

Reports on Shusterman's Work as "The Man in Gold"

Introduction

Shusterman, as a philosopher who draws from the work of John Dewey, has pragmatic expectations for art. For Dewey, communing with art was an intensification of experience, that is to say being in the world. For art is full of meaning, and it is in human nature to rush to search for meanings. Experience is only satisfactory if it enriches what is lived in it. Dewey's message was one of the first voices to warn of the alienation of art. According to it, its consumption should give people a chance for emotional and spiritual compassion. Richard Shusterman's attitude toward art is similar: "As experience, art is obviously part of our lives, a particularly vivid form of our experienced reality, rather than a mere fictional imitation of it."¹

Shusterman has developed his own concept of aesthetics, which he has called "somaesthetics" – the aesthetics of the soma. The Greek word *soma* here means a feeling, animated, purposeful body. Also, the term "aesthetics" is understood in a different way than its usual wider usage, according to which aesthetics is a theory of art and beauty. Shusterman refers to the old, original Greek word *aisthetikos* meaning sensory perception.²

The somaesthetic project's goal is to combine theory with practice and consider the body in two ways: on the one hand, as a medium enabling cognition through perception, and on the other, as an external form of representation. That is why somaesthetics is interested in activities that expand and explore body awareness, such as meditation, yoga, and treatments that shape the appearance, including cosmetics and fashion.³ One of

1) Richard Shusterman, *Pragmatist Aesthetics: Living Beauty, Rethinking Art* (Rowman & Littlefield: New York, 2000), 53.

2) From 1:20: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fOu32uXx20I>, accessed on October 3, 2022.

3) Richard Shusterman, *Body Consciousness, A Philosophy of Mindfulness and Somaesthetics* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 19.

the main tasks of somaesthetics is to eliminate the dominant attitude toward the body in Western philosophy, which sees it as an obstacle to cognition.

The Birth of the Man in Gold

When teaching his theory to French art academy students, Shusterman was confronted with a difficulty that became one of the impulses for the birth of his "Man in Gold" performances. The difficulty occurred when one of the students asked: "how does somaesthetics apply to the contemporary art?" Based on his theoretical considerations, the answer Shusterman gave neither satisfied his students, nor himself. Nor were they able to identify an example of art that would be a reaction to his theory or that would embody it. It made him consider for the first time the idea that he himself could provide such a piece of art.⁴ The idea matched with his belief in Nietzsche's critique that aestheticians usually only have one-sided experience, as only art observers, not creators.⁵ The philosopher decided to get some insight.

Another impulse came from a photographer friend. Even though she appreciated Shusterman's theory of art, she pointed out that it lacked an artistic perspective. She offered him the opportunity of gaining one, in a gesture of handing him a camera, and simultaneously exposing her undressed body. This experiment indeed changed the philosopher's life diametrically, but not necessarily in the intended manner. After his wife discovered the outcomes of that artistic endeavour, his successful (as he perceived it) marriage ended with a divorce.

But eventually the Man in Gold was brought to this world by his friend, the visual artist and photographer Yann Toma. In his photos, using luminous streaks, he reproduces the aura streams of photographed figures.⁶ Shusterman had earlier agreed to take part in his project, which however, was delayed due to numerous doubts. But once he crossed the boundary between the safe sphere of theorizing and dangerous realm of art, Shusterman decided to take it to the next level. In June 2010, in the basement of medieval Royamount Abbey in France, wearing a gold, brocade jumpsuit that he was given by Toma, intoxicated by the darkness and physical exhaustion with which Toma treated him in his shamanic ritual, Shusterman allowed his body to break free from his imposed stillness and escape in search of the daylight (MIG, 14). The rest of it is "history," as they say. The full story of the Man in Gold is described in Shusterman's book *The Adventures of the Man in Gold: Paths Between Art and Life. A Philosophical Tale*. In the rest of the piece, I will mainly focus on the paths between art and life that were threaded through this experiment and are its results.

The Adventures of the Man in Gold

Shusterman recalls the first time he was, as he describes it, possessed by the Man in Gold in the Royamount Abbey: "by the time I reached the garden, I no longer knew what I was doing. More precisely, I was no longer I" (MIG, 30). The Man in Gold became the subject of his consciousness. He existed thanks to the providence of the dancing goddess Wu Xiaoxing, who had previously planted the thought of somaesthetics in the mind of the philosopher, thereby giving his passion a direction that led him to this point. The Man in Gold did not use

4) Richard Shusterman and Yann Toma, *The Adventures of the Man in Gold: Paths between Art and Life. A Philosophical Tale/Les Aventures De L'Homme En Or: Passages Entre L'Art Et La Vie*, Conte Philosophique (Paris: Hermann, 2016), 9. Hereafter referenced parenthetically as MIG with page numbers.

5) Richard Shusterman, "Aesthetic Experience at the Borders of Art and Life: The Case of the Man in Gold," *Eidos. A Journal for Philosophy of Culture* 5, no. 2 (2021): 108.

6) *Ibid.*, 107.

language to communicate – he expressed himself in dancing and posing. Accompanied by Yann Toma, who captured his appearances on videos and photos, he gave spontaneous performances while travelling across the globe: in Cartagena (Colombia), the South Florida Atlantic Coast, and several times in Paris. For his performances he never chose crowded places of the cities and always sought for places that were spacious enough for him to improvise dance without limitations. Nevertheless, sometimes he found himself observed by bystanders. His love and openness toward all people were not always reciprocated. In Cartagena he was intimidated by macho-type men who mocked his attire and addressed him as “señora” (MIG, 50). Even in cosmopolitan Paris young men taunted him in unpleasant manner to express their masculine dominance over him (MIG, 70). Often the golden suit was mistaken for nakedness and people yelled at the Man in Gold to “put some clothes on”; others perceived the suit as a manifestation of the Man in Gold’s perversion (MIG, 64). One such situation happened not to the Man in Gold, but to Shusterman, as he was showing pictures from the performances to his nine-year old daughter as they were waiting for their flight at the New York’s LaGuardia airport. A security officer approached him and ordered to immediately close his laptop, as she took the pictures for pornography (MIG, 40). Because of this situation Shusterman felt the urge to define the distinction between himself and his alter-ego.

The Man in Gold was last seen in a place he had seen earlier in a poetic vision. Yann Toma invited Shusterman to spend a few days with him and his artist friends in their seaside cottage on the northern coast of Denmark. The artist Marit Benthe Norheim and her partner Claus Ørntoft worked on their sculptures there. She created large hybrid boats with female torsos instead of masts, referring to the image of Danish sirens and Viking ship life. His sculptures, on the other hand, were characterized by the primitive sensuality associated with chthonic deities. It was in their company that the Man in Gold could finally surrender to his imagination. He danced between the sculptures; he could finally look and touch without embarrassment or fear. Searching the dark cellars that served as the studio for the artists, he saw a warm, inviting light that he followed. At its source, there was a sculpture pulsating with light, in which he recognized the incarnation of his beloved goddess. He succumbed to his thirsty touch of the flesh and clung to the sculpture. His lust, though not restrained, was free from greed and lust, which made him seem pure and somewhat innocent. This meeting was for the Man in Gold a fulfilment and at the same time the end of his journey. The memory of that time, that prevailed in Shusterman’s mind, was expressed in the most beautifully written and harmonious part of the tale.

Paths Between Art and Life

The last appearance of the Man in Gold described in the tale proved that art and artists do not flourish equally everywhere, and that creatures of fantasy find happiness in the world of fantasy, and not the common world. To the Man in Gold the world seemed like a cold and unfriendly place where he feared rejection and misunderstanding. Only in a home created by artists he could let himself be fully free and let his imagination speak with a full voice. For the Man in Gold, the artists’ house was known as Pink Rock Palace and its hosts as Viking Wizard Queen and King of Mighty Stones and Magical Master of the Lions (MIG, 84). All of the sculptures felt much more alive for him, as he thought, they were charmed by their creators. The radically different experiences that the Man in Gold had in the “real” and the “fantasy” world may suggest that art lies far from life and that paths between them are not easy to tread. So where exactly are these paths between life and art, which the finding of was the motive of the project?

This difficulty to keep the life of an artist in peace with ordinary life appeared at the very beginning of Shusterman’s artistic journey. Once he took the risk, by taking the pictures of the naked model, he broke the rule of his marriage, or what is believed to be a rule of marriage in general. So, his first flirting with the artistic life cost him his marriage and family.

Shusterman's artistic project had the biggest impact on the professional aspect of his life. As I already mentioned earlier, by his performances he wanted to add artistic perspective to his critical work. Moreover, by this artistic endeavour he practised the core of his own philosophy, since experimentalism is the core of somaesthetics.⁷ The whole project of somaesthetics is for Shusterman "a way to integrate linguistic and nonlinguistic dimensions of embodied human life."⁸ According to this view, by bringing to life the Man in Gold – "a philosopher without words" – he applied the requirements of his theory to his practice of philosophy.

His book on these adventures is in fact a translation of the Man in Gold's feelings and thoughts. Even though they are separate beings Shusterman and him share one mind. The philosopher chose the form of a philosophical tale (or maybe it was chosen by the Man in Gold, as Shusterman claims that the impulse to start the book emerged when the Man in Gold "possessed" him again),⁹ because it was a better tool to express his alter-ego, than the academic discursive narrative. And here is the other value that the project brought to the philosopher's life – the chance of self-exploration and getting to know this part of himself that had to give the way to Shusterman-the philosopher. In the tale it has been explained rather enigmatically:

The Man in Gold is driven by two great forces: love and fear. He yearns for the beautiful dancing deity whose human manifestation has sowed seeds of his existence in the pragmatist philosopher who loved those mortal beauties but grimly sacrificed their love on the manly altar of his career in philosophy, a career they ironically inspired and unselfishly nourished... . Beyond such love of beauty, the Man in Gold is driven by the love of knowledge, a curiosity to learn through immediate sensuous experience. (MIG, 58–60)

Unfortunately, in the tale, Shusterman does not speak of what lessons he learned from knowing this part of himself and whether he changed his ways in order to improve the harmony between these conflicted parts of him.

Besides making his philosophy more complete, the project simply became a part of his philosophical work, brought him attention, and became a subject of discussion among both philosophers, artists, and art critiques. The tale was only one of many outcomes of this project: "photographs and videos of the Man in Gold have been presented in art galleries and museums in Paris, Bogota, Helsinki, Stockholm, Denver, Seoul, Kraków, Wrocław, and Shanghai."¹⁰ The Man in Gold also appeared in the movie *A Night with Richard Shusterman* by Yann Toma and Eliot Storey (MIG, 39). Shusterman talked about his project at many conferences around the world and this year Brill published an edited collection dedicated to Shusterman, the greater part of which is focused on the Man in Gold.¹¹

Therefore, I was surprised when in the book and in his own self-reflective essay on the Man in Gold, he stated that the performance of the Man in Gold was a problematic fit with his professional life.¹² All the unpleasant situations that he described in the book that he had to face were either while performing as the Man in Gold

7) Yvonne Bezrucka, "Shusterman as Philosopher and the Man in Gold," in *Shusterman's Somaesthetics: From Hip Hop Philosophy to Politics and Performance Art*, ed. Jerold J. Abrams (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2022), 168.

8) Else Marie Bukdahl, "The Golden Turn in Shusterman's Somaesthetics," in *Shusterman's Somaesthetics: From Hip Hop Philosophy to Politics and Performance Art*, ed. Jerold J. Abrams (Leiden and Boston: Brill 2022), 178.

9) Shusterman, "Aesthetic Experience at the Borders of Art and Life," 110.

10) *Ibid.*, 109.

11) See Jerold J. Abrams (ed.), *Shusterman's Somaesthetics: From Hip Hop Philosophy to Politics and Performance Art* (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2022).

12) Richard Shusterman, "Aesthetic Experience at the Borders of Art and Life," 108.

or in private, rather than as Shusterman, the philosopher. I dare to state that to his career in philosophy itself the project was perfectly fitted. It has been already twelve years since the Man in Gold was born, but recipients of Shusterman's philosophy still follow his traces.

Not-the-Child in Gold

So is there anything that readers can actually learn from this tale? After reading the story and other pieces on the Man in Gold my reflection was that art, as a space where people can express themselves more freely and use provocation to shake their observers, is a sort of a mirror where the flaws of everyday social life can get clearly reflected. When reading the tale, it struck me how people cling to their beliefs about how a man, or a grown-up, should feel, act or look like. And later I discovered that this binding to stereotypes is not only limited to observers who randomly happened to cross the paths with the Man in Gold. While reading other authors' reflections on Shusterman's book and the whole project, I found fragments where the Man in Gold's behavior is defined as childish: "and while the narrator argues that none of these traits by any means clash with his sense of masculinity, a man in a golden costume is associated rather with a child in his spontaneity (waving at passing cars) and low resistance to rejection and mockery."¹³ Is a "low resistance to rejection and mockery" really something that people simply grow out of with age and is a domain of a childish mind? Probably the number of grown-up people who in our times struggle with social anxieties defy such a thesis. The expectation to be resistant to rejections and mockery and assigning them to the domain of childhood is rather the way of dealing with the cruelties of the world in which, it is believed, softness and vulnerability can only cause us pain. In my view, one of the goals of Shusterman's experiment was to feel which of one's traits of personality come from within, and which are imposed on us by the rules of societal life. Even though mocked because of his golden suit the Man in Gold felt confident in his manhood "knowing that true men possess not only the hard, yang essence, but sensitive yin essence as well" (MIG, 54).

There was also the criticism of an expert who specialized in theatre history who after watching the Man in Gold's performance in Berlin gave a verdict that it has nothing to do with art and "is merely an irreverent, provocative exercise in narcissistic role-playing that insults the very idea of art, because its alleged performance art is done by someone who is not a legitimate artist."¹⁴ In his essay published in *Eidos. A Journal for Philosophy of Culture* in 2021 Shusterman clarified that the artistic status of the Somaflux project is legitimized by Yann Toma's established status as an artist, even though earlier in the same essay he expressed the opinion that art is an area where people can freely express themselves, and should be free from categorial limitations that make not only social life, but also the internal lives of selves harder and less joyful.¹⁵ Probably it is Shusterman the philosopher who finds himself obliged to legitimize the status of his work, even one that carried the message that legitimization does not define what is art and what is not.

At the end of this little report, I would like to discuss one more aspect of the theatre historian's "expert" criticism. Shusterman might be the first professional philosopher who created art through the exploration of his own body and psyche, but he was not the one who invented performance art and who used his body as a medium of art. Would he call all the artists who in their activity focus on exploring their aesthetic experiences and reflections narcissistic? Based on his justification, he called out Shusterman's narcissism because he did not

13) Anna Budziak, "Ukryty, jawny, zdystansowany: Richarda Shustermana *The Adventures of the Man in Gold: Paths Between Art and Life. A Philosophical Tale*," *E(r)go Theory-Literature-Culture*, no. 41, 2 (2020): 206.

14) Shusterman, "Aesthetic Experience at the Borders of Art and Life," 108.

15) *Ibid.*, 106.

see any artistic value in his work. However, my presumption is that it was also connected to Shusterman's gender and age (in the tale and in his essays Shusterman presents himself as an "aging philosopher"). People are less shocked when female artists use their bodies as a medium for their art, probably because of two reasons. One is of course the belief that "looking into the mirror" is a domain of women and it is not manly to be interested in one's own body. The other is that for the last decades, women artists have consciously explored their bodies as a means and medium of art, to take control over themselves and their sexuality, that have been objectified and controlled by the church and man. Therefore, it might be time for the men to do the same, to take control over their bodies and souls, even if any attempt to stare in the mirror can give them the label of "narcissist." That term, after all, originated in the tale of a man contemplating, and perhaps seeking to "know himself" too, in a way a somaesthetician surely could appreciate.



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