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STUDIES IN SOMAESTHETICS 4

Shusterman's Somaesthetics

*From Hip Hop Philosophy to Politics
and Performance Art*

Edited by

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BRILL

yearned to board them so he could wed his movement with the river's flow, merge with the water which he felt as his essence.³⁷

7 The Dunes and the Sea of Northern Jutland

The last of the adventures of the Man in Gold recounted in the book was in Northern Jutland, Denmark. On Sunday 25th June 2014, Toma and Shusterman arrived in Aalborg, the largest city in this part of Denmark. Denmark is a prominent place for somaesthetics, and one of the many homes of the Man in Gold.³⁸ Over the years, in the course of Shusterman's lectures at Aalborg University (and its affiliated institutions in Copenhagen), and through collaborations with other artists, the topics of somaesthetics and the Man in Gold have emerged with considerable frequency, ultimately leading to the founding of *The Journal of Somaesthetics*, based in Aalborg University.³⁹ But perhaps the most surprising work of somaesthetics to emerge from Shusterman's work in Denmark was *The Adventures of the Man in Gold*.

I had the honor of being the first Dane to host the Man in Gold in my home. It was in my own rustic cottage by the beach, in the northernmost part of Denmark, where the Baltic and the Nordic seas meet in frequently rough seas beyond green dunes lined with fields of seductively scented flowers. The sound of the strong winds and the rhythmic movements of the waves are constant, and the strong daylight seemed somehow to have prevented the Man in Gold from appearing. Then suddenly, as Shusterman himself poetically describes the scene, the Man in Gold was there.

Yann looked up at the heavens, wondering if his friend had arrived by riding the gentle clouds rather than the rough waves (for both elements share his beloved watery essence). Then, kissing the golden guest between the

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 68.

³⁸ When the University of Aalborg, in the Northern part of Denmark, invited Shusterman to be visiting professor in 2013, it afforded the Man in Gold an opportunity to connect with a new academic and cultural environment and to work with a number of contemporary artists. Unfortunately, the university failed to formalize this appointment due to Danish immigration restrictions, but Shusterman gained an enduring connection to the Department of Art and Technology at Aalborg University, while at the same time expanding his work to Aalborg University's institutions in Copenhagen.

³⁹ See, for example, Gongkai's "Dialogue with Richard Shusterman on Philosophy, Art and Life" and Peng Feng's article "Somaesthetics and its Consequences in Contemporary Art," *Journal of Somaesthetics*, vol. 1, no. 1, Somaesthetics and Visual Art (2015), 42–107.



FIGURE 4 Yann Toma, *Somaflux with Richard Shusterman performing as the Man in Gold: Sunset in Vesterklit*, 2014

PHOTO COURTESY OF YANN TOMA AND RICHARD SHUSTERMAN

eyes to energize his *qi* [energy flow], Yann raised his hands in benediction and bellowed (in his special shaman voice) "*L'homme en or!*"⁴⁰

The Man in Gold soon began to dance in the dark dunes amidst flashes of light that tore the darkness and turned the dunes into a magical landscape (Figure 4). I followed the captivating dance of the Man in Gold to a quiet place and found him deep in meditation, astonished by the very landscape he had created. Attending this performance, as a real artistic event, heightened my senses and awareness, and created dynamic suspense, like nothing else (Figure 4).⁴¹

The next morning, after having slept in my cottage, the Man in Gold indicated his wish to visit two artists, the Viking Queen and her husband the King of Mighty Stones. The Man in Gold had looked forward to meeting with these art colleagues for the first time, and to learning more about art, especially the

40 Shusterman, *Adventures*, 82.

41 *Ibid.*, 82.

creative process, and the relation between art and life, and to new opportunities to gain access to the sensory experience of reality. Laura DiSumma-Knoop highlights this particular meeting with the two artists, as it is recorded in the book, *The Adventure of the Man in Gold*, claiming that moment to be “the moment in which the book advances what I take to be its strongest and most innovative point: that philosophers can create and that they are entitled to artistic expression.”⁴²

The final chapter of the *Adventures* is titled “The Magic Vessels of the Viking Queen.” I now make way for the Queen herself, Marit Benthe Norheim, the very Viking Wizard Queen of Shusterman’s tale. I will leave it to the two artists to describe the Man in Gold’s marvelous adventures in their artworld.

8 The Artists of Pink Rock Castle, by Marit Benthe Norheim

Richard Shusterman in the last chapter of the *Adventures*, “The Magic Vessels of the Viking Queen,” identifies two sculptors Claus Ørntoft as the “King of Mighty Stones” and “Magical Master of the Lions,” and Marit Benthe Norheim as “The Viking Wizard Queen.” I write now as the Viking Wizard Queen of “Pink Rock Castle” in North Jutland, Denmark,⁴³ and of our honored guests, the philosopher Richard Shusterman, the photographer Yann Toma, and the mysterious Man in Gold. By inviting the Man in Gold to inhabit his body, Shusterman opened himself to a strange and difficult possession, difficult even for him to understand. In the *Adventures* Shusterman even asks why he continues to allow such possession; after all, life would probably be easier if he didn’t. But Shusterman acknowledges that there is no ultimate philosophical answer; only a sense that perhaps this possession “had to be.”

Why did I open myself up to this strange possession? I am not certain of the answer. Having long been taught by philosophy’s modes of critical thinking and the even more potent surprises of life, I am skeptical of the certitude of self-knowledge and the capacity to penetrate one’s true and deepest motivations. We are masters of self-deception.⁴⁴

42 Laura T. Di Summa-Knoop, “A Review of Shusterman and Toma’s *The Adventures of the Man in Gold: Paths Between Art and Life: A Philosophical Tale*,” *Newsletter of the American Society for Aesthetics*, vol. 38, no. 2 (Summer 2018), 5 (<https://cdn.ymaws.com/aestheticsonline.org/resource/resmgr/newsletters/38.2.pdf>). I will leave it to the two artists to describe the Man in Gold’s marvelous adventures in their art world.

43 *Ibid.*, 84.

44 Shusterman, *Adventures*, 8.



FIGURE 5 Yann Toma, *Somaflux with Richard Shusterman performing as the Man in Gold: The Lion's Altar*. Hirtshals, North Jutland, Denmark, 2014
PHOTO COURTESY OF YANN TOMA AND RICHARD SHUSTERMAN

In his alter ego of the Man in Gold, Shusterman simply *is* the artwork, created with the assistance of Toma the “midwife” photographer. But *why* he is the Man in Gold, and how the Man in Gold experiences the world through the philosopher, Shusterman cannot say. These things lie beyond the reach of reason.

As an artist myself, it is spellbinding to read the philosopher’s tale, observing how fluidly Shusterman slides into and out of his two personas, Shusterman the philosopher, and the Man in Gold, their realities, and their different ways of being in the same world. I say “as an artist” because I find it easy to identify with these two modes of aesthetic experience, namely, finding inspiration in a feeling of being possessed, as if by a spirit that takes control of me as an instrument for the creation of art. Somehow, the artwork seems to know more than I, and so much more that sometimes it can take years to understand what that artwork wanted to convey through me. This kind of experience of becoming an “instrument” or “channel” of art, and an attendant feeling of “divine inspiration,” are not easy things to explain; and explanations are not always welcome subjects in our rational world.⁴⁵

45 *Ibid.*, 14.

In thinking back on the Man in Gold's wonderful visit, I remember one particular summer day in our garden. I had been watching Richard and Yann engaged in a photography shoot. The photographer with his dynamic energy prepared his camera and lighting while the philosopher quietly disappearing into himself and preparing to change his identity into the Man in Gold. Soon they began to move in synchronicity, a kind of dance and performance, the Man in Gold in his performance before the camera, and the photographer in his own dynamic performance before the subject. The Man in Gold would leap and then strike a pose, holding it perfectly motionless, while the photographer would focus his camera, and then quickly whirl about his subject, tracing the aura of the Man in Gold with golden light.⁴⁶ The photographic performance appeared to be very intense and seemingly physically exhausting. Eventually they had to take a break.

Searching for a place to rest, the Man in Gold found a giant, flat, granite slab in our carving yard, still warm from summer sun. Upon touching the textured surface of the granite slab, the Man in Gold felt a warm surge of magical energy and stretched out upon it to rest in rejuvenate (Figure 5).⁴⁷ The slab later became one of a number of slabs that Claus used in his sculptured public square titled *Small Tectonic Space*, located by the sea in Hirtshals, not far from where we live. Claus likes to invite people to use the giant granite composition as a place to rest, play, or reflect (Figure 6).

We live in the far north of Denmark, with all its wild and windy weather. In sculpting the square, Claus sought to give expression to this area of the north, by shape and texture of the granite, and the natural play of darkness and light on the stone. As Claus writes,

The sea and nature around Hirtshals demands interaction between mighty forces. The sculpture writhes in baroque fierceness and after dark, the over 400 tons of granite plates float on light while smoke seeps out between the cracks. In principle, the square is one slab of granite, which the sculptor has cleaved into 44 pieces. The benches have been pressed into undulating motion from whole oak planks.⁴⁸

Shusterman describes Claus in the *Adventures* both as King of Mighty Stones and as the Magical Master of Lions. He is Magical Master of Lions because he sculpted from granite three lions for the Queen of Denmark. In presenting

46 *Ibid.*, 82.

47 *Ibid.*, 106; photograph on 108–109.

48 Claus Ørntoft, *Skulpturelle rum* (Sculptural Spaces, 2019), 4.



FIGURE 6 Claus Ørntoft, *Small Tectonic Space*. Granite slabs and sculpture are floating on light and smoke after dark. Hirtshals, North Jutland, Denmark, 2016
PHOTO COURTESY OF EIGIL KIRKEGAARD

the lions to the Queen, at an unveiling entitled *Three Lions and Nine Hearts* (May 2013), Claus's speech described the different phases of his creative process, and how in sculpting the lions he bore always in mind the involvement of nature and the viewer (Figure 7), which are also essential elements in Richard Shusterman's philosophy of art. Claus writes (here translated from the Danish):

The Queen asked me to look at the park before we met for the first time. Her Majesty was concerned that the solution be site specific. That it wasn't just something that looked as if it had simply fallen out of the sky, but related to the site in terms of its content as well as architectonically. That is just up my street! I walked around the park and pondered. Seeing as it was the Queen who had approached me, I thought a lion would be fitting. The figure of the lion has always been a feature of my production, because I have always been interested in the Romanesque stonemasons who built the early granite churches in Denmark and used the Animal as Emblem and Animal as Narrative. Those stonemasons had never seen a

lion before, but they understood the tale of the strongest animal, powerful and difficult to control. It is protective, as we can see in baptismal fonts, but also with great powers that one had to be wary of. I kept circling around the theme of the lion—and SAW a lion standing abandoned in the large—in inverted commas—empty, park space. I looked at other possible solutions, but the idea of the lion kept resurfacing without any obvious way that I could use it. Then I realized that there are actually three lions in the Royal Coat of Arms. I suddenly saw a simple solution that would fulfill all the requirements: The solution would have a clear relationship to the location and, within the coat of arms, which I had taken as my starting point, had free movement, both in terms of content as well as architectonically. The lions occupy the area in front of the palace with ease, and make it their territory. They create direction in the space and the spaces in between them without actually touching the park. Thus, the three lions have leapt out of the coat of arms in a free interpretation. The hearts are scattered around them and create an oblique reference to the coat of arms. And there are also three lions on the palace's gable! When I got the idea, I thought that it would be three triumphant lions that occupied the park and that it would be easy! But when I went from idea to process, I quickly realized that creating triumphant lions was an impossible task, because in my world it would represent perfection and would become a postulate. And that it thus had to be a process towards triumph. Later in the process I realized that these are three lions in the midst of a process.⁴⁹

Both Claus's lions and my sculptures of the human body and boats form central parts of Shusterman's last chapter, "The Magic Vessels of the Viking Queen." My sculpture of a nude woman, in fact, is also a crucial character in the *Adventures*, because she is the woman with whom the Man in Gold falls in love.⁵⁰ In the tale, she is Wanmei, a Chinese goddess. In creating her, I have wondered often who she is, but, like Claus and like Shusterman himself, consider the viewer of the artwork to complete it. At our home, once Shusterman had metamorphosed into the Man in Gold, he too was now a work of art, but

49 Ørntoft, *Three Lions and Nine Hearts* (I/S Stenshede, 2013), richly illustrated. The speech was given for the unveiling of the sculptures in May 2013, 5–7. See also in the same book articles by Claus Ørntoft, ("The process—sketches and models"), Birgit Jenvold ("About the exhibitions"), and Else Marie Bukdahl ("To see a World in a Grain of Sand").

50 Shusterman, *Adventures*, 1.

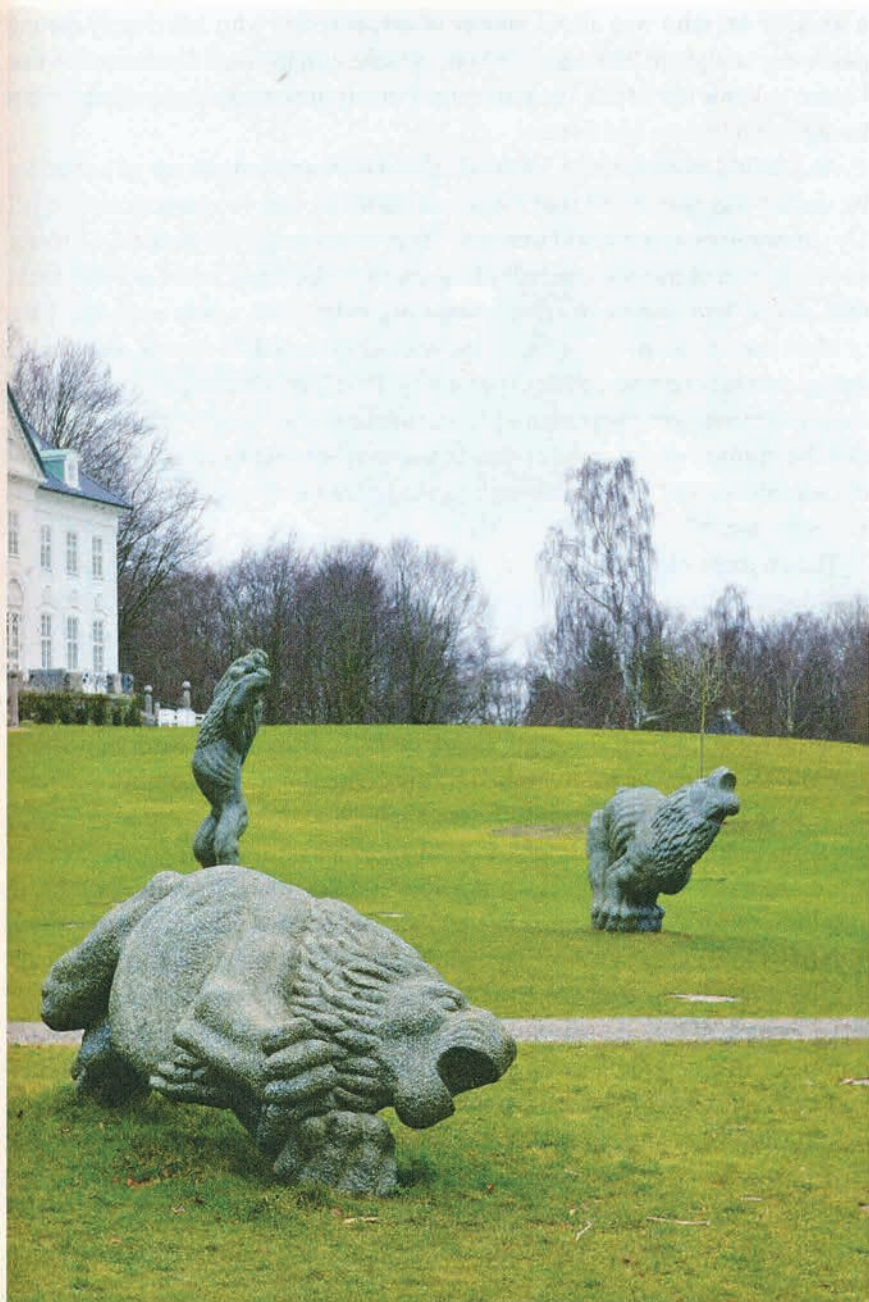


FIGURE 7 Claus Ørntoft, *Three Lions and Nine Hearts*, 2012. Granite, Marselisborg Palace Park, Aarhus, Jutland

PHOTO COURTESY OF CLAUS ØRNTOFT

a work of art who was also a viewer of art, and one who felt deeply for this particular sculpture. Through the Man in Gold, and through Shusterman's tale, I came to know her better, the sculpture, I mean, and something perhaps of her background in Asia and fiction.

As a child I lived in India. I started school in Norway at the age of seven. But by then, I was convinced that I was half Indian. I had so many stories to tell. My experiences of the world were not those of Norway. This division, I suspect, and this need to narrate one half of my mind to the other, and the other to the first, would form me as an artist and a story teller, from a very early age. Later in life, I see the many ways Asian societies cherish public spaces, as places to gather and eat and share their experiences. That love of open public spaces has stayed with me over the years and continues to shape the way I think about art, and the kinds of sculptures I create. In that respect, and I suspect many others, my sculptures and boats, although made in Denmark and residing there are also very Asian.⁵¹

The concept of passage, or travel, often between two very distant places, is also essential to my work. I suspect my own inner division informs this aspect of passage and distance as well, just as certain divisions and experimental syntheses seems to inform Shusterman's philosophical explorations in the *Adventures*. He too is divided: on the one hand, he is a philosopher of art who travels widely; on the other hand, he is an artist and a work of art, who also travels widely in his many adventures. The theme of mobility, or travel, appears in several of my sculptures, and in each of them I continue to see and feel representations of emotions. I see in my boats representations of the emotions because emotions themselves are so mobile: they arrive and they depart and they make their presence felt in such powerful ways, like ships coming to land, and leaving again; or like automobiles that drive past us, seemingly driving through us, often slowly, sometimes fast, and often with great size and force. But not always do emotions rush past us and through us; and not always do they arrive without warning. Sometimes we seem to know they are coming; we can even "see" them coming on the horizon. Sometimes we are able to prepare ourselves and "climb into them," as it were, never in full control, but at least partly directing their course; sometimes we are able to take the helm and sail, and through such sailing we feel free.

51 Marit Benthe Norheim, "A Sailing Sculptural Installation with Direct Social Participation, Artistic Exchange and Incorporated Music," *Journal of Urban Culture Research*, published jointly by Chulalongkorn University, Thailand, and Osaka City University, Japan, vol. 7 (2013), 79.



FIGURE 8 Marit Benthe Norheim, *Life-boats*. Three sailing sculptures in ferrocement, 2017
PHOTO COURTESY OF CLAUS ØRNTTOFT

In the *Adventures* the Man in Gold is a deeply emotional being, and in the last chapter of the work he climbs upon, and into, the “Magic Vessels of the Viking Queen,” which he experiences as vessels for feeling strong and unique emotions. I call the vessels *Life-boats*. They are sculptural installations in ferrocement, designed to invite and engage direct social participation and artistic exchange; and they incorporate music by composer Geir Johnson (Figure 8).⁵² The three *Life-boats* are sailing sculptures. They are CE certified canal boats and they are seaworthy: they sail with captains and crews. Their subject matter is a three-part portrait of women, in different universal stages and conditions (young womanhood, pregnancy, and old age).⁵³

52 Else Marie Bukdahl analyzed the relation between Shusterman’s somaesthetics and the projects of Marit Benthe Norheim in several articles including *The Camping Women* and *The Life Boats*. See her article “New Visual Dialogues and New Art Projects with a Social and Melioristic Goal in the Urban Space and at Sea,” *Journal of Urban Culture Research*, published jointly by Chulalongkorn University in Thailand and Osaka City University, Japan, vol. 8 (Jan.–June 2014), 73–77.

53 Ann-Dorte Christensen and Marit Benthe Norheim, *A Shipload of Women’s Memories, Narratives across Borders* (Aalborg: Aalborg University Press, 2017), 113.

In cities where they dock, the public can board the three Life-boats and experience the installations from the inside. The insides of the Life-boats are artistically designed, and nautical in nature. From the outside of each Life-boat, and from the inside, one sees and learns of each of the three women's identity, her narrative. Each woman is titled, or subtitled, with a kind of name, drawn from the indoor word-identification game called "My ship is loaded with ..."

My ship is loaded with Memories—the aging woman floats on her stomach with her rear end making up the cabin. She carries 19 figureheads on her back which are emblematic portraits of living women over the age of 70 who have in common that they come from different cultures and have related to other cultures than their own.

My ship is loaded with Life—the pregnant woman floats on her back with her stomach as the cabin. Her interior will be filled with self-portraits drawn directly on the walls.

My ship is loaded with Longing—the young woman lies on her side, with her hip as the cabin and with a treasure chest decorated with pearls and glass into which people can post letters describing their hopes, dreams and longing. The three *Life-boats* are always sailing together.

My ship is loaded with Longing was the first ship finished. It was resting outside my studio when the Man in Gold climbed aboard and into her hull, followed by the photographer, exploring her entire bodily form. At the time, I was still in the process of creating *My ship is loaded with Life*. The Man in Gold climbed aboard this ship too, still in roughly modelled concrete sculpture. The photographer was there too and delighted in photographing the Man in Gold upon the woman ship, playing with the proportions of a giant grey rock woman and a comparatively small golden man (Figure 9).

As I beheld the Man in Gold inside the giant woman, I considered then, as I had considered in creating the Life-boat, how each human being is created inside a woman. In forming a woman of vast size and power, seaworthy and capable of carrying many human beings, I reflected on how we are all very much the same kind of being; and in seeing the Man in Gold inside this woman, I saw him too as one of us, a physical being made from a physical being, despite descriptions of the mind as detached from the body in much of western philosophy, and which Shusterman has sought to overcome throughout his writings. But in observing the Man in Gold, I also saw a being who unlike us, a man, a philosopher, an artist, but also a living work of art, a being who was, in some sense, a living and glowing sculpture. Perhaps that partly explains

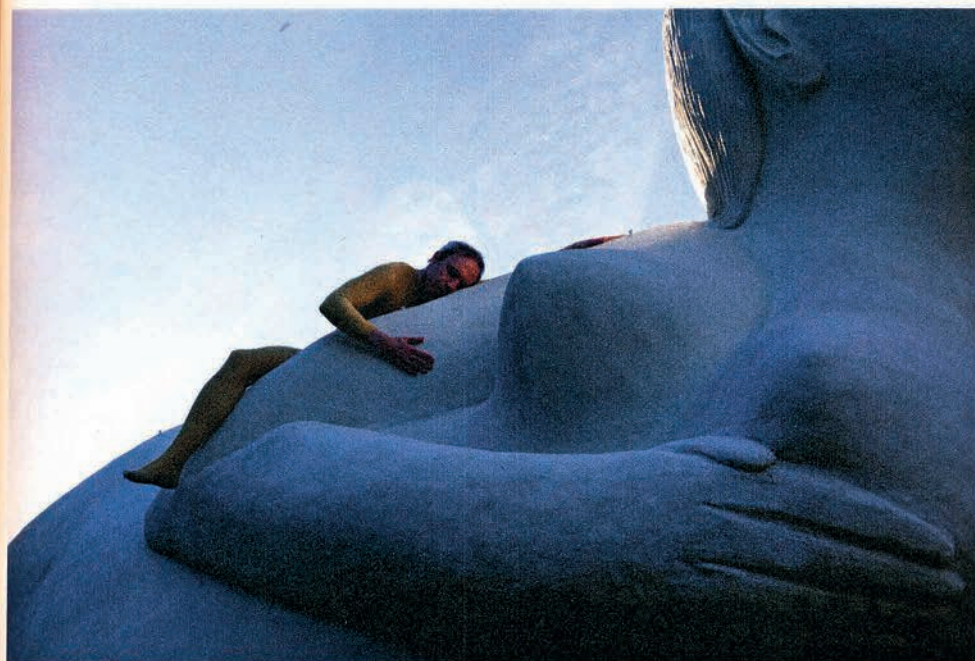


FIGURE 9 Yann Toma, *Somaflux with Richard Shusterman performing as the Man in Gold: Ship of Longing*, 2014

PHOTO COURTESY OF YANN TOMA AND RICHARD SHUSTERMAN

his powerful attraction to one of my sculptures of women, a nude slightly smaller than the size of the Man in Gold. I sculpted her at the Norwegian Art Academy while a student. I had been experimenting with the transparency of the material, thinking of this transparency as representative of her fragility. When the Man in Gold found her near the end of the corridor of the studio, along one of the back rows, Toma was there to photograph the interaction, man and woman, darkness and light, life and art, sculpture and performance, stillness and motion, all complementing one another.⁵⁴ With Toma's lighting, the sculpture's golden aura glowed, and as it glowed so too did the aura of the Man in Gold, and soon they melted together, the Man in Gold and the woman he would name "Wanmei" (Figure 10).⁵⁵ The nature of their attraction was somewhat mysterious, but perhaps not entirely. As Shusterman writes in the *Adventures*, "The Man in Gold fears being misunderstood, not only because

54 Shusterman, *Adventures*, 112.

55 See photographs of Wanmei in Shusterman's *Adventures*, 115–116, and front cover.



FIGURE 10 Yann Toma, *Somaflux with Richard Shusterman performing as the Man in Gold: The Look of Love*, 2014

PHOTO COURTESY OF YANN TOMA AND RICHARD SHUSTERMAN

misunderstandings spur the scorn of rejection, but also because they betray and sully the love that is his hope and mission.”⁵⁶ In Wanmei, the Man in Gold, a man and artwork, felt he was truly loved and understood, and he too felt that he truly understood and loved the artwork and woman Wanmei.

9 The Birth of a New Artwork and New Literary Work

I, Else Marie, return now to give not only a very short description of the *Adventures* as a philosophical tale but also concluding remarks about the birth of a new artwork and a new literary work. Shusterman has called the *Adventures* a philosophical tale and there is a parallel to the long history in the literary world. But he does not use the works of his predecessors as models. Rather, they can be considered earlier parallels to his book in Voltaire’s philosophical tale *Candide* (1759), Diderot’s *Rameau’s Nephew* (1761–62), and Milan Kundera’s

⁵⁶ Shusterman, *Adventures*, 64.

Identity: A Novel (1998). As in Shusterman's book, there are continuous transitions between the real and the fictional world that reveal general philosophical issues.⁵⁷

In his intense encounter with the world of visual art and particularly his impressive performances as the Man in Gold, Shusterman has provided new conditions for solving fundamental relations between existential and aesthetic questions. In Yann Toma's magical photos, performances, and films, which are characterized by highly evocative artistic qualities, the Man in Gold has succeeded in revealing these new conditions. When encountering the Man in Gold in the glittering appearance, one is reminded of Shakespeare's famous words, "We are such stuff as dreams are made on," because dream and reality are interwoven in the adventures of this fictional magical figure. Through his rhythmical, nonverbal body language, he has opened numerous doors to a new understanding of artistic creation, the connection between art and life and the body-mind relation. The Man in Gold has succeeded in what Rainer Maria Rilke calls bringing "into *oeuvre* the form of things whose seal has not been broken."⁵⁸

The *Adventures*—an original version of a philosophical tale—proves that Shusterman has become an "an excellent writer of poetic prose."⁵⁹ The many often surprising transitions in the book between the real and the fictional world reveal new developments of key issues in his somaesthetics, among others his concept of body-mind awareness, the difference between the language of form and verbal language, and the very intense active relationship between the

57 The adventures of the Voltaire's fictional character Candide also contain real events like the disastrous year of 1755 combined with basic existential conditions. But contrary to Shusterman, Voltaire created his philosophical tale as a consistently humorous and ironic tale that expresses philosophical views, particularly the view that this world is not the best of all possible worlds. The *Adventures* also contains parallels to Diderot's *Rameau's Nephew*. This work is a fictional and humorous philosophical conversation between Diderot (not in fact Diderot himself, but with some elements from his life) and the famous composer Rameau's nephew (a fictional figure, but with some traits from the real world), which also makes continuous transitions between the real and the fictional world, revealing general philosophical issues. Diderot's work is a richly faceted fictional critique of those who argued against the Enlightenment. Milan Kundera's *Identity: A Novel* is a modern philosophical tale that also has certain features in common with the *Adventures*. Like Shusterman, Kundera blends reality, fantasy, satire and philosophy and confronts the reader in a different way with a large range of questions about our identity, which is indeed a central theme of the *Adventures*.

58 Quoted by Merleau-Ponty in *The Primacy of Perception* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1964), 188.

59 Stefán Snævarr, "Shusterman and the Man in Gold," *The Nordic Journal of Aesthetics*, no. 54 (2017), 92.

viewer and the artwork. Shusterman has succeeded in bringing the biographical, philosophical, and fictional parts of the *Adventures* into a narrative and stylistic unity, in which the photos of the magical recreation of the Man in Gold's performances visualize how bodily interaction with the surrounding world creates new somaesthetic experiences and new meaning. The Man in Gold's unpredictable experiences in the enchanted experiential visual space created by Yann Toma's magical photographic tools have been transformed in the *Adventures* into a literary, philosophical, and poetic world that inspires us to think, feel, and create in new ways.

