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Interviewing Richard Shusterman

Part 2

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Note: This part of the interview took place at the Hotel Helka in early June, 2000, after Dr. Shusterman arrived in Finland to give a keynote lecture "Art as Dramatization" at the AWE symposium. The first part was published in Finnish Journal of Music Education (vol. 5, no. 1-2), but this is the first publication of this portion of the interview.

LV: In what terms do you understand the current relationship between philosophy of education and philosophy in general in the United States?

RS: Most philosophers and philosophical institutions have unfortunately disrespect for

education and philosophy of education, even though for Plato and Rousseau and Dewey education was at the heart of philosophy. Most philosophy departments do not even teach philosophy of education on a regular basis, and so I guess that the ordinary philosophers do not bother to read or even know about the work of educational thinkers.

LV: Is this because of the influence of the analytic tradition which pretty much neglected the pragmatist tradition?

RS: Partly, but I think it is also deeper than that. I think it is because philosophers have

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generally focused on what they consider to be essential issues like philosophy of language, epistemology, metaphysics and philosophy of mind. But in any case, we have little contact with people that do philosophy of education.

There have been in the United States, after Dewey died and still today, groups of philosophers that remained interested in pragmatism. They did not have much public resonance or influence in the field and they were mostly located in the Midwest—which does not mean that they were not any interesting or good, it is just that they did not play a big role within the dominant institution of philosophy. So for instance when I learned about pragmatism, it was never through those people, it was only because the people who were more accepted in the analytic framework began to be interested in pragmatism.

LV: Do you think that there was a conscious neglect of the American philosophy or thinking?

RS: Yes, I think that there was a conscious neglect. I would not say of American philosophy, but I would say of American pragmatism in the traditional Dewey and James way for three reasons. The first was because people were tired of the influence that Dewey had, because he was very influential in the public eye. The other reason was that not only American but also other philosophers were fascinated and intrigued by analytic philosophy and logical positivism. The whole idea of the new logical methods was very attractive and influential in the 1950's. Partly also, because many great European philosophers came to England and the United States as refugees from Nazism.

Their influence was very strong and they attracted a lot of young students. Also, a lot of people became interested in Wittgenstein. It was all very new and European cultural prestige helped. And then, I guess the third thing was that some American philosophers combined the ideas of pragmatism and these new logical ideas. I guess that two best examples are W.V.O Quine and Nelson Goodman, both of whom were very interested in logical positivism and studied with Carnap. They also used ideas that they had learned at Harvard that were connected with pragmatist tradition, because there were people in Harvard—the main one of these was C.I. Lewis—who had studied pragmatism and been influenced by Dewey. For instance, in Quine's article *Two Dogmas of Empiricism* (1951/1953), both of the dogmas he criticized were earlier criticized by Dewey, though not in the same kind of language. So I think that the third reason for

neglecting Dewey was that many of his ideas were already absorbed by American philosophers, but they did not think that they needed to give Dewey credit for them.

LV: So do you think that there is a kind of ‘common sense pragmatism’ at least hinted in most of American thinking, even within the empiricist-analytic tradition?

RS: I think that it is not simply a ‘common sense pragmatism’, but that several pragmatist ideas were absorbed through a new generation of teachers who had learned pragmatism but preferred the style of analytic philosophy. Probably you are right. There is, in pragmatism, a sense of the American openness to experimentation and experience and the idea of looking towards the consequences and not just back at origins that constitute a New World. There was

always a lot of the pragmatist tradition that was absorbed almost un-consciously in American thought but there was also simply the desire to do something more technical and precise than what Dewey did. I understand this because Dewey is not always a very clear and attractive writer in philosophy. That is one of the reasons he is hardly translated into French. I tried for several years to have his *Art as Experience* translated but so far with no success. It was easier to get my book *Pragmatist Aesthetics* translated.

LV: But Dewey’s style hit with the teachers.

RS: You're right. I guess that the people who work in education might be more receptive to Dewey's practical ideas about educating for democracy. They also might

like the way his writing is not technical in the way analytic philosophy is. But according to what you say about the music education praxiologists, they seem to be more influenced by Aristotle than by Dewey. There may be some parallels, of course.

LV: Do you think that there is a new opening of the philosophy to the more practically oriented people?

RS: Yes, I think it is not only because of pragmatism, but also because of two important trends. One trend is the marginalization of philosophy in general in society. That is very hard for you to understand, I think, because in Finland, as well as in France and Germany philosophy has a big cultural importance. Very often in France, Germany and in Austria, if there is a conference that I am invited to, I have to do the opening, because they like to start with

the philosophy. And therefore in Europe it is very hard to imagine, especially in countries with strong philosophical traditions, that philosophy could be very marginal and unimportant. But what is happening in a country like United States, because of the newness and the practical orientation of the spirit of the country, we do not have this big respect for philosophy. In modern times philosophy is finding it harder and harder to justify itself. Because of its marginalization, philosophy is being forced to deal with practical problems, and therefore subjects like applied ethics are becoming increasingly active.

A second reason for a practical turn in philosophy is closely related. Practical philosophy is making more and more impact also outside the academic profession of philosophy because applied philosophers can get jobs even outside university. For instance bioethics, which raises the issues of abortion,

bioengineering, euthanasia, etc., is a discipline recently demanded by many hospitals and health care services. Such institutions employ philosophers and ask for philosophical answers to issues of practice. Business ethics has also become more important. In short, since the whole profession of philosophy is less traditionally powerful in the American culture and because these new practical issues are seen to be important in American society, American philosophy is becoming more open to practical things. I just learned that even in Finland you have people who are interested in philosophical counseling! That is another practical use for philosophy but one that mainstream philosophy in America is still very suspicious of. To conclude, it is partly the pressure from the outside world that created this openness to the practical, but the revival of pragmatism has also helped.

Maybe there is some kind of background connection here, although it is not very clear.

LV: Some of the neo-pragmatic ideas appear to be recycled and taken back to the United States via European philosophy, like in the case of later Wittgenstein, who was, I understand, influenced by James and Dewey when he was teaching in Austria.

RS: I am not sure of Dewey, but James was a big indirect influence on Wittgenstein in two areas. I know for sure that Wittgenstein read carefully James' work in psychology and so parts of *Philosophical Investigations* and other related writings, that had to do with philosophy of psychology, actually mention James. He was very critical of James' ideas relating to will and kinesthetic sensation. The other area that he read James a lot was in the philosophy of religion. He was an admirer of

James' *Varieties of Religious Experience*. Wittgenstein's view of religion is a bit like James' and pragmatism's in that he does not think of religion in terms of propositional

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truth. However, Wittgenstein did not call himself a neopragmatist and did not accept the term pragmatism, partly because he saw it much in the way that Russell saw it, that is, as pragmatism in the vulgar sense of immediate practical payoff. But does pragmatism circulate back through Europe to create neopragmatism? Beyond Wittgenstein, I'm not that sure. It is true for example, in the way Habermas and Apel learned a lot from Mead, Dewey and Peirce, but their work has not been very influential on neo-pragmatism.

LV: There's also feedback through Piaget and Vygotsky in psychology, as well as through the new philosophy of cognition, and perhaps also through Heideggerian philosophy.

RS: Heidegger and the others are in some ways reactions against the Cartesian way of doing things that has been dominating European philosophy. Sometimes, when I have given my thoughts about pragmatist aesthetics in Europe, people have asked me if I was inspired by Asian or African philosophies, and I always used to get shocked and wonder why they would think like this. Then I realize that pragmatism, like these other philosophies, is a way of rejecting a lot of the orientations and established presumptions and methods that are central in the Cartesian and Kantian tradition. Because pragmatism seems so different from the

dominant European tradition, people thought my work must be influenced by Asian or African philosophies. On the other hand, pragmatism did absorb a great deal of European philosophy; it just mixed the European traditions into something excitingly new.

There is in Europe more interest in pragmatism than there used to be. In Germany, it is taken more seriously than in France. Rorty, particularly, has not been taken very seriously in France. He is taken as an enemy of truth and not respected as much as he deserves to be respected. I guess I have been fortunate in that the French have not really hit me with that criticism but I guess that is because most of my translated work is in aesthetics and again, and I am not as extreme in my relativism as Rorty is.

LV: In *Pragmatist Aesthetics*, you mentioned that you were much influenced by Adorno.

RS: I do not think that I could have appreciated Dewey if I had not appreciated Adorno. Adorno was someone who made it clear to me that aesthetic questions have to be understood also in terms of a larger social field that includes the field of political struggle. If you don't have that awareness, then Dewey just seems to be talking about things that are not related to "real" aesthetic issues. You have to appreciate the way that aesthetic issues are nested inside real historical contexts and social/ideological environments to be able to appreciate Dewey's theories of art and experience, art and society and his critique of the museum concept of art, which is largely a social critique. I guess that Adorno was very helpful in having, like Dewey, an emphasis

on aesthetic experience, even though he also has a very strong criticism of the dangers of aesthetic experience as purely immanent *Verstehen*. So Adorno was one of the people, like Heidegger, Gadamer and Benjamin, who criticized the concept of aesthetic experience for certain things but also realized that it is very important. Most Anglo-American philosophers, after Dewey and Beardsley, just condemned or ignored the concept altogether.

LV: Another thing that you put emphasis on in your book is the aspect of popular art, which is also kind of a thing that traditional aesthetics avoided.

RS: That I did not get from Adorno. I got a bit of it from Dewey, but this is in Dewey always a problem. Dewey did not actually do anything for popular art and he did not

actually write very much about it, even though he said that it needs to be recognized. It was the same thing about the somatic experience, which he mentions but does not write about much. By the way, there is a second edition of *Pragmatist Aesthetics* in English (Shusterman 2000a), which has a new introduction, where I respond to major lines of criticism against the first edition. Also, there is a whole new chapter of somatic aesthetics, which I call 'somaesthetics', which I am developing in my current work (see *ibid.* ch. 10).

LV: In the first chapter of the Finnish version of *Pragmatist Aesthetics* (Shusterman 1997), you wrote this little history of art theory, which ended in ideas that appear to converge with the current 'praxial' movement in the philosophy of music education, which sees music basically

as signifying practice. Do you think that Deweyan philosophy could bring something new to that concept?

RS: I think that art is usefully understood as signifying practice, but I think that definitions of art simply as practice, especially if taken in an MacIntyrean kind of way, that do not also emphasize experience and the larger goals in which that practice is situated, have the kind of danger of making art too much limited to the artworld and its ideology. So my point in that chapter was really to argue the paradox that Dewey was right to define art as experience, even though that philosophically, in formal terms, it is a bad definition: both too wide and too narrow in scope. But it is a useful definition because it points to things that definitions like ‘signifying practice’ leave out or at least do not sufficiently emphasize. I think that pragmatism fits very well into the idea of

‘praxiological’ approaches to art, but I also think that what is left out of the analytic and the praxiological definitions is the way the practice is embedded and connected with the wider practices and with the wider world, and secondly, they need to consider, what sort of natural elements of purposes get served by that practice.

My lecture at Kiasma (Shusterman 2000b) is going to be a lot on this topic, not on the topic of art as practice, but on two

So my point...was really to argue the paradox that Dewey was right to define art as experience, even though that philosophically, in formal terms, it is a bad definition...

different approaches to art, dominating the aesthetics of today, both of which, on their own, I think, are wrong. One is the naturalist and the other the conventionalist approach.

Some of the formulations of the praxiological theories focus too narrowly on the conventions of practice, leaving out the naturalistic element. However, I think that pragmatism clearly advances the idea of art as practice while also insisting on art's natural roots. It is not that practice and experience are incompatible, it is just that some of the theories of practice in the analytic tradition have sort of obscured the idea of experience and also the larger practices of life in which art practices are situated.

LV: Have you found any parallels between African American aesthetics and pragmatic thought?

RS: I actually have another paper on that subject (Shusterman 1999; see also Shusterman 2000a, x). Between Emerson

and Dewey, there was an important African American philosopher, Alain Locke, whom Dewey must have known about, and who had views I would characterize as pragmatist aesthetics. Locke was the major philosophical force in the Harlem Renaissance. The problem with Locke, similar to Dewey, is that his own taste is still very classical and dominated by high art. It is true that Locke wrote lovingly also about Negro Spirituals, and even favorably about jazz. But he had no appreciation of the blues, which was also an important musical force at that time for African American culture. More generally, he still felt classical style concert music to be the desired ideal, and his hopes were that themes from popular Negro music could be one day transformed into a high art classic. He did not think Gershwin's attempt to classicize the popular was very successful. In any case, Locke was well versed in pragmatist philosophy and was taught by

pragmatists at Harvard, for example, by a student of William James. So I think that there are some important connections between African American aesthetics and pragmatist aesthetics, even before the work of John Dewey.

In general, I think that African American culture has the pragmatic spirit of openness, experience, *metisage*, earthiness, and also the aspect of somatic embodiment. For me, since I was a child, African American music was my favorite. (Now my favorite music, generally, is Brazilian.) When I went to high school, in the breaks, there would always be two groups of people singing. One group sang Italian type of rock music, like the Four Seasons, working on the harmonies. Another was the soul music group, which I preferred to listen to. Also, I always had interest in dancing. I just got tired of the great divide between what I experienced and

enjoyed in music and art in general and what I had to write about.

LV: Do you practice music yourself?

RS: As child I had some piano lessons, but I did not like it too much. From the age fourteen to nineteen I played the guitar, but I never had any formal training.

LV: Do you still have your guitar?

RS: No. I miss it sometimes, but not enough to buy a new one and to take the time to practice seriously. Time is the main problem. I do not know whether I will take up playing music again because there are so many other things that I must do or want to do. Playing the guitar was something, however, that I liked to do, or at least that is

how I remember it. Perhaps playing music again will be something to look forward to when I retire. But that seems a very long way ahead.

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