

# **ART THOU PAYING ATTENTION? - PRESENCE AND SUSTAINABILITY IN THE PERFORMING ARTS**

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## **Introduction**

### **Dear Reader,**

If you are interested and have a little attention that you can lend us for a while... Here in an essay about a research project “ Presence and sustainability in the Performing arts”. The project started in the summer 2021 and was concluded in June 2023. However, we see it as an ongoing process. If you get tired you can stop reading. Our text will be here when and if you would like to return....

The project started from the idea that the premise of the performing arts is to capture people’s attention. But at the same time our attention is under pressure through experience economy, digitalisation and work-life conditions. We consider it urgent to find ways of creating sustainable relations to attention within this field. The purpose was therefore to develop a more sustainable relation to attention within the performing arts, in the meeting with meditative practices. The research questions we have been working with were the following:

- In which ways can the use of meditative practices contribute to a more sustainable relation to attention in the performing arts and in artistic education?
- How can we create an increased awareness of the relation between artistic choices and the demands on practitioners’ and audiences’ attention?

In this essay we would like to share how we have worked with these questions, which insights we came to in this part of the process, and how we would like to pursue similar questions in the future. You will be following our dialogue. It can be read from A-Z or really anyway you want...

## **Flying High – Falling Hard**

### **Hi again Reader,**

As the first part of the project, we started acquainting ourselves with each other’s practices and our reasons for engaging with mediative techniques and searching for ways of dealing with attention.

### **Dear Camilla,**

Hi again (from CDG-Airport!).

Here is the link to the course I’m doing learning armbalances within yoga. Not easy...I have massive bruises on my arms after the Crow and Crane exercises<sup>1</sup>. Well well... See you Monday!

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<sup>1</sup> ”Crow/kakasana” and ”crane/bakasana” are two armbalancing asanas (positions) in yoga where you balance your knees on your triceps and hopefully look like a bird. ”Asana” is sanskrit and means ”seat”.

**Dear Johanna,**

Thank you for the link! I still have not found the time to join the yoga ninja classes. However, I have received a surprising amount of publicity. At least one e-mail per week, urging me to join. It both triggers my temptation and my circus instinct and my bad conscience for not managing to squeeze it into my weekly schedule.

The publicity insists that the course offers a method to success. But the flip side of the coin is that it tells you that if you do not succeed it is only your own fault. It builds on a “your-thoughts create-your-reality-approach” - so if my reality is not full of success, then... It seems to be yoga thinking read through positive psychology. It resembles a “Nike-fication” of the self-transformatory aspect of yoga discourse. From stilling your mind to know yourself and the absolute as in Patanjali’s Yoga Sutras<sup>2</sup>, to “just do it!”.

It is definitely not without precedence in the history of yoga – selling yoga by making believe that it can work wonders. But at the moment those words “ You can do it” have the opposite effect on me. Rather than giving me hope and strength, I give up... Even so, I’m not sure that succeeding some arm balances will transform my personality, give me a winner’s psyche. In fact, I have done several of those balances earlier, and it never transformed me into the super hero of my life.

By the way, how did you come across yoga?

**Dear Camilla,**

My very first yoga session came late in life. And in a very difficult period of my life. The teacher told us: focus on what happens on you mat. Don´t compare yourself to others. I thought: you don´t have to tell me this. This is so difficult that there is no way I would have the capacity to focus on anything else than the asanas. It was hard, strenuous, and in the beginning not very exciting, but it immediately became a daily habit: one hour a day when my mind just focused on exactly what happened on that small rectangular square. When the outside world was left to its own doings.

Thinking back on my experience as a theatre and opera director, I have begun to reconsider the role of attention. The director creates the opportunity for presence and attention between stage and auditorium by lending her/his attention as a substitute audience. And makes her/himself superfluous through the repetition process. Operating oneself away, step by step, so that the live event can take place between the participants.

My professor Folke Abenius told me during my first Master education, in Opera directing, that the director who is not exhausted by a four-hour choir rehearsal in an opera production is lying. Then the director's presence is set in relation to the expression of maybe 80-100 people. It becomes a projection wall for all those people trying to send and receive. Every expression I as the director make is also received and sometimes commented on.

Over the years, I have understood that even the tiniest stress level in me creates waves in the ensemble. And during these three decades as director, the rehearsal times in the institutional

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<sup>2</sup> Patanjali’s Yoga Sutras is a collection of aphorisms on the philosophy and practice of yoga probably compiled in between the 2<sup>nd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> centuries. It is unknown whether Patañjali was one author or several. In modernity the text has become one of the globally known classics of yoga philosophy. Within contemporary yoga practice it is current to refer to the eightfold path of yoga as explained in the second chapter of the Yoga Sutras. The eightfold path contains: yama (abstinences), niyama (observances), asana (yoga posture), pranayama (breath control), pratyahara (withdrawal of the senses), dharana (concentration of the mind), dhyana (meditation) and samadhi (absorption).

theatres have become more and more condensed, due to financial reasons. We need to deliver, instantly, and the creative process is somewhat forced with the premiere in mind.

25 years ago I directed non-stop, travelling between cities I knew nothing about, meeting hundreds of new participants per year. One day my eye sight was blurry. The doctor told me that I was burnt out... I immediately decided to down scale my activities. To do less. But it took me 25 years to realise that I also needed to exercise my body and my mind in stress-control and awareness. To exercise resting. To exercise my attention. What about you?

### **Dear Johanna,**

I first came into yoga when trying to figure out how to become more flexible to improve my circus skills. At the same time – despite all the reluctance I had against the yoga-as-self-transformation-discourse – it did start a process of change. It gave me a quiet space that I could return to in the midst of all turbulence. It became a means for recovery when my nervous system was all tense with stress and anxiety.

However, it was not only an easy ride, a fancy postcard with a sunny beach. Some parts of the practice have also broken me down in periods. Some parts of the practice can be physically violent. Some teachers can be quite authoritarian. Transforming the inner core of your body also makes you vulnerable. Also, the practice demands a dedication to something extremely repetitive, promising transformation, but without revealing into what...

When rolling out of bed early in the morning creating a triangle-shape with my body, or balancing on my arms, I give myself a task where the mind focusses on the sensations only. What do I discover about myself? Why do I feel discomfort or joy? Why do I want to achieve something very difficult? The questions raised on the mat sometimes mirror or open up questions about myself in everyday life.

The practise can offer a possibility to peel off the layers to the innermost core of our existence, bringing oneself to a state of absolute presence. In that way it also infuses other parts of my life.

## **From Freezing to Shaking**

### **Hello Reader!**

During the second part of the project, we invited practitioners to lead workshops as specialists in their fields. Thus, we tried to engage with meditative techniques that we had not yet encountered in order to reflect on their possible effect on attention and their relation to the performing arts.

We engaged in meditation, led by Fredrik Edlund (yoga teacher), TechnoSomatics, led by Frédéric Gies (choreographer/dancer), and Forest bathing, led by Helena Johard (BA in Fine Arts/PhD neurobiology). Each workshop included practice and discussion, and was open to staff and students in the performing arts department. Via the three workshops: Meditation, Chakra, forestbathing we immersed ourselves in practises that were new to us and that in different ways opened up new doors to attention.

## Dear Johanna,

The meditation workshop with Fredrik brought me to the fine line between my yoga- and meditation practice and my circus practice. As we were doing Shaking meditation with closed eyes on our square mats in a dimly lit studio, I tapped into my improvisation habits. I started secretly looking for opportunities. I started giving myself tasks. I started asking myself “what can I do with this?”. Suddenly, the mat was a potential circus apparatus with possibilities for supring circus movements.

Fredrik mentioned Csikzentmihalyi’s flow theory<sup>3</sup>, proposing that we are the most alert when we do tasks that are neither too difficult nor too easy. However, the physical challenge of yoga does not only lie in the acrobatic difficulty. One repeats the same figures over and over again, not only to lay the ground for more challenging ones, but also to confront one’s own mind. Staying alert even when doing things that do not demand your full attention becomes the real challenge.

There are physical challenges too, but for me they work differently. In my circus practice, I would work towards tricks that demand more refined use of technique. In my yoga practice, the most challenging postures are the ones that demand that I change the very material of my body. For me, one of the most impossible figures is one that others can do with no training whatsoever: lotus.

Meeting the limit of what we can do, confronts us with our desires: the desire to move on, to try something new, to succeed. But in yoga, we try to learn to accept what is, even when it is not exciting. Paradoxically, knowing that there are many postures I will never be able to do makes me accept to do simple things again and again. I know only too well from my circus practice, that even if I would learn one more thing, there would still be more outside of my reach. What do you do to accept boredom in a practice?

## Dear Camilla,

Fredrik’s workshop with the final meditation made me think of the productions of Robert Wilson and his slow tableaux. Wilson has said:

Time in theatre is special. Time is plastic. We can stretch it out on stage until it becomes the time of the mind, the time of a pine tree moving gently in the wind or a cloud floating across the sky and slowly becoming a camel, then a bird. I’m the slowest director in the world. You must always give the audience space to see and time to think. The time of my theatre is the time of interior reflection.<sup>4</sup>

It is so unusual with the tempo “grave” or in English “slow” in performing arts today. The aesthetics is very often fast-paced, with steep counterpoints between changes of images and formats. In contrast, some opera creators have work with extended time, many repetitions and long-lasting performances – for instance in Richard Wagner’s work in the 19<sup>th</sup> century with his 5 hour long operas. The storyline of one of his operas could easily be told in a couple of minutes. It requires both perseverance and patience to follow, but can also open up for an expanded perception.

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<sup>3</sup> The psychologist Mihaly Robert Csikszentmihalyi (1934-2021) coined the term “flow” in order to describe highly concentrated states of mind and what it requires to obtain them. In short, his idea is that the task at hand should be neither too easy nor too difficult, in order to obtain flow.

<sup>4</sup> Arthur Holmberg (1996). *The Theatre of Robert Wilson*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. p.162.

Wagner's aesthetics even transformed the architecture of the theatre to make this happen. It was only with Wagner's new building, Bayreuth, that the orchestra pit, as we conceive it, was invented, concealing the orchestra from the audience. At the same time, the light over the auditorium was diminished, so that the focus was only on the stage. This can be compared Mozart's operas from the 18<sup>th</sup> century, which are fast-paced and packed with intricate storytelling. The audience sat in a lit-up room, where they could both see each other and the singers on stage.

At Drottningholm court theatre, where I have directed several works, the benches are excruciatingly hard and the auditorium during summer becomes hot as a sauna. In the summer months there was always at least one audience member who fainted. I set up a parameter for the up-coming productions: One act must never exceed 1 hour, after an hour the audience needs a break and fresh air. So I cut out large chunks of these old operas in order to keep the time limit.

And now I keep thinking: but in the 18th century they did not cut at all in the four hour long operas in the summer months. And the audience back in the days wore extremely uncomfortable and super warm rococo costumes, not shorts and tops. How could they cope? How have the attention span and expectations on pace changed since then?

In the workshop with Fredrik, it was boring to shake. It is interesting being bored. In contemporary life we always have the option to quickly get new kicks via smartphones, computers etc. Refraining from trying to entertain myself, not giving myself constantly new material to process, to just continue - that opens up for another form of attention.

## Dear Johanna,

I have not slept all night. After working with Frédéric's interpretation of the seven chakras<sup>5</sup> and how to move from them through the spine so much serotonin/dopamine/noradrenalin was triggered that it kept me awake. Referring to the chakras is current in yoga. However, postural yoga works mostly through the skeletal axis of the body: bending forwards and backwards, twisting left and right. Now, I was slowly shaking to the weirdly mild techno beats until the tissue around every vertebrae of the spine left its grip around the skeleton, as if I had moved things that never move.

Physical practices within the performing arts and within meditative practices function in performative ways. Though we cannot directly locate certain objects in the body, trying to work on those objects *does* something. *Imagining* the *chakras*, makes us *feel* the chakras. It does not really matter what they are and whether they are there. If nothing else, they are at least there as a kind of Stanislavskijian "magic if".

Both in yoga and in circus practice, we interweave scientific and esoteric vocabularies. We are using scientifically supported methods to build up strength and flexibility, and we are trying to sense what cannot be located even with an x-ray. We use these vocabularies to create specific forms of attention and give rise to different experiences. They become part of our attentional tools.

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<sup>5</sup> In yoga thinking, the chakras are understood as energy centres in the body, lying along the spine. Historically, they were developed within tantric traditions and then absorbed into Medieval hatha yoga in India. There have been different understandings of how many chakras there are, but in contemporary practice the most common is to refer to seven chakras. The seven chakras are (from the bottom and up): Muladhara Chakra (Root Chakra), Svadhishthana Chakra (Sacral Chakra), Manipura Chakra (Solar Plexus Chakra), Anahata Chakra (Heart Chakra), Vishuddha Chakra (Throat Chakra), Ajna Chakra (Third Eye Chakra), Sahastrara Chakra (Crown Chakra). They are understood as relating to different physical, emotional and spiritual aspects of being.

**Dear Camilla,**

I couldn't feel my solar plexus chakra. At all. And I really tried. The other six I somehow thought I connected to.

This workshop with Frédéric Gies on Techno somatics happened on a normal day at SKH. In other words a busy day at work. Before the workshop there was one of these emergency situations that had to be dealt with. Entering the studio my mind was in a thousand different places. I was feeling stupid and trying to cover it up by being "professional". Dancing techno at work focusing on chakras felt stupid. Just like when I started yoga and felt really uncomfortable practicing: Oum. A sacred sound and symbol that was rarely given sufficient attention and context. A group of Western yogis hijacking a culture pretending that it belonged to us.

**Dear Camilla,**

I met a tree. I held a leaf in my hand. I introduced myself to the forest. I greeted the ground under my feet. My feet all of a sudden felt so clumsy when I learned that even plants have sensory cells and can hear, feel, smell.

I met a wind and it welcomed me. Or did it really? It felt like a welcome since the wind greeted me with its sound. I was in a Forest bath. A Japanese ritual aimed at presence in nature. I froze. We all froze. One master student in summer clothes welcomed the cold and told that it heightened the experience. I swam in the forest. And it was completely new to me.

After 2 years of being almost completely digital due to the pandemic, it was as if my senses were awakened. One reason for zoom fatigue may be that we are only using one or two of our senses: sight and hearing (and touch via hammering on the key board). Now I met the smell of the soil, the feeling of the bark. Maybe the abrupt shift from Zoom to Funghi made the experience all the stronger.

**Dear Johanna,**

After doing the forest bath my first thought was to never practice anything indoors anymore. Most of the practices I engage with, are more easily done indoors, in more or less specialised spaces. Even if yoga can be done anywhere, certain conditions make it easier. On Instagram you always see pictures of people doing yoga outdoors. But whenever I have tried, my capacity to practice "ahimsa", non-violence has been challenged, as I am tempted to clash all mosquitoes that cluster around me in the humid morning air.

For our autumn forest bath, there were no mosquitoes. Instead, the sensation of soft mosses, cold winds and wet raindrops opened my senses to the multitude of impressions possible. Impressions that we try to shut out of the rooms we design for specific experiences: black boxes for performing arts, empty studios for yoga. We create empty rooms where we design experiences wilfully, instead of taking in the impressions already out there. Outdoors.

**Drama – Yes Please, but Keep it on Stage**

**Hi Reader, you are still here with us. Thank you!**

There is a misconception around yoga that one would rest oneself to clarity. In the performing arts, it is almost the opposite: there is a (mis?)conception that there cannot be life without drama, theatre without conflict.

When starting the research we knew that we would like to involve actors. We are not performers ourselves and it is a different position that we would need to explore. As one part of the project we therefore invited two actors, Lena Carlsson and Sylvia Rauan, to work with us. They also shared their experiences from different times in their career, when difficult work conditions made it hard for them to be anchored in their acting techniques, go through the process methodically, and be present in the work.

We decided to work with scenes from a play that Johanna wrote a couple of years ago. The title of the play is: *Towards Carmel*. The play is about a woman who has decided to step away from the world as we know it and go into a Carmelite convent. In the course of the play, we learn that traumatic childhood experiences may be one the reasons why she has chosen to withdraw into a convent. In the convent she has no other contact than with the other sisters, she is quiet twenty-two hours a day, and her possibility to meet family and friends is limited to a couple of days per year.

The play unfolds during one hour when her biological sister has urgently asked to come and meet her, demanding that she leaves the convent and that they together would travel to the mountain Carmel in Israel for a new start.

During the two weeks we worked with the actors, we wanted to experiment with how to integrate meditative techniques from yoga into the rehearsal process. We deliberately choose a play that demands, at times, a high intensity of emotions and sharp shifts from calmness to desperation and outright anger.

Our idea was that this material would be interesting and challenging to explore together, aiming for sustainability in work relations and conditions and trying to maintain mental equilibrium. We asked ourselves: how can we help the actors work with this material without exhausting themselves mentally in the long run even when working with a heavy material?

### **Dear Johanna,**

To me it was as if we entered directly into the potential conflict between the dramaturgical structures of theatrical action and yoga techniques. To put it simply: Yoga techniques work over long periods of time trying to still the mind to help control all possible mental storms. This idea is best summarized in the classical yoga philosophy of Patanjali and the most well-known of Patanjali's yoga sutrats: "yogas citta-vrtti-nirodha" or "yoga is the stilling of the changing states of the mind"<sup>6</sup>.

Dramatic action, on the other hand, basically works by bringing us in to a situation unfolding over a short period of time, revealing fundamental conflicts and making them explode before our eyes. This principle has been the Aristotelean spine of European theatre history and continues to build a corner stone of dramatic writing as well as of acting techniques.

Basically, what we put to a test was a couple of questions: can you still make your emotions fictively explode while including yoga techniques in the process, and can this help us create more

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<sup>6</sup> Bryant, Edwin F. (2009). *The Yoga Sutras of Patanjali – A New Edition, Translation, and Commentary*. New York: North Point Press. p.10

sustainable working situations for actors? And how would this affect the work of the actor in creating a character?

### **Dear Camilla,**

A contemporary expression of our understanding of theatre as an space for extreme emotions, has been formulated by Casper Holten, a Danish director. He has discussed the performing arts as “an emotional gym.”

When we discussed this with the actors, they both agreed that it is not the emotions in themselves that makes a piece of work demanding. It has more to do with how to set up a safe space, where they can explore the full depth of the material in an atmosphere of trust. They both agreed that rehearsing intense emotions in and of itself was not exhausting, it can even be revitalising.

But the problem for them usually occurs when their impulses are hindered, and when a demand for fast delivery cuts short the process. The actors described situations in the past where they felt used, neglected, humiliated and lacked ownership over both their process and their practice. These were the situations that they felt were exhausting and draining, and these were the situations that prevented them from exploring the characters in depth in order to be able to perform a character with many layers.

### **Dear Johanna,**

During the process we worked with yoga asanas and breathing exercises. We included these exercises in the beginning, middle or end of the rehearsal sessions, in order to better understand how they might affect the process.

In the rehearsals we also worked with techniques for approaching the text: full reading of the text trying to withhold our ideas of the text; careful reading of particular scenes trying to find the character’s motives behind their words and actions; trying out scenes on the floor letting the actors explore the situations and see what impulses that the text may reveal when played out in the bodies.

We thus moved to both ends on different scales: from the actors professional selves to the emotional lives of their characters, from meditative stillness to agitated bodily movement, from reading the text without emotional layers to living the emotion in character full on.

It struck me how the pranayama, the various breathing exercises we practised together, were the yoga methodes that really seemed to make a huge difference for the actors. Through the breathing techniques, the actors described that they could connect to their inner bodily process and create a clear consciousness from where to start the gym of the emotions.

Additionally, we explored using breathing techniques to influence character dynamics. By slowing or hastening the breath, the bodily composition of the character changed, giving the actors access to different layers of emotional charge. Thus, breathing become the interface between the actor’s body and the character’s fictional state.



### **Dear Camilla,**

Yoga philosophy also encompasses the concept of tapas<sup>7</sup>, which refers to the burning away layers, signifying the necessity of discipline and effort. However, this burning needs to happen in a way that stays respectful to one's needs and capacities.

Another concept in Yoga is "ahimsa" meaning non-violence or non-harming, which can easily be translated into rehearsal process. Here it could mean: don't force, be thankful for what you receive, listen to what happens to be there and observe it. It can also relate to other participants in the process. Being respectful to others, always.

For the actors rehearsing this play, they needed to be in full contact with a wide range of emotions, some of them violent, some of the aggressive, so the ahimsa-concept would be useful to determine and maintain the necessary boundaries. What kind of boundaries do I, or we involved in the process, need to set up in order to be able to go into those emotions? How do I need to prepare myself for entering that emotional turmoil? How do I avoid that the emotions leak from the fictional space into a private space?

### **Dear Johanna,**

We practiced yoga with the actors and they expressed that it helped them enter a concentrated space. This space involved both activity and relaxation which is also one of the concepts in yoga. They expressed that practising together also formed a bond between those present in the space, without demands for instant delivery.

In our experience, yoga and meditative techniques can be one of the tools to become more aware of what we demand of others' and our own attention, and how we can regulate those processes to happen in more carefully attuned ways.

However, the actors and our own experiences from dysfunctional work processes were often part of a system where we were put under stress due to circumstances we had no or little control over, such as shortened rehearsal time, being freelancers with little security etc.

This led to the question: are we trying to dismantle the master's house with the master's tools, to use Audrey Lorde's terms<sup>8</sup>. Are we keeping the system afloat by trying to find stillness in a world where little stillness is available?

It reminded me about an attempt from our university to support the work environment during the pandemic. As employees we were invited to relaxing sessions on zoom which were incorporated in our schedules. But we were already spending eight hours a day on the screen and yet another hour on the screen didn't seem relaxing. This raised questions around whether we are simply patching up a wound already there without addressing the underlying cause.

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<sup>7</sup> "Tapas" has many meanings, but traditionally translates as austerity or discipline. It is one of the niyamas in the eightfold path.

<sup>8</sup> Audrey Lorde: "The Master's tools will never dismantle the Master's house". In: *Sister Outsiders: Essays and Speeches* (1984). E.D. Berkeley, CA: Crossing Press.

## **Reader!**

There are many ways to come to mental sustainability. In yoga, we are working towards samadhi<sup>9</sup>, absorption and enlightenment. This has been interpreted in various ways during history, and there are also many individual interpretations of what it may mean today. In the play, one of the characters needs the secluded life where she tries to find her peace. The other character has not yet put in any work towards such a goal and is constantly unstable and unhappy. In any case, it is very unsure if we'll get to samadhi in this life, but the work is aiming towards that goal.

Yoga practise often ends with the asana: Savasana- or Dead man's pose. By some described as one of the most difficult yoga asanas. In Savasana we are supposed to do one thing: to lie on the floor. Completely still. And let our minds rest. There are hundreds of asanas where we tie ourselves into weird knots, fling ourselves upside-down, balancing on one arm, being ninjas or no ninjas, where the limbs seem to change place with each other. But Dead man's pose only asks for stillness. And then, of course, that drop of sweat that trickles down into one's ear and becomes impossible to ignore. But what if we can just let go and don't do anything about it just now. What might happen? In what other situations in our lives could it be of use to actively aim for stillness? And in relation to artistic processes in the performing arts: which are the situations where it is valuable to just wait and see? See what happens. To be completely attentive- and completely still.

## **Would You Like to be Present Here? / Would You Like to Present Here?**

### **Most honoured Reader,**

From the very start of our research, we were interested in in-depth dialogue with practitioners in the performing arts. This proved to be very difficult during the pandemic. But when society opened up, we quickly signed up for several conferences to share our thoughts and questions with others. And if you want, you can now google "chaotic sound scape" and listen to the files you find while reading this in order to follow our experience...

### **Dear Camilla,**

Longing for dialogue around the arts is what brought me to the university after many years as a freelance director. I had been directing in different theatres in different countries that I often left after the premiere. I left with a stack of reviews under my arm as the main dialogue around my work - which was more like receiving a written monologue that I couldn't interact with.

When asking my new found contact Chat GPT what a research conference is I received the following answer:

A research conference is an event where researchers, scholars, academics, and experts gather to present and discuss their research findings, ideas, and innovations in a particular field or topic. It is a platform for scholars to share their work with peers, receive feedback, and engage in discussions that could lead to collaborations and further research. (...)

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<sup>9</sup> "Samadhi" is the final goal of yoga according to for instance Patanjali's Yoga Sutras. It is understood as liberation and bliss. In different traditions, this can be obtained and understood in many ways. In some traditions it is thought to be obtained in this life, and in others it is thought to possibly happen after death.

They also serve as an opportunity for researchers to receive feedback on their work and to gain exposure and recognition for their research contributions. (AI chat GPT)

What I hoped for at the research conferences we participated in was not so much recognition but a dialogue around the research that could provide new perspectives and move the research forward.

**Dear Johanna,**

Artistic research conferences often gather various research projects under an umbrella of a rather wide-reaching theme. When receiving information that our application had been accepted to one of these on-line thematic conferences, I was very enthusiastic. But writing the abstract turned out to be the easy part, and the problems quickly piled up. The platform was incomprehensible, and it was rock-hard to find the schedule or “where” we were supposed to present in this digital cyber-space.

What I remember from the actual conference, once I finally came “there”, is fragmented. I remember power-point images floating by, while I couldn’t hear anything, as the sound was not on for the first twenty minutes or so. Then we presented, and I think we could be heard. After our presentation some polite and obvious questions were asked that we politely answered. But I still wonder who the participants were and which kind of research they were involved in. It all became very confusing and more like a fragmented show for an absent audience. It became like a Swedish smorgasbord with some gravad lax, mixed with meatballs and sweet dessert, but difficult to detect the various flavours. With this experience lingering, I was even more excited when we could finally go to a IRL-conference to present our project.

**Dear Camilla,**

Yes, I remember our enthusiasm. Our plan was an interactive workshop framed by performance lecture round sustainability and attention. A circle of mats. Sharing ideas. Trying various techniques together leading up to a sharing circle where the participants would be asked to describe their artistic sustainable utopia.

The problems started when our meditative workshop was placed in a room with three other workshops going on in the same room simultaneously. After some e-mails back and forth, the organisers granted us another space. When coming to the conference carrying our fifteen yoga mats it turned out that the space was in a shopping mall where a web company had an office space we could use.

When I entered the shopping mall, I already knew that this would be a presentation I would never forget. And when seeing you standing there, with the fifteen yoga mats in an office space with a huge table that took up all the floor space I wondered, “how on earth are we going to this?”. I could hardly hear your voice, since the construction workers just outside the building were drilling on metal, but I was relieved when you told me that they had found a lobby with a floor where we could roll out our mats on the floor.

We had asked a colleague in sound design to create a sound scape for the beginning of the presentation where various phone signals and typing on computers would underscore our Sun

salutations<sup>10</sup>. We wouldn't have needed that sound scape. The IRL environment at the research conference contributed with distractions far more elaborate...

Here we were: participants in an artistic research conference supposed to be immersed in artistic work and knowledge, surrounded by noise, office workers walking through the circle of mats in order to get to the coffee machine, while we together with the workshop participants were trying to create stillness. As we were in savasana, the construction workers were hammering away and the office workers watched us in disbelief through the glass walls... Somehow I thought: this is the very core of the project: trying to find stillness in a world where little stillness is available...

### **My Captain, my Reader,**

With hindsight we are even asking ourselves if we should have done these presentations in the first place. Why didn't we say no, when the conditions didn't allow the kind of attention we wished to foster? Who would actually have been disappointed if we cancelled? We actually indirectly accepted lots of non-yogic ideas: delivery, achievement, lack of care, pushing our own boundaries without listening to our needs. Looking back, it became obvious that the time we spent working on these accounts of the research also took so much time from the actual research. It was our own choice, but one may wonder which the factors that induce us to value the accounts of the research so highly. We entered the trap, but with eyes wide open and we jumped at our own accord. We didn't have enough Tapas, discipline, to actually refrain from delivery that was of no importance to the actual research.

## **Slow Teachers Making Boring Presentations – Research as Resistance**

### **Slowly, Reader, you are approaching the end of this text,**

A new presentation was coming up. When backtracking what we had been doing, we discovered that we had strayed from our own principles repeatedly. Trying to be efficient and ending up doing things fast. Trying to account for things earlier than actually needed. So we gave ourselves a challenge: to make a presentation that should be as slow and searching as possible, not trying to paste together things hastily, not trying to fill the holes with empty words, searching quality not fancy, seemingly logical answers. In other words: the task we gave ourselves was to try to do a presentation that would mirror the theme of the research.

### **Dear Johanna,**

I just read the book *The Slow Professor – Challenging the Culture of Speed in the Academy*. Here Maggy Berg and Barbara K. Seeber argue that a change towards slowness is needed in order to resist what they call “the corporate university” in which “power is transferred from faculty to managers, economic justifications dominate, and the familiar “bottom line” eclipses pedagogical and intellectual concerns”<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> A Sun salutation is a series of asanas often practiced in the beginning of class.

<sup>11</sup> Berg & Seeber (2016). *The Slow Professor: Challenging the Culture of Speed in the Academy*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press. p.x.

They argue that we need to resist the way increased speed and demands of efficiency have been imposed on academic life and learning. In their “Slow professor manifesto” they propose that “We envision Slow Professors acting purposefully, cultivating emotional and intellectual resilience. By taking time for reflection and dialogue, the Slow Professor takes back the intellectual life of the university”<sup>12</sup>. Maybe that could also be something to start from when thinking about the presentation?

**Dear Camilla,**

We don’t have to go far to learn to be slow. We just need to turn towards some of the artists that have gone before us, and pay attention to their ideas and their methods. For instance, the composer John Cage who explored the concept and consequences of silence. Cage wrote: "I have nothing to say, and I am saying it, and that is poetry, as I need it."<sup>13</sup>

We need to try even harder to be slower. Not only for the slowness in itself, but to focus on being present, learning things we know little about, such as: how hands talk, the art of getting lost, supporting each other on a journey, asking questions with no expectations for answers. Fighting the fight for not being in the critical and effective dialogue but in an analytical, emotional and supportive dialogue.

**Indeed, dear Reader,**

In the end, we decided on a format of presentation that included slowness and silence. We included us practicing yoga with hand-on-assist to give the spectators an impression of the non-verbal communication through touch that is crucial in yoga. We included soul-gazing, sitting silently looking at each other without talking, to give the spectators space to imagine what might be going on in our minds without further input. We gave ourselves a space for exploration, not accountability. At this point, this was the closest we were to a research of resistance. A research that points to knowledge as a multi-faceted living process, rather than a line of boxes to be ticked.

**Sharing Attention in Higher Education**

**Now we are soon to take different paths, Reader,**

Research should finish with some results. Either change perspectives, come with new insights or new findings. In artistic research, perhaps an article like this one, or a mind-blowing contextualized art piece. We wanted this work to contribute to future artistic processes, without necessarily leading directly to artistic work. Therefore we decided planning for a course where we would share our thoughts with others. To bring the texts we read, the practises we had explored to others.

**Dear Johanna,**

I think that the free-standing course at Stockholm University of the Arts in many aspects mirrored some principles of the research project.

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> John Cage (2004). "Lecture on Nothing" in: *Silence*. London: Marion Boyars, p.109.

Firstly, the idea of working completely analogue without computers, PowerPoints etc turned out to be important. The students, and the two of us, writing by hand in notebooks. For me it was rediscovering handwriting, being in a slow process where the hands' actual movements meant that the text would be fixed to the paper since the pencils used made the text impossible to erase. The "here and now" that yoga works towards manifest in flesh and on paper. I also discovered a freedom in the embodied practise of handwriting and wondered why. Maybe one answer is that when I type away at the computer, the text could have been written by anyone, and that also puts a pressure on the text since there are better writers than I around. But with texts by my own handwriting, the text could never have been produced by anyone else. Its qualities and flaws have my stamp on it.

I also think the physical space was important. We work in the performing arts where the embodied spatial encounter is crucial. But in education I often find myself teaching in a room where the size of the room and the equipment needed are the only parameters I pay attention to when planning for the class. In this course, we instead tried to make the space into an experience for the students: what kind of light, how the yoga mats were placed, how the 100 electric candles were put in different formations for each class. We tried to create a space that would make space for sustainable attention.

The choice of the circle formation also created a space where we teachers were part of the circle in a more equal way. A non-hierarchical setting that should mirror that the students' own journey both individually and as a group was the important thing, not their relationships to the teachers teaching them stuff from above.

### **Dear Camilla,**

Prior to the course we also had several conversations about how to mix theory and practise in the course and try to make it into a seamless weave. In retrospect I think that it was as if we both needed to experiment with new formats for students' learning experience, how to make it possible for them exploring sustainable attention throughout every part of the course.

We were also talking about the role of the teacher, and the habits we as teachers sometimes end up in: the safety of already known formats. In this course you often surprised me. I don't know if I surprised you, but sometimes I also surprised myself. When dividing the different parts of the course between us, you for instance took on a lecture of the history of yoga. I never would have imagined that you would show up in class in a hideous t-shirt bought in a supermarket with lots of confused symbols: a picture of Iyengar, some doubtful self-help DIY quotes and disparate symbols hardly connected to yoga at all. Then you positioned yourself in Sirsanana, standing on your head, guiding us through the rather convoluted history of yoga via following and discussing the various signs on the t-shirt. I had never seen you like that before...

I also found myself drawing pictures in colour on big sheets of paper. I don't consider myself good in drawing and always try to avoid it. Now in the analogue course it felt important to stay true to this throughout the course and when unwrapping the massive sheets with the wobbly pictures in front of the students I felt rather satisfied that had positioned myself way out of my comfort zone. I think our attempts also made it possible for the students to try things that were new to them. They were not the only ones going through processes and material they had not experienced before. We were all in a learning process taking our guard down. Avoiding being experts but unpacking material together.

**Dear Johanna,**

The module that really stood out for me, and that the students in the course evaluation also mentioned the most, was the silent module. As I recall it we came up with the idea during a walk and talk and were initially both excited about the idea.

We wanted to explore the possibility of a joint learning experience in complete silence. But we never discussed what we were actually going to do except that everyone should be silent from entering the room to the end of the module. The closer we came to the actual date of the class I started wondering how on earth it would work out.

It turned out it required a lot of planning from us. We also prepared the students quite a bit before the class. Somehow we lost self-confidence and prepared for an emergency white board if somebody really needed to communicate with words. It was never used. We did physical practise together- in silence, we shared reflections from our note books- in silence, we read texts - in silence, we sat in meditation, we breathed together. And later two Sound artists joined us for a sound meditation.

Yoga is sometimes described as turning down the volume. In complete silence this became literal. My senses were on total alert. I also felt that I got to know the students in another, maybe more subtle way.

## **Preliminary Conclusion and Next Step**

**Farewell Reader,**

Throughout the project we asked the students and the participants in the various conferences where we presented: what is your artistic, sustainable utopia?

We never asked ourselves that question. Just as some of the participants mentioned, this is a question that we did not even allow ourselves to ask. This project confirmed that we need to continue to work to create better conditions for our possibility to pay attention. And it revealed to us that we live in a world where we tend to limit ourselves when trying to think of the fundamental changes needed in order to create a sustainable future, even when it comes to developing the conditions for artistic process.

But what if instead we do give ourselves the challenge of finding ways to think beyond such hindrances, to believe that it is actually possible? Or: what if we do not even think of it as an utopia, as an imagination, but convince ourselves that we are making it happen for real.

Imagining that we can fly with steadiness and ease.  
But humans can't fly!  
Not yet....