



PROJECT MUSE®

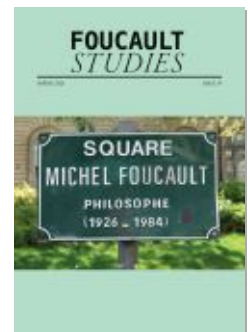
*Foucault's Aesthetics of Existence and Shusterman's
Somaesthetics* ed. by Valentina Antoniol and Stefano Marino
(review)

Silvia Capodivacca

Foucault Studies, Issue 39, Spring 2026, pp. 286-289 (Review)

Published by University of Pennsylvania Press

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/fou.00038>



➔ *For additional information about this article*

<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/988235>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License.

[81.56.64.10] Project MUSE (2026-04-24 07:15 GMT)

REVIEW

Valentina Antoniol and Stefano Marino (eds.), *Foucault's Aesthetics of Existence and Shusterman's Somaesthetics*. London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2024. 195 pp. ISBN: 9781350384804 (cloth).

What is the role of the body in contemporary life? It occupies an ambiguous position, both central and neglected. On one side, the body is highly visible—not only in philosophical discussions but also in media and social narratives—often subjected to intense objectification. In this hyper-visibility, the body is treated as a project to be refined and reshaped, whether through cosmetic surgery or other enhancements, molded to fit ideals of beauty and perfection. On the other side, our experience of the body is increasingly overshadowed by the digital sphere, where interactions take place in virtual spaces that seem to transcend the physical. As we shift more of our lives online, the body risks being sidelined in favor of avatars and digital identities.

At the same time, the body is increasingly conceptualized as a hybrid site, an intersection of the organic and the digital. Practices inspired by transhumanism,¹ such as biohacking and cybernetic enhancements, treat the body not as a static biological entity but as a platform open to continuous upgrades. These shifts challenge us to reconsider what it means to be embodied and whether it is still possible to speak of an “authentic” body in an era of technological integration.

The arts have powerfully mirrored and interrogated these philosophical and societal tensions surrounding the body. The “body art” movement, in particular, underscores the body as a space for aesthetic creation, experimentation, and critical reflection. Marina Abramović’s *Rhythm 0* (1974) starkly revealed the body’s vulnerability by inviting her audience to interact with her using objects ranging from a feather to a loaded gun, exposing the fragility and agency of the human form. Similarly, Gina Pane, in works like *Action Sentimentale* (1973), transformed her own physical pain into a medium of symbolic expression, cutting her skin to explore themes of sacrifice, suffering, and connection. Chris Burden’s provocative performance *Shoot* (1971)—in which he was intentionally shot in the arm—confronted audiences with the unsettling spectacle of violence, questioning societal desensitization to bodily harm. Stelarc’s cybernetic performances, such as the *Third Ear Project* (2006–2007), extended this interrogation into the realm of technology, merging flesh with machines to challenge the perceived boundaries of the body and its evolution in a digital and post-human age. In their works, the body becomes simultaneously subject and object, an interface of endurance, vulnerability, and transformation.

¹ On this topic, see Nick Bostrom, *Superintelligence* (2014) and Kevin Warwick, *I, Cyborg* (2002).

In this context, *Foucault's Aesthetics of Existence and Shusterman's Somaesthetics: Ethics, Politics, and the Art of Living* revisit the intersections between the body, art, and philosophy, shifting attention from the body as an artistic medium to life itself as an aesthetic project. The essays collected in the volume foreground the body as both a subject of philosophical reflection and a site of critical agency, reaffirming its centrality to the art of living. Rather than examining the body as a medium for creating art, as seen in body art practices, they emphasize the cultivation of life as a holistic and intentional creation.

This perspective, as presented by the book's editors, reframes existence as an ongoing aesthetic endeavor, where individuals shape their lives into cohesive and meaningful works of art. By doing so, it redefines the philosophical relationship between life and thought, suggesting that embodiment is not merely a condition of existence but a dynamic and creative engagement with the world. Through this lens, life itself becomes an ethical and artistic act, integrating the physical, emotional, and intellectual dimensions of being into a unified whole. In this view, as proposed by Michel Foucault and developed further by Richard Shusterman, the focus is not only on intellectual engagement but also on practices of self-cultivation that blend ethics, aesthetics, and politics into a unified "art of living." Foucault's and Shusterman's reflections encourage a return to the question of how philosophy, instead of merely interpreting life, can actively contribute to the creation of a richer, more meaningful existence.

The edited volume successfully unites two interpretations of the multifaceted term "aesthetics." On one hand, it advocates for a renewed sensitivity to artistic themes, exploring questions about life as an art form and how creative self-fashioning intersects with ethical and political practices. On the other hand, it revisits issues of perception and sensibility, a vital dimension of both the concept and discipline of aesthetics. This dual approach enriches the discussion by merging reflections on aesthetic experience in a broad sense with an examination of embodied perception as a fundamental aspect of the human condition. In doing so, the book lays the groundwork for an exploration of two central figures whose ideas are intricately interwoven throughout: Michel Foucault and Richard Shusterman.

Foucault's work is pivotal for his concept of the aesthetics of existence, a theme he developed during his 1980s research on the care of the self. This inquiry revisits Greco-Roman Antiquity, examining ancient practices of self-cultivation as a means to rethink the relationship between subjectivity and truth in contemporary contexts—what he referred to as an ontology of the present. For Foucault, the imperative to care for oneself (*epimeleia heautou*) holds primacy over the pursuit of self-knowledge (*gnōthi seauton*). He examines a tradition in which self-knowledge is considered attainable only through the active practice of self-care, exploring its various historical expressions. His engagement with the philosophical traditions of the Cynics, Epicureans, and Stoics—often dismissed as "minor" philosophies—highlights the enduring significance of their practices of freedom, resistance, and ethical self-fashioning.

A particularly insightful contribution to this dialogue comes from Daniele Lorenzini's essay, which explores the intersections between Foucault's aesthetics of existence and

political praxis. Lorenzini emphasizes the Cynic tradition as a model of living scandalously and truthfully, in defiance of prevailing social norms. His analysis demonstrates how ascetic practices can serve as acts of resistance, both personal and public. By focusing on the body as a locus of both discipline and liberation, Lorenzini highlights the political implications of Foucault's concept of self-care and its potential to challenge contemporary power structures.

The second key philosopher prominently discussed in the volume is Richard Shusterman, who contributes an original essay crafted specifically for this collection. In his essay, Shusterman underscores the deep and often overlooked connection between his philosophical work and that of Michel Foucault. This relationship is not incidental or marginal but rather forms a foundational aspect of Shusterman's thought, aligning closely with the editors' central thesis and solidifying the grounds for a meaningful comparison between these two influential thinkers.

At the core of Shusterman's philosophy is *somaesthetics*, a term he introduced to define a discipline that integrates aesthetics with the *soma*—the living, sentient body. Somaesthetics involves the critical analysis and reflective cultivation of the body as both the site of subjective experience and a medium of aesthetic expression and self-fashioning. It examines not only how we perceive and engage with the world through our embodied presence but also how we actively shape and stylize ourselves through practices such as care, grooming, movement, and posture. By placing embodied experience at the forefront, Shusterman expands the traditional scope of aesthetics beyond art and beauty, delving into lived bodily practices that aim to enhance well-being and foster ethical self-transformation.

In his essay, Shusterman examines the ways in which his somaesthetic inquiry aligns with and further develops ideas found in Foucault's aesthetics of existence. While both philosophers advocate for a conception of philosophy as a "way of life" that extends beyond academic theorization, Shusterman's focus on the somatic dimension emphasizes the significance of sensory awareness and body-conscious practices. By incorporating concrete somatic disciplines—such as martial arts, dance, Feldenkrais, and mindfulness training—into philosophical discourse, Shusterman enriches and expands Foucault's analysis, demonstrating that the "art of living" must also encompass the art of embodied living.

Foucault's Aesthetics of Existence and Shusterman's Somaesthetics naturally carries profound political implications. This is particularly evident in the contributions of Chris Voparil, Barbara Formis, and Leszek Koczanowicz, who explore how embodied practices intersect with social structures and political struggles. Their work highlights the ways in which practices of self-care and body-consciousness can challenge, subvert, and reimagine dominant political and social norms, offering pathways to both individual and collective transformation.

Chris Voparil engages with the challenge of ethical self-transformation in the context of white privilege, arguing that cultivating a new embodied sensibility can promote alternative, more inclusive forms of subjectivity. By conceptualizing whiteness as a performative style rather than a fixed identity, he suggests that practices of self-stylization offer

a meaningful pathway toward dismantling entrenched power dynamics and fostering social equity.

Barbara Formis shifts the focus to the relational and reciprocal aspects of embodiment, connecting aesthetic practices to feminist critiques of traditional notions of subjectivity. Her analysis highlights how bodily practices, rather than being neutral or apolitical, can serve as acts of resistance and solidarity, enabling the creation of more equitable and supportive communities.

Leszek Koczanowicz grounds the discussion in the concrete political context of Poland, particularly the 2020 women's protests against restrictive abortion laws. Introducing the concept of *somapower*, an extension of Shusterman's somaesthetics, he emphasizes the body's emancipatory potential as a political agent. Through embodied acts of protest that reclaim public spaces, these movements illustrate how the body itself becomes a critical site of political struggle and defiance against oppressive policies.

In conclusion, *Foucault's Aesthetics of Existence and Shusterman's Somaesthetics* illustrates that aesthetics, ethics, and politics are not isolated realms but deeply intertwined, unified by a central theme: freedom. Whether expressed through individual self-cultivation, artistic creativity, or collective acts of resistance, the contributions in this volume underscore that the art of living is inextricably linked to the pursuit of liberation. This publication thus represents a vital contribution to contemporary philosophical and political discourse, offering fresh insights into the ways in which embodied practices can shape more ethical and emancipatory modes of existence.

References

- Bostrom, Nick, *Superintelligence: Paths, Dangers, Strategies*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014.
- Warwick, Kevin, *I, Cyborg*. Champaign, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2002.

Author info

Silvia Capodivacca
 silvia.capodivacca@gmail.com
 Pegaso University
 Italy

Silvia Capodivacca is Associate Professor of Aesthetics at Pegaso University. She has held visiting research appointments both at Columbia University and the City University of New York (CUNY). Her research focuses on contemporary German and French philosophy, especially Nietzsche, Deleuze, and Foucault.