

# Somaesthetics at the Limits

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## I

Morten Kyndrup kindly invited me to open this conference by sketching how the problematic question of limits has pervaded the contemporary field of aesthetics, and he suggested I do so by sketching how the issue of limits has shaped my own trajectory from analytic philosophy to pragmatism and continental theory and into the interdisciplinary field of somaesthetics.\* Reviewing my almost thirty-year career in philosophical aesthetics, I realize that much of it has been a struggle with the limits that define this field, though I did not always see it in those terms.

When I was still a student at Oxford specializing in analytic aesthetics, my first three publications were papers protesting the limits of prevailing monistic doctrines in that field: theories claiming that poetry (and by extension literature in general) is essentially an oral-based performative art without real visual import, and theories arguing that beneath the varying interpretations and evaluations of works of art there was nonetheless one basic logic of interpretation and one basic logic of evaluation (though philosophers differed as to what that basic logic was and whether it was the same for both interpretation and evaluation). When I proposed contrastingly pluralistic accounts of interpretive and evaluative logic, while suggesting that literature could be appreciated in terms of sight as well as sound, I was not consciously aiming at transgressing prevailing limits. I was more interested in being right than in being different or original, and I saw myself as working fully within the limits of analytic aesthetics.<sup>1</sup>

When I expanded my horizons to embrace pragmatism in the late 1980s, I became conscious of pushing at the limits of analytic philosophy, though I considered my work to be largely an extension of treating familiar questions and forms of reasoning in analytic aesthetics and philosophy, much in the way that Nelson Goodman, Hilary Putnam, Richard Rorty, and Joseph Margolis were combining pragmatist insights with analytic styles of argument.<sup>2</sup> And in using some continental philosophy for inspirational insight (from Nietzsche and Adorno to Foucault and Bourdieu), I

could assure myself that the most respected analytic philosopher of art, Arthur Danto, had built much of his theory on Hegel. Of course, when my book *Pragmatist Aesthetics* devoted its largest chapter to the analysis and advocacy of hip hop, I could no longer pretend to myself that I was essentially working within the traditional limits of analytic or even pragmatist aesthetics. Formerly friendly colleagues began to identify me as a sensationalist transgressor of hallowed boundaries of academic philosophy, reminding me through painful words or even more painfully silent shunning that I had passed beyond limits that defined acceptable work in analytic aesthetics.<sup>3</sup> Though my new work continued to command a distanced respect (and was even appreciatively used by analytic colleagues to save them the time of reading pragmatist and continental authors for themselves), I could no longer fully be trusted. My subsequent turn to somaesthetics, crowned by professional training as a somatic educator in the Feldenkrais Method, confirmed my image as *Grenzgänger*, a border-crosser, a transgressor of boundaries.<sup>4</sup> Like it or not (and initially I greatly disliked it), I had evolved from a mainstream analytic aesthetician into a limit-defying provocateur, who had to be kept at some distance from the inner circles of power within that mainstream establishment however much it accorded my work a respectful hearing.

Pierre Bourdieu once suggested, in conversation, a sociological explanation of this trajectory: my bi-national, transcultural background, which tends to make outsider status and boundary crossing a necessity of life, would promote a habitus of transgressing limits that would likely be mirrored in philosophical work. Though I had seemed to achieve insider status in analytic aesthetics (as editor of a Blackwell collection on that topic and as tenured in Temple's philosophy department that was famous for analytic aesthetics), this insider persona could not really fit my entrenched habitus as a displaced intellectual, a wandering Jew who had left America for Israel at age sixteen, and who then experienced outsider status there and again at Oxford before returning, in my mid-thirties, as a stranger to the States though frequently leaving again for extended periods in France, Germany, and Japan. Perhaps Bourdieu was right. But more interesting than such social self-analysis, however, is the much broader hypothesis that I wish to explore in this lecture: that the play of limit transgression is a central feature of the field of aesthetics, a key aspect of its history and structure.

## II

Modern aesthetics defined itself from the beginning as transgressing boundaries and exceeding limits. Baumgarten introduced aesthetics pre-

cisely to extend philosophy beyond the limits of conceptual knowledge and into the sphere of sensory perceptions and what he calls “the lower cognitive faculties.” As he insists in paragraph 3 of *Aesthetica*’s “Prolegomena,” one of aesthetics’ goals is “improving knowledge also beyond the borders of the distinctly knowable” (“*Die Verbesserung der Erkenntnis auch über die Grenzen des deutlich Erkennbaren hinaus vorantreibt*”). There is a basic logic at play here: To justify a new philosophical discipline or science like aesthetics, he must argue that it is needed to go beyond the limits of the studies we already have, that it occupies a place beyond the boundaries defined by other fields. Hence Baumgarten likewise defends the need for aesthetics by saying it goes beyond the limits of Rhetorik and Poetik by comprehending a larger field (“*Sie umfasst ein weiteres Gebiet*”) by including also objects of other arts. Nor can aesthetics be simply equated with critique or with art, Baumgarten argues, because critique in general includes critique of logic while aesthetics is said to deal specifically with matters of sensibility, and because aesthetics is claimed to be a science (*Wissenschaft*) rather than just an art.<sup>5</sup>

Beyond Baumgarten, the modern field of aesthetics can be seen as an attempt to go beyond the limits of older philosophies of beauty, sublimity, and taste to engage a much wider domain of qualities and judgments relating to our pleasurable and meaningful experience of art and nature. And we can see the essential move of Hegelian aesthetics (and other aesthetic idealisms) as moving the essence of aesthetics beyond the limits of sensuous and nonconceptual experience toward the idea of art as purveying the very highest spiritual truths albeit in a somewhat sensuous form. Moreover, we can certainly see modernity’s progressive revolutions of artistic forms and styles in the same Hegelian spirit of dynamic movement that progresses by meeting and overcoming determinations of boundaries.

We may have forgotten the limit-defying trend in aesthetics because the dominant Anglo-American aesthetic school of the last half century, analytic aesthetics, has been keen to insist on defining limits and on policing them. Initially, it had the best of reasons to stress the need for more recognition of limits and distinctions in order to remedy the limit-defying confusions of the dominant aesthetic idealism of the early twentieth century, perhaps most powerfully exemplified in Benedetto Croce. As I have elsewhere argued, analytic aesthetics emerged largely from dissatisfaction with the woolly vagueness of idealist, Hegelian-inspired aesthetic theories such as Croce’s that affirm a more unbounded aesthetics whose project is limit defiance.<sup>6</sup>

Croce’s project was shaped by a struggle to defend the transcendent

power of aesthetic insight from the limitations of encroaching positivisms with respect to art's meaning: whether such positivism was expressed by subordinating artistic creation and evaluation to the strict rules of genre criticism or to historical and sociological causal explanations, such as Hippolyte Taine's famous formula of "race, milieu, and moment."<sup>7</sup> For Croce, who defines the aesthetic in terms of a basic formative power of intuition that pervades all meaningful perception, aesthetics cannot be confined to a narrow domain of poetics and fine arts nor to questions of natural beauty. The aesthetic instead is a fundamental principle of intuitive perception that pervades the experienced world as a whole. All the world, Croce argues, is essentially a matter of aesthetics, since "all this world is intuition, "is nothing but intuition or aesthetic fact."<sup>8</sup>

Identifying intuition with expression and language, and insisting that the nature of intuitions and language is "perpetual creation" and change, Croce argues that any attempt to limit aesthetic intuition into fixed boundaries, categories, or meanings is as useless and perverse as "to seek the immobility of motion." Traditional limits of aesthetic genres and rhetorical categories are thus completely swept away: "Expression is an indivisible whole," Croce claims, hence "a philosophical classification of expressions is impossible, for there is no essential distinguishing principles or fixed "formal differences" to justify such categorial limits, only differences of degree and context and changing convention. The same goes for the alleged limits between artist, critic, and audience; and even art and non-art. "The limits of the expressions and intuitions that are called art, as opposed to those that are vulgarly called non-art, are empirical and impossible to define. If an epigram be art, why not a single word?" Challenging not only the limits but even the standard distinctions between disciplines, Croce affirms that "philosophy of language and philosophy of art are the same thing." By asserting that traditional aesthetic distinctions cannot rely on fixed essential principles since aesthetic perception is always a matter of the changing play of language and experience, yet failing to equally insist that pragmatic distinctions can nonetheless be usefully made, Croce's theory falls into a much wider essentialism, a monism of the world as intuition-expression or language. (Deconstruction, I have argued, in pursuing a very similar argument against the foundations and fixity of genre and disciplinary distinctions, also tends to fall into the trap of linguistic essentialism where all the world is nothing but text.<sup>9</sup>)

Analytic aesthetics emerged as a power in the mid-twentieth century by attacking the influential Crocean view for the dreary, vague, and apparently useless monotony of its distinction-demolishing essentialism.

By that time, art no longer required to be defended against reductionist explanatory models, whether of traditional rhetoric or of sociological determinism. This was because more autonomously aesthetic varieties of art and literary criticism had by then been firmly established, such as that advocated by the New Criticism. Croce's early analytic critics did not generally maintain that the genre distinctions Croce dismissed could be justified by appeal to real metaphysical essences or to tradition. On the contrary, they themselves offered critical revisions of traditional essentialisms about art and its genres. But they did maintain that in order to talk illuminatingly about art, one must draw some distinctions and respect some limits of signification of one's theoretical terms; and that to define these boundaries more clearly and maintain them more consistently could promote better ways of talking about art.

Monroe Beardsley, for example, in distinguishing the perceptual object from its physical base and authorial intention, explicitly argued that since there is no essence of the aesthetic object to be discovered, we have "to propose a way of making the distinction" which itself can only be justified pragmatically. "One can only point to the conveniences of adopting it, the inconveniences of rejecting it, ...[and] its own inconveniences."<sup>10</sup> Similarly, John Passmore, in complaining of "the dreariness of aesthetics" prescribed the remedy of "a ruthlessness in making distinctions," in drawing limits that may "seem arbitrary" but can be justified pragmatically by the fact that certain distinctions or limits can structure the aesthetic field in a way that "gives rise to interesting generalizations."<sup>11</sup> He even suggested that the dullness of aesthetics arises from the attempt to construct a subject where there isn't one, "that there is no aesthetics and yet there are principles of literary criticism, musical criticism, etc. and that general aesthetics should be abandoned "for an intensive special study of the separate arts," whose specific differences should be respected. But most analysts in aesthetics still pursued projects of finding general limits to distinguish aesthetics from other fields. J.O. Urmson, for example, argued that "We should expect to find a criterion which allows us to distinguish the aesthetic, the moral, the economic, the intellectual, and other evaluations by a single *fundamentum divisionis*," and that "to call an appreciation aesthetic has as part of its point the effect of ruling out the moral as irrelevant."<sup>12</sup> Stuart Hampshire devoted an entire article "Ethics and Appreciation" to arguing likewise that the ethical and aesthetic judgments were entirely different in logical form, and that aesthetics should confine itself to the limits of its own subjective and particularist logic.<sup>13</sup>

### III

The history of analytic philosophy's attempts to draw firm and convincing distinctions can instructively illustrate how aesthetics tends to resist clear and strict limits. Analysts such as Beardsley and Urmson tried to distinguish the aesthetic from the non-aesthetic in terms of the former's being narrowly concerned with the perceptual appearance or surface "look of things."<sup>14</sup> Yet this appearance-based limit was shown to break down once we realize that what we know about an artwork's material properties and purpose will in fact affect, and should affect, how that work appears to us, thus reversing the primacy of appearance over non-perceptual knowledge in aesthetic appreciation. Other analysts, such as Frank Sibley, tried to draw a sharp aesthetic/non-aesthetic limit in terms of the alleged logically anomalous and independent status of aesthetic terms, the claim being that such terms were neither rule-governed nor conditioned by and inferable from any set of non-aesthetic features of the artwork but instead rely on aesthetic taste alone for their application.<sup>15</sup> Yet closer analysis showed that this alleged independence from non-aesthetic properties could not be maintained, since aesthetic properties had to be at least causally and ontologically dependent on the work's other properties, and since it was clear that the prominent presence of some non-aesthetic properties (such as great size, mass, weight, bulky shape) could entail that certain aesthetic properties (such as delicate fragility) would not be appropriate for describing the work.<sup>16</sup> Moreover, predicates such as unity and balance seemed to straddle the alleged distinction since they could be conceived in both aesthetic and non-aesthetic (computational) terms.

Similarly, the attempt to limit aesthetics to a realm devoid of all ethical considerations met the insurmountable difficulty that ethical content so often deeply pervaded the artwork's meaning that the work could not be properly understood without attending to its ethical dimensions. Attempts to distinguish a special aesthetic attitude or a special aesthetic experience that is limited to artworks and natural beauty (and arises always and only in their presence) have likewise proven very problematic, to such an extent that analysts have persistently questioned whether the notions of aesthetic attitude and aesthetic experience are at all useful for defining the field.

Increasingly aware of the problem of determining the limits of the aesthetic, analytic philosophers have devoted increasingly greater attention to defining instead the limits of art. Two different limit-defining projects can be noted here: first, drawing the boundaries of the realm of art as a whole in contrast to the rest of life and what Danto calls "mere real things";

and, secondly, defining the specific borders of individual artworks, i.e., the borders that mark off a true instance of the given work (say a genuine text or performance of *Hamlet*, or an authentic copy of an etching) from objects that are inauthentic presentations, copies, or forgeries of the artworks they claim to be. Both these projects aim at perfectly covering the extension of the concepts they define (whether art as a whole or a particular artwork) by providing a verbal formula that would fit all and only the right objects for the concept in question: namely, with respect to the general concept of art, those objects that are accepted as works of art; or, with respect to a particular artwork, those objects or events that are accepted as authentic instances of the particular work in question (in painting most often this is a single instance).

Any proposed definition of this sort can be challenged by bringing counterexamples that its verbal formula would either wrongly cover or fail to cover and so would either wrongly include or exclude from art's domain or from the particular artwork's authentic instances. The proposed definition is thus shown to be either too wide or too narrow; its motivating ideal is perfect coverage, and I have therefore called this definitional style "the wrapper model of theory." For like the better food wraps, such theories of art transparently present, contain, and conserve their object – our conventional view of art. They aim to preserve rather than transform art's practice and experience. Like the condom, another form of elastic transparent wrapper (which the French aptly designate "*preservatif*"), such definitions aim to preserve the conventional limits of art (and thus art itself) from contamination by art's exciting yet impure enveloping environment while at the same time preserving that environment from art's potential to create new life by its penetration beyond the limits that seek to compartmentalize it within the established artworld and within the established criteria of legitimately authentic performances or instances of a particular artwork.

Let us first consider the issue of defining the limits of the particular artwork's identity. This was of crucial importance to analytic aesthetics as part of its preoccupation with art's objects that in turn arose from academic criticism's preoccupation with objective critical truth, which seemed to demand a clearly defined object to serve as the standard of truth. Thus Beardsley claimed, "The first thing to make criticism possible is an object ... with its own properties against which interpretations can be checked," and artworks therefore must be such "self-sufficient entities" whose properties and meaning are independent of their contexts of genesis and reception.<sup>17</sup> The object of art becomes a fetishized "icon" whose

limits of identity and authenticity must be strictly defined and protected from fakes and corruptions.<sup>18</sup> But we see, in Nelson Goodman's influential theory of work-identity, how the need for precisely defining the work's identity leads to the paradoxical result of defining it independently of its aesthetically important properties, since such properties are too vague and variable for clear definitions. Since, for Goodman, the identity of a musical work is defined by the notes of the score, the most miserable performance without actual mistakes counts as fully authentic "while the most brilliant performance with one wrong note does not."<sup>19</sup> But what is the real point of defining an artwork to preserve it if the aesthetically important properties of that work are not meant to be preserved? Is it not more fruitful to concentrate on preserving or enriching the aesthetic values of aesthetic experience, even if this involves admitting some wrong notes or letters or reproductions? Such analytic perversities helped push me toward pragmatism, as did the analytic attempts to define art in general.

The most influential of these attempts to define art have likewise tried to do so without appealing to the notion of the aesthetic (whose limits and essence analysis had earlier failed to effectively define). Instead these theories define art in terms of something beyond aesthetic perception but alleged as necessary for shaping such perception in appreciating art – namely, the artworld, a notion that Arthur Danto introduced to analytic aesthetics through his beloved example of Warhol's *Brillo Boxes* and that George Dickie then interpreted in terms of the institutional theory of art. That institutional theory, which defines an artwork as simply any "artifact upon which some person or persons acting on behalf of a certain social institution (the artworld) has conferred the status of candidate for appreciation,"<sup>20</sup> is purely procedural, leaving all substantive decisions and principles to the artworld. By stressing this social context through which art is generated and provided with properties not directly exhibited to the senses (properties that distinguish between Warhol's *Brillo Boxes* and their visually identical counterparts), the institutional theory can explain how art can have a definitional essence without its objects sharing a core of exhibited aesthetic properties. The theory's success in covering all and only authorized artworks is matched by its explanatory poverty. It provides no explanation of the reasons or constraints for proposing artworld membership, no explanation of the artworld's history and structure or of the artworld's relationship to the wider socio-cultural and politico-economic world in which the artworld is embedded and by which the artworld is significantly shaped.

Danto rejects the institutional theory as lacking explanatory value because of its historical emptiness. Ignoring Wofflin's insight that not everything is possible at every time, the institutional theory fails to consider the historical conditions that structure the artworld and that therefore shape and limit its participants' actions in creating and interpreting art. It cannot explain why Warhol's work would not have been accepted had Warhol produced it in fin-de-siècle Paris or quattrocento Florence but could be art in Manhattan in the 1960s. The explanation, Danto argues, depends on the history of art and art theory, since objects are artworks only if they can be interpreted as such by the artworld. Thus, the *Brillo Box* as a work of art required an interpretation to that effect, both creatively by Warhol and responsively by his audience; and the artworld "required a certain historical development" to make that interpretation possible.<sup>21</sup> And since the artworld is but an abstraction from the artistic, critical, historiographical and theoretical practices that constitute art's history, art is essentially a complex historical practice that must be defined and understood historically.

So far so good; but Danto also insists on viewing the structure and history of the artworld simply in terms of "its own internal development," in essential isolation from history's wider social and cultural contexts, economic factors, and political struggles. This compartmentalization from the rest of life is part and parcel of Danto's insistence that the distinction between art and reality is absolute. But, as Danto surely knows, relations between the wider lifeworld are significantly formative of directions in the artworld. Why was it Warhol's *Brillo Boxes* rather than Duchamp's much earlier objets trouvés (or readymades) that so strongly captured Danto and the wider public's interest and thus more decisively transformed our notion of contemporary art? Is not the wider social and cultural revolution of the 1960s part of the explanation, along with the ever-increasing power of consumerist culture and of popular media culture to which Warhol himself was so attached? How can we explain the emergence of graffiti art and the work of Keith Haring and Jean-Michel Basquiat without looking to social and cultural movements such as hip hop that were initially beyond the established limits of the established artworld?

By faithfully representing our established concept of art and insisting on its objects' radical distinction from "mere real things," Danto's theory best realizes the dual goals of wrapper definitions: accurate reflection and compartmental differentiation that set art apart from the rest of life.<sup>22</sup> My dissatisfaction with the value of these goals helped push me toward

the path of pragmatism. If all substantive decisions as to what counts as art are left to the internal decisions of the artworld as recorded by art history, then what useful purpose does simply reflecting those decisions in a philosophical formula serve, apart from appeasing the old philosophical urge for theory as mirroring reflection of the real?

The theoretical ideal of reflection originally had a point when reality was conceived in terms of fixed, necessary essences lying beyond ordinary empirical understanding. For an adequate representation of this real would always remain valid and effective as a criterion for assessing ordinary understanding and practice. But if art's realities are the empirical and changing contingencies of art's historical career, then the reflective model seems pointless. For here, theory's representation neither penetrates beyond changing phenomena nor can sustain their changes. Instead, it must run a hopeless race of perpetual narrative revision, holding the mirror of reflective theory up to art's changing nature by representing its history.<sup>23</sup>

But art's mutable history need not be merely represented; pragmatism urges that it can also be made through theoretical interventions. So pragmatism also rethinks the roles and limits of aesthetic theory and philosophy. No longer content with simply analyzing realities and concepts, it seeks to improve them and thereby promote better experience. But doesn't such theoretical activism mean abandoning philosophy altogether by forsaking its traditional project and self-image as the wholly disinterested pursuit of truth? First, philosophy's most powerful achievements were not always, if ever, really governed by this goal. Certainly Plato's theory cannot be seen as disinterestedly representing the nature of art. It was clearly a politically motivated response to the pressing problem of whose intellectual leadership (art's ancient wisdom or philosophy's new rationality) should guide Athenian society at a time of troubled change, political dissension, and military defeat. Secondly, the very ideal of pure, neutral reflection typically disguises an impure bias. Fixation on the facts often reflects the interest of a conservatism that is happy to reinforce the status quo by representing it in definition, or is simply too timid to take part in the messy struggle over the shaping of culture. The fetishism of disinterested knowledge obscures the truth that philosophy's ultimate aim is to benefit human life rather than serving pure truth for truth's sake. If art and aesthetic experience are crucial forms of human flourishing, then philosophy betrays its role if it merely looks on with neutrality without joining the struggle to extend their breadth and power.

## IV

For such reasons I turned from analytic philosophy to pragmatism, while also enlisting insights from hermeneutics, critical theory, and poststructuralism that challenge in different ways some of the assumptions and limits of analytic aesthetics: its fetishized concern with precisely defining art's objects that are presumed to have a fixed identity, unity, and ontology; its exaggerated sense of art's demarcation from the rest of life and its autonomy from wider social and political forces that in fact penetrate even into the very forms of artistic expression; and its essentially descriptivist conceptual approach that typically eschews revisionary projects and socio-political engagement so as to represent and reinforce the established cultural status quo.<sup>24</sup>

If analytic theory is essentially demarcational – seeking to define by delimiting the concepts it analyzes in terms of wrapper definitions of extension, then the pragmatism I practice tries to be more transformational in style. Though beginning with a recognition of the established meanings and limits of the concepts it treats, the pragmatist examines whether a concept's range can be usefully extended (or narrowed) in places where its borders seem vague and flexible enough to allow such extension (or restriction) without destroying the concept's principal meaning and value but rather making it more meaningful and useful in improving our aesthetic understanding and experience. Recognizing that Dewey's definition of art as experience was hopelessly inadequate as an extensional or wrapper theory, I argued (in *Pragmatist Aesthetics*) that it was nonetheless useful as a transformational theory that by emphasizing aesthetic experience could not only break the hold of object fetishism in contemporary art, aesthetics, and culture but could also be used to help acquire artistic legitimacy for popular arts (such as rap music) that provided powerful aesthetic experience but were not yet granted genuine aesthetic or artistic status.

My own subsequent proposal to define art as dramatization was likewise not at all aimed at perfect wrapper coverage of the extension of art but instead to highlight two crucial aspects of art – intensity of presence and formal framing – that have generated conflicting theories that divide contemporary aesthetics.<sup>25</sup> The concept of dramatization connotes both intensity of meaningful appearance, action, or experience (which generates theories that define art in terms of immediate, captivating presence or experience). But it also connotes the formal framing of an action, appearance, or experience through a historically established conventional framework that differentiates what is framed from the ordinary flow of

life. This second feature lies at the core of contemporary theories that define art in terms of its historically constructed social differentiation from other realms, theories such as Pierre Bourdieu's, Danto's, and Dickie's. In proposing the idea of art as dramatization, my aims were also transformational in that the definition will take us beyond the conventional limits of established art by applying also to forms of ritual and athletics that display significant artistry and aesthetic experience but do not fall under the concept of art. It can also apply, as I have recently argued,<sup>26</sup> to practices of love-making, the so-called erotic arts, whose status as art and potential to provide intense and artistically dramatized aesthetic experience has been neglected in the West. Its exploration forms part of my current research program in somaesthetics.

## V

Somaesthetics, of course, is a natural extension of my work in pragmatist aesthetics. Bringing aesthetics closer to the realm of life and practice, I realized, entails bringing the body more centrally into aesthetic focus, since all life and practice – all perception, cognition, and action – is crucially performed through the body.<sup>27</sup> Somaesthetics was thus conceived to complement the basic project of pragmatist aesthetics by elaborating the ways that a disciplined, ramified, and interdisciplinary attention to bodily experience, methods, discourses, and performances could enrich our aesthetic experience and practice, not only in the fine arts but in the diverse arts of living. It originated as an attempt to go beyond the limits not only of Baumgarten's neglect of somatic cultivation in his original project of aesthetic cultivation, but also beyond the rejection of body and desire that is so prominent in the Western tradition of philosophical aesthetics from Shaftesbury and Kant through Schopenhauer and into the present, despite the fact that body and desire are so prominent in Western art and literature, even in its religious forms.

Somaesthetics also involves an attempt to go beyond the conventional limits of philosophical aesthetics as mere theory by insisting on a practical dimension of actual cultivation of somatic discipline, though we should remember that Baumgarten originally conceived aesthetics as a discipline that one practiced not only in theory but through practical aesthetic exercises. Finally, somaesthetics, even in its more theoretical pursuits, goes beyond the typical disciplinary limits of philosophy by enlisting also a variety of disciplines (such as history, sociology, cosmetics, anatomy, meditative and martial arts, physiology, nutrition, kinesiology, psychology, and neuroscience) that can be helpful in understanding the

experience and use of one's body in appreciative perception, aesthetic performance, and creative self-fashioning and for examining the methods of improving such experience and use. Anatomy and kinesiology, for example, can help explain how greater flexibility in the spine and ribcage can increase one's range of vision by enabling greater rotation of the head, while, on the other hand, more intelligent use of the eyes can conversely (through their occipital muscles) improve the head's rotation and eventually the spine's.

Some critics have expressed the worry that this breaking out of philosophy's disciplinary limits risks making somaesthetics an incoherent and unstructured field with no center relating to aesthetics. In particular, the interest in natural science is feared as an invasive impertinence to aesthetic theory. But I believe that aesthetic research should be properly informed by the best relevant scientific knowledge, and the sciences that explain somatic functioning are surely relevant to the question of enhancing somatic experience, use, and beauty. Renaissance art and art theory provide a good precedent for the use of science, since they clearly owe much of their success to the study of anatomy, mathematics, and the optics of perspective. The central, structuring focus of somaesthetics is the body's use in appreciative perception (*aisthesis*) and aesthetic self-fashioning, and there are certainly many matters that fall outside its limits. Issues in formal logic and income tax hardly seem to pertain to the field, but there is little point to outlaw their possible relevance a priori from the outset. If some aspect of knowledge can be convincingly shown to relate importantly and productively to somaesthetics' central concerns, then somaesthetics can reinterpret or extend its borders at that precise place to take it in, recognizing that limits (just like concepts) can still function when they are flexible and vague. Somaesthetics, moreover, contains some structuring distinctions that provide some flexible and somewhat overlapping borders within the field. The different branches of analytic somaesthetics (essentially descriptive theory), pragmatic somaesthetics (comparative evaluation of methodologies of practice), and practical somaesthetics (actual performance of somatic disciplines) have already been elaborated by me too often to warrant repetition here.

Instead I wish to close by briefly considering another kind of limit with which somaesthetics is concerned and which has been especially emphasized by some important contemporary French philosophers, such as Georges Bataille and Michel Foucault. It is not so much a conceptual limit or disciplinary boundary but an experiential one, which they sometimes call "limit-experience" (*expérience-limite*) and which they describe as an

experience of violent intensity typically involving some violent form of somatic transgression that is also typically a transgression of moral as well as somatic norms.<sup>28</sup> The value of these limit-experiences lies not simply in their experiential intensity that seems related to the intense sublimities of aesthetic experience, but in their power to transform us by showing us the limits of our conventional experience and subjectivity and by introducing us to something fascinatingly powerful beyond those limits, an “*au delà*” of what we are and know. Is somaesthetics committed to such limit-experiences? And what would such commitment imply about its general viability and value – in pragmatic, ethical, social, and health-related terms?

Certainly somaesthetics is committed to studying the use of such forms of limit-experiences, but that does not imply a commitment to advocating them as the best way to enlarge our somaesthetic capacities and to achieve wider transformational improvements of our selves and self-knowledge. In fact, there is growing evidence from recent studies in psychology and neurophysiology that indicate the dangers of such sensory violence for our powers and pleasures of perception. These studies reinforce perspectives of the old Weber-Fechner law of psychophysics which explain how increased intensity of stimulus reduces the power to perceive and appreciate smaller sensory differences – thus tending to generate a spiral affect where ever stronger stimulation is demanded to meet the rising sensory thresholds, habits, and needs. Somaesthetics can therefore involve also a critique of the limits (cognitive, aesthetic, as well as practical, moral, and social) of these violent limit experiences, while also exploring other limit-experiences that deploy more gentle, subtle means to probe a wide range of somaesthetic limits (limits of sensory attention, somatic flexibility, habitual breathing rhythms, and muscular tensions) that can equally achieve powerful experiences of transformative exultation that expand the self.

Moreover, somaesthetics should not limit itself to the realm of ecstatic limit-experiences. There is a range of different somaesthetic limits that we fail to appreciate in everyday life, and a better experiential knowledge of them could significantly improve the ways we live. Lacking the sensitivity to sense these limits – such as the border between satiating our hunger and being full, between engaging perceptual interest and overstimulation, between proper tonus for postural poise and excessive muscular contraction – has led all too much of our population to problems of obesity, insomnia, and chronic back pain. We often do not perceive these borders because our somaesthetic awareness has not been sufficiently

sharpened and sensitized to grasp them. These problems of recognizing limits might be called the somaesthetic pathologies of everyday life, and it is the topic I would have discussed today, had my friend Morten Kyndrup not asked me to provide a fuller overview of my exploration of the limits of aesthetics.

### Notes

\* This paper was given as the opening keynote lecture for the Nordic Society of Aesthetics meeting held in Aarhus, June 2007.

1. See Richard Shusterman, "The Anomalous Nature of Literature," in *British Journal of Aesthetics*, 18 (1978), 317–329; "The Logic of Interpretation," in *Philosophy Quarterly*, 28 (1978), 310–324; "The Logic of Evaluation," in *Philosophy Quarterly*, 30 (1980), 327–341.

2. In my "Introduction" to *Analytic Aesthetics* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1989), I explore how some pragmatist perspectives can be seen as convergent with and even formative of some important approaches in analytic aesthetics.

3. See R. Shusterman, *Pragmatist Aesthetics: Living Beauty, Rethinking Art* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1992).

4. I first introduced the concept of somaesthetics (or more precisely Somästhetik) very briefly in my book *Vor der Interpretation* (Wien: Passagen Verlag, 1994), but the first time I discussed it in a substantive way was in *Practicing Philosophy* (London: Routledge, 1997). I devoted a chapter to it in the second edition of *Pragmatist Aesthetics* (New York: Rowman & Littlefield, 2000), two further chapters in *Performing Live* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2000), and in too many subsequent papers to list here. My fullest treatment of somaesthetics (a field that goes far beyond the traditional questions of art and aesthetics) is in *Body Consciousness: A Philosophy of Mindfulness and Somaesthetics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008). For some interesting critical discussions and applications of somaesthetics by other hands, see the essays of Martin Jay, Gustavo Guerra, Kathleen Higgins, and Casey Haskins. See also the articles by Thomas Leddy, Antonia Soulez, and Paul C. Taylor, and my response in *Journal of Speculative Philosophy*, 16, no. 1 (2002): 1–38; Gernot Böhme, "Somästhetik – sanft oder mit Gewalt?" *Deutsche Zeitschrift für Philosophie*, 50 (2002): 797–800; J. J. Abrams, "Pragmatism, Artificial Intelligence, and Post-human Bioethics: Shusterman, Rorty, Foucault," *Human Studies*, 27 (2004): 241–258; and Eric Mullis, "Performative Somaesthetics," *Journal of Aesthetic Education*, 40, no. 4 (2006): 104–117. A fuller bibliography on somaesthetics can be found in *Body Consciousness*.

5. My citations from Baumgarten are from the bilingual (Latin-German) abridged edition of this work, Alexander Baumgarten, *Theoretische Ästhetik: Die*

*grundlegenden Abschnitte aus der "Aesthetica"* (1750/58), trans. H. R. Schweizer (Hamburg: Felix Meiner, 1988), 3, 5.

6. See R. Shusterman, "Analytic Aesthetics, Literary Theory, and Deconstruction," *The Monist*, 69 (1986), 22–38. For an account of Croce's relationship to pragmatist philosophy, see "Croce on Interpretation: Deconstruction and Pragmatism," *New Literary History*, 20 (1988), 199–216.

7. See Hippolyte Taine, *History of English Literature*, trans. H. van Laun (New York, 1886), 18, as quoted in W. K. Wimsatt and C. Brooks, *Literary Criticism: A Short History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1954), 532.

8. See B. Croce, *Aesthetic*, trans. D. Ainslie (London, 1922), 22–23, 26, 30, 110–113, 146, 197–198, 234, 247.

9. See "Analytic Aesthetics, Literary Theory, and Deconstruction," and also R. Shusterman, "Deconstruction and Analysis: Confrontation and Convergence," *British Journal of Aesthetics*, 26 (1986), 311–327.

10. See M.C. Beardsley, *Aesthetics* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1958), 52–53.

11. See J. Passmore, "The Dreariness of Aesthetics," in *Aesthetics and Language*, edited W. Elton (Oxford, 1954), 45–50, 55.

12. See J. O. Urmson, "What Makes a Situation Aesthetic?" in *Aesthetics: Contemporary Studies in Aesthetics*, edited F. J. Coleman (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1968), 360, 368.

13. See S. Hampshire, "Logic and Appreciation," in Elton, *Aesthetics and Language*, 169.

14. See M. C. Beardsley, *Aesthetics* (New York, 1958), 29–52; J. O. Urmson, "What Makes a Situation Aesthetic?" *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, supp. 131 (1957), 72–92.

15. See F. Sibley, "Aesthetic Concepts," in *Philosophical Review* 68 (1959), 421–450.

16. For these and other criticisms of Sibley's theory, see T. Cohen, "Aesthetic/Non-aesthetic and the Concept of Taste: A Critique of Sibley's Position," *Theoria*, 39 (1979), 113–152; P. Kiry, *Speaking of Art* (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1973); Gary Stahl, "Sibley's Aesthetic Concepts: An Ontological Mistake," *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, 29 (1971), 385–389.

17. See M. C. Beardsley, *The Possibility of Criticism* (Detroit: Wayne State UP, 1970), 16.

18. See *The Verbal Icon: Studies in the Meaning of Poetry* (UP of Kentucky, 1967).

19. See Goodman, *Languages of Art* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1969), 120, 186, 209–210.

20. See George Dickie, *Aesthetics* (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1971), 101; and *Art and the Aesthetic: An Institutional Analysis* (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1974). I provide a more detailed critique of his theory in *Pragmatist Aesthetics*, 38–40.

21. See Arthur C. Danto, *The Transfiguration of the Commonplace* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1981), 208.

22. See chapter 1 of *The Transfiguration of the Commonplace*.

23. Danto tries to avoid this worry by insisting that despite art's changing history it has a defining and unchanging "transhistorical essence" that "is always the same." His claim is that there is "a fixed and universal artistic identity" or "unchangeable" essence of art, even an "extrahistorical concept of art," but that this essence merely "discloses itself through history" (*After the End of Art* [Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997], 28, 187, 193). Likewise, though this defining essence determines the limits of art (by marking art off from what is not art), it does not in any way limit how art can appear, since aesthetic properties are excluded from this essence. So in that sense, for Danto, anything could be a work of art though many things are not works of art.

The problem with this essentialist strategy is that the definition it provides is not at all helpful in telling us how to recognize a work of art, which is among the main reasons why essentialist definitions of art have been sought. Nor does Danto's notion of essence provide effective criteria for evaluating art or make stylistic suggestions for creating art, which are the other important practical motives for seeking an essential definition of art. Both good and bad artworks, Danto realizes, must have the very same essence, since both are works of art by virtue of that essence, and that essence is not at all a matter of aesthetic or artistic quality (*After the End of Art*, 197; *The Madonna of the Future* [New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2000], 427). Danto's essentialist strategy also fails to define art's essence in a narrow enough way. His two criteria for the essence of an artwork (which he admits are too "meager" to "be the entire story") are to "have a content or meaning" and "to embody its meaning" (*The Madonna of the Future*, xix). Yet iconic signs and all sorts of cultural objects also do that, and so do most intentional actions. A real-life kiss has meaning and embodies it. But that does not make it a work of art; though, of course, one could stage a kiss as an artwork or represent one as Klimt and Rodin did so sensually.

24. For more on these themes, see *Pragmatist Aesthetics*, chs. 1, 2, 6, 7, 8.

25. See R. Shusterman, *Surface and Depth* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2002), ch.13.

26. See R. Shusterman, "Asian Ars Erotica and the Question of Sexual Aesthetics," in *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 65.1 (Winter 2007), 55–68.

27. For more detailed arguments concerning the points about somaesthetics outlined here and in the rest of this paper, see my writings cited in note 4 above.

28. See Foucault's "How an 'Experience-Book' is Born," in *Remarks on Marx: Conversations with Duccio Trombadori*, trans. R. J. Goldstein and J. Cascaito (New York, 1991) and Bataille's *Inner Experience* for some of the discussion of this idea.