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## Updating *Artes Vulgares*

Commentary: Richard Shusterman,  
*Ars Erotica: Sex and Somaesthetics in the Classical Arts of Love*  
(Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021), 436 pages.

I think “it is official” now. *Ars Erotica* will become some sort of classic. There are several reasons why. Some (even adult philosophers, as I have seen when Richard Shusterman has spoken on the topic at a conference), just cannot stop giggling when they hear the word sex. Many will grab the book out of curiosity, and maybe some, although I do not believe that many, will even do it for camp reasons. Many of these readers have a neurotic and/or complicated relationship to sexuality, and hopefully at least some of them will find the book helpful, as they reflect on themselves and their sexual lives through the text.

On the other hand, I cannot imagine anyone in aesthetics or with a scholarly interest in sexuality who would not find the book helpful. Nothing comparable on the relationship of aesthetics and sexuality has been done and the book embraces the topic globally – featuring Shusterman’s vast and deep knowledge – about not just Western philosophy and culture, but also Chinese and Japanese thinking among others.

The name of the book is also ingenious. It sounds great. The mongrel *Ars Erotica* was borrowed from Michel Foucault, who distinguished between “*scientia sexualis* and non-Western sexual knowledge in the form of *ars erotica*,” and was chosen (the author says), because the Greek *eros*, which accentuates better physical love and lovemaking, is more suitable as a term than the Latin *amor*, which is more ambiguous, and favors romantic “milder forms” of affection and friendship liking (AE, 3). *Ars*, the Latin derivative term from Greek *tekhne*, in other words making and doing something, referring to a skill, is at the very heart of sexual practice and culture. Shusterman writes that the hybrid “combines the advantages of both languages” (AE, 4), but a curious reader

could of course ask: “Why not *Tekhne Erotica*?” “What did the Latin *Ars* add to the existing Greek concept that was needed for the book?” First of all, *ars* has an educational extension and the concept refers to disciplines that gained more identity during the Middle Ages (e.g., mathematics, grammar). The Medieval *artes liberales* (the free “arts,” based on the lack of physicality) and the *artes vulgares* (the practical “arts,” added later to the system, where the body was involved) might actually be a good framing to think of when one reads *Ars Erotica*. It is definitely about *artes vulgares* – practical knowledge which, in another situation, could have a role in our education; in fact, it could be a discipline we could learn through mainstream education. The book discusses how this has been done (marginally) here and there in different ages and includes philosophical and theological reflections on the topic.

The historical work provided in the book traces the history of philosophy and body practices in sex through religion – Shusterman notes that for example the *Kamasutra* was written by a religious scholar (AE, 17) – with literature so extensive that one understands why it took such a long time to finish it (the book has been in the making for as long as I remember).

I do not know if this has been a common experience, but I did not think that I was into the topic. However, when I read the book, I realized that I had read my Ovid, Al-Nafzawi’s *The Perfumed Garden* (AE, 18), and many of the mentioned Asian classics followed my studies in tantra, Chinese, Japanese, and Hindi (language studies often lead you to classics related to the culture of the language, although you would never reach a competent stage in your studies); in addition, cheap erotic classics have always been widely available. While highbrow culture has taken care of other forms of classical literature, we needed the popular press to keep up with erotic civilization. The impressive sales of erotic classics probably has a lot to do with the same gigglers that cannot take up the topic without feeling nervous. Sexuality interests people because they have related complexes, unfinished business, and probably for the same reasons one could always find Pier Paolo Pasolini’s *Decamerone*, *Canterbury Tales*, and *Salò* among video rentals, it was natural that the *Kamasutra* could suddenly be found in a pile of books on the shelf of a kiosk one visited on the way to the train in the last year in high school. As the socialist theorist Antonio Gramsci once asked about Dostoyevsky, “How do workers read Dostoyevsky when they buy his book on the way to the train?” We could of course ask what kind of interpretations did less educated readers gain from reading these classics, which in the end might have functioned a bit like women’s magazines for some. It would be too much for this book, but the lowbrow life of the ancient classics of *ars erotica* could be a great topic of research for someone into popular literature. Following this, it is interesting how today we have countless self-help books on sexuality; this too might be beyond the scope for *Ars Erotica*, but it would definitely reward future studies. Some of them continue, in an interesting way, to distribute the somaesthetic practices of ancient forms of *ars erotica*. For those who have not been able to participate in tantra teaching, *Sexual Secrets: The Alchemy of Ecstasy* by Nick Douglas and Penny Slinger teaches all the somatic practices from training the PC muscles to preventing ejaculation; which can be supported with yoga exercises – Shusterman mentions Chinese non-ejaculation sex and its history (AE, 152–54) and thus developing richer and more nuanced male orgasms – without forgetting the female side of the training, which I cannot, of course, be familiar with. Also, one could think that today’s popular culture is full of “perfumed gardens,” from films like Mira Nair’s *Kama Sutra: A Tale of Love* to even banal TV series like *Sex and the City* (without forgetting Candance Bushnell’s novel of the same title). They teach, help to reflect, and give ideas to people about their sexual practices, and perhaps to a slightly lesser degree than *The Perfumed Garden*, turn into philosophical reflection. The same applies to “airport literature,” for example *The Soul of Sex* by Thomas Moore, which explains, describes, and celebrates contemporary religious celibacy: a phenomenon that probably developed from the times when the first religious appraisals (and practices) of celibacy and virginity were written (AE, 126). *Ars Erotica* covers Paul’s interest in Christian celibacy and discusses the way people viewed it as a method for living and becoming closer to God

(AE, 122, 152). I had no idea that some (e.g., Cassian) believed that Christian virgins were true athletes of Christ (AE, 129). These are good reminders of sometimes idealistic and practical somaesthetic history which today we easily see as nothing more than conservative culture. Knowledge of the history of sex could be useful for any radical who attacks all forms of religious and conservative culture.

As aesthetics has its role here, it is natural that Shusterman asks the “big question” at the very beginning. Can *ars erotica* be considered art? In response to the question of the counterpart of an artwork he suggests a long lovemaking session with dinner (AE, 5). Shusterman mentions the interesting side story of how high-class Chinese courtesans included the practice of various arts in their work which made the sexual upbringing of the educated upper-class male quite interesting artistically (AE, 178). More importantly, Shusterman also asks about the aesthetic principles that govern the erotic arts (AE, 178).

In the introductory pages, Shusterman discusses countless aspects of sexuality that have an aesthetic side to them, for example performativity through looks and costumes (AE, 6), stylization with the human soma as the key (artistic) medium (AE, 7), and the symbolic richness of sexuality, where knowledge, imagination, and context changes the acts and situations as much as in conceptual art (AE, 8). What is missing is the classical folk philosophical tale, that sex is better when the partners are in love. In general, the book does not discuss this, which is understandable, as the practice of sex has taken up so many pages. The book also delves into the legal and moral constraints (AE, 12) that make up the context of sex more than our engagement with art.

Shusterman, mentions at the outset (AE, 15) that erotic arts, where they were taught and practiced, were mostly for privileged males. The book does not only take the easy path. It presents radical violent acts of Japan (AE 16, and chpt. 7) and its high-class seventeenth century courtesan culture (AE, 26), ancient forms of Mediterranean pederasty (AE, 36), and Spartan eugenic ideas about older brides (it was believed that by being more mature, they would give birth to stronger children) (AE, 37), which can be considered as one of the strengths of the book. The topic can quite easily lead to controversy, but it is not rewarding if one does not go all the way.

The book gives a good basic understanding of the history of *ars erotica* and is a great introductory companion for a global understanding of the topic. For someone who just remembers a couple of acts with “jade stalks” from his youth (spent with popular literature), it is absolutely great to find easy taxonomies of where to start with Chinese *ars erotica*. Shusterman presents Chinese books on the topic as 1) medically oriented, 2) guides for the householder, and includes the 3) radical Daoist aims for paranormal longevity. Not surprisingly, this is mixed together in self-help books and contemporary tantra schools today. Still, the same spirit of self-cultivation stressed by Shusterman (AE, 177) has remained, which I find interesting.

Shusterman criticizes Foucault for not understanding how the Chinese actually worked for more pleasure and not against it with their *ars erotica*, and claims that Foucault lacked a holistic understanding of Chinese culture (AE, 150, 152, and 161), which might be true. One could add that Foucault, like Walter Benjamin, was experimental, and tested out many things in practice, but failed to realize that he might have needed to take some tantra classes to understand what preventing ejaculation (and training unknown muscles to be able to do it) could do for orgasms.

A critical reader might ask if the book differentiates between too few literary stories (*The Perfumed Garden*), philosophical analysis (e.g., Al-Ghazali’s defence of sex as a spiritual path that combines asceticism and pleasure) (AE, 25), and maybe even education in sexuality (e.g., the Chinese models) in its search for ancient knowledge and practice. On the other hand, it always makes clear the textual nature of the discussed classics, while still inquiring into the hints on the ancient forms of somaesthetics in them, which is the aim of the book. It is true that Ovid’s *Ars amatoria* is a strategic manual in the fashion of Machiavelli (AE, 21). It focuses on rivalry and is quite misogynistic, for example in its wish that females do not destroy their bodies by getting pregnant (AE, 95–96). This type of analysis is valuable for the reader.

The history of *ars erotica* is quite male and upper class, but understanding it is important for all of us. When it comes to the hidden *artes* of females, the working class, and other groups, *Ars Erotica* forms a good base for further study. It does not dive deep into an ethical discussion of power relations, but they are obvious for any reader, and Shusterman is of course not shy to note them. The book does not contain, though, any notion about the way ordinary (i.e., not very educated nor privileged) people have known things and shared knowledge about sexual practices. These might be less documented, but for sure people have always helped each other and shared “tricks” for the bedroom, and even philosophized about these issues vernacularly. In the end of the book Shusterman writes;

To the extent that our modern philosophical tradition continues to define the aesthetic in opposition to the erotic, it will remain difficult to do proper justice to the beautiful aspects of sensual desire and to the rewarding arts of sexual fulfilment. A look at the other cultures and other times can provide, as this book suggests, ample resources for a broader, deeper erotic vision to enrich the field of aesthetics and our art of living. (AE, 396)

The book really fulfils this promise.



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