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*Embodied creation and perception in visual art.  
Theory and practice in Richard Shusterman's  
Pragmatist Aesthetics illustrated by interpretations  
of selected works by Louise Bourgeois,  
Antony Gormley, Marit Benthe Norheim  
and Jeppe Hein.*

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RICHARD SHUSTERMAN'S ORIGINAL CONTRIBUTION to – and independent criticism of – “classical pragmatism and neopragmatism” developed via a network of dialogues with both the various “pragmatists” as well as with philosophers and aestheticians who have different standpoints and are thus opposed, but always with solid arguments.

These dialogues, which contain both ongoing development of his own positions and that of others as well as confrontations with the viewpoints of opponents, are characterised by many intersecting paths which are always described not only with great precision, but also with intensity, commitment, irony and humour. On a map of the highways and byways of philosophers and aestheticians, Richard Shusterman's new topographic map emerges. It is characterised by his currently very influential philosophy and aesthetic which Wojciech Malecki has rightly termed “embodying pragmatism”<sup>I</sup> and which later developed into a new interdisciplinary field of studies entitled “somaesthetics.” Shusterman has repeatedly stressed that it is “the living body – a sentient soma” he is referring to and not “a mere mechanical corpse”.<sup>II</sup>

He has always repudiated the notion of universal truth and epistemological foundationalism and focused on social practice and political experimentation emphasising that truth must be relative to specific social contexts and practices. He is also convinced that philosophy can and must solve practical and social problems. Realising this goal has always been a leitmotif in the development of his pragmatist aesthetics. He has expressed this view as follows:

“More dangerously, the fetishism of disinterested neutrality obscures the fact that philosophy's ultimate aim is to benefit human life, rather than serving pure truth for its own sake. Since art is a crucial instance and cherished resource of human flourishing, philosophy betrays its mission if it merely looks on with abandoning neutrality at art's evolving history without joining the struggle to improve its future.”<sup>III</sup>

“Pluralism” is another keyword in his pragmatism because it points to openness and the sense that our world is in a continuous process of change, which ensures that unilateral approaches are always sidelined in favour of a multiplicity of “access routes”. Shusterman describes this view as follows:

“Though this is the last of the themes I mention here, it is certainly one of the most central to pragmatism. Because an open, changing, and contingent world implies diversity, pragmatism appreciates plurality, rejecting the idea of a single, permanent, all-encompassing truth or a single ‘block universe’ devoid of change and diversity. Because human practices are also diverse, pragmatism, as a philosophy based on practice, has further reason for being pluralistic.”<sup>IV</sup>

Shusterman attacks contemporary philosophy for focusing too much on “theorizing about” the body rather than adopting a more practical “embodied approach” because according to Shusterman, contemporary body theory needs

I In his book *Embodying Pragmatism. Richard Shusterman's Philosophy and Literary Theory*, Peter Lang, Frankfurt am Main 2010, Wojciech Malecki described these dialogues or “maps” with great precision and learning and a well argued criticism. And in this connection he revealed and analysed Richard Shusterman's original contribution in a lucid, independent and clearly profiled manner.

II Shusterman, *Thinking Through the Body, Educating for the Humanities: A Plea for Somaesthetics*. This article was originally presented on April 6, 2006, at his inaugural lecture at the Dorothy F. Schmidt Eminent Scholar in the Humanities at Florida Atlantic University, Boca Raton, p. 3. [thinkingthroughthebody.net](http://thinkingthroughthebody.net). It was later published in the *Journal of Aesthetic Education*, vol. 40, no. 1, 2006, pp. 1-21.

III Shusterman, *Pragmatist Aesthetics: Living Beauty. Rethinking Art*, 2. ed., New York 2000, p. 45.

IV Shusterman, *What Pragmatism Means to Me: Ten Principles*, *Revue française d'études américaines*, no. 124, 2e trimestre 2010, p. 65.

some “structuring overview or architectonic to integrate its very different, seemingly incommensurable discourses into a more productively systematic field.” The creators of our era’s “body theory” also have too little sense of the practical value of their concept of the body and thus do not understand – as Shusterman expresses it – that it is missing “something that the individual can directly translate into a discipline of improved somatic practice.”<sup>v</sup>

Another key concept in Shusterman’s philosophy and aesthetics is art interpreted as experience. He emphasises that “what inspired me about Dewey’s aesthetics is his stressing of the value of experience, deeply felt and fully embodied experience, in the appreciation of art”<sup>vi</sup>. Shusterman has a crucial focus on lived experience and its influence on self-knowledge. The aesthetic experience is never passive, thus an artwork is not complete until the viewer has experienced and interpreted its particular qualities. This is why there is always an interaction between the artwork and the viewer and the viewing experience is always “a transactional nexus of interacting energies connecting the embodied self and the environing world, including the social world that constructs the biological organism into a self. So conceived experience can be a helpful notion for appreciating the varieties of energy, value, meaning, knowledge, and behaviour that extend beneath and beyond the realm of intellectual thought.”<sup>vii</sup> Experience is always connected to experimentation and also builds on the interplay between tradition and innovation. Or, as Shusterman expresses it:

“Pragmatism moreover deploys the idea of experience as experimentation. For pragmatist experimentalism, both old and new ideas can be tested to see what they produce in experience. As the world of experience is pervaded by change, so our thinking and action cannot rely only on past wisdom and must look forward not only to deal with new changes but also to improve our current living condition.”<sup>viii</sup>

Richard Shusterman does not agree with Richard Rorty, who claims that “all possible experience or understanding must have a linguistic character.” Shusterman is convinced that John Dewey is correct in highlighting “the immediate non discursive” experience as a very valuable source of experience and an epistemological foundation.<sup>ix</sup>

It is clear that various philosophers have believed that the concept of non-discursive experience is a chimera. Dewey’s interpretation of it, Shusterman’s independent development of it and Rorty’s criticism of it in particular are a large and complex chapter, which Wojciech Malecki has described in an in-depth and persuasive manner<sup>x</sup>. Shusterman rightly notes that since Plato, philosophers have been sceptical about “non-discursive experience”, in contrast to the philosophical traditions of the East, where “experiences” of this kind have always played a central role.

v Malecki, *op. cit.*, 2010, p. 143 and Shusterman, *Performing Live: Aesthetic Alternatives for the Ends of Art*, Cornell University Press, 2000, p.141.

vi *Interviewing Richard Shusterman. Part 1 in Action, Criticism and Theory for Music Education*, April 2002, vol 1. 1, p. 5.

vii Shusterman, *Intellectualism and the Field of Aesthetics: The Return of the Repressed?*, *Revue Internationale de Philosophie* 220, 2002, p. 331. See also: Malecki, *op. cit.*, 25.

viii Shusterman, *What Pragmatism Means to me: Ten Principles* in *Revue française d’études américaines* /2, n° 124, p. 63.

ix Malecki, *op. cit.*, 2010, p. 27.

x Malecki, *op. cit.*, p. 25-37.

Shusterman creates neither a metaphysical nor an ideological superstructure for his analyses of “experience”. When he interprets “art as experience” it thus means that both the artist and the person experiencing the works operate on an open platform with a great deal of visibility.

Shusterman’s somaesthetics, which contains three keywords: Soma, Self and Society, are – as he has remarked – “a natural extension of my work in pragmatist aesthetics. Bringing aesthetics closer to the realm of life and practice, I realised, entails bringing the body more centrally into aesthetic focus.”<sup>XI</sup> His own precise definition of this discipline is as follows:

“Somaesthetics offers a way of integrating the discursive and nondiscursive, the reflective and the immediate, thought and feeling, in the quest of providing greater range, harmony, and clarity to the soma – the body-mind whose union is an ontological given but whose most satisfying unities of performance are both a personal and cultural achievement.”<sup>XII</sup>

Somaesthetics is thus both “a specific field of studies and methodic physical exercises”, which Shusterman – with his novel approach – has made a “subdiscipline of philosophy”. Its scope is clear in Shusterman’s definition of its three primary areas – where theory and practice are closely integrated:

1. Analytic somaesthetics “describes the basic nature of our bodily perceptions and practices and their function in our knowledge and construction of reality.”<sup>XIII</sup>
2. Pragmatic somaesthetics has a “distinctly normative, prescriptive character – by proposing specific methods of somatic improvement and engaging in their comparative critique.”<sup>XIV</sup>
3. Practical somaesthetics – which is the actual performance of somatic disciplines.

Shusterman points out that Professor of History Martin Jay’s “insightful analysis shows that rather than being limited to experiences of organic unity and wholesome consummation that Dewey urged, somaesthetics can also illuminate artistic expressions of rupture, abjection and disgust, which form a significant part of contemporary visual art”<sup>XV</sup>. Shusterman thus draws a whole range of important artistic expressions into aesthetics, which also have a very important place in the art of our era.

As we have seen, Shusterman blames contemporary aesthetics for being too intellectual, “emphasizing art as a symbol system or an object of mere cognitive interpretation, rather than an object of deeply felt experience.” He is convinced that “this stress on the power and value of aesthetic experience is (..) very important for the contemporary art world which seems to be losing its appeal for the general public because of its failure to create powerful aesthetic experience.”<sup>XVI</sup>

In the following section we will highlight a series of artworks which have a “powerful appeal” and which have provided new experiences for many of the people who do not come into contact with art frequently and who have often turned their backs on it because it has failed to make an impression on them.

XI Shusterman, *Somaesthetics at the Limit*, *The Nordic Journal of Aesthetics*, no. 35, 2008, p. 18.

XII Shusterman *Somaesthetics and the Revival of Aesthetics*, *Filozofski Vestnik* no 2, 2007, p.148 - 149.

XIII Shusterman, *Pragmatist Aesthetics, Living Beauty, Rethinking Art*, second edition, New York, 2000, p. 271.

XIV Shusterman, *Pragmatic Aesthetics*, op. cit., p.272.

XV Shusterman, *Somaesthetics and the Revival of Aesthetics*, *Filozofski Vestnik* no 2, 2007, p. 141.

XVI *Interviewing Richard Shusterman*, op. cit., p. 5.



But these artworks also visualise major elements of Richard Shusterman's somaesthetics, in much the same way as these aesthetics can clarify important aspects in the artworks and place them in a new and promising context. These analyses also demonstrate that art can promote somatic consciousness and awareness, have a social or cultural goal or meet limit-experiences.

THE INTERNATIONALLY RENOWNED SCULPTOR LOUISE BOURGEOIS (1911-2010) is a prime example of an artist who – as Shusterman expresses it – “thinks through the body.” Her perception of our bodies and the body in art is best characterised by what Shusterman calls “a living body”, because “all perception, cognition and action is crucially performed through the body.”<sup>xvii</sup>

She was convinced that the artistic universe and her own life history were fused together. In her work the body – both her own body and the body in her sculptures – become, in a particularly unique way, what Shusterman calls a “means for communication”. She expressed this as follows:

“Since the fears of the past were connected with the functions of the body, they reappear through the body. For me, sculpture is the body. My body is my sculpture.”<sup>xviii</sup> Time after time, she found that art could dissolve trauma, eliminate anxiety and function as a liberating force. She expressed this view as follows:

“My sculpture allows me to re-experience the fear, to give it physicality, so I am able to hack away at it. Fear becomes a manageable reality. Sculpture allows me to re-experience the past, to see the past in its objective, realistic proportion.”<sup>xix</sup>

She visualised this experience by focusing on what Shusterman calls “the critical, ameliorative study of one's experience and use of one's body as a locus of sensory-aesthetic appreciation and creative self-fashioning”.<sup>xx</sup> The visualisation of this experience can be seen in her large works in the public space such as Maman (1999) (Fig. 2), which is a 5 meter high spider, modelled in bronze which, with its body and many legs, symbolises a protective mother animal and contains a specific reference to Louise Bourgeois' own mother, who was a weaver. Louise Bourgeois described the work as follows:

“The Spider is an ode to my mother. She was my best friend. Like a spider, my mother was a weaver. My family was in the business of tapestry restoration, and my mother was in charge of the workshop. Like spiders, my mother was very clever. Spiders are friendly presences that eat mosquitoes. We know that mosquitoes spread diseases and are therefore unwanted. So, spiders are helpful and protective, just like my mother.”<sup>xxi</sup>

The very sensuous sculpture Nature Study (1984) (Fig. 1) visualises Louise Bourgeois' concept of the body. The six breasts, the dog-like pose and the claws



FIG. 1

LOUISE BOURGEOIS  
Nature Study. 1984

Latex. 76.2 × 48.3 × 38.1 cm  
Ny Carlsberg Glyptotek,  
Copenhagen, Denmark  
Photo: Ny Carlsberg Glyptotek

xvii Shusterman, *Somaesthetics at the Limits*, *The Nordic Journal of Aesthetics* no. 35, 2008, p. 18.

xviii Louise Bourgeois, *Destruction of the Father. Reconstruction of the Father. Writings and interviews 1923-1997*, London, 1998, p. 228.

xix Louise Bourgeois, *op. cit.*, 1988, p. 228.

xx Richard Shusterman, *Performing Live: Aesthetics Alternatives for the Ends of Art*, Cornell University Press, 2000, p. 144.

xxi Quote in [Wikipedia.org/wiki/Louise\\_Bourgeois](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Louise_Bourgeois)

reveal her preoccupation with sexuality, motherhood and her determination to defend her family forcefully.<sup>xxii</sup> She described it as follows:

“It is not an image I am seeking. It is not an idea. It is an emotion you want to recreate, an emotion of wanting, of giving and of destroying.”<sup>xxiii</sup>

In both artworks the viewer is drawn into her magical sphere of art, and stimulated to experience it with the entire body and all its senses, because it is essential to move around her sculpture constantly in order not to miss any of the many surprising aspects it contains. Her works also demonstrate that the soma – our body and the body in the visual arts – are always shaped by the social and physical environments in which they are nested. Encountering her work gives you an understanding that visual art – unlike philosophy and literature – has an aspect that is immediately accessible. The work of art, created in a convincing way by the non-linguistic language of form, is a visible world full of presence and intensity. Shusterman highlights precisely these “two crucial aspects of art – intensity of presence and formal framing.” It is the formal or artistic evocative framework, “that differentiates what is framed from the ordinary flow of life.”<sup>xxiv</sup>

FIG. 2

LOUISE BOURGEOIS

Maman. 1999

Bronze, stainless steel and marble

500 × 333 cm

Kongens Nytorv – Copenhagen, Denmark

Photo: Per Bak Jensen



xxii Else Marie Bukdahl, *The visual arts liberating power. On the relationship between life and art in Louise Bourgeois' works in Carlsbergfondet*, Yearbook 2003, pp. 161-162 and illustrations.

xxiii See [www.fantasyarts.net/bournature.html](http://www.fantasyarts.net/bournature.html)

xxiv Richard Shusterman, *Somaesthetics at the Limits*, op. cit., p. 17.



Louise Bourgeois' sculptures are modelled with unmatched skill and resonant intensity. In principle, all irrespective of individual background and culture can experience visual art. Before the observer, art stands as a visible monument, installation or digital work. But the often numerous layers of meaning in art can be difficult to interpret, and they are never, and can never be, unequivocal.

ANTONY GORMLEY INTERPRETS HIS ART as “an attempt to materialise the place at the other side of appearance where we all live.”<sup>xxv</sup> Many of his works are created from forms modelled on his own body, because – as he says – this is “the closest experience of matter that I will ever have and the only part of the material world that I live inside.”<sup>xxvi</sup> His works are not symbolic but contain traces of a real event or of a real body.

He describes his installations in urban and rural environments as “displacement”, “other places” or “energy fields”. All three key words can describe the very impressive installation in Deichtorhallen in Hamburg: Horizon Field Hamburg (2012) (Fig. 3). It is site specific, created for the great hall with a large window providing spectacular views of Hamburg. Dirk Luckow describes the installation as consisting of “a large, black, reflective, synthetic surface measuring 1200 square metres and which, suspended from a steel structure, horizontally spans almost the entire reach of the Deichtorhallen's northern hall at a height of 7.4 metres. Rather like a large, lightly oscillating airborne raft, this object, weighing 70 tons, floats in space and can accommodate up to 100 visitors at a time.”<sup>xxvii</sup>

Horizon Field Hamburg (2012) visualises the aim of somaesthetics, which is to play an important role in the art of living. In this installation the artistic ex-

FIG. 3

ANTONY GORMLEY  
Horizon Field Hamburg, 2012  
*Large black, reflective, synthetic surface*  
*Deichtorhallen's Northern Hall*  
*Hamburg, Germany*  
*Photo: Trans-Pond*



<sup>xxv</sup> Quoted in Gormley: *Making Space*, Beban Kidron documentary 2007, shown on Channel 4 UK, November 2009. Channel4.com.

<sup>xxvi</sup> Gormley, *op. cit.* 2007

<sup>xxvii</sup> Foreword by Dirk Luckow for the catalogue for the exhibition *Antony Gormley Horizon Field Hamburg*, Deichtorhallen Hamburg, Snoek, p. 16. The catalogue contains the following articles: Dirk Luckow, *Unbounded Space*, Stephen C. Levinson, *A Swing for the Gods*, Iain Boyd Whyte, *Elevated Thoughts on a raised platform*.

perience involves the whole body and uses it as living soma in new and startling ways. There is no doubt that “the experience of ascending onto the platform, of experiencing our visual, acoustic and physical impact on it – both individually and as a group – heightens our awareness (..) and reassesses our position in the world.”<sup>xxvii</sup> (Fig. 5). In addition, new communities are established amongst the many people who find themselves on the platform. They dance, talk, enjoy themselves, rest and they are constantly placed in new and surprising situations which remove the boundaries between young and old and break down the differences in culture and working life. (Fig. 4). Spontaneous joy flows through the crowd, which moves freely and boldly on the platform resembling “a piazza hanging in the sky”, a “dark pool” or a “deep lake frozen overnight”.<sup>xxix</sup> But participants also experience fear, anxiety and thrills. Gormley “plays on people’s fear of the limitless, the infinite, the unbound void: the oscillation of the platform feels as though the earth beneath one’s feet is being pulled away – the steadfastness of one’s own body disappears.” The many mirror effects create an undefined sense of space and the mirror image that the ceiling creates on the black reflective facade provides participants with a thrill, because they feel that they are stepping into the abyss and forget that they are walking on a black mirror. In addition, the “vaulted ceiling space extends beneath our own bodies into sheer infinity and engenders a floating sensation.” (Fig. 6).<sup>xxx</sup>



FIG. 4

The experience of most participants on the “dark pool” can be characterised as a contemporary interpretation of Edmund Burke’s portrayal of the “sublime” as a “sentiment or a passion”. He points out that everything the imagination cannot sum up in a single impression – the darkness of night, the wide open space and “infinity” – arouses a sensation of “the sublime”. The very fact that these attempts to synthesize fail abysmally evokes “horror” and “terror”. But this “terror” is mingled with a sensation of “delight” because “the terror-causing threat becomes suspended” and because it reveals new experience and ways of looking

FIG. 5



xxvii Iain Boyd Whyte, *Elevated Thoughts on a raised Platform*, pp. 139-140.

xxviii Stephen C. Levinson, *A Swing for the Gods*, op. cit., 2012, p. 82 and p. 86.

xxix Dirk Luckow, *Unbounded space – Antony Gormley’s Horizon Field Hamburg*, op. cit., 2012, p. 44.

xxx Dirk Luckow, *Unbounded space – Antony Gormley’s Horizon Field Hamburg*, op. cit., 2012, p. 44.



at and experiencing things.<sup>xxxI</sup> The French postmodern philosopher Jean-François Lyotard rightly claims that “for Burke the sublime was not a matter of elevation (the category within which Aristotle defined tragedy) but a matter of intensification.”<sup>xxxII</sup> Intensity is an important keyword in Shusterman’s conception of art in connection with the description of the “limit-experience” which the majority of people experience on the swaying, reflective platform. He characterises this “intense limit experience” as follows:

“The value of these limit-experiences lies not simply in their experiential intensity that seems related to the intense sublimities of aesthetic experience, but in their power to transform us by showing us the limits of our conventional experience and subjectivity and by introducing us to something fascinatingly powerful beyond those limits, an “au delà” of what we are and know.”<sup>xxxIII</sup>

The Danish art critic Lisbeth Bonde described her boundary transgressing experiences on the shiny black suspended floor. The thrill and the fear that she experienced at the start when she stepped out onto the platform was later transformed into joy and happiness at the many unexpected experiences that she had. This double movement is characteristic of “the sensation of the sublime”. She describes it as follows:

“After having climbed the staircase, you have to walk on a ramp before you step down on the platform. Then you enter this vast, reflecting floor. You generally take the first step with some anxious hesitation, because the surface looks like water, which only a well-known person from the New Testament was able to walk on. In this way, Gormley destabilizes our normal senses of orientation, which we tune simultaneously for instant action. Some of my companions

FIG. 6



xxxI Else Marie Bukdahl, *Johannes Wiedewelt. From Winckelmann’s Vision of Antiquity to sculptural Concepts of the 1980’s*, Edition Blöndal 1993, pp. 42 - 43. Also see *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* (1757) by Edmund Burke. Lain Boyd Whyte also cites Burke in his interpretation of Gormley’s work. See his article *Elevated Thoughts on a Raised Platform* in *op. cit.*, 2012, pp. 126-128.

xxxII Quoted by Else Marie Bukdahl in *Wiedewelt*, *op. cit.*, p. 44.

xxxIII Shusterman, *Somaesthetics at the Limits*, *op. cit.*, p.20.

had to give up due to fear of heights, but if you dare to enter this mirroring floor you can have a good experience. First of all you can make the huge platform swing. However it requires many participants and coordinated movements to make Gormley's "horizontal field" sway or swing. When I saw the exhibition, there were unfortunately too few participants so we couldn't make it sway, but we noticed a little vibration and swaying when we ran to and fro in a line on it. This artwork breaks down barriers between people who suddenly start to dance or hop together. It is a true, interactive experience which involves the body and which invites you to act playfully and at the same time it is a sublime horizontal sculpture." xxxiv

By being active participants in the completion of the artistic process, they are also provided with a more in-depth view of the process of artistic creation. It is they, after all, who are a very integrated part of the work. Dewey's key word "learning by doing" which is also centrally located in Shusterman's somaesthetics, becomes a reality.

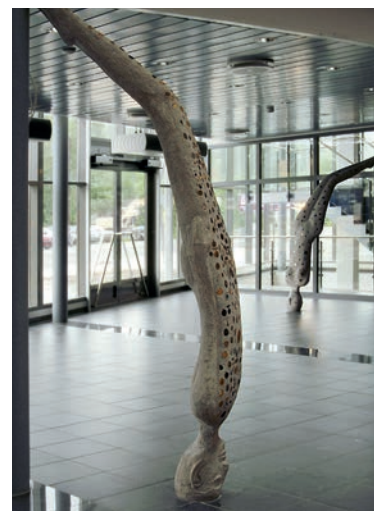
Gormley has described the goal of his art as follows:

"The best art for me always makes you turn your back on the work and face existence with the ability to see what you didn't before." xxxv In Horizon Field Hamburg he has fully realised this goal.

THE DANISH AND NORWEGIAN ARTIST MARIT BENTHE NORHEIM (born 1960) is known first and foremost for the many unique sculptures and installations – often on a large scale – which she has created in Norway, Denmark, England, Sweden, Iceland and Greenland. These works reveal new perspectives and communicate new patterns of meaning in the public space. They thus confer a new identity on the locations in which they are situated. Through her works she creates a closer and more personal contact with the audience and local population groups, raising questions of identity and the relationship between the individual and society. Like Shusterman, she is interested in how the power of art "can serve individual, social and political reconstruction" and support "the pursuit of perfectionist self-cultivation in the art of living". xxxvi In her site-specific projects – in industrial plants, schools and other institutions – she has thus attempted to improve both the environment and the living quality of the people who live there. She has stimulated their imagination, and added a poetic dimension to a one-dimensional and often cold technological world. She has had what Shusterman calls "a meliorist goal of making things better (..) opening thought and life to new and promising options." xxxvii

Almost all Marit Benthe Norheim's sculptures – mainly of women – are modelled directly in cement. They exude a formal simplicity, a particular sensibility and an intense expressive force. They are thus able to communicate new aspects of inner and outer reality. The art historian Trond Borgen rightly remarks that "Norheim uses the body as a symbol and metaphor for basic human emotions, experiences and attitudes." Through her female figures she visualises her conception of the body which is the core in somaesthetics because she, as Shusterman expresses it, "treats the body not only as an object of aesthetic value and creation,

FIG. 7



MARIT BENTHE NORHEIM  
The Front of the Medal. 2002-2003

White concrete, used medals. H. 320 cm.  
Frisklivsenteret, Porsgrunn Sports and  
Cultural Center, Norway.  
Photo: Helge Hansen

xxxiv This is an unpublished text, which I have been given permission to print.

xxxv L. B. Whyte, *Elevated thoughts on a raised platform* in op. cit., 2012, p.140.

xxxvi Shusterman, *Pragmatism and East-Asian Thought, Metaphilosophy* vol. 35, 2004.

xxxvii Shusterman, *What Pragmatism Means to Me* in op. cit., p. 64.



but also as a crucial sensory medium for enhancing our dealings with all other aesthetic objects and also with matters not standardly aesthetic”<sup>xxxviii</sup>, particularly the basic existential questions. She considers the body to be our primary means of engaging with the world, including our mental life.

These views are visualised in her sculptural installation in the Sports and Cultural Center in Skien, Norway (fig. 7), where she has installed a male and a female figure which stand easily and elegantly on their heads. They are both covered in medals. In this work, Marit Benthe Norheim wanted to emphasise the positive and the life-affirming. Or as she expresses it:

“The artwork must be positive, just like the building, which includes both sports and health, both the traditional and the new. We speak of the “flipside of the medal” – a Danish expression, which is the equivalent of the flipside of the coin. I want to put something on the front. Joy, pride and the work that lies behind every medal that we get.”<sup>xxxix</sup>

An important element in somaesthetics is what Shusterman calls “to break the hold of object fetishism in contemporary art, aesthetics and culture.” He calls this characteristic the “exaggerated sense of art’s demarcation from the rest of life and its autonomy from wider social and political forces that in fact penetrate even into the very forms of artistic expression.”<sup>xxxx</sup>

To counteract such efforts at artistic isolation and to intensify the dialogue between art, the surroundings and people, Marit Benthe Norheim has created moveable sculptures with integrated music, thus creating in them a new time dimension, which constantly creates new surprise elements, which are capable of splintering the network of conventions which envelop our everyday lives. These works are examples of vibrantly embodied art.

FIG. 8

MARIT BENTHE NORHEIM  
Five Camping Women. 2008

*A rolling sculptural installation made in relation to The European Capital of Culture Stavanger 2008. White concrete modelled over old functional caravans.*

H. 4 m · L. 4.5 m · w. 2–2.5 m.

*Private collection. Photo: Niels Fabæk*



xxxviii Shusterman, *Pragmatist Aesthetics*, op. cit., p. 278.

xxxix Quoted in Else Marie Bukdahl's book: *Billedkunstneren Marit Benthe Norheim*, Copenhagen, 2005, p. 52.

xxxx Shusterman, *Somaesthetics at the Limits*, op. cit., p. 17.



One of the last and most promising examples of her realisation of this goal is a rolling sculptural installation with Five Camping Women (2008). It consists of five large female sculptures, which are built on top of five working caravans. (Fig. 8). Their interiors are filled partly with sculptures, partly photographs, partly porcelain mosaics. We meet five sensuous and forceful camping women: The Refugee, Maria Protector/Virgin Mary, The Bride, The Siren and the Campingmama. In the interiors of each of the caravans, the renowned Norwegian composer Geir Johnson has composed or adapted music, which in a richly expressive manner, highlights the themes that each of the Campingwomen symbolize. For example, the Campingwoman representing Maria Protector is a symbol of contemporary humanity's need for care. (Fig. 9). Geir Johnson has interpreted the tension between the human and the divine aspect in Maria the Protector in his personal adaptation of Gregori Allegri's work of the 1630's, *Misere Dei*. In the interiors of the Campingwomen there are also sculptures, e.g. of the dead Jesus, who visualises God's love for humanity. (Fig 10).

In the five Campingwomen, Marit Benthe Norheim has created expressive sculptural interpretations of the ambiguous, the mysterious and the power of light and dark in women's personalities. These Women have set new points of reference in our everyday lives, provided us with new poetic inspiration and hope for the experience of new values and new meaning. They have stretched out a network, which expresses a materiality and an intensity that has been obscured by the technology of our information society. The many surprising connecting threads, which the Camping Women create between visual art, music, the adults' and children's worlds are extended in many new and unexpected ways. The Campingwomen travel from location to location and have opportunities to establish new dialogues with the various people they meet.

The Campingwomen directly engage the senses and imaginations of the audience. They create new orientation points or disseminate knowledge of reality, which cannot be mediated by the verbal language. They also incorporate the viewer in a very active way, in the sense that he or she can enter into the caravans, meditate, listen to music, discuss or study the photos, sculptures or other works that are inside. When it comes to the artist and the viewer, this is an example of a totally embodied experience, creation and perception.

Her next, very interactive project – the Life-boats – will be integrated into a European framework. She is working on creating three sculptures in cement, which will become functioning boats, shaped as female figures. They will be 12m in length. The three sailing women are **My ship is loaded with:**

- I. **Longing** – the young one, entering into the world.
- II. **Life** – in the middle of life and fertilised
- III. **Memories** – the aging or the dead.



FIG. 9

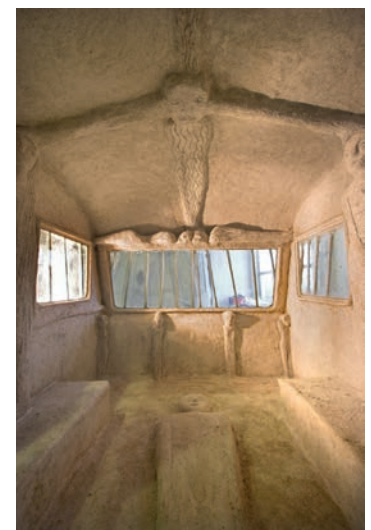
MARIT BENTHE NORHEIM  
The Campingwoman –  
Maria Protector. 2008

*Outside*

*The interior with sculptures, e.g. of Jesus  
Christ. White concrete H. 4 m · L. 4.5 m*

*Private collection. Photos: Niels Fabæk*

FIG. 10



The first piece is finished in a very evocative manner. They are destined for voyages on the European canals and will create different and surprising activities in the harbours in which they dock. Marit Benthe Norheim emphasises that the “life-boats project is about meetings, about exchanges (..) about daring to move into unknown territory (..) I will, as with several of my previous projects, be using direct participation and direct involvement in the process, both in the production phase as well as on the journey.”

MARIT BENTHE NORHEIM

Longing – the young woman entering the world. 2008 – 2012

*Belongs to the series Life-boats. A sailing sculptural installation in ferrocement.*

*H. 4.2 m · L. 12 m · W. 3 m.*

*Private collection. Photo Claus Ørntoft.*



FIG. 11

IN THE INTERNATIONAL ART WORLD THE DANISH ARTIST JEPPE HEIN (born 1974) is famous for his production of experiential art and interactive artworks, which are placed at the edge of where art, architecture and technical innovations intersect. Notable in their formal simplicity and frequent use of humour, his urban installations often feature surprising and captivating elements, which place spectators at the centre of the event.

Jeppe Hein focuses on the corporeal experience of the world, thereby uncovering new perspectives in the interpretation of how urban installations – which can be considered to be cultural objects – communicate with the body. He is also preoccupied with investigating how the installations’ focus on the corporeal experience contributes towards another set of bodily, sensual experiences of the city space. His urban installations’ connections to the social space – that is, all the people who walk around them – are built in such a way as to inspire new communities and contacts. Jeppe Hein regards his urban installations as “a tool to bring people in a city together, to establish new kinds of social spaces, which create new connections between people and the city.” Both participants



and the viewers are co-creators of new social spaces in the city.<sup>xxxxi</sup> Jeppe Hein's urban installations' uniqueness and targets are clarified via Shusterman's interpretation of "the embodied nature of human experience and cognition" which they visualise. This interpretation becomes nuanced, when Shusterman's understanding of "community" is included, a core concept in his somaesthetics because it is "an indispensable medium for the pursuit of better beliefs, knowledge and even for the realization of meaning through language and the arts" and because "communication between individuals provides the means for correcting false beliefs. It allows for a sharing and critique of alternative viewpoints."<sup>xxxxii</sup>

In order to realise his ideas of establishing new social spaces through the establishment of urban installations he created what he called Modified Social Benches in 2005 and the following year. Ten of them were set up in Aarhus in 2009. All the benches contain clear, often humorous departures from the usual concept of a bench. They thus challenge peoples' imaginations. Some benches are bent and pulled out of shape; others are too tall or too short.

Almost all of the benches inspire those who encounter them to create new communities through bodily interaction. Situations with laughter and jokes arise. In this simple way, the benches focus on somaesthetic improvement, which is an important aspect of Shusterman's somaesthetics.

As an example of these Ten Modified Social Benches, one bench can be singled out, it is situated in an area where many socially excluded people circulate and where there has never previously been a bench. It is a social bench. The seat curves downwards, as if it were soft and if you sat on it you would slide towards the other person sitting on the bench and contact would take place. (Fig. 12). The same goes for the bench, which has a lopsided seat which is impossible to sit on, but upon which one can both slide and skate (Fig. 13).

The encounter with the benches awakens the audience's ingenuity and new patterns of movement are established and – with occasionally very liberating laughter – new acquaintances are established.



FIG. 12



FIG. 13

JEPPE HEIN.

Bench no. 3 and Bench no 7. 2009

Part of the series

Ten Modified Social Benches

Shown in Aarhus, Denmark

Photo: Line Marie Bruun Jespersen

xxxxi Line Marie Bruun Jespersen, *Urbane Installationer*, Aalborg University, 2011, p. 161.

xxxxii Shusterman, *What Pragmatism Means to Me: Ten Principles*, op. cit., p. 62.



LOUISE BOURGEOIS, ANTONY GORMLEY's, MARIT BENTHE NORHEIM's and JEPPE HEIN's works visualise – as we have seen – some basic elements in Shusterman's somaesthetics, particularly when it comes to embodied creation and perception, the interactive dialogue with the viewer and the surroundings, the unification of art and experience as well as the hope of being able to inspire and benefit life. But it is precisely this aesthetic, which has also revealed new aspects of the works of the artists discussed here. It has thus demonstrated that it can provide artists, in this precise and intense way, with a new and stimulating understanding of the body's role in the arts as a resource for working on the problems of creating and interpreting art and improving the quality of our life and the society as such. It is precisely these essential elements in Shusterman's conception of art, which will be able to provide a great deal of inspiration for the artists of our time.

Shusterman's somaesthetics appeals not only to the artistic elite, but to the whole spectrum of our cultural and social life, which it provides with new ideas and inspiration. Or as Didier Maleuvre sums it up: "Pragmatism's aesthetic theory downplays the representational dimension of artworks to show that they are performative, gestural entities (in plain speech, a work of art does not just represent, it also enacts what it talks about): they are agents of life, not just make-believe."<sup>xxxxiii</sup>

*Else Marie Bukdahl*

*D. Phil. Former Rector of the Royal Danish Academy of Fine Arts*

<sup>xxxxiii</sup> Didier Maleuvre, *Art and Criticism: Must Understanding be Interpretive?* in *Substance: A Review of Theory & Literary Criticism*, 2001, Vol. 30 Issue 3, p. 120. Review of Shusterman's book *Pragmatist Aesthetics*, 2. ed. 2000.