

BA Photography in The Arts: Contextual Practices

Ways of Perceiving (ADAD4019)

Essay: Imagined Exhibition

Word count: 1,578 + Bibliography
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My proposed exhibition will be based around the concept of somaesthetics – a discipline proposed by Richard Shusterman regarding the practical, empirical and philosophical study, appreciation and stylisation of the body – and the use of this field of study in the world of art. The show will touch upon various themes of physical and mental health, including topics such as bodily harm, physical and sexual abuse and personal growth. All of the themes represented will be conveyed through a series of works that reflect relevant and current societal issues, and as such, a key aim of the show is to offer the audience an insight into the minds and methods of those afflicted by such issues. Artists and artwork selected for this exhibition include Yoko Ono and her work through audience inclusive live performance, and Ali Waller and her work stemming from personal trauma and work alongside victims of rape and sexual assault.

The proposition of the theory of somaesthetics was at first, the responsibility of Richard Shusterman; and whilst numerous philosophers, theorists and artists have confronted this theory since its initial debut, it remains most thoroughly explained and explored by its originator. Shusterman discusses the term somaesthetics through several of his publications, most notably his book entitled *Thinking through the Body: Essays in Somaesthetics*, within which he touches upon a number of applicable areas of study in which the theme of somaesthetics can be highlighted. The most relevant to my proposed exhibition being, unsurprisingly, the topics of photography and the arts.

An important discussion that Shusterman has within his book, and one that will feature as a prominent theme within the exhibition, is that of the common lack of appreciation and acknowledgement that ‘the body’ receives within art and society in general. He comments,

“We humanist intellectuals generally take the body for granted because we are so passionately interested in the life of the mind and the creative arts that express our human spirit. But the body is not only an essential dimension of our humanity, it is also the basic instrument of all human performance, our tool of tools, a necessity for all our perception, action, and even thought.” (Shusterman, 2012)

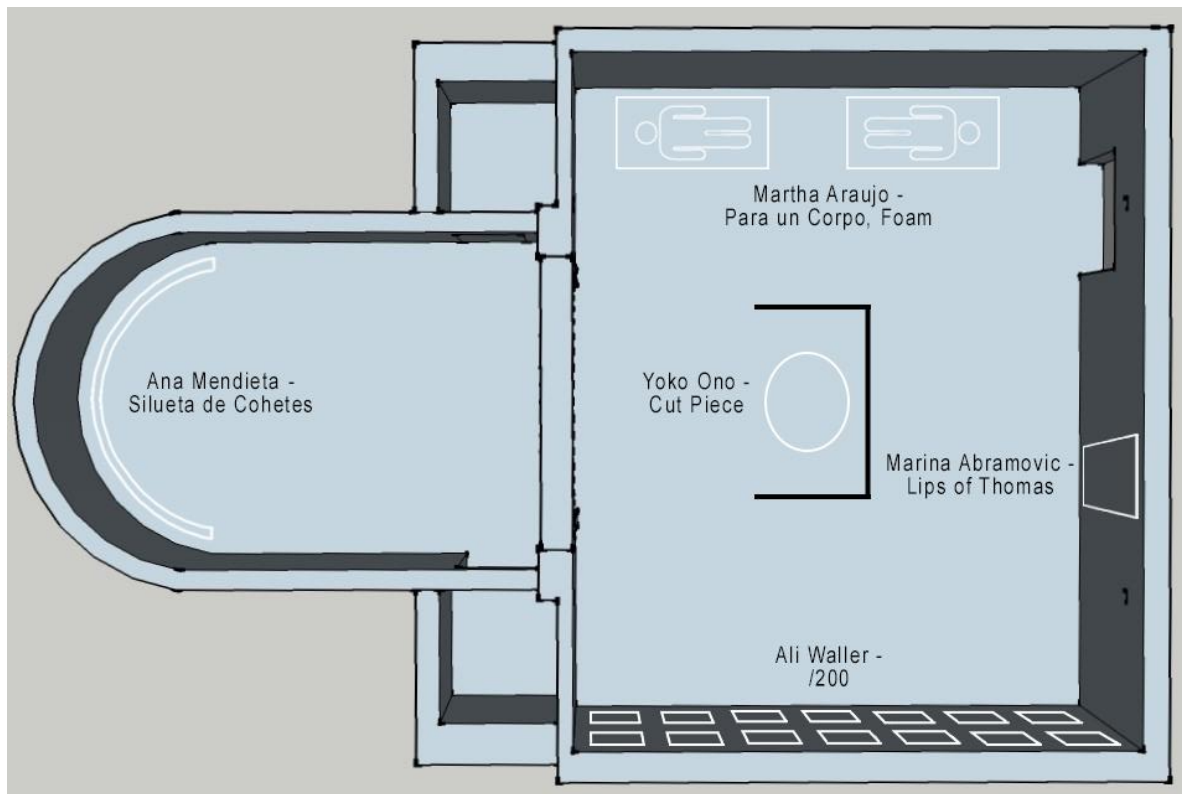
Reviewing Shusterman’s *Body Consciousness: A Philosophy of Mindfulness and Somaesthetics*, Bryan S. Turner discussed Shusterman’s notes on Maurice Merleau-Ponty’s *Phenomenology of Perception* (Merleau-Ponty, 1945). Calling into question the reasoning behind Merleau-Ponty’s acclaimed ignorance towards the body within philosophy; “One answer is its very vulnerability – its capacity for being wounded. Because we suffer daily from discomfort, pain and fatigue, the body’s imperfect senses distort the truth just as its desires distract the mind. Hence philosophy has often portrayed the body as a prison from which the mind seeks to escape.” (Turner, 2008) The theory that I aim to prove through the curation of this exhibition, is that these traits – the suffering and vulnerability – of the physical form, are precisely the elements that make its inclusion within philosophy a necessity. The experiences that the human body endures, directly correlate to the mental and spiritual perceptions of the world in which it exists.

Following this direction of questioning, the exhibition will aim to convey that the ‘scientific body’ and the ‘spiritual’ do not have to always be portrayed as separate fields. That the importance of the physical study of the human form and how it interacts practically with the world around it is directly related to the perception of its alternative spiritual and metaphysical form, often conveyed through artistic and religious studies.

Shusterman discusses this theory as a matter of essential education regarding even the basic elements of humanity; “true humanity is not a mere genetic given but an educational achievement in which body, mind, and culture must be thoroughly integrated.”

(Shusterman, 2012) The work within the exhibition will be the central aspect of examining this idea, as the work of all five artists featured have called into question the importance of this basic aspect of somaesthetic theory – some even without intention or awareness.

An example of this is the work */200* by Ali Waller. For */200* Waller utilises the physical shape of the chest, to represent certain emotionally and physically traumatic events. Each of her subjects sit to have their chest cast in plaster, and as the cast is removed Waller says to them, “As I take off your cast, leave whatever you need here. By removing the cast at the end of our time together we both get something off our chests.” (Waller, n.d.) Through this work, and the work of other artists that accompanies it, the idea of the interdependent existence of physical and metaphysical experience is made apparent, and it is through the presentation of this artistic evidence, that I will communicate the theme of somaesthetics alongside the endurance of the human body through various states and experiences.



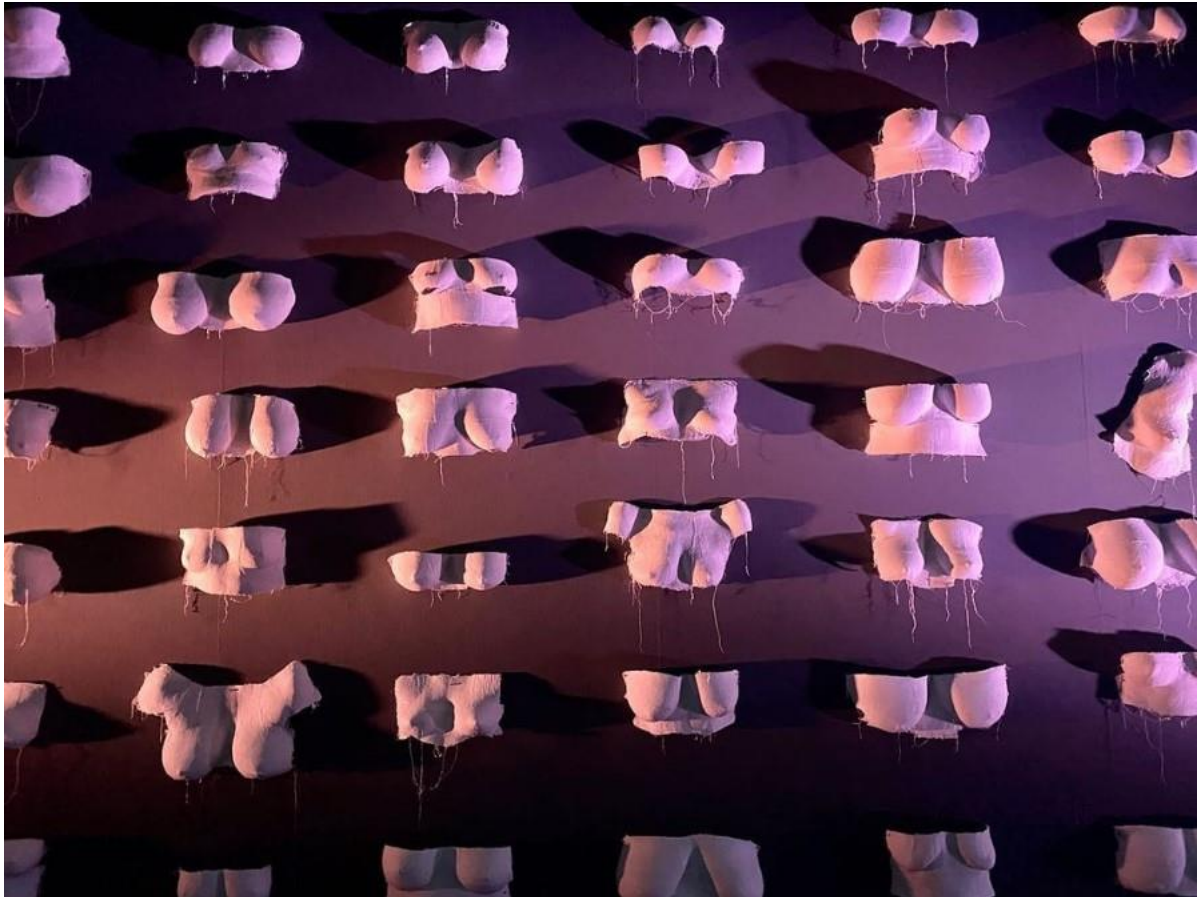
(Fig.1 – Map of Mission Gallery with artwork arrangement)

In total, the exhibition will consist of the work of five different artists. I will utilise the space within the Mission Gallery in Swansea to produce the exhibition (fig.1), as I feel this space best lends itself to the narrative between the artworks. I will better explain the role of each artist and their artwork within this narrative as I introduce them; but in short, the exhibition will hopefully portray the progression through the human body and its spiritual and physical growth and endurance through the course of a lifetime.



(Fig.2 – *Lips of Thomas*, Marina Abramović, 1975) (Fabienne Dumont, 2013)

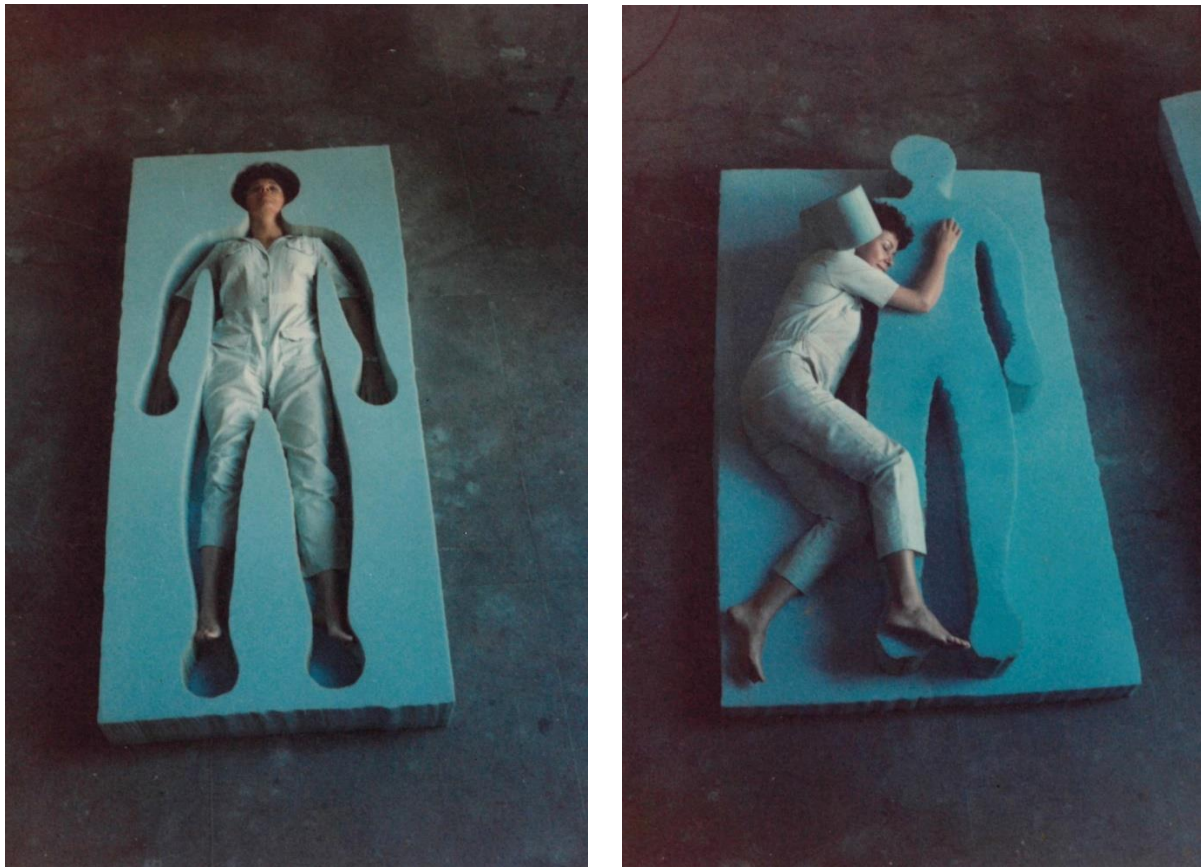
The first artwork, displayed just left of the entranceway, will be Marina Abramović's photograph belonging to *Lips of Thomas* (fig.2). This photograph will stand to represent the much larger performance piece from which it originally came. *Lips of Thomas*, 1975, was a live performance piece by Abramović which focussed on her communist background, and the persistence to endure. Throughout the performance, she uses her own body as her canvas, carving the Communist star into her stomach, addressing the political themes relating to torture. (IMMA, n.d.) (MOMA, 2023) Displayed in a 30.6 x 40.6 cm format my hope is for this work to serve as the beginning of the journey along the narrative path; as a means of acknowledgement of pain or struggle, an admission.



(Fig.3 - /200, Ali Waller 2021) (Waller, 2021)

The next work, continuing around the gallery on the left, will be that of Ali Waller, */200*. */200* (or *Out of 200*) is a continuously expanding project that Waller began in 2020, when she began casting the chests of female survivors of sexual assault. Speaking about the origins of her work Waller said, “The original installation consisting of 550 plaster casts was sparked after I watched the 'Filthy Rich' documentary on Netflix, a commentary on the Jeffrey Epstein story told by survivors of his coercion, rape, and ongoing abuse. In the beginning I intended to cast 200 survivors to reflect the \$200 which he paid victims after assaulting them. I almost tripled that number in 5 months”. (SECCA, 2023) Waller’s work will be displayed in a similar fashion to that in figure 3, as the wall it will be featured on will

contain – within reason – as many cast pieces as possible. The intention of this will be simply impact of scale, especially in its contrast to Abramovic’s much smaller scale work displayed on the neighbouring wall.



(Fig.4 – *Para un Corpo pleno de vazios* (left), *Para un Corpo e o seu duplo* (right), Martha Araújo, 1986) (PM8 Galeria, n.d.)

Returning to the entranceway, the work at the base of the wall on the right will be that belonging to a series by Martha Araújo entitled *Para un Corpo... (foam)*. Created in 1986, this audience interactive exhibit focusses on the human form and the connection and disconnection between the body and its environment. Araujo’s work focusses on “the limits

of the body, understood in its physical, individual sense and its metaphorical, poetic connotations, in which the body is invited to publicly interact with the clothes and objects produced by the artist, and frequently with other people, thus becoming, to all effects, a communal, collective body". (Galeria Jaqueline Martins, n.d.) Even the names of the pieces – in English, 'For a Body Full of Voids' and 'For a Body and Its Double' – suggest an element of uncertainty and emptiness that will only add to the atmosphere of the exhibition. This lends itself fittingly to the narrative of the exhibition, as it is a widely interpretable exhibit, allowing the opportunity for a number of perspectives on its relationship with the human form.



(Fig. 5 – Cut Piece, Yoko Ono, 1964) (Imagine Peace, 2010)

The fourth feature of the exhibition will be the addition of a live performance by Yoko Ono, *Cut Piece*. First performed in 1964, *Cut Piece* conveys themes of invasion of physical form, as the audience is expected to cut away pieces of her clothing of their own accord. Ono's intentions for the piece was a sort of "form of giving, giving and taking" (Concannon, 2008), in response to the usual ways of artists that tend to only give the audience what they choose. This concept of having any level of control over another individual's body fits the theme of the narrative, and being at the centre of the gallery – sheltered on three sides by thin walls – it calls into question the morals of each individual who takes part.



(Fig. 6 – Frames from *Silueta de Cohetes*, Ana Mendieta, 1976) (Fondazione per l'Arte Moderna e Contemporanea CRT, n.d.)

The Final element of this imagined exhibition will be the film piece *Silueta de Cohetes* by Ana Mendieta, 1976. "The imagery is a metaphor for the passage of time and self-transformation, deeply personal themes for the artist" (The Cleveland Museum of Art, n.d.), which within the context of this exhibition, will represent the end of a journey through

personal trauma and indicate a form of self-growth. At two minutes and 23 seconds, this short film will be displayed on a large, curved screen at the back of the small space just off the main gallery room, and will ideally continue on a loop throughout the full exhibition opening hours.

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