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Somaesthetics and Aesthetic Transactions: Art and Phenomenology Today

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SOMAESTHETICS AND *AESTHETIC TRANSACTIONS*: ART AND
PHENOMENOLOGY TODAY

by

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A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for a Degree with Honors
(Art History and Studio Art)

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Abstract

This thesis inquires into the application of Richard Shusterman's somaesthetics with respect to contemporary art, through an analysis of the work of Yann Toma and Tatiana Trouvé included in the exhibition *Aesthetic Transactions*, 2012. In exploring somaesthetics in relation to art, this thesis addresses John Dewey's aesthetics and idea of the consummatory experience, and Maurice Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology with respect to art and experience as parts of the foundation of Shusterman's ideas of somaesthetics. In today's decentralized, global art world, can somaesthetics offer a means of understanding and maintaining art's vitality for viewers and/or artists? In this thesis, I argue for somaesthetics' potential utility in approaching contemporary art.

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Introduction



Figure 1: Robert Ryman, *Untitled* (1961). Oil on unstretched linen. 10 ¾ x 10 ¼" (27.3 x 26 cm).

Paint. Thick, white, fingerlike strokes brush shoulders with each other, converge, gather, greet one another, cluster, halt suddenly, diverge, arc, twist, break. They assert themselves purposefully, determinedly over occasional pale tints of chartreuse and soft cerulean, scrubbed and dripped discreetly onto a thin, translucent layer of primer. Edges

of abrupt staccato marks converge; some define themselves alone: one, two, three stacked, parallel dashes stitch together patches of mint and baby blue, vaguely discernable amongst the swarm of warm, buzzing white marks petrified in their positions of over fifty years. Their thick, pasty consistency seems to be all that keeps them contained within the imperfect cut linen square that is their support. Edges fraying, its threads escape only to be engulfed in the mass of daubs mid-furl—thin, hairlike structures caught beneath thicker, rough valleys and now-crusting mountains of paint. Step back: the cut linen square is mounted floating in an abyss of white smoother and calmer than the one it contains, at eye level, less than a square foot in its entirety; illuminated, it seems to emit its own white light, glow. Paint.

Robert Ryman's *Untitled*, 1961, is one of the first of a lifetime of white paintings—some of them organic and gestural, some of them linear, all of them of white marks of Ryman's own, united but all subtly unique variations. What critics and others have described as “unnerving,” “unsettling” and “maddeningly artless” “naked pictures,” are by Ryman himself described as “realist.”¹ Suzanne Hudson attempts to hold to Ryman's definition; from this perspective, she notes, his paintings “open onto and often explicitly annex the light, space, and walls of the galleries in which they are sited as part of the composition ... a shadow cast by a deeply projecting stretcher is as much a part of the work as a painted field on the support that produces it.”² Ryman's paintings are not

¹ Suzanne P. Hudson, *Robert Ryman: Used Paint* (Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 2009), 3, 10.

² *Ibid.*, 10.

illusions or windows into alternate or invented worlds, times, or spaces, but are intended as physical objects existing in our own world.

As an artist emerging in the public eye in the later 1960's who has largely eluded categorization (having been aligned with Minimalism, and later both Process and Conceptual Art), Hudson argues that "Ryman's material experimentation manifests its own signs—not merely as process, but as embodied thinking."³ Here, Ryman's physical engagement with his materials (paint, support, canvas, etc...) as a physical form himself, a body in space, takes on great importance. As Hudson explains, drawing from Harold Rosenberg, this type of painting "turned on the artist's encounter with the canvas as an arena for physical activity and psychological revelation. The artist as actor needed to be fully present for an encounter with his materials and active in a way that made the paint coextensive with the body unfurling it."⁴ According to Ryman, this embodied thinking—his distinct awareness of his own being as a physical body in his process of creating art, and the evidence of this left behind in the form of his white paintings—must not be judged by pre-established opinions or thoughts, but simply experienced in person; painting, for Ryman, "has continued as a series of propositions that are born out of an engagement with the materiality of paint, the properties of support structures, and notions of how such objects relate to their beholders in an exhibition space."⁵ For Ryman, it is not about any type of imagery or representation within his paintings themselves, but his own—and *our* own, as viewers—experience with paint and these objects as just that: objects. His painting is both "derived from a series of encounters through which actions

³ Ibid., 3.

⁴ Ibid., 86.

⁵ Ibid., 10, 18.

unfold out of and against a discrete set of options and concerns” and “the byproduct of an experiment and the evidence of its material instantiation—a process that continues to the present...”⁶ For Ryman, experience is defined by his encounters with the physical materials of painting: his body’s physical interaction with paint, brushes, canvas, support, all of these objects’ interactions with each other, and with their environment. It is this “experience” that is paramount for him as a creator, and for us as we encounter and interact with his objects and thus the evidence of his own actions, decisions, and thinking—as we, in turn, “experience” his work.

For Susan Sontag, too, our experience of art objects is key. Writing in 1965, four years after Ryman’s creation of *Untitled*, 1961, amidst an art world having recently absorbed abstract expressionism—including action painting and color field painting—at the height of post-painterly abstraction, and seemingly infatuated with hermeneutics, Sontag also calls for our experience, rather than interpretation, of art objects in her essay “Against Interpretation.” In opposing and calling for a re-evaluation of interpretation—our conditioned mode of approaching art, which has the potential to be liberating, but instead actually radically alters the art itself and can be “stifling”—Sontag advocates the pure, sensuous, immediate experience of all art, for “the merit of these works certainly lies elsewhere than in their ‘meanings.’”⁷ It is the images and form of art that first seduce and interest us in a work, and prompt us to understand or try to find its potential

⁶ Ibid., 109.

⁷ Susan Sontag, “Against Interpretation,” in *Against Interpretation and Other Essays* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1966), 7-8.

“meanings.”⁸ Interpretation, according to Sontag, “violates art” in its implication of “dissatisfaction” with the art object and desire to replace it with something else, such as narrative.⁹ It is for this reason avant-garde art is always “perpetually on the run,” sometimes even purposefully attempting to avoid interpretation through experimentation with form “at the expense of content.”¹⁰

Sontag not only calls our attention to the complications and issues with interpretation, and our need to reconsider our employment of it, but also prompts us to think seriously about the way in which we approach art in general and what is at stake here. What are we to do? While Sontag reminds us that criticism is here to stay, she asks us to consider how it might better serve the work and avoid taking its place. How can paintings like those of Robert Ryman’s overcome their criticism—positive or negative—and be something to us other than “naked pictures,” “maddeningly artless” and “unnerving,” spiritual and transcending, or even, as Ryman himself defines them, “realist”? How can we enable ourselves to “experience” art in itself, unobstructed by previous criticism?

John Dewey, writing during the 1930’s and influential to the shaping of the ethos of experiential learning promoted at the Museum of Modern Art at the time Robert Ryman worked and received his exposure to and education of painting there in the 1950’s, defines experience as the “result, the sign, and the reward of that interaction of organism and environment which, when it is carried to the full, is a transformation of

⁸ Ibid., 9.

⁹ Ibid., 10.

¹⁰ Ibid., 11.

interaction into participation and communication.”¹¹ Sontag claims that the most significant and liberating value in art is its “transparence”: “experiencing the luminousness of the thing in itself, of things being what they are.”¹² How can we, as organisms, interact with our environments as Dewey suggests, “experience” an art object, and best ensure that we are able to see the transparence, the luminousness of an art object such as *Untitled*, 1961, itself?

To further this, Sontag asserts that we have, as a culture and a society, lost the sharpness in our sensory experience, that our sensory faculties have been dulled by overproduction and excess, and that interpretation does not help with this—instead, it takes the sensory experience of the work for granted¹³ This is the heart of our issue:

What is important now is to recover our senses...Our task is not to find the maximum amount of content in a work of art, much less to squeeze more content out of the work that is already there. Our task is to cut back content so we can see the thing [the art object] at all...The aim of all commentary on art now should be to make works of art—and, by analogy, our own experience—more, rather than less, real to us.¹⁴

According to Sontag, just as with Robert Ryman’s paintings, we need to allow ourselves to “experience” art; this summons in itself raises many important questions: how are we to accomplish this? And what is truly meant by “experience”?

Sontag continues by analyzing the concept of style in relation to these questions. She is especially interested in the issue whereby “the main tradition of criticism in all

¹¹ John Dewey, *Art As Experience* (New York: Minton, Balch & Company, 1934), 22.

¹² Sontag, “Against Interpretation,” 13.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Ibid., 14.

arts...in effect treats the work of art as a statement being made in the form of a work of art.”¹⁵ This is a case, she claims, of “art being put to use,” and she proposes a critical alternative perspective: “A work of art encountered as a work of art is an experience, not a statement or an answer to a question. Art is not only about something; it is something. A work of art is a thing in the world, not just a text or commentary on the world.”¹⁶ In this case proposed by Sontag, one example of an experience can be “a work of art encountered as a work of art.”¹⁷ What exactly does this imply, and how are we to do this? How *is* a work of art something—a “thing in the world”—rather than about something?¹⁸ How can a work of art not be about something?

While works of art do refer to the real world—our experience, values, and knowledge—they do not give rise to conceptual knowledge, Sontag argues.¹⁹ Instead, we gain a different kind of knowledge—not *of* something, but instead an experience of the *style* of knowing something, a way of knowing things in general. And in this, a work of art becomes dependent on the person having the experience; their compliance as the “experiencing subject” is necessary.²⁰ So how can we, as viewers, become “experiencing subjects”?

According to Sontag, part of the answer to this question lies in our ability to negotiate between aesthetic response and ethical response—the “pleasurable stimulation of consciousness” versus “responsible and humane conduct,” “achievement of human

¹⁵ Ibid., 21.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Ibid., 22.

will, dictating to itself a mode of acting and being in the world.”²¹ Although it may be true that our response to art can be considered “moral” in the way that it is “the enlivening of our sensibilities and consciousness,” it is the qualities of our aesthetic experience (such as “disinterestedness, contemplativeness, attentiveness, the awakening of the feelings”), including the qualities of the aesthetic object itself (“grace, intelligence, expressiveness, energy, sensuousness”) which emerge as essential in that they are also the qualities that make up a moral response to life: they can serve to instruct us to morally respond to life.²² It is the processing of experience itself that deserves our attention in the experience of art, Sontag claims—“transcending of the world in art is also a way of training or educating the will to be free in the world.”²³

For Sontag, the aesthetic experience defines itself as an experience of the forms or qualities of human consciousness, in which art objects can be seen as “living, autonomous models of consciousness,” and the world itself can be taken as an aesthetic phenomenon.²⁴ In this world where consciousness is defined as wider than action, for it includes activities that have no need for justification, Sontag speaks of giving ourselves to the art object, detaching ourselves from the world—“adopting a different, more theoretical vantage point,” and allowing ourselves to be returned to it more open and enriched by art.²⁵ What does she mean by this—how exactly might we surrender ourselves in this way, and allow ourselves to have these experiences, means of viewing ourselves, in a meaningful and effective way? How might this “transcending the world”

²¹ Ibid., 23.

²² Ibid., 25.

²³ Ibid., 26, 31.

²⁴ Ibid., 27-28.

²⁵ Ibid., 28-31.

be something that is available to all of us?

“The most potent elements in a work of art are, often, its silences.”²⁶ This, and many of Sontag’s ideas, seem to hold true for understanding and approaching the work of Robert Ryman in the way he intended: to just see it, to experience it, as organisms, bodies, interacting with our environments.

In this thesis, I will develop an inquiry into the experience of art—the ways in which we experience art, and the nature of art and experience. These are not new issues, but have been addressed by others throughout history. Susan Sontag is relevant and raises this issue in a critical moment for art in the twentieth century, in 1965, almost fifty years ago; the thread she is part of in the discourse on art and experience can be traced back far earlier, through, among more, artists and philosophers. This thread has been in existence throughout history, woven in and out of discourse, dialogue, thought, writing, creation; sometimes it loops, weaves back in under, or becomes thinner, more threadbare and difficult to trace. It may have mutated, grown, switched directions, and redefined itself, but it has always been there, and is still here today. This thread can be traced especially through the ideas of John Dewey in *Art as Experience*, 1934, and later in the 1940’s, through Maurice Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology. Today, it has been picked up and carried most notably by philosopher Richard Shusterman, creator and advocate of somaesthetics. It emerges and re-emerges time and again not only because of its significance to each moment, style, artist, or writer, but because of its importance to all moments, and to us all as humans.

What do we mean, the experience of art? Surely it has been important in

²⁶ Ibid., 36.

modernist painting, through minimalist painting and sculpture, and through many other movements in art...but how, and how now, into the present? Has art become so much of “everything goes,” no essential answer to no “essential question” or problem, that there are no longer any rules, any guidelines, any means for us to understand it? In such a multifaceted, decentralized contemporary art world, how do we, as viewers, understand art? And how do we, as artists, construct it? Are past methodologies to be discarded? Or is this our task—to seek meaning in a seemingly structureless world of contemporary art?

Shusterman, through Dewey, Merleau-Ponty, and his own ideas of somaesthetics can help offer us ways to better understand not only contemporary art itself, but how it can be important in a society that continuously seems to demand art’s justification, for art to defend itself. Now, more than ever, it seems that Susan Sontag’s call for experiencing art—not interpreting it—is ripe for recalling and reenacting as a means of providing structure (or rather, revealing and reinforcing the potentials of this non-structure), and dealing with painting, an art frequently presumed dead, and contemporary art in general: can we live with it? No, not how we can live with something that is dead, but how it can continue to be alive in our interaction with it, and how important this interaction is: our experience of art, especially in the ways addressed by Shusterman and his ideas of somaesthetics, built through his own dealing with Dewey and Merleau-Ponty, emerges as not only valuable in its own right, but especially in that it can serve as a model on how to deal with and interpret all experience, and therefore ourselves.

In the following parts, I will attempt to offer an analysis of experiencing painting, and later, contemporary art through Shusterman’s contemporary philosophy of

somaesthetics with respect to his 2012 exhibition “Aesthetic Transactions” and its predecessors—the ideas and aesthetics of the philosophers necessary to the formation and understanding of somaesthetics, as referenced by Shusterman: Dewey and Merleau-Ponty. Part One will offer an analysis of and inquiry into Dewey’s ideas of “aesthetic experience,” especially through his later work, *Art as Experience* (1934); Part Two, of Merleau-Ponty’s ideas of phenomenology and experience; and Part Three, of Shusterman’s contemporary philosophy of somaesthetics with respect to “Aesthetic Transactions.”

Part One: Dewey and the Aesthetics of Experience

In working towards an understanding of Shusterman's contemporary somaesthetics, it is essential to first work towards understanding the aesthetics of a philosopher of a different moment—the early twentieth century: John Dewey (1859-1952). “America's Philosopher,” although now recognized as one of the seminal thinkers of the twentieth century, was not initially, or for a considerable length of time, widely discussed in terms of his aesthetics.²⁷ He has been more prominently noted as an educational thinker, reformer, pragmatist, and even social critic than for his work related to the arts; Dewey was a spokesperson for pragmatism and educational theory, a naturalist and instrumentalist, a philosophical psychologist, and an advocate of progressive, social democracy and the use of empirical scientific methodology to guide approaches to life.²⁸ Although aesthetics were discussed in parts of his broad range of works throughout his career (including *Psychology* (1887), *Democracy and Education* (1915), *Philosophy and Civilization* (1931) and especially *Experience and Nature* (1925)), his only book dedicated to aesthetics, *Art and Experience* (1934), was published late in his career, the year he turned seventy-five.²⁹

Art and Experience was initially received with confusion.³⁰ While Dewey believed that art and the aesthetic were “the ultimate response to the issues that motivated

²⁷ Larry A. Hickman, introduction to *Reading Dewey: Interpretations for a Postmodern Generation*, ed. Larry A. Hickman (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1998), ix-xxi.

²⁸ Thomas M. Alexander, “The Art of Life: Dewey's Aesthetics” in *Reading Dewey: Interpretations for a Postmodern Generation*, ed. Larry A. Hickman (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1998), 1.

²⁹ Phillip W. Jackson, *John Dewey and the Lessons of Art* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998), xi.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, xi.

his philosophy,” and that “the aesthetic theory of a philosopher ‘is a test of the capacity of the system he puts forth to grasp the nature of experience itself,’” *Art and Experience* was criticized for being overly Hegelian and contrary to the pragmatism Dewey claimed to advocate, and so was taken by many as an incomprehensible tangent rather than an integrated culmination and critical to his entire philosophy.³¹ Dewey’s aesthetic philosophy promoting the arts, as opposed to the sciences, as the ideal of human achievement was not widely discussed in the face of a rise of analytic philosophy in the beginning of the second half of the twentieth century.³² However, by the early 1990’s, Richard Shusterman raised new discussion of Dewey as he converted from analytic philosophy to pragmatism, and later advocated pragmatist aesthetics through his book, *Pragmatist Aesthetics* (2000).

It was through this book that Shusterman championed Dewey. Although unsure of how much aesthetic experience should be analyzed in philosophical terms itself, Shusterman understood that he needed to look at Dewey at length, and that, as Dewey prescribes, “to esthetic experience...the philosopher must go to understand what experience is.”³³ Having converted to pragmatism after being influenced by teaching his philosophy students who were dancers, for Shusterman, Dewey’s “upbeat aesthetic of natural energies” was appealing in that it “captures the aesthetically essential theme of the body which was lacking in analytic aesthetics but increasingly important and alluring in continental theory,” and rejected dualisms of all types, including the dichotomies of

³¹ Alexander, “The Art of Life,” 1,5.

³² Richard Shusterman, *Pragmatist Aesthetics: Living Beauty, Rethinking Art*, (Oxford, UK: B. Blackwell, 1992), 11.

³³ *Ibid.*, 10-11.

“body and mind, material and ideal, thought and feeling, form and substance, man and nature, self and world, subject and object, and means and end.”³⁴ Opposed to the widespread analytic approach that Shusterman had been a scholar and teacher of, Dewey’s aesthetics advocated continuity, connecting art and life through “recovering the continuity of esthetic experience with normal processes of living.”³⁵ Dewey’s aesthetic philosophy would be key not only to Shusterman’s newfound conversion to pragmatism, but also to the developments of his aesthetic philosophy of somaesthetics, as according to Shusterman, “it represents the best point of departure for new aesthetic thinking.”³⁶ Although some of Dewey’s views might be dated, Shusterman argues, pragmatist aesthetics points to “the most promising future we can envisage for aesthetic inquiry...To fulfill that future we will have to read and develop its Deweyan past.”³⁷

Dewey’s Aesthetic Philosophy

Experience itself is at the heart of that Deweyan past, in Dewey’s aesthetics, and is central to its focus and goal. In *Art as Experience*, Dewey sets out to define the nature of art and aesthetic experience. This experience is that of “the live creature”— we, as humans, in our interaction and exchange with our lived environments as beings, guided by our desire to experience the world so that we can immediately enjoy meaning and value.³⁸ Dewey attempts to connect art and life, and aims at “recovering the continuity of

³⁴ Ibid., 10, 14.

³⁵ Ibid., 13.

³⁶ Richard Shusterman, "Why Dewey Now?" *Journal of Aesthetic Education* 23.3 (1989): 66, accessed March 16, 2014, doi: 10.2307/3332763.

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Alexander, “The Art of Life,” 3.

esthetic experience with normal processes of living.”³⁹ For Dewey, these two—art and life—are not divided and separate entities, but are united in that they are both defined by experience. Art, according to Dewey, is not solely the art object viewed in a museum, but instead, “the actual work of art is what the product does with and in experience.”⁴⁰ In this sense, it is also an event, and according to Dewey, “there is no work of art apart from the human experience.”⁴¹ Dewey argues that the special function and value of art, where we typically conceive of aesthetic experience, is not in meeting any specialized end, but in playing a role for the live creature by serving many ends, by integrating means and ends, and by “enhancing our immediate experience which invigorates and vitalizes us,”⁴² allowing us to achieve whatever ends we each pursue.⁴³ Through this, art “keeps alive the power to experience the common world in its fullness.”⁴⁴ Deweyan aesthetics, Shusterman notes, is not interested in “truth for truth’s sake,” but in achieving

richer and more satisfying experience, in experiencing that value without which art would have no meaning or point. For Dewey, experience rather than truth is the final standard. He sees the ultimate aim of all inquiry . . . not as mere truth or knowledge itself but as better experience or experienced value. The value of knowledge is in being instrumental to the enrichment of immediate experience through the control over action that it exercises.⁴⁵

The purpose of aesthetics, and *Art and Experience*, according to Dewey, is “to restore the continuity between refined and intensified forms of experience that are works

³⁹ Shusterman, *Pragmatist Aesthetics*, 13.

⁴⁰ Dewey, *Art As Experience*, 3.

⁴¹ Thomas M. Alexander and John Dewey, *John Dewey's Theory of Art, Experience, and Nature: The Horizons of Feeling* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1987), 187.

⁴² Shusterman, *Pragmatist Aesthetics*, 9.

⁴³ Alexander, “The Art of Life,” 5.

⁴⁴ Dewey, *Art As Experience*, 138.

⁴⁵ Shusterman, *Pragmatist Aesthetics*, 18.

of art and the everyday events, doings and sufferings that are universally recognized to constitute experience.”⁴⁶ In order to achieve this, and to understand experience in general, we have to go to aesthetic experience, and, for Dewey, to the concept of having “*an* experience” or “consummatory experience.”

Dewey and the “Consummatory Experience”

“Experience,” according to Dewey, “is the result, the sign, and the reward of that interaction of organism and environment which, when it is carried to its full, is a transformation of interaction into participation and communication,” and involves some degree of “undergoing.”⁴⁷ Experience occurs in time and space, where time is not an “endless, uniform flow” or a “succession of instantaneous points,” but instead can be viewed as an organization in change, or growth, organizing the relationship between uniform flow and instantaneous points.⁴⁸ Space is the “comprehensive and enclosed scene” where one’s doings and undergoings take place.⁴⁹ Within these parameters, experience forms patterns; the most crucial of these is that of the consummatory experience, or “*an* experience.”

“*An* experience,” as opposed to experience in general, is a relationship of doing and undergoing that has structure, is fully-formed, a complete whole in that “the material experienced runs its course to fulfillment,” and “is integrated within and demarcated in

⁴⁶ Alexander, “The Art of Life,” 6.

⁴⁷ Dewey, *Art As Experience*, 22.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 23.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*

the general stream of experience from other experience.”⁵⁰ Although made up of a “flow of parts” that do not lose their self-identities,”⁵¹ “*an* experience” is unified by a single quality or “feel.”⁵² Where experience in general often is interrupted or not carried to any type of conclusion, *an* experience is unique (and rare) in that it is carried out to its consummation, and so is also referred to as “consummatory experience.”⁵³ Within Dewey’s concept of the consummatory experience, the relationship between parts is perceived in a dynamic, growing continuity of interaction.⁵⁴

For Dewey, consummatory experience can be positive or negative, anything from running a race, to eating a meal or having a conversation; each is an interaction between human and environment, a relationship of doing and undergoing, acting and being acted upon, that forms a consummate whole, and in which all independent parts are united by an overarching quality that defines the experience altogether.⁵⁵ Although it may not be possible to identify this unifying “quality” until after later reflection on a completed experience, Dewey argues that it is pervasive throughout the experience, and works to distinguish a consummatory experience from ordinary experience.⁵⁶ The form of a consummatory experience, however, is perhaps most significant to this idea of its unity and aesthetic quality: according to Dewey, “no experience of whatever sort is a unity unless it has esthetic quality.”⁵⁷ An experience’s form is due to its consisting of “doing

⁵⁰ Ibid., 35-36, 38.

⁵¹ Ibid.

⁵² Alexander, “The Art of Life,” 15.

⁵³ Dewey, *Art As Experience*, 38.

⁵⁴ Alexander, *John Dewey’s Theory of Art*, 208.

⁵⁵ Dewey, *Art As Experience*, 35.

⁵⁶ Ibid., 37.

⁵⁷ Ibid., 42.

and undergoing in a relationship”⁵⁸—a “perceived relationship between the phases of experience which are had or undergone and those which are done.”⁵⁹

For Dewey, the ultimate example of consummatory experience is art; it is here where the attitude of the artist is most akin to that of the live creature itself, and in which the “whole creature is alive.”⁶⁰ Through Dewey, art becomes instructive as a model of what *an* experience means—through the experience of art, we can learn about what it means to have *an* experience in general.⁶¹ Through the actions and undergoings of the artist—in true connection with the “live creature”—and his or her perception of the relationship of these actions and undergoings, we are presented with the epitome of consummatory experience, an idea whose influence would reverberate, if covertly, through American art in the decades to come.

Influence of Dewey

Eighteen years following *Art as Experience*, Harold Rosenberg wrote for *Art News* in New York on the topic of “The American Action Painters”: a new category of American painting given this name by Rosenberg and separated from earlier “abstractionists” by a differing consciousness of painting’s function. He observed, “at a certain moment the canvas began to appear to one American painter after another as an arena in which to act—rather than as a space in which to reproduce, re-design, analyze, or ‘express’ an object, actual or imagined. What was to go on the canvas was not a picture

⁵⁸ Ibid, 45-46.

⁵⁹ Alexander, “The Art of Life,” 16.

⁶⁰ Dewey, *Art As Experience*, 27, 32.

⁶¹ Jackson, *John Dewey and the Experience of Art*, 33.

but an event...an encounter..." the motive of which was for "extinguishing the object."⁶² Rosenberg, in commenting on this new emerging painting, as if these artists had been "directed by a single voice", argues that, here, all aspects of painting except for the act itself were subordinated; what mattered was "always the revelation contained in the act: in the final image will be a *tension*."⁶³ Rosenberg's writing on this emerging informal abstract painting, what he terms the "act-painting," echoes Dewey's ideas of aesthetic experience.⁶⁴ His identification of the American Action Painters rings true with Dewey's ideas and goals, and indeed, according to Rosenberg, "the new painting has broken down every distinction between art and life;" what Dewey had advocated and called for in *Art as Experience*, it seems, had been achieved.⁶⁵ Rosenberg notes, in accordance with Dewey, that now, art's value must be found apart from art, and that the art, "the act," transcends the world.⁶⁶ Just as in seeking an understanding of Dewey's aesthetic experience, "the spectator [of American Action Painting] has to think in a vocabulary of action: its inception, duration, direction—psychic state, concentration and relaxation of the will, passivity, alert waiting. He must become a connoisseur of the gradations between the automatic, the spontaneous, the evoked."⁶⁷ He is, in short, prompted to think about aesthetic experience as Dewey defines it, about the relationship between all doing and undergoing the artist must negotiate and perceive. In analyzing this new painting's place in the art world, the center of which Rosenberg places in New York, he, like

⁶² Harold Rosenberg, "The American Action Painters," *Art News* (1952): 22-3.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, 23, 48.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 23.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*

Dewey, acknowledges the educational value of art: “Modern art is educational, not with regard to art, but with regard to life.”⁶⁸ In many ways, Rosenberg’s “American Action Painters” seem to be the physical manifestation, realization, and models of Dewey’s aesthetic experience.⁶⁹

However, Rosenberg is more focused on the psychological and personal aspect of this new painting for the artists, “The American Action Painters” themselves. For him, their taking to “the white expanse of canvas as Melville’s Ishmael took to the sea” is a more personal dramatic struggle, “an adventure over depths in which he might find reflected the true image of his identity,” and “the creation of private myths” for the artist rather than purely about this experience of painting in itself (the philosophy of just “TO PAINT”).⁷⁰ The experience of painting for Rosenberg, although key to the definition of the new American Action Painters, seems to exist as a means, and serve a purpose outside of itself, to transcend itself—to provoke the artist into a “dramatic dialogue.”⁷¹ In calling for a genuine criticism, audience and understanding of this “new painting,” although possibly directed at his opponent in the criticism of Abstract Expressionism, Clement Greenberg, perhaps he needed to look not in the present, but backwards to Dewey.⁷²

In “The American Action Painters,” Rosenberg is more focused on the psychological drama and personal aspect of this new painting on the artist, of the “event” that is Action Painting, and more concerned with the artist’s identity than solely the

⁶⁸ Ibid., 48.

⁶⁹ Ibid.

⁷⁰ Ibid.

⁷¹ Ibid.

⁷² Ibid., 49.

experience itself, the result of this new “act-painting” being a means for the artist to engage in a dramatic personal struggle and creation of personal myths. According to David Kenneth Holt, Harold Rosenberg’s relationship with Dewey’s ideas in general is somewhat problematic—Rosenberg does not accept a physical and transcendental art, just a transcendental one, for example.⁷³ This seems to distinguish itself from Clement Greenberg’s adherence to formalism and the emphasis of the art object itself.⁷⁴ However, regardless of Rosenberg’s interpretation of this new painting, or of the question of Dewey’s direct influence on the artists in this movement, Rosenberg’s description of these new types of painters and what they were doing undoubtedly resonates with Dewey’s ideas of aesthetic experience.

Dewey’s own views on Abstract Expressionism have remained controversial. Although he has been recognized for his promotion of a variety of types of art, from painting and sculpture to folk arts, and does not criticize abstraction, Dewey mostly includes representational art from the Impressionist and Post-Impressionist period as examples in *Art as Experience*, and has been criticized for being conservative in not dealing more with the avant-garde art of his moment, despite the influence of his old student and colleague Barnes, a collector to whom he dedicated *Art as Experience*, and who introduced him to much modern art, and served as a key source for discussion on art and aesthetics.⁷⁵ It is argued (especially by Maurice Berube in “John Dewey and the

⁷³ David K. Holt, *The Search for Aesthetic Meaning in the Visual Arts: The Need for the Aesthetic Tradition in Contemporary Art Theory and Education* (Westport, Conn: Bergin & Garvey, 2001), 110.

⁷⁴ Charles Harrison and Paul Wood, ed., *Art in Theory, 1900-2000: An Anthology of Changing Ideas* (Malden, MA: Blackwell Pub, 2003), 589.

⁷⁵ Maurice R. Berube, “John Dewey and the Abstract Expressionists,” *Educational Theory* 48 (1998):213-224. doi: 10.1111/j.1741-5446.1998.00211.x.

Abstract Expressionists” (1998)) that Dewey’s aesthetics, through *Art as Experience*, although perhaps largely ignored in general during the twentieth century, did in fact influence many American artists following its publication,⁷⁶ notably Regionalist painter Thomas Hart Benton, abstract painter Robert Motherwell, Minimalist sculptor Donald Judd, and arguably Happening and Performance artist Allan Kaprow, among others, and had a strong influence on Abstract Expressionism and Abstract Expressionist painters.⁷⁷ Jackson Pollock, as the “star student” and mentee of Benton, is no exception.

Dewey’s Aesthetic Experience and Jackson Pollock

A definition of a significant art is, then, thrown back on a definition of that kind of experience which can generate it...A living art, or living arts rather, are generated by the direct life experiences of their makers *within milieus and locales*...Experience...as it bears on the question of a vital art, is closely tied to locales. As experience of this nature is heavily conditioned environmentally and psychologically it has a direct social relationship to the community.⁷⁸

Stuart Buettner’s quote of Thomas Hart Benton in “John Dewey and the Visual Arts in America” reveals the extent of the influence of Dewey’s aesthetics on Benton—an influence that he acknowledged, and in which the concept of art was a “living” one, inextricable from and defined by experience.⁷⁹ These ideas would become the milieu the young Jackson Pollock experienced as a student and friend of Benton’s during the 1930’s at the Art Students League in New York.

⁷⁶ Ibid., 214-215.

⁷⁷ Tom Leddy “Dewey’s Aesthetics”, *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Spring 2013 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.). <http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2013/entries/deweyaesthetics/>.

⁷⁸ Stewart Buettner, "John Dewey and the Visual Arts in America." *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 33.4 (1975): 390, accessed March 17, 2014, doi: 10.2307/429650.

⁷⁹ Ibid.

Although Pollock would later claim his work with Benton as important “as something against which to react very strongly,” and despite the opposition of their painting (Regionalism versus Abstract Expressionism), the influence of Benton’s teaching on Pollock is undeniable.⁸⁰ This is evident especially through Pollock’s modification of Benton’s values and emphases in painting, and the similarities that can be observed in their attitudes on the experience of art. Benton’s precepts can be recognized in Pollock’s modification of “not only Benton’s accentuated linearity and centrifugal construction, but also his teacher’s focus on light and dark as the primary basis of pictorial organization, his stratification of forms to create a feeling of deep space, and his accent on rhythm.”⁸¹ The influence of Benton on Pollock in terms of his attitudes and ideas, and his concept of art, can also be argued, as is by Buettner: “there can be little doubt that many of the artistic attitudes which had meaning for Benton were obviously assimilated by Pollock,” despite the difficulty of tracing any direct influence of Dewey on Pollock.⁸² Regardless of the extent of Dewey’s *direct* influence on Pollock, Pollock exemplifies Dewey’s aesthetics and idea of the consummatory experience through his process-based drip painting such as *Lavender Mist: Number 1*, 1950, the very type of “action painting” Rosenberg hails.

⁸⁰ Nancy Jachec and Jackson Pollock, *Jackson Pollock: Works, Writings, Interviews* (Barcelona, Spain: Ediciones Polígrafa, 2011), 133.

⁸¹ Ellen G. Landau, *Jackson Pollock* (New York: Abrams, 1989), 222.

⁸² Buettner, “John Dewey,” 390.

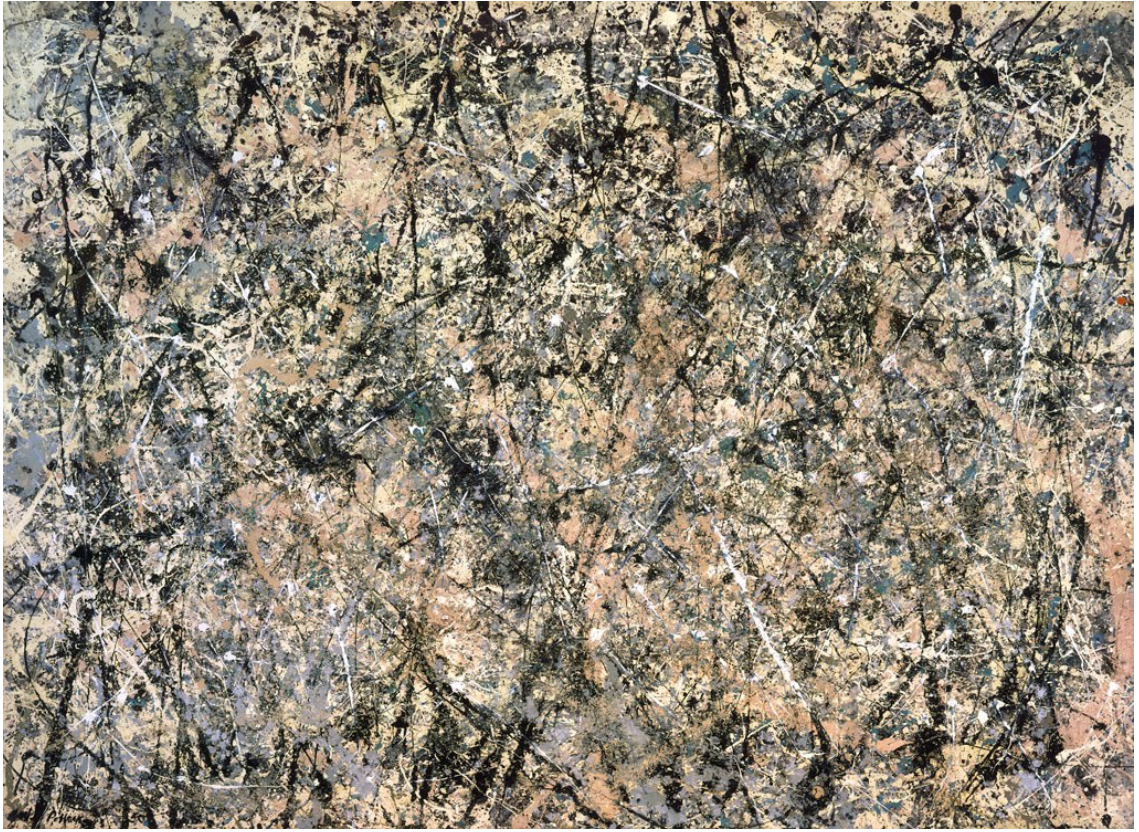


Figure 2: Jackson Pollock, *Lavender Mist: Number 1, 1950* (1950). Oil, enamel, and aluminum on canvas. 87 x 118”.

Lavender Mist: Number 1, 1950: oil and enamel paint on canvas, 41 x 118 inches, close to ten feet full of Pollock’s drips, drags, lines, scattered drops of lavender, soft violets and mauves, creams, warm and cool grays and black paint that would come to define the fully developed style of “drip painting” he became known for. By this time, he had substituted the traditional use of brushes for their use “more as sticks rather than brushes—the brush doesn’t touch the surface of the canvas,” with a “flowing kind of paint,” and stretched canvas on an easel or the wall for unstretched canvas on the floor.⁸³ Although Pollock was not the first artist to create a composition by “spilling paint” on his

⁸³ Jachec and Pollock, *Jackson Pollock: Works, Writings, Interviews*, 138.

canvas, as many writers have noted, it is truly through his action, the act of his painting in its totality, that he exemplifies “an experience.”⁸⁴ Although the painting itself adheres to Dewey’s aesthetic experience in its energy, tension, relationship and unification of all drops and drips of paint forming a unified, structured whole, it is truly the “event” or process—the action—of painting itself by which the live creature creates which models Dewey’s consummatory aesthetic experience.

Through Pollock’s act of painting *Lavender Mist*, we can begin to understand Dewey’s idea of the live creature actively engaged in interacting with his lived environment. In the structuring of his studio environment, his materials and surface, and the way that he interacts with these alone, we can begin to understand Pollock as “the live creature”: with his canvas on the floor, Pollock explains that he feels “a part of the painting, since this way I can walk around it, work from four sides and literally be *in* the painting...”⁸⁵ No longer fighting with his materials, with the medium of paint, Pollock “seems to become one with it.”⁸⁶ As has been noted from Hans Namuth’s famous photographs of the artist working, Pollock is “engaged in an intense dialogue with his materials,” in an extremely physical way, despite the fact that he never made physical contact with the forms he was creating as the brush was no longer touching the canvas.⁸⁷ The scale of *Lavender Mist* and many of his later paintings required a manner of painting that was extraordinarily physical, in which the “interaction” between environment (Pollock’s surface, the unstretched canvas on the floor, and his materials, his brushes

⁸⁴ Landau, *Jackson Pollock*, 150.

⁸⁵ Jachec and Pollock, *Jackson Pollock: Works, Writings, Interviews*, 51.

⁸⁶ Landau, *Jackson Pollock*, 183.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*

used as sticks and the liquid paint itself) and “live creature” (Pollock himself) was taking place on a larger, more dramatic scale and in a more intensified way than had happened with painting in the past. No longer was this “interaction” taking place solely in the hand, the brush, and the canvas, but in Pollock’s entire studio, throughout the room, in “dancelike” and “muscular” movement that engaged every part of his body.⁸⁸ *Lavender Mist*, following Pollock’s innovation in *Number 1A*, typifies his works “where it is clear that, in order to create it, he had involved virtually every bone and muscle in his body.”⁸⁹ This is the live creature completely engaged with his environment; here Pollock is interacting to his fullest capacity.

Interacting here is key: it is not only Pollock’s action, his “doing,” in his active splattering, dripping, pouring in circling his canvas physically as if in dance in creating *Lavender Mist*, but his “undergoing,” his perception and appreciation of this doing, that forms this interaction. For Dewey, the painter has to “undergo” consciously the effect of every brushstroke, and has to see the connection with what he is doing “and where his work is going.”⁹⁰ His conception of the experience of art—and thus, “an” experience in general— involves not only the act of production itself, what Dewey refers to as the “artistic,” but also, and inseparably, the “aesthetic”: the perception, appreciation, and enjoyment of that production.⁹¹

⁸⁸ Ibid., 182-183.

⁸⁹ Ibid., 190.

⁹⁰ Dewey, *Art As Experience*, 45.

⁹¹ Ibid.

Although accounts of Pollock's painting in his own words are limited, as he was wary of being betrayed by words, he explained in *Possibilities*, 1948, that "When I am *in* my painting...I have no fears about making changes...it is only when I lose contact with the painting that the result is a mess. Otherwise there is pure harmony, an easy give and take, and the painting comes out well."⁹² It is through this that we are able to better understand Pollock's making of *Lavender Mist* as a result of Pollock's remaining in constant "contact" with the painting, not only in a physical "artistic" way, but mentally, in his perception and appreciation of that physical movement, that action of creating. Indeed, Robert Motherwell characterized Pollock as using paint as "his thought's medium;" his destiny a "confrontation with the process of painting itself."⁹³

Lavender Mist, as one example of Pollock's confrontation with the process of painting, is united by its overall coverage of paint (Pollock's "allover approach"), and its balance between dark and light, thin and thick violet, gray and pale paint— there is tension, but negotiated and balanced. It is aesthetic, down to the Deweyan sense of the word: while the biggest complaint and criticism about Pollock's drip painting was that it was "unorganized chaos," drip paintings such as *Lavender Mist* were not "accidents" at all in any sense, but the result of Pollock's own perception and appreciation in addition to action.⁹⁴

Pollock does not fail Dewey's conception of artists as individuals gifted with sensitivity, and heightened perception: Pollock's comprehension of the world of man and his surroundings was noted to be "all-inclusive" by his friends and associates, his "deeply

⁹² Landau, *Jackson Pollock*, 168.

⁹³ *Ibid.*, 147.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, 179.

felt sympathy with the rhythms of the universe” “inherently shamanistic” and “unusually intuitive.”⁹⁵ He had an “extreme awareness” for the physical aspect of his painting, and it was not random—in the development of his drip painting, Harold Rosenberg notes that Pollock had succeeded in finding a means of projecting “the expression of a pure state,” and, according to Landau commenting on Namuth’s photographs of Pollock working, in becoming “one” with his work.⁹⁶ Pollock’s own summation of his work reads:

Technic is the result of need—
new needs demand new technics—
total control—denial of
the accident—
States of order—
organic intensity—
energy and motion—
memories arrested in space,
human needs and motives—
acceptance—⁹⁷

Pollock’s “total control,” “denial of...the accident,” and “States of order” are here at odds with the claims of unorganized chaos that so infuriated him. What others perceived as such disorder and inexplicable pandemonium of paint, Pollock saw as a mental and physical process through which he desired to “create a holistic experience for both himself and the spectator.”⁹⁸ Although he recognized the role of chance in his work, he recognized equally his own role in attempting to deny the accident and maintain control. When asked if he used the accident or controlled it, Pollock replied with, ““What makes you think it’s an accident when I know what I’m going to drip before I work?”” and later elaborated, ““When I am painting I have a general notion as to what I am

⁹⁵ Ibid., 159.

⁹⁶ Ibid., 166.

⁹⁷ Ibid., 149.

⁹⁸ Ibid., 172.

about...I can control the flow of paint; there is no accident...”⁹⁹ Pollock’s highly physical and active process can thus be seen also as one balanced with perception and reflection, and Pollock’s own understanding of this balance, uniting Dewey’s concept of the artistic “doing” and the aesthetic “perception and appreciation” that “make an experience *an* experience.”¹⁰⁰

In *Lavender Mist*, 1950, this is visible through Pollock’s “allover approach”—his equal treatment of the canvas as a whole—and the balance, rhythm and movement of line and forms learned through his time with Benton: aspects that could not be achieved by a “mindless” process, of which he was often accused. No one color or type of drip overpowers the rest, but rather all are negotiated in a holistic structure: an underlying web of long, black linear drips supports a smattering of pale colored spatters, thin, white spidery linear drips, “myriad tiny outbursts of colored energy,” and a balanced directionality, weight, form, and amount of paint throughout. Pollock’s risking unwanted marks and drips, and working in a mental and physical interaction with his painting to bring his paintings to their conclusion, embodies the very relationship of undergoing and doing that defines Dewey’s consummatory experience, where, according to Dewey, “what is done and what is undergone are thus reciprocally, cumulatively, and continuously instrumental to each other.”¹⁰¹

In this type of painting, this type of experience, each independent part of Pollock’s experience of painting—each movement and gesture that leads to a new mark, each color used, each brush used, each session of work, and each way it can be broken

⁹⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰⁰ Dewey, *Art As Experience*, 48.

¹⁰¹ Ibid., 50.

down into parts—retains its identity. As viewers, we can visually identify individual marks and colors in *Lavender Mist*—long, thin linear drip, light gray drop, etc... individual parts of Pollock’s process and experience; each of these self-identified parts, is simultaneously integrated into what we can also visually identify as a complete whole of the finished piece and Pollock’s completed experience. In this sense, *Lavender Mist*, and Pollock’s drip paintings in general, adhere to Dewey’s qualification for consummate experience as being a whole comprised of independent parts. *Lavender Mist* is united by form, which for Dewey, in art, can be seen as “the operation of forces that carry the experience of an event, object, scene, and situation to its own integral fulfillment.”¹⁰²

Although the experience of painting was key to Pollock, the purpose of his painting, he believed, was to make a statement. This statement, whatever it may be, can be thought of as the overarching “quality” or “feel” that unites “an experience” for Dewey. For Pollock, his statement was often about painting itself, arrived at through the expression of emotion. As viewers, we might come to identify an overarching quality as a pervasive mood or emotion evoked through aspects of the painting such as color or movement. This all-encompassing quality might be identified differently based on the identifier, but in Pollock’s paintings it exists, if even only because he sought to make it exist, through making a statement and expressing his emotion. “Experience of our age in terms of painting—not an illustration of—(but *the equivalent*)” is what he wrote of what he intended to express in his work.¹⁰³ Through Pollock’s relationship of “doing” and

¹⁰² Alexander, “The Art of Life,” 9.

¹⁰³ Landau, *Jackson Pollock*, 241.

“undergoing” through the way in which he paints, and his perception of this relationship, he exemplifies Dewey’s consummatory experience.

Through Pollock’s action painting such as *Lavender Mist*, we can come to better understand not only Pollock’s experience of painting, but of what it means to have “an experience” according to Dewey, a consummatory experience. In *Art as Experience*, Dewey attempts to show how the “conception of conscious experience as a perceived relation between doing and undergoing enables us to understand the connection that art as production and perception and appreciation as enjoyment sustain to each other.”¹⁰⁴ Through his unique style of drip painting, Pollock shows us how art as production, perception, and appreciation as enjoyment enables us to understand the conception of conscious experience—“an experience” in particular—as a perceived relation between doing and undergoing. Through Pollock, the act of painting exemplifies the consummate experience, and thus can serve to instruct us about experience in general.

Mark Rothko and Dewey’s Consummatory Experience

While studying Jackson Pollock’s action painting can give us an understanding of the way the act of painting or creating in general in art can exemplify Dewey’s idea of consummatory experience, looking briefly to Pollock’s contemporary, Mark Rothko, and his painting *Number 61 (Brown, Blue, Brown on Blue)*, 1953, can provide an understanding of the role of the aesthetic aspect of “an experience” as opposed to the “artistic,” not through the creation of art, but in viewing it. Rothko is not an action painter as Pollock can be thought of, but instead paints large surfaces that prompt

¹⁰⁴ Dewey, *Art As Experience*, 46-47.

contemplation.¹⁰⁵ Rather than concerning himself with the means of painting, Rothko is more interested in the result, although he does not oppose Dewey's definition of art as being not solely the object—he is interested in the experience of the viewer and the transcendental. For Rothko, as he writes in “The Romantics Were Prompted” in 1947,

Pictures must be miraculous: the instant one is completed, the intimacy between the creation and the creator is ended. He is an outsider. The picture must be for him, as for anyone experiencing it later, a revelation, an unexpected and unprecedented resolution of an eternally familiar need.¹⁰⁶

Whereas Pollock is interested in the act of painting, Rothko seems to be more interested in the result— what happens after its completion. In this way, he offers us another perspective on Dewey's consummatory aesthetic experience and means through which it is exemplified through art. Through Rothko's large scale paintings, the critical “aesthetic” aspect of Dewey's consummatory experience is modeled not through the act of painting itself, but in viewing; through this we are able to better understand Dewey's idea of the aesthetic in consummatory experience—the perception.

Number 61 (Brown, Blue, Brown on Blue), 1953, although painted only a few years after *Lavender Mist*, 1950, is far removed from Pollock's action-filled expanse of drips and spatters. Instead, Rothko's larger-than-human scale (almost ten foot tall) composition of unoutlined slightly translucent brown, white, and blue rectangles buzz

¹⁰⁵ Peter Selz and Mark Rothko, *Mark Rothko* (Garden City, N.Y: Distributed by Doubleday, 1961), 9.

¹⁰⁶ Mark Rothko, “The Romantics Were Prompted...,” in *Art in Theory, 1900-2000: An Anthology of Changing Ideas*, ed. Charles Harrison and Paul Wood (Malden, MA: Blackwell Pub, 2003), 572.

against a cerulean background, “presented in relentless frontality.”¹⁰⁷ Although not a flat, two-dimensional image, the “space sensations” implied in *Number 61 (Brown, Blue, Brown on Blue)*, 1953 lie outside of the picture plane, “on some meeting ground between the picture and the viewer.”¹⁰⁸ It is this space and interaction with which Rothko was primarily concerned, and which is of particular importance to an understanding of Dewey’s consummate experience.

¹⁰⁷ Selz and Rothko, *Mark Rothko*, 11.

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, 12.



Figure 3: Mark Rothko, *Number 61 (Brown, Blue, Brown on Blue)* (1953). Oil on canvas. 116½ x 92”.

Here, as the viewer in an interaction of this type with *Number 61 (Brown, Blue, Brown on Blue)*, we are confronted with a painting in our own human scale, almost as another being with whom to interact. It is precisely this interaction that Rothko desires, and which is so important to Dewey's consummatory experience. Although perhaps an entire consummatory experience has been carried to its fulfillment in Rothko's creation of this painting, on a larger scale another one is still in progress: that of the painting as an entirety. Here, the viewer comes into play through her own perception of the vast expanse of blue forms she is confronted with. "Perception," for Dewey, goes beyond recognition for the reception of a work, where receptivity is a process of a series of responsive acts that accumulate toward objective fulfillment, but rather takes "continuous interaction between the total organism and the objects"—in this case, the viewer and the ten feet of *Number 61 (Brown, Blue, Brown on Blue)*.¹⁰⁹ In order to achieve the "undergoing" phase of a consummatory experience, according to Dewey, we must summon energy and use it towards a response; as "undergoing" is not passive, but involves surrender, we must be willing to take things in, but also to create: "to perceive, a beholder must *create* his own experience."¹¹⁰

It seems to be this which Rothko himself calls us to do in interacting with his paintings— for him, as he recorded in his personal collection of writings, *The Artist's Reality*, published posthumously, space is "the most inclusive category of the artist's statement and can very well be the key to meaning in the picture."¹¹¹ For Rothko, the

¹⁰⁹ Dewey, *Art As Experience*, 52- 54.

¹¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 54.

¹¹¹ Mark Rothko and Christopher Rothko, *The Artist's Reality: Philosophies of Art* (New Haven, Conn: Yale University Press, 2004), 59.

experience of viewing his works was of the utmost importance, and he was often particular and thought by some to be somewhat controlling about aspects of exhibiting his work, such as lighting, hoping to create a type of sanctuary for the viewer.¹¹² In experiencing Rothko's work as he desired, and as Dewey advocates, in allowing ourselves to interact with the painting and opening ourselves to taking things in, but also summoning energy to allow ourselves to create our own experience, which Rothko sets us up for through his emphasis on the space surrounding his work for our interaction, we are able to engage directly in the aspect of perception necessary to "an experience" as claimed by Dewey.

It is this perception—the perception of the relationship between doing and undergoing—through which the consummatory experience can come to completion. In viewing *Number 61 (Brown, Blue, Brown on Blue)*, we are able to view Rothko's creation, the relationship between his own doing and undergoing, objectified, and thus, with our perception of this, work to create and complete a type of overarching, larger consummatory experience of the work itself. It is through this relationship—that of the artist and the viewer with respect to the painting, the entire system of the painting as a whole, from the artist's own potential consummatory experience in creating it through her own perceived relationship of doing and undergoing, and of artistic and aesthetic components, to the viewer's perception of the artist's relationship of doing and undergoing—that a larger, total consummatory experience surrounding the painting is realized.

¹¹² Mark Rothko and Diane Waldman, *Mark Rothko, 1903-1970: A Retrospective* (New York: H.N. Abrams, 1978), 66.

The Phenomenological Sense of John Dewey

Through an understanding of Dewey's aesthetics, and especially of his concept of the aesthetic experience, we are able to better understand the nature of art and experience in general, and especially the concepts that informed, motivated, and influenced Richard Shusterman in his development of somaesthetics, through which new ways of approaching art—especially contemporary art—can be opened up and utilized. Whether directly or indirectly, Dewey's influence on various American artists of the twentieth century, and later, philosopher Richard Shusterman, was real.

One notable concept of Dewey's influence is the reciprocity of “experiencing-experienced” that Victor Kestenbaum argues is “implicit in Dewey's notions of interaction and transaction,” and is “a well-developed conception of intentionality.”¹¹³ In addition to this intentionality, Kestenbaum argues for the importance of a principle of Dewey's philosophy of experience that both admirers and critics had seemingly ignored: Dewey's emphasis on immediately lived meanings as opposed to knowledge as a means of understanding reality, which are based in his concept of habit.¹¹⁴ To better appreciate Dewey's powerful philosophy of experience, Kestenbaum works to illuminate this notion of habit from a phenomenological point of view, something that he looks to Maurice Merleau-Ponty to accomplish for his establishment of pre-objective intentionality of habitual meaning.¹¹⁵ Through Kestenbaum's work, we can understand Dewey's *Art as*

¹¹³ Victor Kestenbaum, *The Phenomenological Sense of John Dewey: Habit and Meaning*, (Atlantic Highlands, N.J: Humanities Press, 1977), 1.

¹¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 3.

¹¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 6-7.

Experience, as more than a study in aesthetics, and “the pre-objectivity intentionality of habit” as “the most basic context of Dewey’s book.”¹¹⁶

Kestenbaum here models Dewey’s own value of reflection as “the most reliable method for securing meaning” in looking not only at the effects of the past on the present (or at least the less distant past), but how the present can also open up new meanings in the past, in looking back.¹¹⁷ In moving forward to explore the ideas and influence of Merleau-Ponty himself in working towards an understanding of Shusterman’s somaesthetics, I hope that this spirit of reflection can be continued, and that new insights can be gained not only in building off of a better understanding of Dewey, but perhaps also in looking back at these ideas through other understandings and ideas.

¹¹⁶ Ibid., 110-111.

¹¹⁷ Ibid., 112.

Part Two: Phenomenology and Aesthetics

In taking the next steps towards an understanding of Shusterman's somaesthetics, it would be helpful now to work towards understanding a philosophy and aesthetics that, like Dewey's, but in a different way, deals with experience; we need to deal with phenomenology. Phenomenology, broadly defined, is "the study of structures of consciousness as experienced from the first-person point of view, in which intentionality is the central structure of an experience," in that the experience is being directed toward something.¹¹⁸ It is the study of "phenomena," the appearance of things, or things as they appear to us in our experience: "the ways we experience things" and "the meanings things have in our own experience," including the significance of objects, events, tools, the flow of time, the self, and others as these things arise and are experienced in our "life-world."¹¹⁹ This part of the thread tracing the issue of experience, including that of art, overlaps with Dewey's ideas of art and experience and aesthetics. Edmund Husserl (1859-1938), the founder of phenomenology, was writing on and concerning himself with these types of issues, "phenomenological-descriptive analysis of specific types of experiences and their correlates (experiences of thinking and knowing and their products) as well as with describing general structures of consciousness" and the "foundation and elaboration of the corresponding methodology (phenomenological reflection, reduction...)" as early as 1900 in his *Logical Investigations*, twenty-six years before

¹¹⁸ Christian Beyer, "Edmund Husserl", *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Winter 2013 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.) <<http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2013/entries/husserl/>>.

¹¹⁹ Ibid.

Dewey would publish *Art as Experience*.¹²⁰ Although *Logical Investigations* and Husserl's early thinking about these issues of experience, as that of a mathematician branching out towards psychology and philosophy, begins more from science rather than art, the thinking that began with this text formed the foundation of the phenomenology that Husserl's student, Heidegger, and later phenomenologists and philosophers such as Merleau-Ponty, would build upon, connect more thoroughly, and create variations on in a way that is important to aesthetics.¹²¹

Departing from his early investigations in *Logical Investigations*, 1900-1901, Husserl began to develop his concept of "transcendental phenomenology," which would mature in his later works, in search of a "pure consciousness" and the units of consciousness he defines as "intentional acts" or "intentional experiences," those "having intentional content," which would come to define "intentionality" as a critical component of phenomenology.¹²² He also begins the type of thinking that would lead to his development of "epoché" or "bracketing," a method which called for phenomenological description (first-person perspective description exactly as something is experienced or intended by the subject) that "must not rely upon the correctness of any existence assumption concerning the object(s)...the respective act is about"; instead, "the epoché has us focus on those aspects of our intentional acts and their contents that do not depend on the existence of a represented object out there in the extra-mental world."¹²³ This, according to Husserl, leaves us with a "pure" conception, approach, understanding and

¹²⁰ Rudolph Bernet, Iso Kern, and Eduard Marbach, *An Introduction to Husserlian Phenomenology* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern UP, 1993), 1-2.

¹²¹ Beyer, "Edmund Husserl."

¹²² Bernet, *An Introduction to Husserlian Phenomenology*, 4.

¹²³ Beyer, "Edmund Husserl."

experience of the world. Although Husserl had a background in mathematics and physics, his interest was in what was left when the scientific conceptions of the world were removed, this “pure” conception of the world. Phenomenology itself Husserl presents as a “new, critical, and rigorous science” “committed to an ideal of fully justified knowledge, an ideal that the positive sciences fail to live up to since they fail to reflect on their own epistemological and metaphysical presuppositions in their exclusive orientation toward the acquisition of more and more results.”¹²⁴ According to Zahavi, “Husserl...argues that it is impossible to carry out this investigation [that of philosophical core questions concerning the being and nature of reality]...if one simply presupposes and accepts the metaphysical and epistemological assumptions that characterize our daily life, which is implicitly and unquestionably accepted by all of the positive sciences.”¹²⁵ We should, according to Zahavi in explaining Husserl, “not let preconceived theories form our experience, but let our experience determine our theories,” thus specifying phenomenology not as a theory itself, but as a method and a science.¹²⁶ “Epoché” or “bracketing” is Husserl’s prescription for how to do this. “Bracketing,” for him, is not effected to “deny, doubt, neglect, abandon, or exclude reality from our research” but instead to “suspend or neutralize a certain dogmatic *attitude* toward reality...to focus on... the objects just as they appear.”¹²⁷

Zahavi, through *Husserl’s Phenomenology*, works to dispel a prevailing view of Husserl as unable to free himself from the framework of a classical metaphysics of

¹²⁴ Dan Zahavi, *Husserl’s Phenomenology*.(Stanford, CA: Stanford UP, 2003), 44.

¹²⁵ Ibid.

¹²⁶ Ibid., 45.

¹²⁷ Ibid.

subjectivity, which has caused him to be often considered as having been surpassed by his student, Heidegger, and later phenomenologists, in many ways.¹²⁸ Husserl's influence and significance are complex, as his philosophy was not taught during the Nazi era due to his Jewish roots; instead, Heidegger's phenomenology was, and consequentially, Husserl's phenomenology was often read through the lens of Heidegger.¹²⁹ Husserl is important to consider, however, not solely as a precursor to Heidegger, Merleau-Ponty or others, but for the "uniqueness" of his phenomenology that is being appreciated especially recently as more of his manuscripts have been published of late.¹³⁰ This is important to keep in mind in moving forward in looking at later philosophers and phenomenologists, Heidegger, Merleau-Ponty, and later Shusterman. Each of these contributors to this thread of thought, like Dewey and others, remain significant to the development of thought on experience, art and phenomenology (and all areas) not only in the role they once played in carrying this thread while alive, or through any stagnant or cemented position in the past, but in an active way through others' generation of new scholarship, discourse and understandings surrounding their work. In this way, each can thus continue to serve as lively participants in this discourse.

Martin Heidegger and "The Origin of the Work of Art"

Martin Heidegger (1889-1976), regardless of whether or not he ought to be thought of as overshadowing his teacher, Husserl, was indeed a key factor in the development of phenomenology, publishing "The Origin of The Work of Art" in 1950

¹²⁸ Ibid., 141.

¹²⁹ Ibid.

¹³⁰ Ibid., 144.

based off of lectures delivered in the mid 1930's. The most widely discussed work of Heidegger's philosophy of art, and often taken as the full and complete statement of this philosophy, "The Origin of the Work of Art" is truly only the beginning of his path towards thinking about art, as we know Heidegger was aware of through his later thinking and criticism.¹³¹ However, despite its potential "deficiencies," of which Heidegger was also aware, and the fact that it is best understood within the context of other texts and Heidegger's thinking from the same time period, "The Origin of the Work of Art" raises some critical issues in approaching art from a phenomenological perspective.¹³² Heidegger's intention to "disrupt the prevailing theoretical climate" and call for a type of art that is not "marginal" or trivial, but that can be instructive on how to live, seem to closely resonate with Dewey's aesthetics as explained in *Art as Experience*.¹³³ He, like Dewey, is also troubled by the division between art and life, art and "fine art;" however, he is troubled most by the conception of art having evolved to being for the provision of "aesthetic experiences," which he situates opposite a conception of art in which art "provides guidance as to how to live."¹³⁴ Because of this, his contribution to "creating the possibility of the rebirth of art" varies slightly from Dewey's.¹³⁵

For Heidegger in his search for the "Origin of the Work of Art, art is "the happening of truth," and "the artwork is that in and through which 'truth happens.'"¹³⁶

¹³¹ Julian Young, *Heidegger's Philosophy of Art* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2001), 5.

¹³² Ibid.

¹³³ Ibid., 15.

¹³⁴ Ibid., 12.

¹³⁵ Ibid., 15.

¹³⁶ Ibid., 16-19.

What is meant by the “happening of truth”? Heidegger seeks to clarify this by replacing “happening of truth” with “opening up of world”; in this sense, the artwork becomes defined as something that does this: “opens up the world.”¹³⁷ However, Heidegger explains that it cannot do this indefinitely; an artwork may lose its “greatness” or ability to “open up the world” if it is removed from its “world” or original setting, (as an art object relocated to a museum setting) or if its world “falls” (as the world of ancient Greece did around the Parthenon).¹³⁸ In this sense, the “world” of a work of art is incredibly important, constituting, as Heidegger argues, “a ‘framework for the present-at-hand,’” and as Young describes, “a type of metaphysical map” involving the “regions of being” and “kinds of beings” that inhabit it, and it is also internalized by a culture: “to understand what one’s world is, then, is to fundamentally understand what, fundamentally, there is.”¹³⁹ In looking at the world this way, at what “there is,” and as a structure of beings, the work of art opens up the “being of beings.”¹⁴⁰ It is this structure of beings that is so important, as it gives meaning and identity to those who belong to it: “‘Being-in-the-world’ ... is knowing where and who you are, and what you have to do.”¹⁴¹

Art plays such a significant role, then, according to Heidegger, in that it *creates* world, this structure of beings through which meaning and purpose can be found.¹⁴² The artist, as one of these beings in the world, “‘makes expressly visible’” his or her world, and “‘repeatedly experiences the world ‘for the first time.’”¹⁴³ Like Husserl, Heidegger

¹³⁷ Ibid., 19.

¹³⁸ Ibid., 20.

¹³⁹ Ibid., 23-24.

¹⁴⁰ Ibid.

¹⁴¹ Ibid., 29.

¹⁴² Ibid.

¹⁴³ Ibid., 32-33.

believes this world to be non-objective, and like Dewey, that the “‘simple and essential’ meanings” which establish our “‘position in the midst of beings,’” and give our lives meaning and direction, have been separated from daily life.¹⁴⁴ Stulberg notes that for an artwork to be “a happening of truth” and to “open up a world,” for the being of things to be “unconcealed” by an artwork, the preservers of art are just as important as its creators.¹⁴⁵ It is they, he notes, who “inhibit all usual doing, knowing and looking...in order to linger and stand in the truth that is happening in the work” and in doing so transform the work from “the role of a stimulus to experience,” to the role of a special, important event. According to Stulberg, “the work comes about as a work only when it is *fashioned* and preserved.”¹⁴⁶ In this sense, we can see Dewey’s ideas resonate in the value of both the experiences of creating and viewing art, here, in the “unconcealing” of the being of things. Ultimately, Heidegger notes that he has not resolved the whole riddle of art, but that he has “set forth the riddle for all to ponder and see.”¹⁴⁷

The Phenomenology of Maurice Merleau-Ponty

Mystery was at the core of the philosophical thought of later phenomenologist Maurice Merleau-Ponty (1908-1961): one mystery in particular “surfaces and resurfaces throughout his work, implicitly and explicitly...: *perception*.”¹⁴⁸ Referred to as “one of the most interesting and original philosophers of the twentieth century,” Merleau-Ponty

¹⁴⁴ Ibid., 33-37.

¹⁴⁵ Robert B. Stulberg, "Heidegger and the Origin of the Work of Art: An Explication," *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 32.2 (1973): 263, accessed March 26, 2014, doi:10.2307/429043.

¹⁴⁶ Ibid.

¹⁴⁷ Ibid., 265.

¹⁴⁸ Taylor Carman, *Merleau-Ponty* (London: Routledge, 2008), 7.

contributed themes belonging to metaphysics, epistemology, and the philosophy of mind through his critique of intellectualism and empiricism, his notion of the bodily nature of perception, and his non-representational account of intentionality through his writings beginning with *The Structure of Behavior*, 1938, prominently through his major work *Phenomenology of Perception*, 1945, and through his final, posthumously published work, *The Visible and the Invisible*, 1964.¹⁴⁹ Despite Merleau-Ponty's early death at the age of fifty-three in 1961, at a time when he had begun a significant stage in working out his philosophy, these two later works especially, *Phenomenology of Perception* and *The Visible and the Invisible*, have been "incorporated into the celebrated philosophical works of our century."¹⁵⁰

Although his works did not initially receive the same amount of attention as those of his contemporaries and friends, including Jean-Paul Sartre and Simone de Beauvoir, his philosophy, especially his phenomenology, has retained an ongoing relevance in diverse fields.¹⁵¹ Influenced by the phenomenology of Husserl, Heidegger, and Gestalt psychology, Merleau-Ponty's most enduring contributions to philosophy, according to Carman, "belong to theory—or rather, as the title of his magnum opus has it, the *phenomenology*—of perception."¹⁵² Although Madison claims that the philosophical basis for *Phenomenology of Perception* has long gone into question, and that Merleau-Ponty's unfinished *The Visible and the Invisible* was to "take up, deepen and correct his

¹⁴⁹ Ibid., 1.

¹⁵⁰ Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Galen A. Johnson, and Michael B. Smith, *The Merleau-Ponty Aesthetics Reader: Philosophy and Painting* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern UP, 1993), xiii.

¹⁵¹ Jack Reynolds, "Maurice Merleau-Ponty (1908-1961)," Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy, accessed March 30, 2014, <http://www.iep.utm.edu/merleau/>.

¹⁵² Carman, *Merleau-Ponty*, 1.

entire philosophy as he had previously formulated it,” *Phenomenology of Perception* remains critical to include in working towards an understanding of Shusterman’s somaesthetics.¹⁵³ Shusterman engages directly and critically with Merleau-Ponty (as “something like the patron saint of the body”¹⁵⁴) and his phenomenology and insights about the lived body, especially in terms of his own “pragmatist reconstructive dimension of somatic theory.”¹⁵⁵

Merleau-Ponty’s Aesthetic Philosophy:
Phenomenology of Perception and “Eye and Mind”

The mystery of perception for Merleau-Ponty, Carman explains through his comprehensive account of Merleau-Ponty’s philosophy *Merleau-Ponty*, 2008, lies in the fact that it “discloses a world”; indeed, according to Merleau-Ponty, the task of phenomenology is “to reveal the mystery of the world and the mystery of reason.”¹⁵⁶ Merleau-Ponty works towards explaining this most thoroughly through his key 1945 work, *Phenomenology of Perception*, through which he claimed he “tried, first of all, to re-establish the roots of the mind in its body and in its world.”¹⁵⁷ Through this text, his phenomenology emerges as an attempt to “free the phenomenon of perceived awareness from the dominant conception of intentional content as abstract, discursive, and generally *thought-like*” and emphasizes the essential bodily intertwining of perception and the perceived world,” grounding perception in the “unity of the human body,” “the material

¹⁵³ Gary Brent Madison, *The Phenomenology of Merleau-Ponty: A Search for the Limits of Consciousness* (Athens: Ohio UP, 1981), xxviii.

¹⁵⁴ Richard Shusterman, *Body Consciousness: A Philosophy of Mindfulness and Somaesthetics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 49.

¹⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 75.

¹⁵⁶ Carman, *Merleau-Ponty*, 7.

¹⁵⁷ Madison, *The Phenomenology of Merleau-Ponty*, 69.

subject of the world,” rather than in sensation or as a function of judgment.¹⁵⁸ Having been highly influenced by Husserl and Heidegger, Merleau-Ponty’s most important contribution, according to Carman, is “his account of perception as neither a subjective experience nor an objective property of the mind, but an aspect of our *being in the world*.”¹⁵⁹ His phenomenology comes about to describe intentionality, the “aboutness” of experience (perhaps comparable to the “overarching quality” Dewey speaks of in his own idea of aesthetic experience?), in a way that reflects and supports Heidegger’s belief that “an ontology of human experience must proceed from a phenomenological description of human experience.”¹⁶⁰

Through its discussion of “the body,” “the world as perceived,” and “being-in-the-world,” *Phenomenology of Perception*’s “principal discovery is that of the lived body,”¹⁶¹ through which we are both open to the world and embedded in it.¹⁶² In fact, as Merleau-Ponty points out, we have a world only by having a body in it, and the body is “our anchorage in the world’ ... a general way of having the world.”¹⁶³ In this sense, he follows that “we shall find in ourselves, and nowhere else, the true meaning of phenomenology,” claiming,

I am the absolute source, my existence does not stem from my antecedents, from my physical and social environment; instead it moves out towards them and sustains them, for I alone bring into being for myself (and therefore into being in the only sense that the word can have for me) the tradition which I elect to carry on...¹⁶⁴

¹⁵⁸ Carman, *Merleau-Ponty*, 75-76.

¹⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 74.

¹⁶⁰ *Ibid.*

¹⁶¹ Madison, *The Phenomenology of Merleau-Ponty*, 68.

¹⁶² Carman, *Merleau-Ponty*, 10.

¹⁶³ *Ibid.*, 11.

¹⁶⁴ Maurice Merleau-Ponty and Colin Smith, *Phenomenology of Perception* (London: Routledge, 1962), ix.

Following this, we can better understand the world as perceived and our place in it: “We must not,” Merleau-Ponty warns us “...wonder whether we really perceive a world, we must instead say: the world is what we perceive;” not what we think, but what we live through.¹⁶⁵ We are in communication with this world, and are open to it, but we cannot possess it; “it is inexhaustible.”¹⁶⁶ Phenomenology, although a study of essences, is also, according to Merleau-Ponty, “a philosophy which puts essences back into existence, and does not expect to arrive at an understanding of man and the world from any starting point other than that of their ‘facticity’”; we are asked to “return to things themselves.”¹⁶⁷ To do this, to return to “the things themselves,” Merleau-Ponty claims,

is to return to the world prior to knowledge of which knowledge always speaks and in relation to which every scientific determination is abstract, indicative, and dependent, like geography in relation to the countryside in which we have learned beforehand what a forest, a prairie, or a river is... The world is there before any analysis I could carry out.... Perception is not a science of the world, it is not even an act, a deliberate taking up of a position; it is the background from which all acts stand out, and is presupposed by them.¹⁶⁸

We are called to be childlike, to share in this mentality in which the world is believed to be accessible to all around us, and in which perception is understood as the “background condition of intelligibility”: a world which we are familiar with “long before we are in a position to comprehend the world or ourselves from the depersonalized

¹⁶⁵ Ibid., xvi-xvii.

¹⁶⁶ Ibid.

¹⁶⁷ Ibid., vii, ix.

¹⁶⁸ Ibid., ix-xi.

standpoint of science.”¹⁶⁹ Although Merleau-Ponty rejected Husserl’s notion of “epoché” or “bracketing” as impossible as a method of returning to a type of “pure” consciousness, he did believe there was a wisdom of its own in this world we come to know as children, one that is pre-reflective, pre-theoretical.¹⁷⁰

“Eye and Mind,” as the last essay of Merleau-Ponty’s published in 1961 before his untimely death, and republished in 1964, articulates and clarifies his phenomenology and aesthetics, and his ideas of lived bodies perceiving and “being in the world” through the example of painting. Galen Johnson claims in his introduction to the essay that it might be called “Merleau-Ponty’s suicide” due to the philosopher’s seeking to “bring to written expression the silent and mute meanings of prereflective brute Being”¹⁷¹; indeed the quote of J. Gasquet which Merleau-Ponty commences his investigation with—“What I am trying to convey to you is more mysterious; it is entwined in the very roots of being, in the impalpable source of sensations”¹⁷²—seems an expression of the philosopher as well as the painter.¹⁷² Through this challenging task, Merleau-Ponty shows us that it is appropriate for a philosophy that attempts to undertake the “prospection of the actual world” to investigate painting.¹⁷³ This is similar to Dewey, except that for Merleau-Ponty it is not in terms of modeling “aesthetic experience” but rather because it is “precisely this philosophy that animates the painter—not when he expresses his opinions about the

¹⁶⁹ Carman, *Merleau-Ponty*, 61.

¹⁷⁰ Ibid.

¹⁷¹ Galen A. Johnson, ed., *The Merleau-Ponty Aesthetics Reader: Philosophy and Painting* (Evanston, Ill: Northwestern University Press, 1993), 45.

¹⁷² Maurice Merleau-Ponty, “Eye and Mind.” in *The Merleau-Ponty Aesthetics Reader: Philosophy and Painting*, ed., Galen A. Johnson, and Michael B. Smith (Evanston, Ill: Northwestern University Press, 1993), 121.

¹⁷³ Madison, *The Phenomenology of Merleau-Ponty*, 96.

world but in that instant his vision becomes gesture...”¹⁷⁴: as Cézanne, “he thinks in painting.”¹⁷⁵ In addressing this issue, “Eye and Mind” addresses more directly what it means to have a body, to be open to the world by perception, and what perception is.¹⁷⁶

Through “Eye and Mind,” Merleau-Ponty continues to oppose understanding the world through science alone—a method that is, to him, a construction largely removed from the “real world” itself, and dangerously taken as absolute. He calls instead for scientific thinking to “return to the ‘there is,’” offering painting as that which “draws upon this fabric of brute meaning which operationalism would prefer to ignore...art and only art does so in full innocence.”¹⁷⁷ For Merleau-Ponty, it is the painter who most fully and successfully carries out his idea of the lived body, who “gives himself entirely to drawing from the world,” who “takes his body with him,” and “by lending his body to the world...changes the world into paintings.”¹⁷⁸ To look to the painter is to “go back to the working, actual body—not the body as a chunk of space or a bundle of functions but that body which is an intertwining of vision and movement.”¹⁷⁹

It is this connection of vision and movement, “seeing and being seen,” which underlies Merleau-Ponty’s ideas of being in the world, “the world” being shared by both the visible world and the world of our movement.¹⁸⁰ Through an establishment of ourselves as being simultaneously visible and “immersed in the visible,” he claims, we can approach the world “by looking” and not by appropriating what we see: we can

¹⁷⁴ Ibid.

¹⁷⁵ Merleau-Ponty, “Eye and Mind,” 139.

¹⁷⁶ Madison, *The Phenomenology of Merleau-Ponty*, 97.

¹⁷⁷ Merleau-Ponty, “Eye and Mind,” 122-123.

¹⁷⁸ Ibid., 123.

¹⁷⁹ Ibid., 124.

¹⁸⁰ Ibid.

“open onto the world.”¹⁸¹ According to Merleau-Ponty, it is through this that humanity is produced: “a human body is present when, between the see-er and the visible, between touching and touched, between one eye and the other, between hand and hand a kind of crossover occurs...”; it is in this system of exchanges precisely that problems of painting can be found.¹⁸² In viewing painting, we see “according to it, or with it” rather than simply “seeing it,” while in creating a painting, a painter “comes into full possession of his vision” by seeing and from vision itself alone.¹⁸³ While he is painting, any painter practices the theory of vision; through this, the “crossover” in which humanity is produced here is a purely visual one, as painting “celebrates no other enigma but that of visibility.”¹⁸⁴ The process of “being in the world,” for the painter, according to Merleau-Ponty, becomes a totally interactive one akin to breathing in that it consists of inspiration and expiration of Being, as the roles of painter and the visible change places; Cézanne is the painter whom Merleau-Ponty discusses as exemplifying this.¹⁸⁵

Merleau-Ponty’s Phenomenology and Paul Cézanne

Sixteen years prior to “Eye and Mind,” Merleau-Ponty dealt with Cézanne and his work through his earlier essay on painting, “Cézanne’s Doubt,” 1945, the same year that *Phenomenology of Perception* was published. Although the essay is also partly devoted to a study of Leonardo da Vinci through Freud’s *Leonardo da Vinci: A Study in*

¹⁸¹ Ibid.

¹⁸² Ibid., 125.

¹⁸³ Ibid., 127.

¹⁸⁴ Ibid.

¹⁸⁵ Ibid., 129.

Psychosexuality, Merleau-Ponty's main focus is Cézanne.¹⁸⁶ This sustained interest in the French painter is no accident. Cézanne, especially through his later landscapes after 1870 such as *Mont Sainte-Victoire*, 1885-1887, through his unique method of painting, represents not the objects or landscape before him, but his experience of and in the world—one constructed by his perception. In doing this, Cézanne exemplifies Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology and aesthetics.

“Painting was his world and his mode of existence,” Merleau-Ponty sets forth initially in “Cézanne’s Doubt.”¹⁸⁷ Mont Saint-Victoire, near Aix, France, was inextricably involved with this world for a considerable time as the physical setting which Cézanne perceived, and through which his world came into being. This was a place he not only felt deeply connected to as his own “native soil,” but as a landscape which he was “deeply in love with,” and which he dealt with frequently, almost religiously, with respect to painting in the later years of his career as a persisting “motif.”¹⁸⁸ For Cézanne, a “motif” was not a beautiful view, but was:

a configuration of lines or planes discovered when the natural subject is seen from a specific viewpoint” where “the same subject seen from a different angle offers subject for study of the most powerful interest and so varied that I think I could occupy myself for months without changing place, by turning now more to the right, now more to the left.¹⁸⁹

¹⁸⁶ Johnson, *The Merleau-Ponty Aesthetics Reader*, 5.

¹⁸⁷ Maurice Merleau-Ponty. “Cézanne’s Doubt,” *The Merleau-Ponty Aesthetics Reader: Philosophy and Painting*, ed. Galen A. Johnson (Evanston, Ill: Northwestern University Press, 1993), 69.

¹⁸⁸ Paul Cézanne, Theodore Reff, and William Rubin, *Cézanne: The Late Work : Essays* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1977), 26.

¹⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, 45.

It was what Rubin and Reff defined as “a section of nature encompassed by view and for that very reason isolating itself, making a whole of what is a fragment.”¹⁹⁰

Through this repeated inquiry into, transactional engagement with, and synthesis of his immediate surroundings through paint, Cézanne truly “takes his body with him,” and “gives himself entirely to drawing from the world,” “lending his body to the world” in the way that, according to Merleau-Ponty, “the artist changes the world into paintings.”¹⁹¹ *Mont Sainte-Victoire*, 1885-1887, one of these paintings and part of Cézanne’s world, “where strokes of pulsing color applied with extraordinary freedom and conviction, build up an image of the world in continual flux, the land merging with the trees, the trees with the sky...,” although a landscape painted later in Cézanne’s career and development, can help us to understand Cézanne’s painting as representation of his experience of the world, especially as one of the paintings that would define the “consummation of Cézanne’s painting”—the “stirring climax of Cézanne’s art.”¹⁹²

Cézanne’s painting as representation of his own experience in the world can come about through Cézanne himself as a “working, actual body” as defined by Merleau-Ponty—an “intertwining of vision and movement.”¹⁹³ Cézanne defined himself this way through his daily bodily work and interaction with his environment. Every day, at least during his later years in working on landscapes such as *Mont Sainte-Victoire*, he began work early in the morning, worked throughout the day, and especially late afternoon painted *sur le motif* outside, walking to his studio and taking a carriage, or eventually

¹⁹⁰ Ibid.

¹⁹¹ Merleau-Ponty, “Eye and Mind,” 123.

¹⁹² Cézanne, Reff, and Rubin, *Cézanne: The Late Work : Essays*, 29, 111.

¹⁹³ Merleau-Ponty, “Eye and Mind,” 124.

even departing on foot, farther away to a destination from which he would paint, traversing winding lanes, thickets of oaks and pines, for at times up to an hour's walk, totally immersing himself as a body in the motif he would then paint.¹⁹⁴ It was here, as a body situated in nature, that Cézanne would fully become an “intertwining of vision and movement,”¹⁹⁵ more than as with any other previous style or method of painting he had involved himself with; it is here in which he defined himself as “steeping himself serenely in this world of the eye,” “a man who dwells with his perceptions.”¹⁹⁶

Here, working in and from nature, painting became for Cézanne “the exact study of appearances” rather than as imagined scenes or the projection of dreams; this was thanks to the Impressionists, especially Pissarro, a revered friend, teacher and father figure for Cézanne.¹⁹⁷ As Meyer Schapiro’s 1965 critical account of Cézanne’s painting emphasizes, through the valuable years Cézanne spent as an apprentice to the painter nine years his senior, “Pissarro taught Cézanne a method of slow, patient painting directly from nature. It was a discipline in seeing,” and one that was unique from the type of truth of perception Impressionism afforded.¹⁹⁸ While Impressionism tried to capture “the very way in which objects strike our eyes and attack our senses,” using a limited palette and color contrasts to modify local colors in nature, restoring a type of truth of the impression through the juxtaposition of separate parts and tones, Cézanne, although influenced by these ideas and values, seems to have had a different aim.¹⁹⁹ Cézanne, through his much

¹⁹⁴ Cézanne, Reff, and Rubin, *Cézanne: The Late Work : Essays*, 104-105.

¹⁹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁹⁶ Meyer Schapiro and Paul Cézanne, *Paul Cézanne* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1988), 9.

¹⁹⁷ Merleau-Ponty, “Cézanne’s Doubt,” 71.

¹⁹⁸ Schapiro, *Paul Cézanne*, 26-27.

¹⁹⁹ Merleau-Ponty, “Cézanne’s Doubt,” 72.

more inclusive palette of eighteen colors, including earth tones normally excluded by the Impressionists, does not sacrifice the weight of the object through a breaking up of its tone or through losing it in its relationships to the air and other objects, but rather, according to Merleau-Ponty, seeks to “find it again behind the atmosphere”; he sought to “return to the object without abandoning the impressionistic aesthetic which takes nature as its model.”²⁰⁰ In *Mont Saint-Victoire*, we can see the influence of Impressionist ideas through the juxtaposition of complimentary and contrasting colors—peachy hues tending toward oranges set off cooler shadows of blue violet on the mountain’s face, while collections of strokes of brighter yellow-orange pair with blue violet to define fields and homes below. We are not, however, confronted with an impression of the mountain as an ephemeral weightless relationship of air, objects and space, separate strokes to form an overall atmosphere. Rather, *Mont Sainte-Victoire* reveals itself to us in its full identity as mountain, solid, which Cézanne’s multidirectional strokes define to us not as a moment, but as a complex compilation of many moments, all of the moments of Cézanne’s act of painting and looking.

Cézanne, then, was involved in a “discipline of seeing” different than that of the Impressionists, his contemporaries. More than they, he emerges as a Being, a body in Merleau-Ponty’s terms, “immersed in the visible by his body, himself visible,” simultaneously seeing, being seen, opening onto the world, and “caught in the fabric of

²⁰⁰ Ibid.

the world.”²⁰¹ His painting is, according to Schapiro, a “more direct instrument of the self.”²⁰²

Cézanne achieves this through a “dedication to the visual as a complete world grasped directly as a structure of tones.”²⁰³ Mont Sainte-Victoire emerges in *Mont Sainte-Victoire*, 1885-1887, according to Schapiro in “changing colors from point to point” in which “all seems to flicker”: “layers intricately fitted and interlocked,” “a contrast of movements, of the marginal and centered, of symmetry and unbalance,” yet “deep harmony, built with a wonderful finesse.”²⁰⁴ This color and depth Cézanne claims “are there only because they awaken an echo in our bodies and because the body welcomes them,” and that “nature is on the inside.”²⁰⁵ Through this, we can begin to understand the buzzing collection of patches of tones, varying in their direction, that construct Cézanne’s mountain. It is not just the mountain they construct, but something to do with Cézanne himself: his perception, his seeing of the mountain, as they are there “only because they awaken an echo” in Cézanne’s body, and it is only through his body’s welcoming of them which they are made manifest. In this sense, Cézanne’s body becomes integral to his painting in that it is only through his body that he perceives the world around him, through which vision and movement are intertwined.

²⁰¹ Merleau-Ponty, “Eye and Mind,” 124-125.

²⁰² Schapiro, *Paul Cézanne*, 24.

²⁰³ Ibid.

²⁰⁴ Ibid., 74.

²⁰⁵ Merleau-Ponty, “Eye and Mind,” 125.



Figure 4: Paul Cézanne, *Mont Sainte-Victoire* (1885-1887). Oil on canvas. 26 x 35 3/8".

It is through these multi-directional areas of tone which we can understand Cézanne's work, his understanding of the landscape around him, not as immediately complete, but as composed of many moments, parts and perceptions—both within each specific construction of Mont Sainte-Victoire in color, and in the time spent constructing this particular landscape itself again and again. It is not the object, the mountain, fully formed as in the instantaneous moment of a photograph, or even the sensation and perception of the object itself, which is at stake, constructed and dealt with by Cézanne for so many years, but Cézanne's experience of and in this world, his perceiving and being in the world, which emerges through the coming into being of views of Mont Sainte-Victoire such as these. Pavel Machotka emphasizes this clearly through his extensive comparison of Cézanne's painted landscapes to the physical motifs themselves as he has located and photographed them in 1996. Through these images—the complete, static and instantaneous image of Mont Saint-Victoire given to us in the pictorially unified perceptive system of a photograph, compared to the composite view of the mountain provided by Cézanne, we can see how “paintings such as these help clarify once again how Cézanne understood pictorial space in relation to real space: he did not flatten it in any simple manner, but controlled its overall depth or modulated our progression into it by discrete steps.”²⁰⁶ We can see Cézanne's vision of the mountain unlike a composition “which obeys the laws and methods of Alberti's perspective...the spatial container does not exist prior to its contents and it is not distinct from them; it is on the very existence of the latter that the whole figurative construction depends”;

²⁰⁶ Pavel Machotka and Paul Cézanne, *Cézanne: Landscape into Art* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1996), 75.

“Cézannian space is no longer space indifferent to its contents,” but one in which he “tries to synthesize in a single vision...the successive moments of a temporal continuity.”²⁰⁷ These successive moments captured—the patches of pink, violet and blue forming the faces of Mont Sainte-Victoire, similar to the patches of directionally varied strokes that form the sky—reveal to us more about the way in which Cézanne experienced this landscape, the way he, as a body, perceived it, than they do about the objects and this landscape itself. Just as Merleau-Ponty described perceiving the paintings at the caves of Lascaux, saying “I do not look at it as one looks at a thing, fixing it in its place...my gaze wanders within it as in the halos of Being. Rather than seeing it, I see according to, or with it,” so don’t we see “with” Cézanne’s work, just as Cézanne see “with” his world, his landscape.²⁰⁸

According to Merleau-Ponty, “painting celebrates no other enigma but that of visibility,” and “the painter, any painter, *while he is painting*, practices a magical theory of vision.”²⁰⁹ Cézanne, through depicting his experience of the world and perception of it through *Mont Sainte-Victoire*, does this most of all.²¹⁰ “‘The landscape thinks itself in me,’ he said, ‘and I am its consciousness’”; according to Merleau-Ponty, “the painter recaptures and converts into visible objects what would, without him, remain closed up in the separate life of each consciousness: the vibration of appearances which is the cradle of things.”²¹¹ Cézanne not only represents, through his work, the way in which he experiences the world—phenomenologically—but does so in a way that is meaningful to

²⁰⁷ Cézanne, Reff and Rubin, *Cézanne: The Late Work*, 73-74.

²⁰⁸ Merleau-Ponty, “Eye and Mind,” 126.

²⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, 127.

²¹⁰ *Ibid.*

²¹¹ Merleau-Ponty, “Cézanne’s Doubt,” 77.

us as viewers; “a painter like Cézanne, an artist, or a philosopher, must not only create and express an idea, but must also awaken the experiences which will make the idea take root in the consciousness of others...if a work is successful, it has the strange power of being self-teaching.”²¹² Through Cézanne’s work, not only are we offered a means of understanding the way in which he experienced the world, through his own perception and phenomenological engagement, but also what this way of experiencing the world entails in itself, and how we, ourselves, experience our own worlds.

The way in which Cézanne paints, especially in his later works, seems to provide one response, one echo, to Merleau-Ponty’s call for scientific thinking to return to the “there is” as discussed in “Eye and Mind.”²¹³ Although Cézanne’s later paintings, such as *Mont Sainte-Victoire*, are themselves constructions such as Merleau-Ponty reminds us of science as being, they are constructions whose grounds have returned firmly to the “there is.”²¹⁴ Despite claims of Cézanne’s painting as detached and objective, in his return to the “there is” through his painting his perception and experience of the world, and through his position as “part of the landscape”²¹⁵ himself, not distanced, he instead exemplifies Merleau-Ponty’s definition of humanity, of the presence of the human body, in his crossover between the see-er and the visible, between the sensing and the sensible²¹⁶ Cézanne, Schapiro notes, maintains a “characteristic meditateness and detachment from desire,” as well as a tendency towards “the experience of the qualities of things without

²¹² Ibid., 79.

²¹³ Merleau-Ponty, “Eye and Mind,” 122.

²¹⁴ Ibid.

²¹⁵ Schapiro, *Paul Cézanne*, 14.

²¹⁶ Merleau-Ponty, “Eye and Mind,” 125.

regard to their use or cause or consequence.”²¹⁷ Although what may be termed an aesthetic attitude has been seen instead as objective detachment, Cézanne, through his experience with the world and painting of this experience, is truly *attached* to the directly visible world “as his sole object for meditation.”²¹⁸ This tension between Cézanne’s seemingly (and perhaps truly, in some ways) detached attitude towards painting and his deeply engaged interaction with it in painting, and commitment to paint nature “in complete naiveté of sensation, as if no one had painted it before,” opens some interesting questions, and presents Cézanne as a unique representative of Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology in emerging as both seemingly scientific (objective) and basically human (subjective).²¹⁹ In this sense, perhaps he has achieved Merleau-Ponty’s call for a science returned to the “there is” and a philosophy of what Merleau-Ponty described as being in the world.²²⁰ Overall, according to Schapiro, Cézanne is able to make his “sensing, probing, doubting, finding activity a visible part of the painting and to endow this intimate, personal aspect with the same qualities of noble order as the world that he has imagined”—he is able to make visible the way he experiences the world, the “coming into being” of that which he paints through his perceptions and “constructive operations,” a way that is phenomenological in the sense of Merleau-Ponty.²²¹ This in itself is compelling in that it teaches us about the experience of painting and art in general.

²¹⁷ Schapiro, *Paul Cézanne*, 17.

²¹⁸ *Ibid.*

²¹⁹ *Ibid.*

²²⁰ *Ibid.*, 19.

²²¹ *Ibid.*

Phenomenology and Rackstraw Downes

Cézanne had painted *Mont Sainte-Victoire* fifty-eight years before Merleau-Ponty would embark upon “Cézanne’s Doubt,” and seventy-seven years before “Eye and Mind” would be published, already making him a figure of the past for Merleau-Ponty looking back. But what of this space and time since Cézanne—and since Merleau-Ponty? Have there been other painters who emphasize this way of being in the world in a similar way?

Upon first inspection, a contemporary landscape by American painter Rackstraw Downes, such as *Water Flow Monitoring Installations on the Rio Grande Near Presidio, TX (5-Part Painting)*, 2002-3, might suggest, in response to this question, “no, not here.” This landscape in five parts, each at least 3.5 feet in width, and about two feet in height, seems to oppose all that Cézanne stood for with respect to phenomenology: despite Downes’ vehement refusal to use photography in making his paintings, this landscape seems to us almost photorealistic, the mountainous forms at the periphery of the flood plains appearing to us seemingly all at once, an instantaneous whole, opposite of the jarring strokes of planes of color forming Cézanne’s *Mont Sainte-Victoire*. However, further inquiry into Downes as a painter prompts us to withhold this initial response. Rackstraw Downes, having emigrated from England to emerge as a unique American landscape painter especially during the second half of the twentieth century, began painting landscapes in 1965, shortly after “Eye and Mind” was published.²²² Already removed from the all-important painting of his time, abstract painting, by painting representationally, and selecting for his subject the landscape, Downes further distanced

²²² Robert Storr, “As Far as the Eye Can See,” in *Rackstraw Downes* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP, 2005), 71.



Figure 5: Downes, Rackstraw Water-Flow Monitoring Installations on the Rio Grande Near Presidio, TX (5-Part Painting): Part 2: Facing South, The Flood-Plain from East of the Gauge Shelter, 10 A.M. (2002-3). Oil on canvas, 28.5 x 48" (72.4 x 121.9 cm).

himself from the popular movement of the time by insisting on painting from life, out of doors in the landscape itself. These plein air paintings are hardly on a scale Cézanne could have carried on his hour's walk to his site, some measuring up to ten feet wide, though frequently less than two feet tall. *Water-Flow Monitoring Installations on the Rio Grande Near Presido, TX*, a five-part painting, would total over seventeen feet stretched end to end; despite the image's seeming instantaneousness and wholeness, we cannot perceive it this way except from a distance: "difficult to absorb fully at once...the eye can take them in only piecemeal" or else, from a distance, where the detail is lost.²²³ Even in his own perception in the act of painting, Downes' turning of his head in forming such a wide panorama results in his preference for the curved edges of the horizon, a unique

²²³ Ibid., 118-121.

effect. It is this—his own act of painting and dealing with perception—that forms a link with Cézanne, one hundred years his senior.

Like Cézanne, for Downes, “picture-making is, to begin with, a faithful record of exactly what he sees before him as he sets up his easel in precisely the same spot day after day...and sometimes to keep returning to the site over a period of two, even three years.”²²⁴ Although he takes for his subjects the banal and the overlooked as opposed to Cézanne’s taking on of his beloved home, selecting underbellies of freeways, unremarkable New York City street corners, dumps, construction sites, etc., Downes is no less involved “in every aspect of the here and now.”²²⁵ In fact, according to Schwartz, “Downes’ thoughts add up to a many-sided brief for seeing experience...through more ‘empirical’ and less ideological eyes”: “virtually all of Downes’ paintings since the early 1970’s are about his experience as he charts what he sees when he moves his head from left to right or from down to up.”²²⁶ His works, though not fractured by color or space, deal with the same concerns with perception, experience, and “being in the world” on which Merleau-Ponty focused; they are, according to Schwartz, “fundamentally about the man in the center who is doing the looking”²²⁷ and who turns “the experience of looking at a painting into a process of nailing down a slippery prey.”²²⁸ In describing the task of Downes, this “man in the center,” Storr claims:

Painting is about ideas, surely, but it is about looking first and last, about the effect of consciousness of banishing preconception and awakening one’s visual faculties to their fullest degree, of paying attention, of

²²⁴ Sanford Schwartz, “Cinemascope Visions,” *Rackstraw Downes* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP, 2005), 12.

²²⁵ *Ibid.*, 20.

²²⁶ *Ibid.*, 24-25.

²²⁷ *Ibid.*, 25.

²²⁸ *Ibid.*, 32.

noticing, of wondering at, of recognizing, of verifying, and then of starting over from scratch as if one had seen nothing the first time. That is what Rackstraw Downes does, and that is what his pictures demand that we, the viewers, do.²²⁹

Storr notes that Downes' subject is the way we occupy space, and he negotiates this through the format of his painting: so wide we cannot possibly take it all in, or perceive it in total, from as close as one might normally approach a painting. He also negotiates this through his act of painting, his process of recording the details of the world around him as he himself perceives them, treating the canvas with an overall heightened level of detail that is just as implausible realistically as Cézanne's jarring patches of color. Downes refers to this as empiricism; for him, by "reversing the trajectory of painting away from fragmentation" other equally revealing phenomena become visible, including the limits on our own perception and cognition in time.²³⁰ His canvases are not, then, as realistic as they appear, as they evoke what Storr terms the state of "lived duration," in which cyclical periods of time pass again and again as Downes perceives and paints.²³¹ In relationship to not only space, but especially to time, Downes is establishing his own "being in the world" through his bodily work of painting, and himself claims "to any diagram I prefer—and trust—the experience-based statement of Cézanne": "for progress toward realization there is only nature, and the eye is educated by contact with her. It becomes concentric by force of looking and working."²³² The influence of Cézanne and the phenomenology of Merleau-Ponty seems not only to have

²²⁹ Storr, "As Far As the Eye Can See," 61.

²³⁰ Ibid., 72.

²³¹ Ibid., 76.

²³² Rackstraw Downes, "Turning the Head in Empirical Space," in *Rackstraw Downes* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP, 2005), 143.

been connected to Downes' work, but also to have reached and reverberated within the world of art in the years following the publishing of "Eye and Mind." Perhaps there is a truth in these ideas more compelling than movements that have come to pass since.

Downes expresses this well in describing his own method of working and his identity as an artist: "some artists' preoccupations are like circulatory or muscular systems, not sheddable skins."²³³ Ultimately, the body itself can be seen as defining this experience of being in the world; it is not only the "there is" that must be returned to, but, as Richard Shusterman recognized and took on, the body itself.

²³³ Ibid., 167.

Part Three: Richard Shusterman's Somaesthetics

We now follow the thread of art and experience to the center for Body, Mind and Culture at Florida State University, Boca Raton, present day, to the office of one particular lived body, Richard Shusterman, in more detail. Having emerged as a public intellect for his work in somaesthetics, Shusterman has become recognized internationally for his contributions in philosophy and this pioneering work in his proposed discipline of somaesthetics, his *Pragmatist Aesthetics* having been translated into over thirteen languages.

The extensive breadth and depth of the concepts and aspects of Shusterman's project of somaesthetics, from his turn away from analytic philosophy towards pragmatism through to his current thought, certainly deserve more attention than this account provides; they are far-reaching, developing and finessing a thorough, all-inclusive explanation of his proposed discipline, and address a variety of topics. However, I hope here not to address all aspects and topics included under this rich new proposed discipline, but to create an understanding of Shusterman's philosophy of somaesthetics through which it will be possible to approach art, especially contemporary art. In this sense, I hope to inquire into somaesthetics in a way that will allow for its understanding as a tool with which to approach contemporary art. In doing this, I cannot discuss the scope of his philosophical work and thought on the development of this discipline over the past thirty years, but will instead focus on two of Shusterman's texts critical to an understanding of his proposal of somaesthetics, as they embody and encapsulate the central aims and aspects of this philosophy: "Somaesthetics: A

Disciplinary Proposal” (1999) and *Body Consciousness: A Philosophy of Mindfulness and Somaesthetics* (2008).

In approaching Richard Shusterman’s somaesthetics, it is helpful to turn first to his essay, “Somaesthetics: A Disciplinary Proposal” (1999). Published seven years following his popular *Pragmatist Aesthetics*, in the *Journal of Aesthetics and Criticism*, this essay serves as Shusterman’s early identification, establishment, and clarification of his idea and project of somaesthetics as a proposed new philosophical sub-discipline. It is here where we can gather, from Shusterman’s own clarifications, the true aims and central concepts of somaesthetics as defined by the philosopher himself, through which we will later be able to apply in approaching art. Although a wealth of scholarship could be (and is beginning to be) devoted to the many aspects and wide-ranging implications of Shusterman’s somaesthetics and its connections to other disciplines and issues, I aim to focus on its potential utility in approaching art and for contemporary art in particular, and will therefore first focus on an understanding of Shusterman’s somaesthetics at its core, which Shusterman’s 1999 proposal outlines.

In this text, Shusterman sets out to revive the idea of aesthetics as “a life-improving cognitive discipline that extends far beyond questions of beauty and fine arts and involves theory and practical exercise,” and to end its neglect of the body, both introduced with Baumgarten at the outset of modern aesthetics.²³⁴ He aims to propose “a somatically centered field, somaesthetics, that can contribute significantly to many crucial philosophical concerns, thus enabling philosophy to more successfully redeem its

²³⁴ Richard Shusterman, "Somaesthetics: A Disciplinary Proposal," *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 57.3 (1999): 301-302, accessed April 4, 2014, doi: 10.2307/432196.

original role as an art of living.”²³⁵ He defines somaesthetics provisionally as “the critical, meliorative study of the experience and use of one’s body as a locus of sensory-aesthetic appreciation (aisthesis) and creative self-fashioning,” which is therefore committed to the “knowledge, discourses, practices, and bodily disciplines that structure such somatic care or can improve it.”²³⁶ Shusterman recognizes that he is not the first to propose this— rather, that consideration of the body and its importance has ancient roots in philosophy in the likes of Socrates and other Greek philosophers as well as in Eastern thought, and discussion of the body with respect to many issues already exists. He perceives his role as being to restore this concern of the body to what he believes is its rightful place as part of the core of the discipline of aesthetics, working to disassemble the long-upheld mind-body dualism (of which “body” has been excluded) that has been pervasive since Baumgarten’s conception of modern aesthetics, and to unify, structure, and integrate already-existing somatic discourse into “a more productively systematic field.”²³⁷ This is valuable to philosophy, he argues, especially as by looking from the somaesthetic philosophical perspective, we can improve our knowledge of the world; we can do this by perfecting our bodily senses and “by an improved direction of one’s body.”²³⁸

How exactly are we to set about doing this, that is, perfecting our bodily senses and directing our bodies, and what is meant by “the experience and use of one’s

²³⁵ Ibid.

²³⁶ Ibid., 302.

²³⁷ Ibid., 302-304.

²³⁸ Ibid., 302.

body”?²³⁹ Shusterman identifies this as being twofold through two non-exclusive modes important to somaesthetics: the body’s *representation* as well as its lived *experience*. He borrows Kant’s term “representation” here to refer to the body (our own, or of another) as an object grasped by our external senses; the body as external form and appearance, the mode he claims tends to be more dominant in our culture.²⁴⁰ By the body’s lived experience and experiential somaesthetics, Shusterman refers not to the body as external object, but rather, harking back to Merleau-Ponty, the “experience of one’s own body from within,” “the aesthetic quality of its ‘inner’ experience.”²⁴¹ In addition to these two modes, Shusterman identifies three main dimensions to somaesthetics: analytic, pragmatic, and practical somaesthetics.

The analytic dimension refers to the theoretical dimension that “describes the basic nature of bodily perceptions and practices and also of their function in our knowledge and construction of reality” and allows for the opening up of and extending out to broader topics such as society and power, as Foucault has done.²⁴² Pragmatic somaesthetics, in contrast, is prescriptive rather than descriptive, “proposing specific methods of somatic improvement and engaging in their comparative critique,” and always presupposes the analytic dimension.²⁴³ Going beyond analysis, pragmatic somaesthetics propose applicable methods to improve the bodily senses and our lived experience previously discussed by “remaking the body and society.”²⁴⁴ These “methods”

²³⁹ Ibid.

²⁴⁰ Ibid., 299, 306.

²⁴¹ Ibid., 299, 305.

²⁴² Ibid., 304.

²⁴³ Ibid., 305.

²⁴⁴ Ibid., 304-305.

could consist of anything from the practices of yoga, creating art, or dance to diverse diets and psychosomatic therapies, and can serve to enrich the quality of our experience, and also “make our awareness of somatic experience more acute and perceptive.”²⁴⁵ The actual practice of these varying methodologies make up Shusterman’s “practical somaesthetics.”²⁴⁶

It is the actual practice—the “body work”—of these methods which is key to somaesthetics, Shusterman argues; it is through this critical dimension, most often neglected by body philosophers, he says, which the project of somaesthetics as a sub-discipline of aesthetics and philosophy is itself considered a way of life and “embodied practice” by Shusterman, far more than just theory.²⁴⁷ In this way, somaesthetics emerges as exciting—although pushing the boundaries of the discipline of aesthetics in all that it encompasses, it calls for a broader reconsideration of philosophy as something more than theory, and instead as defined by collaboration between thinkers and practitioners.²⁴⁸ It is through this that we can begin to understand somaesthetics as highly applicable to art—a discipline that inherently involves both practice and theory.

Somaesthetics, then, becomes instructive not just in the appreciation of art, but in its performance, and in the process of creating itself: “if it is foreign to most philosophy departments, this broad conception of aesthetic discipline is familiarly at work in other academies—those of music, art, dance, and cooking,” Shusterman reminds us.²⁴⁹ How somaesthetics is and will be categorized and demarcated as a discipline is yet to be

²⁴⁵ Ibid., 305.

²⁴⁶ Ibid., 307.

²⁴⁷ Ibid., 307-308.

²⁴⁸ Ibid., 309.

²⁴⁹ Ibid.

determined; it is still growing, and it will be defined by this collective work of thinkers and practitioners alike. According to Shusterman, the issue of its categorization and boundaries within philosophy ought to be far less of a concern than somaesthetics itself.²⁵⁰ For this paper, my inquiry will involve Shusterman's somaesthetics, as a sub-discipline of aesthetics within philosophy with these three dimensions and two modes with respect to contemporary art.

Although the union of Shusterman's three dimensions of somaesthetics, the analytical, pragmatic and practical, may seem ambitious or difficult, Shusterman highlights John Dewey as exemplary to somaesthetics in his working with all three dimensions. Tracing the thread of art and experience himself back to Dewey, Shusterman emphasizes Dewey's theory of "body-mind" (indeed it is this unity which Shusterman aims to achieve through somaesthetics), pragmatic study of this concept and the modern body discipline and therapy, the Alexander Technique, and twenty years of personal practice of this technique. In this, Shusterman argues, Dewey embodies the three-dimensional discipline of somaesthetics, and truly the idea of philosophy as a way of life, "a disciplined aesthetic practice whose greatest artwork is our self."²⁵¹ In this sense, we are all artists, and somaesthetics can be useful and instructive for our own creation of self as well as a tool for better appreciating art. Overall, according to Shusterman, somaesthetics affirms the line between aesthetics and the living soma, and can thus achieve a "robust, full-bodied vitality."²⁵² Just as Shusterman argues here in his early

²⁵⁰ Ibid.

²⁵¹ Ibid., 310.

²⁵² Ibid.

proposal for somaesthetics’ revitalization of aesthetics, I would like to argue for its potential revitalization of art.

Nine years and tens of works on somaesthetics later, a further comprehensively defined somaesthetics can be found in Shusterman’s *Body Consciousness: A Philosophy of Mindfulness and Somaesthetics*, 2008. Shusterman himself has since worked towards his earlier-outlined pragmatic dimension of the discipline here through his dealing with the ideas of six key body philosophers— Michel Foucault, Maurice-Merleau-Ponty, Simone de Beauvoir, Ludwig Wittgenstein, William James and John Dewey—and their somatic philosophies, with the aim of proposing and encouraging improved body consciousness as a means to “enhance one’s knowledge, performance, and pleasure” and relieve some of the suffering we undergo in contemporary culture related to the body (such as stress, overstimulation, personal and social discontents).²⁵³

Here, Shusterman continues to advocate the pragmatism he argued for through his dealing with Dewey in *Pragmatist Aesthetics*, in 1992, putting “experience at the heart of philosophy,” celebrating “the living, sentient body as the organizing core of experience,” and committing himself fully to the discipline not only through his outpour of scholarship on the subject, but through the practical somaesthetics of pursuits such as his own Zen training in Japan, practice of the Feldenkrais Method of somatic education and therapy.²⁵⁴ Through this we can see the combined influence of Dewey’s value of experience as central and Merleau-Ponty’s situation of the living body as the “organizing core” of experience, but the relationship of these two philosophers to Shusterman’s somaesthetics

²⁵³ Richard Shusterman, *Body Consciousness: A Philosophy of Mindfulness and Somaesthetics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), ix.

²⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, xii.

is worth further inquiry. Although Shusterman's chapters on the ideas of each philosopher provide critical insight into the wide scope of somaesthetics and its methodologies as Shusterman tests his proposed sub-discipline with respect to each of these various body philosophers' thought, his ideas of somaesthetics with respect to Merleau-Ponty in Chapter Two, "The Silent, Limping Body of Philosophy: Somatic Attention Deficit in Merleau-Ponty" and Chapter Six, "Redeeming Somatic Reflection: John Dewey's Philosophy of Body-Mind will be most helpful in addressing and approaching contemporary art with and through somaesthetics.

The importance of these two philosophers to Shusterman's development and refining of somaesthetics comes not from absolute affirmation or adoption of their ideas, but from Shusterman's qualification of their philosophies, dealing critically with them, and working to position somaesthetics in relation to them—not necessarily in line with them, but sometimes against them. In "The Silent, Limping Body of Philosophy: Somatic Attention Deficit in Merleau-Ponty," Shusterman develops his value of somaesthetic reflection. To do this, he qualifies Merleau-Ponty's somatic philosophy by recognizing his critical contribution, especially as a strong part of the foundation of his own concept of somaesthetics, but ultimately criticizing his resistance to somaesthetic reflection, and seeks instead to establish through somaesthetics a "more practical, reconstructive pragmatist approach to somatic philosophy."²⁵⁵ Shusterman takes away from Merleau-Ponty as important his celebrating "the primacy and sufficiency of unreflective, 'primary consciousness.'"²⁵⁶ This also serves as challenging to Shusterman's somaesthetics in

²⁵⁵ Ibid., 51.

²⁵⁶ Ibid., 56.

some ways, and so it is taken up not only to be used in support of somaesthetics, but in part as something for Shusterman to react against, like Pollock with Benton's style of painting. Unlike Pollock's claimed rejection of his mentor's style, however, Shusterman's reaction against Merleau-Ponty is not a stated rejection or total opposition, but a positioning; Shusterman does not try to distinguish himself totally from Merleau-Ponty, but instead acknowledges this influence and positions somaesthetics with respect to Merleau-Ponty's dialogue in proposing his own philosophy.

This major aspect of Merleau-Ponty's thought that Shusterman maintains as crucial within somaesthetics is his affirmation of "the existence and restoration of a primordial perception or experience of the world that lies below the level of reflective or thematized consciousness and beneath all language and concepts"; "our basic unreflective intentionality that silently and spontaneously organizes our world of perception."²⁵⁷ While Shusterman holds to the importance of this, he does not wish to uphold the second part of Merleau-Ponty's definition: "...without the need of distinct perceptual representations and without any explicitly conscious deliberation."²⁵⁸ Although this pre-reflective perception is an important part of the foundation of body consciousness and somaesthetics, it is only a part, and cannot be taken as the totality of body consciousness, especially, Shusterman argues, in that it is not instructive in the pragmatic or practical ways that he advocates. Instead, it merely describes our perception and experience of the world, but does not offer us any practical means of improving or dealing with this experience. In this sense, Merleau-Ponty's "silent, limping body" of philosophy can be

²⁵⁷ Ibid., 57-59.

²⁵⁸ Ibid., 59.

seen as forming a beginning and important aspect of somaesthetics for Shusterman, but also an important platform to depart from in thinking about how to build off of this philosophy and apply it practically to life in focusing on “examining and sharpening our consciousness of one’s actual bodily feelings and actions so that we can deploy such somatic reflection to know ourselves better and achieve a more perceptive somatic self-consciousness to guide us toward better self-use.”²⁵⁹ Shusterman thus believes in habit’s somatic base, like Merleau-Ponty, but also in body consciousness’ ability to correct or change habits, and to “improve unreflective behavior that hinders our experience and performance,” and builds his idea of “lived somaesthetic reflection” off of and out from Merleau-Ponty’s ideas.²⁶⁰ While Merleau-Ponty desired a return to a “pure, primordial state of unified experience” and prereflective unity, opposing a division of reflective consciousness and representational thinking, Shusterman offers a new solution to this in calling for “practical methods for individuals to improve their somatic consciousness and functioning.”²⁶¹

In Shusterman’s sixth and final chapter of *Body Consciousness*, “Redeeming Somatic Reflection: John Dewey’s Philosophy of Body-Mind,” involves a final finessing of somaesthetics by looking at and through the ideas of John Dewey and his influences. For Shusterman, Dewey was one of the philosophers who went the furthest towards the integration of practical methods with theory to improve somatic consciousness and functioning: “Dewey wisely affirmed somatic reflection for both theory and practice,” and thus perhaps even served as a model for Shusterman himself as a philosopher this

²⁵⁹ Ibid., 6.

²⁶⁰ Ibid., 63.

²⁶¹ Ibid., 74.

way.²⁶² What Shusterman takes as important from Dewey for his refining of somaesthetics comes from Dewey's idea of "body-mind," the importance of habit, transactional self, and practical applications (for Shusterman's practical dimension of somaesthetics) through a closer look at Dewey's influences— both his reliance on and distinguishing himself from his major influences F.M. Alexander and William James. Shusterman argues here that Alexander, developer of the "Alexander Technique" which Dewey would come to practice and advocate and instrumental to understanding Dewey's philosophy, was perhaps not completely beneficial to Dewey; rather, for his somaesthetics, he desires Dewey's somatic theory to have been distanced more clearly from Alexander's views.

Shusterman takes as important to his somaesthetics Dewey's opposition to dualistic thinking, especially with respect to body and mind, and thus takes his concept of "mind-body" as crucial: the desired goal of "dynamic, harmonious functioning that we should continually strive to attain" and which also depends on social unity.²⁶³ This goal, for Dewey, takes not only individual effort, but "societal reconstruction," where "the integration of mind-body in action" is most important; mental and bodily reactions are not separate, but are "already enveloped in the primal unity of purposive behavior."²⁶⁴

This purposive behavior and mind-body action, according to Dewey as highlighted by Shusterman, depends on our habits of feeling, thinking and acting.²⁶⁵ While maintaining the significance of spontaneity that Merleau-Ponty cultivates,

²⁶² Ibid., 182.

²⁶³ Ibid., 185.

²⁶⁴ Ibid.

²⁶⁵ Ibid., 189.

Shusterman takes from Dewey the fact that it is our habits which spontaneously perform our will and make up the self, our habits coupled with our means of bodily movement; this Dewey draws from Alexander.²⁶⁶ Shusterman takes on the spirit of Dewey and Alexander in his somaesthetics through this recognition of the connection between will and habit, and prompts us to reconsider what is gathered from Merleau-Ponty through these philosophers' ideas on what "free" spontaneous action truly entails—the conditioning by habit—and their emphasis on inhibition as a crucial tool for correcting these habits and improving our use of the self by allowing us to do this and teach ourselves new ones.²⁶⁷ Through this, inhibition is developed as key to somatic reflection.²⁶⁸

Overall, Shusterman is critical of Alexander's failure to address current science pertaining to his research and philosophy including posture, movement and mind (as this could have been greatly supplemented and enriched by scientific knowledge and interdisciplinary research) and his failure to test his theories through standard experimentation and analysis.²⁶⁹ He supports Dewey's recognition of the limitations of the conscious reflection that Alexander advocated (one in which total conscious control is possible), and that somatic consciousness and reflection is a refined, intelligent habit in itself which must be learned.²⁷⁰ He does this especially in recognizing Dewey's departure from Alexander on the topic of the arts— activities that were for Alexander dangerous, especially for children, in that they "speak most powerfully to the most primitive, savage

²⁶⁶ Ibid., 190.

²⁶⁷ Ibid., 195.

²⁶⁸ Ibid., 198.

²⁶⁹ Ibid., 203.

²⁷⁰ Ibid., 205.

parts of us,” as he championed a radically rationalist ideal that “rejects any reliance on emotions or spontaneous feelings for guiding behavior.”²⁷¹ Shusterman argues that Dewey didn’t distance himself enough from Alexander on this, and, while taking up ideas of these philosophers, sets out to take these steps in forming this distance himself through somaesthetics.²⁷² To do this, he proposes a strategy of “rigorous practical work in critical somaesthetic self-consciousness” to discern how to correct our habits, the use of a “pluralistic toolbox of somatic disciplines,” and the help of others (especially teachers of these various methods).²⁷³

We cannot expect, perhaps, as Alexander does, to transcend all disease and physical disabilities through our reasoning and deliberate consciousness; we are instead, as Dewey recognizes, shaped and influenced by our environments, have less control than Alexander believes, and, as selves, are truly “transactional.”²⁷⁴ This idea of the transactional self, in fluid exchange between world and self, Shusterman takes from Dewey as significant, especially in his own practice of not only analytical and pragmatic somaesthetics, but especially in practical somaesthetics, particularly through his largest public application of this practical dimension through curating the 2012 exhibition, *Aesthetic Transactions*.

²⁷¹ Ibid., 209.

²⁷² Ibid., 210.

²⁷³ Ibid., 212-213.

²⁷⁴ Ibid., 215.

Aesthetic Transactions, 2012

In attempting to further his commitment to remaining open to new experiences, challenges, and interdisciplinary projects, and to practically applying his philosophy, Shusterman accepted the offer to curate an art show in 2012 at the Michel Journiac Gallery to accompany a conference at the Sorbonne in France honoring the twentieth anniversary of the publication of *Pragmatist Aesthetics: Living Beauty, Rethinking Art*.²⁷⁵ There, through the visible and physical uniting of theory and practice, Shusterman worked to emphasize the transactional experience of his pragmatism—the very aspects of Dewey’s philosophy he highlighted as important four years previous in *Body Consciousness*. He defines transactional experience as “double barreled”:

First, it underlines that experience is not something confined to the interiority of human consciousness but necessarily involves or incorporates the subject’s environment, both through the active engagement and more passive absorption of enviring conditions and energies. Transactional experience also connotes the idea of experiments in transcending disciplinary boundaries, transgressing entrenched dichotomies, and transforming established concepts or topics, together with the idea that these transactions can succeed in advancing both theory and practice through the experiences and lessons that such experiments induce.²⁷⁶

Admittedly personal in nature, as a physical manifestation and putting into practice of Shusterman’s somaesthetics, *Aesthetic Transactions* featured the work of seven artists dealing with somaesthetics and the theme of aesthetic transactions, many explicitly and having sought out Shusterman themselves. Through this, they present a variety of interesting means of connecting somaesthetics not just to life and lived

²⁷⁵ Richard Shusterman, "Catalogue Essay: Aesthetic Transactions: Pragmatist Philosophy through Art and Life," *Aesthetic Transactions*, accessed April 16, 2014, <http://aesthetictransactions.webs.com/>.

²⁷⁶ Shusterman, “Aesthetic Transactions.”

experience, but directly through art. The artists, Luca del Baldo of Italy, Carsten Höller, working in Sweden, Tatiana Trouvé, working in Paris, Thecla Schiphorst of Canada, ORLAN of France and working in New York and Los Angeles, Pan Gongkai of China, and Yann Toma of France, represent a range of contemporary art from traditional oil painting to installation, performance and photography to engage with this theme of aesthetic transactions and active somatic engagement in a host of different ways, some even including Shusterman himself in the creation process.

Although somaesthetics can be used as a tool through which to think about a wide variety of contemporary art, the artworks included in *Aesthetic Transactions* by these seven artists represent a sampling of work which was directly and intentionally related to his somaesthetics, having even been approved by Shusterman himself. In this way, they provide for us a solid medium through which to examine the application of somaesthetics to contemporary art, and for this reason, I will analyze the work of two artists in the show in terms of somaesthetics: how can somaesthetics be important to contemporary art? How might it allow us to think about contemporary art, and how can it be used as a tool in approaching art today? I hope that through closer analysis of and inquiry into the “Radiant Flux” photography of Yann Toma, and the installations of Tatiana Trouvé, *Polder Installations*, and *Untitled trees*, we might be able to better answer these questions, and find meaningful ways to approach further contemporary art through somaesthetics.

Yann Toma: *Somaflux*, 2010

Perhaps a most interesting example of somaesthetics put into action (quite literally) through *Aesthetic Transactions* can be found in the photographs of Paris-based artist Yann Toma, titled *Somaflux*, somaesthetics with Richard Shusterman, 2010, which Shusterman claimed “epitomizes this experiential method of transactional aesthetic inquiry.”²⁷⁷ Shusterman had known Toma since 1996, having collaborated with the artist on previous occasions, recognizing his key themes of energy and light in his ownership and revitalization of Ouest-Lumière, an unused Paris electric company, as a virtual company for artistic interventions, in his work as a conceptual artist, and especially through the practice of what he terms “Radiant Flux,” a form of “space writing” through which the artist works to represent visually and capture the “invisible aura” of the person posing for him, which he perceives as a “continuously changing, contextually sensitive energetic force emanating from the person’s body.”²⁷⁸ It is this method through which Toma worked with Shusterman in 2010, and is achieved through a highly staged, almost theatrical indoor or dark photo shoot using long exposure, and Toma’s performance in quickly “tracing” the subject’s (here Shusterman, dressed in a gold bodysuit upon Toma’s request) aura using the light of a lamp, and remaining in constant, quick motion to keep himself out of the finished photo. The resulting images reveal Toma’s visualization of his subject’s aura as energetic lines of light; here, in *Aesthetic Transaction’s Somaflux* images, Shusterman is seen as “l’homme en Or” (“The Man in Gold”), grounded and serious in Toma’s provided Lycra suit, “that glittering second skin,” activated by upward-

²⁷⁷ Ibid.

²⁷⁸ Ibid.

shooting thin pillars of white light that themselves seem to hold their own presence as bodies in the space with Shusterman, as can be seen in the *Somaflux* photograph used in the exhibit poster for *Aesthetic Transactions*.²⁷⁹ In other *Somaflux* photographs, these pillars of light can be seen seemingly growing from Shusterman's supine body, enclosing him as in a cage, or dancing around his form more tightly and fluidly as he takes a more active stance.

In practicing somaesthetics and using it as a tool for thinking about contemporary art, we must, like Dewey and Shusterman, deal in all three dimensions—analytical, pragmatic, and practical somaesthetics—and take contemporary art as a proposed bodily practice and method of somatic improvement. This requires a significant change in mindset at the get-go as we have just defined art in a specific way for this purpose. For the purposes of this paper, I will use the analytic and pragmatic dimensions more than the practical, as applying practical somaesthetics to contemporary art would largely entail the process of creating art itself.

Looking through analytic somaesthetics, and using it as a tool for thinking about contemporary art, we are dealing with the dimension that describes the practices and perceptions of the body and their functioning in our knowledge of and construction of reality.²⁸⁰ This comes to the forefront in Yann Toma's *Somaflux* photographs, as they truly embody somaesthetics themselves, seeming to give Shusterman's philosophy visual form and model somaesthetics more explicitly perhaps even than Pollock's drip paintings gave visual form to Dewey's idea of aesthetic experience or Cézanne's landscapes gave

²⁷⁹ Ibid.

²⁸⁰ Shusterman, "Somaesthetics: A Disciplinary Proposal," 304.

form to Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology. Here, rather, we can see more directly the ideas and parameters of somaesthetics, as Shusterman has laid it out: indeed, as

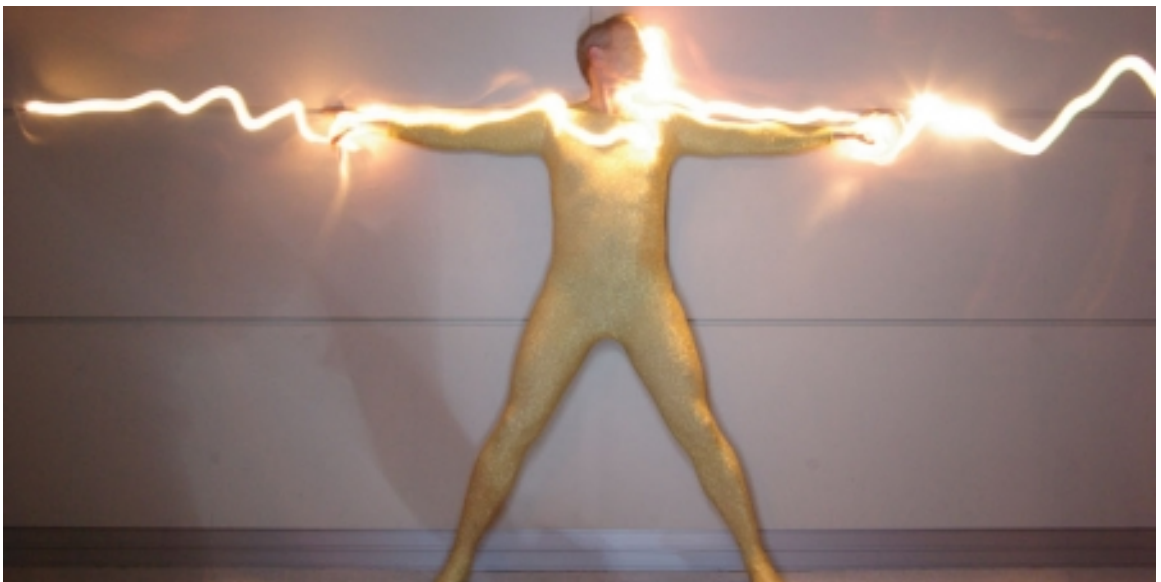


Figure 6: Toma, Yann with Richard Shusterman. *Somaflux* (2010).

Shusterman himself claims, “my work with Yann Toma epitomizes this experiential method of transactional aesthetic inquiry.”²⁸¹ In this sense, these images explicitly deal with somaesthetics and we can begin to understand how Shusterman, despite recognizing how his somaesthetics through his emphasis on body consciousness and mindfulness may seem “New Age,” emphasized somaesthetics’ roots in philosophy’s ancient past and its rightful place at the core of aesthetics; it is less radical or new than it is more of a restoration and return to values past.

Toma’s *Somaflux* series truly embodies somaesthetics, as the “study of experience and use of one’s body as a locus of sensory-aesthetic appreciation and creative self-fashioning,” and as committed to the practices that can improve somatic care, as Shusterman himself, subject and participant in the work, can testify.²⁸² In this sense, we see somaesthetics involved especially in the process of the creation of the work, through the creation of Toma’s *Somaflux* photographs, as we can understand through the account of Shusterman himself as a participant. These photographs work to unravel the mind-body dualism—Toma and Shusterman work to unravel this themselves through their performance and creative process. We can, through Shusterman’s involvement, understand the improvement of his own knowledge through the heightened experience of his bodily senses and improved directionality of his body in his transformation into “l’homme en Or.”

Through the nature of this image—the way in which it was created—issues of bodily perception and use are brought to our attention; without any outside information

²⁸¹ Shusterman, “Aesthetic Transactions.”

²⁸² Shusterman, “Somaesthetics: A Disciplinary Proposal,” 302.

regarding the photographs, we can see that they contain the existence and movement of at least one body, that of Shusterman. He stands, facing the camera, amongst the strangeness and darkness of his surroundings punctuated by the other brightly luminous forms that share the environment with him. We can note, in the photograph depicting him with his arms at his side, the tension in his shoulders, the firmness with which he is anchored to the ground, the distance between his feet supporting this solid stance, the positioning of his feet, his gaze, his hands at his side. We are aware of these things—the tension and motionlessness of Shusterman’s pose, his standing for the long exposure shot, the placement and positioning of his body—because it is made explicit to us, mainly because of the way in which he is portrayed. Through the form-fitting golden suit, we are most made aware of “body”; it is highlighted to us in gold, unhidden by conventional clothing or any typical form of appearing, but instead manifests itself to us in a truly unexpected way. Here, the form of Shusterman’s body is exposed, and through this unusual usurpation of convention and expectation, we are prompted to focus on the body.

The presence of Toma himself—the second body present in the photograph—is made visible only through the traces of the lamps which he held to create the luminous forms surrounding Shusterman, to give form to the philosopher’s aura. Here we see repeated the idea of form and gesture as trace of the presence and movement of the artist; just as Pollock’s drips and splatters served as visual evidence to us of the direction and movement of his arm in flinging, spilling, and dripping the liquid paint, and therefore his presence, so don’t lines of light serve as evidence of the movement of Toma’s hands and arms carrying the lamps: he was here, then he was there, to the left, down, etc... We can

follow the line of light as an abstracted trace of his own bodily movement and presence; in this sense, the use of the body is brought to our minds as we are prompted by these lines to imagine Toma moving around Shusterman. The presence of these two bodies in the *Somaflux* photographs serves as our most immediate point of connection in with the idea of the body, especially its use, through these photos.

What was this process like? What was Shusterman's experience in having Toma move about him, and Toma's of Shusterman's necessitated stillness as he himself decided and acted on where to trace with light? Shusterman recounts his experience in posing for these photographs:

My instructions as photographic subject were to remain silent and motionless in the bare, darkened seminar room, while Yann would swiftly hover and dance around me with his two small lamps, trying to sense and trace with their light the aura of energy that he felt emanating from my body. After a short burst of such energetic swirling, Yann would return breathless to his camera to terminate the shot and then rest momentarily before beginning a new sortie of aura or energy tracing... Yann whirled about me with his lamps and body twirling forcefully so close to me that I could feel their motion and his, hear and feel his effortful breathing, and occasionally feel his quickly moving body bumping into mine.²⁸³

It is not the presence of these two bodies within the frame of the photograph which is most interesting to us, but their interaction in the creation of this work (and it seems to have truly been an act of work). Through this temporal dance of drawing around Shusterman, a transactional dance between experiential and representational modes Shusterman identifies as delineating the discipline, the perception and sensory awareness of both bodies seem to have been heightened; Toma's effort to successfully execute the precise lines desired without lingering long enough in any one place to allow himself to

²⁸³Richard Shusterman, "Somaesthetics with Yann Toma," in *Yann Toma* (Paris: Janninck, 2011), 360.

become a part of the image, and his breathlessness in his forceful, quick whirling about also affected Shusterman's own awareness and perception of the event. We can see this through the vividness with which Shusterman recalls what he heard and felt, and it in turn prompts us, as viewers, to take on a heightened awareness and perception. The artist and philosopher dance between bodies, body and environment, and body as object versus as lived experience. Especially as a duet, with Toma dressed in black, the instigator of the activity and creation at the beginning, contrasted to and coupled with the gold-clad Shusterman, this interaction further highlights to us the nature of the relationship not only between subject and artist, but also that of representational and experiential body and dualisms in general. As Shusterman reminds us, "it is wrong to think that the photographer's aesthetic experience and the posing subjects can be neatly separated," just as, for him, the mind and body cannot be separated. We can see this through Shusterman's description of his experience.²⁸⁴ Toma and Shusterman together truly embody this aspect of somaesthetics.

Both artist and philosopher are also engaged in each of Shusterman's three dimensions of somaesthetics—the analytic, pragmatic and practical—through their collaborative process. Toma engages in this theoretical dimension through his own theory with respect to the basic nature of bodily perceptions, practices, and their function in our knowledge through his ideas of energy and aura; these are what he seeks to perceive and encapsulate of others' bodies through his work. He also allows for the opening up and expanding out to topics outside the body, such as economics, through his conceptual

²⁸⁴Richard Shusterman, *Thinking through the Body: Essays in Somaesthetics* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge UP, 2012), 259.

work (including *Radiant Flux*) as services offered by his company, Ouest-Lumière. These ideas of energy and aura are also important to Toma himself as body, with his own aura and energy, in working to do this. In his work, dancing around subjects such as Shusterman, and clad in black with his lamps, Toma must work toward another key aspect of Shusterman's somaesthetics: inhibition.

It is through bodily inhibition that Toma is able to create these careful yet energetic and powerful images; he is a master of his own body, keeping it invisible while highlighting and describing Shusterman's with light, carefully controlling his own rapid, dramatic, and even violent actions for the illumination of the supposed aura of his subject. Doing this, in this dance, seems to require rare supercontrol over one's body, and super somaesthetic awareness. Toma himself serves as a model of somaesthetic awareness and discipline, it seems, in the creation of this work, integrating of all three dimensions of somaesthetics, and serving as a model for Shusterman in his method of somatic improvement of choice, art-making via photography and performance. This is the "applicable method" Toma proposes and demonstrates through his actions, offering Shusterman the chance to further engage in pragmatic somaesthetics by analyzing this method.

The most clearly emphasized dimension of somaesthetics in Toma's 2010 *Somaflux* series is the practical: the actual "body-work" that he does in creating around Shusterman, and likewise, Shusterman's growing engagement in this "body-work" himself. This collaboration between artist and subject emphasizes and calls our attention to the bodily interaction of artist and subject in all cases, reminding us that at the core of

this relation lies a body with respect to another body. If the subject is a landscape, an object, an idea, or something more abstract, we are reminded here that at the most basic level, as with Cézanne's landscapes, the creation of a work of art is made up of the bodily interaction between artist and subject, his environment and that in it. This interaction is dramatized here in that we cannot see Toma's body, but know that this interaction took place via the trace of the lamps he carried. Through this heightened example of the relationship between artist and subject, bodily sensory awareness, action and perception, Toma and Shusterman instruct us in becoming more aware of our own selves as bodies, our own perception and senses. How do we interact with the bodies around us? Our environments? Through the intensification of this event, we as viewers are prompted to question and consider our own bodies as loci of perception and sensory awareness: how do we feel? What do we hear? What is around us? We are prompted to take this example of somaesthetics in practice into our own lives, and at least consider our bodies more, become more aware of ourselves this way. As Shusterman himself acknowledges, the significance of these images lies not in the photographs themselves—the result—but rather in the process of their creation.²⁸⁵ Instead, he notes,

they involve a complex art of collaborative performative process, a developing dance of intuitive communication (of energies, feelings, and intentions) and cooperative improvisation that ultimately issues in photographic prints or video but is itself extremely rich in shared aesthetic experience for those involved in that creative performative process.²⁸⁶

Through approaching these works through somaesthetics, this process of their creation, the interaction between artist and subject, especially as bodies and loci of

²⁸⁵ Shusterman, "Aesthetic Transactions."

²⁸⁶ Ibid.

perception, is emphasized. In this sense, approaching contemporary art through somaesthetics can prompt our focus on the creation of the work itself, the conditions and context of the artist, and can help us to see these works not as isolated objects removed to a museum or gallery, but as created through the integration of the same tools available to us all: our perception and our body. In this way, contemporary art, today part of a global art world, can become more accessible through focusing on the body and perception.

This process of heightened somatic awareness and perception during this creation of Toma's *Somaflux* images held special importance for Shusterman as a philosopher, through which we can learn. He claims:

after a long day and night of docile static posing in the dark, my deep somaesthetic drives for sunshine and movement made me suddenly bolt from the blackened room into the Abbey's sunny, flower-fragrant courtyard and gardens. Toma chased after me, filming my capering ramble... which then prompted me to improvise scenarios of dance and gesture that fit my playful mood and picturesque environment... This new persona signaled a real change in our transactional aesthetic experience that Toma happily welcomed... I had become a real partner in artistic creation... that artistic transformation helped transform myself as a philosopher, both by providing me new insights into the performative process and aesthetic experience of artistic creation... and by extending my sense of personal identity as a transactional philosopher of the art of living to include this golden, free-spirited, aesthetic avatar who by extending my experience into new roles and contexts also expands my self and self-knowledge.²⁸⁷

Shusterman's experience as the "Man in Gold" highlights and supports the existence of the "primordial perception or experience of the world," the prereflective consciousness beneath all language and concepts; through Shusterman's "escape" into the sunshine, he seems to be spontaneously recovering his own childlike prereflective

²⁸⁷ Ibid.

consciousness rather than doing any careful somaesthetic reflection involving inhibition.²⁸⁸ On the contrary, he claimed, “it freed me from some inhibitions.”²⁸⁹

At first impression, this seemingly instinctive and thoughtless act seems to reflect Merleau-Ponty’s ideas of the primacy of unreflective consciousness, including the part which Shusterman himself rejected: “without the need of distinct perceptual representations and without any explicitly conscious deliberation.”²⁹⁰ Shusterman did advocate an explicitly conscious deliberation—it was through this distinction which he distinguished somaesthetics from Merleau-Ponty’s ideas, establishing it as a discipline in which habits that negatively impacted our performance and experience of life could be changed through this deliberation and somaesthetic reflection. In this way, we can always seek to improve, and, surprisingly, Shusterman supports that this can be done through inhibition itself. Whereas in the somaesthetics Shusterman proposes our conditioned habits that determine our behavior can be altered if we are able to inhibit our carrying out of that habit first, Shusterman, in running out into the sunshine to fulfill his need for movement and light, seems to be problematic in his actions.

However, through this process of the creation of *Somaflux*, Shusterman emerges claiming that “art can provide such reflective transactions by which a philosopher can come to see and transform himself through self-exposure.”²⁹¹ It is through this contrast between the appearance of Shusterman’s actions, and his processing of them later in reflecting on his performance, that we are able to perhaps understand this transformation

²⁸⁸ Shusterman, *Body Consciousness*, 57.

²⁸⁹ Shusterman, “Aesthetic Transactions.”

²⁹⁰ Shusterman, *Body Consciousness*, 59.

²⁹¹ Shusterman, “Aesthetic Transactions.”

in a new light; what may seem like spontaneous, wild, and carefree may have been a challenging step towards changing habit for Shusterman. In this case, he may have inhibited his learned habit of remaining still in order to learn a new way of being.

What can this transformation teach us by looking at art through somaesthetics? Through Shusterman's transformation through performance and taking part in the act of creation, we are able to better understand art's potential aid in this process of practical somaesthetics— of working to improve our habits and experience of the world. The experience of art seemed to have opened up new possibilities for Shusterman, and to have helped him in his quest to improve on habits or learn new ones that would serve to improve his experience; for him, this meant learning to take risks in exposing himself, as he was dressed as “l'Homme en Or,” to others, to accept help, and to further know himself: “how can we have self-knowledge without self-exposure? We need the others' viewpoint on ourselves to see our blind spots and know ourselves more wholly.”²⁹² (“Aesthetic Transactions”). Through the potential possibilities inherent in art as opposed to other areas of life (where “practice” can in turn “enrich and refashion theory”) we might be able to more effectively carry out this process of practical somaesthetics and improve our own experience and perception. In this sense, contemporary art can emerge as powerful through somaesthetics as a means of aiding our own self-improvement.

Overall, Toma's and Shusterman's embodiment and true practice of somaesthetics—in its theoretical, pragmatic, and practical dimensions, and both representational and experiential modes—serves as a powerful example of a method through which to improve our bodily senses and our lived experience. We can analyze

²⁹² Richard Shusterman, “Aesthetic Transactions.”

this method, propose adjustments or alternatives through our own practicing of pragmatic aesthetics as viewers; we can study this method (this type of art-making) and decide for ourselves to embark upon the practice of this method and thus practical dimension of somaesthetics.

In this sense, *Somaflux* is instructional to us as viewers. In approaching these works, these images, through somaesthetics, the study of experience and use of one's body (in this case, the bodies of Toma and Shusterman) as a locus of sensory-aesthetic appreciation, they become much more to us than photographs: aesthetically pleasing and interesting photographs, to be sure, but meaning something different to us alone. Through somaesthetics, we can see these images of two bodies, experiencing beings perceiving and sensing (although Toma's is secretly hidden), as examples of a method that we can take on ourselves; they serve as instructive. Through this modeling, we are prompted to consider our own bodies and how they move, perceive, and interact with their environments. Through these mysterious images, we can learn perhaps to consider our own bodies in general, to apply this awareness to our own action, and to carry this somaesthetic awareness to other areas of our lives, or even throughout our lives.

Just as Dewey advocated art as the ultimate embodiment of aesthetic experience, and thus as a model for interpreting and dealing with experience in general, so too can *Somaflux* be considered a model for how to deal with ourselves as bodies, how to become more self-aware. Of course, the extent to which we encounter this work affects our understanding of this viewing the still photographs may provide a very different experience than watching a video of Shusterman, "l'Homme en Or," escaping the

confines of the darkened interior our into the world, and even more different still from encountering “l’Homme en Or” himself, in person during his performances of this role in the streets at *Aesthetic Transactions*. Each of these could serve as instructive on various levels in somaesthetics, but all can help us to think about our own senses, perception and action, our own relationship to our surroundings. This can be critical in an age where “improved direction of one’s body,” and therefore improved our knowledge of the world, is not only beneficial but also critical.²⁹³

In approaching contemporary art through Shusterman’s somaesthetics, this discipline can be used as a tool for heightening our experience with these objects of life, something Shusterman himself recognizes as crucial to our world today where we are faced with suffering based on ineffective awareness of the soma.

Yann Toma’s *Somaflux* images in *Aesthetic Transactions* prompt at least pragmatic if not practical somaesthetics through prompting our awareness of ourselves as bodies (our relationship to ourselves as body-mind, but also to others as other bodies) through the visualization of Shusterman’s embodiment of this philosophy through these images. They encourage somaesthetic reflection, which we can then apply not only to our viewing of these works, but to other areas (hopefully even to all areas) of life, and can thus enrich the quality of our experience through improved body consciousness as a means to “enhance one’s knowledge, performance and pleasure” and relieve some of the suffering Shusterman recognizes we undergo in contemporary culture related to the body

²⁹³ Shusterman, “Somaesthetics: A Disciplinary Proposal,” 302.

(in other words, live more meaningful lives), as Shusterman describes in *Body Consciousness*.²⁹⁴

Tatiana Trouvé: *Polder* installations and *Untitled* “trees”

Tatiana Trouvé represents another example of contrasting spontaneity and “boldly open mind” with “extremely methodological spirit.”²⁹⁵ In looking through somaesthetics as a tool with which to think about contemporary art, Tatiana Trouvé provides us with a means of applying this to work that does not, as Yann Toma’s work does, explicitly deal with the human body. Trouvé’s work, although dealing implicitly with the body instead, is no less rich when considered through somaesthetics. Although her work deals less directly with the body than Toma’s and others’ included in the show (such as Thelca Schiphorst, whose fabricated *Tendrils* respond to touch); it is just as, if not more, strong in its connections to somaesthetics.

Trouvé, an Italian artist working in Paris, is another contact of Shusterman’s with whom he had collaborated prior to the exhibition in 2007, after Trouvé’s winning the Marcel Duchamp prize for young artists, conversing with her in French and writing on the very topic of her work a text titled “Corps sans Figure.” Shusterman found himself “fascinated by the different ways that the soma is extremely central to Trouvé’s art and yet representations of it are entirely absent from her work,” and himself feels it to be most present in the “transactional experience” of her *Polder* installations, as well as

²⁹⁴ Shusterman, *Body Consciousness*, ix.

²⁹⁵ Shusterman, “Aesthetic Transactions.”

strongly evoked in two of her *Untitled* works she refers to as “trees,” both of which are featured in the exhibit.

Through somaesthetics, Trouvé’s *Polder* installations and “trees” take on new meanings and emphases, in turn raising our own body consciousness. Unlike Toma’s *Somaflux* images, there is no direct reference to the body for us to take as a model; instead that role is taken on by us, as viewers, explicitly. Rather than the images being created as the final result of the process of creation, here, with Trouvé’s *Polder* and *Untitled* installations, the images seem to serve more as a starting point for a second process of creation following the live performance and “transactional experience” key to somaesthetics by us, viewers, in our relationship to these objects in space. In our direct involvement this way, we are brought to use somaesthetics in a powerful way; it becomes not something we understand from a distance or passively by viewing, but rather through our own direct experience and engagement. We do not see, removed, body as the locus of perception and sensory aesthetic appreciation, its use and perception; we feel and perceive this ourselves. Through this, contemporary art, especially the works of Trouvé, can become powerful, pertinent and accessible to all of us as bodies, uniting us and prompting us to become more aware of our bodies and think more about our own experience and its use at this site of sensory-aesthetic appreciation.

In Trouvé’s *Untitled*, 2008, we find ourselves in the role previously occupied by Shusterman in Toma’s *Somaflux* images, in inhabiting the shared space between artist and subject. Despite the physical absence of the artist, Trouvé herself, we are still prompted to feel like the performers in the spaces and objects Trouvé has constructed for

us to inhabit, experience, and interact with. This *Polder* installation consists of lean forms and structures formed with thin metal rods bent in wide curves and loops that make the metal look like a much more ductile material, almost fluid and moving, as if perhaps this is not their permanent state, but rather that they might move again, perhaps while we are in the room. Shusterman is right in calling them bodies without a face— there are no figural elements to be found in this work, and yet we understand them as having a presence just as a body would.

Untitled 2008 consists of what appears to be a continuous line of metal rod punctuated by small, infrequent rubber attachments or handles. Seven or eight times the metal rod rises to a curved peak of over seven feet tall, just above the heads of viewers, while the bar remaining on the floor appears to pool in abstract designs as if it were made not of metal, but of dropped string. This small grouping of metal structures stands alone, like a group in conversation.

How do we, as lived bodies, perceive and experience this piece? As bodies ourselves, our awareness may be heightened by these fellow presences, a little taller than us, in the room, and we can see how Trouvé's claim rings true: "I believe more and more that the fields in which my sculpture and installations come together are opened by links between abstraction and architecture, between experiences of space and of the body."²⁹⁶

According to Shusterman, "their reduced architectural spaces.... heighten one's somatic awareness by making one feel one's body is out of scale."²⁹⁷ Through this, we are made

²⁹⁶ Richard Shusterman and Tatiana Trouvé, "Text: "BODY WITHOUT A FACE." *Tatiana_Trouve Text*, Galerie Perrotin, accessed on April 16, 2014, https://www.perrotin.com/text-Tatiana_Trouve-28.html.

²⁹⁷ Shusterman, "Aesthetic Transactions."

hyper aware of our own scale, and how we relate to these objects— we feel smaller, and may feel enticed to enter into the dialogue that seems to be occurring between the eight “bodies.” In this, we become highly active participants in Trouvé’s work, bringing to it a life that mirrors that which was lived in its initial creation. In our ability to move around this piece, navigate around it in space, study it, and fully engage with it visually and physically as an object in the world, we rehearse our own practice of perception and exercise our somaesthetic awareness. This is key to the development of ourselves as people —we benefit from this practice, as it can be seen as a means of strengthening our bodily awareness, which, according to Shusterman, can help us to better experience in general, and thus lead us towards living better lives, a goal of his somaesthetics. It can work to help us to practice somaesthetic reflection, and become more conscious in our working to adjust and change our own habits in order to live better lives.

Trouvé’s “trees” also serve as objects for us to interact with as bodies and instigators of “aesthetic transactions”; these are metal rods bent sparsely and loosely, covered and laced up in leather, tied with hanging strings lose and vein like. These strange, reduced yet highly and tactilely, richly detailed forms of metal, wrapped in leather and covered in epoxy paint, evoke the body nonetheless— in their posture and form, they are suggestive of limbs, while their material (a leather “skin” wrapping a solid skeletal structure) is evocative of the stuff of bodies, our own flesh and bones. Shusterman notes our human reaction to them as one of sympathy: “their beckoning beauty and congenial stature arouse a somatic sympathy that makes one feel one’s body

all the more.”²⁹⁸ Whereas in *Somaflux*, Shusterman’s own body was that put on display and exposed, here these forms expose themselves to us and elicit our sympathy; we sympathize not by identifying with the subject (before, Shusterman) and his self-exposure, but as viewers with the forms and feelings evoked by them, in feeling ourselves as bodies as sites of perception, as akin to these structures, and thus the ones exposed. On the same scale as our bodies, Trouvé’s “trees” such as *Untitled*, 2008, evoke human forms that have suffered in their vulnerable structures—the remains of something that was once fuller, perhaps—and thus prompt us to think about the forms of our own bodies as healthy and robust in comparison. In feeling sympathy for these forms, we are enacting our humanity in relating to these forms that are both exposed and covered, as so aren’t we.

This nature of Trouvé’s “trees” construction as simultaneously and interestingly both covered and revealed truly embodies the “transactional” nature of somaesthetics: through these gaps in the laced leather, these moments between cords and leather covering coated in epoxy paint, the outside world can pass. Careful observation of their leather lacing reveals their construction to be meticulous and labored, despite the free and almost spontaneous form that results as a whole, especially as seen from a distance. Through this evidence of the artist’s craft in forming what to us can appear as types of bodies, we can be reminded of and see mimicked the careful crafting and construction of our own bodies and experience; this echoes Shusterman’s maintenance of the idea that even what may seem to us to be spontaneous, free intentionality or action can be thought

²⁹⁸ Ibid.



Figure 7: Trouvé, Tatiana *Untitled* (2008). Metal, rubber. 7.1 x 8.9 x 7.10 ft

of as stemming from habit, but that these habits are not unchangeable— we can change their construction. In this sense, Trouvé’s sensitive “tree” installations can reveal to us a version of ourselves, and bring our thinking of body and perception as viewers of these objects is to the forefront.

In this sense— a completely different, perhaps more subtle one than Toma’s— Tatiana Trouvé’s installation pieces in *Aesthetic Transactions* powerfully evoke the soma in a way that prompts somaesthetic reflection and a heightened awareness of ourselves. In this, we, all bodies in general, can find one way of finding meaning in her work in our basic relation through somaesthetics: her work, through somaesthetics, serves to connect us better not only to art, but especially back to ourselves and to other bodies, prompting consideration of how we relate to other bodies in general. Trouvé’s installations help return the body to our minds as Shusterman hoped to return consideration of the body to aesthetics through somaesthetics.



Figure 8: Trouvé, Tatiana. *Untitled* (2008). Metal, leather, epoxy paint.

Conclusions

Just as Dewey highlighted the experience of art as the epitome of his idea of aesthetic experience, so, perhaps, doesn't art emerge as a significant encapsulation of Shusterman's somaesthetics. In looking at the work of contemporary artists Yann Toma and Tatiana Trouvé, we are not only able to gain a better understanding and have a meaningful experience with their work, but are able to better and more fully understand somaesthetics, its significance and potential utility in other areas of life or life in general; we are able to understand art as an example of a proposed applicable method to improve the bodily senses and our lived experience, including that involving art. Just as in viewing art, we help to realize a larger, total version of Dewey's consummatory experience surrounding the work, from the artists own doing and undergoing, to the viewer's perception of the artist's relationship of doing and undergoing, forming one all-encompassing doing (by the artist) and undergoing (by the viewer), so don't we, through viewing art, fully practice Shusterman's somaesthetics. This occurs especially through the experiential mode of somaesthetics, "the experience of one's own body from within."²⁹⁹

In today's highly decentralized and global contemporary art world, somaesthetics provides a means of approaching and thinking about contemporary art that anyone, any "body-mind," might employ—regardless of nationality, language, class, gender, sexuality, age, political or religious views, etc...—and therefore a truly democratic means which can then work to break down barriers between high and low art, art and life. Of course, somaesthetics cannot be prescribed as all-encompassing, the only, or even the

²⁹⁹ Shusterman, "Somaesthetics: A Disciplinary Proposal," 299.

best or most effective means of understanding contemporary art; many at least general, if not specific, political, social, autobiographical, or many other types of meanings contained in a work could be lost through adherence to a pure, singular and dogmatic reliance on somaesthetics or any discipline alone as a tool for approaching art. Somaesthetics, then, is just one way in which to approach and think about contemporary art, one that can be meaningful and useful in approaching that in today's decentralized and global contemporary art world. It is perhaps through somaesthetics which we can truly understand a systematic method of truly "experiencing" art—any art—as Susan Sontag calls us to do.

Although it may be in specific meanings understood through specific knowledge of context, history, political, economic or social systems, psychology, philosophy or biography of the artist of any given work of art or of the art object itself where an art object may take on more meaning and become most exciting, significant or important to someone or many, somaesthetics can offer one method through which anyone, any "body," and the public at large, could approach and find meaning in contemporary art, a method through which divisions of high and low art, and of art and life can be worked to be disassembled, and through which aesthetics might be, as Shusterman hopes, restored to its former definition as a "life-improving cognitive discipline that extends far beyond questions of beauty and fine arts and involves theory and practical exercises" in which the body is no longer neglected.³⁰⁰

How effective is a call for this in an art history thesis which deals with aesthetics itself, and which will inevitably not be read by "anyone" or "the public at large" but

³⁰⁰ Ibid., 301.

likely a smaller, specific audience, my professors and perhaps others already interested in somaesthetics, aesthetics, phenomenology or contemporary art? Will any friends and family who may read this who perhaps do not regularly seek out interacting with contemporary art or art in general be the ones who might stand to gain the most, and, if so, how might an argument for a means of approaching contemporary art be most effective?

Shusterman has already answered just this through his actions in curating *Aesthetic Transactions* in 2012. Perhaps it is through these public events—exhibitions themselves—through which these methods of approaching contemporary art can be communicated, divisions between high and low art, art and life, may be worked on being disassembled, and aesthetics worked on being restored as a further-reaching, more practical in addition to theoretical, “life-improving” discipline that is not considered limited to questions of beauty or fine arts, a discipline which one might be more likely to interact with and benefit from sooner than years into the study of art history or philosophy. Through his writings and lectures, many of which can be found and watched on YouTube, and especially through curating an exhibition connecting somaesthetics to contemporary visual art, Richard Shusterman has publicly emerged as a type of celebrity-philosopher, but one who seems to have genuinely worked towards this restoration of aesthetics to its proposed origins as a discipline that can be useful and applicable in improving our lives. Perhaps what could be called for next is a public exhibition of contemporary art like *Aesthetic Transactions* in the U.S.

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