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Interviewing Richard Shusterman

Part I

Lauri Väkevä
lvakeva@ktk.oulu.fi

This part of the interview was made via email in May 2000. Dr. Shusterman kindly replied to a series of questions concerning the role of pragmatism in contemporary philosophy, the new approaches to John Dewey's thought, pragmatist aesthetics in art and music education, and the Finnish-translated book, Pragmatist Aesthetics *(Shusterman 1997a).*

LV: There seems to be a general renaissance of pragmatism gaining hold within many disciplines, including aesthetics and educational philosophy. Why do you think pragmatism has attained new popularity both sides of the Atlantic? Is there a need for these revitalized pragmatic standpoints, especially in current theory of art and in related fields? Are there competing positions in the new stream of pragmatic thought, e.g., those following Rorty and other relativists contra "traditional" pragmatists? Do you think that postmodern philosophy and classical pragmatic standpoints cohere enough to justify these positions? Is there a deep contradiction in doing pragmatic philosophy in analytic terms?

RS: Yes, there has been a significant revival of pragmatism in the United States and to some extent also in Europe since the mid-1980's. From the 1950's to the mid-1980's pragmatism was very much eclipsed in the States by analytic philosophy imported from England and the continent (e.g. Carnap). However, in areas like education, which were very central to Dewey's interests but completely marginal to analytic philosophy, there remained throughout this time a core of philosophers who

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were faithful to the pragmatist tradition, but they had little influence on the main philosophical scene in America. (I should mention that Dewey's great interest in education was not only expressed in theoretical writings -- many

articles and his famous book *Democracy and Education* (LW 9), but also in practical work. He set up a very influential experimental school in Chicago.)

I first got deeply interested in pragmatism when I came to teach in the United States in the mid-eighties. I think the main reasons for my interest in pragmatism are typical for many philosophers. First, there was the feeling that analytic philosophy was not making the sort of progress it had initially hoped for. It was still good as a critical tool and method, and its best work seemed to be in progressively criticizing its own founding theories, notions, and projects: those enunciated by G.E. Moore, Bertrand Russell, the early Wittgenstein, Frege, the Vienna Circle. But secondly, there was the excitement I felt about continental theories of poststructuralism (Foucault, Derrida) and the Frankfurt-school (especially Adorno and Walter Benjamin). Continental philosophy seemed to deal with larger, more politically relevant questions and issues that analytic philosophy seemed to almost completely ignore. But the style of much continental theory seemed too unclear, inadequately argued, and undisciplined for my tastes. Pragmatism, as James and Dewey practiced it, seemed to provide the model of how to combine the clear arguments and common sense of analytic philosophy together with the large and socially important issues of continental philosophy. My book *Pragmatist Aesthetics* (Shusterman 1997a), by treating particular problems and topics in the philosophy of art, also tries to show how pragmatism is a very fruitful middle way between the analytic and continental traditions of philosophy.

The most influential pragmatists in the United States (Richard Rorty and Hilary Putnam) are those who, like myself, turned from analytic philosophy to pragmatism. These two philosophers and Nelson Goodman and Joseph Margolis (also important analytic philosophers of art who then expressed strong pragmatist tendencies) are all older philosophers who have had a very helpful influence on my work, even if I very often disagree with them. Putnam and Margolis are far more interested in traditional metaphysical questions than Rorty or I am, and they are far less subjectivistic and voluntaristic than Rorty. But I also do not share the extremity of Rorty's sense of contingency and idiosyncrasy. As I argue in a number of my books, Rorty's treatment of contingency confuses what is not absolutely necessary with what is merely arbitrary and accidental. He thus does not give adequate attention to the power and justifiability of social norms,

and to the biological nature of human beings. He tends too easily to dismiss both the social sciences and natural sciences. He focuses on literature as the way to self-salvation and social improvement. I differ not only from Rorty but from all the other pragmatists I mention by insisting on the value of the non-linguistic dimension of experience (the other philosophers tend to equate experience with linguistic experience and Rorty rejects the notion of experience altogether) and on the importance of attention to a bodily dimension of philosophy, which I partly pursue through the notion of philosophy as a way of life.

The other significant area where my work is very different from theirs is in my attention to popular art as a valuable source for reviving aesthetic experience and directing new energy to social and political causes. My positions are in some ways postmodern, but they are not nihilistic or relativistic in the sense that anything goes or that any view is as justifiable as any other. Though in some of writings I have, for polemical and didactic purposes, sharply contrasted analytic aesthetics to pragmatist aesthetics on several key points, I don't think it is impossible to combine analytic philosophy and pragmatism, especially if we think of analytic philosophy more as a method or style of argumentation. Goodman, Putnam, Rorty, Margolis, Stanley Cavell, and myself combine ideas and methods of analytic philosophy with certain general pragmatist orientations that the classic pragmatism of Peirce, James, and Dewey made famous: orientations that are less about breaking things down and tracing them back to their ultimate foundation and more about looking forward to see how their consequences work in practice.

LV: What about the role of Dewey's aesthetics today? What does Dewey's aesthetics have to offer for the current art world? What difference would it make if we thought of the arts pragmatically? What implications do you see that it would hold for art education? What about the art politics in general?

RS: In some ways, Dewey's aesthetics seem obsolete even for the artworld of the time in which he wrote his famous book *Art as Experience* (LW 10). Though he wrote in the 1930's his taste in plastic art did not really extend past turn of the century post-impressionism. He never really came to grips with cubism and other very influential movements. Similarly, while Dewey affirmed in principle the right of people to enjoy popular art and suggested its potential to give aesthetic experience to those people, he himself did nothing in

his writings to make a real case for the aesthetic value and legitimacy of the popular arts. He seemed to recognize that popular art would need to be seriously discussed and written about in order to gain adequate cultural legitimacy, but he himself failed to provide such writing. To fill in these disturbing gaps in pragmatist aesthetics, I had to develop my own theories that relate to popular art and contemporary art practices. I explain this more in detail in *Pragmatist Aesthetics* and my new book *Performing Live*, but also in an article "Popular Art and Education" that is also published in Finnish (1997b).

What inspired me about Dewey's aesthetics is his stressing of the value of experience, deeply felt and fully embodied experience, in the appreciation of art. Most contemporary aesthetics has tended to be overly intellectualist, emphasizing art as a symbol system or an object of mere cognitive interpretation, rather than an object of deeply felt experience and intense pleasure. This stress on the power and value of aesthetic experience is I think very important for the contemporary artworld, which seems to be losing its appeal for the general public because of its failure to create powerful aesthetic experience. I discuss this in a controversial paper called *The End of Aesthetic Experience* (1997c) and further in *Performing Live* and in French book of 1999 *(La fin de l'experience esthetique)*. Dewey is important in affirming the value of aesthetic experience and in insisting on its natural roots, but (as I argue in my book in Finnish and in these newer texts), he makes a mistake by trying to simply define art as experience and by tending to view aesthetic experience simply as foundational historic constant without adequately recognizing its historical and cultural modifications. Nonetheless, Dewey's democratic openness and his interest in integrating art and life are very pertinent and valuable for art today, including the idea of the art of living.

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LV: In the 1990's there appeared pragmatic tendencies in Anglo-American philosophy of music education in the form of praxial philosophies. Among

other things, these standpoints want to distance themselves from the aesthetic positions, and center on the notion of music as a form of praxis, or as signifying practice. Another thing these positions suggest is to pay attention to the world musics and popular music practices as suitable materials for music education. How do you see these developments in relation to the development in the general theories of art?

RS: Unfortunately, music education is not my specific field and I do not know the work of the American philosophers of music education. Still I can easily understand their interest in turning from traditional views of musical aesthetics that focus on the identity and sanctity of the musical work, which is therefore often considered to be an ideal transcendental form. This position is usually called platonism in musical aesthetics. In contrast, I think it is more fruitful and accurate to adopt a more pragmatic praxial view that treats music as a practice. For pragmatist aesthetics, it is clear that we have no musical works without practices of playing and listening, which themselves are embedded in wider social practices. There is, of course, a musical artworld as well as the visual arts' artworld. Analytic aesthetics has been talking since the late sixties about the "artworld" and its practices. But many of the philosophers who correctly view art and music as social practices of signification, fail to explain or even recognize sufficiently the ways in which these signifying practices are embedded into wider cultural and social practices that determine to some extent the nature and possibilities of our art practices.

Pragmatist aesthetics therefore tries to go a bit beyond the internalist approach by recognizing the wider social issues that frame artistic practices of creation and reception. That is why my discussion of popular art and of rap is quick to consider the major social and political issues that they raise. By focusing on popular music and different world musics, we find a good way to break out of our habit of thinking about music in terms of transcendental works of genius so as to understand them better in terms of practices of creating, playing, and hearing. So I think you are right that there is a logical connection between practice-oriented aesthetic theory and a greater openness to musical expression beyond the classical and established modernist tradition. My position (as expressed in *Pragmatist Aesthetics* and *Performing Live*) is of course a position that emphasizes art as practice, but I

argue that praxial theories too often tend to ignore the dimension of experience, so I insist especially on that dimension, as did Dewey.

LV: Your Finnish-translated book dealt with a considerably controversial subject of rap music. Do you see a larger tendency of choosing study objects from the traditionally repressed or otherwise avoided repertory, like e.g. Afro-American cultures? Are there any parallels with the critical tradition-oriented approaches here?

RS: Everyone who interviews me always asks me about my choice of rap music as a subject for a whole chapter of my book. Almost every newspaper article about my book had either ”rap” or ”hip hop” in the article title (almost none used the word ”pragmatism” in their title), even though rap is only one chapter of a book that had 9 chapters in its original English version. I think my book got more media attention than most other books in aesthetics because of my treatment of rap. I published my book already back in 1992 when rap was still reasonably fresh and was just beginning to make its mark in the cultural consciousness of society (even if it had in fact existed since the mid-seventies – I in fact first published a long article on rap in 1991). Rap grew to be a worldwide phenomenon, and I think the media attention and potential probably helped get my book translated into several languages: French, German, Finnish, Polish, Portuguese, Japanese, Korean, Slovak. But I had no idea of this when I was writing the book. I knew nothing of marketing and did not choose rap for marketing reasons. I studied it because of two kinds of reasons: First, at that time, I very much liked listening (and dancing) to rap. The genre was still not overly commercialized, there was still the living tradition of Grandmaster Flash and African Bambaattaa, but also the most important new work of Run DMC, Public Enemy, BDP, and Ice-T. But secondly, I thought that rap was extremely interesting as an art form and especially interesting for the philosophy of art. Rap was particularly exemplary of some of the most important and distinctive themes of pragmatist aesthetics: that the creation and appreciation of art should be actively embodied, that art’s cognitive and practical functions should be more significantly recognized and emphasized (which also means that art can have an effective practical use in education), that popular art can claim and deserve aesthetic legitimacy, that questions of aesthetic legitimacy involve also wider

social and political issues that aesthetics cannot therefore ignore.

Rap makes all these points in various ways. It insists on the dimension of movement and dance for its appreciation, and on the transformative power of aesthetic experience; it claims to be not only music and poetry but also philosophy and a kind of non-technical science which can be useful for life; rap artists often identify themselves as teachers and rap affirms the notion of "Edutainment" (education through entertainment), which is the name of an album by KRS-One. Rap has been used to teach reading and writing in some urban schools; and it has also been active politically, causing even Presidents of the U.S. to engage in critical debate with rap representatives. (Of course, gangsta rap has also taught some bad lessons that have emerged in several famous shooting incidents between rap stars; so it is important to emphasize the more positive messages of rap, taught by the more positive "knowledge" rappers). In its struggle to acquire cultural recognition, rap has often made the point that political and social oppression are the structuring background of the failure to appreciate the aesthetic potential of their music; and rappers also make it clear that their struggle for cultural and aesthetic recognition is part of a larger struggle to improve the general social status of the black urban youth population from which the music originated. Success in a musical career can mean money that can then provide opportunity for wider emancipation. All these points are developed in much more detail and with concrete examples in my book. So, because rap seemed so clearly to manifest the themes I wanted to stress in my pragmatist aesthetics (including the idea that such an aesthetics should deal with contemporary aesthetic forms and not just old and already established works of art), rap seemed a natural choice of genre. I never imagined that rap would become the center of media attention to the book. Perhaps I was naïve, but I was surely lucky that the public controversy over rap contributed to interest in my aesthetic theory.

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Leaving aside the issue of being controversial, I think that it is important to study cultural forms that have not yet received adequate aesthetic attention, even

if these cultural forms are not at all repressed. Take American country music, for example, which is the topic of a long chapter of my new book, *Performing Live* (Cornell University Press, 2000). Country music is the music of the mainstream majority in America and was never censured or publicly attacked in the way that rap has been. But country music, even more than rap, is generally scorned by intellectual culture as aesthetically worthless kitsch, and thus fails to receive serious philosophical-aesthetic analysis that could better reveal its value. Because there is some country music I find worthwhile, I wanted to understand and better appreciate the source of appeal of this music, rather than just assuming the consensus view that condemns country as worthless and shallow. So in terms of the pragmatist theory of William James, I develop an argument that shows the aesthetic qualities, values, and strategies of this music and that also explains how some of our traditional philosophical prejudices blind us to what is worthwhile in country music. In the same book, I also do a similar job of critical but sympathetic and reconstructive analysis for a variety of contemporary body disciplines that have an important and explicit aesthetic aspect.

Let me conclude by reminding readers that my pragmatist aesthetic is not directed against the established genres of high art, only against their frequent claims of exclusivity. As you know, my book also contains the analysis of the high modernist poetry of T.S. Eliot. I just think that so much aesthetic analysis is devoted on the established genres of high art that it is important also to study forms of aesthetic expression that are as yet less legitimized and studied, though they are socially and culturally very significant. Moreover, it is important to study these less legitimized forms by considering them in aesthetic terms of meaning and value, in much the same way that we study the canonized works of high art, rather than simply approaching these popular but less legitimized forms of cultural expression merely in terms of sociological or ethnographic analysis – as we typically do for the cultural expressions of alien or primitive cultures. The popular arts are part of our lives and can play a profound role in our experience, so we should enable them to play this role more successfully through aesthetic criticism and interpretation of those arts. We cannot assume, as some educational theorists have argued, that these arts are so clear and transparent to everyone that they do not need to be explained and should have no place in our school curriculum. But I make this point more

extensively in an article called "Popular Art and Education", which, as I already mentioned, has been published in Finnish (1997b).

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