

## VI

### AESTHETIC EMBODIMENT<sup>1</sup>

A body, by its simple force, and in its act, is powerful enough to alter the nature of things more profoundly than ever the mind in its speculations and dreams was able to do!<sup>2</sup>

#### **Embodied appreciation**

Aesthetic appreciation has typically been described as an act of consciousness, a certain, distinctive sort of consciousness. Such an account is not only inadequate but distorted, for there is no consciousness without body, no disembodied consciousness. If an aesthetic is to be non-dualistic, it must proceed differently.

How, then, is body involved in aesthetic activity? Some of the ways are obvious, such as works that require the physical participation of the audience, as with sculptures that the observer must activate by moving, sitting, or manipulating something; Happenings; participatory theater; architecture; interactive art in all its forms and degrees. But there are still more subtle ways in which the human body is actively present and makes an essential contribution to the art work and its appreciation.

Aesthetic embodiment is a complex and many-faceted notion. What is embodiment?

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<sup>1</sup> Presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Society for Aesthetics, San Francisco, CA, 29 October 2003 and previously unpublished. I want to express my appreciation to Marina Kronkvist, who has suggested sources and ideas that have benefitted this chapter.

<sup>2</sup> Paul Valéry, 'Dance and the Soul', Eupalinos, in *Dialogues* (New York : Pantheon, 1956), Vol.4 of *Collected Works of Paul Valéry*, Bollingen Series XLV, p. 60.

What is it to understand the human being as body, without employing a physicalistic definition or assuming a mind-body division, for ‘pure’ body is as much a philosophical fiction as pure mind or simple sensation? A dualistic framing of the human presence in an aesthetic occasion is inherently misleading.

What unified renderings of embodiment are possible? One comes from the Tantric Buddhist tradition, where ‘body’ *is* ‘embodiment’.<sup>3</sup> Shaw expresses this vividly:

Exponents of the [Tantric] tradition ... write in depth and with precision about embodiment, which is understood to be not a “soul” in a “body” but rather a multilayered mind-body continuum of corporeality, affectivity, cognitivity, and spirituality whose layers are subtly interwoven and mutually interactive. This nonessentialist self is seen not as a boundaried or static entity but as the site of a host of energies, inner winds and flames, dissolutions, meltings, and flowings that can bring about dramatic transformations in embodied experience and provide a bridge between humanity and divinity. It is in the light of this model of a dynamic, permeable self without fixed boundaries that the Tantric Buddhist paradigm must be interpreted.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Herbert V. Guenther, *The Tantric View of Life* (Boulder and London: Shambala, 1976), p. 105. Guenther continues, ‘As such it is active and tendential. When we look at man in this way, we focus not so much on *what* he is but on *how* he acts’. pp. 105-106. Guenther quotes gNyiś-med Avadh©tipa: ‘“body” is a dynamic pattern, creative as embodiment, and not primarily the various organs’. *ibid.*, p. 111.

<sup>4</sup> Miranda Shaw, *Passionate Enlightenment, Women in Tantric Buddhism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994), p. 11.

Our Western tradition has done much to disembody art. Guenther notes that this tradition is concerned with ‘removing the work of art from the space and time of our experience and locating it in an ideal space, thereby enabling the spectator to look at it coldly from distance. In aesthetic perception the work of art remains alive; it calls out to be felt and touched, and each part of it is perceived as if it were for the moment all of the world, unique, desirable, perfect, not needing something other than itself in order to be itself. In this experience there is the warmth of closeness, not the coldness of distance’.<sup>5</sup>

One of the curious things about the idea of embodiment is that we have no word in English that conveys the fullness of meaning that is expressed inadequately by the term ‘human embodiment’. Embodiment is not somatic but includes a whole array of factors that are not merely peripheral but that incorporate culture, history, and personal experience. Such factors include facial expressions, posture, dress, personality, speech patterns and vocal inflections, and many others. This makes it important to distinguish between ‘body’ and ‘embodiment’.

### **Two senses of ‘embodiment’**

Literally, ‘embodiment’ derives from ‘in’ + ‘body’. Two of its meanings are useful here:

1. to put into a body; to invest or clothe (a spirit) with a body
4. to cause to become part of a body; to unite into a body.<sup>6</sup>

Embodiment in aesthetics is a complex notion that reflects both of these senses. In the first, the aura of physical presence is embedded in the art work. I have shown elsewhere how this occurs through a detailed examination of Debussy’s Prelude for piano, ‘La Cathédrale engloutie’, and

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<sup>5</sup> Guenther, *op. cit.*, p. 60.

<sup>6</sup> *Oxford English Dictionary*, (Oxford: At the Clarendon Press, 1933), Vol. III, p.109.

Wallace Stevens's poem, 'Peter Quince at the Clavier'.<sup>7</sup> In the first, the sunken cathedral is made present by the stately progression of chords built on the interval of a fifth and their bell-like resonance. Stevens's poem fuses a language of musical sounds, of the body, and of consciousness. The second, perhaps more direct sense of embodiment, occurs in the aesthetic response to art when the somatic participation of the appreciator is involved. This is commonly recognized in architecture, dance, and music, but it occurs, I think, on a more implicit and imaginative level, in other arts such as sculpture and literature.

Embodiment in the first sense is clearly present in what is called program music, music that explicitly depicts through melodic figures, rhythmic patterns, or texture the often directly physical experience of an action, event, or even an extended narrative. Thus the cock's crow in Saint-Saens's 'Danse Macabre' interrupts the skeletons's frenzied dance and sends them scurrying back into their graves, all depicted musically. The incessant musical motion in Dukas's 'The Sorcerer's Apprentice' easily conveys the compulsive activity in the tale and its physical exhaustion. Debussy's tone poem, 'La Mer', offers a auditory depiction of the atmospheric event of dawn breaking over the water. And Bach's tonal painting of the emotions and actions in the text of the requiem mass are vivid musical depictions of such things as falling tears.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Arnold Berleant, 'Musical Embodiment', *Tidskrift för kulturstudier (Journal of Cultural Studies)* 5, Summer 2001, 7-22. Reprinted as Ch. 11 'Embodied Music', in Arnold Berleant, *Aesthetics and Environment* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2002), pp. 143-155. This sense of embodiment is also relevant to questions concerning representation in the arts. See also Joyce Brodsky, 'How to "see" with the whole body', *Visual Studies*, 17/2 (2002), 99-112.

<sup>8</sup> This is related to but not the same as the theory of the affections (*affektenlehre*) influential in seventeenth and eighteenth century music whereby works were to be unified by a dominant emotion that was also to be excited in the listener. This first sense of embodiment implies a metaphysical claim and bears some resemblance to Orthodox iconography, in which the two-dimensional icon is considered a window through which the worshiper can encounter the

This sense of embodiment leads to re-thinking the meaning of representation in the arts, for example in portrait and landscape painting. Moreover, the significance of embodiment here extends beyond the aesthetic realm. Religious and political beliefs are often embodied so that a challenge to them evokes what is perceived as a mortal threat and may lead to a violent response.

The second meaning of ‘embodiment’ conveys the active presence of the human body in appreciative experience. This is more easily seen in some cases than in others. In aesthetics much depends on which art one takes as paradigmatic. Most often the choice has been painting. This has led to concepts and problems that have seemed integral to aesthetics but are really partial to that art: distance, disinterestedness, framing, and representation. Painting encourages an analytic, intellectualist, contemplative response, whereas other arts lead in different directions. Music, film, and perhaps literature, for example, are arts of immersion and suggest engagement theory.<sup>9</sup> Unlike painting, the three-dimensionality and physicality of sculpture emphasize bodily presence, and even more so does dance. In this sense, human experience is embodied in art and given sensuous form. Purcell’s ‘Dido’s Lament’ embodies the experience of grief. We not only undergo it; we actively engage with it as we grieve with Dido.

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heavenly archetype of the saint that is depicted.

<sup>9</sup> Here is Eudora Welty in *Delta Wedding* (ch. 2):

‘In that moment he enacted an entire complicated house for the butterfly [that he had been watching] inside his sleepy body. It was very strange but she had felt it. She had then known something he knew all along, it seemed then, that when you felt, touched, heard, looked at things in the world and found their fragrances, they themselves made a sort of house within you, which filled with life to hold them, filled with knowledge all by itself. And all else, the other ways to know, seemed calculation and tyranny.’

‘How can we know the dancer from the dance?’ Yeats asks.<sup>10</sup> The human body moves largely through actions and responses that are often untutored and preconscious and carry with them organic and often erotic associations. We embody art in appreciative experience, and this second sense of embodiment, to become part of the human body, has a lot to tell us about aesthetic appreciation. Let us follow Yeats’s poetic insight and take dance as our model.<sup>11</sup>

Dance is the quintessential performing art: Something is actualized directly and immediately. Laban identified this as gesture, movement that is conscious and goal-directed, that takes place between tension and release.<sup>12</sup> Dance clarifies and intensifies the organic experience of vital movement that is true of all experience. The sense of immediacy that action has in dance conveys a feeling of freedom. This is an action that, as Merce Cunningham observes, ‘is so intense, that for the brief moment involved, the mind and body are one’.<sup>13</sup>

In a vital dance performance, moreover, a charged atmosphere develops that embraces everyone present to the experience of the active presence of the body, audience as well as dancers.<sup>14</sup> constituent of the aesthetic field -- the dynamic presence of the human body in its

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<sup>10</sup> William Butler Yeats, ‘Among School Children’, in *The Collected Poems of W. B. Yeats* (London: Macmillan, 1958), p.245. See also Paul Valéry, ‘Dance and the Soul’, p. 42: ‘Her whole being becomes dance, and wholly vows itself to total movement!’

<sup>11</sup> See my discussion of dance aesthetics in *Art and Engagement* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1991), Ch.7.

<sup>12</sup> Rudolf von Laban, *Die Welt der Tänzers* (Stuttgart: 1920), p. 20.

<sup>13</sup> Merce Cunningham, ‘The Impermanent Art’, in Richard Kostelanetz, ed., *Esthetics Contemporary* (Buffalo: Prometheus, 1978), p. 311.

<sup>14</sup> ‘A vital performance generates a magnetic spirit that implicates everyone and everything present to experience, each of these making a distinctive contribution to the occasion.

immediacy and in its possibilities. This refers not only to the bodies on the stage but also to the focus of forces on and in the human organism by which all that is present is drawn into this region of energy. Everything, moving or stationary, is affected -- set, hall, onlookers, as well as dancers.' Arnold Berleant, *Art and Engagement*, p. 155. 'As the art of the moving body, then, dance is embodied movement; it is the manifestation of the self in movement, *as movement*'.<sup>15</sup>

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dance takes as central: the active presence of the body. Dance makes explicit an essential

<sup>15</sup> *Art and Engagement*, p. 160.

Indeed, through the moving presence of the body, dance establishes a world, defining space and establishing the passage of time. Fraleigh makes explicit such a sense of the dancing body: ‘Dance is lived not only through the body but also *as body* by the performer and the perceiver’. Indeed, ‘Dance celebrates embodiment’.<sup>16</sup> Taking dance as a model of embodiment for other arts, we may be said to dance the music, to dance the painting, in appreciative enjoyment. We may indeed embody our dance of life.

This sense of embodiment, the active presence of the human body in appreciative experience as exemplified by dance conveys, in the intense form we call art, truths about all experience. It understands experience as always embodied and, in a unified rendering of humans as conscious organisms, emphasizes our actual presence. Because such presence is always situational, we can speak of the experience of environment as an embodied aesthetic. The Nicaraguan poet, Gioconda Belli, describes how we embody landscape:

Rivers run through me, mountains bore into my body and the geography of this country begins forming in me turning me into lakes, chasms, ravines, earth for serving love ....

Ultimately, environment, conceived as an embodied aesthetic, is ontological.

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<sup>16</sup> Sondra Horton Fraleigh, *Dance and the Lived Body; A Descriptive Aesthetics* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1987), pp. 53, xvii. Fraleigh holds ‘that lived-body concepts, which refute traditional dualistic notions, provide a basis for describing the lived wholeness of the self in dance (being the dance) ....’ (p. 12.) ‘Lived-body concepts hold that the body is *lived* as a body-of-action. Human movement is the actualization, the realization, of embodiment’. (p.13) ‘... Movement *is* body, not just something that the body does’. (p. 13) ‘[Trisha] Brown’s dances open the viewer to the ongoing flow of his own bodily lived aesthetic as they are valued in his experience (intrinsically)’. p. (45)



Merleau-Ponty developed out of this a distinctive philosophical understanding of body-world : ‘... a body’, he says, ‘ ... is a *charged field* ....’<sup>17</sup> ‘Charged field’ is a pregnant phrase. It suggests energy that reaches out, not ‘outside’, for that suggests an ‘inside’, but ‘outward’ because of the pervasiveness of energy. The body is a concentration of forces that is part of a field. This, in fact, is not ‘a body’ but ‘a self’. ‘I’ am a charged field.

### **Aesthetic embodiment**

All of this leads to a changed understanding of experience and especially aesthetic experience. When centered on embodiment, not only does the world *look* different, it *is* different. So, too, is aesthetic experience different as embodied, as ‘aesthetic embodiment’. The aesthetic becomes a mode of embodiment. What makes embodiment aesthetic? What does the aesthetic add? What it does on other accounts: intense focus, charged meaning, and perceptual power, for embodiment is highly perceptual. Yeats says it all:

Art bids us touch and taste and hear and see the world, and shrinks from what  
Blake calls mathematic form, from every abstract thing, from all that is of the  
brain only, from all that is not a fountain jetting from the entire hopes, memories,  
and sensations of the body.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1968), p. 267.

<sup>18</sup> W.B. Yeats, ‘Three Pieces on the Creative Process: The Thinking of the Body’ in *The Creative Process*, ed. B. Ghiselin (New York: New American Library, 1952), pp. 106-7.

For the contemporary American poet, Adrienne Rich, poetry is ‘an instrument for embodied experience’.<sup>19</sup>

In embodiment meanings are experienced rather than cognized. That is to say, we grasp them with our bodies, literally incorporating them so they become part of our flesh. Meaning, thus become most powerful, is capable of the love-death of Tristan and Isolde, the Middle-East suicide bombers, acts of utmost devotion, lives of total dedication. Aesthetic meaning is embodied in such a way: ‘In aesthetic perception the work of art remains alive; it calls out to be felt and touched, and each part of it is perceived as if it were for the moment all of the world, unique, desirable, perfect, not needing something other than itself in order to be itself’.<sup>20</sup>

This resembles Merleau-Ponty’s discourse on the ‘flesh of the world’, whereby he extends the connection of body and world as a homogeneous continuity.

*Flesh of the world* .... These phenomena-questions: they refer us to the perceiving-perceived *Einfühlung*, for they mean that we are already *in* the being thus described, that we *are of it*, that between it and us there is *Einfühlung*. That

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<sup>19</sup> Adrienne Rich, *What Is Found There; Notebooks on Poetry and Politics*, (New York: C.W. Norton, 1993) p. 13.

<sup>20</sup> The entire passage is as follows: ‘While the conceptual framework was responsible, as far as our Western tradition is concerned, for removing the work of art from the space and time of our experience and locating it in an ideal space, thereby enabling the spectator to look at it coldly from a distance, in aesthetic perception the work of art remains alive; it calls out to be felt and touched, and each part of it is perceived as if it were for the moment all of the world, unique, desirable, perfect, not needing something other than itself in order to be itself. In this experience there is the warmth of closeness, not the coldness of distance’. Herbert V. Guenther, *The Tantric View of Life*, p. 60 and *passim*.

means that my body is made of the same flesh as the world (it is a perceived), and moreover that this flesh of my body is shared by the world, the world *reflects* it, encroaches upon it and it encroaches upon the world (the felt [*senti*] at the same time the culmination of subjectivity and the culmination of materiality), they are in a relation of transgression or of overlapping—This also means: my body is not only one perceived/among others, it is the measurant (*measurant*) of all, *Nullpunkt* of all the dimensions of the world .... We touch here the most difficult point, that is, the bond between the flesh and the idea, between the visible and the interior armature which it manifests and which it conceals.<sup>21</sup>

### **Embodiment as cultural**

Because humans are holistic, integral beings, it is no wonder that embodiment reflects the powerful influences of culture. We can speak therefore of enculturated embodiment: its manifestation is physical, biological, and behavioral, and emphatically non-dualistic.

Culture is embodied in innumerable ways. Behavior patterns are an obvious form. Different cultures inculcate different characteristic postures. There are distinctive Cuban, German, British, and American stances. There are characteristic French facial expressions. Gestures, ways of walking, and clothing styles vary from culture to culture, as do body decorations in the form of makeup, jewelry, and tattoos.

Belief systems also lead to different forms of embodiment. Compare, for example, attitudes toward the body associated with medieval Christianity and Victorian England and the characteristic behaviors to which they led; consider Aboriginal bonding with places through ancestral associations. Modern scientific views, too, have shifted from the objectification of the body to contextualism: Thinking of the body as a biological organism has led to the study of

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<sup>21</sup> *The Visible and the Invisible*, pp. 248-249.

cultural ecology. Behavioral patterns are gender-related, for culturally-established belief systems direct behavior according to sexual orientation. Sculpture offers a vivid exemplification of embodiment in the markedly different representations of the body that reflect different historical cultures in, say, the work of Michelangelo, Blake, and Rodin. (Rodin's *The Kiss* may be seen as combining Michelangelo's physicality and Blake's spirituality). Environment may be said to be a universal, all-inclusive context. It combines physical, social, cultural, and historical factors that shape the body through sensibility and taste. Finally, we need to recognize that individual embodiment is ultimately particular, reflecting the history of individual experiences mediated by such cultural factors.

These ideas are not new; they are only newly recognized. Two very different nineteenth century contemporaries, Marx and Nietzsche, understood this well:

The chief defect of all hitherto existing materialism—that of Feuerbach included—is that the thing, reality, sensuousness, is conceived only in the form of the object or of contemplation, but not as human sensuous activity, practice, not subjectively.<sup>22</sup>

A person's body is the soul.<sup>23</sup>

### **The aesthetic body**

We can think of the aesthetic body, then, as culturally shaped, entwined, and embedded in a complex network of relations, each of which has a distinctive character and dynamic. Race, class, gender, and geography are lived through bodily forms and structures. These structures of

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<sup>22</sup> Karl Marx, *Theses on Feuerbach*, opening sentence.

<sup>23</sup> Quoted by Robert Musil in *The Man without Qualities* (New York: Knopf, 1995), p.479.

cultural, sexual, racial and social differences are embedded in lived bodies.<sup>24</sup>

The aesthetic body, as a receiver and generator of sense experience, is not static or passive but possesses its own dynamic force, even when inactive. Aesthetic embodiment is being fully present through the distinctive presence of the body with the sensory focus and intensity we associate with the experience of art. It is being most completely human.

Aesthetic embodiment has powerful implications for aesthetic theory. It leads to a somatically grounded understanding of aesthetic experience. This, in turn, requires that we expand our understanding of aesthetic appreciation. Appreciation can no longer be confined to a contemplative and objectifying act of consciousness. Similarly, the aesthetic object is not discrete and self-contained but both responds to and acts on the perceiving body. Ultimately, the range of the aesthetic is vastly enlarged in its extent, its scope, and its inclusiveness.<sup>25</sup> Such an

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<sup>24</sup> See Gail Weiss, *Body Images: Embodiment as Intercorporeality* (Routledge, 1999).

‘Tantric Buddhism is one tradition that honors gendered embodiment, where both male and female achieve ‘liberation through ecstasy’. Miranda Shaw, *Passionate Enlightenment*, p.183. The form of a male and female Buddha in sexual union is known as maithuna or yabyum form. See p.184. Tibetan Tantric Buddhism contains a conflict between celibate (monastic) and non-celibate factions. See p.177.

<sup>25</sup> Cf. Wolfgang Iser: ‘I take this picture of the human as originally standing opposed to the world--man against the rest of the world--to be fundamentally misguided. Even cognition is misconstrued when it is omitted that all our cognitive and linguistic reference to objects thrives on a prelinguistic disclosure and acquaintance with things, one deriving from primordial world-connectedness, that for its part stems from our being evolutionary products of the same processes in which the things we have contact with came into being. Through cognition and language alone we would never get to objects. It's rather our primordial world-connectedness that allows for this.’ ‘Reflecting the Pacific’, *Contemporary Aesthetics*, I (2003), Sec. 5.

Similarly with the sublime. Iser writes: ‘We are led to experience our deep

understanding constitutes genuine theoretical progress.

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connectedness with the world--in a physical as well as an intellectual respect. According to Kant, the experience of the sublime takes us beyond the physical world; on my view experiencing the ocean and the coastal world connects us with the world.' *Ibid.*, Note 11.

NOTES