

## **ON BEAUTY, THEORY AND PRACTICE: RICHARD SHUSTERMAN INTERVIEWED BY HERMANN KLEIN**

In the following interview, philosopher Richard Shusterman answers a few questions for the 2016 issue of the German journal *Feldenkrais Zeit*, whose theme this year is “Beauty.” *The Feldenkrais Journal* is delighted to publish the English version, which resonates with many of our articles this year. Thanks to Hermann Klein, Editor at *Feldenkrais Zeit*, and Shusterman for their eloquence and candor in this thought-provoking precedent for cross-journal publication.

**You are an internationally well-known academic but also a Feldenkrais practitioner, and you don’t hide it. How did you come to leave writing desk and bookshelves?**

I never really left the writing and teaching of philosophy. Even during my Feldenkrais Training (New York 1998-2002), I was the head of the philosophy department of Temple University in Philadelphia. At that time, I had to hide from my department colleagues the fact of my Feldenkrais training, especially because it meant that I was absent from my office many days because of the training. I did not dare tell my philosophy colleagues why I was absent; I thought they would never accept my motives and interests in such practical bodywork. They were even suspicious that I was interested in the body in a theoretical way. Now, after two major books on somaesthetics with Cambridge University Press—*Body Consciousness* (2008) and *Thinking through the Body* (2012)—I hope my philosophical colleagues can appreciate my somatic approach. In any case, I am no longer in my old department. I was offered an endowed professorship in the Humanities at Florida Atlantic University, and there I set up a Center for Body, Mind, and Culture where I am not limited by the conventional attitudes and narrow disciplinary boundaries of academic philosophy.

**Coming out of pragmatism (James, Dewey) and often referring to Foucault (and Wittgenstein), and reaching as far back as Greek philosophy, you are asking for a new, embodied approach to philosophy. You are asking that we rediscover the body practically and claim, for instance, that it would be helpful for philosophers to practice things like the Feldenkrais Method. How are your experiences with colleagues?**

Yes, my pragmatist orientation in philosophy convinced me that the practical study of body functionality could give me more insights and confidence in somatic theorizing. Several examples in my books derive from personal experience of teaching the Method. As for colleagues and students, some of them have been stimulated by my writings to practice Tai Chi or Yoga or even (but unfortunately more rarely) the Feldenkrais Method. Many philosophers, however, remain hostile to the idea of introducing bodily practices into their philosophical work. They think of theorizing as fundamentally opposed to practice, and thus worry that practice will ruin the logic and purity of theory.

**And, reciprocally, how are your experiences with Feldenkrais practitioners or trainers? Would you say that it could or should be of equal importance for Feldenkrais practitioners to study somaesthetics? Should theory be part of Feldenkrais training?**

My respect for the autonomy of the Feldenkrais Method and for the single-minded commitment of its trainers is too strong to allow me to advocate a revision of their established training practice that would incorporate my theory of somaesthetics. I do think, however, that somaesthetic theory can be useful in situating the Feldenkrais Method within the wider study of the body’s relationship to our social and cultural lives and to our practice of the art of living. It can help show how the Feldenkrais Method contributes to understanding and improving life as a whole rather than just to improving our somatic performance. Somaesthetics offers one way of helping to renew Feldenkrais theory and avoid its becoming stuck in the past because of its justified admiration for the genius of Moshe Feldenkrais. The Feldenkrais Method is a remarkable and remarkably logical and scientifically-grounded method; it should not be turned into a cult.

**Somaesthetics is about aesthetics and as such addresses the arts. Do you still use the term "Beauty"? Does any aspect or conception of "Beauty" have importance in your philosophy and practice?**

Yes, beauty is an important concept for me. It even appears in the title of the first book that won me a large international audience, *Pragmatist Aesthetics: Living Beauty, Rethinking Art* (1992), which has been translated into 14 languages, including German—as *Kunst Leben: Die Aesthetik des Pragmatismus* (Fischer 1994). You'll notice that "beauty" is dropped out of the title in the German edition and the French translation (Minuit 1992) also omitted the term "beauty." It was not a fashionable concept in the art world and in the academic world at that time. Aesthetics was focused on art rather than beauty, perhaps because beauty was too easily reduced to kitsch and superficial ideals of the advertising world. Actually, my original title for the book in English was *Living Beauty, Rethinking Art: A Pragmatist Aesthetics*. But my editor insisted I reverse the title and subtitle because "Living Beauty, Rethinking Art" sounded too vague and dreamy while "Pragmatist Aesthetics" would be clearer in meaning to an academic audience. Although beauty is an important concept for me, I don't try to define it because I do not think it permits a univocal definition. There are many different kinds of beauty, and I don't see how they fit neatly under a meaningful common denominator. Different traditional definitions of beauty—such as the classical ideal of unity in variety or Stendahl's "promise of happiness"—capture different aspects or kinds of beauty. No conceptual phrase captures all the variety of beauty or its power. Moreover, describing and defining beauty in a complex theoretical way typically diminishes the power of its pleasure.

**Do you see any connection between Feldenkrais work and Beauty? I remember Moshé Feldenkrais, approximately: "Making the impossible possible, the possible easy, the easy aesthetically appreciated."**

Yes, I think there is a connection, but in English we usually formulate the last phrase as making "the easy elegant." Somaesthetics argues that through better body awareness we can not only make our movements look more attractively smooth and elegant, but we can also experience the beauty we feel in making such better movements. Better body awareness enables us to be clearer about our feelings and thus to enjoy them more. But the value is not limited to pleasure. Better body awareness enables us to better recognize and manage our pains so that we can better manage, diminish, or avoid them and escape further injury.

**You wrote, that some of your colleagues or students began to practice Yoga and Tai Chi, but less Feldenkrais. I sometimes experienced the same. Do you have any guesses about this. I believe, this belongs not only to the academic world. Is it because ancient methods catch fascination, or the sometimes more "spiritual" or even "esoteric" approach? Do they miss the strong structures in the Feldenkrais work?**

There are probably many reasons why most people choose other somatic practices (like yoga or Tai Chi or even zazen) over Feldenkrais: these ancient methods have a long history of popularity and value; Feldenkrais Method is still a very young discipline. Yoga and Tai Chi have the appeal of exotic cultural otherness (which Feldenkrais lacks) but they are also more available in the contemporary marketplace. Another reason why Feldenkrais is less popular may seem trivial, but I think it is worth mentioning. The name "Feldenkrais" may be simple enough for Germans but this name is often very difficult for other Westerners and Asians to pronounce or spell, and thus to recognize or remember or talk about. Difficult names are harder to popularize, which is why advertisers take considerable efforts in naming a product." I hope that "Somästhetik" is not too difficult a name, although I chose it for conceptual reasons and without any thought of marketing. I still don't think in that direction; I'm too busy with my philosophical work.