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*His authored books include *Surface and Depth* (2002); *Performing Live* (2000); *Practicing Philosophy: Pragmatism and the Philosophical Life* (1997); *Sous l'interprétation* (1994), *Pragmatist Aesthetics: Living Beauty, Rethinking Art* (1992, 2nd edition 2000); *T.S. Eliot and the Philosophy of Criticism* (1988); and *The Object of Criticism* (1984). His most recent book, *Body Consciousness: A Philosophy of Mindfulness and Somaesthetics* was published by Cambridge University Press. It provides the most detailed formulation of his project of somaesthetics.*

SOMAESTHETICS AND ARCHITECTURE

*A Critical Option*¹

I

This paper explores the use of somaesthetics for architecture, paying special attention to the vexed issue of criticality. However contested the disciplinary status, definition, and function of architecture may be, the field of architecture is thoroughly familiar to this audience, while somaesthetics is probably still a mystery that demands an introduction.² Rooted in the classical pragmatist tradition that regards experience as a crucial philosophical concept while affirming the body as the organizing core of experience, somaesthetics can be briefly defined as the critical study and meliorative cultivation of how we experience and use the living body (or soma) as a site of sensory appreciation (aesthesis) and creative self-fashioning. It is therefore also concerned with the knowledge, discourses, practices, and bodily disciplines that structure such somatic care or can improve it.³ Somaesthetics is thus a discipline that comprises both theory and practice

1 The indefinite article in the subtitle of this paper is meant to emphasize that somaesthetics is being proposed here as merely one critical option for architecture. It is not being proposed as the only option or even the most important option, but simply as an option that I think is promising and worth considering for certain issues here discussed. I believe we need a plurality of tools in our critical toolbox; and such pluralism will prevent us from mistaking the loss or eclipse of one critical mode for a loss of criticality altogether.

2 In an earlier paper I delivered to an architectural audience, I concluded by evoking the term somaesthetics but had no space to expand on it. See Richard Shusterman: "On Pragmatist Aesthetics," in Joan Ockman: *The Pragmatist Imagination* (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 2000), pp. 116–120.

3 For initial formulations of this project, see Richard Shusterman: *Practicing Philosophy*:

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(the latter clearly implied in its idea of meliorative cultivation). The term “soma” indicates a living, feeling, sentient, purposive body rather than a mere physical body that could be devoid of life and sensation, while the “aesthetic” in somaesthetics has the dual role of emphasizing both the soma’s perceptual role (whose embodied intentionality contradicts the traditional mind/body dichotomy) and its aesthetic uses in stylizing one’s self and one’s environments but also in appreciating the aesthetic qualities of other selves and things. Somaesthetics was conceived to complement my basic project of pragmatist aesthetics by elaborating the ways that a disciplined, ramified, and interdisciplinary attention to bodily feelings, methods, and performance could enrich our aesthetic experience and practice, not only in the fine arts but in the diverse arts of living.⁴ It originated as an attempt to overcome the rejection of functionality, embodiment, and desire that largely defines the Western tradition of philosophical aesthetics from Shaftesbury and Kant through Schopenhauer into the present, despite the fact that body and desire are so prominent in Western art and literature, even in its religious forms.

Pragmatism and the Philosophical Life (New York: Routledge, 1997); “Somaesthetics: A Disciplinary Proposal,” *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, 57 (1999), pp. 299–313; *Performing Live* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2000). The most comprehensive account of somaesthetics is in my *Body Consciousness: A Philosophy of Mindfulness and Somaesthetics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008). For some of the more interesting elaborations and critical discussions of somaesthetics by other scholars, see, for example, Martin Jay: “Somaesthetics and Democracy: Dewey and Contemporary Body Art,” *Journal of Aesthetic Education*, 36 (2002), pp. 55–69; Eric Mullis: “Performative Somaesthetics,” *Journal of Aesthetic Education*, 40, (2006): pp. 104–117; Shannon Sullivan: “Transactional Somaesthetics,” in her *Living Across and Through Skins* (Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 2001); Cressida Heyes: “Somaesthetics for the Normalized Body,” in her *Self-Transformations* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007); and Wojciech Malecki: “Von nicht diskursiver Erfahrung zur Somästhetik,” *Deutsche Zeitschrift für Philosophie*, 56 (2008), pp. 677–690.

4 For an articulation of that project, see my *Pragmatist Aesthetics: Living Beauty, Rethinking Art* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1992); 2nd edition (New York: Rowman and Littlefield, 2000), which has an additional chapter devoted to somaesthetics.

Somaesthetics is a complex field with three fundamental branches that involve multiple aspects. *Analytic somaesthetics* explores the diverse forms of somatic perceptions and practices and their function in our knowledge and construction of reality. Besides topics in philosophy of mind, ontology, and epistemology relating to the mind-body connection and the role of somatic factors in consciousness and action (whose study extends into physiology and neuroscience), analytic somaesthetics also includes the sort of genealogical, sociological, and cultural analyses that Foucault so powerfully introduced: how the body is both shaped by power and employed as an instrument to maintain it, how bodily norms of health and beauty and even the most basic categories of sex and gender are constructions sustained by and serving social forces.

Pragmatic somaesthetics is a more normative branch concerned with methods of somatic improvement and their comparative critique. Over the course of history, a vast array of methods have been recommended to improve our bodily experience and use: diverse diets, gymnastic training, martial and erotic arts, dance, aerobics, bodybuilding, cosmetics, massage, yoga, and Western disciplines of psychosomatic improvement like the Alexander Technique and the Feldenkrais Method, in which I am professionally trained. We can distinguish between holistic methods and more atomistic methods that focus on particular body parts or surfaces. Somatic practices can also be classified in terms of being directed primarily at the individual practitioner herself or instead primarily at others. A massage therapist or a surgeon works on others but in doing t'ai chi ch'uan or bodybuilding one is working more on oneself. The distinction between self-directed and other-directed somatic practices cannot be rigidly exclusive, since many practices are both. Applying cosmetic makeup is frequently done to oneself and to others; and erotic arts display a simultaneous interest in both one's own experiential pleasures and one's partner's by maneuvering the bodies of both self and other. Moreover, just as self-directed disciplines (like dieting or bodybuilding) often seem motivated by a desire to please others, so other-directed practices like massage may have their own self-oriented pleasures.

Despite these complexities (which stem in part from the interdependence of self and other), the distinction between self-directed and other-directed body disciplines is useful for resisting the common presumption that to focus on the soma implies a retreat from the social. My professional training as a somatic educator-cum-therapist has taught me the importance of caring for one's own somatic state in order to pay proper attention to one's client. In giving a Feldenkrais lesson of Functional Integration, I need to be aware of my own body positioning and breathing, the tension in my hands and other body parts, and the quality of

contact my feet have with the floor in order to be in the best condition to assess the client's body tension, muscle tonus, and ease of movement and to move him in the most effective way. I need to make myself somatically very comfortable in order not to be distracted by my own body tensions and in order to communicate the right message to the client. Otherwise, when I touch him, I will be passing on to him my feelings of somatic tension and unease. Because we often fail to realize when and why we are in a state of slight somatic discomfort, part of the Feldenkrais training is devoted to teaching how to discern such states and distinguish their causes.

Somatic disciplines can further be classified as to whether their major orientation is toward external appearance or inner experience. Representational somaesthetics (such as cosmetics) is concerned more with the body's surface forms while experiential disciplines (such as yoga) aim more at making us feel better in both senses of that ambiguous phrase: to make the quality of our somatic experience more satisfying and also to make it more acutely perceptive. Much of my recent book, *Body Consciousness: A Philosophy of Mindfulness and Somaesthetics*, focuses on the project of experiential somaesthetics by examining the modes and uses of heightened somatic consciousness as a way of critically analyzing and resisting contemporary culture's obsessive focus on advertised representations of external body norms of beauty that are oppressively used to stimulate feelings of inadequacy that impel us to buy products in the usually hopeless quest to meet those norms.

Of course, the distinction between representational and experiential somaesthetics is one of dominant tendency rather than rigid dichotomy. Somatic practices typically have both representational and experiential aspects (and rewards), because there is a basic complementarity of representation and experience, outer and inner. How we look influences how we feel, and vice versa. Practices like dieting or bodybuilding that are initially pursued for representational ends often produce inner feelings that are then sought for their own experiential sake. Just as somatic disciplines of inner experience often use representational cues (such as focusing attention on a body part in meditation), so a representational discipline like bodybuilding deploys experiential clues to serve its ends of external form, using critically trained awareness of muscular feelings to distinguish, for example, the kind of pain that builds muscle from the pain that indicates injury.⁵ This paper

⁵ As experiential and representational somaesthetics are not mutually exclusive categories, they are also not exhaustive. Some somatic disciplines might be more distinctively classified as more performative than representational or experiential. Such disciplines are devoted primarily

will suggest how heightened experiential somaesthetic awareness can be critically deployed in the experience and design of architecture. But a corollary or reciprocal suggestion is also implied in my arguments: that architecture might in turn be critically deployed to promote more discriminating somaesthetic awareness.

Besides the analytic and pragmatic branches of somaesthetics, we also need what I call *practical somaesthetics*, which involves actually engaging in programs of disciplined, reflective, corporeal practice aimed at somatic self-improvement (whether representational, experiential, or performative). This dimension of not just discoursing about somatic disciplines but systematically performing them is too often sadly neglected in academic approaches to embodiment, but it is crucial to the idea of somaesthetics as practice as well as theory.

II

Somaesthetics should be pertinent for architecture if the soma is, and though this pertinence should be obvious, let me briefly highlight some features of the soma's architectural centrality. First, the body—as a composite structure through which we live—is symbolically understood through tectonic notions. This symbolic connection extends from ancient Greek philosophers like Plato, Roman architects like Vitruvius and early Christian thinkers like St. Paul, through Renaissance writers like Henry Wotton, and all the way into modern scientific critics of religion such as Freud.⁶ As Plato analogized the body's architectural structure to a prison, so Vitruvius and St. Paul highlighted the body-temple analogy: Vitruvius in terms of their attractively symmetrical proportions of parts to whole, while St. Paul

to increasing strength and performance; for example, weightlifting (as distinct from bodybuilding), martial arts, athletics, gymnastics, etc. But to the extent that such performance-oriented disciplines aim either at the external exhibition of strength and skill or, alternatively, the inner feelings of those powers, we can assimilate them into either the dominantly representational or experiential mode.

6 Plato's famous image is most influentially evoked in the *Phaedo* (82d); Vitruvius: *The Ten Books on Architecture*, trans. M. H. Morgan (Cambridge, Mass. Harvard University Press, 1914), parenthetical page references to this text will be to this edition. Henry Wotton, in *The Elements of Architecture* (London, 1624 and based on Vitruvius) advised his architectural viewers "to pass a running examination over the whole edifice, according to the properties of a well shaped man." For more details on Wotton and 17th-century English architecture, see Vaughan Hart: "On Inigo Jones and the Stuart Legal Body: Justice and Equity...and Proportions Appertaining," in George Dodds, Robert Tavernor, and Joseph Rykwert (eds.): *Body and Building* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2002), pp. 137-149; citation 138. Freud explains the body-house analogy in his *Introductory Lectures on Psycho-analysis* (lecture 10), see the James Strachey edition (New York: Norton, 1966), p. 153, p. 159; see also Freud's *The Interpretation of Dreams*, translated by A.A. Brill (New York: Modern Library, 1950), pp. 125-126.

“The body is the storm-center, the origin of coordinates, the constant place of stress in [our] experience-train. Everything circles round it, and is felt from its point of view.”

William James

emphasizing “that your body is the temple of the Holy Ghost that is in you” (1 *Corinthians* 6:19), an analogy that gets secularized by the time of Freud, whose interpretation of dreams identifies the house as the dream-work’s symbol for the body, the place where one’s far from immaculate psyche is housed.

Besides this symbolic linkage, the soma fundamentally shapes some of the most basic concepts of architectural design. Consider the following features.

1. If architecture is the articulation of space for the purposes of enhancing our living, dwelling, and experience, then the soma provides the most basic tool for all spatial articulation by constituting the point from which space can be seen and articulated. To see the world at all, we must see it from some point of view, a position that determines our horizon and directional planes of observation, that sets the meaning of left and right, up and down, forward and backward, inside and outside, and eventually shapes also the metaphorical extensions of these notions in our conceptual thought. The soma supplies that primordial point of view through its location both in the spatiotemporal field and the field of social interaction. As William James remarks, “The body is the storm-center, the origin of coordinates, the constant place of stress in [our] experience-train. Everything circles round it, and is felt from its point of view.” “The world experienced,” he elaborates, “comes at all times with our body as its center, center of vision, center of action, center of interest.”⁷

2. Our lived experience of space essentially involves distance, and it is through the soma’s powers of locomotion that we get us to our sense of distance and space. The soma is thus what enables us to appreciate not only the visual effects and structural design features that rely on perceiving distance and depth, but also the multisensorial feelings of moving through space (with their kinaesthetic, tactile, proprioceptive qualities) that are crucial to the experience of living with, in, and through architecture. The concrete living space that the soma architec-

7 See William James: “The Experience of Activity.” In: *Essays in Radical Empiricism* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1976), p. 86.

turally defines is not an abstract, fully homogeneous space but rather a space shaped by the body's directionality—with its front, sides, and back. The essential architectural feature of façade expresses this notion of directional facing.

3. If architecture involves mass as well as space, then the soma likewise provides our most immediate sense of mass and volume. We feel the solid mass and thickness of our body; we also feel the liquids and gases that move through its volume. If verticality is basic to architecture, then the body is our basic experiential model of verticality and of the need to both deploy and resist gravitational forces to achieve it. The soma's vertical posture and ability to maintain it in locomotion not only enables the particular perspective we have in seeing but also is what frees our hands so that we can use them to handle objects more effectively, to draw, design, and build skillfully. Moreover, the architecture of the body (the fact that we are essentially top-heavy—our heavier head, shoulders, and torso resting on our significantly less massive legs) is part of what impels the soma to move since its vertical equilibrium is more easily sustained in motion than in standing still. It is hard to stand motionless in place for more than a few minutes, but we can enjoy walking for much longer periods without any strain.

4. Key principles of architectural form, as Vitruvius long ago remarked, seem derived from the soma. "Without symmetry and proportion there can be no principles in the design of any temple", he argues, defining these formal features in terms of the "relation" between the building's "different parts to the general magnitude of the whole," "as in the case of a well-shaped man" and justifying this relational principle on the grounds that "nature has designed the human body so that its members are duly proportioned to the frame as a whole." He likewise claims the basic forms of circle and square can be derived from the body, as can the basic notions of measurement needed in design (72–73). A case for the soma's role in determining architectural scale could similarly be made, just as one could argue that the body centrally informs the architectural feature of pillars, which Vitruvius saw as imitating male or female forms.

5. Despite its non-discursive materiality (which suggests mute dumbness), architecture, as artistic design, is expressive. The soma's non-discursive expressivity through gesture provides a central model for architecture's expressive power. So much so that Wittgenstein deploys it to define architecture and distinguish it from mere building. "Architecture is a *gesture*. Not every purposive movement of the human body is a gesture. And no more is every building designed for a purpose architecture."⁸

8 Ludwig Wittgenstein: *Culture and Value* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1980), p. 42.

6. The soma further provides a basic model for the relationship of architectural design to the environment. An architecturally successful building must both fit in and stand out as a distinctive achievement, just as a soma must do in order to survive and flourish, performing a balancing act of absorbing and relying on the wider natural and social resources of its environment but at the same time asserting its distinctive individuality. Just as we always experience a building in terms of its background environmental framing, so we cannot feel the body alone independent of its wider *Umwelt*. If we lie down close our eyes and simply try to feel ourselves alone and motionless, what we will feel, if we are attentive, is the environmental surface on which we are lying and the enviroing air we are breathing and feeling on our exposed body surfaces.

7. Such non-visual feelings of the body remind us that if architectural design is based on the soma and aims to enhance somatic experience, it should be critically attentive to the soma's multiplicity of senses. These senses, as neurophysiologists now realize, go beyond the traditional five and include some that are identified as distinctively somaesthetic senses in the narrow sense of dealing with sensory perception through the body per se rather than through its particular sense organs (eyes, ears, nose, tongue, etc.).

III

If the soma is the crucial medium through which architecture is experienced and created, then developing its critical discriminatory powers could enrich architecture's critical and creative arsenal, since critical perception is always part of the creative process. It is often said that our term criticism comes from the Greek word for a judge "krites" (κριτης) but it ultimately comes from the Greek verb "krino" (κρινω) which means to distinguish, discriminate, separate; hence the adjective (κριτικος) the counterpart of our term critical means "able to discern" or discriminate.⁹ Recalling this core sense of discrimination can help us address, with the help of somaesthetics, two of the greatest challenges to criticality in architecture: the problem of autonomy and the problem of atmosphere.

1. Autonomy connotes independence, and one prominent (spatially derived) notion of independence implies a separation from that of which one is indepen-

9 For more on the Greek terms, see *Liddell and Scott's Greek-English Lexicon* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997). Interestingly, design—a core concept of architecture has a rather similar etymology of distinguishing or marking off: deriving from the Latin *de + signare* to mark off or separate—as in the articulation of space through making signs or marks.

dent. That separation is reflected in the notion of critical distance, where the critic sustains his objective judgment by having a point of view somehow external to the object or situation she is judging rather than being essentially involved or implicated in it. The idea of the judge as disinterested observer conveys the same sense of critical distance. But contemporary theory has shown that a purely external viewpoint for judging our natural, social, and cultural world is logically untenable; such a view would be a view from nowhere and from which we would see nothing meaningfully. We simply cannot stand outside the world to assess it altogether apart from the interests we have and seek in it. Today's thoroughly globalized political, economic, and media networks reinforce in concrete socio-cultural terms this message of our essential, inextricable implication in the world and world order.

Architects have not been slow to draw the conclusion by questioning the notion of autonomy on which several versions of critical architecture rely.¹⁰ In using the energies, institutions, permissions, monies, and other affordances of establishment society, the architect cannot avoid being somehow entangled and complicit with it. That the architect is somehow “a surfer on the waves of societal forces” forms part of Rem Koolhaas's questioning of architecture's critical posture, a suspicion that “there is in the deepest motivations of architecture something that cannot be critical” and that leads him into the far broader field of urbanism to urge a radically uncritical outlook: “we have to dare to be utterly uncritical...we have to become irresponsible,” embracing a “Nietzschean frivolity.”¹¹

Such post-critical arguments may seem compelling if the critical attitude is presumed to require an external, autonomous standpoint—altogether detached and disinterested. But that basic presumption can be challenged by recalling the

10 In proposing a “post-critical” architectural approach, Somol and Whiting define the critical position (exemplified in different ways by Michael Hays and Peter Eisenman) as presuming “that autonomy is a precondition for engagement” and that such autonomy implies some sort of separation or distance from other things, sometimes described as being “between” other disciplines or discursive formations. Robert Somol and Sarah Whiting: “Notes Around the Doppler Effect and Other Moods of Modernism.” In: *Perspecta*, 33 (2002), p. 73.

11 Rem Koolhaas: “What Ever Happened to Urbanism.” In: Rem Koolhaas and Bruce Mau: *S,M,L, XL* (New York: Monacelli Press, 1995), p. 971, for the quotes on uncritical Nietzschean frivolity. The other quotes are taken from Hilde Heynen: “A Critical Posture for Architecture?” In: Jane Rendell and Jonathan Hill (eds.): *Critical Architecture* (London: Routledge 2007), p. 51, and George Baird: “Criticality and its Discontents,” *Harvard Design Magazine*, 21 (2004–5), p. 649 who takes this Koolhaas quote about architecture's deepest (and uncritical) motivations from an oral remark, quoted by Beth Kapusta in the *Canadian Architect Magazine*, 39 (August 1994), p. 10.

Somatic self-examination provides a model of immanent critique where one's critical perspective does not require being entirely outside the situation critically examined but merely requires a reflective perspective on it that is not wholly absorbed in the immediacy of what is experienced.

soma. We can critically examine aspects of our somatic experience without going outside our bodies to some putative detached, disembodied mind. We use a finger to probe a small bump on our face; we use our tongue to discover and remove the traces of food on our upper lip or on our teeth. We discriminate or assess our pain within the painful experience not only after it has passed and we are, in that sense, beyond or outside it. Beyond these ordinary practices of somatic consciousness, a variety of meditative disciplines are structured on heightening the soma's conscious critical self-examination.

In short somatic self-examination provides a model of immanent critique where one's critical perspective does not require being entirely outside the situation critically examined but merely requires a reflective perspective on it that is not wholly absorbed in the immediacy of what is experienced; a perspective better described as positionally eccentric (or decentered) rather than as external. Such perspectives can be achieved by efforts of disciplined willful attention but also often arise spontaneously through experiences of somatic dissonance where unreflective coordination is disrupted and so stimulates a decentered, reflective critical attention to what is going on. Critical somatic consciousness involves some aspects of the soma's complex array of systems examining other aspects of that complexity.

I could say far more about the relations between unreflective immediacy and reflection in body consciousness, and how these different modes can be integrated to maximize the quality of our experience and performance. But retaining the crucial point that criticality requires no position of complete independence or externality, I now turn to the second major challenge to architectural criticality: the problem of atmosphere.

2. Deriving from the Greek words for vapor and sphere, atmosphere's primary meaning is air, thus suggesting lightness, intangibility, a certain formlessness and elusiveness that can readily evoke a sense of frivolity or lack of gravitas, structure, or substance. In modernist architectural discourse the notion of atmosphere had a typically negative nuance, suggesting a vaguely subjective quality without

clear structural form or function but also something gratuitous, frivolous, contrived, and artificial or impure.¹²

With the decline of architecture's modernist paradigm (and its positivist, rationalist, objectivist, and minimalist ideologies), there has been increasing recognition of atmosphere's important architectural role.¹³ Architectural meaning and

12 Despite atmosphere's primary sense of air and hence lightness, modernism's critique of atmosphere focused on the sort of artificially intensified atmosphere that was thickly laid-on as an ornamental effect to heighten mood or intoxicate perception. Though air is essentially light we can speak of a heavy or stale atmosphere.

13 The decline of criticality in architecture is sometimes linked with the waning of the modernist paradigm. It is certainly true that various trends in the modernist movement of architecture had utopian visions that were critical of the hierarchical social status quo that was both reflected in traditional architectural structures and sustained by them. But it also needs to be remembered that key figures in modernism equally advocated a realistic, pragmatic policy of reconciling architectural ambitions with the hard realities of the socioeconomic world. For instance, Bauhaus visionaries such as Walter Gropius and Ludwig Mies van der Rohe justified their departure from the earlier utopian expressionism by emphasizing the need for a pragmatic acceptance of the new realities of technological progress, new materials, and living conditions. If Gropius urged a "resolute affirmation of the lived environment of machines and automotive vehicles," without "romantic beautification," then Mies insisted that "we take the changed economic and social conditions as a fact," since "these things go their own destined way, blind to values" and the designer can only accept "these realities" in order to bring out from them something of value. See Walter Gropius: "Grundsätze der Bauhausproduktion" (Dessau), 1926. In: Ulrich Conrad (ed.): *Programme und Manifeste zur Architektur des 20. Jahrhunderts* (Bauwelt Fundamente: Braunschweig, 1975) p. 90. Ludwig Mies van der Rohe: "Die neue Zeit," 1930, in Conrad, 114. My translation. Here are the quotations in German, first Gropius:

"Nur durch dauernde Berührung mit der fortschreitenden Technik, mit der Erfindung neuer Materialien und neuer Konstruktionen gewinnt das gestaltende Individuum die Fähigkeit, die Gegenstände in lebendige Beziehung zur Überlieferung zu bringen und daraus die neue Werkgesinnung zu entwickeln:

- Entschlossene Bejahung der lebendigen Umwelt der Maschinen und Fahrzeuge.
- Organische Gestaltung der Dinge aus ihrem eigenen gegenwartsgebundenen Gesetz heraus, ohne romantische Beschönigungen und Verspieltheiten."

Now the quote from Mies:

"Die neue Zeit ist eine Tatsache; sie existiert ganz unabhängig davon, ob wir 'ja' oder 'nein' zu ihr sagen. Aber sie ist weder besser noch schlechter als irgendeine andere Zeit. Sie ist eine pure Gegebenheit und an sich wertindifferent. Deshalb werde ich mich nicht lange bei dem Versuch aufhalten, die neue Zeit deutlich zu machen, ihre Beziehungen aufzuzeigen und die tragende Struktur bloßzulegen.

Auch die Frage der Mechanisierung, der Typisierung und Normung wollen wir nicht überschätzen.

Und wir wollen die veränderten wirtschaftlichen und sozialen Verhältnisse als eine Tatsache hinnehmen.

value cannot be reduced to tectonics and definable visual or structural forms. A crucial dimension of architecture is what its articulated spaces mean and contribute to the lived experience of those who dwell in those spaces and pass through them. A significant part of that lived experience of meaning and value is what architectural theorists now generally denote as *atmosphere*. This notion, which deserves extended analysis, seems to encompass the vast array of perceptual qualities, dominant feelings or moods, and ambient effects that emerges not only from the complexity of forms, relations, and materials of the articulated space, but also from the complexity of practices, environmental effects, and experienced qualities that pervade the lived space of a building or other architectural structure.

The increasing attention given to atmosphere can be traced to new directions in aesthetic theory, but also to broader cultural trends that challenge the traditional emphasis on the weighty, the substantive, the resistant as that which defines what is truly real. Our new media and technologies (with their corresponding new economies and ethos) are dematerializing the traditional heaviness of the life world, so that the previously invisible atmospheric dimension of our environments (through which our ever more electronically and nano-technically shaped experience is conducted) now emerges as powerfully real and essential. As one popular thinker puts it (with characteristic errant faith in our unlimited resources): “It is through the occurrence of abundance in the modern that the heavy has turned into appearance—and the ‘essential’ now dwells in lightness, in the air, in the atmosphere.”¹⁴ Moreover, we should remember that airiness has, in our cultural history, very strong associations with spirituality.¹⁵ This extends even to architecture, where, as Peter Eisenmann notes, “the airy” is associated with “the sublime” in contrast to the materiality of the grotesque.¹⁶ Aura, which is also frequently used to convey the notion of atmosphere (and derives from the Greek for air or breath) is often applied with lofty or spiritual connotations. Walter Benjamin’s famous theory of art’s aura, for example, clearly links it to the elevated, religious atmosphere of ritual or cultic use.¹⁷

Alle diese Dinge gehen ihren schicksalhaften und wertblinden Gang.

Entscheidend wird allein sein, wie wir uns in diesen Gegebenheiten zur Geltung bringen.”

14 Peter Sloterdijk: “Against Gravity,” an interview with Bettina Funcke, *ArtForum/BookForum*, February/March, 2005, cited from http://www.bookforum.com/archive/feb_05/funcke.html

15 There are etymological roots for this spirituality, as the Greek root is related to the Sanskrit word for breath or soul (*atman*).

16 Peter Eisenman: “En Terror Firma: In Trails of Grotexes,” *Architectural Design*, 1–2 (1989), p. 41.

17 Walter Benjamin: “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction,” *Illuminations*,

Atmosphere remains problematic for criticality because any mode of criticism that claims to be reasonable, principled, and in some sense objective seems to logically require some object against which critical propositions can be measured.

In recent architectural theory, the turn to atmosphere has been closely linked to the so-called post-critical project. But post-critical should not be confused with *acritical*. The post-critical turn to atmosphere is also a serious critical response to the perceived limits of earlier views of architecture that denigrated or neglected the atmospheric as irrelevant to architecture's disciplinary practice and mission, and that defined architect's disciplinarity (and criticality) in terms of autonomy. Thus Somol and Whiting affirm the post-critical trend as a move "that shifts the understanding of disciplinarity as autonomy to disciplinarity as performance or practice," and that identifies the defining core of architectural practice within a broad notion of design that includes the atmospheric: "Design encompasses object qualities (form, proportion, materiality, composition, etc.), but it also includes qualities of sensibility, such as effect, ambiance, and atmosphere."¹⁸

Atmosphere's challenge to criticality does not disappear, however, even if we take a more comprehensive, more sensible view of criticism as involving not only negations, resistances, and oppositional attitudes but also constructive assessments, interpretations, and positive appreciations. Atmosphere remains problematic for criticality because any mode of criticism that claims to be reasonable, principled, and in some sense objective rather than arbitrary seems to logically require some object against which critical propositions can be measured for accuracy and insight. But atmosphere does not provide such an object, because it is precisely something that is defined by its contrast to conventional objecthood. It distinctively lacks the clear contours, firm and enduring substance, and discrete individuality of ordinary objects in space. Nor is atmosphere something that can be reduced to a mere matter of purely personal private space, a merely personal, idiosyncratic reaction, because different individuals obviously share common perceptions of atmosphere. Theorists of

trans. Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken, 1969), pp. 221–227.

¹⁸ Somol and Whiting, see note 10, p. 75.

atmosphere have noticed that it hovers in an intermediate space between the objective and subjective.¹⁹

Atmosphere is, I think, best understood as an experienced quality of a situation, and such qualities are notoriously resistant to conceptual definition and discursive analysis. If it defies clear categorization as objective or subjective, this is because atmosphere is a qualitative feature of a situation that is typically grasped as an absorbing whole before that situation is divided into its objective and subjective elements.²⁰ Atmosphere is experienced by the subject as a perceptual feeling that emerges from and pervades a situation; and like other perceptual feelings, atmosphere is experienced in large part as a bodily feeling.²¹

Such somatic experienced qualities are typically very difficult to analyze because they are not fixed in stable objects, and they tend to be felt in terms of nameless, elusive, and often transient feelings. Further difficulties in critically analyzing these somatically perceived atmospheric qualities derive from the fact that we are not habituated to pay explicit attention to the bodily feelings involved in our perception, because the habitual focus of our attention and interest is the external world of objects.²² Perceptual feelings are experienced somatically with different levels of awareness, and most of these feelings function beneath full consciousness. While asleep, I still can feel that a pillow inhibits my breathing and so I adjust myself to move it without ever regaining consciousness. Even when we are awake, most of our somatic feelings or perceptions do not reach explicit consciousness or awareness because our attention is elsewhere directed. In descending a staircase, we are rarely aware of our kinaesthetic feelings of movement, our proprioceptive feelings of balance and extension in space, and the tactile qualities of contact that our feet make with the steps. But we must at least implicitly feel these qualities for the soma to react properly in coordinating our movement. Such implicitly felt qualities exert a significant influence on our

19 See Gernot Boehme: "Atmosphere as the Fundamental Concept of a New Aesthetics," *Thesis Eleven*, 36 (1993), pp. 113–126.

20 I have similarly argued that our initial or immediate experience of art is not neatly divided into distinct categories of qualities or meanings (for example, "aesthetic" versus "ethical" qualities and meanings). See Richard Shusterman: "The Convergence of Ethics and Aesthetics," in Sanda Iliescu (ed.): *The Hand and the Soul: Ethics and Aesthetics in Architecture and Art* (Charlottesville, Va: University of Virginia Press, 2009), pp. 33–43.

21 Walter Benjamin, at one point, likewise describes the aura as something that we perceive bodily by "breathing" in the atmosphere of its situation—"a peculiar web of space and time." I here quote from the first German version of Benjamin's essay reprinted in his *Gesammelte Schriften* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1991), p. 440.

22 I explore these problems and their remedies in *Body Consciousness*.

behavior, attitudes, and moods.²³ They constitute the core of atmosphere, and atmosphere too is something that often affects us without our even being aware of it as an explicit dimension of our experience.

Many of the qualities that constitute atmosphere are not simply somatically perceived but also relate to senses that are distinctively bodily—namely, our proprioceptive, kinaesthetic, vestibular, tactile, senses. Our sensory experience of architecture is far more than the changing visual input as we survey and walk through its spaces. There are feelings of light and shade that are felt on our flesh and not just through vision. We feel the different temperatures and movements of air on our skin as we move through architectural space (along with the smells that the air brings us that stimulate the senses in our nostrils and mouth. There are also all the tactile and muscular sensations of walking through the space—the feel of the surface material beneath our feet, the rhythm of our footsteps, the kinaesthetic feel, proprioceptive balance, and muscular effort of traversing a courtyard or ascending or descending a staircase or adjusting one’s gait and posture to negotiate a narrow corridor or low door. As the soma is trained or habituated to adjust to different kinds of spaces (at once physical and social), so it implicitly reacts proprioceptively to the changing kinosphere without one usually noticing it; and such reactions often have an affective dimension with real aesthetic significance and sociopolitical import. A huge kinosphere that dwarfs the visitor entering the space of an authoritative power, a demanding staircase to approach the elevated throne of authority provide familiar examples of how architecture can instill an atmosphere of majesty that is at once potently aesthetic and political.

If architectural theory recognizes that the more tactile, somaesthetic senses are crucial to architecture’s experienced atmosphere, the presumption remains that these dimensions of atmosphere are in principle too elusive for the exercise of criticality. The *locus classicus* of this influential presumption is Walter Benjamin’s famous account of architectural experience that contrasts tactile and optical perception while also comparing architectural experience to that of film. Unlike painting (with its traditional aura of uniqueness), film and architecture both enable a “simultaneous, collective experience” for aesthetic reception “by the mass audience” (234). But Benjamin then contrasts film and architecture in terms of the former’s greater possibilities for critical consciousness through its objectifying representational photographic technologies and optic focus as op-

²³ Indeed as some philosophers and neuroscientists have argued, they even guide our processes of rational thinking. See *Body Consciousness*, ch. 5–6.

posed to architecture's problematic resistance to critical consciousness through its predominant reliance on habits of tactile appropriation.

"Buildings," writes Benjamin, "are appropriated [the German is the less dynamic *rezipiert*] in a twofold manner: by use and by perception—or rather, by touch and sight. Such appropriation [*Rezeption*] cannot be understood in terms of the attentive concentration of a tourist before a famous building. On the tactile side there is no counterpart to contemplation on the optical side. Tactile appropriation is accomplished not so much by attention as by habit" (240). We should note how Benjamin's terminology does not even give tactile experience the full status of perception (*Wahrnehmung*), which connotes cognition and active consciousness but rather suggests blind absorption (*Rezeption*) through the mechanism of habit. Benjamin goes on to argue that this unthinking, uncritical tactile absorption through habit also "determines to a large extent even optical reception" in architecture. Moreover, through its persistent deployment in the ubiquitous realm of architecture, this uncritical mode of habitual, somatic reception "acquires canonical value" or pervasive power that extends to other domains of culture and of life, where, in times of great historical change, the challenges that face human perception and adjustment "cannot be solved by optical means, that is, by contemplation [or focused attentive consciousness], alone" (ibid.) Benjamin can then return to film experience and argue that there too, reception by the masses, though optical, is still essentially a reception governed by habit and characterized by distraction that thus "requires no attention". Thus the mechanical reproduction of art is matched by an unfocussed, "absent-minded," uncritical reception through the mechanism of habit (241).

Benjamin provides no evidence that the tactile feelings we experience in architecture must remain in the realm of inattentive, absent-minded, mechanical habit that precludes explicit awareness for critical assessment. There is nothing in tactile and other distinctively somatic feelings that prohibits our perceiving them with conscious, focused attention – and in many conditions we do. In everyday experience we often notice and even try to describe varieties of pain, itches, tickles, caresses, sensual pleasures, feelings of dizziness, speed, hot, cold, and the feel of different surfaces and fabrics on our skin. Benjamin, of course, is right that our habitual way of experiencing architecture is in term of blind inattentive habit. But habits, as learned (even if implicitly learned) behavior, can be changed, and not all habits are blind and inattentive. Though Benjamin understandably contrasts habit with attention, there are indeed habits of attention; and developing such habits is an essential key for success in education and life. It is certainly true that most of us are far better at focusing critical attention on visual representations

than on tactile or somaesthetic feelings, and there may be reasons for this beyond the effects of mere habit (for example, evolutionary reasons and factors concerning the way that distance and visual spatial array can facilitate individuation and objectification). But we should not erect a dualism between optical and tactile perception, because the former in fact intrinsically involves the latter, as the very act of vision necessarily deploys the muscular movement of our eyes and thus the tactility of proprioception—or feeling of muscular movement. Moreover, as recent research in the visuo-motor neuron system has shown, perception is significantly transmodal such that seeing an action will also activate neurons involved in the motor or muscular performance of that action, and apparently vice versa.

If Benjamin argues that our habitual and absent-minded tactile reception of architecture has rendered its optical reception likewise inattentively absent-minded, then why not turn the tables and argue that by heightening our attention to the tactile or somaesthetic feelings of architectural reception we could render such perception not only more acute, penetrating, and critical but also sharpen our attentiveness and penetration of architecture's optical experience. It is an anatomical fact that one's rotational range and ease of vision can be increased by improving, through proprioceptive sensitivity, the rotational range of one's spine. Moreover, by training and exercising somaesthetic attention we can gain a more attentive and explicit consciousness of the vague but influential somatic feelings that constitute our experience of architectural atmosphere and thus a more focused, more discerning awareness for its critical analysis. Such training is valuable for improving the critical sensibilities not only of designing architects but also of the various populations who inhabit architectural spaces and whose informed input on architectural design would be useful, if such design is truly meant to serve them best. There are a variety of methods for training such somesthetic sensibility, which I discuss in my book *Body Consciousness*; they are best demonstrated in workshop settings and not from the podium in huge lecture spaces such as this, whose atmosphere is inappropriate for such training, and where I'd need to take more time and demand even more acute and patient attention than you have already granted me. Thank you.²⁴

²⁴ I also wish to thank the organizers of the conference for inviting me, and to give particular thanks to Olaf Pfeifer for providing me with helpful bibliographical assistance in preparing this lecture.