Performance art and somaesthetics

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PERFORMANCE ART AND SOMAESTHETICS

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Abstract

This article aims at pointing out some fundamental aspects of performance art, especially the body presence and its aesthetic implications from a philosophical perspective. It will also develop the new theory of somaesthetics elaborated by Richard Shusterman.

Keywords: body, intuitive consciousness, live art, performance, somaesthetics.

During the 1960s and 1970s, performance art manifested intensively under various ways and manners. It belonged to a wide range of artistic movements including happenings, body action, body painting and even installations. The first approaches were explored during Futurist shows and especially during Dadaist and Surrealist soirées where the participants, artists and audience, could interfere, talk, and move. The artistic soirées took place in common locations as cabarets, pubs, art galleries. Artists belonging to painting, literature, music, film making, and dance were present. These artistic gatherings had one basic common characteristic: the idea of making art, the idea of live art. Not the work of art as a well finished product but the action, the experience of living artistically was the main purpose. At that historical moment, such activities were thought to be a new vision, a new way of making art in strict opposition to what art had meant till then.

This basic characteristic of live art is maintained in performance art too. A large series of theoretical consequences derive from it.

The visual art is seen as an on-going process, not as a finished object (the painting itself); the relationship between artist and spectator changes. The “work” of art is the action itself which means that at the end of this action nothing remains except some photos or video images. Thus, the work of art is

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no longer a stable, long-existing product but an ephemeral and also immaterial one. The visual art becomes action, event, something that happens. Being an act it is defined by the notion of presence and by the temporality of the present supposing a direct, immediate experience. It is thus characterized by spontaneity and immediacy. According to Derrida’s theory, the presence of the body can be a proposal for a metaphysics of presence. It expresses the desire for a transcendent meaning; it ensures an immediate access to the essence of the action. If we accept this way of understanding performance art then it could be considered not only as a presentation but also as a re-presentation which speaks about an absence.\(^3\)

As for the artistic material, it is usually the human body and especially the artist’s own body. The presence of this new artistic material has significant implications. The subject – object relationship is no more an oppositive one; on the contrary, it is an associative one as the object (the body) is at the same time the subject (the artist). The relationship between artist and spectator changes also a lot as the spectator can interfere and react to what he sees and he also can experience intense feelings when participating to such performance. Thus the first preoccupation of this art is the direct experience instead of the hermeneutic attitude demanded by the classical art.

In our opinion, the most significant aspect is the presence of the living body, especially of the artist’s body which brings an intense feeling of living experience. The analysis of some of the consequences of this new material and medium (the artist’s own body) constitutes the purpose of this article. Our approach is structured into two parts. In the first part (A) we will analyze several performances of two couples of artists: Gilbert and George and Marina Abramowicz and Ulay. In the second part (B) we will try to analyze some philosophical implications generated by the presence of the artist’s body in this art.

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**A.** Gilbert and George are two British artists who performed in 1969 at the Royal College of Art of London, their performance being entitled *The Singing Sculptures*. The two artists stood motionless for many hours on a small 6-feet tall table while a cassette recorder played a music hall piece, *Underneath the Arches*. They had their faces and hands covered in bronze paint and they wore drab and old fashion suits (belonging to the 1920s). Large drawings were moving around them generating a space which included the artists themselves and the audience. These moving drawings seemed to blur the difference between art and life. The performances lasted for 7 hours during 5 days. They

\(^3\) This is the point of view expressed by Christine Rosse in her study “The Paradoxical Bodies of Contemporary Art”, in *A Companion to Contemporary Art*, p. 383.
were repeated many times and then, once again in 1991. The two artists called themselves *living sculptures*.

Afterwards, Gilbert and George performed other works stressing the idea of violence or abject. This couple of artists always manifested, through their behavior, a significant distance or separation from the public, they eliminated any interaction with the spectators. This separation was enhanced by the base on which they stood and their faces covered with paint which imposed a bigger distance from the spectators similar to that established between the mime and his public. Thus the communication was strongly restricted between them.

They even established a *Law of Sculptors* in 1970:

1. *Always be smartly dressed, well groomed relaxed friendly polite and in complete control.*
2. *Make the world to believe in you and to pay heavily for this privilege.*
3. *Never worry assess discuss or criticize but remain quiet respectful and calm.*
4. *The lord chisels still, so don’t leave your bench for long.* (Green, 2001, 148).

This *law*, written in a non-academic English language, free spelling and odd archaic syntax, seems to be a parody of the artistic tradition. All is based on
an exaggerated respect of tradition, manner, etiquette in their appearance and performance. They used to choose pedantic titles for their performances and the music as a fetish. They created even a stamp – G&G – with which they stamped their fronts in 1969. Their gestures could be interpreted as a parody of the English society and its normalized behavior. The law was a kind of recipe for a well studied immobility and impassivity. Their behavior, their old fashioned and drab suits, their refusal to talk, all contributed to their success. They succeeded in raising the art to a pseudo-religious level due to their impassivity.

Then, during their following performances, they incorporated another aspect in their performance: their movements became more robotic, they acted as mechanic puppets. Thus, they combined a very stylish but old fashion English dandy behavior with that strangely metallic painted face and robotic or mechanical gestures. There was a combination that attracted much at the end of the 1960s and the 1970s in a Western country dominated by the fascination for humanoids and aliens.

Another significant characteristic: the two artists had mirrored gestures and an identical behavior as they acted as one double body.

Gilbert and George – *Hoi Polloi*

There is another couple of artists: Marina Abramowicz and Ulay (F. Uwe Layseipen) who experienced the idea of a third identity, not only the self identity and the other’s identity but another one, beyond the two, a sort of
common corporal identity. Between 1976-1980, Marina and Ulay acted in several performances entitled *Relation Works* which tried to explore the limits of the self. These limits become accessible only through a process of disappearance of the outside and of a growing inaccessibility manifested from the inside for any connection with the outside. In a more clear expression, the two artists tried to reach those limits by a deep concentration which meant a process of absorption within the one’s inner self cutting any connection with the outside. According to Abramowicz, “[w]hen you are focused on the here and now, people get the impression that you are absent.” (Green, 2001, 157).

How did they do this? – practicing a kind of oblivion. They created scenarios of immobility and inside absorption which were perceived from the exterior as completely non-active. They practiced the self-absorption, the self-​evanescence by trying to eliminate any aspect of personal identity which supposes connection to the outside, to the others. This self-absorption is mutually-perceived and thus this couple admits firstly the romantic vision of a self sufficient couple but then they overpass this condition towards a third one that of *one two-headed body*, as Marina said. They seemed to practice a de-constructivist corporal art as they succeeded in escaping from the limits of the individual subjectivity. The artist extracted his self from the social and sexual codes reaching finally a sort of sensitive intuition of the other’s body and feelings. In 1977, during the performance *Relation in time*, they stood still hours and hours back to back, bound to each other with their hair. They developed a deep experience of self psychic and physical concentration and created for themselves an inner world where the spectator could not look in. The artists admitted that during the performance they escaped mentally through exotic worlds. Thus they tried to extend the limits of the self.

![Marina and Ulay – Relation in Time](image)
During 1980-1981 they spent long periods of time in Australian deserts trying to communicate between them through other ways than the language in order to develop an enhanced mutual sensitivity. They also exercised sadhus, an Indian practice, and succeeded thus in creating “immobile paintings”. In 1981 they had another experiment without eating and talking for a long period of time. According to Abramowicz: “… it is quite logical that we went to the desert because of our kind of background, and the work we do. We minimalize ... and we try to realize with pure body and energy.” (Green, 2001, 159). During their solitary existence they developed a heightened sensitivity and tried to communicate through means other than physical sight, in a telepathic way.

Abramowicz’s biographical entry for that year states: “1981 – Experiments without eating and talking for long periods of time/ Meeting Tibetans/ Nightsea Crossing performance/ Be quiet still and solitary/ The world will roll in ecstasy at your feet/ Eating honey, ants, grass hoppers/ anima mundi/ wounded snake men/ missing boomerang/ slow motion” (Green, 2001, 167). They spoke then about an exercise intended to reach a “pure body and energy”.

During the same year 1981, the two artists prepared static live pictures characterized by impassivity and immobility. An example is their performance Tango at the Trienale of Australian Sculpture, in Melbourne. Marina wore a red dress and Ulay, a black suit. They danced together some steps of tango while the music was played by a cassette recorder; they separated few times and then, they remained in a tango embracing in the center of the room for some minutes. The critics appreciated their experience about self absorption through a process of self purification. The language is annulled and a process of voiding out the identity and any structured value starts up. One could speak about the temptation of the void or the emptiness which is also familiar to the explorations of contemporary art, at least since Yves Klein, during the 1950s.

This void or emptiness supposes a practical experience of “the death of the artist” theorized by R. Barthes. The artist has no longer personal life outside or behind the work of art. The artist with and within his body is the work of art. All these approaches supposed firstly giving up using the language as a way of communication and thus giving up identification. Finally, the body gets an autonomy that makes possible the revelation of certain corporal intuitive capacities that have been forgotten in the civilized industrial and consumerist society. Denise Green remarks that in Eastern ancient cultures which influenced a lot the practices of these artists, the rituals and practices intermediate a special relation with an inner spirituality and a material, natural world from the outside (Green, 2005, 36-37). The meaning of identity in these cultures derives from a metonymic vision of the universe where the human being is in strict continuity with the natural world where he/she lives. In the Aborigines’ culture, the inner self extends to mythical and mystical dimensions which are lived in a unified manner. The self projects itself in the outer landscape which is thought as magic
and mystic and this space invades the inner subjectivity. In the Indian culture, there is a goddess, Uma, which represents the creation, power and energy. The process of sculpting its statue represents the direct manifestation of the goddess itself through the energy force and creativity involved in producing that object. All these characteristics of the goddess are acting from the inside of the material when being sculpted.

The self absorption of the artist could be considered also as liberation from the language understood as instrument of the civilized society. This liberation results in a new condition according to which the other is no longer perceived as another identity, but on the contrary the other becomes part of the extended self generating a third condition which is like “a two-headed body” as Marina Abramowicz said. In order to get this level of perceptive consciousness, the two artists became familiar with some Buddhist practices as Vipashana, Zen and some Australian practices of the Aborigines. Their purpose was to get a deeper knowledge of one’s own body and its forgotten capacities.

B. As we could see, these examples of performance art suppose the application of some basic ideas: the work of art is the performance itself, the instrument is the body of the artist which is present as an object of the action but also as a subject, the time of action is obviously the present. A lot of questions arise when trying to analyze this art from a theoretical perspective and a clear separation becomes obvious if we compare this art to a classical, traditional European painting. No more finished product separated from the artist. The painting is replaced by a living person (flesh and bones) who is, in our examples, the artist him/herself. The condition of uniqueness of the authorship has also changed: there are two artists (a couple) who act as one body. This art is also ephemeral as nothing of it remains after the action itself, except some photos or videos. Then the meanings of such art-works are completely new. They are based on explorations of a wide variety of topics: experience of space, time, lack of communication, memories, experience of one’s own body, exploration of forgotten extended capacities of the body in order to adapt to more demanding necessities, experience of violence, etc. And all these are experienced by the artist on his own body proving an extension of the meaning of art. The art is no longer a very well defined and restricted domain; it is equivalent to life, to human life in a human body. Thus we can assert now that the performance art is a domain where the meaning of art gets an enlarged sense with significant consequences when trying to understand contemporary art. We also think that some of the philosophical approaches of the 20th century can contribute a lot when trying to get a deeper and widened understanding of this domain. Among these philosophical approaches we mention M. Merleau-Ponty’s analysis of *bodily-being-in-the-world* in his
Phenomenology of perception, J. Dewey’s pragmatist understanding of art as experience and a recent research, R. Shusterman’s new proposal – Somaesthetics.

We shall insist in the following pages on R. Shusterman’s new approach by marking also his points of view concerning his predecessors’ theories.

Shusterman proposes a new vision on aesthetics which he calls somaesthetics. According to his theory, somaesthetics means “a body centered discipline” (Shusterman, 1999, 303). He tries to point out the fact that such a discipline is not new; in fact it has its sources in the ancient Greek philosophy and its kalokagathia concept. He mentions that nowadays philosophy is restricted to a narrow academic domain instead of keeping up its very ancient first meaning as a way of living or the wisdom of living. In his Timaeus, Plato pleads for the right balance between body and mind which was the main purpose of the ancient Greek philosophy even before Plato. Socrates himself used to maintain his body in good condition. Cleobulus and Aristippus, philosophers of the Cyrenaic philosophical school, thought that the good practice of the body could help to become a virtuous man. Epicurus saw the health of the body and the equilibrium of the mind as the fundamental purposes of a philosophical behavior. Diogenes at his turn thought that a good control of the body was important in becoming virtuous.

Shusterman remarks that this attitude stressing out a balanced body-mind connection was also present in the Oriental wisdom such as the Buddhist thought, in t’ai chi ch’uan, yoga and zen practices. As the Japanese philosopher Yuasa Yasuo insists, the concept of “personal cultivation,” or shugyō (a Japanese equivalent of “care of the self”), is perceived in Eastern thought as “the philosophical foundation” because “true knowledge cannot be obtained simply by means of theoretical thinking, but only through ‘bodily recognition or realization’ (tainin or taitoku)” (Shusterman, 2008, 18). The Chinese ancient philosophies, Confucianism and Daoism, stress out also as an imperative the self knowledge of one’s own body. “He who loves his body more than dominion over the empire can be given the custody of the empire.” Or, “being complete in body, he is complete in spirit; and to be complete in spirit is the Way of the sage” (Shusterman, 2008, 19).

Then, during the 18th century, the European philosophy, after a long period of stressing out only the superiority of mind in comparison to the body, succeeds in making a progress by Al. Baumgarten’s contribution. His Aesthetics should be considered as the expression of a new direction of philosophical research. Baumgarten tried to prove the existence of a sensitive knowledge based on sensitive perception (aesthesis). This sensitive knowledge should be

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4 There are many texts (articles and studies) where we can find his new approach. Here are some of them: “Somaesthetics: A Disciplinary Proposal”, 1999; Pragmatist Aethetics, (Rom. transl.), 2004, especially pp. 266-301; Body Consciousness: A Philosophy of Mindfulness and Somaesthetics, 2008.
connected to the abstract rational thought and thus ensure a complete theory of knowledge. The German philosopher was convinced that the perception could be considered as a level of knowledge and also it could contribute to a better life. He called his aesthetics the art of well thinking, saying that it is the science of sensitive cognition (Shusterman, 1999, 304). He was convinced that this science could contribute to the enhancement of knowledge.

Shusterman is however critic when appreciating that Baumgarten omitted to include in his research the body itself and its education or cultural shaping. He remarks that Baumgarten maintained the philosophical Western tradition (Descartes, Leibniz and Wolff) considering the body only as a simple mechanism not as the real core of perception.

In Shusterman’s view, somaesthetics should be “a critical, meliorative study of the experience and use of one’s body as a locus of sensory-aesthetics appreciation (aesthesis) and creative self-fashioning. It is devoted to the knowledge, discourses, practices and bodily disciplines that structure such somatic care or can improve it” (Shusterman, 1999, 306). He points out that knowledge is based on perception and it is generated by the body. We can have our perceptions only in strict connection with our bodily-being-in-the-world as Merleau-Ponty mentioned in his Phenomenology of Perception (Merleau-Ponty, 99-123). A better knowledge of the body, of how we get our perceptions and the continuous exercising of the body in order to ameliorate our perceptive capacities could enhance our bodily connection to the world, our implication in life. This kind of knowledge is a self knowledge that has been a philosophical purpose at least since Socrates and the Apollonian imperative – know thyself. According to Shusterman’s thought this means knowledge based on lived personal experience centered on becoming aware of our physical behavior, on our habits, and gestures.

Then the right, correct action and virtue are also a philosophical issue. Shusterman thinks that getting this practical knowledge of our body could help us to use our volitive side in a more appropriate way. By knowing more precisely our body capacities we could better orient our desires and volition.

There is also a more social side of this soma-knowledge. Shusterman mentions Foucault’s studies on the history of corporal domination in relation to the social imperatives of various historical periods. Each historical period produced an ideology of domination expressed even by somatic norms. By getting aware of such ideologies and also by having a good knowledge of our own body’s needs and functions we can better protect ourselves against various new manners of submission and domination. Shusterman also points out that Nietzsche and Merleau-Ponty were those philosophers who stressed out a certain ontological dimension of the body. It is a criterion for personal identity and an ontological base for the description of mental states.
To all these approaches through which the knowledge of the body facilitates a better understanding, Shusterman adds the contribution of certain therapies which are based on the tight connection between somatic and psychological sides of the human being. He particularly refers to the methods of F.M. Alexander and M. Feldenkrais whose main purpose is to enhance the awareness of our body, to get a better consciousness of our bodily-being. All these therapies are based on practical exercises. According to Shusterman’s approach, the new discipline Somaesthetics, should have three interconnected sub-domains.

- An analytical side which should analyze the nature of perceptions and their functions. It supposes ontological and gnoseological approaches of the body as well as sociological analyses such as those already achieved by M. Foucault and P. Bourdieu.
- There would be also a pragmatist somaesthetic which should have a “prescriptive character” (Shusterman, 2008, 24). It should propose methods of ameliorating the body functions through a comparative analysis of methodologies of practices: those representational, pointing out how the body appears and those experiential, analyzing the internal experiences.
- And finally, a third sub-domain would be a practical somaesthetics which should suppose a practice of an intelligent shaping of the body by practicing, exercising through direct experience of corporal norms and ideals.

All these aspects should be perceived as ways of knowledge. We can understand now that Baumgarten’s vision of aesthetics as a discipline of education is reactivated in Shusterman’s new proposal but with a strong accent on the body. In such a vision the body should not be considered as an object on which we apply a force or a desire. It becomes a medium in order to enhance our capacities of thinking and finally to establish better or more appropriate connections with the world. A better soma-knowledge supposes better habits in all our activities.

In art as well. In this situation, the aesthetics gets an extended meaning (sense). Somaesthetics can help us to better understand how one could play better an instrument or paint or shape a material. Somaesthetics can also help us to better understand performances such as those mentioned in the first part of this article.

Standing still for long periods of time means a deep effort of the artists’ bodies, a good control achieved exactly through this better awareness of the body’s functions, capacities, their limits and how these limits could be extended or exceeded. It also can tell us something about the fact that this body enhanced perceptive awareness could generate a more artistic expression of philosophical topics as the absence or the separation, the presence, the void, the connection or separation between interior and exterior, the violence, the existence, the
existence in connection to the nature, especially the non-humanized one such as life in and within the desert. In this way, art is no longer perceived as a separate domain from the other life experiences. Being dominated by experience, by action, it should be perceived in connection with all the others life experiences as John Dewey stressed out in his *Art as experience*. He remarked in his courses at Harvard in 1931 that the classical artistic product or the work of art is completely separated from the artist. In consequence, this art, considered as a universe of objects, does no longer communicate with life. Dewey said that art should reestablish the continuity with other forms of experience which are events, actions, deeds or pains common to the general human experience.

In order to understand the artworld we should abandon the old manners of aesthetic evaluation and appeal to experience. We should come back to the basic material which is the day-to-day experience. Art is not a copy of the real objects; it reflects emotions and ideas associated with the basic daily experiences. Shusterman mentions that Dewey manifested a deep interest in the Alexander’s therapy and he practiced this therapy for 20 years. This direct implication in the exploration of the deep connection body-mind and the process of getting aware of one’s own body and its enhanced capacity convinced Dewey of the necessity to propose this new vision about art thought as an experience in perfect continuity with the other life experiences.

The performance art is obviously a very good example of such continuity and the art in its dynamics. The instrument and the material of this art is the human body but one which is not only object but also subject. This approach supposes exactly the possibility of manifestation of the life experience because the subject is the artist who brings his live experience and this one is applied onto the artist’s own body which is thus an object of expression and a medium of artistic language.

In our opinion Shusterman’s somaesthetics could be successfully applied to analyses of performance art, happenings, events, installations. On the contrary, in the case of other kind of artistic contemporary movements, its application seems to be less efficient such as in the case of conceptual art, for instance. Anyway, the idea of performing artistic activities is also used in art-therapies which have a positive impact in many cases especially on children with certain handicaps but also on old persons or for imprisoned ones. It could also be very helpful in practicing and performing culture, activities which help people to better understand various ways of living and thinking characterizing other historical periods and societies.

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BIBLIOGRAPHY