

Transfiguration, Art, Pathicity. Somaesthetics Reconsidered

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In this discussion piece, I will comment on the collective volume, edited by Jerold J. Abrams, *Shusterman's Somaesthetics. From Hip Hop Philosophy to Politics and Performance Art* (2022). I will articulate my reflections around three main themes, which intersect the theme of several of the essays of the volume: I will first of all consider the concept of transfiguration, commenting upon the difference between Danto's hermeneuticist perspective and Shusterman's somaesthetic reinterpretation, with special regard to his performative experiment, the Man in Gold. Secondly, I will turn to a possible consequence entailed by this reinterpretation concerning the relation between aesthetics and art. Finally, I will turn to the controversy between somaesthetics and pathic aesthetics, and comment on a possible way to reconcile some elements of both, starting from the condition of the suffering body. | *Keywords: Transfiguration, Art, Pathicity, Somaesthetics, Shusterman*

The interdisciplinary field of enquiry of somaesthetics, which Richard Shusterman has theorised since the late 1990s, has now reached a breadth of internal approaches and a theoretical depth that well justifies a general reconsideration of the domain such as that proposed by the collective volume edited by Jerold J. Abrams *Shusterman's Somaesthetics. From Hip Hop Philosophy to Politics and Performance Art* (2022). Somaesthetics, originally defined by Shusterman 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” (Shusterman, 1999, p. 267), has in the last twenty years expanded beyond the very boundaries of philosophy to include regions of sociology, neuroscience, cultural studies, etc., which share certain foci and values (Abrams, 2022, pp. 246-247).

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In his introduction Abrams correctly points out the background at the basis of somaesthetics, insisting in particular on the pragmatist lesson which Shusterman has drawn from Dewey and Rorty, but also on an author such as Arthur Danto, who remained within the analytical horizon from which Shusterman himself had set out. Since its inception, somaesthetics has intended to develop not only an analytical investigation, devoted to the theoretical study of the body, but has also entailed a pragmatic dimension, which includes practical guides for the improvement of body consciousness in its various forms (from diets to bodybuilding, from martial arts to bioenergetics); and finally, a performance-oriented side, in which the body is actually trained through the relevant somatic techniques and care. In this sense, somaesthetics is part of a broader revival of philosophical practice that has been emerging in the West since the 1970s. The crucial element in this perspective is not the construction of a theoretical system, but the attempt to outline itineraries of self-reformation leading to the transformation of one's mode of perceiving and being in the world. Approaches such as philosophical counselling, inaugurated by Gerd Achenbach, clinical philosophy (James and Kathy Elliot; Lúcio Packter), philosophical midwifery (Pierre Grimes), philosophy for children (Matthew Lipman), have highlighted the need to reduce the gap between philosophy as academic knowledge and its influence in the lives of its practitioners. In such a revival, a prominent position is undoubtedly occupied by the work of Pierre Hadot, who brought attention back to the original meaning of philosophy as an art of living which would play a role for Shusterman himself. From this point of view, philosophy (hence also aesthetics) is not merely a declarative or explanatory discourse, but also a set of practices aimed at a performative change in the inquiring subject. In the following commentary on the volume edited by Abrams, I will take this perspective as the basis for a few reflections. For the sake of convenience, I will articulate my paper around three more specific conceptual networks that emerge in some of the contributors' essays: transfiguration; art; pathicity.

The concept of transfiguration, which Abrams's essay *Somaesthetics, Photography and the Man in Gold* analyses and which is taken up by Shusterman himself in his concluding response to the various contributors (*Somaesthetics, Pragmatism and the Man in Gold: Remarks on the Preceding Chapters*), was popularised in contemporary aesthetics by Arthur Danto with his volume *The Transfiguration of the Commonplace. A Philosophy of Art* (1981). In Danto's case, transfiguration concerns the object of aesthetic interest. After the invention and initial establishment of photography and film in the mid to late 19th century, painting, which had reigned supreme in the realm of the visual arts up to that point, found itself in the uncomfortable position of having to justify its centrality. The confrontation with the realism of photography and the moving images of cinema led art to embark on a path of self-knowledge through a series of convulsions that lasted until the second half of the 20th century, leading to a rapid succession of schools and styles, ranging from Impressionism to Abstract Expressionism. As is well known, the end of this path is identified by Danto in Andy Warhol's *Brillo Boxes*, exhibited at the Stable Gallery in Manhattan, New York, in the late spring of 1964. The Brillo Boxes are

wooden sculptures made to look like boxes of Brillo brand dishwashing soap pads, produced by Procter & Gamble and designed by second-generation abstract expressionist James Harvey. While many visitors to the exhibition mocked Warhol's work, and gallery director Eleanor Ward herself was far from satisfied with the exhibition, Danto recognised in that exhibit nothing short of the end of art, the work that brings to completion the trajectory of development undertaken by painting in the 19th century. With Warhol's Brillo Boxes, in fact, art comes to clearly ask the philosophical question about its own essence: what makes those boxes works of art as opposed to those in the grocery store? In this sense, Warhol's operation goes even beyond Duchamp's *Fountain*, the ready-made sculpture consisting of a urinal signed by R. Mutt and photographed at Alfred Stieglitz's studio in 1917. While with *Fountain* Duchamp had shown that any object can be raised to the status of a work of art by the artist's act of choice, with the *Brillo Boxes* Warhol intends to question why the everyday Brillo boxes, which Warhol intends to replicate, are not artworks. What, in short, allows the "transfiguration" of bland, obvious, uninteresting, merely real things to the plane of art? At this point, it is philosophy that must pick up the baton from art and provide the answer to that question, explaining that the essence of art is precisely the path that leads art to formulate the question about its own essence.

Without going further into Danto's discussion, the question is interesting because it attracts attention to the essential difference from the concept of transfiguration in Shusterman's somaesthetics. As Shusterman himself points out in his response essay (Abrams, 2022, pp. 252-253; cf. already Shusterman, 2012), what Danto speaks of is not, at least in a technical sense, a transfiguration, but a transubstantiation. The point, in fact, concerns the elevation of the ontological status of mere real things to works of art without the appearance of the object being changed, as for the Eucharist wafer. Yet, the transfiguration, at least that of Jesus – Shusterman points out in commenting on the relevant passages of the Gospels – is a change that appears in his bodily features ("his face did shine as the sun, and his raiment was white as the light", Matthew, 17:2). Herein lies perhaps the true and most profound difference with Danto: the transfiguration for which somaesthetics seeks to provide both a theoretical framework and the practical strategies is not effected by means of an atmosphere of artistic theory that the eye cannot descry as it is the artworld according to Danto (1964) – an atmosphere of artistic theory which must be projected onto the object; rather, it takes place directly in the inquiring subject itself, who intends to embark on a path of aesthetic refinement. What is heightened here, in short, is the dimension of *aisthesis* in its bodily dynamics, which can lead to the acquisition of new habits or in general to a repositioning of one's somatic perspective in the world.

This shows a clear break from hermeneuticism and theoreticism, and brings to light the melioristic dimension that constitutes the hallmark of somaesthetics. As an exemplification of this aspect, most of the essays in the book edited by Abrams focus on Shusterman's own artistic performance that culminated with the publication of *The Adventures of the Man in Gold: Paths between Art and Life*

(Bilingual Edition: English/French, 2016). The Man in Gold can be understood as an experiment in practical somaesthetics by Shusterman. Invited by his photographer friend Yann Toma to don a tight golden bodysuit costume for a photoshoot at the Royaumont Abbey in France, Shusterman is transfigured into another person, the shy and joyful Man in Gold. In the volume, Shusterman's texts about the adventures of The Man in Gold in the timespan 2010–2014 are collected – the Man in Gold himself does not speak, but is a silent presence in Toma's photographs. The photographer uses light drawing techniques to bring out the auratic brilliance of the Man in Gold, following him up to the moment when he finds love in the glowing golden nude sculpture Wanmei (in Chinese, "perfection"). Embracing Wanmei, a work by Danish sculptor Marit Benthe Norheim, it is suggested, the Man in Gold undergoes a transfiguration similar to that of the burning bush witnessed by Moses.

This atypical work of literary and multimedia fiction (in addition to photographs, there are also short films featuring the Man in Gold) is extensively analysed in the essays of the second part of the volume. Shusterman's experiment – experimentalism is an essential feature of pragmatism, as Else Marie Bukdahl reminds us in *The Golden Turn in Shusterman's Somaesthetics: The Magical Figure of the Golden Man* – provides an opportunity to examine the transformational potential of the corporeal self from multiple perspectives, insofar as the Man in Gold is both Shusterman and not Shusterman. While being temporarily inhabited by the Golden Man, in fact, Shusterman nevertheless retains awareness of his periods of possession, managing to provide readers with information about those moments. It is no coincidence that Diane Richard-Allerdyce's essay (*An Exquisitely Beautiful Longing: A Lacanian Reading of the "Adventures of the Man in Gold"*) uses a Lacanian framework to interpret such an experiment, foregrounding the fact that "all human subjectivity comes into being on the brink of a loss" (Abrams, 2022, p. 164); if the sense of wholeness of the self is a fiction, as made evident by the case of the Man in Gold, it can however be harnessed creatively. In this sense, the fiction of the Man in Gold makes it possible to problematise the relationship between art and philosophy in the precise moment in which art seems to step into philosophy itself. As a matter of fact, in a somaesthetic approach it is no longer art that takes the form of a philosophical question as a sign of self-fulfillment, as was the case with Warhol's *Brillo Boxes* in Danto's interpretation, but philosophy itself that needs to be performed artistically in order to get to the limits of its own practical possibilities, while still providing insights into the language of the apparently mute body.¹ In this perspective, while the artistic dimension is still connected to the concept of transfiguration, it no longer results from an ontological transubstantiation of the object, but is the outcome of an intensification of the vital dimension of the self – a sort of "*Beförderung des Lebens*", to put it in Kantian terms, rooted in the soma.²

¹ In fact, one of the aims of somaesthetics is precisely to integrate the discursive and nondiscursive on the common ground of the soma, see Abrams (2022, p. 178).

² This is true not only of Shusterman's transformation into the Man in Gold with which the volume opens, but also of the peculiar vivification that his required love for Wanmei enables him to experience.

The relationship between art and life deserves a closer look. In fact, one of the most powerful stimuli that drove Shusterman to put on the golden bodysuit and become the Man in Gold is precisely the attempt to overcome the distance between his philosophical perspective and the arts. Shusterman's own aesthetic journey began with an analysis of the literary arts from an analytical perspective; subsequently, following the pragmatist and somaesthetic turn, the author's reflections specifically addressed the performing arts. The fact remained, however, that no matter how much Shusterman theorised the centrality of the practical aspect in somaesthetics, his philosophy seemed to find no way to concretely achieve this aspiration firsthand. As pointed out in Yang Lu's essay, *On Shusterman's Somaesthetic Practice: The Case of the Man in Gold*, Shusterman, following a personal episode that led him to reflect on the prevalence of the classical perspective of the interpreter in his thinking, agreed to explore the artistic possibilities inherent in his thought, to the point of becoming a performer of his own philosophy with the Man in Gold. The consideration of aesthetics as a possible form of practice reveals Shusterman's connection not only with the original conception of philosophy as an art of living, but also with the origin of aesthetics as an art of beautiful thinking. Despite the prevalence of the mind over the body, Baumgarten himself had already affirmed the need to keep together under the umbrella of aesthetics both a theoretical dimension (the science of sensible knowledge) and a practical dimension of thought (aesthetics as the art of beautiful thinking) which will in turn have a theoretical-practical dimension (the applicative techniques of the principles of aesthetics such as poetics could be) and a practical part *tout court*, in which the beautiful mind, suitably trained, is called upon to formulate beautiful thoughts in the first person. Such a tripartition, as mentioned above, will also feature in somaesthetics (analytical, pragmatic, and practical-performative somaesthetics); in this light, Shusterman, just like Baumgarten, does not view aesthetics simply as a speculative theory of the arts, but first and foremost as an art in itself, which can culminate in turn with an artistic work in the strict sense (in the case of the Man in Gold, a multimedia performance). By enhancing the pragmatic dimension of art as doing – a kind of doing that aims to intensify *aisthesis* – Shusterman thus goes beyond the radical caesura that has occurred in post-Baumgartenian aesthetics and was already evident in Herder, where the relationship between aesthetics and the arts was supposed to be merely theoretical. The principle of the division of aesthetic labour already affirmed during the *Sturm und Drang* whereby the aesthetician is responsible for speculation and the artist for the making of beauty must therefore be profoundly revised in this perspective.

On this note, I come to the third point of my commentary, which concerns the dimension of pathicity. Here it is Tonino Griffero's essay (*Somaesthetics and Pathic Aesthetics*) that provides food for thought. The distance that emerges between Griffero's atmospheric perspective and Shusterman's somaesthetic one concerns in particular the question of agency. Griffero traces the basis of aesthetic sphere back to the "non-distancing complicity with the atmospheric world" in the felt-bodily experience of the perceiver. In such

a phenomenological perspective, based not so much on the soma as on the body (*Leib*) in its vital and sentient dimension (as distinct from the material body or *Körper*), Griffero emphasises the importance of the pathic dimension, the ability to let oneself go to what is happening around us, marking a significant distance with the melioristic perspective of somaesthetics. It is precisely the consideration of the pathic dimension that, according to Griffero, makes it possible to philosophically rehabilitate the *lebensweltlich* involvement of the living body in environmental tonalities beyond the lordship of the subject that has dominated the modern era. While, in short, the emphasis for Shusterman falls on a melioristic activism, for Griffero the crucial point is the atmospheric harmony with the world and thus the resonance of appearances in the percipient's body, which generates specific affective situations. In response to Griffero's thesis, Shusterman, who recognises a broad common basis between their conceptions, states that somaesthetics includes not only an active dimension, but also a passive dimension, in deference to the thesis, already supported by Dewey, that experience is a relationship between doing and undergoing, outgoing and incoming energy (Abrams, 2022, p. 251).

The very experiment of the Man in Gold seems to confirm the permeability of the bodily identity in both directions. In fact, this experience has some features in common with the condition of dispossession that the aesthetic tradition since Plato's *Ion* (see Abrams, 2022, p. 16) had identified in the culminating moment of the artistic act: the inspiration of the poet or rhapsode. As already evident in Baumgarten, an author to whom both Shusterman and Griffero refer, the aesthetic act seems to involve two aspects: on the one hand, the need to develop embedded aesthetic *habitus*, which for Baumgarten were first and foremost *habitus* of thought, and which shape the identity patterns of the beautiful mind; on the other hand, the need to be exposed to the advent of something we perceive as radically other to ourselves, which, however, at the same time resonates in the subject's innermost being, raising the degree of its powers in a sudden and unexpected manner. Traditionally, this advent was explained with the doctrine of *en-thousiasmos*, the coming of the god in us: "The god, here is the god!", exclaimed the Cumaean Sibyl when Apollo took possession of her (Baumgarten, 1750, § 82). Yet, Baumgarten maintains, the visitation of such otherness – the "breathing into oneself of something greater" (Baumgarten, 1750, § 80), causes a more intense degree of vivification of the subject, because it allows one to involuntarily bring to consciousness one's interconnection with the entire universe "*pro positu corporis*". Although requiring prior preparation and an active effort, inspiration thus preserves an unavoidable character of gratuitousness (pathic element).

The centrality of the pathic dimension is also apparent in another condition mentioned by Griffero, that of illness and vulnerability. It is precisely the theme of illness that has triggered important reflections on the living body in the social sciences in the last decades, which could also be fruitful for (soma)aesthetics in order to better understand the indissoluble intertwining of agency and pathicity of *aisthesis*. Thomas J. Csordas, who advocated

embodiment as a paradigm for anthropology (Csordas, 1990), had already clearly pointed out that the body is not just a given natural object, but an active subject, embedded in a network of social processes, that feels itself and the world through the devices of its own cultural construction. The point, then, is not simply to account for the historical ways in which the body is understood in a certain context, but to look at the way in which the body is traversed by social processes that simultaneously provide it with a language to somatically express its (re)positioning in the world (see the classical essay ‘The mindful body’ by Nancy Scheper-Hughes and Margaret Lock, 1987). In this sense, illness does not need a cognitively mediated symbology to convey meanings, because our somatic ways of being are already imbricated in a culturally informed context and express themselves in an aesthetic and pre-cognitive experience. In such an aesthetic dimension, illness can reveal biopolitical roots, not only owing to the inscription on the body of the iatrogenic aspects of a certain social system, but also because illness can sometimes embody forms of resistance and protest to the established order, becoming an actual “technique of the body”. A classic example is that of hysteria (see Martin, 1987): at a time (late 19th and early 20th century) when the function of women in Europe was predominantly procreative, female discomfort was traced back to a problem with the reproductive system, which could be removed for therapeutic purposes. In this context, women often used to express their discomfort precisely through a disorderly movement of the abdominal area, which testified to the incorporation and appropriation of the dominant social symbology in a lived experience.

The suffering body therefore amounts to a privileged aesthetic terrain in which both the atmospheric ephemerality of proximate spatial environments and elements of “*longue durée*” such as large-scale social and political processes can intertwine.³ In this perspective, where the idea of “thinking through the body” (Shusterman, 2012a) is taken seriously, it therefore seems necessary to combine an “aesthetics of the body”, where the body is understood as a sentient subject susceptible to improvement through specific habituation techniques that help to develop “new skills of balance and body alignment” (Abrams, 2022, p. 251), and an “aesthetics in the body”, where the body is experienced in an immediate manner in its co-implication with the world in the multiplicity of planes that cross it. In the produced and productive, pathic and agentic, sides of *aisthesis*, the body, as Leszek Koczanowicz’s essay on somapower suggests, can thus become the existential terrain not only of conflict, but also of possible transgression and emancipation. Exploring and deepening these connections certainly represents an important challenge for the future of somaesthetics.

³ Another example is that of Capoeira, which Matthias Röhrig Assunção, author of an important volume on this bodily practice, sees as an evergreen symbol of resistance that fascinates young people all over the world (Röhrig Assunção, 2005, p. 2).

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