

Preface. Somaesthetics and Beauty

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Preface

Somaesthetics and Beauty

Beauty is a cornerstone of philosophical aesthetics, perhaps *the* fundamental one. However, if beauty performs a long-living philosophical role, ever since Plato connected it to the truth, it encounters serious problems from Modernism onwards. Some of the most visionary intellectual sensibilities from the end of the 19th century noticed the changes that turn beauty into an antiquated concept. For example, Paul Valéry, who in 1928 asked whether “the Moderns still make any use of it,” concluded that “the Beautiful is no longer in vogue.” Increasingly seen as a phenomena in entertainment, beauty never recovers to regain its former philosophical glory. On the other hand, the ambiguous decline of true beauty and the parallel rise of pleasure or sensation-seeking beauty continues to pose a concern to aesthetic thought. To be sure, the aestheticization of everyday life blends economy and aesthetics, industry and style, mode and art, consumption and creation, mass culture and elitist culture. But how does this aestheticization of the contemporary world affect the very experience of beauty?

The lack of borders within the aesthetic field rebounds on a corresponding unlimitedness in our ability to perceive. Similarly, the question is: Has the beautiful become too broad and thus too superficial a concept, or does the sentiment of beauty help us to differentiate our perceptions? Mapping the conceptual potential of beauty points not only to a revaluation of modern and contemporary art and artistic ways of challenging traditional beauty, but it simultaneously emphasizes the need for focusing on the sensible, perceptive, and bodily experience. The primary question remains, how, despite trivialization, beauty may still (or again) refer to an aesthetic experience that manifests itself in the sensing body, both as originating from the body and as appearing in a meaningful embodied experience.

In this issue of the *Journal of Somaesthetics*, we collected contributions from various fields exploring experiences of beauty vis-à-vis aestheticized phenomena in everyday life, design, art, urbanity, and elsewhere. We did not want to limit contributions to specific fields or methods of inquiry but included contributions from various relevant fields and their epistemological perspectives (aesthetics, arts, health studies, sports, and natural sciences).

The issue starts with Stefano Marino’s interview “Beauty from a Pragmatist and Somaesthetic Perspective: A Conversation with Richard Shusterman,” which presents Shusterman’s approach toward the significance of the notion and experience of beauty for somaesthetics.

The first section of articles that focus on existing theories on beauty. Anne Elisabeth Sejten’s “Beauty Trouble” provides an introductory analysis that traces the concept of beauty as an epistemic turn toward sensibility in which beauty seems to have disturbed rather than stabilized the autonomy of aesthetics. These discussions about beauty allow her to identify conflicting features in four shifting concepts of beauty from the foundational century of the Enlightenment until today and, thus, to argue that the concept of beauty has had a persistently dynamic and vital role in aesthetics.

Tanehisa Otabe’s article seeks to establish a counterweight to Kant’s transcendental theory of beauty by bringing to the fore Herder’s almost forgotten work *Calligone*. Herden counters Kant’s dualism with a kind of monism that does not accept Kant’s distinctions between, for example, nature and art, nor the distinction between the beautiful, the agreeable, and the good. Herder’s ambition is an integration of aesthetic experience and beauty as the fine art of living.

Finally, in “The Beauty of Mathematical Order,” Esther Oluffa Pedersen presents a study of the role of mathematics in beauty. Drawing extensively on Greek philosophy, she discusses how mathematical beauty connects not only to the aesthetic theory of Kant but also to creative works in modern design and poetry. Mathematics appears to be a key to understanding the Platonic and Aristotelian notions of natural order and creation, which again prove to be relevant to the understanding of somaesthetics.

The second section comprises articles that deal with the human subject’s own bodily aesthetic experiences as a participant of a participatory work of art, or as the somaesthetic relationship between dancers, audiences, and sites, or as the aesthetic experience of the athlete. In his article “Can There be Beauty in Participatory Art?,” Falk Heinrich characterizes beautiful experiences as the lived intensity that appropriates the participant by positioning him or her as one constituent of a situation that consists of a multiplicity of other constituents such as the site, the conceptual framework, and other people.

In his article “Challenging Urban Anesthetics: Beauty and Contradiction in Georg Simmel’s Rome,” Henrik Reeh addresses the experience of beauty in cities. Reconstructing the prevalent role of the blasé attitude in Simmel’s view of the metropolis, he highlights how, surprisingly, Simmel elaborates on a contextual or even conflictual notion of beauty in Rome around 1900. One hundred and twenty years later, Reeh returns to a particular park in Simmel’s Rome and demonstrates how somaesthetic qualities are decisive sources of beauty in the contemporary city as well. His article includes experiential and artistic materials that aim to strengthen somaesthetics in the realm of academic research.

In their article “Performative Somaesthetics: Interconnections of Dancers, Audiences, and Sites,” Suparna Banerjee and Jessica Fiala discuss somaesthetic authorship and agency in dance, its audience, and “embodied encounters with sites.” Through a discourse on two case studies, *TooMortal* (2012) by Shobana Jeyasings and *Dusk at Stonehenge* (2009) by Nina Rajarani, they explore what happens at the aforementioned intersection.

John Toner’s and Barbara Montero’s “The Value of Aesthetic Judgements in Skillful Action” inquires into the world of sport and the role that skill has in it. Toner and Montero claim that still, not much attention has “been devoted to an evaluation of the aesthetic dimension of sport from the performer’s perspective.” They address this issue by covering aesthetic experiences that athletes experience and analyzing their value and use in sports.

The third section deals with beauty and ecology. Else-Marie Bukdahl’s article “Aesthetic Challenges in the Field of Sustainability: Art, Architectural Design, and Sustainability in the Projects of Michael Singer” insists that beauty is not merely a contemplative concept but is to be constructed. Singer’s work is to be understood as an artistic action that regenerates nature and creates landscape and architectural projects in which artistic and ecological goals were integrated into the construction process.

In her article “The Aesthetic Enchantment Approach: From “Troubled” to “Engaged” Beauty,” Sue Spaid introduces the *aesthetic enchantment approach*, which enhances the scientific cognitivism stance on beauty by adding a performative dimension to it. An example of this is the active commitment of citizens in citizen science approaches to ecologically degraded sites, which add a bodily aesthetic dimension that is pertinent for ameliorative aspects of the sentiment of beauty to the cognitive dimension.

Falk Heinrich, Max Ryyänen and Anne Elisabeth Sejten, Issue Editors