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T. J. Bonnet
Center for Body, Mind, and Culture
Florida-Atlantic University, USA
https://orcid.org/0000-0002-7921-1382
tbonnet2021@fau.edu

Sporting Education and Somaesthetics

Review: Satoshi Higuchi,
Somaesthetics and the Philosophy of Culture: Projects in Japan
(New York, NY; Oxford, England: Routledge, 2021), 138 pages.

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Satoshi Higuchi's *Somaesthetics and the Philosophy of Culture* is a succinct and innovative work in aesthetics and philosophy of education, despite what the title may otherwise imply. Indeed, the title may be the only shortcoming in this work, for it does not convey the scope of the concepts covered. It may be better titled *Somaesthetics and the Philosophy of Education*, but even this does not express the important and fascinating discussions on the aesthetics of sports contained herein; and "education" is perhaps too narrow to encompass the range of application of the ideas (especially in the final part of the book). However, when the reader looks past the title, they will find a nicely organized work introducing readers to the topic of the aesthetics of sport, its application for improving pedagogy, and several avenues for further development in these areas. Higuchi's previous work is a tireless series of granting legitimacy to the study of sports. *Somaesthetics and the Philosophy of Culture* is another important step in this project. Readers need not be familiar with Richard Shusterman's multidisciplinary project of somaesthetics for, when it is necessary, Higuchi provides the relevant details. Readers who *are* familiar with somaesthetics will very quickly see how the ideas here complement it well.

In the foreword, Shusterman explains his relationship with the author and highlights his previous encounters with Japanese academics and religious leaders and their own reception to his project of somaesthetics.

Somaesthetics, to use his definition, is the "critical, meliorative study of the experience and use of one's body as a locus of sensory-aesthetic appreciation (*aisthesis*) and creative self-fashioning" (SPC, 267). One of the excellencies of Higuchi's book is how it utilizes the aesthetics of sports to enhance the meliorative and educational aspects of somaesthetics (especially in the final part). As Higuchi lays out in the preface, the book's three parts correspond to three goals. The first part offers the aesthetics of sport as an innovation in aesthetics generally. The second investigates the idea of "bodily knowing," grounded in an "Eastern theory of the body." The third explores the implications in education. This part features the work of Higuchi's students, where they take the foregoing discussions into diverse areas.

In chapter one, "Aesthetics of Sport," Higuchi defines the aesthetics of sport as "an aesthetics that sets sport as the object of consideration" (SPC, 4). Since "aesthetics," and its Japanese translation *bigaku*, is usually understood as an academic discipline, making sport an object of aesthetic consideration means making a significant innovation in aesthetics generally. Higuchi claims Shusterman's somaesthetics helped him to make this case, and in this chapter he provides a history of the aesthetics of sport as well as a systematic explication of its features. In a very neat manner, Higuchi explores the subtleties and complexities we encounter when trying to define "sport" and "aesthetic." "Sport," as Higuchi explains, is variable; it encompasses familiar games such as baseball and basketball and less obvious examples like acting or poker. Higuchi hones in on four important factors: body-ness, competition, organization, and play. His definition reads, "sport is a physical activity [body-ness] that involves competition with others or a confrontation with nature [competition] based on artificial rules [organization] in a special circumstance where the association of significance is different from the one in everyday life [play]" (SPC, 9). Concerning the meaning of "aesthetic," Higuchi explains that the domain of the aesthetic is sensation (*aisthesis*). In his important work in aesthetics, Shusterman has written that aesthetics comes from Alexander Baumgarten's term *aesthetica*. "Baumgarten defines aesthetics as the science of sensory cognition and as aimed at its perfection," writes Shusterman.[1] Higuchi uses aesthetics in a similar way. When it is connected with sports, some of the problem areas that emerge include "the aesthetic experience of the sports spectator, the aesthetic experience of the sports performer, and the aesthetic object in sport" (SPC, 11). In this book, Higuchi is less concerned with exploring these topics and more intent on extending aesthetics from the singular study of fine art to also encompass the study of sport.

The next chapter elucidates the bodily features of the aesthetic experience of the sports performer. The work of Masakazu Nakai informs much of the background in this chapter. Nakai, inspired by the work of Heidegger, "captured an atmosphere within the place sports occur and a peculiar sensory experience in sports practice with the concept of sports mood, indicating its four characteristics: spatial, common existential, bodily technical, and temporal" (SPC, 16–17). Nakai's argument made the reality of sport to be inherently aesthetic. Of those four characteristics, two worthy of further note are the spatial and the technical. Kinesthetic perception is perception done through bodily movements. Higuchi makes the point that kinesthesia is a source of aesthetic experience for the sport performer. Furthermore, they need to act within a certain space, usually demarcated with lines or barriers in a designated area. The "sports mood" that Nakai posited is fostered in this enclosed area. They are, in other words, "embedded" in this space. This is the spatial aspect. The technical characteristic of the sports performer's aesthetic involves the skill or "technique" of the performer. Technique might be understood as an expression of the sports mood. Nakai analyzed technique in terms of muscle movement and he particularly seized on the ambiguous sensation of the body as both subject and object. In Higuchi's words, "when a sports performer acquires an aesthetic mood through bodily movements, his or her body is a subject-body as a bearer

1) Richard Shusterman, *Pragmatist Aesthetics: Living Beauty, Rethinking Art* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2000), 265.

of kinesthetic perception and an object-body that changes its position and posture in the movement. A sports performer practices sports movement with the body" (SPC, 22). The spatial aspect makes the sports performer a part of the sport environment and technique is their way of acting skillfully within that space. This makes the body an integral component of the aesthetic experience of the sports performer, which is indispensable to Higuchi's larger argument. What this chapter does well is present the many difficult ideas of Nakai's argument in a well-organized manner. This is helped by the "Concluding Remarks" section with seven summarizing points. It is clear by Higuchi's overall presentation that he wants his readers to comprehend the ideas being covered, for as it will become clear, they have the potential to be far-reaching and momentous.

"Sport and Art," the third chapter, returns to the question of whether sport can be considered art. Higuchi reviews a debate between Spencer Wertz and David Best on this question. Wertz believed sport was indeed an art and could be understood in artistic terms. Best, however, opined that sport is better taken on its own terms because the rules and formalities of sport impose restrictions on its expressiveness not found in most arts. As Higuchi deftly notes, behind this debate is a "politics of culture" wherein the effort to make sport an art is an attempt to elevate its status into high culture or fine art. Those who deny sport from being an art wish to keep it away from high culture. This connects to the aesthetic theories of Wolfgang Welsch. Welsch, like Wertz above, affirmed sport to be art but in a different sense. Welsch's understanding of art was prejudiced to the art of high culture and as such had to admit a considerable distance between sport and art, despite wanting to equate the two. Higuchi proposes two conceptions of art with this in mind: "While art (A) (art-art) is an elite concept of art observed in the tradition of the history of fine arts, art (B) (sport-art) is a new popular concept of art that contains amusement like sport, according to Welsch" (SPC, 34). Higuchi adds to this another notion of art, denoted as "<art>."[2] This new notion is a step toward innovation in aesthetics for Higuchi, for it acts as a unified notion of art. In Japanese, *geijutsu* can mean "fine art" but in its original context, it more so describes highly affecting and effective actions. We may say that the perfect form of a golf swing is very "artful" in the same way. For Higuchi, *geijutsu* is a useful term for combining beauty and skillfulness and this is important for his argument for <art> bridging what we call the fine arts and "sport-art." The body, for Higuchi, is the locus for combining fine art and sport-art, beauty and technique. When we witness, for example, the maneuverability of an ice hockey player as they weave through the opposing defense and score an incredible goal, there is palpable enjoyment to this display of skill (assuming you are not on the opposite team). Similarly, for the players themselves, performing those skills in the game is exhilarating. Skill, therefore, is an important aspect for this conception of <art>. So, Higuchi nicely states: "sport is <art> as a field of the aesthetic in the bloom of *techne* [skill or technique] based on human body-ness, which leads to a discovery of the world, the self, and others by means of gaining a skill" (SPC, 37). This is a creative and attractive understanding of sport which works as a foundation for the topics that follow.

The second part of the book focuses on body-ness and bodily knowing. Bodily knowing (*shintai chi*) has an extensive literature in Japanese. A main source for Higuchi is Akitomo Kaneko. According to Kaneko, bodily knowing is knowledge manifested in bodily movement. Knowing how to dribble a basketball is an example. Kaneko wanted to know how this knowledge can be transferred by means of movement. In other words, how a player who can dribble a basketball can transmit those skills to someone who cannot. Higuchi notes that bodily knowing, according to Kaneko, introduces some problems in education and what it means to learn. In 2005, Keio University instituted a "bodily knowing project" to change the standards of academic learning. Practices such as breathing, collage, and dance were implemented, but Higuchi criticizes the project for being unclear and inexact with its methods. However, Higuchi continues, the project has natural affinities with the discipline of somaesthetics.

2) This term stands for "art" as it is spelled in Japanese *katakana*.

Before examining that connection, the next chapter considers "Eastern body theory," particularly the work of Yasuo Yuasa in his book *The Body: Toward an Eastern Mind-Body Theory*.[3] Yuasa's book was highly influential in Japan. Without going into too much detail, Yuasa advanced components of an Eastern understanding of body-mind, drawn from readings of important Japanese philosophers such as Watsuji Tetsuro, Nishida Kitaro, and the Buddhist thinker Dogen. Higuchi takes issue with the attempt to clearly demarcate a distinctly "Eastern" conception of body-mind from a "Western" one. He recognizes that two broad paradigms can be constructed but we must also recognize that one can inform the other. They are, in other words, not mutually exclusive. While Higuchi had argued this point in more detail in previous works, it is very much in line with the discussions that came before, especially in his conception of <art>. Higuchi straddles the line between East and West in other ways too. His frequent use of the Japanese language as an important part of his analysis is one example. Indeed, Higuchi proposes that instead of translating "aesthetics" as *bigaku*, the word *kanseiron* be used. "*Kanseiron*," he writes, "literally means a theory of *aisthesis* [sensory perception]. Somaesthetics is a discipline of the critical, ameliorative study of the use and experience of the body, according to Shusterman" (SPC, 63). This ties back to Shusterman's revival of aesthetics as distinctly about sensory perception (*aesthesis*).

Part three of Higuchi's book is dedicated to meliorism and education. Some of the book's most significant ideas occur here. Higuchi diagnoses that most schools in Japan follow a model of *tsumekomi kyoiku* or rote learning. However, rather than an emphasis on mere memorization, the schools stress a "repetition of study all day long, day after day." The problem, therefore, "is a problem of *lifestyle*" (SPC, 69). There is, Higuchi argues, a limitation to this kind of learning by rote memorization. He wants to consider *kansei* (sensibility) as a source of learning, which works as a somaesthetic as well. In other words, *kansei* can be a vehicle toward bodily knowing. This leads to a change in what and how we understand learning itself. Following Manabu Sato, Higuchi details three phases of learning: encounters with the world, with others, and with one's self. Based on the idea that individuals are socially embedded in the world, learning first begins with understanding things and processes of the external world. This leads to forming relationships with others and understanding concepts such as tolerance, problem-solving, and conflict resolution. Finally, there is how the self comes to develop their own aspirations, ideals, and habits. Higuchi stresses this is not a linear process. It is all connected and simultaneous. This baseline understanding of the learning process can contribute to the elimination of rote learning. Higuchi argues that "technical subjects" – including physical education, music, and arts – can overturn rote learning by their mutual incorporation of *skill*. This ties back to the problem of bodily knowing: it is not enough for a student to merely understand the words of the teacher. In rote learning, this is where learning stops. One must, in a word, *embody* the learning. There is a difference, Higuchi maintains, between "understanding" and "being able to do." The latter is where skill comes into play. Higuchi's formulation is worth quoting in full:

> If we call the knowledge acquired in bodily practice "practical knowledge," then skill is a mastery with practical knowledge. It is a sort of knowledge gathered by means of the body (i.e., bodily knowing). We cannot do things without knowing something in our experience. A skilled performer knows various things in his or her own practice even if he or she is not able to verbalize them. Therefore, a skilled performer can teach learners something about the matter concerned even without learning a particular teaching method because he or she could utilize the knowledge gained during practice. The transmission of a mastery of skills would become possible in such a way. When practical knowledge is provided with an explicit linguistic expression, it becomes technique — a rational, efficient way to solve a particular task, by which an objective mutual under-

3) Yasuo Yuasa, *The Body: Toward an Eastern Mind-Body Theory* (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 1987).

> standing regarding the practice would become possible. We can call this technical knowledge, which becomes theoretical knowledge in its systematization. (SPC, 76)

While Higuchi concludes with an acknowledgment of the problems still to be resolved, the change in our understanding of knowledge Higuchi describes is extremely compelling.

The rest of the book features papers by Higuchi's students. I hope to see this practice of including the work of students continue because it is an effective way to jump start the careers of junior scholars as well as to take the topic of a book into diverse areas of application. Tracing a history of idealism in education from the Enlightenment, Jiyun Bae offers meliorism, "the tendency to seek changes for the better," as the "fundamental nature of education" (SPC, 84). Following Shusterman's example of meliorism in somaesthetics, they show how meliorism means to take the body as a serious medium of experience, while applying it to Japanese examples. Taiki Matsuda illustrates how somaesthetics can inform the sociology of violence. Violence can manifest in education as corporal punishment and bullying. Matsuda argues that school harbors "potential violence," meaning it allows for the possibility of forceful violence to occur. Through somaesthetics – including a creative utilization of Shusterman's argument for the art of rap music[4] – we can develop body-based practices and tools to solve the realities of violence. Shoko Nagata's paper explores how culture is understood through language study. Through an extended analysis of ESOL, in New York particularly, they show how arts and crafts stimulate participation and understanding of other cultures. This kind of learning by encounters is in line with the three phases of learning Higuchi covered above. Finally, in "The Meaning of Language in Education," Higuchi and Yayoi Sutani reexamine common theories of language pertaining to social constructivism, including Saussure (as interpreted by Maruyama), Dewey's experimental model of education, and Shusterman's somaesthetics. The results of their investigation lead them to conclude,

> The consideration of the body would restore the vivid meaning of language and enable the acquisition of actual knowledge. In this respect, activities that disregard language, as well as the literary interpretation of texts during learning, are criticized. An understanding of language that considers the body would present the possibility of a completely different form of learning. It may be said that one of the particular directions is "aesthetic education" linked to somaesthetics. (SPC, 133)

All together, the essays included here contain important and interesting ideas in the study of education. To my mind, their collective focus on meliorism is the most valuable aspect and all of these essays have important contributions to this effort of introducing meliorism into education. A short conclusion by Higuchi tying together the related themes and concepts in this already short book would have been appreciated. It would help readers solidify the connections made between the aesthetics of sport, somaesthetics, and the philosophy of education. Nevertheless, Higuchi's book is a brisk read with just the right amount of technical detail to make the journey significant. The lucid style, combined with the range of subject matter, make the book accessible to a very large range of readers.

4) See Shusterman. *Pragmatist Aesthetics*, chapter 8.