

# SOMAESTHETICS AND THE REVIVAL OF AESTHETICS

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I welcomed Aleš Erjavec's invitation to contribute an article for the international issue of *Filozofski vestnik* devoted to "The Revival of Aesthetics" and organized to coincide with the XVII International Congress for Aesthetics (in 2007). It provides me with an excellent occasion to reflect on the role of somaesthetics in the project of reviving aesthetics and promoting a more expansive scope and style of aesthetics, emphasizing international dialogue and transcultural metissage. It is a particularly opportune moment for such reflection, since 2007 marks the tenth anniversary of my first using this term in an English publication.<sup>1</sup> Moreover, the international context of this essay is most appropriate since somaesthetics began in international circumstances and was largely inspired through my transcultural explorations in Asian philosophical traditions.

As I sit down to write this text on a gray Paris morning, November 2006, I recall that I first introduced the notion of somaesthetics in my German book *Vor der Interpretation* (1996), where it immediately caught the attention of a reviewer for the influential daily *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* (12.11.96) who however completely misunderstood (or perhaps intentionally misrepresented) its central ideas. With the anti-somatic and exclusively text-centered

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<sup>1</sup>That was in my *Practicing Philosophy: Pragmatism and the Philosophical Life* (New York: Routledge, 1997). For further elaboration of somaesthetics, see my *Performing Live* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2000), ch. 7–8; "Somaesthetics and *The Second Sex*", *Hypatia* 18 (2003), pp. 106–136; "Thinking Through the Body, Educating for the Humanities: A Plea for Somaesthetics," *Journal of Aesthetic Education* 40:1 (2006), pp. 1–21. For critical discussions, see the essays of Gustavo Guerra, Kathleen Higgins, Casey Haskins, and my response in *Journal of Aesthetic Education* 36:4 (2002), pp. 55–115. See also the articles by Thomas Leddy, Anthony Soulez, and Paul C. Taylor in a symposium on *Pragmatist Aesthetics* 2<sup>nd</sup> edition (which contains a chapter on somaesthetics); the symposium, which includes my response, is published in *Journal of Speculative Philosophy* 16:1 (2002), pp. 1–38.

bias so typical of the philosophical hexis, the reviewer told his readers “to imagine [somaesthetics] as something like whipping oneself while reading Kant, mountain-climbing while reading Nietzsche, and doing breathing exercises while reading Heidegger.” This ridiculous caricature, however, was useful in provoking me to elaborate the project of somaesthetics in sufficient detail and in repeated publications so as to combat such misinterpretations.

For those still unfamiliar with my conception of somaesthetics, it can be most briefly defined by its focus on the body as a locus of sensory-aesthetic appreciation (*aisthesis*) and creative self-fashioning. As an ameliorative discipline of both theory and practice, somaesthetics aims to enrich not only our abstract, discursive knowledge of the body, but also our lived somatic experience and performance, seeking to enhance the meaning, understanding, efficacy, and beauty of our movements and of the environments to which our movements contribute and from which they also draw their energies and significance.

The silly review from the FAZ also confirmed a general methodological insight that has served me well – the value of trying riskier ideas in international contexts and especially in foreign languages that one’s home community is likely not to notice or focus on for criticism. This greater freedom to experiment in distant lands and foreign languages has an anatomical parallel I learned from my work in somatic education – one usually has greater ease and freedom of movement in one’s distal than proximate parts of the body. But exploratory experiments in foreign languages calls for skilled translation, and I want here to acknowledge my gratitude to those who have translated my texts on somaesthetics and from whose penetrating questions and comments I have greatly learned.<sup>2</sup>

Not only was my first mention of somaesthetics in a foreign book, but I first conceived this notion while traveling in foreign parts, on a brief visit to Poland, during my year as a Fulbright Professor in Berlin (1995–1996), when I was exploring ways to revive aesthetics through the orientations of pragmatist philosophy. A key aim of my book *Pragmatist Aesthetics* (1992) was to close the gap between art and life, theory and practice, the aesthetic and the practical, so as to help revive aesthetics by enlarging its domain beyond the narrow limits of disinterested non-functionality that philosophy’s traditional ideology has assigned it. Aesthetics, I argued, becomes much more vital and

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<sup>2</sup>I especially wish to thank Jean-Pierre Cometti, Nicolas Vieillescazes, Heidi Salaverria, Robin Celikates, Fuminori Akiba, Adam Chmielewski, Alina Mitek, Wojciech Malecki, Krystyna Wilkoszewska, Peng Feng, Satoshi Higuchi, Emil Visnovsky, Zdenka Kalnicka, Jinyup and K. M. Kim, Józef Kollár, Arto Haapala, Max Rynnanen, and Gisele Domschke for work relating to translations.

significant, when it engages the practical and thus informs the praxis of life, impacting on a complex of social, ethical, and political issues.

Bringing aesthetics closer to the realm of life and practice, I realized, meant bringing the body more centrally into aesthetic focus, since all life and practice – all perception, cognition, and action – is crucially mediated through the body. Somaesthetics was thus conceived to complement the basic project of pragmatist aesthetics by elaborating the ways that a disciplined, ramified, and interdisciplinary attention to bodily experience, methods, discourses, and performances could enrich our aesthetic experience and practice, not only in the fine arts but in the diverse arts of living.

Moreover, as I explained in a programmatic article “Somaesthetics: A Disciplinary Proposal” (*Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, 1999), we need an aesthetics of embodiment to revitalize aesthetics through contact with the living body and to redress the willful neglect of the body in Baumgarten’s founding text of modern aesthetics, an omission reinforced by subsequent intellectualist and idealist theories (from Kant through Hegel and Schopenhauer and on to contemporary theories that emphasize disinterested contemplation).

Though Baumgarten gave aesthetics a pragmatic dimension of self-cultivation – expressed in its aim of “the perfection of sensory cognition” that “will give an individual, *ceteris paribus*, an advantage over others”, not just in thought but “in the practical action of common life,” he essentially excluded somatic cultivation from his systematic program of sensory perfection because he identified interest in the body with physical ferocity, lust, and orgies. Baumgarten defines aesthetics as the science of sensory cognition and as aimed at its perfection. But the senses surely belong to the body and are deeply influenced by its condition. Our sensory perception thus depends on how the body feels and functions, what it desires, does, and suffers. Yet Baumgarten refuses to include the study and perfection of the body within his aesthetic program. Of the many fields of knowledge therein embraced, from theology to ancient myth, there is no mention of anything like physiology or physiognomy. Of the wide range of aesthetic exercises Baumgarten envisages, no distinctively bodily exercise is recommended. On the contrary, he seems keen to discourage vigorous body training, explicitly denouncing what he calls “fierce athletics” (“*ferociae athleticae*”), which he puts on a par with other presumed somatic evils like “lust,” “licentiousness,” and “orgies”. This sadly influential error reflects the religious context of his times and the radically rationalist outlook he inherited from the tradition of Descartes, Leibniz, and Christian Wolff that viewed the body as essentially a machine and therefore not the true site of sensory perception. On the other hand,

these philosophies that sharply divide the body from the perceiving mind were themselves largely inspired by religious doctrines that denigrated the body to save and celebrate the immaterial soul.

We may have gotten beyond these religious contexts and views of embodiment. But because contemporary aesthetics has not yet given the body the systematic attention it needs, our culture's aesthetic ideals of body remain enslaved by shallow and oppressive stereotypes that serve more to increase profits for the cosmetics industries than to enrich our experience of the varieties of bodily charms. We clearly needed, I thought as I wandered alone through a garden in Warsaw, a new aesthetics of the body to revitalize aesthetics in at least three different ways: to revive Baumgarten's idea of aesthetics as a life-improving cognitive discipline that extends far beyond questions of beauty and fine arts and that involves both theory and practical exercise; to end the neglect of the body that Baumgarten disastrously introduced into aesthetics (a neglect intensified by the great idealist tradition in nineteenth-century aesthetics); and to propose an enlarged, somatically centered field that while grounded in aesthetics can also contribute significantly to other crucial philosophical concerns. This third venture, I reasoned, would not only help revitalize aesthetics by connecting it more centrally to other philosophical issues but could also help revive philosophy's original role as an embodied art of living in which aesthetics would understandably play a meaningful role. My 1997 book *Practicing Philosophy* was essentially devoted to defending that idea of philosophy as an aesthetic-ethical way of life.

But what, I wondered, should the envisaged field of body aesthetics be called, since that conjunction of terms in our culture seems entirely dominated by superficial notions of external form and consumerist cosmetic ideals of supermodels, beauty queens, and body builders; and since the very notion of body too often suggests mere material mass? Somaesthetics (a simple splicing of "soma" and "aesthetics") was the term that came to me. I admit it is more ugly than mellifluous, and can occasionally be misunderstood. I remember the first time I used it as the title of an invited lecture outside North America, the conference organizers (in Scandinavia) misread my handwritten fax and announced the title as "Some Aesthetics" in their program. But by and large, the term "somaesthetics" has been immediately understood as relating to aesthetics of embodiment. I think it aptly designates the field I envisage, and I am pleased that other scholars have also generously adopted it. As a less familiar term (deriving from the Greek word for body), "soma" is used here to distinctively denote the sentient lived body rather than a mere physical body.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Homer is the exception among Ancient Greeks in using *σῶμα* to designate the corpse,

It can thus incorporate dimensions of bodily subjectivity and perception that I regard as crucial to the aesthetics of embodiment and to aesthetic experience in general; since all aesthetic experience, at least for us humans, is embodied experience. Somaesthetics claims the body deserves more careful aesthetic attention not only as an object that externally displays beauty, sublimity, grace, and other aesthetic qualities, but also as a subjectivity that experiences aesthetic pleasures through somatic sensations, kinaesthetic, proprioceptive, haptic, gustatory, etc. The notion of *aisthesis* (perception) that is also incorporated into its name reinforces that somaesthetics is concerned with the sentient perceiving “body-mind” (i.e. *Leib*) rather than with the body as a mere physical object or mechanism (*Körper*).

Moreover, the term “somaesthetics” held particular charm for me, because it mitigated an orthographical problem that increasingly perturbed me. The problem is whether the discipline Baumgarten founded should be rendered in English as “aesthetics” or more simply as “esthetics.” Though the matter seems trivial, it is as stubbornly pervasive as the written use of the term (and its cognates e.g. ‘aesthetic’) and cannot be avoided or deferred. The question of whether “ae” or merely “e” should designate the first vowel sound of our philosophical discipline was even chosen as the theme the artist Saul Steinberg chose to define our field in his poster to celebrate the fiftieth anniversary of the American Society of Aesthetics. My analytic philosophical education at Jerusalem and Oxford had taught me to use the more sophisticated Greek-styled diphthong “ae” but now that I was advocating American pragmatism, should I not adopt the simpler, more streamlined “esthetic” that Dewey insisted on using. The “ae” was more familiar and more elegant perhaps, but the plain ‘e’ seemed clearly more honest and economically functional, and thus more in keeping with pragmatism. Discussing Steinberg’s poster in *Art News* (Nov. 2006), Danto has described the aesthetics/esthetics difference as one merely “in font” and visual appearance with no morphological or phonetic significance. Though one might challenge his analysis by insisting that a difference of a letter is more than a difference of font, the point remains that the “a” in “aesthetics” does no semantic or phonetic work at all, so that aesthetics and esthetics are phonetically and semantically the same. Principles of functional economy (central to philosophical reasoning and to pragmatism especially) should then urge us to drop the unnecessary, non-functional ‘a’, even though it might be visually more pleasing. Somaesthetics, however, has the advantage of giving the ‘a’ a real semantic function through

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using instead δέμας (frame) for the living body of a person. For more details, see *Liddell and Scott’s Greek-English Lexicon*.

its use in “soma,” while at the same time keeping the visuality and pronunciation of “aesthetics” within its longer lexical frame – and, of course, trying to revive the field of aesthetics by highlighting the vital bodily dimension of creating, perceiving, and appreciating things of beauty and art.

I recognize, however, that the term is not perfect. It does not accord with the best grammar of etymological construction: somatoaesthetic (as in the somatosensory system) would be, strictly speaking, more correct, and some Polish translations of my work insist on making this revision. However, I can defend the construction by noting its established use in physiology and neurology (where it appears without the ‘a’) in the term “somesthetic” (and also “somesthetics”) that is commonly used to designate the somatosensory. The somesthetic system refers to bodily senses other than those of our teleceptors (sight, hearing, smell) and taste; that is, it designates feelings of skin (touch), proprioception, kinaesthesia, bodily temperature, balance, and pain. I was not aware of this usage when I choose the term somaesthetics for the field I envisaged, but its existence is encouraging since it suggests how somaesthetics can usefully intersect with philosophy of mind and neuroscience in sharing a common concern with bodily perceptions.

It also signals the thoroughly interdisciplinary nature of somaesthetics, which expresses my view that aesthetics and philosophy will thrive better through collaborative engagement with other disciplines rather than through a purist policing of disciplinary borders. Somaesthetics shares the broad interpretation of aesthetics as concerned with the wide range of heightened perception that Baumgarten initiated and that has been revived by such enlightened contemporaries as Gernot Böhme, Martin Seel, and Wolfgang Iser. Engaging a diverse range of knowledge forms and disciplines that structure our somatic care or can improve it, somaesthetics is a framework to promote and integrate this wide variety of theorizing, empirical research, and practical, meliorative disciplines of bodily activity. It is not a single theory or method advanced by a particular philosopher but an open field for collaborative, interdisciplinary, and transcultural inquiry. Those researchers interested in the somatic dimensions of aesthetics and the arts are hereby invited to relate their research to the developing somaesthetic project. Its applications already extend beyond the traditional arts, to fields as diverse as computer design and tattoos to health and fitness and the use of hallucinogenic drugs in education.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> See, for instance, Ken Tupper, “Entheogens and Education,” *Journal of Drug Education and Awareness* 1:2 (2003), pp. 145–161; Tom Leddy, <http://www.aesthetics-online.org/ideas/leddy.html>; Titti Kallio, “Why we choose the more attractive looking objects: somatic markers and somaesthetics in user experience,” in *Proceedings of the 2003 International*

I cannot here address the full range of somaesthetic inquiry but should at least acknowledge three exemplary contributions that suggest the diversity of somaesthetic research. Martin Jay, arguably America's preeminent intellectual historian, has deployed the concept to probe the connection between contemporary art and political theory. In "Somaesthetics and Democracy: Dewey and Contemporary Body Art," he traces my somaesthetic initiative back to its roots in Dewey's pragmatist aesthetics and then links it to my celebration of hip hop as a vibrantly embodied art engaged in political protest and change. Though I never identified hip hop as the paradigm of somaesthetics (the field is far too diverse to admit of one paradigm and my somaesthetic research has concentrated equally on body-mind disciplines such as Alexander Technique and Feldenkrais method that Jay also notes), Jay argues that a more effective critical example of somaesthetics and politics can be found in the provocative and often perturbing field of contemporary body art – a genre of performance art that focuses on highlighting the artist's own body and usually subjecting it to radical, disturbing experiences or deformations. Jay's insightful analysis shows that rather than being limited to experiences of organic unity and wholesome consummation that Dewey urged, somaesthetics can also illuminate artistic expressions of rupture, abjection, and disgust, which form a significant part of contemporary visual art, but also of perceptions in the ordinary *Lebenswelt*. Though my treatment of rap's aesthetics of rupture and fragmentation expressed a similar wariness of the presumptive demands of all-embracing unity, Jay's analysis makes this point even stronger while extending somaesthetic analysis into contemporary art criticism. Before leaving the field of art, I should also note how Peter J. Arnold and Bryan Turner (the renowned sociologist of the body) have recently applied somaesthetics in their analysis of dance, and Eric Mullis uses it to study dramatic performance.<sup>5</sup>

In "Transactional Somaesthetics: Nietzsche, Women and the Transformation of Bodily Experience," the leading pragmatist feminist philosopher Shannon Sullivan deploys somaesthetics not to address matters in the artworld but to argue for transformations of our real world through the

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*Conference on Designing Pleasurable Products and Interfaces*, pp. 142–143; *Electronic Edition (ACM DL) BibTeX*; Stephen J. Smith and Rebecca J. Lloyd, "Promoting Vitality in Health and Physical Education," *Qualitative Health Research* 16:2 (2006), pp. 249–267.

<sup>5</sup> Martin Jay, "Somaesthetics and Democracy: Dewey and Contemporary Body Art," *Journal of Aesthetic Education* 36:4 (2002), pp. 55–69; P. Arnold, "Somaesthetics, Education, and the Art of Dance," *Journal of Aesthetic Education* 39 (2005), pp. 48–64. Bryan Turner, "Introduction – Bodily Performance: On Aura and Reproducibility," *Body and Society* 11:4 (2005), pp. 1–17; E. Mullis, "Performative Somaesthetics," *Journal of Aesthetic Education* 40:4 (2006), pp. 104–117.

adoption of somaesthetic methods “that attempt to improve lived experience in concrete ways.”<sup>6</sup> Through a critical reading of Nietzsche’s intriguing views on the body’s importance, Sullivan explores the ways Nietzsche wrongly ignores or trivializes the sorts of somaesthetic practices typically associated with women, and in defending their importance she also examines (through the example of Alexander Technique) the crucial role of dialogue, instruction, and other-directedness in somaesthetic practices, thus refuting the common presumption that working on the body is an essentially selfish project.

One of the most innovative explorations of somaesthetics can be found in the work of the young American philosopher J. J. Abrams, who explores how “somaesthetics could be extended more fully into the future” instead of primarily concentrating (as I have tended to) on exemplars from ancient Asian body-mind practices and similar body-mind disciplines of twentieth-century Western culture. Abrams examines how somaesthetics needs to face the challenges of genetic engineering, robotics, nanotechnology and neural-implant technology all of which can significantly revise our traditional sense and range of body-mind experience and performance.<sup>7</sup> Though I did address the somatic influence of new media in the chapter “Somaesthetics and the Body/Media issue” of my book *Performing Live*, I am grateful that Abrams takes matters much further and underlines the need to direct somaesthetic attention more closely to the new “posthuman” technologies that are now reshaping our experience. My comparative lack of attention to this domain does not signify a denial of its importance, but only the limits of my knowledge and time. There are, to repeat, far too many important research projects in the field of somaesthetics for any single researcher (or research institute) to even begin to achieve or exhaust.

The field of somaesthetics, as I conceive it, can be divided into three main branches, whose structure I have noted in previous writings but which needs to be recalled here both to address some of the more common criticisms of somaesthetics and to note some of the more interesting contributions that others have made to this field. *Analytic somaesthetics*, the most distinctively theoretical and descriptive branch of the project, is devoted to

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<sup>6</sup> *Living Across and Through Skins: Transactional Bodies, Pragmatism, and Feminism* (Bloomington: University of Indiana Press, 2001), p. 112.

<sup>7</sup> Jerold J. Abrams, “Pragmatism, Artificial Intelligence, and Posthuman Bioethics: Shusterman, Rorty, Foucault,” *Human Studies* 27 (2004), pp. 241–258. The German philosopher Dieter Thomä in reviewing the German translation of *Practicing Philosophy (Philosophie als Lebenspraxis)* in the Swiss daily *Neue Zürcher Zeitung* (20.7.2002) also urges that somaesthetics should consider more closely the new scientific domains of genetic technology and cosmetic surgery.

such research, explaining the nature of somatic perceptions and comportment and their function in our knowledge, action, and construction of the world. Besides traditional topics in philosophy concerning the mind-body issue and somatic aspects of consciousness and action, analytic somaesthetics is concerned with biological factors that relate to somatic self-use; how, for example, greater flexibility in the spine and ribcage can increase one's range of vision by enabling greater rotation of the head, while, on the other hand, more intelligent use of the eyes can conversely (through their occipital muscles) improve the head's rotation and eventually the spine's.

This does not mean somaesthetics should be assimilated into physiology and thus expelled from the humanities; it only underlines the (obvious but much neglected) point that humanities research should be properly informed by the best scientific knowledge relevant to its studies. Renaissance art and art theory owe much of their success to their study of anatomy, mathematics, and the optics of perspective. Philosophers' traditional disdain for the body may be largely a product of their ignorance of physiology (as Nietzsche suggested) coupled with their pride in privileging only the knowledge that they do master.<sup>8</sup> Analytic somaesthetics is also deeply concerned with what the social sciences have to say about the modes and structuring contexts of somatic experience – including genealogical, sociological, and cultural analyses that show how the body is both shaped by social power and employed as an instrument to maintain it, how bodily norms of health, skill, and beauty, and even our categories of gender are constructed to reflect and sustain social forces.

In contrast to analytic somaesthetics whose logic is essentially descriptive, pragmatic somaesthetics has a distinctly normative, often prescriptive character because it involves proposing specific methods of somatic improvement or engaging in their comparison, explanation, and critique. Since the viability of any proposed method will depend on certain facts about the body (whether ontological, physiological or social), this pragmatic dimension presupposes the analytic dimension. But it transcends analysis not simply by evaluating the facts analysis describes, but by proposing methods to improve certain facts by remaking the body and the enviroing social habits and frameworks that help shape it. A vast and complex array of pragmatic disciplines have been designed to improve our experience and use of our bodies: various diets, modes of grooming and decoration, meditative, martial, and erotic arts, aerobics, dance, massage, bodybuilding, and mod-

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<sup>8</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, trans. W. Kaufmann and R. J. Hollingdale (New York: Vintage, 1968), par. 408.

ern psychosomatic disciplines like Alexander Technique and Feldenkrais Method.

We can distinguish between holistic or more atomistic methods. While the latter focus on individual body parts or surfaces – styling the hair, painting the nails, shortening the nose through surgery, the former techniques – such as Hatha yoga, t'ai chi ch'uan and Feldenkrais Method – kk comprise systems of somatic postures and movements to develop the harmonious functioning and energy of the person as an integrated whole – refusing, in treating the soma, to divide body from mind.

Somatic practices can also be classified in terms of being directed primarily at the individual practitioner herself or instead primarily at others. A massage therapist or a surgeon works on others but in doing t'ai chi ch'uan or bodybuilding one is working more on oneself. The distinction between self-directed and other-directed somatic practices cannot be rigidly exclusive, since many practices are both. Applying cosmetic makeup is frequently done to oneself and to others; and erotic arts display a simultaneous interest in both one's own experiential pleasures and one's partner's by maneuvering the bodies of both self and other. Moreover, just as self-directed disciplines (like dieting or bodybuilding) often seem motivated by a desire to please others, so other-directed practices like massage may have their own self-oriented pleasures.

Despite these complexities (which stem in part from the interdependence of self and other), the distinction between self-directed and other-directed body disciplines is useful for resisting the common presumption that to focus on the body implies a retreat from the social. Experience as a Feldenkrais practitioner has taught me the importance of caring for one's own somatic state in order to pay proper attention to one's client. In giving a Feldenkrais lesson of Functional Integration, I need to be aware of my own body positioning and breathing, the tension in my hands and other body parts, and the quality of contact my feet have with the floor in order to be in the best condition to assess the client's body tension, muscle tonus, and ease of movement and to move him in the most effective way. I need to make myself somatically very comfortable in order not to be distracted by my own body tensions and in order to communicate the right message to the client. Otherwise, when I touch him, I will be passing on to him my feelings of somatic tension and unease. Because we often fail to realize when and why we are in a state of slight somatic discomfort, part of the Feldenkrais training is devoted to teaching how to discern such states and distinguish their causes.

Somatic disciplines can further be classified as to whether their major orientation is toward external appearance or inner experience. Representational

somaesthetics (such as cosmetics) is concerned more with the body's surface forms while experiential disciplines (such as yoga) aim more at making us feel better in both senses of that ambiguous phrase: to make the quality of our somatic experience more satisfying and also to make it more acutely perceptive. The distinction between representational and experiential somaesthetics is one of dominant tendency rather than rigid dichotomy. Most somatic practices have both representational and experiential dimensions (and rewards), because there is a basic complementarity of representation and experience, outer and inner. How we look influences how we feel, and vice versa. Practices like dieting or bodybuilding that are initially pursued for representational ends often produce inner feelings that are then sought for their own experiential sake. Just as somatic disciplines of inner experience often use representational cues (such as focusing attention on a body part or using imaginative visualizations), so a representational discipline like bodybuilding deploys experiential clues to serve its ends of external form, using feelings to distinguish, for example, the kind of pain that builds muscle from the pain that indicates injury.

Another category of pragmatic somaesthetics – “performative somaesthetics” – may be distinguished for disciplines that focus primarily on building strength, health, or skill and that would include practices like weightlifting, athletics, and martial arts. But to the extent that these disciplines aim either at the external exhibition of performance or at one's inner feeling of power and skill, they might be associated with or assimilated into the representational or experiential categories.

Besides the analytic and pragmatic branches of somaesthetics, we also need what I call *practical somaesthetics*, which involves actually engaging in programs of disciplined, reflective, corporeal practice aimed at somatic self-improvement (whether representational, experiential, or performative). This dimension of not just reading and writing about somatic disciplines but systematically performing them is sadly neglected in contemporary philosophy, though it has often been crucial to the philosophical life in both ancient and non-Western cultures. I have always insisted on this practical dimension while acknowledging the difficulties of inserting it into the ordinary academic curriculum. More and more I have been able to offer instruction in somaesthetics in workshops that include practical demonstrations and exercises. Two recent examples were a special 4-day Ph.D. course on aesthetic experience at the Danish Pedagogical University (May 2006) and a one-day workshop “Thinking Through the Body” at the Jan Van Eyck Academy in Holland (Nov. 2006) (<http://thinkingbody.janvaneyck.nl/>).

Some criticisms of somaesthetics have been recurrent enough to war-

rant a further response here. One critique claims that our culture is already far too conscious of body aesthetics – a preoccupation that is both fueled and fueled by the billion dollar cosmetics, fashion, and diet industries, so somaesthetics should be rejected for reinforcing this obsession. My response has always been that our cultural problem is not somatic attention per se, but misguided somatic attention. In other words, our attention to the body is one-sidedly, uncritically, and obsessively focused on advertised stereotypes and questionable ideals regarding certain external properties of the body, while neglecting other dimensions of our bodily experience and use that could be much more rewarding both personally and for our social world. Rather than merely affirming our culture’s body practices, somaesthetics is a clarion call for “their comparative critique” in terms of their rival methods. That is why I describe its branch of pragmatic somaesthetics as “reconstructive critical theory” where the rival methods are critically “analyzed in terms of their presuppositions, effects, and ideologies”.<sup>9</sup> Somaesthetics is not simply aimed at improving the body for its own sake but for its contribution to the flourishing of the whole person and eventually to the society in which that person is situated.<sup>10</sup> Martin Jay, Shannon Sullivan, J. J. Abrams and others have recognized this in applying somaesthetics to projects of democracy, gender, and society relations.

Other criticisms arise from the fact that somaesthetics designates a general field of inquiry and practice rather than a single advocated theory, official doctrine, or exclusive disciplinary technique. Though this plurality is important to its purposes of integrating different varieties of somatic theory and different techniques of somatic practice, it can mislead critics who fail to recognize the different branches. So, for example, in recommending that we practice somaesthetics, I am not recommending that we confine ourselves to practical exercises and give up the discursive work of philosophy (which is an essential part of the practice of analytic somaesthetics and also plays a role in pragmatic somaesthetics). Nor am I recommending all the specific body practices that fall under the rubric of practical somaesthetics, since some of those practices (in terms of their limitations and dangers) are in fact targets of my pragmatic somaesthetic critique. This ambiguity (which gets disambiguated in context and through the distinctions between the different branches of somaesthetics) in no way invalidates the coherency of the field.

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<sup>9</sup> Shusterman, *Performing Live*, pp. 142, 156.

<sup>10</sup> I already made this point in *Practicing Philosophy*, giving somaesthetics “the role of critically examining such body practices and their attendant ideologies to see what sense they make, what good or harm they do, and whether they could profit from a better formulation of aims and methods” (p. 176).

Similar ambiguities abound in other fields that involve comparative critique and/or actual practice. One can advocate the practice of philosophy while criticizing many of the philosophies practiced. One can affirm the value of religious study without affirming all of the religions studied, or perhaps even any of them. One can celebrate the actual practice of music, while strongly criticizing particular techniques or styles of making music.

Failure to appreciate somaesthetics' multiple branches and their interrelations can help explain Richard Rorty's critique that my "somatic aesthetics" is a confusion since he presumes that somaesthetics is essentially concerned with nondiscursive practice and that there is no way of fruitfully combining nondiscursive somatic experience with philosophical or any other kind of theory that is essentially discursive. "Talking about things is one of the things we do. Experiencing moments of sensual joy is another. The two do not stand in a dialectical relationship, get in each other's way, or need synthesis in a programme or theory."<sup>11</sup> This presumed dichotomy between language and somatic experience – an obvious heritage of mind/body dualism – is clearly refuted by the important use of language in guiding our nondiscursive somatic practice. Though the experiences of dance, music, and meditation cannot be captured by mere words, there is no doubt that words are very useful in directing practitioners toward the realization of successful performance and enriching appreciation. Rorty, who identifies somatic pleasures too narrowly with those "of food and those of sex," should realize that our culinary pleasures can be heightened and educated through discursive means (cookbooks, food and restaurant criticism), just as our sexual experience can be improved through language – whether it be through impassioned suggestions of our partners in the midst of lovemaking or through reflective dialogue and perusal of erotic manuals in other contexts or perhaps through the reading and writing of love poetry.

Rorty, moreover, wrongly equates somaesthetics with the body practices championed by Foucault, Bataille, and Deleuze that celebrate irrational Dionysian excess. Complaining that "Foucault's, Bataille's and Deleuze's discussions of the body leave [him] cold," Rorty fails to see that my somaesthetic theories provide precisely a critique and an alternative to such philosophies that reduce the value of somatic experience to irrational extremes of passion and pleasure. Ironically, the German press has criticized my pragmatic recommendations in somaesthetics precisely for not remaining fully

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<sup>11</sup> Richard Rorty, "Response to Richard Shusterman" in Matthew Festenstein and Simon Thompson (eds.), *Richard Rorty: Critical Dialogues* (Oxford: Polity Press, 2001), p. 156.

in the French Dionysian tradition of radical excess but instead advocating more gentle, sensitive, and thoughtful modes of bodily discipline and joy.<sup>12</sup>

I take, in fact, a pluralistic (which does not mean an “anything goes”) position, recognizing that all bodily disciplines have their limits, and that different aims, values, and contexts require different methods. But my main point is that interest in the body does not necessarily signify a retreat from thought, a betrayal of philosophy’s reflective, critical enterprise by abandoning oneself blindly to the body’s passions and pleasures. First, there is the discursive realm of analytic and pragmatic somaesthetics, describing somatic functions, practices, norms, ideals, methods, social and theoretical contexts and engaging in their comparative critique. But even within the concrete realm of practical somaesthetics there are disciplines that focus precisely on bringing reflective skills to bodily experience by developing a heightened and more precise cognitive awareness of our somatic feelings, posture, or action.

Such body-mind disciplines central to the experiential mode of somaesthetics (and including Alexander Technique, Feldenkrais Method, Zen meditation) are in some ways more mentally or intellectually demanding than they are physically demanding. As my Zen master Roshi Inoue Kido explained at his Dojo by Japan’s Inland Sea, the essential is not mastery of the lotus position but mastery of consciousness, of heart and mind. I have repeatedly argued we cannot equate immediate experience narrowly with pure somatic experience, because there are not only immediate experiences of linguistic understanding; there are also somatic experiences that are mediated through language and even consciously experienced in terms of explicit conceptualizations (as when one is asked to assume a specific posture with a particular limb and then asked to sense what that posture feels like). Though introduced to revive aesthetics by rescuing it from a one-sided philosophical intellectualism that banishes cultivation of the body and nondiscursive immediate experience from the domain of true aesthetic culture, somaesthetics was never proposed as an anti-intellectual doctrine of pure experience and feeling, a recipe for purging philosophy and aesthetics from the reflective and discursive inquiry that they need.<sup>13</sup> Somaesthetics offers a way of inte-

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.* See, for example, “Sanfter atmen” in *Süddeutsche Zeitung* (9/10 Februar, 2002), a review of *Philosophie als Lebenspraxis*. On the other hand, the distinguished German philosopher and aesthetic theorist Gernot Böhme, chides that same book for being too tolerant of Foucault’s excesses in “Somästhetik – sanft oder mit Gewalt?,” *Deutsche Zeitschrift für Philosophie*, Heft 5 (2002). For my somaesthetic approach to eroticism, see “Asian Ars Erotica and the Question of Aesthetics,” *JAAC* 65:1 (2007).

<sup>13</sup> This unfortunate misconception of somaesthetics as advocating blind, mute experience with no conceptual or intellectual content is evident in an article published in a

grating the discursive and nondiscursive, the reflective and the immediate, thought and feeling, in the quest of providing greater range, harmony, and clarity to the soma – the body-mind whose union is an ontological given but whose most satisfying unities of performance are both a personal and cultural achievement.

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much earlier international issue of *Filozofski vestnik*, connected with a prior International Congress of Aesthetics. See Simo Sääteellä, “Between Intellectualism and ‘Somaesthetics,’” *Filozofski vestnik* 20: 2 (1999), XIV ICA Supplement, pp. 151–161. The article was written before my 1999 *JAAC* article appeared outlining the project of somaesthetics, so the mis-construal was perhaps an understandable error (by a good philosopher), even if there was already enough in *Practicing Philosophy* to show how erroneous it was. I hope the myth of somaesthetics as a philosophy of nonthinking has now been finally laid to rest.