

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

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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.¹ Pasolini himself was a poet, filmmaker, playwright and theorist whose art always had a political agenda. He

¹ 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.²

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).³ 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.⁴ 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.⁵

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.⁶ 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),⁷ 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.⁸

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),⁹ where Jay first shows favorable respect for Richard Shusterman's somaesthetics, but then criticizes Shusterman for not taking body art sufficiently into account.¹⁰

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.¹¹ 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.¹² 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 5th Avenue Galleries and the conservative bourgeois culture supporting the 'high arts'.¹³

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.¹⁴ 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'.¹⁵ 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."¹⁶

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),¹⁷ 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.¹⁸ 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,¹⁹ 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*,²⁰ 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 Benjamin²¹ – 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.²²

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 19th 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.²³

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.²⁴ 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,”²⁵ 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.²⁶

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.²⁷

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."²⁸ 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

²⁸ 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.²⁹

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,

²⁹ 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.”³⁰ 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.

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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.