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*New visual dialogues and new art forms in the urban space and at sea*

*The projects of Marit Benthe Norheim discussed and viewed  
in relation to Richard Shusterman's Pragmatist Aesthetics and  
selected works by Louise Bourgeois, Antony Gormley, Rirkrit  
Tiravanija and Superflex.*

Contribution to the conference

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THE RENOWNED AMERICAN PHILOSOPHER RICHARD SHUSTERMAN has interpreted pragmatist aesthetics in an original way. He has later developed this interpretation into a new interdisciplinary field of studies entitled “somaesthetics”, where the key word is that it is “the living body – a sentient soma” he is referring to and not “a mere mechanical corpse”.<sup>1</sup> The word “soma” comes from the Greek σῶμα, meaning “body”.

The notion of holism is central in his aesthetics. It is “*an orientation toward seeing things in terms of continuities rather than dualisms. We have already noted continuities between body and mind, nature and culture, theory and practice. But the continuities of common sense and scientific inquiry, science and art, thought and feeling, ethics and aesthetics are also salient in pragmatism.*”<sup>2</sup>

The Zen Buddhist notions of the union of the body and the mind, the mindfulness and the body-mind awareness also inspire Shusterman. He has described this inspiration as follows:

“*Zen Buddhist-style notions of art and religious practice offer a religion of immanence with no transcendental, personal God existing outside the world of creation; no eternal, personal, immaterial soul existing apart from its embodied manifestations; and no sacred world (an art world or heaven) existing beyond the world of experienced flux.*”<sup>3</sup>

He has always focused on social practice and political experimentation emphasising that truth must be relative to specific social contexts and practices. He is also convinced that philosophy can and must solve practical and social problems. Realising this goal has always been a leitmotif in the development of his pragmatist aesthetics.<sup>4</sup>

“*Pluralism*” is another keyword in his pragmatism because it points to openness and the sense that our world is in a continuous process of change, which ensures that unilateral approaches are always sidelined in favour of a multiplicity of “access routes”.<sup>5</sup>

Another key concept in Shusterman’s philosophy and aesthetics is art interpreted as experience.<sup>6</sup> Shusterman has a vital focus on lived experience and its influence on self-knowledge. The aesthetic experience is never passive, thus an artwork is never complete until the viewer has experienced and interpreted its particular qualities. This is why there is always an interaction between the artwork and the viewer and the viewing experience.<sup>7</sup> Experience is always connected to experimentation and also builds on the interplay between tradition and innovation.<sup>8</sup>

1 Shusterman, *Thinking Through the Body, Educating for the Humanities: A Plea for Somaesthetics*. This article was originally presented on April 6, 2006, at his inaugural lecture at the Dorothy F. Schmidt Eminent Scholar in the Humanities at Florida Atlantic University, Boca Raton, p. 3. [thinkingthroughthebody.net](http://thinkingthroughthebody.net). It was later published in the *Journal of Aesthetic Education*, vol. 40, no. 1, 2006, pp. 1-21.

2 Shusterman, *What Pragmatism Means to Me: Ten Principles*, *Revue française d'études américaines*, no. 124, 2e trimestre 2010, p. 64.

3 Richard Shusterman, *Art and Religion*. Full version of Prof. Richard Shusterman’s lecture given at JDRC in Kraków, March 12, 2008. [www.deweycenter.uj.edu.pl/tekst\\_shusterman.html](http://www.deweycenter.uj.edu.pl/tekst_shusterman.html) - See paragraph III

4 Shusterman, *Pragmatist Aesthetics: Living Beauty*. *Rethinking Art*, 2. ed., New York 2000, p. 45.

5 Shusterman, *What Pragmatism Means to Me: Ten Principles*, *Revue française d'études américaines*, no. 124, 2e trimestre 2010, p. 65.

6 *Interviewing Richard Shusterman. Part 1 in Action, Criticism and Theory for Music Education*, April 2002, vol 1. 1, p. 5.

7 Shusterman, *Intellectualism and the Field of Aesthetics: The Return of the Repressed?*, *Revue Internationale de Philosophie*, 220, 2002, p. 331. See also: Malecki, *op. cit.*, 25.

8 Shusterman, *What Pragmatism Means to Me: Ten Principles*, *Revue française d'études américaines*, no. 124, 2e trimestre 2010, p. 63.

Shusterman highlights “the immediate non discursive” non-linguistic experience as a very valuable source of experience and an epistemological foundation.<sup>9</sup> When he interprets “art as experience” it thus means that both the artist and the person experiencing the works operate on an open platform with a great deal of visibility.

Shusterman’s somaesthetics, which contains three keywords: Soma, Self and Society, are – as he has remarked – “*a natural extension of my work in pragmatist aesthetics. Bringing aesthetics closer to the realm of life and practice, I realised, entails bringing the body more centrally into aesthetic focus.*”<sup>10</sup>

His own precise definition of this discipline is as follows: “*Somaesthetics offers a way of integrating the discursive and nondiscursive, the reflective and the immediate, thought and feeling, in the quest of providing greater range, harmony, and clarity to the soma – the body-mind whose union is an ontological given but whose most satisfying unities of performance are both a personal and cultural achievement.*”<sup>11</sup>

Somaesthetics is thus both “a specific field of studies and methodic physical exercises”, which Shusterman – with his novel approach – has made a “subdiscipline of philosophy”. Its scope is clear in Shusterman’s definition of its three primary areas – where theory and practice are closely integrated:

1. Analytic somaesthetics “*describes the basic nature of our bodily perceptions and practices and their function in our knowledge and construction of reality.*”<sup>12</sup>
2. Pragmatic somaesthetics has a “*distinctly normative, prescriptive character – by proposing specific methods of somatic improvement and engaging in their comparative critique.*”<sup>13</sup>
3. Practical somaesthetics – which is the actual performance of somatic disciplines.

Shusterman points out that somaesthetics can also illuminate artistic expressions of rupture, abjection and disgust, which form a significant part of contemporary visual art.”<sup>14</sup> He thus draws a whole range of important artistic expressions into aesthetics, which also have a very important place in the art of our era.

Shusterman blames contemporary aesthetics for being too intellectual, “*emphasizing art as a symbol system or an object of mere cognitive interpretation, rather than an object of deeply felt experience.*” He is convinced that “*this stress on the power and value of aesthetic experience is (..) very important for the contemporary art world which seems to be losing its appeal for the general public because of its failure to create powerful aesthetic experience.*”<sup>15</sup>

In the following section we will highlight a series of artworks which have a “powerful appeal” and which have provided new experiences for many of the people who do not come into contact with art frequently and who have often

9 Malecki, *op. cit.*, 2010, p. 27.

10 Shusterman, *Somaesthetics at the Limits*, *The Nordic Journal of Aesthetics*, no. 35, 2008, p. 18.

11 Shusterman *Somaesthetics and the Revival of Aesthetics*, *Filozofski Vestnik* volume/letnik XXVIII number/Stevilka 2, 2007, p.148 - 149.

12 Shusterman, *Pragmatist Aesthetics, Living Beauty, Rethinking Art*, second edition, New York, 2000, p. 271.

13 Shusterman, *Pragmatic Aesthetics*, *op. cit.*, p.272.

14 Shusterman, *Somaesthetics and the Revival of Aesthetics*, *Filozofski Vestnik*, no 2, 2007, p. 141.

15 *Interviewing Richard Shusterman*, *op. cit.*, p. 5.

turned their backs on it because it has failed to make an impression on them. But these artworks also visualize major elements of Richard Shusterman's somaesthetics, in much the same way as this aesthetics can clarify important aspects in the artworks and place them in a new and promising context. These analyses also demonstrate that art can promote somatic consciousness and awareness, have a social or cultural goal or meet limit-experiences.

THE INTERNATIONALLY RENOWNED SCULPTOR LOUISE BOURGEOIS (1911-2010) is a prime example of an artist who – as Shusterman expresses it – “thinks through the body.” Her perception of our bodies and the body in art is best characterised by what Shusterman calls “a living body”, because “*all perception, cognition and action is crucially performed through the body.*”<sup>16</sup>

She was convinced that the artistic universe and her own life history were fused together. In her work the body – both her own body and the body in her sculptures – become, in a particularly unique way, what Shusterman calls a

FIG. 1

LOUISE BOURGEOIS  
Maman. 1999

Bronze, stainless steel and marble  
500 × 333 cm  
Nytorv – Copenhagen, Denmark  
Photo: Per Bak Jensen



16 Shusterman, *Somaesthetics at the Limits*, *The Nordic Journal of Aesthetics*, no. 35, 2008, p.18.

“means for communication”. She has expressed it herself as follows:

*“Since the fears of the past were connected with the functions of the body, they reappear through the body. For me, sculpture is the body. My body is my sculpture.”*<sup>17</sup>

Time after time she found that art could dissolve trauma, eliminate anxiety and that it can function as a liberating force. She expressed this view as follows:  
*“My sculpture allows me to re-experience the fear, to give it physicality, so I am able to hack away at it. Fear becomes a manageable reality. Sculpture allows me to re-experience the past, to see the past in its objective, realistic proportion.”*<sup>18</sup>

She has visualised this experience by focusing on what Shusterman calls “the critical, ameliorative study of one’s experience and use of one’s body as a locus of sensory-aesthetic appreciation and creative self-fashioning.”<sup>19</sup> The visualisation of this experience can be seen in her large works in the public space such as Maman (1999) (FIG. 1), which is a 5 meter tall spider, modelled in bronze which, with its body and many legs, symbolises a protective mother animal<sup>20</sup> and contains a specific reference to Louise Bourgeois’ own mother, who was a weaver. Louise Bourgeois described the work as follows:

*“The Spider is an ode to my mother. She was my best friend. Like a spider, my mother was a weaver. My family was in the business of tapestry restoration, and my mother was in charge of the workshop. Like spiders, my mother was very clever. Spiders are friendly presences that eat mosquitoes. We know that mosquitoes spread diseases and are therefore unwanted. So, spiders are helpful and protective, just like my mother.”*

The very sensuous sculpture Nature Study (1984) (FIG. 2)<sup>21</sup>, visualizes Louise Bourgeois’ concept of the body. The six breasts, the dog-like pose and the claws reveal her preoccupation with sexuality, motherhood and her determination to defend her family forcefully. She expressed it as follows:

*“It is not an image I am seeking. It is not an idea. It is an emotion you want to recreate, an emotion of wanting, of giving and of destroying.”*<sup>22</sup>

In both artworks the viewer is drawn into her the magical sphere of her art, and stimulated to experience it with the entire body and all its senses, because it is essential to move around her sculpture constantly in order not to miss any of the many surprising aspects it contains. Her works also demonstrate that the social and physical environments in which they are nested always shape the soma – our body and the body in the visual arts. Encountering her work gives you an understanding that visual art – unlike philosophy and literature – has an aspect that is immediately accessible. The work of art, created in a convincing way by the non-linguistic language of form, is a visible world full of presence and intensity.

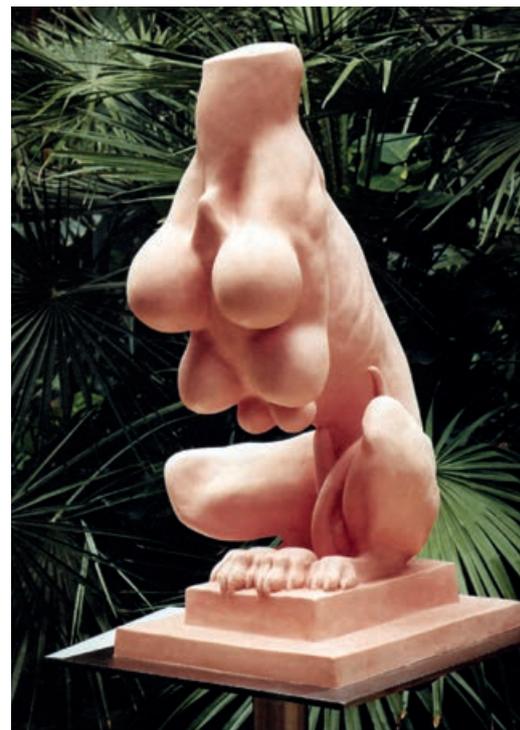


FIG. 2

LOUISE BOURGEOIS  
Nature Study. 1984

Latex. 76.2 × 48.3 × 38.1 cm  
Ny Carlsberg Glyptotek,  
Copenhagen, Denmark  
Photo: Ny Carlsberg Glyptotek

17 Louise Bourgeois, *Destruction of the Father. Reconstruction of the Father. Writings and interviews 1923-1997*, London, 1998, p. 228.

18 Louise Bourgeois, *op. cit.*, 1988, p. 228.

19 Richard Shusterman, *Performing Live: Aesthetics Alternatives for the Ends of Art*, Cornell University Press, 2000, p. 144.

20 Quote in [Wikipedia.org/wiki/Louise\\_Bourgeois](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Louise_Bourgeois)

21 See Else Marie Bukdahl, *The visual arts liberating power. On the relationship between life and art in Louise Bourgeois’ works in Carlsbergfondet, Yearbook, 2003*, pp. 161-162 and illustrations.

22 See [www.fantasyarts.net/bournature.html](http://www.fantasyarts.net/bournature.html)

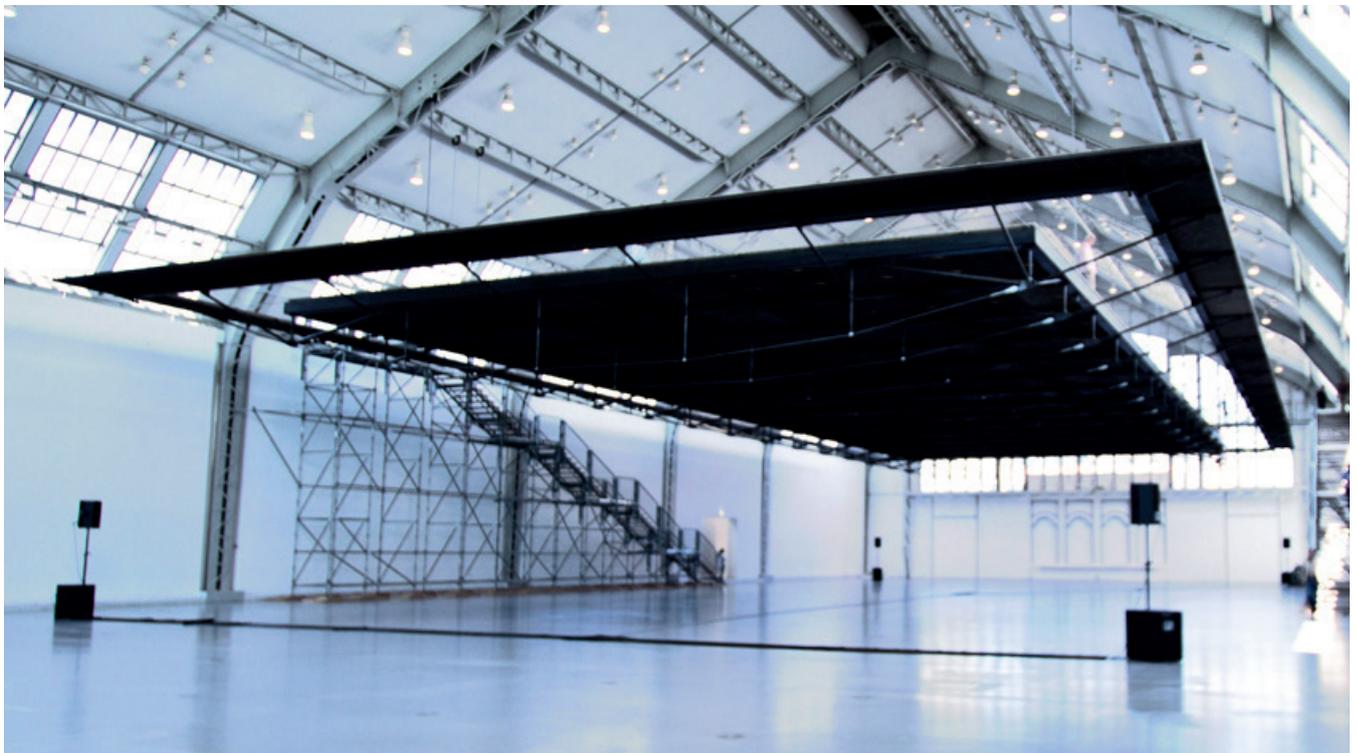
Shusterman highlights precisely these “two crucial aspects of art – intensity of presence and formal framing.” It is the formal or artistic evocative framework, “that differentiates what is framed from the ordinary flow of life.”<sup>23</sup> Louise Bourgeois’ sculptures are modelled with unmatched skill and resonant intensity. In principle, all irrespective of individual background and culture can experience visual art. Before the observer, art stands as a visible monument, installation or digital work. But the often numerous layers of meaning in art can be difficult to interpret, and they are never, and can never be, unequivocal.

ANTONY GORMLEY INTERPRETS HIS ARTWORK as “an attempt to materialise the place at the other side of appearance where we all live.”<sup>24</sup> Many of his works are created from forms moulded from his own body, because – as he says – this is “the closest experience of matter that I will ever have and the only part of the material world that I live inside.”<sup>25</sup> His works are not symbolic but contain traces of a real event or of a real body.

He describes his installations in urban and rural environments as “displacement”, “other places” or “energy fields”. All three key words can describe the very impressive installation in Deichtorhallen in Hamburg: Horizon Field Hamburg (2012) (FIG. 3). It is site specific and created for the great hall with a large window providing spectacular views of Hamburg. Dirk Luckow describes the installation as consisting of “a large, black, reflective, synthetic surface measuring 1200 square metres and which, suspended from a steel structure, horizontally spans almost the entire reach of the Deichtorhallen’s northern hall at a height of 7.4

FIG. 3

ANTONY GORMLEY  
 Horizon Field Hamburg, 2012  
 Large black, reflective, synthetic surface  
 Deichtorhallen’s Northern Hall  
 Hamburg, Germany  
 Photo: Trans-Pond



23 Richard Shusterman, *Somaesthetics at the Limits*, op. cit., p. 17.

24 Quoted in *Gormley: Making Space*, Beeban Kidron documentary, 2007, shown on Channel 4 UK, November 2009. [www.Channel4.com](http://www.Channel4.com).

25 Gormley, op. cit. 2007

metres. Rather like a large, lightly oscillating airborne raft, this object, weighing 70 tons, floats in space and can accommodate up to 100 visitors at a time.”<sup>26</sup>

Horizon Field Hamburg (2012) visualizes the goal of somaesthetics, which is to play an important role in the art of living. In this installation the artistic experience involves the whole body and uses it as living soma in new and startling ways. There is no doubt that “the experience of ascending onto the platform, of experiencing our visual, acoustic and physical impact on it – both individually and as a group – heightens our awareness (...) and reassesses our position in the world.”<sup>27</sup> (FIG. 4). In addition, new communities are established amongst the many people who find themselves on the platform. They dance, talk, enjoy themselves, rest and they are constantly placed in new and surprising situations which remove the boundaries between young and old and break down the differences in culture and working life (FIG. 5). Spontaneous joy flows through the crowd, which moves freely and boldly on the platform, which resembles “a piazza hanging in the sky”, a “dark pool” or a “deep lake frozen overnight”.<sup>28</sup> But participants also experience fear, anxiety and thrill. Gormley “plays on people’s fear of the limitless, the infinite, the unbound void: the oscillation of the platform feels as though the earth beneath one’s feet is being pulled away – the steadfastness of one’s own body disappears.” The many mirror effects create an undefined sense of space and the mirror image that the ceiling creates on the black reflective facade provides participants with a thrill, because they feel that they are stepping into the abyss and forget that they are walking on a black mirror. In addition, the “vaulted ceiling space extends beneath our own bodies into sheer infinity and engenders a floating sensation” (FIG. 6).<sup>29</sup>



FIG. 4

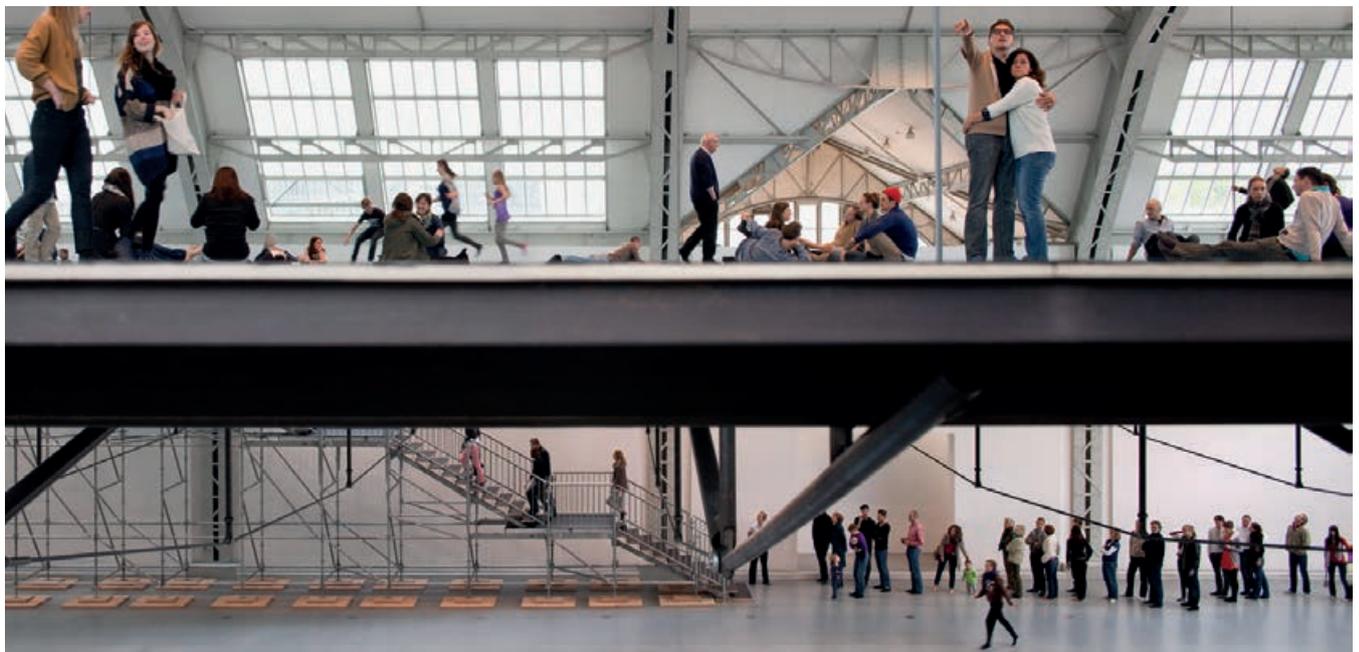


FIG. 5

26 Foreword by Dirk Luckow for the catalogue for the exhibition Antony Gormley Horizon Field Hamburg, Deichtorhallen Hamburg, Snoek, p. 16. The catalogue contains the following articles: Dirk Luckow, Unbounded Space, Stephen C. Levinson, A Swing for the Gods, Iain Boyd Whyte, Elevated Thoughts on a raised platform.

27 Iain Boyd Whyte, Elevated Thoughts on a raised Platform, pp. 139-140.

28 Stephen C. Levinson, A Swing for the Gods, op. cit., 2012, p. 82 and p. 86.

29 Dirk Luckow, Unbounded space – Antony Gormley’s Horizon Field Hamburg, op. cit., 2012, p. 44.

By being active participants in the completion of the artistic process, the guests in the exhibition are also provided with a more in-depth view of the process of artistic creation. It is they, after all, who are a very integrated part of the work. Dewey's key word "learning by doing" which is also centrally located in Shusterman's somaesthetics, becomes a reality.

Gormley has described the goal of his art as follows:

*"The best art for me always makes you turn your back on the work and face existence with the ability to see what you didn't before."*<sup>30</sup>

In Horizon Field Hamburg he has fully realised this goal.

FIG. 6



30 L. B. Whyte, *Elevated thoughts on a raised Platform in op. cit.*, 2012, p.140.

THE PROMINENT THAI ARTIST, RIRKRIT TIRAVANIJA, has presented surprising installations in Thailand, Europe and particularly in his country of residence, the USA. His installations often take the form of stages or rooms for sharing meals, cooking, reading and playing music. The architecture or other structures he uses always form the framework for different social events. E.g. the installation

Untitled (Free) (1992). He has described this installation in the following way:

*“So when you first walk in, what you see is a kind of haphazard storage space. But as you approached this you could start to smell the jasmine rice. That kind draws you through to the office space. And in this place I made two pots of curries, green curries. One was made how Thai restaurants in New York were making it. To counter that, on the other pot was a authentically made Thai curry. I was working on the idea of food, but in a kind of anthropological and archeological way. It was a lot about, the layers of, taste and, otherness.”*<sup>31</sup>

Tiravanija’s work is fundamentally about bringing people together, and thus creating a better world. His exhibitions are often created on surprising interactions and exchanges among participants. He has many times said that *“it is not what you see that is important but what takes place between people.”*<sup>32</sup> In his installations he is trying with success to bridge a mind-body gap that often exists in Western art. That is exactly what Shusterman has been doing in his somaesthetic theory and practice.

Tiravanija’s artistic goal is also realised in a very impressive way in the project he developed for the Secession in Vienna (2002) where he took Rudolf Schindler’s Kings Road House in Los Angeles as his conceptual starting point (FIG. 8). Rirkrit Tiravanija’s project is based on Rudolf Schindler’s House in Los Angeles and the visions behind it, which are significant not only for architecture, but also for art and the destruction of the false barrier between art and action, that often – as Richard Shusterman has put it – *“trivializes art and robs its power of positive praxis. For art’s highest aim is not to make a few admirable objects in a world filled with misery, but to create a better world through the work such object can generate.”*<sup>33</sup> Rirkrit Tiravanija has created a reconstruction of the studio tract of the so-called Schindler House in the main

RIRKRIT TIRAVANIJA  
Untitled (Free/Still),  
1992/1995, 2007, 2011



FIG. 8

RIRKRIT TIRAVANIJA  
The Interior of the rebuilt  
Schindler House.  
Exhibition View,  
Secession, Vienna. 2002.

31 See [www.moma.org/collection/object.php?object\\_id=147206](http://www.moma.org/collection/object.php?object_id=147206) and illustration.

32 [www.artandculture.com/users/5-rirkrit-tiravanija](http://www.artandculture.com/users/5-rirkrit-tiravanija)

33 Richard Shusterman, *A House divided, From the Documenta X (1997) catalogue on the work of Rosemarie Trockel and Carsten Höller.*

room of the Secession and used this as a scene for various activities that gives the exhibition guests new inspiration and reveals new layers of meaning in our daily life. Therefore Tiravanija's interest focuses less on a faithful architectural facsimile than on "animating" Rudolf Schindler's world of ideas, his concept of inside and outside in relation to the conditions of private and public spaces. To this Tiravanija adds his own ideas on relationships and communities, his characteristic conception of art as an investigation and implementation of "living well". Throughout the duration of the exhibition, the installation will be used as a venue for a multimedia program offered by Tiravanija and various guests, with features such as film screenings, concerts, presentations and lectures (FIG. 9).<sup>34</sup> Time to eat wonderful Thai meals is also part of the activities in the rebuilt Schindler House (FIG. 10). Tiravanija is very fond of Schindler's House in Los Angeles, built in 1922/1922. For in this house Schindler has not used the traditional architectural patterns. He has preferred to work with flowing spatial structures, which allow many new forms of spontaneously social life. There is also in the house interactions between the inside and outside which make new forms of communication possible. That is exactly the social aspects, which Tiravanija has intensified and "animated" in his installation.

FIG. 9

RIRKRIT TIRAVANIJA  
Discussions in Schindler House.  
Exhibition View. Secession,  
Vienna 2002



FIG. 10



RIRKRIT TIRAVANIJA  
Time to eat meals in Schindler House.  
Exhibition View. Secession,  
Vienna 2002

34 See Rirkrit Tiravanija, *Secession in Vienna. July 5-Sept. 1, 2002.*  
[www.secession.at/art/2002\\_tiravanija\\_e.html](http://www.secession.at/art/2002_tiravanija_e.html)

THE DANISH AND NORWEGIAN ARTIST MARIT BENTHE NORHEIM (born 1960) is known first and foremost for the many unique sculptures and installations – often on a large scale – which she has created in Norway, Denmark, England, Sweden, Iceland and Greenland. These works reveal new perspectives and communicate new patterns of meaning in the public space. They thus confer a new identity on the locations in which they are situated. Through her works she creates a closer and more personal contact with the audience and local population groups, raising questions of identity and the relationship between the individual and society. Like Shusterman, she is interested in how the power of art “can serve individual, social and political reconstruction” and support “the pursuit of perfectionist self-cultivation in the art of living”.<sup>35</sup> In her site-specific projects – in industrial plants, schools and other institutions – she has thus attempted to improve both the environment and the living quality of the people who live there. She has stimulated their imagination, and added a poetic dimension to a one-dimensional and often cold technological world. She has had what Shusterman calls “a meliorist goal of making things better (...) opening thought and life to new and promising options.”<sup>36</sup> Almost all Marit Benthe Norheim’s sculptures – mainly of women – are modelled directly in cement. They exude a formal simplicity, a particular sensibility and an intense expressive force. They are thus able to communicate new aspects of inner and outer reality. The art historian Trond Borgen rightly remarks that “Norheim uses the body as a symbol and metaphor for basic human emotions, experiences and attitudes.” Through her female figures she visualises her conception of the body which is the core in somaesthetics because she, as Shusterman expresses it, “treats the body not only as an object of aesthetic value and creation, but also as a crucial sensory medium for enhancing our dealings with all other aesthetic objects and also with matters not standardly aesthetic”,<sup>37</sup> especially the basic existential questions. She considers the body to be our primary means of engaging with the world, including our mental life.



MARIT BENTHE NORHEIM  
The Front of the Medal. 2002-2003

White concrete, used medals. H. 320 cm.  
Frisklivsenteret, Porsgrunn Sports and  
Cultural Center, Norway.  
Photo: Helge Hansen

MARIT BENTHE NORHEIM  
Five Camping Women. 2008  
A rolling sculptural installation made  
in relation to The European Capital of  
Culture Stavanger 2008. White concrete  
modelled over old functional caravans.



35 Shusterman, *Pragmatism and East-Asian Thought*, *Metaphilosophy*, vol. 35, 2004.

36 Shusterman, *What Pragmatism Means to Me in op. cit.*, p. 64.

37 R. Shusterman, *Pragmatist Aesthetics*, *op. cit.*, p. 278.

These views are visualised in her sculptural installation in the Sports and Cultural Center in Skien, Norway (FIG.11), where she has installed a male and a female figure which stand easily and elegantly on their heads. They are both covered in medals. In this work, Marit Benthe Norheim wanted to emphasise the positive and the life-affirming. Or as she expresses it:

*“The artwork must be positive, just like the building, which includes both sports and health, both the traditional and the new. We speak of the ‘flipside of the medal’ – a Danish phrase, which is the equivalent of the flipside of the coin. I want to put something on the front. Joy, pride and the work that lies behind every medal that we get.”*<sup>38</sup>

An important element in somaesthetics is what Shusterman calls *“to break the hold of object fetishism in contemporary art, aesthetics and culture.”* He calls this characteristic the *“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.”*<sup>39</sup>

To counteract such efforts at artistic isolation and to intensify the dialogue between art, the surroundings and people, Marit Benthe Norheim has created moveable sculptures with integrated music, thus creating in them a new time dimension, which constantly creates new surprise elements, which are capable of splintering the network of conventions, which envelop our everyday lives. These works are examples of vibrantly embodied art.

One of the last and most promising examples of her realisation of this goal is a rolling sculptural installation with Five Camping Women (2008). It consists of five large female sculptures, which are built on top of five working caravans (FIG. 12). Their interiors are filled partly with sculptures, partly photographs, partly porcelain mosaics. We meet five sensuous and forceful camping women: *The Refugee*, *Maria Protector/Virgin Mary*, *The Bride*, *The Siren* and *The Camping Mama*. In the interiors of each of the caravans, the renowned Norwegian composer Geir Johnson has composed or adapted music, which in a richly expressive manner, highlights the themes that each of the Camping Women symbolize. For example, the Camping Woman representing Maria Protector is



MARIT BENTHE NORHEIM  
The Camping Woman –  
Maria Protector. 2008.

*Outside.*  
White concrete. h. 4 m · l. 4.5 m.

FIG. 14

*The interior with sculptures,*  
*e.g. of Jesus Christ.*



38 Quoted in Else Marie Bukdahl's book: *Billedkunstneren Marit Benthe Norheim (The visual artist Marit Benthe Norheim)*, Copenhagen, 2005, p. 52.

39 R. Shusterman, *Somaesthetics at the Limits*, op. cit., p. 17.

a symbol of contemporary humanity's need for care (FIG. 13). Geir Johnson has interpreted the tension between the human and the divine aspect in *Maria the Protector* in his personal adaptation of Gregori Allegri's work of the 1630's, *Misere Dei*. In the interiors of the *Camping Woman* there are also sculptures, e.g. of the dead Jesus, who visualises God's love for humanity (FIG. 14). Another example is *The Camping Woman* representing *The Refugee*, for example, is a symbol of the fate of our immigrants (FIG. 16). She bends forward lithely and gazes – with both bravery and fear – into the foreign world that she has been forced to flee to. Inside the caravan, 400 children and refugee women from Stavanger created porcelain mosaics with motifs that express longing and loss (FIG. 15). In the poetry that Geir Johnson has created music for – and which fills the caravan's space – the famous Palestinian poet Mahmoud Darwish has, in his poem, *State of Siege* (2002), expressed both the pain and fear that are a part of daily life for the refugee. However, Darwish also points out the “*the malady of hope is incurable*”. Moreover, even though the refugees must live an uncertain existence, they are “eternity's guests”.

The *Bride*, who is the third *Camping Woman*, has a powerful erotic aura, struts on the caravan roof and embraces two human figures in her skirt (FIG. 18). Inside the caravan, where we hear wedding songs from around the world, the walls are papered with wedding photos, which show all the cultural differences, which exist in our society today (FIG. 17). The fourth *Camping Woman*, *The Siren* is a sensual female figure with a great seductive power (FIG. 19). The inner space of the caravan is covered with handprints – without a doubt impressions left from the many people she has met, loved, kept or left. Geir Johnson has composed the music – which is sung by the famous Norwegian singer Siri



MARIT BENTHE NORHEIM  
*The Refugee*. 2008  
*Interior. White concrete.*

FIG. 16

MARIT BENTHE NORHEIM  
*The Refugee*. 2008  
*Outside. White concrete.*



Torjesen – but it is constantly interrupted by her banal, often scolding remarks such as “*Why aren’t you coming, the coffee is getting cold*”. The seductive enchantment is broken and dissipated by the trivialities of the everyday. In the *Camping Mama* the same ambiguity appears (FIG. 20). She is a large and loving woman but captures those she meets in an almost suffocating net of care and security. This theme is underscored by singer Siri Torjesen, who sings the popular songs in which unimaginative security appears in a petit bourgeois world.

In the five *Camping Women*, Marit Benthe Norheim has created expressive sculptural interpretations of the ambiguous, the mysterious and the power of light and dark in women’s personalities. These women have set new points of reference in our everyday lives, provided us with new poetic inspiration and hope for the experience of new values and new meaning. They have stretched out a network, which expresses a materiality and an intensity that has been obscured by the technology of our information society. The many surprising connecting threads, which the *Camping Women* create between visual art, music, the adults’ and children’s worlds are extended in many new and unexpected ways. The *Camping Women* travel from location to location and have opportunities to establish new dialogues with the various people they meet.

The *Camping Women* directly engage the senses and imaginations of the audience. They create new orientation points or disseminate knowledge of reality, which cannot be mediated by the verbal language. They also incorporate the viewer in a very active way, in the sense that he or she can enter into the caravans, meditate, listen to music, discuss or study the photos, sculptures or other works that are inside. When it comes to the artist and the viewer, this is an example of a totally embodied experience, creation and perception.



MARIT BENTHE NORHEIM

*The Bride*. 2008

*The interior with photos of brides.*



MARIT BENTHE NORHEIM, *The Bride*. 2008. *Outside*. White concrete. H. 4 m · l. 4.5 m. Private collection.

Her next, very interactive project – the Life-boats – will be integrated into a European framework. She is working on creating three sculptures in cement, which will become functioning boats, shaped as monumental female figures. They will be 12m in length. The three sailing women are **My ship is loaded with:**

- I. **Longing** – the young one, entering into the world.
- II. **Life** – in the middle of life and fertilised
- III. **Memories** – the aging or the dead.

The first piece is finished in a very evocative manner. (FIG. 21). The Life-boats are destined for voyages on the European canals and will create different and surprising activities in the harbours in which they dock. Marit Benthe Norheim emphasizes that the *“life-boats project is about meetings, about exchanges (..) about daring to move into unknown territory (..) I will, as with several of my previous projects, be using direct participation and direct involvement in the process, both in the production phase as well as on the journey.”*



MARIT BENTHE NORHEIM

The Siren. 2008.

Outside. White concrete.

h. 4 m · l. 4.5 m.

Private collection.

FIG. 20

MARIT BENTHE NORHEIM, Camping Mama. 2008. Outside. White concrete. H. 4 m · l. 4.5 m. Private collection.



THE THREE DANISH VISUAL ARTISTS Bjørnstjerne Christiansen, Jakob Fenger and Rasmus Nielsen formed a project group in 1993 that they called SUPERFLEX. And they have already gained international recognition for their projects, which are based on new technology but also function on a conceptual level and use social processes and networking as their working material. Their solo exhibitions include Basel Kunsthalle, Mori Museum in Tokyo and in Los Angeles, London, Porto Alegre, Brazil, Bangkok. Their projects are represented in MoMA, New York, Queensland Art Gallery, Jumex collection, Mexico and other Museums and art collections. They were all educated at the Royal Danish Academy of Art and are former students of mine. They describe their most important aim with their often site-specific projects as follows:

*"We are three members of SUPERFLEX and are joined by various international collaborators on individual projects. Since 1993, we have worked on a series of initiatives involving issues such as energy production in developing countries, Internet television studios for specific neighbourhoods and communities and brand name copy production in South East Asia. Though very different, all these projects relate closely to questions of power relations and democracy. We are interested in using our position as artists to explore the contribution that the field of art can make to social, political and economic change. At a time of extreme disillusion with the current representative system and hysteria around immigration and security, it is our suggestion that some possible new ways of thinking and acting can be found through the activity of art and artist."*

There are some clear parallels between the aims of SUPERFLEX and one of the keywords in Shusterman's original development of pragmatism. This deals with what he calls "community" which he characterizes as "an indispensable medium for the pursuit of better beliefs, knowledge, and even for the realization of meaning through language and the arts." He is convinced that "community is not only a cognitive theme in pragmatism but an aesthetic, ethical, and political one, and it contributes to pragmatism's fundamentally democratic orientation. Pragmatists have offered cognitive, ethical, and aesthetic arguments for democracy."

SUPERFLEX describe their projects as Tools that invite people to take part in the creation of their experimental models which often are aimed at changing the economic and cultural conditions in various societies, both in the East and in the West. Shusterman also emphasises the active, creative elements in the experience of art, even though he expresses it in more general terms: *"aesthetic experience is not a passive purposeless affair of disembodied contemplation but rather involves the active somatic engagement of purposive perceptual discrimination."*



SUPERFLEX

Supergas biogas system, 2002

*The land in Cheing Mai, Thailand*

Researchers like Troels Degn Johansen and Åsa Nacking have included SUPERFLEX projects under the heading of relational art. This art form was developed by Nicola Bourriaud in 1998 in his book *Esthétique relationnelle* (Relational Aesthetics, 2002). His definition of relational art is a description of what is precisely the central element of Superflex's projects. He describes this art form as “a set of artistic practices which take as their theoretical and practical point of departure the whole human relations and their social context, rather than an independent and private space.” This type of art is, according to Åsa Nacking, also called “socializing art” because it comprises elements of interactivity and because “its most noticeable characteristic is its socializing effect. This is a type of art that wants to bring people together and to increase understanding for each other and for our own situation.” Bourriaud indicates that artists like Rirkrit Tiravanija and Carsten Höller are prominent examples of artists who work with relational art. It is precisely these artists that Shusterman highlights in his writings. According to him it is “obvious that art is an essentially relational enterprise, especially due to its fundamentally communicative dimension.” In an interview by Aude Launay on Biological Aesthetics he tells us, that he admires “some European artists of such “relational orientation” e.g. Rirkrit Tiravanija, and Philippe Parreno. He met them at an Art and Experience event in Venice (2004) organized by the Ital-

FIG. 23  
 SUPERFLEX  
 Supergas biogas system, 2002  
 The land in Cheing Mai, Thailand



ian art critic Maurizio Bartolotti. But even if Shusterman has clear sympathies with their artistic and social aims, his “*aesthetic theory does not regard them as essentially superior to other ways of art making.*” His “*theoretical position is more pluralistic. There are many ways that art can express its inescapably relational condition and our essentially social existence.*”<sup>40</sup> Höller had a great “*interest in Pragmatist Aesthetics’ themes of full bodied, participatory aesthetic experience and the blurring of the established oppositions between life and art, the aesthetic and the ethical, knowledge and amusement.*” That is why he asked Shusterman in 1996 to write the text for the provocative House of Pigs and People he created together with Rosemarie Trockel for Documenta X in 1997.<sup>41</sup>

SUPERFLEX have “*since 1996 has collaborated with European and African engineers to construct a simple biogas unit that can produce sufficient gas for the cooking and lightening needs for a family living in rural areas in the Global South. In August 1997, SUPERFLEX installed and tested the first Supergas biogas system running on organic materials, such as human and animal stools. The experiment was carried out at a small farm in central Tanzania, in cooperation with the African organisation SURUDE (Sustainable Rural Development). The biogas plant produces approx. 3-4 cubic metres of gas per day from the dung from 2-3 cattle – enough for a family of 8-10 members for cooking purposes and to run one gas lamp in the evening.*” A new version of the Supergas system, using hard water containers, was installed in 2002 at The Land in Cheing Mai (FIGS. 22, 23). The Land was founded in 1998 by Rirkrit Tiravanija – together with Kamin Lerdschaiprasert. It is a collaborative educational-ecological project known also as The Land Foundation, located in the northern part of Thailand, near the village of Samphong, not far from Chiang Mai. “*The project combines contemporary art interventions and agricultural traditional values; the six-hectare land is intended to be cultivated as an open space or community free from ownership, and residents and artists are welcomed to use a plot of land as a laboratory for development’ cultivating rice, building sustainable houses, or channeling solar power. Tiravanija is also part of a collective alternative space located in Bangkok, where he maintains his primary residence and studio.*”<sup>42</sup>

In their Internet art projects SUPERFLEX has succeeded in “*making things happen by establishing and ‘staging’ a variety of relations between individual human ‘agents’ and investigating their development in a computer-mediated communication environment.*”<sup>43</sup>

40 *Biological Aesthetics. Richard Shusterman, an interview by Aude Launay in 02. Revue d'art contemporain trimestrielle et gratuite/été 2008, no 48 with English texts.*

41 *Shusterman's documenta text “A House Divided” was reprinted in C. Höller and R. Trockel, A House of Pigs and People, Köln, 1997, pp. 31-35.*

42 See [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rirkrit\\_Tiravanija](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rirkrit_Tiravanija)

43 *Troels Degn Johansson, op. cit., p. 20.*



FIG. 11

MARIT BENTHE NORHEIM

Longing – the young woman  
entering the world. 2008 – 2012

*Belongs to the series Life-boats. A sailing  
sculptural installation in ferrocement.*

*H. 4.2 m · L. 12 m · W. 3 m.*

*Private collection.*

LOUISE BOURGEOIS', ANTONY GORMLEY'S, RIRKRIT TIRAVANIJA'S, MARIT BENTHE NORHEIM'S and SUPERFLEX works visualise – as we have seen – some basic elements in Shusterman's somaesthetics, particularly when it comes to embodied creation and perception, the interactive dialogue with the viewer and the surroundings, the unification of art and experience as well as the hope of being able to inspire and benefit life. But it is precisely this aesthetic, which has also revealed new aspects of the works of the artists discussed here. It has thus demonstrated that it can provide artists, in this precise and intense way, with a new and stimulating understanding of the body's role in the arts as a resource for working on the problems of creating and interpreting art and improving the quality of our life and the society as such.

The famous Chinese artist Pan Gongkai knows that body consciousness plays an important role in contemporary Chinese and Japanese painting and should have a more central place in Western art and aesthetics.

Shusterman has told us, that in the projects, created by Pan Gongkai, "*West and East coexist in active harmony and moving beauty, without an isolating separation, but also without coercive fusion.*"<sup>44</sup> Shusterman has interpreted this point of view in the following way:

*"If it were indeed possible, aesthetics could really be a wonderful bridge between cultures, even warring ones. But if aesthetics cannot be ultimately separated from a culture's underlying religious attitudes, then it may not be feasible to realize this possibility in our imperfect world until we also work not only through but beyond aesthetics to transform our cultures and religious attitudes in the direction of deeper, more open-minded understanding."*<sup>45</sup>

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<sup>44</sup> *Aesthetic Transaction, op .cit., p. 22.*

<sup>45</sup> *Richard Shusterman, "Art and Religion". Full version of Prof. Richard Shusterman's lecture given at JDRC in Kraków, March 12, 2008. [www.deweycenter.uj.edu.pl/tekst\\_shusterman.html](http://www.deweycenter.uj.edu.pl/tekst_shusterman.html) see paragraph V.*

PHOTOGRAPHIC CREDITS:

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*The photos of Marit Benthe Norheim's projects are provided courtesy of Marit Benthe Norheim, Claus Ørntoft and Niels Fabæk.*

*The Photos of the installation by SUPERFLEX are created by themselves.*



*Else Marie Bukdahl giving her lecture and displaying an image of *The Front of the Medal* by Marit Benthe Norheim, who assists her.*



*Else Marie Bukdahl giving her lecture and displaying an image of *Horizon Field Hamburg* by Antony Gormley, assisted by Marit Benthe Norheim.*



*Else Marie Bukdahl giving her lecture and displaying an image of *Maman* by Louise Bourgeois, assisted by Marit Benthe Norheim.*