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Somaesthetic Awareness and Artistic Practice: A Review Essay

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Do you not see then, Eryximachus, that among all intoxications the noblest, the one most inimical to that great tedium, is the intoxication due to our acts? Our acts, and more particularly those of our acts which set our bodies in motion, may bring us into a strange and admirable state...

...What did she say? She said, "How well I feel!"

—Paul Valéry, *Dance and the Soul*

Indeed we cannot imagine how a *mind* could paint. It is by lending his body to the world that the artist changes the world into paintings.

—Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Eye and Mind*²

A thinker is very much like a draftsman whose aim it is to represent all the interrelations between things.

—Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Culture and Value*³

Richard Shusterman's thoughtful and deeply introspective book, *Body Consciousness: A Philosophy of Mindfulness and Somaesthetics* is a catalyzing investigation into the corporeal views of western philosophy—an area of thought frequently overshadowed by contemporary philosophical emphases on linguistics and the contextually determined structure of thought. His essential concern, which he revisits throughout the book, is that philosophy, as a discipline, needs to return to its earliest ambition of examining less how we think than how to live. For Shusterman, this ambition begins with the body:

Just as skilled builders need expert knowledge of their tools, so we need better somatic knowledge to improve our understanding and performance in the diverse disciplines and practices that contribute to our mastery of the highest art of all – that of living better lives. (p. 4)⁴

In this essay review, I will outline several of Shusterman's essential foci and explore possible applications of his somaesthetic philosophy to the somatic and ethical considerations of studio practice (as artist and teacher of art⁵) and to some of the body-mind challenges facing contemporary artists. I will also suggest ways in which a more cross-disciplinary approach to somaesthetics might serve to enrich various fields of inquiry into the matter of the body-mind and thus further Shusterman's goals of utilizing philosophy to help us lead better, more meaningful lives.

Richard Shusterman's nearest intellectual kin, in a sense, are contemporary cognitive scientists, evolutionary and neurobiologists, and those philosophers and psychologists most deeply involved in the study of the mind⁶—as well as earlier thinkers such as Emerson, Thoreau, and the 13th century Japanese Soto Zen Buddhist Eihei Dōgen⁷. In his current book, Shusterman has focused his investigations on the views of various modern philosophers on the body, Foucault, Merleau-Ponty, Simone de Beauvoir, Wittgenstein, William James, and John Dewey and—by building on and critiquing their thoughts—suggested ways in which the tools of philosophy might be used to further our somatic awareness and wean us of some of the

unhealthier aspects of Western mind-body dualism and from our simple lack of attention—or mindfulness—to our somatic selves.

In Shusterman's (1997) earlier book, *Practicing Philosophy: Pragmatism and the Philosophical Life*, he opened with an amusing and pointed quote by Thoreau⁸ urging philosophers towards a lived philosophy rather than one merely theorized. Shusterman went on to stress that “one must not erect this into a false dichotomy. First, writing is not only a mode of living, but... an important tool for artfully working on oneself—both as medium of self-knowledge and of self-transformation” (p. 3). I would argue that the same is true (or can be) for practicing painting. It is a tool for self-investigation in the sense of the painter being, as the neurobiologist Semir Zeki wrote, a “neurologist”⁹, as the painter is performing perceptual experiments on his or her own mind. Painting is also a means of probing the emotional self (a felt response to images, for instance, or a grappling with one's own history and perceived relationships to others), a means of direct metaphorical communication, and a way of somatically involving oneself in perception via the materials of the painting medium and investing these materials with (or discovering within them) the capacity to physically embody the self.¹⁰ Put more directly, painting and drawing are forms of thinking and awareness that are deeply rooted in the body. That said, how does one, as artist or philosopher, “[work] on oneself”? Interestingly, Shusterman first examines the transgressive philosophical, chemical, and sexual practices of Michel Foucault.

Foucault, Shusterman argues, ultimately suffered from *Anhedonia*—an inability to experience pleasure from ‘ordinarily pleasurable’ stimuli—as a culminating result of his experiences (BC, pp. 30-40). “The persistent demand for extreme intensities threatens not merely to reduce the range of our felt pleasures but even to dull our affective acuity, our very capacity to feel our bodies with real clarity, precision, and power” (p. 38). One problem with this need for escalating intensities of somatic experience, as Shusterman notes, relates to the Weber-Fechner law of subjective perceptual estimations. The repeated indulgence in extreme S/M practice and drug use can make it difficult to reasonably gauge or even to sense—let alone take pleasure in—the more mundane experiences of everyday life.¹¹ The result is apathy or even a deeply schismatic violence in one's somatic relationship to the world wherein one demands aggression or pain—inflicted by self or other—in order to feel anything at all. As Shusterman mentions, Foucault even ruminates on suicide as “a fathomless pleasure whose patient and relentless preparation will enlighten your life” (p. 36).¹² Anhedonia can become a powerfully shaping force in one's somatic awareness and result in a deeply skewed perception of body, mind, and environment. Importantly, Shusterman compares this urgent need for powerful experiential stimuli to the mortification and ascetic practices of religious and other spiritual seekers (consider Saint Francis throwing himself into the briars in order to eliminate or redirect his sexual urges or the awesome ecstatic visions of Saint Teresa). Extreme emotional or somatic stimuli, as well as many forms of transgressive experience (as Bataille

and others have argued¹³) has also been a significant motivating force in the history of modern and postmodern art—as well as, Shusterman notes, in the intensely aggressive competitive market forces, consumerist pressures, and military strategies of contemporary capitalist economies.

Two of these arenas—art and the market—are now (particularly since the climax of the long “death of art” heralded by Marcel Duchamp’s 1917 *Fountain* and peaking with Andy Warhol’s 1964 *Brillo Boxes*¹⁴) deeply entwined and mutually reinforcing. The consequences of this intertwining are significant and exert a profound influence not only on art dealers, collectors, curators, historians, and critics, but on all practicing artists, art educators, and art students as well. Bound up in this influence is the modernist notion of the avant-garde (including its implied ideals of progress, newness, and aesthetic and perceptual upheaval) and the postmodern capitulation or indifference to that utopian ideal coupled with the reduction of art—and the packaged and promoted artist—to merely another (if very expensive and fashionable) commodity. In both modern and postmodern art—whether Jackson Pollock’s claim to be a force of nature or Warhol’s desire to be a machine—the artist’s conception of the body and the relationship of that body to mind is central. Before examining this idea further, and in the context of Shusterman’s comments on the subject of the avant-garde and the application of these concerns to studio practice, let me state that the so-called myth of the suffering artist is hardly a myth at all. Historically, much of our greatest art does of course emerge in part from the extremes of human experience (ranging from ecstatic delight to existential horror) and much of that experience is not what we might conventionally think of as pleasant. Much of it is also rooted in the tangled depths of body-mind perception. Consider Cézanne’s solitudinous isolation and fear of being touched¹⁵, van Gogh’s mental illness, poverty, and episodes of self-directed physical violence¹⁶, and Michelangelo’s lifelong somatic struggles between the spiritual and the erotic in his depictions of the male nude—particularly his late crucifixion drawings. The embodiment, in these drawings, of agonized uncertainty with how to depict this (for him) most sacred event while remaining true to his resonant identification with suffering and sexualized flesh is palpably evident in his highly focused and excruciatingly physical engagement with his materials.¹⁷ In part because of this long association of creativity with pain, it is not uncommon for artists to fear “treatment” for their sufferings as they often are convinced (perhaps rightly) that the muse whispers best in darkness.¹⁸

Whatever the case for individual creative practice, it may be less important here to concern ourselves with how artists create (the complex interrelationship of health, psychosis, awareness, and inspiration) than how our psychosomatic mindfulness affects our sensitivity to the art object (and the experience of making) and our confidence to trust that response even under the weight of what are sometimes diametrically opposed art-world pressures. And there are pressures—particularly for students and especially when they seek meaningful direction

about how to judge art and artists and seek existent validation (economic valuation¹⁹, critical review, popularity, etc.) to help them make these judgments. Again, I would argue that a consideration of somaesthetic awareness might provide some guidance. The complexity in the art studio of balancing acute somatic awareness (and the limits of what it is physically possible to be aware of²⁰) with the goal of the immediate response, “being in the moment”, Zen no-mind, or the trance-like fugue-state achieved when one is fully immersed in the act of making art²¹ is well (if indirectly) addressed by Shusterman, particularly in his chapter, *Deeper into the Storm Center, The Somatic Philosophy of William James*. While his concern is not, of course, the studio practice of artists²², his analysis is directly applicable to such educational issues as the frequent paucity of skill, among art students, for rigorously focused attention during sustained drawing and painting sessions wherein a certain physical and mindful endurance is necessary, and the frequent valuing of the quick, visceral gesture to the exclusion of the highly developed and thoughtfully contemplated work.²³ A more complex issue—the devaluing of basic, let alone advanced, drawing and painting skills in deference to the notion of art as idea and a trading in signs rather than direct visual-aesthetic experience of created objects—might also be addressed by beginning with questions of how the artist conceives *what the self is*. Additionally, if what is sought are visual traces of rigorous introspection, the artist’s body-mind must be well prepared to fully explore and experience the real potency of art making and to be psychologically and physically well enough to experience genuine vulnerability and nakedness and transubstantiate that experience into a physical work of art. Such efforts and questions invariably raise nuanced notions of body-mind that can be usefully probed not only through thoughtful studio practice, but also via the sort of regimented introspection encouraged by James, as well as by exploring some of the recent scientific research into the interwoven nature of mind, body, perception, and will. So—why bother with all of this effort at self-awareness and understanding? Does such heightened consciousness interfere with the artist’s individuality and creative flow?²⁴ Consider the role of words and images in heightening perceptual acuity. James argues that naming something helps us to be more acutely and fully aware of all of the qualities of that thing (just as, for instance, learning a bit about botany and avian taxonomic classifications helps us notice more acutely the differences between flowers or birds) (BC, p. 164). Shusterman also notes “T.S. Eliot argued that the poet’s role, by forging new language, is to help us feel things that could not otherwise be felt” (BC, p. 164). Drawing or painting an object from life does this as well—as does writing and reading poetry. All of these careful efforts at paying attention provide us with a more complex visual-verbal vocabulary and allows us to better perceive and remember our impressions. Combining words with visual images in describing a thing can further nurture our awareness. For example, I found that after reading Leonardo da Vinci’s copious notes on how light is perceived after its complex journey reflecting and refracting its way through variously opaque and transparent leaves of assorted species of trees,²⁵ I not only noticed the differences between trees more easily, but I drew the trees more accurately and engagingly as well.

Two examples of interactions from my own experience, one with a fellow artist, the other with a student, might help to further illustrate and address how these concerns apply to studio practice as artist and teacher:

One evening, a sculptor and I were engaged in a discussion of the various points of intersection of art, science, and the theory and experience of perception—and questions eventually arose about the nature of an artist’s physical and psychological relationship with his or her materials. She spoke of the sculptor, like the potter, as being deeply and materially involved in the very physical stuff of sculpting – clay, dirt, plaster, etc. I offered that painting is also a very physical act and, while pictures may be geometrically shallow, a painter’s somatic relationship to oil and pigment, to chalk gesso and charcoal, is deep—that my materials have innate psychological and physical resonance and a capacity to embody a palpable sense of self and my body’s very kinetic and sensitive act of painting. My sculptor smiled and dismissed my claim with a wave of her hand and, walking away, declared, “Painting is all about the mind”. I was frustrated and wanted to protest. What of painting as embodiment of ecstasy, fugue-trance, self-dissolution and oneness of mind, body, and environment? What about Apelles’ weighty line or Pollock’s drips? What of Rembrandt’s intensely somatic and probing psychological presence in the viscous muck of his very painterly self-portraits? What about painters as some sort of latter-day alchemists seeking the philosopher’s stone in the goo of a disorderly studio? Her response, I think, as amusingly teasing as it was meant to be, is rooted not in twentieth century movements of conceptual art—wherein the term ‘painting’ has frequently been used to cover actions that not only do not involve skillfully or even individually and originally created imagery but sometimes do not even involve paint—but rather in Leonardo da Vinci’s *paragone* arguments justifying the superiority of painting and its rightful place as one of the liberal arts and his derision of sculptors as “brutes” who practice their craft “through great bodily exertion...generally accompanied by great sweat which mingles with the dust and is converted into mud” (da Vinci, 1989, p. 38) while painters paint to “the accompaniment of music or the company of great authors of various fine works that can be heard with great pleasure without the crashing of hammers and other confused noises” (p. 39) In fairness, Leonardo was trying to elevate painting to a position above mere craft and recognize the complex mental labor and insight involved in great art even if it meant disparaging sculpture (and Michelangelo) in the process. What is particularly telling is that Leonardo’s argument used the *physicality* of sculpting to demean sculptors

whereas my sculptor used the same claim to argue for sculpture's immediacy and authenticity.

In an advanced figure drawing and anatomy course (which included a mix of graduate and undergraduate students) I frequently discussed reproductions of drawings from various periods to make particular points about style, technique, concepts, etc. We also investigated, as part of our anatomical study, the nature of perception and the relationship of mind, body, and image. During a discussion of the somatic nature of drawing as evidenced in the sensitive use of inflected contour lines, I used examples of drawings by several artists including Michelangelo, Pontormo, Rembrandt, Matisse, and others. The Michelangelo drawings were given particular emphasis. While the discussion seemed generally fruitful, one of the students was agitated by it and expressed her irritation by claiming that, "Michelangelo does nothing for me." As our discussion continued, it was evident that her objections were numerous and we tried to address them as a group. Among them were the following: A contra-canon attitude—stamps of approval issued prior to our times are irrelevant; A disregard of any possibility of a claim for an even arguably objectively "great" drawing, whatever that might mean; Annoyance that what I emphasized as admirable in Michelangelo's drawing seemed to be lacking in her own (albeit differently) accomplished work; A dismissal of the importance of traditional skill, generally, in contemporary practice (it is the concept that matters, execution and manifestation of the idea as object is secondary); Evident skepticism about what can actually be taught in art school and how one is later validated as a teaching-artist or artist generally; And a genuine astonishment at my claim that there might be something deeply resonant about Michelangelo's engagement with his materials and subject that might transcend boundaries of time and ostensible subject. In short, my student seemed uncomprehending of why these drawings might be considered "great" or even usefully instructive. Her concerns were (and remain) complex and are not simple to address. They might also have been intensified by personal factors that I am not aware of. Still, they needed to be addressed in some fashion if we were to maintain a nurturing, productive, and stimulating educational atmosphere in the studio.

Underlying all of the above conflicts are particular assumptions (probably made unconsciously) about the nature of body and mind. If one conceives of the mind as somehow separable from the body or transcending it, then art can be purely about ideas (concepts) that are then illustrated in order to communicate them²⁶. Such assumptions display a lack of sensitivity to—or skepticism about—the psychosomatic relationship an artist might have with

her materials. My student seemed to assume that art as practiced was separable from art as physically formed—i.e. that image-making is only trivially related to actual practice or perception. Physical attunement with media (and model) is irrelevant if art is only about mind and shared cultural references (conceptual place-markers or signs referring to some outside thing rather than artwork as the thing itself). And that assumption is possible only if mind is somehow autonomous—existing separately from body. The increasingly prevalent attitude in the so-called commercial art world, and the ubiquitous treatment of art as mere fashion-driven commodity, only serves to exacerbate the problem. If art matters at all—and I would assert that it does—then it matters as a means for individuals to embody some sense of the human condition—*of the artist's condition, of an individual's sense of what it is to be*—in a particular medium and make their investigations and experience thereby visible to others. What was needed in the situation with my students was to discover some common ground upon which we could all stand and view the drawings of Michelangelo —tempered by the fact that our respective roles were not quite as peers but as presumed authority figure engaged with the next dissatisfied and questioning generation—and to develop an understood vocabulary with which to discuss them. In order to find this common ground, we might need first to encourage, through our studio practice of drawing from life, a deeply somatic response to the model and embody that response on the paper by physically mimicking, as we draw, the act of seeing and of touch. Before developing this idea of somatic response further—and considering the role it might play in engendering empathy—let us revisit the interaction with my sculptor colleague.

In this case, it seemed that we were each approaching the conversation in a barely contemporized version of Leonardo's old *paragone* defense. Instead of seeking and finding shared territory, (and then being mutually illuminated by the differences) we each sought to defend our aesthetic region and treat art as a competitive field rather than a mutually interested investigation of phenomenological experience and an existentially subjective probing of the human condition. What was lost in the disagreement was the fact that we were *both* arguing for the importance of somatic engagement but somehow stumbled on our respective assumptions about the mind's relationship to the body and the role this assumption plays, however unconsciously, in making and responding to art. What was needed was the encouragement of authentic aesthetic and experiential empathy—between teacher and student, between living and dead artists, between a painter and a sculptor. Somaesthetic philosophy—coupled with a substantial understanding of art history and studio practice—can provide a useful framework for constructing the shared ground needed in both of the above cases as well as a basic methodology with which to proceed. What is not desired, in either case, is the exacerbation of difference and the subsequent descent into radical and incommunicable subjectivity. What is desired is the effort to achieve substantive communication—both directly through the given mediums as ways of thinking and through the requisite accompanying verbal dialogue. Perhaps, given our powerfully shared evolutionary heritage as perceiving and

conscious beings, we might be able to discover an articulable commonality in our shared somatic experience of art.

...

In traditional Chinese and Japanese ink painting in the Chan/Zen and Daoist spirit²⁷, an artist's physical and mental preparation to paint is as much a part of the aesthetic act as painting itself. The artist (often following years of rigorous studio training in making tools and materials and perfecting prescribed techniques of representation) begins a session with quiet meditation—sitting and breathing mindfully²⁸—and continues to meditate via the act of grinding fresh black ink, a substance that was identified with “the root of all colours, the root of all forms, the undifferentiated substance of which the world consists,” an activity which “brought them close to the ground of visible being” (Rawson, 1969, p. 73). This contemplative focus continues through the act of painting and writing (image and word are largely indivisible), usually in quickly executed, deftly sensitive brushstrokes. The result, at its best, is a visceral, visual delight and the viewer is able to feel, via a kind of somatic mirroring, the body motions of the artist's gesture and mental state, both of which serve to underscore or embody the purported narrative or mood of the picture. Additionally, the viewer is drawn into a complex symbol-system rooted, as is Chinese language itself, in sign and metaphorical-poetic thought. These contemplative acts continue long after (sometimes centuries) the work leaves the artist's studio as the various possessors of these works add their own poems and comments on to the surface of the work itself—a record of thoughtful provenance and meditative tradition that serves to add to the work's cultural history and increase its worth. This practice may seem a very foreign conception of art and artists to Westerners, (imagine the happy owner of a Vermeer scribbling his or her thoughtful interpretations upon the surface in indelible ink) and an analogously involved practice of deep contemplation may be too much to expect of American university art students in overly crowded classrooms and under the pressure of an academic schedule—but something of this approach can prove enlightening in the studio. Below, I will consider the somatic and psychological involvement of students in a life drawing class, such as the one I described above, with the model. First, however, consider the following advice to figure painters written by Leonardo da Vinci from his posthumously compiled and published treatise, *On Painting* (1989):

Posture is the first and most noble aspect of figure painting, in that not only is a well-painted figure in a bad posture disagreeable, but also a living figure of the highest quality of beauty loses its reputation when its actions are not adapted to the function they must perform. Certainly and without doubt, posture requires greater deliberation than does the degree of excellence of the painted figure, in that the quality of a figure may be gained by imitation from

life, but *the movement of such a figure is necessarily engendered by a talent of great discernment*. The good painter has to paint two principal things, that is to say, man and the intention of his mind. The first is easy and the second difficult, because the latter has to be represented through the gestures and movements of the limbs...The figure is most praiseworthy which best expresses through its actions the passion of its mind. The movement which is depicted must be appropriate to the mental state of the figure. It must be made with great immediacy, exhibiting in the figure great emotion and fervour, otherwise this figure will be deemed twice dead, inasmuch as it is dead because it is a depiction, and dead yet again in not exhibiting motion either of the mind or of the body. The motions and postures of figures should display the true mental state of the originator of these motions, in such a way that they could not signify anything else. The movements of men should be as required by their dignity or baseness. (pp. 144-46, italics are mine)

All right—but *how* does the artist and the viewer of art discern, by looking at a figure drawing (or painting) what is at work in the model’s and/or the artist’s mind? Again, mindfulness to our own somaesthetic experience as we draw or paint from life may help us internalize the action of the model, and compare it, via our own psychosomatic response, to what *our own bodies* do when we are in the mental state that we are trying to depict. The drawing—and the model’s pose—may then be adjusted to achieve a better fit. This effort at awareness and application, however, is more than the so-called “muscle memory” described by dancers and athletes. There is something anciently evolved and deeply physical going on when we draw. Friedrich Nietzsche (1887/1974) recognized this when he described consciousness as a “net of communication between human beings” (p. 298).

To understand another person, that is to imitate his feelings in ourselves, we... produce the feeling in ourselves by imitating with our own body the expression of his eyes, his voice, his walk, his bearing (or even their reflection in word, picture, music). Then a similar feeling arises in us in consequence of an ancient association between movement and sensation. We have brought our skill in understanding the feelings of others to a high state of perfection and in the presence of another person we are almost involuntarily practicing this skill. (Nietzsche, 1881/1982, p. 89)

Following Nietzsche’s logic, we might conclude that the mere act of looking at, say, a suffering figure in a painting, might actually cause us to suffer involuntarily through somatic identification. Further, in the spirit of Leonardo we might speculate that the best way to paint an expressive figure (especially a convincingly emotional face), is to feel the emotion oneself—to somatically internalize it and allow that feeling to be externalized via the act of

painting²⁹. Shusterman is cautious, however, about accepting what he calls “Nietzsche’s hyperbolic somaticism,” (BC, p. 52) and considers William James to have “given much more careful attention to body consciousness,” (p. 135) (about this he is probably correct—especially regarding James’ idea of consciousness as existing in a ceaseless state of flux and with a “pervasively somatic dimension” p. 142³⁰) but his objections to Nietzsche’s ideas might be tempered—and his praise of James reinforced—by considering the ongoing neurological research (especially of primates) into the mirror neurons found in the pre-motor cortex and their integral role in somatically-modeled learning. These neurons “become active both when the subject performs a particular action—grasping a nut by the fingers for example—and when he sees another individual doing the very same thing”, raising the strong possibility that there may be “‘sensory mirror neurons’, in other words neurons that link the *observation of someone else having a sensation* to the *execution of a similar sensation oneself*” (Humphrey, 2006, p. 104-06).³¹ This possibility—that we literally feel what others feel by watching them³²—raises profoundly interesting questions about the nature of human social behavior—particularly regarding empathy—that might further inform Shusterman’s concerns with how heightened somaesthetic awareness can actually help to improve our relationships with others. Additionally, research into the existence of such mirroring capacities may have something to teach us about what is happening in the brains of artists as they draw and paint from life and how the resulting works resonant somatically-emotionally with their viewers.

In various parts of his text, Shusterman raises issues, particularly related to conceptions of the nature of consciousness, perception, and the self that might be usefully augmented by comparing his philosophical investigations of these matters with the results of recent scientific research that addresses overlapping concerns. His chapter on William James and somatic introspection, in particular, might have benefited from including further evidence from perceptual science about vision as contextually comparative (see BC, p. 161), an expanded discussion of the so-called free will experiments (p. 148-49), and the nature of neural traces being left even by the above-mentioned Jamesian “flux of experience” (See page 142 – this last raises intriguing issues not only about the nature of consciousness per say, but even issues regarding how talk therapy does and does not work.) Shusterman does refer, however, to the research of neurologist Antonio Damasio, et al in his discussion of James’ view of the somatic dimension of consciousness (p. 142-143). My criticism is thus a gentle one as responding effectively to it would have necessitated a much longer book. That said, I do think that the further integration of somaesthetic philosophy and cognitive science might lend support to Shusterman’s arguments as well as provide stimulus for further interdisciplinary study and more varied application.

Bearing all of this in mind, let us return to our discussion of art students in the studio and consider how heightened somaesthetic awareness might influence our teaching. Consider the students’ posture—are they seated, standing, hunched over or erect? Depending upon their

posture, their position relative to the model, the placement of their drawing board, and the scale of the drawing itself, the muscle groups available to move and freely engage vary. It is difficult, at best, to make weight-inflected, sensually informed gestures freely when one is sitting cross-legged in a chair hunched over a drawing board. If the artist is instead standing at an easel that has been placed to the handed side (to the right or left) and in such a way that it is easy to look from model to paper with little need to move or turn the head, then a much freer engagement in the act of drawing is possible. Such a standing posture frees not only the hands, but allows the use of arm and back muscles and encourages the sort of stepping back to look that is essential to lucid visual judgment. Drawing is a somatic act, after all—a dance—and one that requires a certain physical and mental endurance if one is to be fully engaged. Posture plays a crucial role in maximizing the potential range of this engagement. Further—the greater the range of physical movement and muscle use that the artist has herself experienced, the better her ability to internalize and, via the act of drawing, embody the felt pose of the model. Shusterman, in his chapter on James, references at some length how James' athleticism informed his philosophy of the body, just as Shusterman's own somaesthetic philosophy has been informed by his experience in meditation and his practice of the Feldenkrais method. I would argue that, without the deep physicality of their experience to inform their perceptions, both James and Shusterman (as well as Foucault, as discussed above) would have structured their thought very differently. This is true of visual artists working with the body as well. My own practice of martial arts, for example, has deeply enriched my awareness not only of my body's range of possibilities (of extensions and limits of balance, strength, speed, endurance, etc.) but has extended my capacity to feel the bodies of my models psychosomatically as I paint and draw—in part because of the heightened and immediate awareness one must maintain *of the other's body* when sparring. My capacity for empathically embodied drawing is further enhanced by my somatically embedded memories of touching and of being touched, of passion and restraint. Just as a skilled and experienced violinist unconsciously presses down, draws, and eases up with the bow in a fully, physically engaged sensitivity to the emotional potency of sound, the artist presses, lifts, and draws the charcoal across and into the page in a visually traced re-experiencing of the act of touch. Consider too—not only as artists and educators but also as parents—how somatic awareness (of self and, via somatic mirroring, of others) combined with an externally projected inner tranquility can help us achieve our immediate goals. When putting a restless child to bed or getting him dressed, for instance, issuing commands and/or expressing our own frustrations via sighs or raised voices only exacerbates the conflict whereas calm somatic modeling rooted in a letting go of self can serve to calm the child—or the student. This is also why physical demonstration in, say, a drawing or painting class is so essential. Evidence has mounted recently—particularly, again, through the mirror neuron studies mentioned above—that we learn first and well by watching and somatically internalizing the physical behavior of others. As my students—and my children—watch me draw, they literally feel themselves drawing and unconsciously practice the skill before even picking up a pencil.

The point is that simple training and awareness of the body-mind relationship and the encouraging of greater somatic awareness can be of great use to artists. This awareness can also help us transfer skills between disciplines. Knowing, for example, how the eye works (having anatomical understanding of the physical structure of the eye coupled with knowledge of the nature of perception) can affect my ability to intensify my own visual acuity and probity. Learning—as I did through my childhood experience spending rapt and chilly hours looking through a telescope attempting to perceive and split faint double stars—that I can see detail best by centering my focus on my fovea, but that in order to detect faint contrasts in luminosity I am better served by slightly averting my focus onto the peripheral region of my retina, I became more consciously aware of my visual abilities and better able to make unconscious use of my eyes in all circumstances. This early skill has greatly enhanced my visual acuity as a painter and in my daily perception of the world. Wittgenstein noted that drawing employs “a language without grammar,” as we cannot say “what its rules are” (1984, p. 75). That may be, but certainly we can, through greater somaesthetic awareness and heightened visual acuity, develop more profoundly our ability as artists to embody via the act of drawing and painting, even our subjectively felt and ultimately ineffable experiences. This embodiment of directly experienced engagement with perception—of beauty, of pain, of strange wonder and exacting observation—as not only a mental but also a physical act is one of the most essential functions of art.

...

In my studio practice— as both artist and educator—I emphasize the idea that art is an ontological pursuit rather than a mere profession. The art of living well, as Shusterman stresses throughout his book, is the most significant art, and being an artist is ideally living one’s life *as a work of art*. Not, as in the case of Salvador Dalí, as a sort of surrealist performance piece, but rather as an authentically aesthetic and mindful approach to living. Failure, as Wittgenstein and Giacometti’s incessant self-doubts remind us, is intrinsic to this effort, but a cultivated and heightened awareness of our body-mind can help us refocus when necessary. Self-awareness and the viewing of the self not as autonomous free agent but as a permeable entity in a larger (and often mysterious, exhilarating, and sometimes frightening) world are important components of artistic and philosophical practice and are, indeed, something of ends in themselves.³³ Consider the value of Gaston Bachelard’s phenomenological ideals set out in *The Poetics of Space*, in which he investigates the profound somatic resonances we have with objects and environments—so profound that they shape our very being. In grappling, for instance, with the seeming inexpressibility of our body-mind response to the “intimate immensity” of the forest or the sea, he turns to poetry and says, “...for Baudelaire, the word *vast* is a vocal value. It is a word that is *pronounced*, never only read, never only seen in the objects to which it is attached... The word *vast* is a vocable of breath... the word *vast* evokes calm, peace, and serenity” (1964, p. 196).

Bachelard's description itself evokes the Upanisadic idea of the sacred syllable, AUM, as a vocalized embodiment of the fourfold aspects of being³⁴. It is a sound—like Bachelard's *vast*, that when uttered, chanted, has a rhythmic, somatically calming effect. Wittgenstein (1984) asserted, "I think I summed up my attitude to philosophy when I said: philosophy ought really to be written only as a *poetic composition*" (p. 24).³⁵ Poetry is meant to be read aloud, paintings are meant to be seen in person and in a context conducive to calm, focused attention. We need to be mindful of our somatic responses to the places we physically and psychologically inhabit³⁶ and in which we create—our homes, studios, and classrooms—in order to better shape them to encourage the sort of activity or thought that we wish to take place therein.³⁷ Richard Shusterman's attention to somaesthetics— to our breathing, heart rate, posture, and perception³⁸—in order to become more aware of our internal state before it is unconsciously externalized via our actions, is important, indeed essential to healthy living. In closing, recall Foucault's question, "Why should a painter work if he is not transformed by his own painting?" (BC, p. 47) This is not mere self-involvement or idealistic hyperbole, but an ethical imperative—our actions are who we are and this modeling of self is our way of being in the world, is our most important teaching.

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About the Reviewer

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Notes

¹ Valéry, Paul. *Dialogues. Dance and the Soul*. William McCausland Stewart, trans. Bollingen Series XLV, 4, 1956. pp. 53, 62.

² Merleau-Ponty. *The Primacy of Perception. Eye and Mind*. Northwestern University Press. 1964. p.162

³ Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Culture and Value* p.12

⁴ All further references to this book will be indicated as BC.

⁵ For the purposes of this essay—and because I am a painter—I will primarily focus my attention of the art of painting (and drawing). Much of what I am writing is, presumably, applicable to other arts as well.

⁶ The body-mind relationship (and the inevitably linked concerns about the nature of consciousness and perception) is an ever-expanding cross-disciplinary field. Among the many better-known recent (non-technical) books addressing the subject see, for example: Daniel Dennett, *Consciousness Explained*; Nicholas Humphrey, *Seeing Red: A Study in Consciousness*; V.S. Ramachandran and Sandra Blakeslee, *Phantoms in the Brain: Probing the Mysteries of the Human Mind*; and Sharon Begley, *Train Your Mind Change Your Brain*.

⁷ See the writings of Dōgen in: *How to Raise an Ox: Zen Practice as Taught in Master Dōgen's Shobogenzo*, and *Moon in a Dewdrop: Writings of Zen Master Dōgen*.

⁸ “There are nowadays professors of philosophy, but not philosophers. Yet it is admirable to profess because it was once admirable to live.” As quoted by Shusterman (1997, p. 270) from Henry David Thoreau, *Walden*.in *The Portable Thoreau*. Thoreau goes on to say, “To be a philosopher is not merely to have subtle thoughts, nor even to found a school, but so to love wisdom as to live according to its dictates, a life of simplicity, independence, magnanimity, and trust. It is to solve some of the problems of life, not only theoretically, but practically.” Thoreau, H. D. (2004). *Walden* (Jeffrey S. Cramer, Ed.) New Haven: Yale University Press, p.14.

⁹ “Artists are neurologists, studying the brain with techniques that are unique to them...” Zeki, S. (1999). Art and the brain. *Journal of Consciousness Studies*, 6(6-7), p. 80. In Zeki’s book *Inner vision: An exploration of art and the brain* (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 1999) Zeki introduces the term *neuro-aesthetics* to describe his arena of inquiry (p. 2). He also describes “the function of art” as “an extension of the function of the brain—the seeking of knowledge in an ever-changing world” (p.12).

¹⁰ For a deeply erudite and beautifully written meditation on the body-mind relationship of painters and paint, see Albus, A. (2000). *The art of arts: Rediscovering painting*. N.Y.: Knopf. For a quirky but fascinating effort to use the language of alchemy to discuss the oil painter's relationship with his or her materials, see Elkins, J. (1999). *What painting is*. N.Y.: Routledge.

¹¹ This reliance, as Shusterman notes, on ever-greater intensity, eventually results in a diminished capacity to experience pleasure for, at some point, what sort of experience is left? What boundaries have yet to be violated? Donald Kuspit, in his recent book, *The End of Art*, has argued that Marcel Duchamp reached a similar plateau once the question of what may or may not be art—let alone the Kantian questions about art and beauty—had itself been made irrelevant by the general acceptance of the art world of his *Fountain* as a work of art. Still, Duchamp argued *for* the work of art as declared by an artist (and validated by its public) whereas Warhol later set out to destroy the very concept not only of a work of art as a privileged object but the very notion of the artist as any sort of unique entity at all. Warhol declared himself as “superficial” and his so-called art as existing only on the surface—“there is no there, there”. Consider, for instance, Warhol's comment, “If you want to know all about Andy Warhol, just look at the surface: of my paintings and films and me, and there I am. There's nothing behind it.” (As quoted in *Andy Warhol: A Retrospective*. NY Museum of Modern Art, 1989, p. 457.) Warhol's hostility to introspection and to aesthetic experience generally as well as to the culturally and psychologically unique place that art was previously perceived to occupy (however tentatively) is deep and the consequences of his legacy profound.

¹² On Foucault's thoughts on suicide as pleasure, Shusterman seems to skirt the genuinely pathological issues involved in suicidal ideation and attempts. Suicide, whatever else it may be in particular cases, is very often a kind of cascade failure of self-identity – a loss of separation between the conserved self that wills its survival and the other or outside that exists as threat or judge. There is also a powerful will—that seems, at the crucial moment of suicide, intensely rational—to end the psychological pain and quick-mounting fear of complete dissolution. Shusterman seems here to indulge too easily Foucault's seemingly distancing romanticism about self-destruction – behavior that may well be rooted in an inability to achieve somatic and psychological calm or even a consistent moment-to-moment sense of an integrated self. Actual attempts at suicide often occur at moments when the suicide feels most isolated and without outlet for internal suffering—coupled with the sense that whatever immediate relief might be available the pain and fragmentation is destined to recur. Shusterman's attitude here seems somewhat at odds with his general intent as philosopher (and his practice as Feldenkrais practitioner) to help others and to improve the general health of the self. For further discussion from varied viewpoints see John Miller, (Ed.), *On Suicide*.

¹³ See these books by Georges Bataille, *Erotism: Death and Sensuality*, *The Tears of Eros*, and *Story of the Eye*.

¹⁴ For two stimulating and contrasting discussions of the impact of Duchamp's and Warhol's life and work on today's art world see Donald Kuspit, *The End of Art* and Arthur Danto, *After the End of Art* as well as Thierry de Duve, *Kant After Duchamp*. Intriguingly, Kuspit identifies the ultimate theme in Warhol's work as *oblivion* – and oblivion itself as a “characteristically urban” quality. I would add that the work of contemporary artist Jeff Koons (and its accompanying and highly divisive critical reception) is symptomatic of our general period of decadence in art and what might be thought of as a kind of endemic resignation to

earlier, mid-twentieth century assertions of art's powerlessness. See, for example, Jed Perl's recent editorial in *The New Republic*, *Postcards from Nowhere* (http://www.tnr.com/story_print.html?id=b24ee3a8-6d78-478f-9b95-a5b031d003c5) and Donald Kuspit's *The Dialectic of Decadence*.

¹⁵ "(In Aix a child once hit [Cézanne] as he passed by; after that he could not bear any contact.) One day when Cézanne was quite old, Emile Bernard steadied him as he stumbled. Cézanne flew into a rage. He could be heard striding around his studio and shouting that he wouldn't let anybody "get his hooks into me."'" As quoted in Merleau-Ponty (1994), *Cézanne's doubts*. In G. A. Johnson and m. B. Smith, (Eds.), *The Merleau-Ponty aesthetics reader: Philosophy and Painting*. Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, p 60.

¹⁶ See the very illuminating collection, *The Complete Letters of Vincent van Gogh*, 3 volumes.

¹⁷ Of the numerous extant versions of Michelangelo's crucifixion drawings, among the most powerful are those in the Louvre and in The British Museum. It is instructive to compare the Louvre *non-finito* sketches, riddled as they are with tortured *pentimenti*, to the beautiful, if more conventionally finished, British Museum "presentation drawing" of the crucifixion that Michelangelo executed in preparation for a painting commissioned by his patron Vittoria Colonna. Vasari commented on the drawing: "One sees the body not abandoned to fall like dead, but as if living, through bitter suffering arousing itself and writhing." (Web Gallery of Art, Retrieved on June 25, 2008 <http://www.wga.hu/index1.html>)

¹⁸ See Kay Redfield Jamison, *Touched With Fire: Manic Depressive Illness and the Artistic Temperament* and Rudolf and Margot Wittkower, *Born Under Saturn: The Character and Conduct of Artists*.

¹⁹ See, for example, the recent book review by economics professor Tyler Cowen in The New York Sun, *Bubbles, Booms, and Busts: The Art Market in 2008*: <http://www.nysun.com/arts/bubbles-booms-and-busts-the-art-market-in-2008/81581>

²⁰ See Shusterman. BC pp. 204-205 for a discussion of John Dewey's arguments regarding the limitations of self-awareness and how "qualitative immediate feeling provides the underlying unity necessary for the coherence of *all* out thinking." Also see Shusterman (1997), *Practicing Philosophy*, pp. 162-166.

²¹ "That which makes and that which is made are indivisible" See Wallace Stevens (1956), *Two Prefaces* from Paul Valéry, *Dialogues, Eupalinos* (William McCausland Stewart, Trans.), Bollingen Series XLV, 4, p.xiii. Also see Valéry's *Dance and the Soul* for a poetically rich investigation of the body's central role in aesthetic experience.

²² Though it is interesting to note that William James began his career by training as an artist ("art is my vocation" James claimed at the age of eighteen) which Shusterman argues as one of the reasons for his "intense interest in the body and his keen sensitivity to its expressive role in mental and moral life" (BC, p. 136)

²³ In recent years, there has been a spate of criticism devoted to the longing for the smell of linseed oil in the art school once again. In my own experience teaching a multi-leveled course in the materials and techniques of painting—wherein we make oil paint, pastels, frescos, egg tempera, etc. literally from scratch, even digging red earth and transforming it into useable pigment and paint—I have found students voracious for a sophisticated knowledge of and skill with materials (even in the tradition of van Eyck or Rembrandt) not so much for the sheer knowledge per say but for the dramatically broadened range of expressive possibilities that accompanies such skills.

²⁴ For an interesting exploration of heightened consciousness and creativity see E. F. N. Jephcott, *Proust and Rilke: The Literature of Expanded Consciousness*.

²⁵ Leonardo da Vinci (1989). *Leonardo on Painting* (Martin Kemp, Ed.). New Haven: Yale University Press, pp. 176-189.

²⁶ This issue might remind us of Einstein's use of visualization—the *gedankenexperiment*—to puzzle his way through troubling issues of the nature of light. He claims to have had the essential framing of relativity theory largely formed in his own mind before ever noting it down through the communicable (and testable) language of mathematics. See Albert Einstein, *Ideas and Opinions*.

²⁷ For in-depth explorations of traditional Asian painting see: Steven Addis, *The Art of Zen*; John Cahill, *The Painter's Practice: How Artists Lived and Worked in Traditional China*; Yang Xin, et al, *Three Thousand Years of Chinese Painting*; Jerome Silvergeld, *Chinese Painting Style: Media, Methods, and Principles of Form*; and the magisterial tome, Wen C. Fong and James C. Y. Watt, *Possessing the Past: Treasures from the National Palace Museum, Taipei* as well as the classic, first published in 1679, *The Mustard Seed Garden Manual Of Painting*.

²⁸ It is interesting to consider here the recent and numerous brain studies done on meditating Buddhist Monks (see, for example, James Austin, *Zen and the Brain: Toward an Understanding of Meditation and Consciousness*, and the more recent studies performed by neuroscientist Richard Davidson of the University of Wisconsin, Madison in cooperation with the Dalai Lama among others. Among the more intriguing findings was that, at the reported peak of their meditation, the monks' brains displayed a dramatic reduction of activity in the brain region associated with an awareness of what is "I" versus "not I." Patients with injury to this region experience extreme difficulty performing even the most mundane tasks such as getting into bed or grasping small objects as they have no clear sense of where their body ends and the outside world begins. The monks, upon achieving a shutting down of activity in this cortical region, report experiencing a dissolution of the self and a blissful sense of oneness with the cosmos. I suspect that a similar alteration in brain activity may be involved during painting or drawing (or dancing, sculpting, etc) while the artist experiences a seeming forgetting of the self in the trance-like fugue-state of fully immersed activity. I can report numerous such occasions in my own studio practice. Particularly notable was an intense and self-consuming stint of painting for some sixteen hours during which I could not later recall a single verbal thought and felt a loss of all sense of self, yet executed many highly complex decisions about painting. I emerged from this state feeling faint with hunger and fatigue, and strangely without clear memories of my thoughts—but with an acute and lingering somatic resonance from my actions.

²⁹ For an in-depth examination of human expression see: Paul Ekman, *Emotions Revealed, Second Edition: Recognizing Faces and Feelings to Improve Communication and Emotional Life*.

³⁰ Also note Shusterman's comparison of James' ideas to the current research of neurologist Antonio Damasio.

³¹ Nicholas Humphrey's theory of the bodily roots of consciousness—especially his careful elucidation of the difference between sensation and perception—is a fascinating and humbling reminder of how little we really know about the actual nature of mind. It is also instructive to contrast his remarks on Nietzsche (p.104-105), which informed some of what I referenced

here, with Shusterman's. See also: Marco Iacoboni, *Mirroring People: The New Science of How We Connect with Others*.

³² Humphrey also notes, “[Neurosurgeon] Bill Hutchison has described neurons in the anterior cingulate cortex that respond both when a human subject receives a painful stimulus such as a pinprick and also when the subject observes someone else receiving a pinprick” (2006, p. 106)

³³ Shusterman describes Dewey, in *Art as Experience*, as insisting that “the mere fact that something serves as means does not entail that it cannot be enjoyed as an end” (BC, p. 211).

³⁴ See S. Radakrishnan, *The Principal Upanisads*.

³⁵ Wittgenstein, *Culture and Value* p.24 Shusterman refers to this quote both in his *Practicing Philosophy and in BC*.

³⁶ Consider Christopher Alexander's books on architecture and the problems of dehumanization inherent in some modernist ideas of design—e.g. *The Timeless Way of Building* and *A Pattern Language*, and Rudolf Arnheim, *The Dynamics of Architectural Form*.

³⁷ “Working in philosophy – like work in architecture in many respects – is really more a working on oneself. On one's own interpretation. On one's way of seeing things. (And what one expects of them.)” (Wittgenstein, 1984, p.16).

³⁸ Are we, with William James, afraid *because we run* from the bear or do we run *because we are afraid*?

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