). It is the gaze of the flaneur, if you like, the city seen from a secure distance, from a kind of suburb.”<sup>14</sup> Jerry Salz remarks that the waterfall “almost rises up from the surface of the water.”



3. Olafur Eliasson. *Waterfall. Heights near Brooklyn Piers*. New York City. 2008.

---

<sup>14</sup> See note 7, p. 12.

The third waterfall was located at Pier 35 near Chinatown in lower Manhattan. It was - emphasizes Eliasson - “the closest I could get to industry and social housing.” (fig. 4).



4. Olafur Eliasson. *Waterfall*. Brooklyn Pier 35. New York City. 2008.

The fourth waterfall was located on the North shore of Governors Island (fig. 5).<sup>15</sup>



5. Olafur Eliasson. *Waterfall*. *The North shore of Governors Island*. New York City. 2008.

The *Waterfalls* set focus on the areas that they are situated in and underline the fact that the public space is not neutral, but pervaded by social, political and judicial structures. Eliasson has not sought to recreate nature, which is why he has not hidden the scaffolding and materials. He regards the waterfalls as both natural and cultural phenomena.

Jerry Saltz described his overall impression of Eliasson's *Waterfalls* as follows:

Eliasson's falls aren't about spectacle. They're like still centers that put you in touch with the physical world around you. They magically stretch the space of lower Manhattan, making the city seem as grand and amazing as it really is. Concentrating on the falls, you begin to glean the different geographic, economic and industrial environments along the riverfront, how light plays between buildings and water, the way this setting is in constant motion but also oddly still.<sup>16</sup>

15 Website, "26. June 2008. Olafur Eliasson's New York City Waterfalls indviet", *Dansk Arkitekturcenter* og Jerry Saltz, "Take me to the river", *New York Magazine*, July 2008.

16 Jerry Saltz, "Take me to the river", *New York Magazine*, July 2008.

One of Eliasson's most recent large-scale permanent projects in urban space is called *Your rainbow panorama* and was completed in 2011. It hovers on top of the ARoS Aarhus Art Museum in Jutland, Denmark. It consists of a 150 foot long and three-foot wide circular corridor made of glass in every conceivable color. It has a diameter of 52 meters and is mounted on slender pillars 3.5 meters above the museum's roof. Solid steel structures were installed on the museum roof in preparation for the 250-ton artwork. The sequence of colors in *Your rainbow panorama* can be seen throughout the city - by day and by night - and appears as an emblem for ARoS and as a landmark for Aarhus (fig. 6).



6. Olafur Eliasson. *Your rainbow panorama*. ARoS. Museum of Modern Art, Aarhus, Denmark 2011.

The museum itself, which was built by the Danish architectural firm Schmidt Hammer Lassen, is a square-shaped building. An impressive interplay between the floating circular rainbow and the compact square building is thus created. Through this interplay, Eliasson wanted to honor Leonardo da Vinci and his drawing of the *Vetruvian Man* standing in a circle and a square. It is precisely the location of Eliasson's rainbow on the roof of the museum that enables it to create a striking visualization of the relationship between architecture, art and the surrounding sky. This is why it is interpreted as a symbol of eternity or the heavenly dimension, whilst the museum, with its great diversity of artworks and changing exhibitions

is seen as a symbol of the earthly dimension, where the law of transformation prevails (fig. 7).



7. Olafur Eliasson. *Your rainbow panorama*. ARoS. Museum of Modern Art, Aarhus, Denmark. 2011.

The museum's director, Jens Erik Sørensen describes *Your rainbow panorama* as “a giant sundial and a visual calendar charting the cycle of the year. From the various positions in the sky the sun sends its rays through the colored glass, shedding colored light on different houses and flats in central Aarhus by turn.”<sup>17</sup>

The play of color and light has general overall relevance for the project's artistic quality and expressive impact. Carsten Thau describes it as follows:

The sequence of colors in *Your rainbow panorama* has been built in accordance with the subtractive primary colors cyan, magenta and yellow. It features a uniformly colored foil inserted between a double layer of glass, and each pane of glass can be reproduced in large series on the basis of a specific formula.<sup>18</sup>

---

17 Preface by Jens Erik Sørensen in the book *Olafur Eliasson Your Rainbow Panorama*, published by ARoS in connection with the completion of Eliasson's major project, July 2011, p. 19.

18 Carsten Thau, “Skyline Centrifuge”, in *Your Rainbow Panorama*, ARoS, 2011, pp. 51-53.



8. Olafur Eliasson. *Your rainbow panorama*. ARoS. Museum of Modern Art, Aarhus, Denmark 2011.

According to him “spaces are - and should be - experienced via our movement through those spaces. Only then does a true sense of spatiality arise.”<sup>19</sup>

The relationship between color and movement is very much in focus in his project. He describes it as follows:

In *Your rainbow panorama* I was particularly interested in the interplay between color and movement. I have put a ring of colored glass around the visitors; a materialized spectrum of all the colors that make up daylight; a kind of rainbow or color wheel. But there is also a different color circle: the one you produce in your own eyes, which shifts in relation to the colors you walk through as you move within the work.<sup>20</sup>

Eliasson called his project *Your rainbow panorama*. With the word “your” he wants to stimulate the viewers’ own experience and active participation. For him, it is important that the viewers’ and the artist’s experiences of the surrounding world constantly encounter and enrich each other. He has described this point of view in terms, which echo a general theme in Shusterman’s somaesthetics. “When I

---

19 Carsten Thau, *op. cit.*, p. 69.

20 “It’s Your Rainbow - An interview with Olafur Eliasson” by Marie Nipper (17 November 2010) in *Olafur Eliasson*, ARoS, 2011, p. 105.

create an exhibition, I try not only to see the works from my own point of view, but very much also from that of the participant.”<sup>21</sup> It is a matter of discovering what sensing is. “By looking at nature” says Olafur Eliasson, “I do not find nature, but on the other hand I discover my own relationship to an outdoor space.”<sup>22</sup> Thus it is important to persuade viewers to see them selves sensing. Eliasson emphasizes that it “requires you to be able to see yourself from various angles – to have a kind of double view.”<sup>23</sup>

For him, the body has become a dynamic, interactive, sensual consciousness. The spectators experience with their entire body the continually changing sequences of colors. When they walk around *Your rainbow panorama*, they soon realize that the colors affect their experience and began thinking about how it is done. Because “the colors are not just something you see the city through. You also feel them with your body.”<sup>24</sup>

Eliasson is a good example of an artist who – as Shusterman expresses it – “thinks through the body.” His perception of our bodies and the body in art is best characterized by what Shusterman calls “a living body” because “all perception, cognition and action is crucially performed through the body.”<sup>25</sup>

It is precisely these characteristics that the art critic Lisbeth Bonde highlights in her characterization of Eliasson’s art:

Eliasson’s practice is characterized by his constant exploration of the mankind’s interaction with the surrounding world. In the boundaries between science and aesthetics, rational contemplation and sense-based experiences, culture and nature, Eliasson’s art makes us aware of the ways in which we orientate ourselves physically and mentally in our surroundings.<sup>26</sup>

In recent years, the visual arts have attained an increasing importance in Richard Shusterman’s somaesthetic optic and this has been one of the new challenges he has accepted. More and more of our prominent artists have been inspired by, and incorporated aspects of, his aesthetics into their artistic processes. Some of them have learned of them from reading *Pragmatist Aesthetics: Living Beauty, Rethinking Art* (1992), which has stimulated them to immerse themselves further in his

21 Olafur Eliasson *At se sig selv sanse. Samtaler med Olafur Eliasson* (To see yourself sensing. Conversations with Olafur Eliasson), Copenhagen, 2004, p. 54.

22 Olafur Eliasson, *op. cit.*, 2004, p. 99.

23 Olafur Eliasson, *op. cit.*, 2004, p. 54.

24 Olafur Eliasson, *op. cit.*, 2004, p. 54.

25 Shusterman, “Somaesthetics at the Limits”, *The Nordic Journal of Aesthetics*, no 35, 2008, p.18.

26 Lisbeth Bonde, “Famous Danish artists - Olafur Eliasson”, unpublished lecture, 2012. See also Lisbeth Bonde and Mette Sandbye: *Manual til dansk samtidskunst*, Copenhagen, 2006, 2nd ed. 2007.

theoretical and practical practice in the art world. This has resulted in more artists asking him to contribute to their exhibition catalogue or contacting him in other contexts.

The prominent German installation artist Carsten Höller was one of the first artists to approach Shusterman after reading *Pragmatist Aesthetics*, which echoed his own artistic perception of the importance of corporeality in all aspects of human life. While studying the work, he discovered that there were also parallels to his own understanding of the unification of art, science and life and the embodied participation of the public in artworks.

Höller creates cross-disciplinary installations, often allowing exhibition visitors to experiment on themselves, and inviting viewers to be active participants. In 1996, he asked Shusterman to write the catalogue text for the provocative and interactive installation *House for Pigs and People* (1997) that he was creating with Rosemarie Trockel for *Documenta X* (1997). The French philosopher Jean Baudrillard described this impressive installation as follows:

Reaching up on tiptoe to see over a fence, spectators look down on a pigsty, while a large mirror opposite allows them to see themselves observing pigs. Then they walk round the shelter and park themselves behind the mirror, which turns out to be a two-way mirror through which they can once again see the pigs, but at the same time also see the spectators opposite looking at the pigs – spectators unaware, or at least pretending to be unaware, that they are being observed. This is the contemporary version of Velázquez's *Las Meninas*, and Michel Foucault's analysis of the classical age of representation.<sup>27</sup>

In his catalogue essay on this work Shusterman analyzed this project from the somaesthetic perspective as well as characterizing some of the basic ideas in aesthetics that relate to art in particular. This applies first and foremost to the destruction of “the crusty old dogma that firmly divides art from real life and praxis,” but it is also a criticism of the closed world of the gallery, the so-called “white cube.” It is, says Shusterman, important to emphasize that “art's highest aim is not to make a few admirable objects in a world filled with misery, but to create a better world through the work such objects can generate.” These views are also visualized in an individualized manner in Höller's and Trockel's works. This takes place in such a way that “a concretely embodied reality” is created, which - as Shusterman formulates it – shows that “art can play a powerful role in changing other realities by changing our perception, attitudes and consequent actions.” *House for Pigs and People* cast a critical light on the sacred concept of autonomy

<sup>27</sup> Jean Baudrillard, *Impossible Exchange*, translated by Chris Turner, London and New York: Verso 2001:107.

and the often closed world of galleries and museums, in which – as Shusterman expresses it – “the artist is boxed out from the power to enlighten and move the multitudes toward the creation of a better world.”<sup>28</sup> On the one hand, Höller and Trockel are “evoking art’s potential for real world improvement,” but on the other hand, they also reveal “art’s actual limits and impotence.”<sup>29</sup> Visitors view the pigs behind the glass in much the same way as we often settle for simply viewing rather than involving ourselves with groups of people who exist on the periphery of society. As Shusterman notes, “they are seen through the one-way glass of sociocultural privilege.”<sup>30</sup>

Höller has used many of his later sculptures or installations as platforms for interactions with participants and visual dialogues with the surroundings. They challenge our somatic habits and contribute to the art of living by enhancing our bodily awareness and thus approach one of the important artistic aims of Shusterman’s somaesthetics. One example is *Test Site*, which was installed in the Turbine Hall of the Tate Modern in 2006.<sup>31</sup> This huge project “comprised five spiraling tubular slides that ran from the upper floors of the gallery to ground level. Sliding down, especially from the higher levels, was an experience that was both physically and psychically intense.” Using peoples’ experience as what Höller calls “raw material” he created a work of art that was “centered around, and dependent upon, visitor’s participation.”<sup>32</sup> (fig. 9).

---

28 Shusterman’s documenta text “A House Divided” was reprinted in C. Höller and R. Trockel, *A House of Pigs and People*, Köln, 1997, pp. 31-32.

29 Shusterman, “A House Divided”, *op. cit.*, p. 32.

30 Ibid.

31 Mark Windsor, “Art of Interaction: A theoretical Examination of Carsten Höller’s *Test Site*”, *Tate Papers*, Issue 15, 1. April, 2011. See <http://www.tate.org.uk/research/publications/tate-papers/art-in...>, p. 2.

32 Mark Windsor, “Art of Interaction: A theoretical Examination of Carsten Höller’s *Test Site*”, *Tate Papers*, Issue 15, 1. April, 2011. See <http://www.tate.org.uk/research/publications/tate-papers/art-in...>, p. 2.



9. Carsten Höller. *Test Site*. 2006. Tate Modern. London.

The art historian Dorothea von Hantelman has expressed the fusion of subject and object in this interactive work through sliding as follows: "The visitor's experience is (...) not just an important part of the work; it *is* the work and it *is the meaning of the work*."<sup>33</sup> In *Test Site* the glass plate separating the artwork and the viewer has disappeared. The viewer actually acts as a co-creator. Mark Windsor summarizes the impact of the interactive *Test Site* on both viewers, the environment and our perception of urban planning:

*Test Site* poses a threat to urban spatial practices because it prompts an awareness of the pacific control exerted by structured spaces by offering an alternative; one that activates the individual's imaginative capacity against the institutions that suppress it.<sup>34</sup>

The *Test Site* changes every fixed position and opens up to a more dynamic space but it also changes one's normal conventional life style. Höller has expressed this viewpoint in the following way:

The Turbine Hall installation is called *Test Site* because it enables visitors to test the functions of differently shaped slides, mainly to see how they are affected by them, to test what it really means to slide. Again, this applies both for those who actively engage in the process of sliding, and those who watch. People coming down the slides have a particular expression on their faces, they're affected and to some degree 'changed'. This aspect of my installation is very spectacular, as you said, because the performers become spectators (of their own inner spectacle) while going down the slides, and are being watched at the same time by those outside the slides. I'd like to suggest that using slides on an everyday basis could change us, just as other commodities are changing us.<sup>35</sup> (Fig.10).

---

33 Dorothea von Hantelman, *I*, in Jessica Morgan (ed.), Carsten Höller *Test Site*, ed. Jessica Morgan, London 2006, p. 30.

34 Mark Windsor, *op. cit.*, p. 9.

35 Interview with Carsten Höller by Vincent Honoré Assistant Curator, Tate Modern in 2006. See <http://www.tate.org.uk/whats-on/tate-modern/exhibition/unilever-series-carsten-holler-test-site/carsten-holler-interview>.



10. Carsten Höller, *Test Site*, detail.

Viewer participation is a key to all of Carsten Höller's sculptures and larger projects. But it is never an end in itself. Rather, it is a way to test his ideas concerning human perception and physiological reactions. He shatters what Shusterman calls the "false barrier between art and action, that trivializes art and robs its power for positive praxis."<sup>36</sup>

Carsten Höller has a doctorate in biology and has often used his knowledge and training as a scientist in his many sculptures and installations. He focuses particularly on the nature of human relations and nature itself. In the last five years, he has realized several works with the fly-agaric mushroom, including the *Mushroom Suitcase Series* and the *Upside Down Mushroom Room* (2000), which was shown in 2005 at MOCA in Los Angeles. These sculptures vary in size from 1 meter to 2.6 meters. In the large park at Ordrupgaard Art Museum near Copenhagen, Höller has erected the three meter tall *Giant Triple Mushroom*. It is an enlarged replica of mushrooms occurring in the wild in Eurasia. Half the composition of the mushroom is a free interpretation of the fly-agaric mushroom (*Amanita Muscaria*), which is poisonous and psychoactive, the other half consists of two other mushrooms he has selected (fig. 11).

---

36 Shusterman "A House Divided", *op. cit.*, p. 1.



11. Carsten Höller. *Giant Triple Mushroom*. 2014. Mixed media. Ordrupgaard Art Museum, near Copenhagen.

Höller used many different materials to create the Giant Triple Mushroom: polyester, paint, synthetic resin, acrylic paint, wire, kit, polyurethane foam, stainless steel. This sculpture is - much like many of his other works - very clearly site specific. It was unveiled on 6 June 2014 and was created specially for the museum's park, which has the feel of a Romantic garden, with small, winding paths along which are set a variety of sculptures including those of the Danish artist Jeppe Hein. The many groups of large trees provide the park with a special profile. *Giant Triple Mushroom* rises up, almost majestically, and finds its own platform next to the large trees. It appears almost to have chosen the site itself and grown there.

Standing next to it, one feels like Thumbelina in the story by the writer Hans Christian Andersen, who is small in comparison to the large burdock leaves. The sculpture creates a new sense of scale in the park and transforms guests into small beings while creating its own magical sphere (fig. 12). Höller has rightly said of his sculptures, "they offer the possibility of unique inner experiences that can be used for the exploration of the self."<sup>37</sup>

37 Interview with Carsten Höller by Vincent Honoré, *op. cit.*



12. Carsten Höller. *Giant Triple Mushroom*. 2014. Mixed media. Ordupgaard Art Museum, near Copenhagen.

The projects of Olafur Eliasson, and Carsten Höller, which are all based on different types of technology, visualize – as we have seen – some basic elements of Shusterman’s somaesthetics. Particularly when it comes to embodied creation and perception, the interactive dialogue with the viewer and the surroundings, the unification of art and experience as well as the hope of being able to inspire and benefit life. But it is precisely this aesthetic that has also revealed new aspects of the works of the artists discussed here. It has thus demonstrated that there are several

outstanding artists, who in this precise and intense way, have a new and stimulating understanding of the body's role in the arts, viewing it as a resource for working on the problems of creating and interpreting art and improving the quality of our life and society as such. It is precisely these essential elements in Shusterman's conception of art, which will be able to provide a great deal of inspiration for the artists of our time. Shusterman's somaesthetics appeals not only to an artistic elite, but also to the whole spectrum of our cultural and social life, which it provides with new ideas and inspiration.

## Endnotes

**Photo credits:** Olafur Eliasson Studio (1- 8) Tate Modern. London (9-10), Art Museum Ordrupgaard, Denmark (11-12).

**Contact:**

Else Marie Bukdahl  
mail@em-bukdahl.dk

## Notes on Contributors

**Else Marie Bukdahl**, D. Phil., is an affiliated professor at the University of Aalborg, Denmark. She is former professor at the University of Aarhus and the former president of the Royal Danish Academy of Fine Arts (1985-2005) and a member of The Royal Danish and Norwegian Society of Sciences and Letters (1985- and 2006 -). Bukdahl is also an honored member of international *Who's Who* and was selected as one of the Leading Educators of the world by *International Biographical Centre, Cambridge* and is an *Officier des Palmes Académiques* and *Chevalier de l'Ordre des Arts et des Lettres*, Paris. She has a long list of publications spanning from philosophy, aesthetics and literature to visual art and architecture, among others articles on somaesthetics and postmodern philosophy and books on art and architecture, e.g. *The Baroque. A Recurrent Inspiration* (1998), *The Re-enchantment of Nature and Urban Space. Michael Singer Projects* (2011). She has also been involved in exchanges programs with the Academies and Universities in China and The United Arab Emirates and Jordan and has for example published a book about *The exhibition of Art Works in Xiamen from The Royal Danish Academy of Fine Arts* (2005) and *The Islamic Golden Age in Spain* (2006).

**Olafur Eliasson's** art is driven by his interests in perception, movement, embodied experience, and feelings of self. He strives to make the concerns of art relevant to society at large. Art, for him, is a crucial means for turning thinking into doing in the world. His diverse works – in sculpture, painting, photography, film, and installations – have been exhibited widely throughout the world, not only in museums and galleries, but also in the broader public sphere through architectural projects and interventions in civic space. His projects in public space include among others: *Green river*, carried out in various cities between 1998 and 2001; the *Serpentine Gallery Pavilion, 2007*, designed together with Kjetil Thorsen; *The New York City Waterfalls, 2008*; *Your rainbow panorama* at ARoS Art Museum in Aarhus, Denmark 2006-2011 and facades in collaboration with Henning Larsen Architects to Harpa Reykjavik Concert Hall and Conference Centre. *Little Sun* (2012) was created together with engineer Frederik Ottesen. It is global project which provides clean, affordable light to communities without access to electricity and therefore raises global awareness of the need for equal access to energy and light ([www.littlesun.com](http://www.littlesun.com)). As a professor at the Berlin University of the Arts, he led the Institut für Raumexperimente (Institute for Spatial Experiments; 2009–14), a five-year experimental program in arts education located in the same building

as his studio in Berlin. [www.raumexperimente.net](http://www.raumexperimente.net)). Eliasson lives and works in Copenhagen and Berlin.

**Eva Kit Wah Man** got her Ph. D from Chinese University of Hong Kong. She is currently Executive Associate Dean of the Graduate School and Professor of the Department of Humanities and Creative Writing of Hong Kong Baptist University. Her academic research areas include Comparative Aesthetics, Neo-Confucian Philosophy, Feminist Aesthetics and Philosophy, Gender Studies and Cultural Studies. She has published numerous refereed journal articles in *Journal of Chinese Philosophy*, *Philosophy Compass* and *Contemporary Aesthetics*, creative prose writings and academic books in Philosophy and Aesthetics. She is also writing columns for Hong Kong Economic Journal on philosophy and art and hosting cultural programs for Radio Television Hong Kong. In 2004, she acted as a Fulbright Scholar at U C Berkeley, U.S. She was appointed as the Association of Marquette University Women (AMUW) woman chair of Marquette University, Milwaukee, Wisconsin in 2009-2010. She is an active member of the American Society for Aesthetics, International Association of Aesthetics and the Chinese Association of Aesthetics. She has just edited two anthologies on the representation and identity politics of Cantonese Cultures in Hong Kong.

**Pan Gongkai** is an internationally renowned artist, theoretician, and educator with honorary PhDs from the San Francisco Art Institute (SFAI) US and the University of Glasgow, Scotland. He is former president of the two top art academies in China, the China Central Academy of Fine Arts (CAFA) in Beijing (2001-2014), and the China Academy of Art (CAA) in Hangzhou (1996-2001). *Melt*, his recent and large-scale digital installation, was featured at the 54th Venice Biennale (2011). Pan's ink paintings have been exhibited in Paris UNESCO headquarter and major art museums in Beijing, Hong Kong, Macau, New York, San Francisco, and Tokyo. Spiritually charged and widely acclaimed, Pan's ink paintings, and in particular large ones, embody not only the essence of traditional Chinese literati painting but also modern aesthetics; as such, they exemplify the modern transformation of traditional Chinese ink and wash painting. His exhibitions including Solo Exhibition *Withered Lotus Cast in Iron: Pan Gongkai* in Frye Art Museum, Seattle; and *Melt: Pan Gongkai*, WORK Gallery, Ann Arbor, Michigan, US. Pan is the author of many publications, which include: *History of Painting in China* (2001), *Limit and Exploration* (2005), *Analysis of Pan Tianshou's Painting Skill* (1995) and

*On Pan Tianshou's Life and Art* (1995). Pan is also an active researcher. In the last ten years, he directed a comprehensive research project on modern Chinese art, titled *The Road of Chinese Modern Art*, the results of which were published in 2012, and are now critically influencing Chinese scholarship on the liberal arts.

**Peng Feng** is professor of aesthetics and art criticism at Peking University. He is also a playwright, freelance art critic and curator of exhibitions at the international level. He has curated over 200 art exhibitions including the China Pavilion at the 54<sup>th</sup> international art exhibition of Venice Biennale 2011, The 1<sup>st</sup> International Sculpture Exhibition of Datong Biennale 2011, and The 1<sup>st</sup> International Art Exhibition of China Xinjiang Biennale. He has published 12 academic books including *Modern Chinese Aesthetics* (Nanjing: Fenghuang Press, 2013), *Pervasion: China Pavilion at the 54<sup>th</sup> International Art Exhibition of La Biennale di Venezia* (Beijing: People's Art Press, 2012), *Introduction to Aesthetics* (Shanghai: Fudan University, 2011) and *Return of Beauty: 11 Issues of Contemporary Aesthetics* (Beijing: Peking University Press, 2009). He has also translated 7 books including Nelson Goodman's *Languages of Art* and Richard Shusterman's *Pragmatist Aesthetics* and over 200 essays on aesthetics and contemporary art. Recently, his musical *The Red Lantern* is traveling in China. A profile with the title "Peng Feng: Professional Professor, Amateur Curator" was published in *Art in America*, July 2013.

**Max Ryyänen** is the Lecturer of Visual Culture and the head of the major studies in the MA program Visual Culture and Contemporary Art at Aalto University Finland. Although he studied and spent time as a visitor at the universities of Uppsala, Pisa and Temple University, studying aesthetics, philosophy and semiotics, he graduated (MA, Licentiate, PhD) from the University of Helsinki. He is the president of the Finnish Society of Aesthetics. Ryyänen publishes in both academic journals (*Contemporary Aesthetics*, *Nordic Journal of Aesthetics*) and art magazines (*Art Pulse*, *Flash Art*, *Kunstkritikk*) and he is an active teacher of criticism and body philosophy at theatre and dance festivals in Central and Eastern Europe. He has been a founding member of two alternative galleries in Helsinki (ROR, Kallio Kunsthalle). He is currently publishing the book *Aesthetics of Popular Culture* that he has edited together with Jozef Kovalcik (Slovart Publishing). Max Ryyänen's homepage: <http://maxryynanen.net>

**Richard Shusterman** is the Dorothy F. Schmidt Eminent Scholar in the Humanities and Director of the Center for Body, Mind, and Culture at Florida Atlantic University. His major authored books in English include *Thinking through the Body*; *Body Consciousness*; *Surface and Depth*; *Performing Live*; *Practicing Philosophy*; *T.S. Eliot and the Philosophy of Criticism*, and *Pragmatist Aesthetics* (now published in fifteen languages). Shusterman received his doctorate in philosophy from Oxford and has held academic appointments in France, Germany, Norway, Denmark, Israel, and Japan. The French government honored him as a Chevalier de l'Ordre des Palmes Académiques, and he was awarded research grants from the National Endowment for the Humanities, the Fulbright Commission, American Council of Learned Societies, the Humboldt Foundation, and UNESCO. His research in somaesthetics is nourished by his training and professional practice in the Feldenkrais Method.

**Stelarc** is a performance artist who has visually probed and acoustically amplified his body. Between 1976-1988 he completed 25 body suspension performances with hooks into the skin. He has used medical instruments, prosthetics, robotics, Virtual Reality systems, the Internet and biotechnology to explore alternate, intimate and involuntary interfaces with the body. In 1997 he was appointed Honorary Professor of Art and Robotics at Carnegie Mellon University, Pittsburgh. In 2000 he was awarded an Honorary Degree of Laws by Monash University. He has been a Visiting Artist at the Faculty of Art and Design at Ohio State University in Columbus in 2002, 2003 & 2004. He has been Principal Research Fellow in the Performance Arts Digital Research Unit and a Visiting Professor at The Nottingham Trent University, UK. Between 2006 and 2011 he was Senior Research Fellow and Visiting Artist at the MARCS Lab, University of Western Sydney, Australia. He is currently Chair in Performance Art, School of Arts, Brunel University, Uxbridge, UK. In 2010 he has received a special projects grant from the Australia Council and was also awarded the Ars Electronica Hybrid Arts Prize. In 2012 he was the recipient of the Michael Cook Performance and Body Artist Award. Stelarc's artwork is represented by the Scott Livesey Galleries in Melbourne.

**Stahl Stenslie** works as an artist, curator and researcher specializing in experimental media art and interaction experiences. His aesthetic focus is on art and artistic expressions that challenge ordinary ways of perceiving the world. Through his practice he asks the questions we tend to avoid – or where the answers lie in the shadows of existence. Keywords of his practice are somaesthetics, unstable media, transgression and numinousness. The technological focus in his works is on the art of the recently possible – such as i) panhaptic communication on Smartphones, ii) somatic and immersive soundspaces, and iii) discursive design of artistic weaponry, 3D printed in low-cost printers. He has a PhD on Touch and Technologies from The School of Architecture and Design, Oslo, Norway. Currently he is teaching and researching as a professor in Art & Technology at Aalborg University, Denmark.

**Zhou Xian**, is a Yangzi River Chair Professor at Nanjing University, China, where he was associate president, and is founding Dean of Institute for Advanced Studies and Dean of Art Institute. He is vice president of China Aesthetics Association and vice president of China Literary Theory. His research focuses on aesthetics, literary theory, art theory, visual culture and so on. His books, published in Chinese, include *From Literary Discipline to Cultural Critique* (2014), *Cultural Representation and Cultural Studies* (2014), *The Turn of Visual Culture* (2008), *Critique of Aesthetic Modernity* (2005). He has published many articles and book chapters in Chinese and English journals and books. He is co-editor of series on humanities and *Journal of Cultural Studies in China*. He was visiting professor of Université d'Artois (France, 2010), Duke University (USA, 2006), Soongsil University (South Korea, 1994). He found several exchange and collaborative research programs with Emory University, Rice University, Georg-August-University of Göttingen, University of Rochester, University of Alberta, Nice University and the like.



© The Journal of Somaesthetics (JOS) 2015  
Art & Technology, Aalborg University  
Rendsburggade 14, 9000 Denmark  
Contact: [somaestheticsjournal@gmail.com](mailto:somaestheticsjournal@gmail.com)

ISBN: 978-87-7112-243-5

ISSN: 2246-8498



[somaesthetics.aau.dk](http://somaesthetics.aau.dk)