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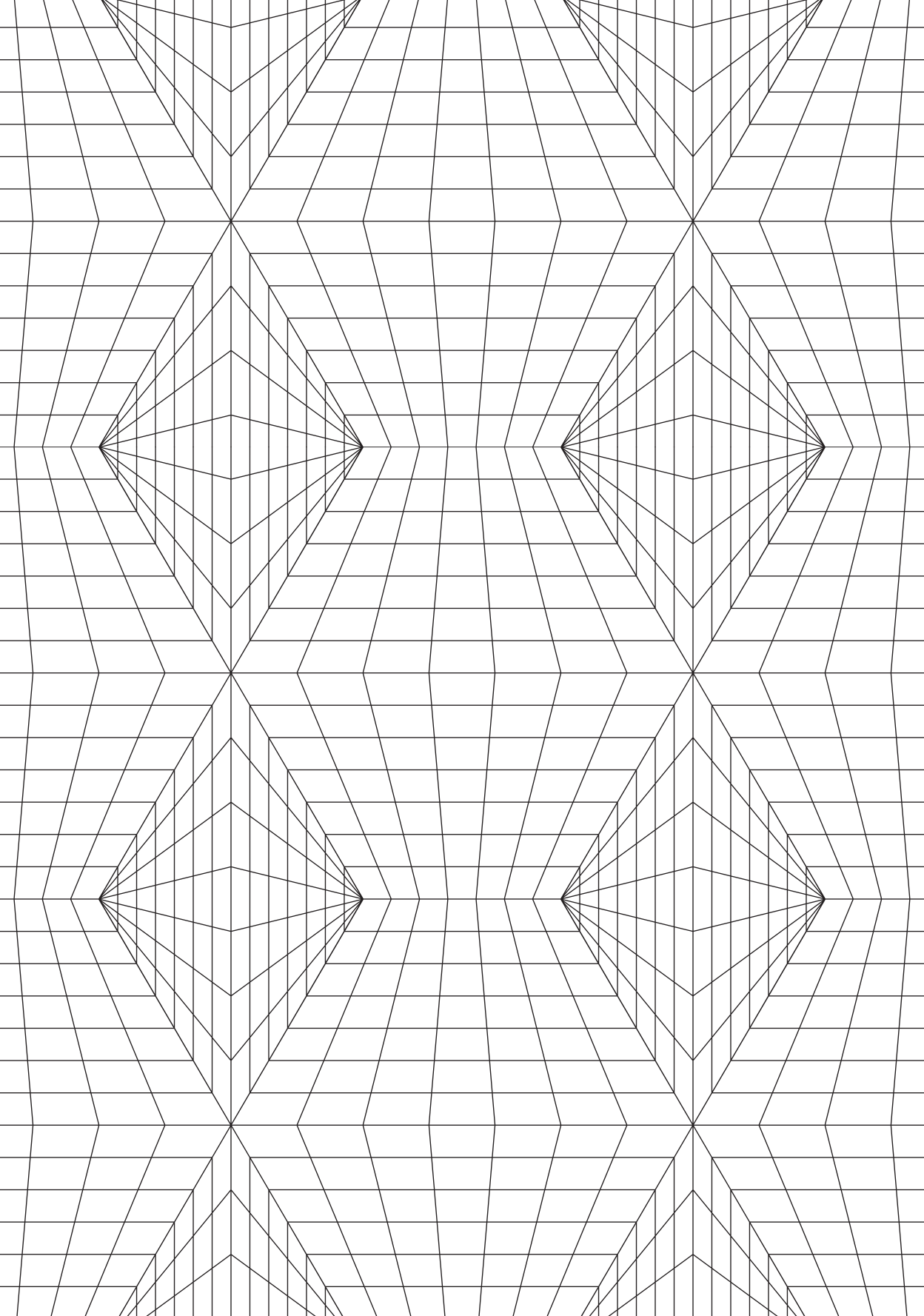

Disegno

Journal of Design Culture
Double-blind peer-reviewed, open access scholarly journal

Aims and Scope

Disegno publishes original research papers, essays, and reviews on all aspects of design cultures. We understand the notion of design culture as resolutely broad: our aim is to freely discuss the designed environment as mutually intertwined strands of sociocultural products, practices, and discourses. This attitude traverses the disciplinary boundaries between art, design, and visual culture and is therefore open to all themes related to sociocultural creativity and innovation. Our post-disciplinary endeavour welcomes intellectual contributions from all members of different design cultures. Besides providing a lively platform for debating issues of design culture, our specific aim is to consolidate and enhance the emerging field of design culture studies in the Central European academia by providing criticism of fundamental biases and misleading cultural imprinting with respect to the field of design.

All research papers published in Disegno undergo a rigorous double-blind peer review process.
This journal does not charge APCs or submission charges.

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DISEGNO_VIII/02_TOTAL(ITARIAN) DESIGN

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The Somaesthetic Impulse, or How Can Design Culture Shape Our Life Forms?

Richard Shusterman and Bálint Veres, eds: Somaesthetics and Design Culture

Ármin Tillmann

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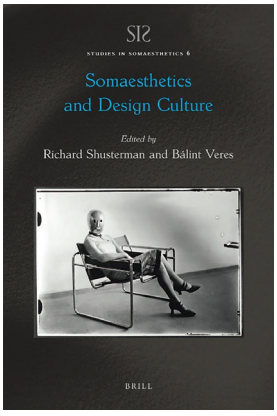

Richard Shusterman and Bálint Veres, eds: Somaesthetics and Design Culture.
Leiden: Brill, 2023, 309 pages.
ISBN: 978-90-04-53664-7.

When we have the impression we can hardly see a way out of a discourse because it has become so specialised and complex and the weight of a library's worth of literature is bearing down on us it is usually a good strategy to take a step back and return to the fundamental starting points for a few thoughts. The present study collection is organised around two key concepts: *somaesthetics* and *design culture*. What is the purpose of somaesthetics, or, more precisely, what is the *raison d'être* of the discipline of somaesthetics? And what does the term "design" actually mean? Is it worth keeping this expression unchanged, or does it need to be critically rethought?

In the twentieth century, corporality regained influence in Western thought after the apparent predominance of mind and consciousness. To mention just a few works of outstanding importance: Merleau-Ponty's *Phenomenology of Perception* ([1945] 1962), Michel Foucault's four-volume *History of Sexuality* ([1976–1984] 1978–1984), Thomas Laqueur's *Making Sex: Body and Gender from the Greeks to Freud* (1990), Jean-Luc Nancy's *Corpus* ([1992] 2008), and last but not least George Lakoff and Mark Johnson's *Philosophy in the Flesh: the Embodied Mind and its Challenge to Western Thought* (1999).

After the so-called *corporeal turn*, the American pragmatist philosopher Richard Shusterman coined the term somaesthetics to revive the ancient conception of the body at a distance from the phenomenological tradition.

In the "Introduction" to *Somaesthetics and Design Culture* Shusterman and Veres point out that somaesthetics faithfully reflects *kalokagathia*, the ideal of beauty from antiquity, according to which beauty and virtue go hand in hand, and seeks to restore the unity between the theory and practice of the philosophical way of life, *vita contemplativa* and *vita activa*. Thus, somaesthetics "would signal the field and its orientation towards practicing philosophy as an ethical-aesthetic way of life" (2–3), whereas the Greek word *soma* designates "the sentient, lived body as a site of active perception and subjectivity: an unavoidable component of all aesthetic experience" (3), and *aesthesis* means "sensory perception." What makes the somaesthetic approach unique is that it implies "a project of appreciating and cultivating the body not only as an object that externally displays beauty, sublimity, grace, and other aesthetic qualities, but also as a subjectivity that perceives these qualities and that experiences attendant aesthetic pleasures somatically." (Shusterman n.d.)

In Shusterman and Veres's recapitulation of the history of somaesthetics they are careful to distinguish the concept of design from the closely related problems of postmodern consumer culture and the aestheticisation of everyday life. However, I do not think that their use of the term is sufficiently critical even though this would be crucial in relation to a systemic phenomenon such as design; a cultural product of the second industrial revolution and of capitalism. They write that the concept of design is "often tied to functionality, operability, communication efficiency or marketing and pay-off" (2), yet this is not the concept they use in the context of somaesthetics *as* a design product. That said, Shusterman and Veres do focus on a previously ignored range of meanings of design, which complements the capitalist counterpart: "design as something sensual, pleasing, emotionally significant, and engaging" (2).

All this sounds promising, but design, by its very nature, is not a transhistorical phenomenon; its conditions are tied to a particular era. It is unlikely that the concept of design can be separated from the cultural logic of late capitalist industrial production and consumer society and, since it must perpetually innovate, it is implicitly required to suspend tradition, modes of experience transfer, and cultural continuity in order to be radically innovative and new: to create new design objects, come up with new ideas, and institutionalise new lifestyles. Therefore, no matter how critically we try to grasp it, the term design will always remain compromised.

In order to give design a completely new meaning, we would need to change the production conditions required for the manufacture of design objects, moving away from the capitalist mode of production towards a more equitable use of materials that do not exploit the environment, is based on renewable resources, and, as in twenty-first century craftmanship, operates on a cooperative basis as a sustainable mode of production that takes material justice into account. At the same

time, a synonym for design that broadens the scope of the concept can be helpful. One such alternative is *form planning*, a term derived from the German concepts *Formbildung* and *Gestaltung*. I consider this term adequate because it implies that design cannot be narrowed down to merely industrial creation, such as the production of design objects, and also includes the planning and development of lifestyles, ways of life, or even forms of life.[1] The architectural analogy is useful: what is architecture if not essentially the same thing, that is form planning, only on a larger scale?

Just like design, architecture is practice-oriented, with the spaces and contact surfaces it creates having use value, as people dwell and work in them, move around in them, and interact with each other in them, but it can also have a decorative-ornamental, delightful, atmosphere-creating, aesthetic purpose that promotes one's well-being, which Walter Benjamin once called exhibition value (*Ausstellungswert*) in his well-known essay "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction" ([1935] 1999). Although admittedly a commonplace, architecture creates spaces, both physically and abstractly. Architectural space includes, among other things, planning, occupation, and design. Since all this involves interventions in the everyday life of a community or a society and its environment, the space-creating function of architecture is inevitably political in nature, and any attempt at neutralisation that seeks to justify its political decisions and ideological presuppositions on purely professional grounds will inevitably entail an ideologically critical analysis.

Somaesthetics and Design Culture was inspired by an international conference entitled *Design Culture and Somaesthetics*, which was held at the Moholy-Nagy University of Art and Design Budapest in 2019. Several chapters are adapted versions of the presentations given at the conference, although "the book developed to include other texts and integrate perspectives from the history of ideas, epistemology, ritual studies, psychology, affordance theory, educational studies, and design history" (7).

Having outlined the merits and possible shortcomings of *Somaesthetics and Design Culture*, I will now attempt to provide a summary of it.

The book's first part ("Studies on Limitations") begins with Bálint Veres's paper "A World Is Born: Craftsmanship, Mediality, and the Somatic Implications of Plato's *Timaeus*." Plato's craftsman presented in the *Timaeus* establishes a link between somaesthetic approaches to making and contemporary design theory. Veres advances two key arguments. First, despite the distance in time, Plato's philosophy continues to shape how modern design culture understands and performs practices aimed at creating or transforming objects and living beings. Second, Plato's account of creation indicates that no act of making can be conceived without relying on some form of mediation and without being implicitly associated with processes of procreation and birth (28–29).

[1] *This journal has employed the notion of design culture in a similar sense, in line with international scholarship in the emergent post-disciplinary field of Design Culture Studies. Although terms such as* Formgestaltung *or* Formgebung *were not unknown to Anglo-Saxon or Scandinavian authors—often appearing in the expression* formgiving*—they generally referred, like their Hungarian counterpart* formatervezés*, to industrial or product design in a relatively narrow sense, without encompassing the design of lifestyles or ways of life. (–eds.)*

Mădălina Diaconu's text "From Making to Lighting a Candle: On Functions, Meanings, and Bodies in Ritual Design" appears to pursue even broader ambitions by centring on an anthropological constant: the human as a ritual being. At first glance, the theme of ritual may seem out of place in a volume devoted to design culture and somaesthetics, which privileges innovation and critiques the unreflective routines, repetitive habits, and traditional practices typically associated with ritual. However, this somewhat Sisyphean attempt to reconcile autonomy-driven, momentary, and capital-dependent design with collectivizing, tradition-based, and transformative ritual illuminates important theoretical limitations within design culture. First, any design that seeks to generate rites *presupposes a philosophy of the embodied subject*: a rite must be enacted, and enactment requires an active soma. Second, the bodies that design addresses—as its targets, users, and representatives—are themselves already *shaped by ritual enculturation*. As a result, designing rituals effectively amounts to planning the enculturation of the body, that is, intentionally shaping its form, consciousness, and behaviour. Thus, although ritual may initially appear to stand in opposition to design, their interaction reveals mutual constraints.

Jessica Hemmings opens her chapter, "Can That Be Taught? Lessons in Embodied Knowledge from Memoir Writing for Craft and Design Education," with a quotation from the Hungarian-British chemist and philosopher Michael Polanyi: "We can know more than we can tell." This statement outlines the conceptual triad that shapes her analysis: embodied knowledge, conceptual knowledge, and the mediating or translating function of language between them. Her epistemological inquiry calls for a reassessment of how learning is understood and practiced within institutional environments—particularly art and design schools—that tend to be conventional and uncritically self-assured. The chapter is organised around the question *Can that be taught?* and yields a provocative "no" when teaching is conceived solely as a mental activity, yet offers a cautiously affirmative "yes" when teaching is understood to include somatic learning and self-directed education. For Hemmings, the issue is not whether language can mediate between tacit and discursive forms of knowledge, but rather *what kind* of language is capable of doing this work.

Steven Leuthold's chapter "Soma and Symbol: The Bridging Function of Style in Design History and Culture" discusses a variety of polarities that nonetheless reveal important continuities, such as somatic versus discursive knowledge, nature and history, unconscious habit and conscious intention. A central opposition is the silent base of the soma and its nervous system that is considered more or less anthropologically constant versus the irreducibly diverse symbolic sphere of cultures and societies through which our somatic being is expressed in myriad ways. But what can mediate between these factors? In Plato's three-part model, *khôra*

serves as a mediator between eternal forms and fleeting phenomena. Similarly, Leuthold proposes that the concept of style—beyond its traditional use in art history—can function as a mediator between the somatic and the cultural. Leuthold revisits Wölfflin and other early theorists, noting that the original understanding of style involved intuitive knowledge and a particular perception of the world, one that resides dormant in the body. According to Leuthold, this somatic dimension was later undervalued, leading to a general depreciation of the concept of style. In contrast, he aims to highlight the enduring significance of style beyond art, stressing its bodily foundations and linking these somatic roots of creative action with the broader social realm of symbolic practices. In this view, style emerges as an epiphenomenon in the "in-between."

The second part of the book, "Bodies, Senses, and Power," marks a clear shift in emphasis. Guy Julier's "Sensing Kalasatama: Design Culture and Neoliberal Bodyhood" interrogates the concept of the rational city—or "rational landscape"—from a political standpoint, bringing questions of power and their correlates within the human sensorium to the forefront. His analysis centres on Kalasatama, a recently constructed district in Helsinki, a city that promotes itself as "the world's most functional city" through the promise of a high-tech urban environment designed to save residents one hour of time each day. Julier argues, however, that this supposed temporal gain entails a corresponding cost paid through specific sensory, gestural, and habitual bodily dispositions. What might initially appear to be disparate topics—neoliberal financialisation and the production of docile, experientially oriented consumer bodies—are examined through a hybrid methodological approach combining qualitative and quantitative discourse. This mode of inquiry closely aligns with forms of "artistic research" that somaesthetics has increasingly cultivated over the past decade.

Extending the discussion of neoliberal built environments, Matthew Crippen's "Bodies Under the Weather: Selective Permeability, Political Affordances, and Architectural Hostility" examines the repercussions that arise when design culture assumes dominance and channels the somaesthetic dimensions of inhabitants and citizens into frameworks shaped by power-driven aspirations. He identifies exclusionary design, hostile architecture, defensive territoriality, selective permeability, and social dysfunction as salient features evident in the "body language" of two architectural cases: the Richard M. DeVos Center at Grand Valley State University and the recently renovated Tahrir Square in Cairo. Although Crippen acknowledges the theoretical possibility of envisioning a design culture guided by somatic awareness and the meliorative aims of pragmatic thought and democratic practice, he also highlights how built environments can be reclaimed as stages for spontaneous rituals, protests, and communal ceremonies—activities that foster social cohesion and somatic freedom.

Tom McGuirk and Alan Summers's "Across the Threshold: A Somaesthetic Approach to the Design of Extended Realities" can be read as a manifesto encouraging designers to cultivate greater somaesthetic awareness in order to develop more experientially enriching approaches to extended realities. Although they refrain from prescribing a definitive method for achieving this aim, they seek to foster advancement through conceptual argumentation and the presentation of instructive artistic examples. On the theoretical plane, they advocate replacing the Cartesian model of cognition with a framework informed by phenomenology, pragmatism, somaesthetics, sociology, and art history.

The third part of the book, "Transformative Experiences," illustrates how enhanced somaesthetic awareness can reshape the experience and practice of artists and designers. It demonstrates how such awareness facilitates a shift from a narrowly object-centred approach to one grounded in situational and relational design. In the chapter "Bespoke Healthcare Design" Dina Shahar and Jonathan Ventura reveal how the typically unquestioned foundations of design—function and aesthetics—acquire renewed significance and dynamism when approached through a more finely attuned somatic sensitivity. Their analysis further shows how design informed by somaesthetic insight surpasses the limitations of traditional ergonomic paradigms, which remain anchored in standardised bodily norms that restrict the recognition of human diversity.

Else Marie Bukdahl's "Sensory Activation in Design, Art, and Architecture – a Somaesthetic Perspective" likewise draws attention to socially oriented works that seek transformation through the integration of somatic and social knowledge. A central example is *Little Sun*, a project by her former student Olafur Eliasson, which functions simultaneously as a meliorative eco-design initiative and a program in social entrepreneurship, while also embodying the richly sensory aesthetic qualities characteristic of his installations. The aspirations of this project evoke a long-standing dilemma in cultural theory, dating back to early high modernism: although art and design profess to expand and invigorate the breadth of human experience, they often struggle to deliver sustained experiential intensity or meaningful transformative impact on personal and interpersonal social life.

The final chapter, "Designing for Somaesthetic Transformation," is co-authored by Shusterman and computer scientist Dag Svanæs and they introduce a key concept: transformative somaesthetic experience. After elaborating ten key features of the conceptual logic of transformative somaesthetic experience, the authors propose two essential considerations in designing for such experience. First, the design must not focus narrowly on the designed object but must design for an entire situation that embraces both object and subject and the environing atmosphere. A second strategy is the introduction of the nonhabitual to stimulate awareness by dramatizing difference.

While it is warmly welcome to have such a comprehensive, interdisciplinary book conveying in-depth knowledge, I fundamentally miss the concept of *philosophy as a way of life*—a concept which can be easily linked to somaesthetics and which could create continuity between the ancient philosophical tradition and intellectual currents with cultural practices from the Far East (such as yoga, tai chi, zen meditation, or even Feldenkrais) which are thoroughly conceptualised and practiced by Shusterman. Philosophy as form of life would be a constituent moment for somaesthetics because, as the French philosopher and historian of philosophy Pierre Hadot has demonstrated, ancient philosophy was not merely a deepening of thought or an intellectual exercise, it was regarded as an art of living, a practice aimed at relieving suffering and shaping, and remaking the self according to an ideal of wisdom. In this sense, design should be understood as a self-shaping activity, or, as Foucault (1988) would say, as technologies of the self. Hence, self-design is a transformation process which changes not only a person's way of thinking, but also their way of life, and ideally has an impact on their immediate environment in the form of a virtuous philosophical conduct. "Such is the lesson of ancient philosophy: an invitation to each human being to transform himself. Philosophy is a conversion, a transformation of one's way of being and living, and a quest for wisdom." (Hadot [1981] 1995, 275)

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