Are you experienced?

**By** [**Vince Carducci**](http://www.metrotimes.com/archives/browse.asp?byline=Vince+Carducci)

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Beauty, the truism says, is in the eye of the beholder. The “eye” doing this beholding is symbolic of the “I” inside each of us, which is supposedly separate from the physical body. Especially nowadays (as a result of the reduction of physical artworks to pure ideas by 1960s conceptual art), we’re said to exist in an aesthetic state where truly anything goes, given a plausible backstory.

One of the more interesting efforts at countering this relativism is the new discipline of “somaesthetics” (*soma* being Greek for body). Somaesthetics attempts to understand beauty and art in terms of experience rather than interpretation, as a product of perceptive living rather than abstract thinking. And since the body is the primary means through which we encounter the world, it makes sense that it should figure prominently in an activity that takes experience as its foundation. (The Greek word from which aesthetics derives is *aisthesis*, meaning “sensory perception.”)

The main advocate of somaesthetics is the philosopher and hip-hop critic Richard Shusterman, who teaches at Temple University in Philadelphia and the College Internationale de Philosophie in Paris. Somaesthetics, as Shusterman conceives it, covers a broad range of activities, including fine and popular art as well as what he calls “creative self-fashioning,” i.e. bodybuilding, piercing, tattoos, etc.

An obvious area where somaesthetics is useful is in understanding dance. Wayne State University professor Charles J. Stivale’s new book, *Disenchanting* Les Bons Temps: *Identity and Authenticity in Cajun Music and Dance* (Duke University Press), was inspired by his years of experience in the sweaty dancehalls of the Louisiana bayous. From his practice of Cajun waltzes, two-steps and jitterbugs, Stivale developed a complex appreciation of a regional folk culture facing the dilemmas of commodification as its music and cuisine have entered the American mainstream. This not only helped Stivale understand the beauty and art in Cajun culture; it helped him become a better dancer.

Somaesthetics also sheds light on the current Detroit Institute of Arts blockbuster, “Degas and the Dance.” Degas was obsessed with ballet his whole life and images of dancers figure prominently throughout his work. Dancers, of course, must cultivate their bodies in order to practice their craft. But for Degas, dancers also represented an escape from repressive bourgeois society. Many of Degas’ dancers are shown nude or nearly so, freed from the restrictive control of the era’s burdensome clothing, which often prevented a full range of motion. Their bodies epitomize impressionism’s desire to do away with the authority of the internal “I” and experience direct sensation. (To revise George Clinton, “Free your ass and your mind will follow.”)

It’s not a big leap from the movements of dance to the rhythms of music. The recent *Standing in the Shadows of Motown* suggests the “bottom up” ways of somaesthetic practice. At one point in the film, one of the Funk Brothers (the studio musicians who played on nearly all of Motown’s significant recording sessions) notes that virtually anyone could be put in front of the band and have a hit single — that’s how important the musical backup was in defining the label’s sound. The movie demonstrates that with concert footage of performers as different as Joan Osborne, Ben Harper, Bootsy Collins and Chaka Khan, all falling into line behind the Funk Brothers’ groove.

Finally, there’s activity that’s not art in the traditional sense. At Feldenkrais “Awareness Through Movement” classes at the Birmingham Community House, for example — and yoga studios, health clubs and martial arts dojos throughout the metropolitan area — practitioners of “creative self-fashioning” are unlearning the dictates of the internal “I” and learning to listen to what their bodies have to tell them. (Besides being a world-renowned academic, Shusterman is a certified Feldenkrais teacher.)

Somaesthetics is an especially apt concept for describing creativity Detroit-style. Besides the Funk Brothers, there’s Detroit’s other brand of world-class music, techno, which dispenses with words almost entirely, thereby allowing you to abandon yourself to the beat. (As Tom Tom Club says, “Who needs to think when your feet just move?”) Somaesthetics rules the streets of Royal Oak and Ferndale in the daytime, and clubs and raves all over the city at night. It also helps to explain why conceptual art and its postmodernist offspring haven’t found many believers among visual artists in the Motor City.

This is not to say that somaesthetics (not to mention art and culture in Detroit) is anti-intellectual. Instead, it’s based on material effects and physical processes. Beauty isn’t just in the “I” after all; it’s in the entire body, right down to the marrow.

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