



Roskilde University

The Hope of The Sensuous

An Exploration of The Critical Gaze and The Devoted Body



Integrated Master Thesis, Performance Design and Social Science
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Det Sanseliges Håb –

En undersøgelse af det kritiske blik og den hengivne krop

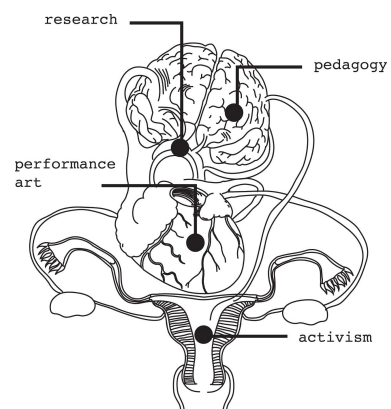
Min interesse i denne undersøgelse er baseret på personlige erfaringer fra performance-eksperimentet Sisters Academy og er rodfastet i et ønske om at undersøge den æstetiske dimensions potentiale samt hengivelse og kritik. Specialet omhandler begrebsapparatet 'det kritiske blik' og 'den hengivne krop' og hvordan disse begreber indvirker på de sanselige eksperimenter foretaget i Sisters Academy. Det er bearbejdet med afsæt i Maurice Merleau-Pontys udlægning af fænomenologi, og jeg har undersøgt problemstillingen på baggrund af notesbøger fra 30 gymnasieelever, som har deltaget i Sisters Academy. Mine kernebegreber, det kritiske blik og den hengivne krop, er konceptualiseret med udgangspunkt i Josephine Machons begreb 'immersion', Massumi's 'intensiveret nærvær' samt Gavin Butt, Irit Rogoff og Eve Sedgwicks perspektiver på kritik. Begrebsapparatet er navngivet af Gry Worre Hallberg. Jeg har konkluderet, at det kritiske blik og den hengivne krop manifesteres som to forskellige deltagelsesmodi i Sisters Academy. De indvirker konstant på hinanden og rummer forskellige potentialer i relation til det sanselige eksperiment. Den hengivne krop har potentiale til at åbne op for nye værensmodi og måder at interagere på og har yderligere evnen til at udvide vores spillerum. Den hengivne krop kan også være en reflekterende krop. Hengivne deltagere kan føle sig begrænset af de som tilgår oplevelsen med et kritisk blik. Det kritiske blik kan samtidig være en sårbar krop. De to deltagelsesmodi forholder sig begge til frygt og frygten for det ukendte, og samtidig er deres forskellige måder at forholde sig til frygt på også en af de ting, som adskiller dem. De to begreber mødes i krydsfeltet, i hvad jeg har kaldt 'den indlevede krop', der tager form som en kritisk praksis, som udspiller sig performativt i mødet mellem deltageren og eksperimentet.

The Hope of The Sensuous –

An exploration of The Critical Gaze and The Devoted Body

My interest in this study is based on personal experiences from the performance experiment Sisters Academy, and it is rooted in a desire to explore the potential of the aesthetic dimension and the notions of devotion and critique. The thesis deals with the conceptual framework ‘The Critical Gaze’ and ‘The Devoted Body’ and how the terms affect the sensuous experiments conducted in Sisters Academy. This is processed from the point of view of Maurice Merleau-Ponty’s definition of phenomenology, and I have investigated the issue based on notebooks from 30 upper secondary school students who have participated in Sisters Academy. The conceptualization of my key theoretical concepts, The Critical Gaze and The Devoted Body, is based on Josephine Machon’s term ‘immersion’, Brian Massumi’s ‘intensified presence’ and finally Gavin Butt, Irit Rogoff and Eve Sedgwick’s perspectives on critique. The terms have been named by Gry Worre Hallberg. I have concluded that the critical gaze and the devoted body manifest as different levels of engagement in Sisters Academy. They affect each other continuously within the framework and hold different potentials in relation to the sensuous experiment. The devoted body holds potential to access new modes of being and being together and has the potential to expand its margin of manoeuvrability. The devoted body can also be a reflecting body. Devoted participants can feel limited by those who approach the experiment with a critical gaze, an approach that can appear one-dimensional. Simultaneously, the critical gaze can also be a vulnerable body. The concept of fear and fear of the unknown are relevant to both levels of engagement. Simultaneously, their way of responding to fear is also a part of what sets them apart from each other. The two concepts merge in the intersection, in what I call ‘The Absorbed Body’, which takes the shape of a critical practice that plays out performatively in the meeting between the participant and the experiment.

All photos: Diana Lindhardt, The I of Sisters Academy



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Introduction

Introduction

This Master thesis takes its starting point in an experiment and movement that I am a part of myself; I am involved as respectively a performer, project coordinator and director's assistant in the experiment 'Sisters Academy' by the performance group Sisters Hope. This premise will act as the outset for my explorations. The study will be rooted in a humanistic and a social scientific approach and will use a theoretical framework named by the founder and artistic director of Sisters Hope Gry Worre Hallberg; *The Critical Gaze and The Devoted Body*, that I will seek to conceptualize in order to explore different levels of engagement represented in Sisters Academy. Before elaborating further, I wish to describe what it could potentially be like to step into Sisters Academy for the first time.

Stepping into the unknown

The courtyard is immersed in red lights, and above the main entrance is a sign reading 'Sisters Academy' shaped in italic red neon letters. You press the doorbell, and the door unlocks automatically. Hesitantly, you open the heavy door, aware that you will leave your everyday life behind for the next 24 hours, contemplating on what awaits ahead. On the other side is an entrance with walls painted in a rich dark green with a golden stencil pattern. A black and white check pattern dominates the floor, and the room is decorated with plants and statues. Two people are sitting on chairs up against the wall, blindfolded, waiting for the unknown. The space is immersed in an otherworldly soundscape. You look to the right, and a hand appears from behind a rose velvet curtain covering a small hatch. The hand is signaling for you to come closer. "Your acceptance letter please" says a soft voice from behind the curtain. You obey the request, taking one last look at the letter: "Dear student, we are pleased to inform you that you have been accepted as a student of Sisters Academy – The Boarding School [...] You will be part of a laboratory. You will take part in classes exploring the quality of the sensuous, do homework and unfold the potential of new modes of poetic and sensuous modes of learning..." The letter is accepted by the hand, and it disappears behind the curtain. Suddenly a woman appears from another hatch in the wall on the left-hand side close to

the floor. She is dressed in a white silk shirt and a long black skirt. She takes you by the hand and guides you through the hatch in the wall. You enter a new room with walls covered in velvet. She asks you if she may blindfold you. Nervously you accept, allowing her to initiate your journey at Sisters Academy with a ritual. After the initiation ritual the blindfold is gently removed, and you leave your electronic devices and everyday clothes behind, being assured that your belongings will be guarded safely in 'The Archive'. You change to a white shirt, suspenders and black pants and shoes – your school uniform. Afterwards you are equipped with a briefcase containing a notebook, a diary and a pencil. The Woman takes you by the hand again, leading you through what seems to be endless layers of fabric immersed in its very own sound. It sounds like you are inside an organism. When finally exiting out on the other side, you stand in the main hallway of Sisters Academy. The walls are covered in velvet, almost everything is red. A radio is playing, but not a tune that you would hear on the outside. In the center of the room you see a creature with three heads, six arms and six legs – three women conjoint by the waist, all dressed in black catsuits and high heels, one with her face covered by a lace veil. They sit on a round chair with wheels. Suddenly, they look in your direction and roll towards you: "Welcome to Sisters Academy. We are The Octopus. We will sense what you need, and based on this, we will assign you to your first class". The Octopus observes you intensely for a while, one of the women squints her eyes. "You should go to The Gardener" says one part of The Octopus. "No" says another part, "I think The Nurse would be the right choice". They whisper amongst each other and discuss for a little while. Finally, one says, "Please take the egg on the shelf behind you, and bring it to The Nurse". Suddenly a big door opens, and a bright red light pours out. "That is our Grand Hall" says The Octopus. "There you will take part in our morning and evening gatherings". A majestic figure steps out. A tall woman covered from the neck down in what seems to be endless layers of heavy black fabric. She wears a lace veil on a flower crown, covering her face. Underneath it you catch a glimpse of red lips and dark, almost black eyes. In her hand, covered in lace gloves and with nails decorated with dark red nail polish, she holds a bell, and rings it in a ceremonious manner, while she crosses the hall in slow motion. You realise that this must be The Sister, The Headmistress of Sisters Academy – the school of a sensuous society. The Octopus points in the direction of another door opening, and you move towards it in a

slow pace. You feel how the movements of your body are slowly adjusting to the otherworldly surroundings, while you look for the tableaux of The Nurse, one of the staff members of Sisters Academy. Soon your first sensuous class will unfold...

Having described how it could feel like to step into Sisters Academy, I will now proceed to unfold what Sisters Academy actually is: “*Sisters Academy is a school in a world and society where the sensuous and poetic mode of being is at the center of all action and interaction*” (About Sisters Academy). It is a radical experiment manifested by the movement and performance group Sisters Hope. The group is among other rooted in critical theory and has a clearly articulated intention to democratize the aesthetic dimension. Aside from being affiliated with relational aesthetics (Bourriaud 2002), Sisters Hope also stands on the shoulders of a tradition of political theatre, breaking with, and challenging, the established conventions of both theatre and contemporary society (Gade 2004: 81). The term ‘political theatre’ was first named in 1920 by Erwin Piscator, the mentor of German playwright Bertolt Brecht (Jørgensen 2004: 9). The tradition blossomed in connection with the student riots in 1968 and is still relevant today. It has included many different takes on the form and function of theatre and performance. A central figure in the history of political theatre is Augusto Boal, founder of Theatre of the Oppressed, who has also developed methods to lessen the distance between stage and spectator (Boal 2008). Despite Sisters Hope’s activist intention to democratize the aesthetic, the activist dimension is expressed differently than with earlier representatives of political theatre. It relates more to an overall intention to democratize the aesthetic dimension and not so much to specific political issues. Moreover, Sisters Hope does not identify itself as a theatre group but as a performance group, because the group works with a poetic, performative layer over a layer of fiction and breaks with the traditional idea of representation in theatre (Hallberg 2009: 51).

To democratise the aesthetic dimension

Hallberg often quotes the American mythologist Joseph Campbell when explaining her vision for a potential future world – a Sensuous Society (Manifesto):

“You can tell what's informing a society by what the tallest building is. When you approach a medieval town, the cathedral is the tallest thing in the place. When you approach an eighteenth-century town, it is the political palace that's the tallest thing in the place. And when you approach a modern city, the tallest places are the office buildings, the centers of economic life.” (Campbell 1991: 126)

Since respectively The Enlightenment and The Industrial Revolution, a specific set of values have dominated our society, and more specifically values that consider rational thought to be the highest of virtues. The quote bears witness to the fact that the only dimension that has yet to stand in the center of Western civilization is the aesthetic. This argument is also at the core of Sisters Hope's work (Manifesto). Moreover, the quote underlines the relevance of conducting further research on the potential of the aesthetic field. According to philosopher, sociologist and political theorist of the Frankfurt School Herbert Marcuse, *“Art breaks open a dimension inaccessible to other experience, a dimension in which human beings, nature, and things no longer stand under the law of the established reality principle”* (Marcuse 1978: 72). Thus, the aesthetic dimension can be said to have liberating potential which *“... defy the rationality and sensibility incorporated in the dominant social institutions”* (Marcuse 1978: 7).

Sociologist, philosopher and representative for the second generation of the Frankfurt School Jürgen Habermas has also criticised the influence of the state and capitalism on society when defining ‘The Public Sphere’: *“a network for communicating information and points of view (i.e. opinions expressing affirmative or negative attitudes)”* (Habermas 1996: 360). According to Habermas, the public sphere, the social space generated in communicative action, is power-ridden and oppressed, excluding fruitful and clarifying discussions (Habermas 1996: 362). He argues that emancipation can be reached through linguistic practices, and that the best rational argument should always be the solution to any question. However, his perspective on emancipation differs radically from mine, since I subscribe to Marcuse's idea of the aesthetic as potentially liberating.

Rooted in critical theory, herewith Marcuse, Sisters Academy explores the potential of tactile and bodily knowledge to possibly liberate human beings from the imbalance of

the current state of our society through immersive and interventionist performance strategies (Hallberg: l. 78). Experiences from Sisters Academy will act as a point of departure for my Master's thesis, and my outset will be a theoretical framework named by the founder and artistic director of Sisters Hope Gry Worre Hallberg; *The Critical Gaze and The Devoted Body*.

The Critical Gaze and The Devoted Body

The notion of The Critical Gaze and The Devoted Body emerged from collective experiences that we had in the large-scale immersive performance-installation Sisters Academy #3 – The Boarding School in Sweden in 2015 (Hallberg: l. 16). In this manifestation, we created a sensuous boarding school, where different participatory levels were invited into the overall framework; performers, whom we call Sisters staff, took part, concerts and seminars were conducted, upper secondary school classes came to visit, students enrolled for at least 24 hours, and finally visiting researchers, teachers and artists conducted residencies at the academy. The latter had responded to a call to investigate their own practice within the frame. Sisters Hope works with the concept of immersion, so by changing space, different ways of navigating in the world, being and being together are explored. Marcuse states that “*the encounter with the fictitious world restructures consciousness and gives sensual representation to counter-societal experience. The aesthetic sublimation thus liberates and validates childhood and adult dreams of happiness and sorrow*” (Marcuse 1978: 44), and one could argue that this might be the potential of the sensuous spaces and experiences that Sisters Hope creates – it might enable us to access a mode of being and a way of perceiving the world that is inaccessible in everyday life. Hallberg perceives it as a gesture of devotion when participants give in to this parallel universe that Sisters Academy is. It can be a courageous and vulnerable act, because you can donate your body to an unknown experiment and explore yourself and the world on new premises (Hallberg: l. 41).

The critical gaze is very trained in the Western world, and it has many ambassadors particularly in academia. French philosopher and mathematician René Descartes declared, “*I think, therefore I am*” (Descartes 2003: 24) and thus defined human existence by its ability to think, and he encouraged using scepticism and doubt in

knowledge-production. It serves an important purpose and is often rooted in an intention to protect the oppressed. Simultaneously, historical events, such as Nazism, The Second World War and Soviet Communism, might have led us to fear or be critical towards the concept of seduction, because we have seen that it can have severe consequences. However, Hallberg's argument is that while setting out to protect the weak through deconstruction of unhealthy structures, the critical gaze can be blind to the negative effect that it itself can have on the devoted body and the gesture of devotion. Historically, it is clear that we have gained a lot from critical approaches, but according to Hallberg there is also a potential loss in losing the ability to devote oneself (Hallberg: l. 47). It should be added that devotion is a complex term with many nuances that have yet to be conceptualized and does not per se relate to courage or the experience of the piece.

We experienced how the critical gaze limited the potential of the devoted body a few times during the manifestation, when we invited researchers into Sisters Academy, *"where the act of devotion was looked at with suspicion"* (Hallberg: l. 144). It is relevant to explore how this element of critique affects the devoted body and how this reflects back on the critical gaze. Hallberg underlines that it was not a general tendency but simply something that became very clear in certain moments during Sisters Academy #3 – The Boarding School (Hallberg: l. 139). Furthermore, it is important to stress that it is not something that we have experienced exclusively from visiting researchers, but also from students, staff and beyond. Hallberg states: *"We don't try to block out rationalism, reflection and cognitive processes, not at all, we just say that the devoted body, the sensuous experience has been under-prioritised, and it's the vulnerable position, so we have to protect that. And so the interesting thing is how these two can coexist."* (Hallberg: l. 150). Thus, it is important to state that the goal is not to diminish the qualities of the critical mind, or to say that the ultimate way to engage in the world, or within the framework of Sisters Academy, is through devotion. All participants carry a notebook during their stay at Sisters Academy, so reflection is an important part of the experiment. However, the devoted body does not have many ambassadors compared to the critical gaze, and since it is less cognitive and more bodily and tactile, it might not master the power of language in the same way that the critical mind does. Therefore, it is relevant to give a

voice to the act and potential of devotion. Perhaps if we allow ourselves to give in to certain situations, we will to a greater extent have access to the potential of the aesthetic experience?

Based on these reflections, I intend to unfold and explore how the potential of the sensuous and poetic experiments conducted by Sisters Hope relate to the notion of the critical gaze and the devoted body. Maurice Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology will act as a starting point for my study, as he places the body at the center of our ability to perceive and understand the world (Merleau-Ponty 2002: 177). My theoretical outset will be rooted in Josephine Machon's concept of immersion (Machon 2009), Brian Massumi's affect-theory (Massumi 2015) and different perceptions of critique outlined by Solveig Gade & Laura Luise Schultz based on descriptions by Gavin Butt, Irit Rogoff and Eve Sedgwick (Gade & Schultz 2016; Butt 2005; Rogoff 2003; Sedgwick 2006). My empirical foundation will be notebooks donated by participants, or students, of Sisters Academy. The above has led me to the following research question:

Research question

How does The Critical Gaze and The Devoted Body affect the sensuous experiments conducted in Sisters Academy?

Critique of Enlightenment and The Aesthetic Dimension

I will now underline the social scientific foundation of both the performance group Sisters Hope and my thesis by unfolding their mutual roots in critical theory.

An immanent critique of The Enlightenment

In ‘Dialectic of Enlightenment’, philosophers Theodor W. Adorno and Max Horkheimer address one of the Frankfurt School’s most central concerns – the rise and domination of instrumental reason (Held 1980: 148; Horkheimer & Adorno 2002). They argue that instrumental reason and capitalism have come to penetrate still more dimensions of everyday life (Held 1980: 154), and that the expansion of productive forces has not led to a liberated society, although this is a central ideal of the criticised philosophy: *“Enlightenment, understood in the widest sense as the advance of thought, has always aimed at liberating human beings from fear and installing them as masters. Yet the wholly enlightened earth is radiant with triumphant calamity”* (Horkheimer & Adorno 2002: 1). Thus, Adorno and Horkheimer unfold contradictions between the philosophy of The Enlightenment and enlightenment, as they set out to explore *“why mankind, instead of entering into a truly human condition, is sinking into a new barbarism”* (Horkheimer & Adorno 2002: 217). In other words, they practise an immanent critique in the hope to carve the path for an emancipatory notion of enlightenment *“released from entanglement in blind domination”*, that is a consequence of seeking to break with the mythical and metaphysical (Horkheimer & Adorno 2002: 11). The intention was to undermine all beliefs that claim completeness and encourage an unreflected affirmation of society. According to Adorno and Horkheimer, enlightenment gives itself an absolute status over and against its objects, making it oppressive (Held 1980: 50f). Although they have not defined domination, they argue that our thoughts, purposes and desires would be radically different if it had not been for the effects of it. In spite of their differences, Marcuse’s definition of domination resonates with Horkheimer and Adorno’s position:

“Domination is in effect whenever the individual’s goals and purposes and the means of striving for and attaining them are prescribed to him and performed by him as something prescribed. Domination can be exercised by men, by nature, by things – it

can also be internal, exercised by the individual on himself, and appear in the form of autonomy.” (Held 1980: 149)

Horkheimer and Adorno are critical towards modern sciences and their mathematization of nature and the way they consider “*a purely rational world as the only true reality*” (Held 1980: 160). They criticise that nature, from an Enlightenment perspective, has no value in and for itself, and that ideas and actions are judged based on their usefulness. Nature only has meaning in so far as it has utility and is instrumental to human purposes (Held 1980: 153). They state that “*For enlightenment, anything which does not conform to the standard of calculability and utility must be viewed with suspicion*” (Horkheimer & Adorno 2002: 3). Horkheimer and Adorno argue that fear of the unknown is the foundation of ancient and modern systems of thought and moreover the root of the desire to dominate nature (Held 1980: 155). This is central and resonates with Sisters Hope’s approach, as the unknown is used performatively to create otherworldliness. Horkheimer and Adorno criticize how there is a radical separation of subject and object in Enlightenment that merely reduces the external world to objects of manipulation, and at the same time subjects become increasingly dominated by a history and society that appears to be pre-given (Held 1980: 155): “*The increasing control of humanity over nature seems to bring even greater oppression. The expansion of the productive forces has not opened a path to a liberated society*” (Held 1980: 156). Based on their critique of instrumental reason, both Adorno and Marcuse ascribe liberating potential to the aesthetic dimension from the suppressing structures of society (Held 1980: 164).

A Historical Perspective

Horkheimer and Adorno wrote *Dialectic of Enlightenment* during the Second World War, more specifically between 1939 and 1944. Although it goes far beyond a critique of contemporary events, as the above points at, it is still shaped by the social conditions and historical events of its time. When Horkheimer and Adorno set out to explain why humanity had entered into a new kind of barbarism instead of a truly human state, they also referred to the threatening experiences related to the war and the uprise of the National Socialist terror (Horkheimer & Adorno 2002: 217). This premise is relevant to bring forth in the light of the central terms in my thesis; the critical gaze and the devoted

body, since I have already suggested, that our scepticism of devotion might be connected to historical experiences of mass seduction. Horkheimer and Adorno argue that these events were not a deviation of modern history but were in fact deeply rooted in the fundamental characteristics of Western civilization (Horkheimer & Adorno 2002: 218). They ask how these devastating events and this extensive mass seduction could possibly have taken place.

According to Adorno, the answer can be found in his critique of ‘The Culture Industry’ (Horkheimer & Adorno 2002: 94) and the term ‘Formation’, equivalent to the German ‘Bildung’¹ (Adorno 1959: 93). Culture has a formative dimension that has been restrained and amputated due to the dominating structures of civilization and led to a cultural industry that instead reproduces a ‘Semi-formation’, or ‘Halbbildung’². The dominating ideal is no longer rooted in cultural formation but instead cultural goods, and what appears to be mass culture, that has proven to actually be semi-formation. To Adorno, the mass culture is the culture industry manipulating a reconstruction of the formative culture. Semi-formation is, in opposition to formation, deprived from autonomy and is formation simply as socialization (Leo Mar 1998). From this perspective, the formative dimension of culture is the foundation of immanent criticism, and thus semi-formation blocks out the practice of immanent criticism (Adorno 1959: 98). Thereby, mass manipulation is performed through the culture industry, according to Adorno. This is a relevant perspective when reflecting upon the nuances of the critical gaze and the devoted body on a macro-level.

The Aesthetic Dimension

Marcuse states that *“the need for radical change must be rooted in the subjectivity of individuals themselves, in their intelligence and their passions, their drives and their goals”* (Marcuse 1978: 3). According to him, these inner resources of the human being – their passions, joys, sorrows, imagination, conscience – are being suppressed by the current state of society, and emancipation can be achieved through the aesthetic dimension. The aesthetic dimension has revolutionary, radical political and liberating potential, because

¹ Danish translation: Dannelsen.

² Danish translation: Halvdannelsen.

it can transcend reality and challenge status quo by opening up a new dimension of experience (Marcuse 1978: 5ff).

Marcuse's critique of civilization is rooted in a Freudian philosophy. He points to the continual increase of productivity and its promise of a better life, and argues that intensified productivity is in fact bound up on intensified unfreedom. According to Marcuse, it has led to the mechanization and standardization of life, mental impoverishment, destructiveness of present day progress and domination of man by man (Marcuse 1966: 4). Marcuse sharply criticizes contemporary capitalist societies, claiming that their dominant interest demands repression (Marcuse 2002: 8). His argument is that the praised economic, political and social freedoms of society have lost their progressive function and have become instruments of domination, keeping individuals dependent of the system that they maintain and strengthen (Marcuse 2002: xxxi). Marcuse's theory "*presupposes the existence of a human subject with freedom, creativity, and self-determination...*", which can be rediscovered if liberated from the current domination of society (Marcuse 2002: xxvii). In Marcuse's Freudian view, the pleasure principle is what is being dominated (Marcuse 1966: 12), and from Adorno's view, it is the immediate sensations and needs.

Marcuse argues that "*Art challenges the monopoly of the established reality to determine what is 'real', and it does so by creating a fictitious world which is nevertheless 'more real than reality itself'*" (Marcuse 1978: 22). Thus, art does not simply "*produce 'false consciousness' or mere illusion but rather a counter-consciousness*" (Marcuse 1978: 9). The encounter with this fictitious world can restructure consciousness and provide a sensuous representation of a counter-social experience which liberates past and present dreams of happiness and sorrow (Marcuse 1978: 44). Sisters Hope would use the term 'poetic' over 'fictitious', since the outset is not a fictive universe or fictive characters but the inner, inherent poetic potential. Hallberg has previously stated that she does not distinguish between reality and performance, since it is our very real bodies and flesh that obtain very real experiences within the space for intensified presence in the performance, and in everyday life other performances might be played out. Thus, immersive performance art has the potential to expand our manoeuvrability and mode of

being. Marcuse believes that the aesthetic dimension has a transformative potential which can be achieved “*through a reshaping of language, perception, and understanding so that they reveal the essence of reality in its appearance: the repressed potentialities of man and nature*” (Marcuse 1978: 8). Furthermore, Marcuse argues that the aesthetic should play a significant role in society, and that the potential of the dimension should not be ignored: “*renunciation of the aesthetic form is abdication of responsibility. It deprives art of the very form in which it can create that other reality within the established one—the cosmos of hope*” (Marcuse 1978: 52)

Neither of the Frankfurt School philosophers intended to present a constructive, solution-based critique (Held 1980: 150), and this is where Sisters Hope differs radically from its early sources of inspiration. Sisters Hope pro-actively seeks to democratize and open the aesthetic dimension by creating laboratories and experiments to explore the potentials of the sensuous and poetic. Sisters Academy is such an experiment.

About Sisters Hope

In this chapter I will describe the experiment that my Master's thesis is based upon. The intention is to secure a deeper and more nuanced understanding of the aesthetic experience facilitated by Sisters Hope.

Sisters Hope

The performance group and movement Sisters Hope was founded in 2007 by PhD Anna Lawaetz and performance artist and PhD fellow Gry Worre Hallberg, and it is currently led by Hallberg who manifests performatively as The Sister within the framework of Sisters Academy. Hallberg is a former SIGNA-performer³ and co-founder of the performance agency Fiction Pimps and the group Club de la Faye. She has an academic background in Theatre- and Performance studies. Sisters Hope operates in the intersection of activism, performance art, research and education (About Sisters Hope). The overall argument and hypothesis is that the aesthetic dimension is underpenetrated in our current Western civilization and holds liberating potential, and through the performance strategies immersion, intervention and interaction, Sisters Hope seeks to open and democratise the aesthetic dimension in everyday life. Currently Sisters Hope is unfolding the large-scale project Sisters Academy to open and unfold more sensuous and poetic modes of being, being together and learning (About Sisters Hope).

Sisters Hope's work is characterized by a 'feminine aesthetic', and similarities have previously been pointed out between the ambience and symbols of our performance-installations and the feminist works of the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s. Many ask about the origin of the name and the feminine symbols and qualities that are a part of the project's DNA; the predominance of female performers, the logo, the red and pink lights, high heels, red lipstick, lace, soft shapes and atmosphere. Contrary to what some might think, Sisters Hope does not work from an articulated feminist agenda. The group and project are called respectively Sisters Hope and Sisters Academy, because Lawaetz and Hallberg manifested as poetic twin sisters within the frame in the initiation

³ SIGNA is a Copenhagen based artistic collective founded by Signa & Arthur Köstler (SIGNA).

of the group and project. Thus, they named the group intuitively based on the narrative that they created together. In this case, Sisters Hope draws on the logic of art by allowing intuition, imagination and the narrative to prevail. One could argue that there is a freedom in expressing oneself purely intuitively without considering potential interpretations and choosing not to limit oneself to accommodate these interpretations. Several connotations have been attributed to these characteristics both internally and externally. The result of this intuitive approach has thus inspired many questions, reflections, discussions and criticism. (For example, questioning whether Sisters Academy is only for women, or whether it is a feminist project).

The Sensuous Society

Sisters Hope and Sisters Academy are rooted in the idea of a sensuous society; “*a framework to explore the radical idea of the aesthetic dimension, the sensuous and the poetic as the highest values of society*” (Hallberg 2014: 8). Sensuous Society is a world where the sensuous and poetic is at the center of all action and interaction (About Sisters Academy). The vision of the sensuous society is articulated in the Sensuous Society manifesto to which Sisters Hope’s work relate. The manifesto is initiated with the following words:

*“**The End is a New Beginning:** In 2008 the financial world cracked, leaving a gap for the new – for the new paradigm to emerge. We regard the crack as a major opportunity.*

***The New Paradigm:** We wish to take this opportunity and support the transition into the new, by living and breathing in the cracks. From here we move.*

***The Sensuous Society:** We will draw from the aesthetic dimension as a source of inspiration to inform the dawning world.*

***We will call it:** The Sensuous Society” (Manifesto)*

The sensuous society is no utopia. Who should lead a sensuous society – the most beautiful? The one who experiences the world most intensely? There would be winners and losers in such a world order too (Manifesto). However, Sisters Hope believes that a sensuous society holds an under-prioritized potential that we do not yet know, because

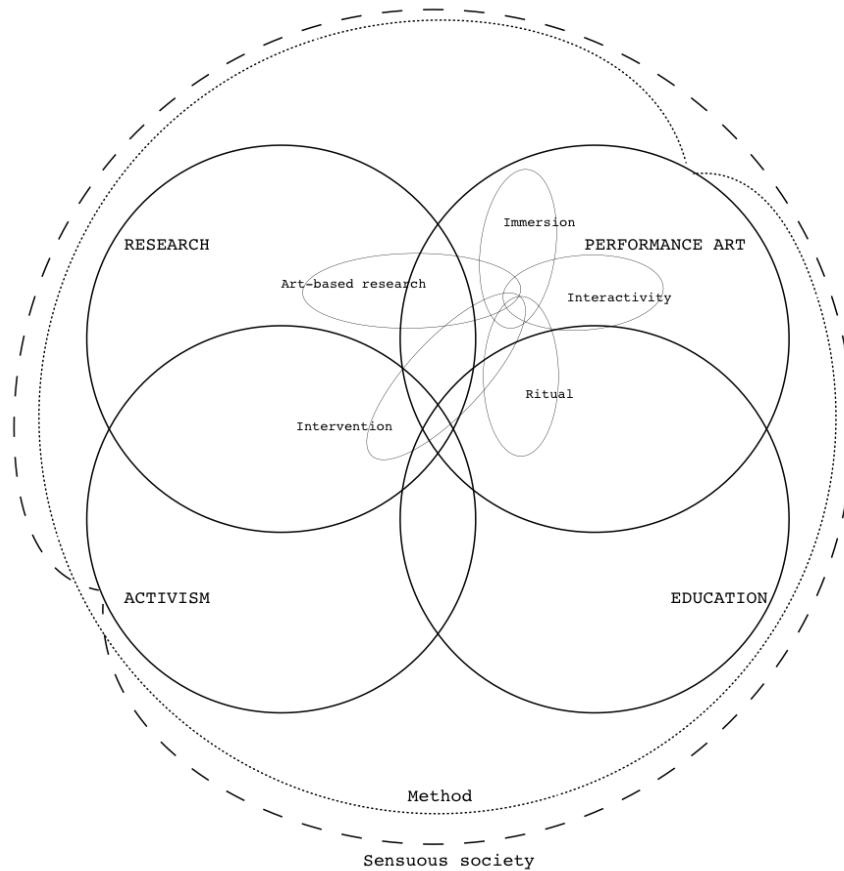
we have not lived it. A way to explore it despite this fact is through lived and embodied performance experiments (Manifest).

Sisters Academy

Sisters Academy is the school of a sensuous society (About Sisters Academy). It is a project and experiment that focuses on the educational system and new more sensuous and poetic modes of learning, because by intervening into this particular field we can potentially “... *change the lives of many*” (Hallberg 2014: 11). Sisters Academy is rooted in the four different logics mentioned above; activism, performance art, research and education.

The four logics

As accounted for, Sisters Academy is rooted in the four logics activism, performance art, research and education. When a project works in the intersection of four different entrance-points, a high level of complexity follows. Furthermore, many paradoxes can arise, because the different logics conflict with each other. However, the paradoxes come with a potential, because many interesting situations, questions, reflections, interactions, dialogues and beyond can follow when they appear. Moreover, it allows us to expand the potential of each logic. Sisters Hope always seeks to move towards the intersection of these four logics. The drawing below illustrates how they are connected.



Model 1 (Hallberg 2017: 21)

Each circle represents one of the four logics. We always seek to move towards and explore the potential of the intersection. The outer circle is connected to the logic of activism, because the whole project is rooted in the activist intention to democratise the aesthetic. In Sisters Academy we explore what the school of a sensuous society would potentially be like, and we use performance art as a method to explore this question. Therefore, the inner methodic circle is attached to the logic of performance art. Through this method, we donate our bodies to an experiment to explore what learning could be in a world where the sensuous and poetic is as the center. Within the logic of performance art, there is a flower of different performance-methods; Immersion, Intervention, Interactivity, Ritual, Art-based research (Hallberg 2017).

Immersion

Sisters Hope uses the strategy of immersion to create an otherworldly frame that can potentially liberate participants from the structures, thought patterns and modes of being

of everyday life to liberate new modes of being and reflection (Hallberg: 1. 31). Immersion refers to how the changing of space can evoke new modes of perception. Immersion has been compared to being thrown into water. Your body will instinctively navigate differently, because you are in a new environment. This strategy plays a central role in the parallel universe of Sisters Academy:

“Once taken over by Sisters Academy, the whole school is immersed into an otherworldly atmosphere that activates the senses and allows us to think and feel radically different from everyday life. The toilets might be pink and filled with low sound of humming, a classroom might have been turned into a forest and if you go to the leader of the school, she will greet you in an office filled with stuffed animals, sweet drinks, stamps, typewriters and fur hats.” (Hallberg 2016: 133)

The concept of immersion will be described more thoroughly in the Theory chapter.

Intervention

We use the method of intervention to penetrate spaces through performance art, also outside the art institution. When Sisters Hope takes over the leadership of upper secondary schools, the group intervenes radically into everyday life. Hallberg articulates how Sisters Hope’s way of working with intervention differs from how the strategy is normally activated:

“When we do The Takeover-format, we intervene radically into a system outside the art system, and through immersion we create these worlds that allow devotion [...] traditionally interventionist art is very critical. It looks critically towards a contemporary subject, and we use intervention in a different way. We use it to intervene into a system, to unfold the aesthetic within that system.” (Hallberg: 1. 330)

In The Boarding School-format, the interventionist aspect is more subtle and refers more to how we all continuously intervene into each other through our actions and presence. One could argue that life is always like that. However, in Sisters Academy *“presence is intensified as we have stepped out of our everyday selves to explore new modes of being and being together”* (Hallberg 2016: 135). This also relates to The Poetic Self

method, that I will account for below – the inner, inherent poetic life expands, amongst other ways, through the meetings we have within the frame of the experiment.

Interaction

Interaction is another strategy used by Sisters Hope. It is an important premise that students, teachers and visiting researchers/teachers/artists take part actively and co-create and explore with the Sisters staff. This is a way to open the aesthetic dimension to participants on a deeper level. There is no make-believe and ideally no division of stage and audience in Sisters Academy. The performers give life to the intensified spaces created by Sisters Hope. They have been trained to navigate in the otherworldly space and can guide participants with less experience from this specific frame. In The Takeover-format, teachers actively explore their practice from new premises, and both teachers, students, visiting teachers/researchers/artists and the Sisters staff explore the qualities of the sensuous and their inner poetic life collectively (Hallberg 2016: 134). The universe is interactive in the sense *“that once you are at the school, whether you are perceived as a student or teacher, you leave your everyday persona behind to explore your potential poetic self while investigating how we can evoke and activate the senses and emotions to deepen the learning experience”* (Hallberg 2016: 134). We work with the notion of becoming co-participants in a joint ritual rather than dividing categories of artists and audience.

Ritual

The ritual⁴ is connected to the logic of education in this context. The overall purpose of the ritual is a transformation of the participant, and ‘the transformational passage’ of the ritual is divided into three phases – a preliminal, a liminal and a postliminal. In the pre-liminal phase, we prepare ourselves for the potential transformation that can take place in the following liminal phase. In the postliminal phase, we anchor the experience. Sisters Hope works very consciously with these three phases – both within the frame of each manifestation and as an overall frame of understanding the potential greater transformation of society.

⁴ Sisters Hope understands the ritual in continuation of Van Gennep’s description of the meaning of the ritual and rite de passage (1909 and further developed by Turner in *The Ritual Process - Structure and Anti-Structure*, 1969).

Religious terms, symbols and metaphors are a significant part of the academy's DNA; at times The Headmistress resembles a nun with her many layers and buttoned up black attire, and words such as 'manifestation', 'ritual', 'Sister', 'transformation' and 'devotion' are central in the language of Sisters Academy. When art became autonomous and the concept of the art genius arose during the Industrialisation and we simultaneously became secular, the arts also primarily took interest in the liminal phase and the potential transformative impact of the ritual.

Art-based research

The permanent is central within the field of pedagogics and the educational system. Working with the three phases in a partly artistic frame can ensure that we work with longer lasting learning and potential transformation –this relates to the circle of art-based research. This circle penetrates the logic of research. The tradition of art-based research resonates with our focus on and exploration of the sensuous. The research logic manifests materially through our archive. All data collected from each manifestation is donated to, and protected in, 'The Archive' (Sisters Hope has an actual archive, where data, documentation and beyond from all manifestations are collected and protected. I will elaborate on The Archive further in the Methodology chapter). The notion of art-based research will be elaborated on further in the Methodology chapter as well.

The Poetic Self

The Poetic Self is a concept and method developed by Sisters Hope. It is not a fictive character, and it is not one's everyday life self; it refers to the inner, inherent poetic potential that we all possess. All Sisters staff members develop a Poetic Self, and all other participants are invited to explore this notion within the framework of Sisters Academy and beyond. The method serves as a way for participants to penetrate the aesthetic dimension, since we potentially "*experience an expanding spectrum of possibilities, new spaces in which we can be*" by exploring our inner poetic potential (Hallberg 2016: 131). We give an image and donate our flesh to this potential – not to change, but to expand. Sisters Hope is interested in how the gap between the imagined and embodied can be reduced and brought almost to zero (Sisters Academy staff).

Sisters Hope focuses on poetic potential rather than creative potential, because it refers to a mode of being rather than an output. We explore the Poetic Self through an exercise as a starting point. When participating in the exercise, you lie down on the floor with closed eyes. A soothing voice will ask you a line of questions after having guided you into a meditative state: *'Time. What relationship does your Poetic Self have to time? Consider time'*, followed by *'Age. Does your Poetic Self have an age? Or are you ageless?'*, *'Space. What relationship does your Poetic Self have to space? What is your shape in space?'*, and so it continues. Listen to the full exercise [here](#). You are invited to choose a name for your Poetic Self and externalize your inner life. The Sisters Academy staff deepen their Poetic Self to the extent that they externalize it by giving it an image. This image is expressed in both wardrobe, their tableaux and interactivity design. Furthermore, all Sisters staff members have written a biography for their Poetic Self. One example is the biography of The Conjureess:

"The Conjureess appears and evaporates like fog, like the clouds moving through the sky or like the play of light and shadow with the shifting sunlight. Sometimes still as an image, sometimes present as a question, sometimes moving like the ever-changing meaning of everything. She conjures up her own existence from moment to moment to explore and expose the latent potential of spaces, people, objects and situations.

She is an explorer of questions rather than a seeker of answers. Her lover is space and she is the daughter of movement. Like a true nomad her form and identity is ever changing along the road. You will not meet her the same way twice. She owns nothing more than what is there right now. She seems to come from nowhere and return to nowhere – but maybe she is ever present." (Staff)

The Poetic Self is dynamic and follows and springs from your life, and thus it can transform over time as you expand and your life unfolds. For example, the image that I created of The Sister in the beginning of the introduction more depicts her visual expression in the first boarding school, Sisters Academy #3 – The Boarding School, Sweden, where she was still mourning the loss of her poetic twin Sister, who fell ill around the time of the first academy. At Sisters Academy #6 – The Boarding School at

Den Frie, she had bare feet, no veil or bells and was almost always accompanied by her newborn twins and a maternal vulnerability.

Two large-scale formats

Overall Sisters Academy is manifested through two different large-scale formats; The Boarding School and The Takeover. A manifestation could however also unfold as a smaller laboratory within a more traditional art space or beyond or an interventionist procession.

The Boarding School

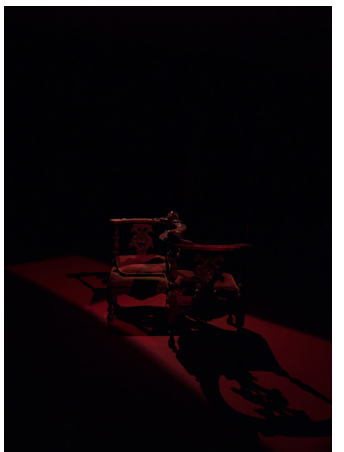
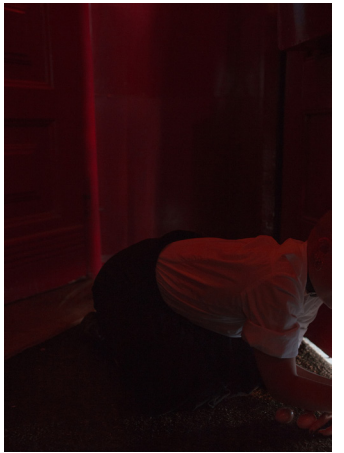
In The Boarding School, Sisters Hope creates a sensuous boarding school as a large-scale, immersive performance-installation, where everyone can enroll as a student to participate in the explorations of sensuous knowledge production. This format involves different levels of participation: performers, visiting researchers/teachers/artists conducting a residency to explore their own practice, daily visits from real upper secondary school classes, concert guests, panelists, panel attendees and the staff of the co-producing institution. The format is durational, and thus the school is open around the clock for the duration of the manifestation (About Sisters Academy). Students enroll at Sisters Academy for at least 24 hours and leave their electronic devices and everyday clothes behind. During their stay, they take part in poetic rituals, morning- and evening gatherings, sensuous classes, meals, encounters and beyond.

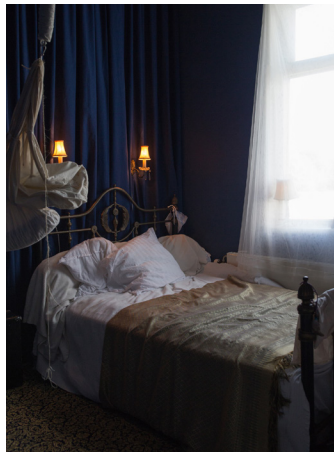
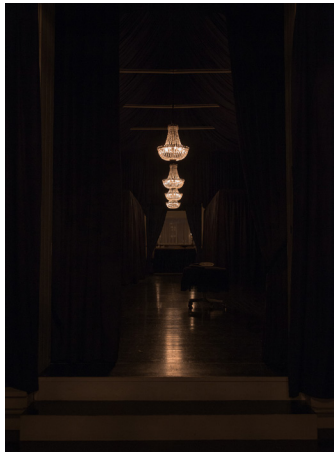
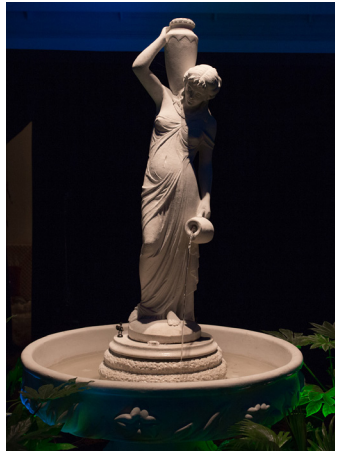
The Takeover

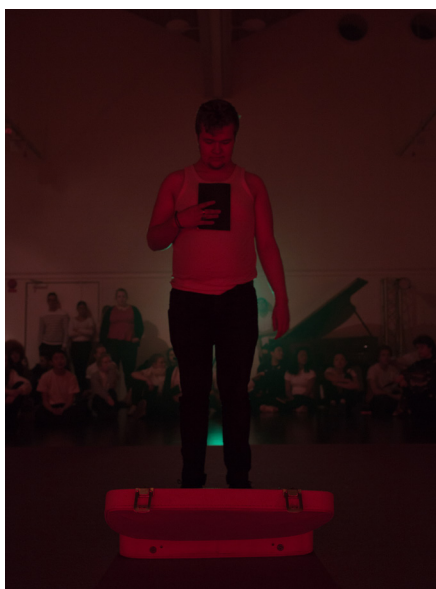
In The Takeover, Sisters Hope takes over the leadership of a real upper secondary school for two weeks. The school is transformed through set-, light-, and sound-design, and The Headmistress and the Sisters staff move into the school as strange, enchanting new colleagues and work proactively with the teachers to innovate their practice. The teachers are “*facilitated to work from the performative premise that they are now teachers at a school based on aesthetic principles [...] Math might start by an exercise on ‘how to sense Pi’, history might be initiated by sharing the dreams of the night to explore collective unconscious patterns*” (About Sisters Academy). Like The Boarding School, this format can involve residencies by visiting researchers/teachers/artists and is also durational, although

students and teachers go back home after school and return the next morning. Students wear a white shirt with the Sisters Academy logo printed on the back, and neither students nor teachers use their electronic devices when they are at school.

On the following pages, I have compiled a selection of images from Sisters Academy to help deepen the understanding of the aesthetic experience experienced within the frame. The images on the first two pages are from Sisters Academy #6 – The Boarding School at Den Frie, and the images on the following two pages are from Sisters Academy #3 – The Takeover, Sweden. Subsequently, I will unfold my methodological reflections in regards to my thesis.









A person with dark hair and closed eyes is lying down, wearing a white V-neck shirt. A wooden shoe is balanced on top of their head. The background is dark and textured.

Methodology

Methodology

In the following chapter, I will present relevant methodological reflections and account for the foundation of my study; a phenomenological approach. I will unfold relevant pre-understandings and ethical reflections. Finally, I will present my empirical data and theoretical framework. This serves the purpose of securing a transparent and valid study.

Scientific theoretical approach

“I am conscious of the world through the medium of my body”
(Merleau-Ponty 2002: 94)

I take my starting point in French philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology (Merleau-Ponty 2002). Besides my own interpretation of his work, I subscribe to Suzanne Dee Pedersen’s reading of his phenomenology in her PhD “Gentagelsens Metamorfose” (2005) or “Metamorphosis of Repetition” (my translation). I do this because she too applies Merleau-Ponty on artistic practices, more specifically on the field of music. Thus, her approach resonates with mine.

According to Merleau-Ponty, our ability to understand the world is rooted in the body (Merleau-Ponty 2002: 177), and we have to sense objects tactilely in order to understand them: “*Sense experience is that vital communication with the world which makes it present as a familiar setting of our life*” (Merleau-Ponty 2002: 61). I subscribe to Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology, because I intend to explore Sisters Academy, devotion and critique as phenomena and how these are experienced bodily by participants. Furthermore, as a researcher I approach the field as a body myself, and the sensuous plays a central part in my study. The body should be understood as a whole, although it senses the world from many different entrance points; through the gaze, the hands, skin, the ears and beyond. All these parts are intertwined, and therefore perception can never be fully understood by studying the senses separately. The body is not merely a physical object, it is both the physical and the mind – a unit of flesh and thought, and this is how the approach differs radically from a conventional scientific point of view (Dee Pedersen 2005: 38ff).

The birth of our perception is pre-cognitive and rooted in our body and the history we carry in it, and therefore we are doomed to make sense of the world and to generate meaning (Dee Pedersen 2005: 50).

The idea of the bodily and tactile experience as the basis of our perception of the world will serve as the outset for my study. I will approach the field as a sensing body. This means that I cannot understand the world or the other in itself, as I will always be limited by time and space, a specific situation, perspective and my personal bodily experience and intentionality. These premises also apply to all other participants of Sisters Academy. This raises the issue of how we can understand or perceive the world. Merleau-Ponty comments on this in the following way:

“We must not [...] wonder whether we really perceive a world, we must instead say: the world is what we perceive. In more general terms we must not wonder whether our self-evident truths are real truths, or whether, through some perversity inherent in our minds, that which is self-evident for us might not be illusory in relation to some truth in itself. For in so far as we talk about illusion, it is because we have identified illusions, and done so solely in the light of some perception which at the same time gave assurance of its own truth. It follows that doubt, or the fear of being mistaken, testifies as soon as it arises to our power of unmasking error, and that it could never finally tear us away from truth. We are in the realm of truth and it is ‘the experience of truth’ which is self-evident. To seek the essence of perception is to declare that perception is, not presumed true, but defined as access to truth” (Merleau-Ponty 2002: xviii)

Thus, the world does not have an objective existence separated from human perception, nor is it simply a subjective product of the human mind. There is a reversible relation between the world and the body, where the world affects and is in the body and the body affects and is in the world. Therefore, the world will always be true to us, and the body will always be true to the world.

Perception is not a scientific interpretation of the world, it is not even a conscious or thought out act, it is the backdrop on which all actions play out. Hence, the world is the field or natural environment for all our thoughts and perceptions (Dee Pedersen 2005:

46ff). We are not always conscious of our bodily experiences in a way where we are able to articulate them with words (Dee Pedersen 2005: 54). This relates to how one can explore and understand the experiences of participants of Sisters Academy.

Merleau-Ponty comments on the role of science and bodily experience:

The whole universe of science is built upon the world as directly experienced, and if we want to subject science itself to rigorous scrutiny and arrive at a precise assessment of its meaning and scope, we must begin by reawakening the basic experience of the world of which science is the second-order expression. (Merleau-Ponty 2002: ix)

Thus, we must continuously return to our physical experience and describe the world as we are confronted with it, so our experience remains the most important in spite of what we learn from science. This leads me to unfold my pre-understanding to make my bodily experience transparent, as it is the foundation of my exploration.

Pre-understanding

“I cannot shut myself up within the realm of science. All my knowledge of the world, even my scientific knowledge, is gained from my own particular point of view, or from some experience of the world without which the symbols of science would be meaningless” (Merleau-Ponty 2002: ix)

In many ways Sisters Academy and I are one. As a result of my role as respectively project coordinator, Hallberg’s personal assistant and performer, I am deeply immersed in the universe and field that I have chosen to explore. When we manifest, I step into my Poetic Self, ‘The Link’, the supporting function to The Headmistress. Often I also step into the function of The Protector of The Archive whose primary task is to guard The Archive and all the valuable data it contains and to facilitate visits to The Archive both during and in-between manifestations. Furthermore, I draft all documents related to The Archive, I take part in Archive-meetings, etc. This involvement in The Archive is also closely related to my role as a researcher. Therefore it is crucial for me to reflect thoroughly upon my own position and how it affects my research and to discuss the

potentials and challenges related to the close relation between myself and the object of my study.

It is a prevalent position in academia to be critical towards a close relation between the researcher and the explored field. Many see distance as a basic condition for proper scientific research, and full participation is warned against. The main argument is that the researcher risks to uncritically adopt the perspective of the informant and explored field. However, distance can also be a source of naivety and a belief that you know something when it is actually not the case. Many theorists also challenge this point of view and emphasize the potentials of having a close bond to the explored field (Prieur 2002: 138f). I intend to unfold these potentials and furthermore introduce the notion of arts-based-research where the researcher and the explored field are inseparable cf. the model describing the four logics that Sisters Academy is based on.

Sociologist Ervin Goffman underlines the importance of extensive physical, bodily participation to understand the explored field sufficiently. According to him, researchers should be exposed to the same conditions as the people they explore in order to experience the world in the same way as them. Thus, bodily and sensuous presence is the foundation for good research according to this perspective. This involves a certain level of devotion and a willingness to take risks and let down your guard – to free yourself from immediate judgements. This approach triggers an empathetic attitude towards the informants and can lead to a deeper insight, because you experience on your body what informants experience on theirs (Prieur 2002: 139f). Few researchers have the possibility to follow Goffman's ideal (Prieur 2002: 141), but my unique role and relation to the field enables me to do this. Because of my in-depth experience with Sisters Academy, I know where to search and what to search for, I understand the data, and I am able to evaluate the available information. Furthermore, it is easier for me to understand what is challenging and paradoxical for my informants. Sociologist Annick Prieur states that participation activates more senses than merely vision and hearing and thereby gives a deeper and not only intellectual understanding of the other (Prieur 2002: 154). However, my level of immersion and engagement will of course be different from

the students' of Sisters Academy, primarily because I facilitate the experience and uphold a frame for them to immerse in.

My position is unique, since I cannot separate myself from the field, we are one and the same. I find it relevant to introduce arts-based-research to expand the understanding of closeness and distance between the researcher and field, as this approach to some extent resonates with mine.

Arts-based research practices are *“a set of methodological tools used by researchers across the disciplines during all phases of social research, including data generation, analysis, interpretation and representation”* (Leavy 2015: 4), and these approaches allow researchers to stay connected to their field of exploration:

“Art-based researchers fully bring themselves into their projects, including the value system guiding the undertaking. Who you are, your sense of justice, your personal motivations and hopes for society, all enter into the project.” (Leavy 2015: 29)

Why do we by rule have insight simply because we are distanced? A distanced approach can on the contrary also lead us to untrue conclusions based on lack of knowledge. Sociologist Patricia Leavy refers to Ronald Pelias who writes:

“I speak the heart’s discourse because the heart is never far from what matters. Without the heart pumping its words, we are nothing but an outdated dictionary, untouched.” (Leavy 2015: 3)

Distance is not necessarily valuable, because our research potentially becomes too detached. Furthermore, a close, bodily engagement with the explored field also resonates with my phenomenological approach, since we have to experience phenomena tactilely in order to understand them according to Merleau-Ponty (Merleau-Ponty: 177). When practicing art-based research, it is essential to be flexible and open, and it requires a *“willingness to be transformed and educated”* (Leavy 2015: 28). To be open to the unknown and learn as you go also prevents the researcher from

uncritically sticking to one set view of the world as the ambassadors of distanced research fear. Thus, you are encouraged to experiment within the field of arts-based research (ABR), trust your intuition, to pursue an unexpected or unknown direction and learn as you go. This resonates with my attempt and inspiration to explore a theoretical framework that is yet to be conceptualized in depth and my ambition to challenge established forms of critique. Finally, my approach resonates with ABR, because I use performance art as a research method and a means of data generation.

As accounted for, my position is unique and cannot simply be equated with the role of a student. I have a double role; I am an immersed participant, and I facilitate and organise the experience of others. On one level, I am bound to be more immersed, because I spend all my time within the frame and have a longer process of preparation. On the other hand, it can be challenging to be as present and immersed as some students, because I have a bigger responsibility. My position in Sisters Academy has naturally shaped my approach as a researcher, and with it has come both advantages and disadvantages. I have learned that I easily take my own insight, or rather other's lack of insight, for granted. In my approach, I have had a tendency to unconsciously neglect that others do not share the same knowledge and experience as me. Moreover, I naturally advocate for and believe strongly in Sisters Hope's methods. This might challenge my ability to portray the participants who partake with a critical gaze as well as the ones who devote themselves to the experience. In line with this, I have worked actively to not fall into the trap of supporting a dualistic view on the devoted and the critical, the body and the mind and beyond. At the same time, I experience that my deep insight into the project and personal experience with the participants has given me a nuanced perspective on the context and a deep empathy for all participants across levels of engagement.

Method and empirical data

Sisters Academy and the manifestations can be considered to be experimental and lab-based, and my approach is to use data collected from this artistic framework to conduct a qualitative study. The data is created by participants during their stay at the academy and is guarded in The Archive. More specifically, my data will consist of

notebooks from participants of Sisters Academy – The Takeover, Sweden. The notebooks were used by the participants for the duration of their stay and donated to The Archive on their last day. Since I have chosen to use notebooks from Sisters Academy #3 – The Takeover, Sweden, I have chosen to delimit the study by not using data from other manifestations created by Sisters Hope. Furthermore, I have chosen to use notebooks from students and thus delimit myself from using notebooks from both teachers, visiting researchers/teachers/artists and the Sisters Academy staff.

According to Merleau-Ponty, our body always experiences the world as meaningful. This means that the world is given meaning before we consciously choose to ascribe meaning to it – hence it is a pre-cognitive act that is difficult to grasp cognitively (Dee Pedersen 2005: 37). This is connected to why it is generally challenging to explore and unfold experiences from immersive, interactive performance-installations sufficiently, because the experiences of the participants to a large extent are pre-cognitive. If I were to interview participants after their stay at Sisters Academy it would only bring forth their experiences to a limited extent, as it is not always possible to articulate or to know afterwards exactly how you were affected bodily in a particular moment. By encouraging participants to share their reflections, thoughts, dreams, drawings, explorations, longings and visions during Sisters Academy, we expand the available knowledge about how the sensuous experiments affect relevant participants. One could call this a diary study (Diary Study Guide). Both the frame and the data is unique, and the fact that the data is accessible to all is rare. Another example of a diary study is the initiative ‘Del din dag’ by The National Museum of Denmark. In 1991 and 2017 they encouraged everyone with interest to write a diary and send it to them to document history and the change in history over time (Nationalmuseet).

Sociologist and economist David Silverman distinguishes between ‘researcher-provoked data’ and ‘naturally occurring data’, although he concedes that using the word natural is misleading, as no data is ever untouched. Researcher-provoked data implies that data is obtained through a particular research environment such as interviews, focus groups or questionnaires, and naturally occurring data is created without the same intervention of a researcher (Silverman 2010: 131). My method places

itself closer to naturally occurring data, although my data was indeed created in a research environment, even if it is an unusual and multifaceted one. This has enabled me to access data without asking specific questions and collect data from situations that I have not intervened directly into. This is both a challenging and valuable aspect of naturally occurring data. On one hand you receive data that can be messy, unsatisfactory and lack a common thread, but on the other hand you can potentially gain access to spaces and situations that you would never normally get access to through more conventional research-methods. Furthermore, the beauty of naturally occurring data is that it might show us things we could never have imagined (Silverman 2010: 132).

The frame extraordinarily allows for participants to experience the world bodily in a different way than in everyday life. This unique approach allows for me to explore the sensuous, the critical gaze and the devoted body. I am able to investigate how participants were affected through data that was created when the experience actually took place.

As accounted for, I have chosen to base my analysis on approximately 30 student notebooks from Sisters Academy #3 – The Takeover, Sweden. Initially, I gave them numbers between 1-30 and carried out a coding to identify interesting and relevant themes. At the same time I had the theoretical framework in mind, as this was my original source of inspiration for the study, which however had not been conceptualized at the time of coding or when choosing the included notebooks. When choosing the notebooks, my main aim was to include examples of devotion and criticism and at the same time to remain open in the process of coding to include all interesting and relevant topics that could come up. In this process I was aware that devotion and criticism were not opposites but complex terms and hoped to understand and explore the intersection. After having conceptualized the theoretical framework, I re-read and coded all notebooks again. This approach enabled me to stay open to new themes and perspectives presented by the students and at the same time to include all relevant aspects related to the critical gaze and the devoted body.

I am aware that the notebooks will only give me a limited insight into how the participants were affected by Sisters Academy. In line with Merleau-Ponty, many ways of affecting and being affected can perhaps not always be expressed in words so easily or naturally. This goes for both participants who engage with a critical gaze, a devoted body or a level of engagement in-between. This is not to support a dualistic perception of the body and the mind; From Merleau-Ponty's perspective, the body is a unity of flesh and thought, and language is as natural a form of expression as any other. However, in some cases it has turned out to be a limited method to document how people are affected by being part of the academy. Furthermore, the interaction and relationship between us as staff and them as students might also affect what kind of data that can be created. They might not be entirely honest or share all critical reflections, because they know that we will eventually have access to their notebooks. Thus, we must expect some level of self-censorship. Overall, the data bears witness to the fact that many deep, poetic and enlightening reflections can be documented, when participants write from an immersed state. This is in many ways a unique and important method. Thus, my intention is not so much to say that words or language is not valuable in this context but more that it would be fruitful to explore and develop new documentation methods, as it seems to be a limiting or insufficient method in some cases. Finally, the fact that all participants are made aware from the beginning that their notebooks should be donated to The Archive might also affect what they choose to share in them.

Ethical reflections

Qualitative research often comes with a responsibility to reflect thoroughly upon the ethical aspects of your study, and this thesis is no exception. In this case, it is essential both in regards to the relevant manifestation and this particular study. We as performers, and I as a researcher, have a responsibility to take care of our participants, because they are stepping into unknown territory, a frame that we create and uphold – and I study writings, drawings and beyond that are very personal to the participants. This comes with a responsibility for how they are portrayed (Brinkmann 2010: 442). This is also why no participants are mentioned by their everyday life name. I will present my ethical

reflections, and then I will unfold how we present and handle donations to The Archive in relation to ethics.

As a starting point, I have sought to stay open to situations where ethical questions have proven to be relevant. Thus, I have tried to avoid simply applying a set of fixed ethical rules. Instead, I have tried to have a reflective approach to these as I went along (Brinkmann 2010: 444). Furthermore, I have reflected upon the purpose of my study; to explore a theme that has been under-prioritised, to challenge a general perception of critique especially within academia, to explore the unknown, the potential of the aesthetic, to learn and share this knowledge.

My ethical reflections have primarily been on a micro-ethical level. It is important to take into consideration that the students of the school had not chosen to take part in Sisters Academy themselves. This is a premise of The Takeover-format unlike when Sisters Hope manifests The Boarding School-format, where all participants purchase a ticket and partake willingly. This is relevant both when manifesting and conducting research on the topic. They are given a school uniform, asked not to bring or use their electronic devices at school, to speak English, and more. To some this will be appealing, and they will feel very drawn to it – others will most likely feel very uncomfortable. One could argue that students rarely, if ever, have the chance to choose and impact the overall frame of their school life. However, this premise underlines the importance of focusing on the pre-liminal phase and the post-liminal phase when manifesting, since the environment is so unfamiliar to the participants. In The Takeover-format, Sisters Hope prepares the teachers through visits with a presentation, facilitation of The Poetic Self-exercise and individual talks with all teachers. The teachers then prepare their students. This is an important premise, because the teachers need to take ownership of the process in order for it to be sustainable and impactful. However, this also means that some students most likely will be better prepared for what is to come than others because of the different levels of engagement amongst the teachers. This means that we as Sisters staff have to be extra sharp when taking over the leadership and do our best to meet and sense into all participants at the school and adapt our process to where they are. In terms of the post-liminal phase, we typically spend the majority of the last week

anchoring and integrating the experience performatively. Furthermore, we encourage the teachers to do an evaluation with their students after the manifestation is over, and we always have an evaluation meeting with the teachers some time after it has ended.

Another aspect that demands ethical reflection is the fact that the students are quite young, and some would argue that they might be more vulnerable, open and prone to be affected by the frame than older participants. I have experienced this to be true to some degree, but at the same time I also want to challenge the impulse to position the students as naive victims – in my experience, young participants can be very open, but I have always experienced them to be strong and capable participants. Either way, this premise comes with a great responsibility and demands an extra sensitivity and awareness. I have aimed at being true to the participants that I have portrayed, and my general guiding principle when conducting the study has been to feel comfortable with the idea of presenting my thesis to them face-to-face. The premises mentioned above made it important for the participants to be fully informed of the premises of The Archive and data collection as described below.

Sisters Academy also has overall ethical guidelines that I will now unfold. Sisters Academy is research-based, and all data collected during manifestations is donated to The Archive. The Archive is open source. This means that everyone can access The Archive and use the data for research, visual presentations and other purposes. Moreover, The Archive is linked to the logic of research cf. the model visualizing the four logics in the introduction. Sisters Hope ensures that informed consent is given by all participants who take part in manifestations and thereby also contribute with data to The Archive. Before 2017 consents were collected orally, and from 2017 written consents have been collected from all participants (Archive Guidelines). My scope in this study will be Sisters Academy #3, Sweden which fell in two parts; The Boarding School and The Takeover. As accounted for, my focus will be on The Takeover. To respect the privacy of relevant participants, I have chosen not to use their everyday life names but only their Poetic Selves, which is also a general Archive guideline (Archive Guidelines).

When participants entered Sisters Academy #3 – The Boarding School, they went through an initiation ritual facilitated by a Sisters staff member stepping into the function of an Evoker whose main task is to open and prepare the participant for the journey that lies ahead within the framework of the academy. A part of this ritual was to elaborate on the concept and premises of The Archive and to hand over a notebook to the participant. The Evoker underlined that the notebook should be donated to Sisters Academy at the end of their stay, and that The Archive is open source. They were encouraged to make copies of their notes before donating it. Before participants left Sisters Academy, they visited The Archive to donate their notebook and potentially other donations. Here they signed the Logbook of the staff member stepping into The Protector of The Archive. They would write “I have donated to The Archive” followed by their signature.

When participants entered Sisters Academy #3 – The Takeover, the premises of The Archive were passed on individually by myself when the notebooks were given to the participants, since I also stepped into the function of protecting The Archive in this manifestation. I elaborated on the concept and premises of The Archive and handed over the notebook to the participant. I underlined that the notebook should be donated to Sisters Academy at the end of the manifestation, and that The Archive is open source. They were encouraged to make copies of their notes before donating it. All participants would donate their notebooks to The Archive as a part of a collective exit ritual on the last day. It will undoubtedly be conflicting to some to have to donate their notebook, and some might feel forced. This is understandable, since the notes are precious not only to Sisters Hope but also very much to the participants. This is also why it is important to make the guidelines very clear from the beginning, so the students can consider what and if they wish to share. We also sometimes experience notebooks with ripped out pages and some that never return to The Archive.

A final ethical consideration is that the full notebooks are not part of the appendix out of consideration of the anonymity of the students which also resonates with the overall Archive guidelines (Archive Guidelines). The notebooks can be accessed in analogue form upon request.

Choice of theory and critical reflections

My theoretical framework is *The Critical Gaze and The Devoted Body*. My conceptualization will be rooted in respectively the notion of immersion as described by Josephine Machon, Brian Massumi's affect-theory and perspectives on critique outlined by Solveig Gade and Laura Louise Schultz and defined by Gavin Butt, Irit Rogoff and Eve Sedgwick.

Brian Massumi has been widely acknowledged, discussed and criticized for his affect theory. Professor of Feminist Theory Claire Hemmings is critical towards him and the contemporary emergence of affect as a way to understand the social world and our place within it (Hemmings 2005: 548). Hemmings has criticised the theoretical celebration of affect, namely by focusing on Massumi and theorist Eve Sedgwick. For both theorists, affect and embodied experience has transformative capacity, because affect is autonomous and outside social signification – it differs from social structures and through that has the capacity to restructure social meaning. However, Hemmings argue that affect does not manifest as difference but “... *as a central mechanism of social reproduction...*” (Hemmings 2005: 551). Focusing on consumerism, feelings of belonging attending fundamentalism or fascism, she argues that affect, in some cases, strengthens more than it challenges a dominant social order. Both Sedgwick and Massumi acknowledge this in their work, but Hemmings is critical towards the fact that they do not pursue it and instead only focus on the positive aspects of affect (Hemmings 2005: 551). Moreover, Massumi has been criticised for his ambiguity when both saying that affect is autonomous, unformed, and unstructured, and that it at the same time is highly organized (Vallgård 2013: 14). I have chosen to base my conceptualization on the works of Massumi and Sedgwick, because their contributions are still valuable to my understanding of respectively the critical gaze and the devoted body, although it can be argued that they have not fully explained the concept of affect.

I have accounted for the fact that I subscribe to – not only my own reading of Merleau-Ponty's work – but also Dee Pedersen's. Furthermore, I have accounted for the arguments that lie behind this choice. This will of course bring a level of uncertainty to

the study, because her reading is rooted in her own personal experience and motives. However, I still chose to do this, because her approach resonates with mine, and this allows me to gain a more refined understanding of how to possibly apply Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology on an artistic field.

Finally, I apply critical theory differently than it usually would be. Often critical theory is used more on a macro-level to expose and discuss pathologies in society (although Marcuse does base his critique on Freud, so this is a statement with modifications). Moreover, members of the Frankfurt School all refrain from coming up with concrete solutions to their critique. I apply their works on a micro-level, and my starting point is a group that has a more proactive approach by seeking to democratize and open the aesthetic dimension by creating laboratories and experiments to explore the potentials of the sensuous and poetic.

Having accounted for my methodological reflections, including my theoretical outset, I will continue to unfold my theoretical foundation in depth in the following chapter.

Theory



Theory

The concept of immersion as described by Josephine Machon, an affect-theoretical framework by Brian Massumi, and perspectives on critique outlined by Solveig Gade and Laura Louise Schultz and defined by Gavin Butt, Irit Rogoff and Eve Sedgwick will act as the foundation for my exploration and understanding of The Critical Gaze and The Devoted Body.

Immersion

Immersion is a term used to describe a specific genre within the field of theatre and performance. Immersive performance-installations put the participants at the heart of the experience. Participants are submerged into a parallel universe that engages all of their senses and allows them to experience things that are not possible in everyday life. Furthermore, the performances most often take place outside the traditional theatre venues (Machon 2009: 64). To be immersed means to involve oneself deeply in a particular activity or experience. Immersion thus defines the action of immersing or the state of being immersed (Machon 2009: 21f). In an immersive performance-installation you are physically surrounded by another world, and as a participant you play an active part and engage bodily in the experience (Machon 2009: 55f).

“Remember what it is like to be immersed in water; to lie back slowly and put your head underwater in the bath. The muted sensation of being submerged in another medium, where the rules change because if you were to breathe as normal your lungs would fill with water; so you have to hold your breath, feeling the buoyancy of your body in this new realm, attending to every moment of what this new experience offers. At once being able to relax within that otherworldly feeling but always alert, ready to respond to your body’s eventual need for oxygen.”

(Machon 2009: xiv)

Immersion in water can be defined as *“the action of plunging your whole body into an alternative medium and its subsequent sensations”* (Machon 2009: xiv), and this definition might help us to understand what it means to be immersed in a universe like Sisters

Academy where the senses are activated and participants are deeply involved in the activities at the school.

Immersion was first used to theorize around computer technologies and telematic environments in the 1980s. It was applied to describe systems that create a three-dimensional image that appear to surround the user or deeply involve one's senses or create an altered state of mind. Immersion has later been applied to describe all-encompassing artistic experiences. Josephine Machon refers to researcher Gordon Calleja when she underlines the importance of understanding the term under the very specific contexts in which it is used (Machon 2009: 59f). Machon connects immersion with presence and explains how immersive theatre establishes a special kind of embodied and noetic presence, because the participant is actually there, physically inhabiting the space created, allowing and encouraging agency and interaction, enabling participants to impact the course of action. This bodily participation in a sensuous environment is a crucial element of the immersive experience (Machon 2009: 61).

Machon describes three different criteria or categories within the immersive theatre experience: 1. Immersion as absorption – where a performance *“is able to engage the participant fully in terms of concentration, imagination, action and interest; a total engagement in an activity that engrosses (and may equally entertain) the participant within its very form”* (Machon 2009: 62). 2. Immersion as transportation – where the participant *“is imaginatively and scenographically reoriented in [...] an otherworldly-world that requires navigation according to its own rules of logic [...] this otherworldly-world is both a conceptual, imaginative space and an inhabited, physical space”* (Machon 2009: 63). This new logic encourages a spontaneous response from participants and sometimes requires a personal abandonment of everyday boundaries (Machon 2009: 27) 3. Total immersion – *“Involving both of the above and leading to an uncanny recognition of the audience-participant's own praesence within the experience [...] Total immersion may enable emotional or existential transformation”* (Machon 2009: 63). All immersive performances exist somewhere between ‘immersion as absorption’ and ‘immersion as transportation’, with ‘total immersion’ being the most intense.

Machon refers to theatre critic Matt Trueman who states:

“[The] desire to experience more fully is at the heart of immersive theatre, which can place us in situations that we are unlikely to encounter in our everyday lives, rather than merely placing them before us [...] immersive theatre might be well-suited to tackle the extremities of human existence.” (Machon 2009: 26)

To experience more fully relates to how immersion is closely connected to presence. Furthermore, she says:

“Rediscovery is central to the experience; of space, narrative, character, theme and sometimes even of unknown depths, or hidden emotions and memories specific to that individual participant. This rediscovery through active decision making is transformative; in terms of the way the individual audience member influences the shape of the ‘show’; and transformative, like a rite of passage, where one can be personally and positively changed through the thematic concerns of the event, communicated via its experiential form.” (Machon 2009: 28)

The immersive quality of Sisters Academy

These quotes describe what Sisters Academy does; create performance experiments to explore the potentials and challenges of a world where the aesthetic dimension is at the center of all action and interaction (Manifesto) and to create a space that encourages presence. Furthermore, Sisters Academy too believes that these immersive universes have transformative potential. Hallberg describes the immersive quality and intention of Sisters Academy:

“Once taken over by Sisters Academy, the whole school is immersed into an otherworldly atmosphere that activates the senses and allow us to think and feel radically different from everyday life. The toilets might be pink and filled with a low sound of humming, a classroom might have been turned into a forest, and if you go to the leader of the school, she will greet you in an office filled with stuffed animals, sweet drinks, stamps, typewriters and fur hats.” (Hallberg 2016: 133)

The quote refers to how Sisters Hope works with immersion in The Takeover-format. When manifesting The Boarding School, the level of immersion is even more extensive since it entails a larger budget and more time to change space, and most crucially, because it is placed in an art institution and thus, is a performance-installation. Every inch of the space is transformed through set-, sound-, and light-design, and both space and performers encourage participants to interact with their entire body and being. The quality of the The Takeover is also strongly interventionist, and the structure of everyday life is present (in terms of schedule) which is a point. Sisters Hope does not remove everyday life in The Takeover – but show how it can work differently when operating in a new aesthetic framework.

There is an overall aesthetic at Sisters Academy, and at the same time all the Sisters staff tableaux at the school have very different aesthetics. The overall aesthetic is characterized by a melancholic and dark atmosphere. The pace is typically slow and sound level low. The lights are dimmed, often red and pink, and the furniture soft. This is mostly due to the fact that this aesthetic is in opposition to everyday life and also because this is The Sister's preferred aesthetic that overflows into the general areas. If someone else would step into the function of The Headmistress or The Headmaster the general aesthetic would most likely look very different. Thus, the general aesthetic and atmosphere of Sisters Academy is not an expression of a universal sensuous space – the sensuous has many expressions, and this is just one of many. Furthermore, the different staff members and tableaux manifest many different faces and interpretations of the sensuous. The main argument behind Sisters Hope's specific immersive strategy is to be in opposition to everyday life.

Machon unfolds the dimensions of immersion further:

“Immersion in water can be a pleasant, powerful experience. It places us in a strange environment that can be comforting or potentially dangerous. It makes us utterly aware – in that moment – of our body and its instinctive response to the medium.” (Machon 2009: xiv)

It is an important point to me that being immersed is not necessarily a comforting and safe feeling – it can feel dangerous as well. This will also come through and be unfolded more in the analysis.

Having presented the concept of immersion, I will now unfold my take on affect. Both are central to my understanding of the critical gaze and the devoted body.

To affect and be affected

In the Canadian social theorist, philosopher and writer Brian Massumi's work 'Politics of Affect' he unfolds his conception of affect through a number of interviews. To him, the notion of affect has a political dimension, because it is rooted in change and *"concerns the first stirrings of the political, flush with felt intensities of life"* (Massumi 2015: ix). Massumi refers to Spinoza when he defines affect as the power to affect and be affected (Massumi 2015: ix). He elaborates further:

"When you affect something, you are at the same time opening yourself up to being affected in turn, and in a slightly different way than you might have been the moment before. You have made a transition, however slight. You have stepped over a threshold. Affect is this passing of a threshold, seen from the point of view of the change in capacity." (Massumi 2015: 4)

A body's ability to affect or be affected is not fixed, it is constantly changing. The concept of affect cannot merely be reduced to emotion: *"an emotion is a very partial expression of affect. It only draws on a limited selection of memories and only activates certain reflexes or tendencies"* (Massumi 2015: 4f). It is a precognitive, bodily sensation that can be felt typically before it is identified as a recognisable emotion. An emotion is only a very limited expression of affect that only draws on selected memories and reflexes. As Massumi says:

"when we feel a particular emotion or think a particular thought, where have all the other memories, habits, tendencies gone that might have come at the point? And where have the bodily capacities for affecting and being affected that they're inseparable from gone? There's no way they can all be actually expressed at any given point. But they're

not totally absent either, because a different selection of them is sure to come up at the next step. They're still there, but virtually — in potential. Affect as a whole, then, is the virtual co-presence of potentials” (Massumi 2015: 4).

Intensified presence

Massumi reflects upon the concept and potential of ‘hope’ and how it relates to affect. According to Massumi, the notion of hope can become valuable if it is separated from concepts like optimism and pessimism – *“from a wishful projection of success or even some kind of rational calculation of outcomes”* (Massumi 2015: 2). By placing hope in the present. This notion of ‘intensified presence’ is central to Massumi’s use of the concept of affect. To be in a state of intensified presence means to be intensely present in the current moment, focusing on the next experimental step rather than potential future success or failure – being right where you are more intensely (Massumi 2015: 3). According to Massumi, being present can expand our margin of manoeuvrability. He explains:

“in every situation there are a number of levels of organization and tendencies in play, in co-operation with each other or at cross-purposes. The way all the elements interrelate is so complex that it isn’t necessarily comprehensible in one go. There is always a sort of vagueness surrounding the situation, an uncertainty about where you might be able to go and what you might be able to do once you exit that particular context. This uncertainty can actually be empowering – once you realize that it gives you a margin of manoeuvrability and you focus on that, rather than on projecting success or failure. It gives you the feeling that there is always an opening to experiment, to try and see. This brings a sense of potential to the situation. The present’s ‘boundary condition’ to borrow a phrase from science, is never a closed door. It is an open threshold – a threshold of potential. You are only ever in the present in passing. If you look at it that way you don’t have to feel boxed in, no matter what horrors are afield and no matter what, rationally, you expect will come”

(Massumi 2015: 2f)

In a state of intensified presence, you bring your entire body into the situation and act instantly before there is time for much reflection. Thus, actions are more based on an affective assessment of the situation and its potentials (Massumi 2015: 9). It can

potentially lead to a sense of vitality and being more alive. It might force you to find a margin, a manoeuvre you didn't know you had, and couldn't have just thought your way into. It can change you and expand your capacity. According to Massumi, having more potentials available can intensify our life, because we are not 'enslaved' by our situations. Furthermore, with intensified affect *"comes a stronger sense of embeddedness in a larger field of life — a heightened sense of belonging, with other people and to other places"* (Massumi 2015: 7). It is tempting to draw associations to Marcuse's hope of a human subject who is liberated from the current domination of society and, as an effect, is in touch with a sense of freedom and his or her passions, drives and goals.

Massumi underlines that affective intensity is not more natural than the ability to stand back and reflect on something or the ability to pin something down in language. Furthermore, he states that he does not subscribe to a dualistic approach to the body and the mind where the two are perceived as two separate entities. He argues that if we define affect as above, it must include elaborated functions such as language:

"There's an affect associated with every functioning of the body, from moving your foot to take a step to moving your lips to make words. Affect is simply a body movement looked at from the point of view of its potential — its capacity to come to be, or better, to come to do." (Massumi 2015: 7)

Affective dimensions of Sisters Academy

Sisters Hope seeks to create spaces and interactions that affect participants and encourage intensified presence. Thus, as described above, Sisters Hope aims to create situations that bring the participants into situations with their entire being on all levels. The intention is for them to experience an expansion of their capacity through the sensuous and poetic, because Sisters Hope believes that this mode of being has liberating, sustainable and nurturing potential.

Perspectives on the role and form of criticism

I will now present different perspectives on critique to be able to define more specifically what I mean by The Critical Gaze.

“criticism is in trouble. Certain time-honored ideas about the role and form of criticism [...] have been shaken by the shifting cultural priorities of a changing world. The unease around such ideas has been made manifest not by any sustained analysis or treatise on the state of criticism today, but rather through varying instances and registers which, taken together, might indicate more deep-seeded changes in contemporary attitudes towards criticism – and to its place and importance within art and culture.” (Butt 2005: 1)

Hallberg refers to Solveig Gade’s and Laura Louise Schultz’ article ‘Kritik af Kritikken’ in an initial draft for a chapter in her PhD-thesis about the critical gaze and the devoted body (Hallberg 2017). Gade and Schultz outline three different paradigms of critique that art theorist Gavin Butt (Butt 2005) and professor in Visual Culture Irit Rogoff (Rogoff 2003) define and declare to be central in the 20th and 21st century; 1. The modernist criticism, 2. The postmodernist critique and 3. The performative criticality (Gade & Schultz 2016: 23). Gade and Schultz underline that the three paradigms in practise do not simply replace each other in a neat chronological order (Gade & Schultz 2016: 26).

The modernist criticism springs from the Enlightenment. Here the critic is perceived as an authority, and the verdict of the critic is considered universal (Butt 2005: 3). The critic passes judgement based on a non-bodily, disinterested and distanced approach. This model opposes to art that encourages interaction and bodily engagement, because this challenges the ideal of the modernist criticism; for the critic to be “... *remote from that which he or she surveys*” (Butt 2005: 3) and for the piece to be neutral and genres separated. Through the 1960s and 1970s participatory art expanded further, and the position of modernist criticism was criticised for its ideal of art as a neutral space and for assuming that the universal spectator is white, middle class, heterosexual and male (Gade & Schultz 2016: 23f).

Simultaneously, the second paradigm of critique associated with postmodernism and post-structuralism emerged (Gade & Schultz 2016: 24). The critic’s “... *dispensation to*

discriminate in the name of universal human values...” (Butt 2005: 3) was challenged, and critics to a larger degree “... *abandoned their claims to speak from a form of privileged or ‘authoritative’ viewpoint*” (Butt 2005: 3). The critic of post-structuralist persuasion instead took a deconstructive approach to uncover hidden power structures and abandoned the idea of positioning him or herself at a remove from the object of criticism. Both Butt and Rogoff point to the fact that this approach has blocked potential new forms of critique (Gade & Schultz 2016: 24; Rogoff 2003). Based on Gade’s and Schultz’ article, Hallberg writes: “*Paradoxically this reading, aimed at protecting the more vulnerable positions, ends up blocking out the possibility of creating new critical paradigms which hold the potentiality of completely new modes of being and being together and furthermore blocks out hope (of change)*” (Hallberg 2017). Thus, in its attempt to prevent ‘bad surprises’ and to not come across as naive this approach also blocks out hope. What if the surprise turned out to be positive? (Gade & Schultz 2016: 25). Furthermore, Butt underlines another issue. This approach to critique, which was originally “*deployed to critique various forms of power and authority [...] have come to be credited with a kind of authority of their own. The final paradoxical twist comes about when a body of work renowned for its deconstruction of authorial value comes to be accredited with precisely such forms of authority*” (Butt 2005: 4). He argues that criticism today might find itself turning away from some of the established procedures of critical practice in order to actually remain critical (Butt 2005: 6).

American theorist Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick has also addressed this issue from a queer perspective and poses an alternative approach that has become widely known (Sedgwick 2006). She writes: “*Because there can be terrible surprises, however, there can also be good ones. Hope, often a fracturing, even a traumatic thing to experience, is among the energies by which the reparatively positioned reader tries to organize the fragments and part-objects she encounters or creates*” (Sedgwick 2006: 22). Sedgwick advocates for an approach that dares to leave room for surprises and positive affects. This perspective is not necessarily in opposition to the postmodernist critique but rather a strategy that builds on top. Here the critic must participate and engage bodily with the piece – he or she must take risks and be willing to co-produce. Butt supports this approach and points towards a critical practice that plays out performatively in the meeting between the

participant and the piece (Butt 2005: 10). He also calls for performative, critical ways of writing that do not judge or describe a given piece from a safe critical distance but rather takes shape as narratives that arise from the meeting with the piece – an approach that encourages critics to experiment with new forms of critique (Gade & Schultz 2016: 25f).

Massumi on the concept of critique

Massumi comments on the concept of critique as well:

“‘Critical’ practices aimed at increasing potentials for freedom and for movement are inadequate, because in order to critique something in any kind of definitive way you have to pin it down. In a way it is almost a sadistic enterprise that separates something out, attributes set characteristics to it, then applies a final judgement – objectifies it, in a moralizing kind of way [...] it loses contact with other more moving dimensions of experience. It doesn’t allow for other kinds of practices that might not have so much to do with mastery and judgement as with affective connection and abductive participation” (Massumi 2015: 14).

The statement underlines the paradox described initially between the intention of some critical perspectives to protect the weak and their at times violent approach to objects of critique. Furthermore, he says:

“A critical perspective that tries to come to a definitive judgement on something is always in some way a failure, because it is happening at a remove from the process it’s judging. Something could have happened in the intervening time, or something barely perceptible might have been happening away from the centre of critical focus. These developments may become important later. The process of pinning down and separating out is also a weakness in judgement, because it doesn’t allow for these seeds of change, connections in the making that might not be activated or obvious at the moment [...] In a sense, judgemental reason is an extremely weak form of thought, precisely because it is so sure of itself. This is not to say that it shouldn’t be used. But I think it should be complemented by other practices of thought, it shouldn’t be relied on exclusively.” (Massumi 2015: 15)

Both quotes by Massumi point towards the fact that critique potentially stops movement and thus becomes a destructive force. This resonates with the critique above of both the modernist criticism and the postmodernist critique.

Having outlined my theoretical foundation, I now intend to clarify my definition of the critical gaze and the devoted body.

The Devoted Body

A devoted body is a body that is completely immersed, or in a state of ‘total immersion’, involving full absorption and transportation to another world (Machon), and at the same time in a state of intensified presence, bringing the entire body into the situation and acting instantly, more based on an affective assessment of the situation and its potentials (Massumi). A participant with a devoted body is involved with his or her entire being and body, is intensely present in the current moment and maintains an openness to the universe. I briefly considered simply equating an immersed body with a devoted body but find that focusing intensely on the present moment is a significant part of the idea of a devoted body, because you leave worries and fear of potential future success or failure behind in this state.

The Critical Gaze

The Critical Gaze refers to the approach by the two first paradigms of criticism outlined above; the modernist criticism and the postmodernist critique (Butt, Rogoff, Schultz, Gade, Hallberg). It is defined by a critical distance to the object of critique, and the critic is credited with a certain level of authority. It can have a deconstructive approach to the situation and experience. Thus, a person experiencing Sisters Academy with a critical gaze does not put his or her body to the idea or let him- or herself be absorbed by the space before passing judgement to the same extent as with the experience of a devoted body.

There are many ways of involving oneself in an experiment such as Sisters Academy — not only with a strict understanding of either a critical gaze or a devoted body.

Furthermore, as I have previously written, there are many nuances to the two terms. For example, since being immersed is not necessary a comforting and safe feeling and can feel dangerous, a critical approach can just as well be rooted in a high level of absorption. You might be critical exactly because you are intensely engaged. Simultaneously, I claim that it is possible to reflect while being devoted. Hallberg refers to Lehmann who claims that one can be both an experiencing practitioner and an analysing researcher, but not not at the same time. According to Lehmann, the two modes cannot co-exist (Hallberg 2017: 35f). However, this is not our experience, and Hallberg argues that reflections can even be deeper in these situations, because “... *our whole body, our whole being co-reflects with our mind...*” (Hallberg 2017: 35). I have witnessed many levels of engagement in-between the two and seek to unfold the nuances of these and the potential of the intersection in the analysis.

Analysis



Analysis

The analysis will explore the notion of the critical gaze and the devoted body in relation to the immersive, radical experiment Sisters Academy. Furthermore, I will explore levels of engagement and reactions in-between the two. All quotes are selected from approximately 30 student notebooks from the manifestation Sisters Academy #3 – The Takeover, Sweden. Notebooks containing many more reflections, dreams, frustrations, fears, visions and beyond than I am able to include here. I have initially given each notebook a number to differentiate them. Furthermore, I will draw on my own experience with, and knowledge of, the project. All students have moved in an otherworldly soundscape and red and pink lights, they have taken part in ritualistic and poetic morning gatherings daily, worn a school uniform, left their electronic devices at home, participated in sensuous classes facilitated by their teachers and the Sisters Academy staff, and they have had sensuous encounters with each other and the permanent and new staff of the school.

The Sisters Academy staff's actions are rooted in their Poetic Self. They give their inner poetic life a physical expression, and this inner landscape also permeates the classes they create and the interactions they take part in. Therefore, I don't necessarily find it fruitful to describe individual approaches in detail, because they have many nuances and can easily be trivialized, but I will nevertheless give a few examples to strengthen the comprehensibility. It is not uncommon for staff members to work with limiting senses – for example by blindfolding (themselves or others) or not speaking – as well as stimulating the senses through for example through touch, washing of hands, eye gazing and beyond. One staff member, The Mechanic, explores silence by not speaking for the entire duration of the manifestation. Another, The Untamed, works with untaming structures through ritualistic, explosive classes. Yet another, The Aura, works with colour and light. These are just a few examples that might give a clearer idea of what takes place within the academy. The analysis will be organised in themes that were strongly represented in the notebooks.

Light and sound

The soundscape, the Sisters Academy radio and the light-design are essential parts of Sisters Hope's immersive strategy. Thus, light and sound help participants to submerge into a parallel universe that engages all of their senses and potentially allow them to explore a margin of manoeuvrability that might not be accessible to them in everyday life. It is a fundamental strategy, and therefore I initiate my analysis by unfolding how the students responded to these elements. I have experienced a range of different reactions to the use of these effects. To the majority, they are simply subtle and natural parts of the universe that they don't reflect too much on. To others, they can be both soothing and magical – and the cause of many frustrations. More students have described how the light and sound affected them:

"The room sounds like a garden, a calm garden. I notice the bells, I notice scribbings. I notice scratches, it enters my body in the arms. I notice knocking on wood, it enters in the chest [...] I'm not listening with my ears, it feels like I'm listening with my whole body" (Notebook 6/The Wanderer)

"I think it's a bit strange and unpleasant with the sounds everywhere. Especially in the bathrooms. I bit tough, my head gets tired!" (Notebook 18)

"I love having music on the toilets ☆" (Notebook 23)

"Fick ont i huvet av allt nytt och av alla ljus och ljud" (Notebook 25/The Twin)

"... I'm tired of all the lights and the music" (Notebook 26)

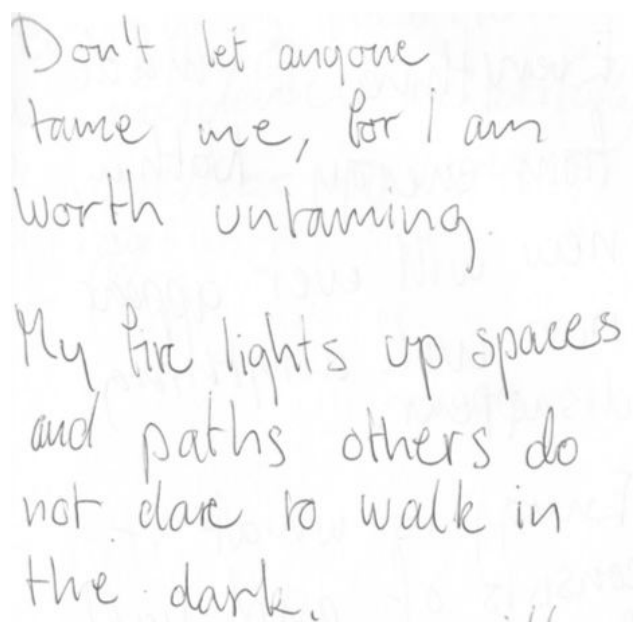
Reading through The Wanderer's notebook, the student behind the first quote, she generally comes across as a devoted body; describing the academy as her comfort zone, how she does not want it to end and how the experiment has had a deep impact on her (Notebook 6/The Wanderer). The two last examples of students, who comment on how the sounds and lights are disturbing to them, express that they generally find it difficult to be at Sisters Academy. They both seem to maintain a distance more or less

throughout the whole duration of the manifestation (Notebook 25 & 26). It is of course difficult to determine whether the frustrations with the light and sound is due to their general frustrations with Sisters Academy, or whether the light and sound put strain on them to the point where they felt uncomfortable and unable to open up to the experience. It is an intense space to move in, partly because of the light and sound, and these particular students could simply be bodies stressed by these effects.

In all cases, I consider the immersive light- and sound strategy to play a significant role in the participants' experience and attitude towards Sisters Academy regardless of how they chose, or were able, to engage. It enables some to sink deep into another dimension, and at the same time it might stop movement in some cases by making it more difficult for some students to open up.

The Poetic Self

The Poetic Self is another central method that Sisters Hope uses to open up the aesthetic dimension to participants. It is a way to unlock poetic potential and expand new unexplored modes of being and being together. When participants choose to explore their Poetic Self, they discover sides to themselves that they might not have encountered before. Based on the quotes below, they express a sense of empowerment and newfound confidence.



Don't let anyone
tame me, for I am
worth untaming.

My fire lights up spaces
and paths others do
not dare to walk in
the dark.

(Notebook 8/The Untouchable)

I did not plan to become
my poetic self today.
But suddenly I did.
It just fell into place.
All natural.

I've never felt this
confident about myself
before. Maybe when I
was 4 years old.

This is me.
I am a magnolia tree.
Soon I will bloom.

what is happening to me?
Something wonderfull.

Scared

In a good way



(Notebook 9/Magnolia)

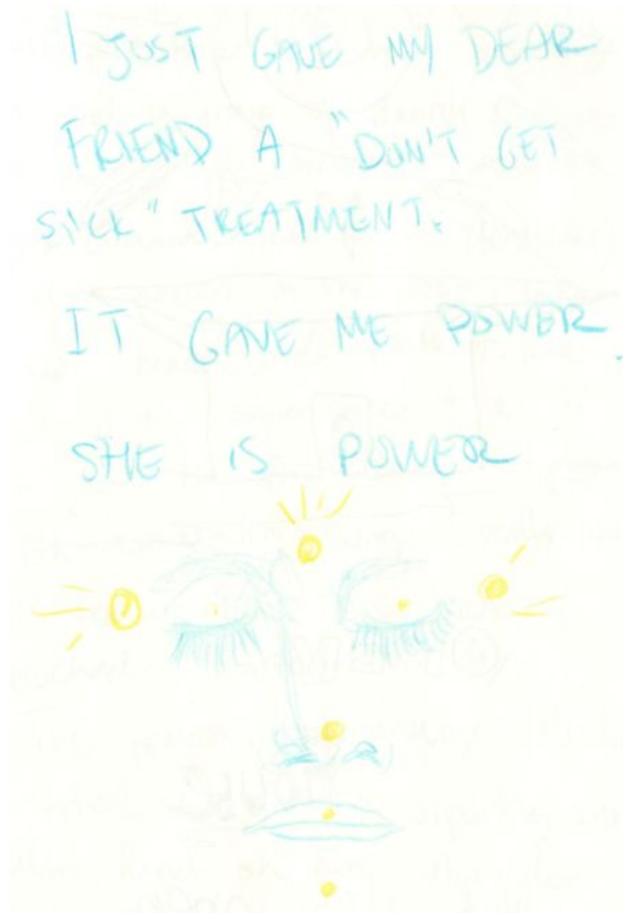
I AM A WANDERER
I am a Wanderer.
I walk from space to
space, often without a
clear goal or purpose.
Some may say that I
don't have any roots,
that I'm rootless.
I don't think that's the case,
in fact I know my roots,
where I belong, my roots
are not only a place,
but my roots are
inside of me, and
I'm grounded.

(Notebook 6/The Wanderer)

The students have used the Poetic Self as a method and valuable tool to access the aesthetic dimension. It is an expansion of their sense of self and something that they own and can take with them and explore beyond the academy – the light, sound and probs will disappear after the manifestation, but their Poetic Self is theirs and permanent. This can potentially strengthen the potential transformative impact and their ability to anchor and integrate what they have learned during the manifestation.

I have experienced that a challenge with the Poetic Self is that participants, at times, can have a tendency to focus a lot on their own inner life, journey and needs and less on the collective and their responsibility for the collective. However, when you manage to

direct your focus back to your surroundings, the experience of the Poetic Self can seem even more powerful. The drawing below hints at this:

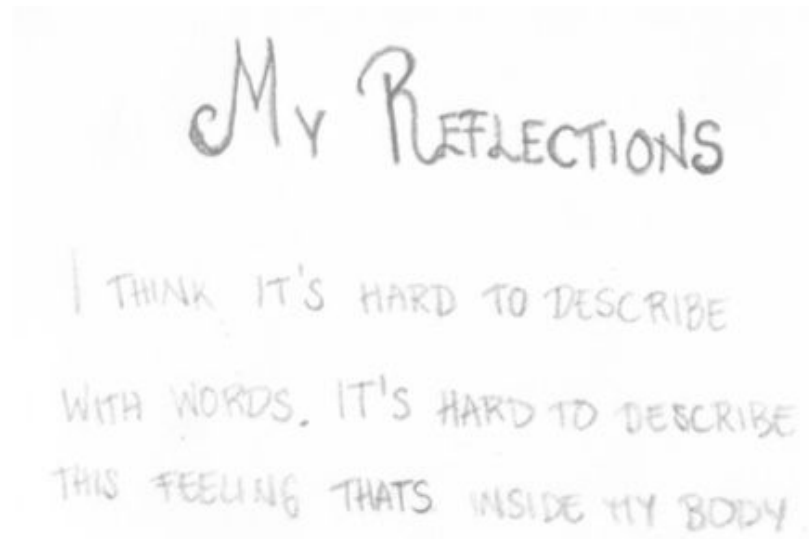


(Notebook 1/The Snake Dancer)

To summarize, I consider the Poetic Self to be a fruitful method to access the aesthetic dimension and in continuation of this, inner, yet unexplored poetic potential and new modes of being and being together. A challenge is that it can lead to participants focusing so much on their own inner journey that they neglect the collective and their collective responsibilities.

Having explored some of Sisters Hope's fundamental strategies, light, sound and the Poetic Self, I will now proceed to investigate how language relates to the critical gaze, the devoted body and Sisters Hope's experiments.

Language

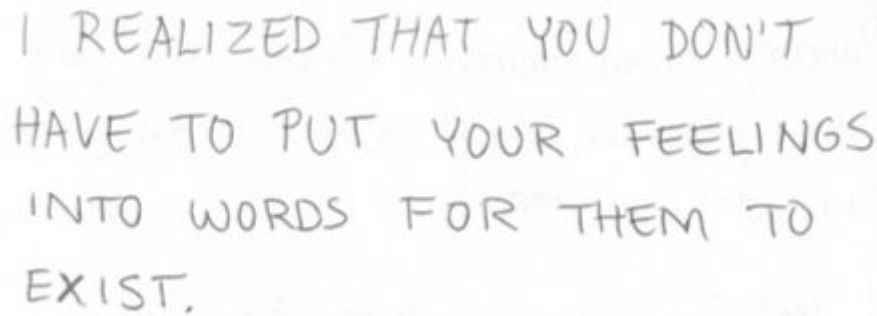


(Notebook 4)

"I don't know what to write. There is so so so much that I want you to know that I am feeling/experiencing. There is so so so much that I have felt. There is so so so much that I have explored. There is so so so much that I have thought about, that I never thought about before. I wish I had written more in my book so you could use what I have been through to help others. I want my learning to teach you but at the same time words seem weak. Words will never explain this in the same way as it is inside my head."

(Notebook 7/The May)

Language is a central topic at Sisters Academy. To Massumi, affecting and being affected is a precognitive, bodily sensation that can be felt typically before it is identified as a recognisable emotion. This might explain why it can be difficult to some that have immersed deeply to describe how they are and have been affected by the experience. This is not to support a dualistic perception of the body and the mind. To repeat myself; From Massumi and Merleau-Ponty's perspective, the body is a unity of flesh and thought, and language is as natural a form of expression as any other. However, sometimes it seems to be a limiting form of expression to the participants.



I REALIZED THAT YOU DON'T
HAVE TO PUT YOUR FEELINGS
INTO WORDS FOR THEM TO
EXIST.

“Something happens to the thing you are describing when you try to form it into words. It changes. Becomes a new reality. And I also often feel that this reality is weaker than it was before.” (Notebook 7/The May)

Overall, the data bears witness to the fact that many deep, poetic and enlightening reflections can be expressed through writing when participants are in an immersed state. At the same time I see that it has proven to be limiting in some cases. This is not only the case for the ones who approach the experience as devoted bodies, but a later chapter in the analysis, ‘The Critical Gaze’, will also hint at the fact that it is not always the best form of expression for those who approach the experience from a distanced point of view, depending on the participant. This is also why Sisters Hope uses other forms of documentation such as film, photography and ‘confession booths’, where all participants can share reflections and beyond through sound- and video recordings.

It will become evident throughout the analysis that the students’ poetic notes might also be an expression of the fact that they have accessed a liberating dimension.



(Notebook 7/The May)

Presence and awareness

“See the full potential of the feet. When I was visiting The Well, I had taken my shoes and socks off. I also got blindfolded. I had no direction I was heading towards. And when I was led into the room, my feet were the first part of my body that could feel the new space I was entering. My feet were the body part that was leading me. I felt the cold floor against my feet. My toes felt different, my skin felt different. Standing in the soil, I started exploring the possibilities and limitations of my feet. Before I didn’t even notice how I was using my feet, and now I was bringing awareness to something new.”
(Notebook 7/The May)

In line with Massumi’s term ‘intensified presence’, the quote shows how the student focuses on the next experimental step within an immersed frame over a distant potential future. The student’s reflections are strongly connected to the body and bodily participation – gaining awareness of the skin, the feet, the sensation of the floor and soil under and on the feet, the potential of the feet. In this particular case, the emphasis is on the tactile aspect of the experience; sensing the soil and temperature on her skin and feet. The student, who has taken the Poetic Self ‘The May’, expresses that she has expanded her consciousness and way of perceiving her surroundings and her own body. She also describes how she has explored dancing when nobody else can see her:

“I feel free, beautiful, happy. Blown away by playfulness. It makes me feel like I am myself, actually inside of my own body. Like I am part of it. It also felt like I was moving without intention or thought. But where did all of the movements come from if not from my mind? From my memory? My body’s own memories? From my soul? Poetic Self? Heart? Maybe it comes from something we could never understand through words, only by feeling.” (Notebook 7/The May).

Both situations described by the student relate to Marcuse’s argument; that the inner resources of the human being can be liberated through the aesthetic dimension, because it can transcend reality and open up a new dimension of experience. Furthermore, it resonates with Massumi’s concept of intensified presence – being intensely present can

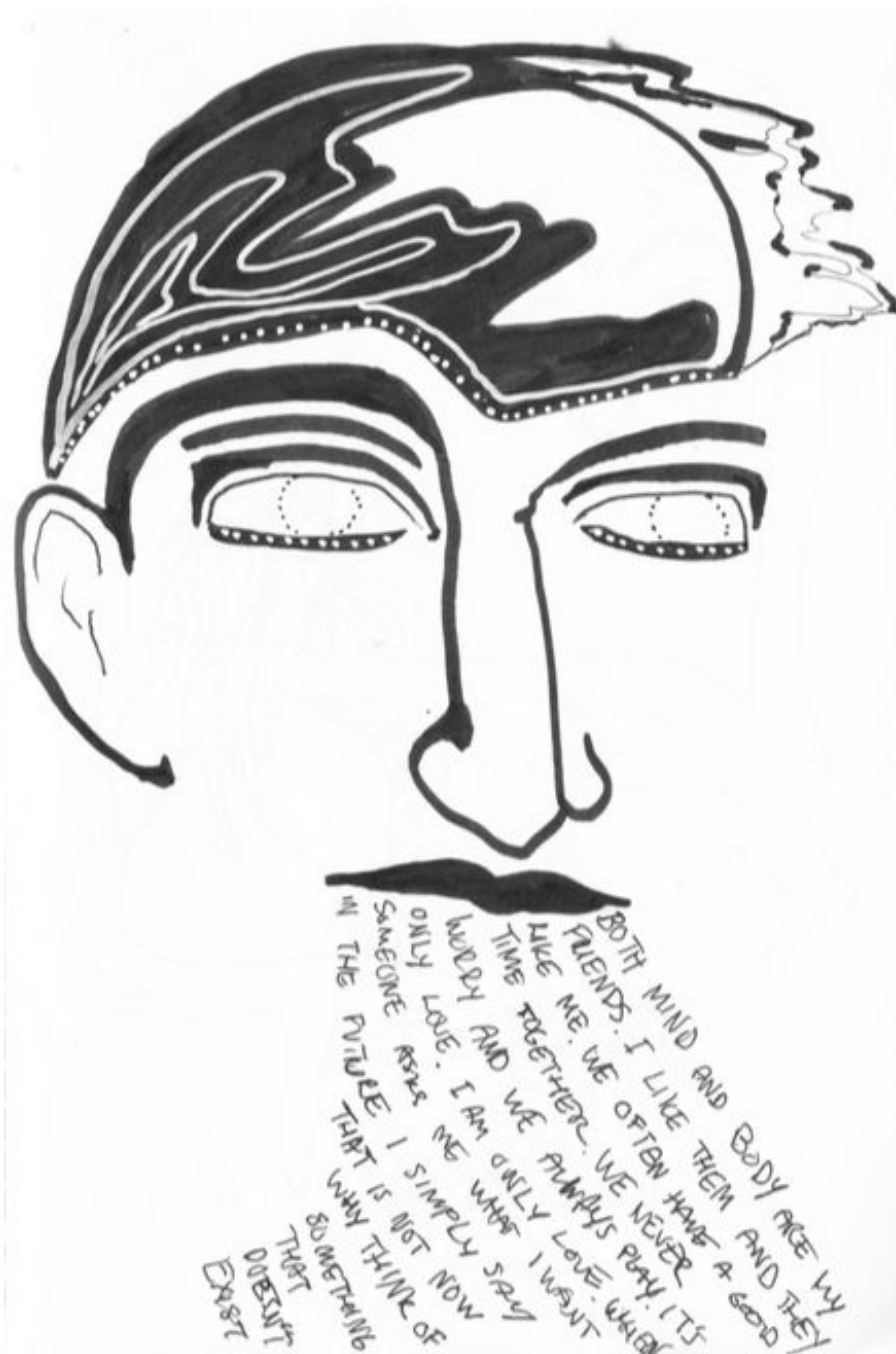
expand our margin of manoeuvrability. She has been empowered by these situations of intensified presence and explored new modes of consciousness and being in the world due to the highly immersive framework of the academy. The May's reflections on where her movements come from can also be connected to her state of intensified presence, where you bring your entire body into the situation and act instantly before there is time for much reflection. Actions will to a larger degree be based on an affective assessment of the situation and its potentials, that can potentially lead to a sense of vitality and being more alive. I would argue that this student is a devoted body, because she is immersed and present at the same time.

A student with the Poetic Self 'Waves' has also articulated how this feeling of presence affected her: *"When do I find peace? When I'm present. When I smile. When I dance. When I interact. When I stop. When I rest"*, and *"Everything will blossom, soon. The present is now and the future depends on the present. Things will be alright, nothing to worry about"* (Notebook 5/Waves). Being present gives her a feeling of being at peace, and it relieves her of worry. This is another example that supports Adorno's, Marcuse's and Massumi's arguments; that emancipation can be reached through the aesthetic dimension (as accounted for in the introduction), and that focusing on the present can expand our margin of manoeuvrability. Waves also writes the following in her notebook:

"The sounds effected me. I felt the waves of the sounds. When The Nurse pressed my head, legs and foot, it was really comfortable. I felt the pressure long after The Nurse pressed. I felt The Nurse present too. All this effected me. I believe it effected me good. I became aware of my surroundings." (Notebook 5/Waves)

Above is yet another example of how the intensified space encourages focusing on the present moment. More specifically, this student emphasizes the affect of sound and touch – sensing the sound waves and the touch of The Nurse, a Sisters Academy staff member. She describes how the sensuous stimulation of both space and another person comforted her and heightened her awareness and perception of her surroundings. In all examples, the students put emphasis on the body.

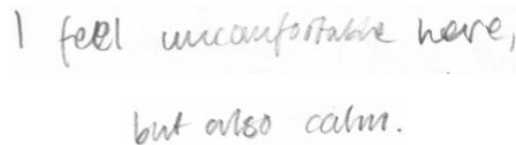
In conclusion, these students all put emphasis on a strong sense of presence. They have experienced a sense of liberation through access to the aesthetic dimension – expressing feelings of happiness, liveliness, awareness and hope – their maneuverability has expanded due to an intensified presence provoked by intensified space and interactions. One can also reflect upon this with Horkheimer's, Adorno's and Marcuse's critique of Western civilization in mind. It supports the argument that our inner life is suppressed by structures in contemporary society. Thus, I consider the sensuous experiment capable of giving participants access to the aesthetic dimension and a mode of intensified presence, and I use Marcuse's and Massumi's theories to unfold this argument.



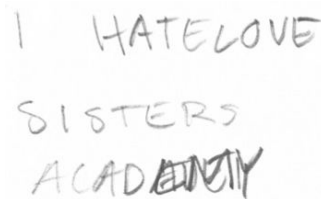
(Notebook 1/The Snake Woman)

Ambivalence and The Absorbed Body

Besides depicting the points made regarding intensified presence, the drawing above by The Snake Woman also touches upon the connection between the mind and body. As accounted for, the body is a unit of flesh and thought from the perspective of both Merleau-Ponty, Massumi and beyond. Thus, it is possible to be critical when engaging bodily. One student has written the following:



I feel uncomfortable here,
but also calm.



I HATELOVE
SISTERS
ACADEMY

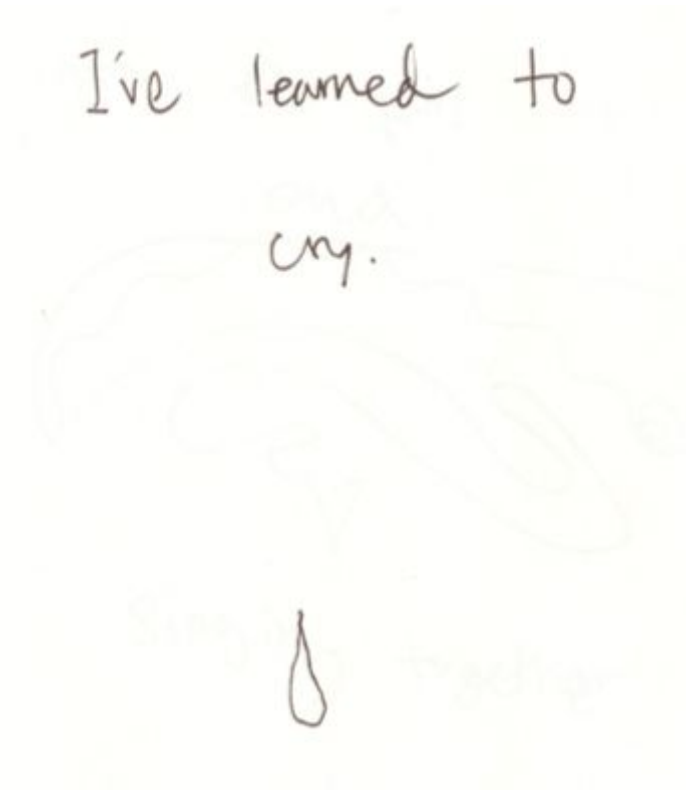
“I feel uncomfortable here, but also calm. I hate love Sisters Academy” (Notebook 3/The Conductor). The quote shows that there are different layers and nuances of immersion and ways of being immersed in Sisters Academy specifically. It can be very ambiguous as the quote shows. When being immersed – as this student seems to be – one can also be critical towards the frame. On the first page in the student’s notebook, the student writes that he or she has a lot of opinions and feelings in regards to Sisters Academy. The student had a sceptical first reaction but expresses a wish to stay open to the experience. The student shares feelings of being tired, angry, irritated, disoriented and sad and at the same time writes that it was an experience of a lifetime that he or she will never forget or wish to be without. Furthermore, the student chose to explore his or her Poetic Self and take a poetic name; The Conductor. This also shows an openness to the universe and a willingness to engage. On the last page the student signed the notebook: *“Rage & Love, The Conductor”* (Notebook 3/The Conductor). Thus, being critical and reflective does not necessarily require keeping a distance. Sisters Academy has affected this student’s state of being; the person now feels more calm, but at the same time the experience has sparked frustration and discomfort at certain moments in the process.

We could then define yet another state of engagement; ‘The Absorbed Body’⁵; a body that is highly immersed but not necessarily devoted. The Conductor has immersed him- or herself deeply in the experiment and put his or her body to the idea, and at the same time the student feels ambivalent, reflecting critically upon the experiment. One could argue that this approach resonates with the third paradigm of critique described by Butt and Rogoff; The performative criticality. (One could question whether this demands a form of visible critique, or whether this criticality is also potentially inherent in the devoted body even though it is not expressed with words). The student dares to participate and engage bodily with the piece despite feeling challenged by it. Thus, in line with Massumi and Sedgwick, The Conductor leaves room for potential positive surprises and affects. Another student expresses the following in line with this point: *“It’s been terrifying, scary, weird, and I’ve got a lot of mixed feelings. But you have to go into all of this with an open mind. Otherwise, you can’t take part in this”* (Notebook 22). The same student wrote on day three that he or she chose to stay home. The person goes on to write: *“Overall, this has been a very special experience. I wonder how much of what I am now, I’ll be after this is gone. I am happy to have taken part of this. I have learned a lot about myself [...] I don’t like to be forced to do things, but I am glad I have done the missions anyways”* (Notebook 22). Like The Conductor, this student also decided to give the experiment a chance to explore new potential insights rather than rejecting it from the beginning. Moreover, the student makes it clear that it can be very difficult to take part in an experience if you do not manage to open yourself up to it.

In conclusion, it is possible to reflect critically while engaging bodily, and based on the examples above, I have defined yet another mode of engagement; The Absorbed Body – a body that is immersed but not necessarily in a state of intensified presence. I consider this approach to resonate with Sedgwick’s and Butt’s take on performative criticality, since the absorbed body leaves room for surprises and positive affects by daring to take risks and being willing to co-produce through bodily participation. It takes shape as a critical practice that plays out performatively in the meeting between the participant and the experiment. Thus, I use the concept of performative criticality to conceptualize the difference between different modes of engagement in the sensuous experiment.

⁵ Danish translation: ‘Den indlevede krop’

Sadness and sorrow



"I've learned to cry" (Notebook 1/The Snake Dancer). Sadness and sorrow are recurring themes in the academy. Perhaps because we, when we are open to the next experimental step (Massumi), are more prone to get in touch with repressed feelings (Horkheimer, Adorno, Marcuse) such as sadness and sorrow. The same student also writes: *"I realised that I don't allow myself to be sad. I am a happy person, and I've never liked sad people [...] I'm thinking of trying to allow myself to be sad, to not be constantly happy"* (Notebook 1/The Snake Dancer). Sisters Academy is characterized by a melancholic and dark atmosphere. Sisters Hope manifests this atmosphere primarily because it is in opposition to everyday life. Hallberg has previously expressed to me that she finds that there is not enough room for sadness and sorrow in the current state of society. On the contrary, we typically strive for, and are comfortable with, feelings such as happiness and joy in our everyday life. To her, true happiness can occur when we also embrace darkness (thus, the point is not to simply remain in a state of sadness just for the sake of it). Furthermore, her longing for spaces that can embrace these modes of being naturally overflows into the general atmosphere of the academy, although the main argument still is that these feelings are not as represented in everyday life. When we then work with

the body and the aesthetic, they emerge to a larger degree. This also clearly affected and resonated with other students of the school. Waves has written: *“I want control of my life. To scream whenever I want. Cry, be sad, get outraged and be however I want ♡”* (Notebook 5/Waves). The examples bear witness to the fact that the immersive framework has liberated suppressed modes of expression or consciousness by giving students access to a space that is in opposition to everyday life, allowing and enabling them to express feelings that are less represented such as sadness, sorrow and darkness.

However, some also find it difficult to embrace the dark atmosphere. The Snake Dancer has written the following in her notebook: *“... I don’t understand why it’s not more happy vibes [...] Where is the joy?”* (Notebook 1/The Snake Dancer). This relates to how being immersed is not necessarily a comforting and safe feeling. Everyday life can be a safe space to be in, because we know the culture and codes of conduct very well. It is not uncommon to feel challenged, unsafe or sceptical when meeting a universe that is unfamiliar and in opposition to what one knows, as Machon accounts for when describing immersion.

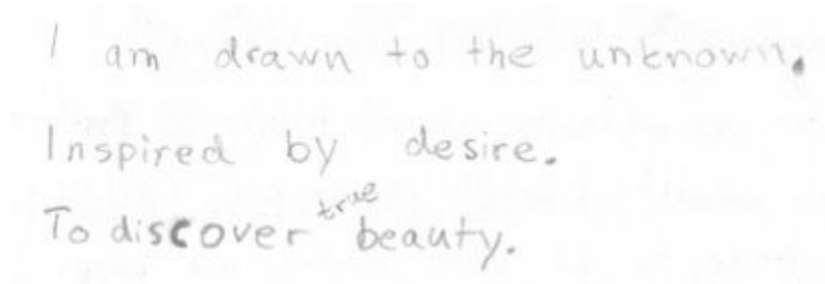
I have now explored notes from students by relating them to Horkheimer, Adorno and Marcuse’s overall critique of Western civilization. Based on this, I can conclude that creating an immersive space, that is in opposition to our current society, can potentially liberate suppressed modes of expression or consciousness. Simultaneously, it can also alienate participants who might not feel suppressed, in this case, sadness and sorrow. In line with the above, I will go on to explore fear of the unknown.

Fear of the unknown and taking the leap



(Notebook 7/The May)

"We feel fear. Fear of the unknown. But everything is unknown. The future is unknown. Then we should be scared all the time" (Notebook 5/Waves). The unknown is yet another recurring theme at Sisters Academy – both fearing it and feeling drawn to it. This is also in line with the point above. Sisters Hope works actively with the concept of the unknown and the mystery to create otherworldliness, which the students' notes reflect.



(Notebook 10/The Strider)

'True' is an essential detail in the quote above and can be related to my point about happiness in the chapter 'Sadness and sorrow' – one might be able to find a deeper, more resilient and sustainable happiness by embracing sadness over praising sadness merely for the sake of sadness. The Strider emphasizes true beauty as the reason for her

attraction to the unknown. Thus, to this student, it seems that what is true can be reached by giving space to what is less represented in everyday life, which is also in line with Marcuse and Adorno's critique. Relating to this, it is relevant to note that the unknown, and fear of the unknown, is a pronounced theme amongst the students, since Horkheimer and Adorno describe this as a cornerstone in our current system of thought. When we as the Sisters staff are confronted with fear of the unknown within the frame, we seek to guide relevant participants to overcome and go beyond their fear through performative methods as opposed to psychological methods, exactly because we see potential in the aesthetic dimension. (This also relates to the four logics, specifically the logic of activism and performance art). Sisters Hope believes that if one dares to take the leap of devotion, new potentials might appear: *"The Sisters Academy experience has been quite a rollercoaster. It has been outside my comfort zone but that has made me feel more safe than before"* (Notebook 19/The Arctic Ice). This quote shows how a student, The Arctic Ice, has stepped out of his or her comfort zone and, through that, has expanded. Furthermore, this resonates with Massumi's statement that our potential of affecting and being affected is dynamic and changes all of the time. The quotes above also resonate with my conceptualization of The Absorbed Body. The students were challenged in certain situations but overcame it and came to new, personal realizations.

This is also related to the critical gaze and the devoted body. One could argue that if you approach a situation with a critical gaze, and thus with a distanced and deconstructive approach, you have potentially acted on fear. The mind is fragile, and we are in danger of being manipulated with everywhere, but if we don't dare to trust, our minds will be clouded. If we dare to approach criticism in a different way, like Sedgwick suggests, we might be able to go deeper and discover new potentials. This also underlines that a devoted body is not simply naïve, but it is really a brave act to devote oneself to something. It requires openness and taking risks, and previous examples from students show that it is not something that one necessarily does without considering it thoroughly. Moreover, it underlines that it can be fruitful to engage in experiences with an absorbed body, managing to stay open and willing to take risks while still making room for critical reflections. However, we should be careful not to simply do to the critical gaze what we claim that a distanced critical approach can do to the devoted

body. We must seek to approach the critical gaze in the same way that we encourage others to approach their object of critique.

Based on the above, I can conclude that the unknown is a pronounced theme amongst the students. Furthermore, the chapter above strengthens the argument for a new form of criticism. Thus, I relate experiences from the academy to Horkheimer and Adorno's reflections on the unknown and use Butt and Sedgwick's perspective on performative criticality to argue for a new form of critique.

The Critical Gaze

"I feel so disturbed with a group of boys in my grade. They push all of the academy away and act in what they use as protecting ways, but I feel as disrespectful. It's hard to handle these feelings of frustration. How can I help them and make them feel safe? They affect me in ways I do not want to realise. They hurt me." (Notebook 8/The Untouchable)

A student, The Untouchable, expresses how she is affected by a group of boys in her class who from the beginning have chosen to keep a distance and engage as little as possible with the academy and clearly disapproves of Sisters Academy's intention and methods. It is clear that she is affected quite deeply by their position and reactions. The student's journey is 'disturbed', and it might prevent her from daring to go as deep as she would have done otherwise. This relates to how Massumi argues that critique can potentially stop movement. Besides frustration, the quote above also holds a level of empathy, when she reflects upon how she might be able to make the distanced students feel safe. This reflection might be relevant in trying to build a bridge between the two levels of engagement. It also reflects that the critical gaze can be linked to fear or feeling unsafe, which also proves that it can be a vulnerable position. What I too find relevant to explore is what lies behind the reactions of the group of boys in mention. To emphasize; we should be careful not to simply do to the critical gaze what we claim that a distanced, deconstructive approach can do to the devoted body. I came across the following statements in notebooks from a few students who disapproved of the experiment:

“This is silly. Like; really silly. Like oh my fucking god!!” (Notebook 27)

“Dear Diary, this is still really fucking stupid” (Notebook 27)

“The idea of a poetic self is stupid so I do not have one” (Notebook 27)

“I did not like this very much [...] The togetherness was quite nice but everything else to me had no point [...] I will never do this again [...] The Sisters are weird people that I have no interest in ever meeting again!” (Notebook 28)

It’s been really weird these two weeks and I must say that I prefer the original school because this is too much for me, and I feel that during these two weeks I haven’t learned anything. I understand the idea but it didn’t work on me” (Notebook 29)

It is clear that these students have strong opinions about Sisters Academy and have chosen to engage as little as possible from the beginning. They seem to express feelings of frustration and anger, however they don’t articulate directly how they were affected on a deeper level or what part of the project that irritated or triggered them. On the one hand, their statements come across as slightly one-dimensional and closed, but at the same time it is clear that they feel what they write strongly. Furthermore, they have no immediate interest in sharing their feelings, reflections and beyond with Sisters Academy. The outcome would most likely have been different if I had chosen notebooks from visiting researchers engaging with a critical gaze.

My own observation from this manifestation was that the few who did not participate became outsiders to some degree. They were now the minority, and this might have left them feeling insecure, discouraged or constrained. These are of course merely presumptions and not something that I can conclude based on their notes, but it is at any rate important to be considerate of their position. Below are excerpts from a logbook that I wrote for Sisters Academy during the manifestation relating to the students in question:

“1.3.16 ... A little group of students and parents are sceptical about the project, and this was a topic discussed on the teachers meeting. We are talking about how to turn the situation into something constructive and how to include the group.”

“2.3.16 ... One of the parents of the sceptical students, who is a firefighter, showed up at the school to inspect. He has afterwards called the fire department to come and inspect the school officially with the hope of closing it down. We don't know when they are going to come.” (Logbook: 4)

The excerpts confirm that the sceptics were a small number of students and thus a minority. Furthermore, they show that their parents disapproved of Sisters Academy too. One parent even tried actively to close down the manifestation through his profession as a firefighter. Thus, it seems that the students' background and past experiences played a significant part in their response to the experiment.

Seeing that these particular students were in a difficult and complex situation during the manifestation – although some felt violated by their attitude – it is important to have empathy and understanding for their position and their reasons for not opening up to the experience. During the manifestation Sisters Hope tried to do this actively by talking about it on daily teachers meetings and Sisters staff meetings, seeking to meet this energy in the best way possible (performatively) through for example morning gatherings. Seeing that they are all young boys, one reason that they felt alienated and foreign to the universe could have had something to do with the feminine atmosphere that some would argue permeates many dimensions of Sisters Academy. During the manifestation, they often sat in The Gardener's tableaux and felt comfortable talking to him at times. The Gardener is a male staff member, who can be said to be one of the least theatrical staff members present at this manifestation. This supports this presumption.

Another incident comes to mind when reflecting upon this group of boys. On the day of this incident, I wrote the following in the mentioned logbook:

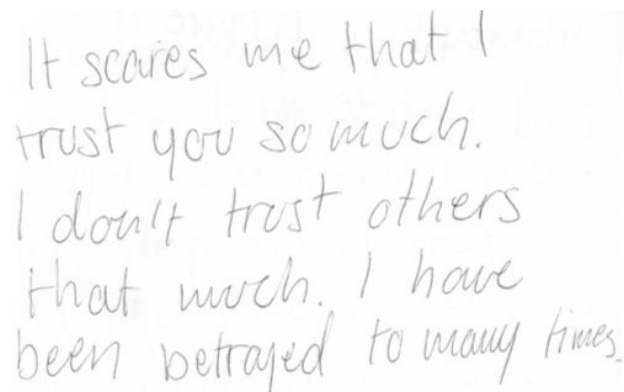
“10.3.16 ... We conducted a morning gathering to pass the school back to the students and teachers in a ritualistic way. This started a dialogue about different ways of being and being together and how it is important that we are all able to be here in different ways and participate on different levels.” (Logbook: 5)

The excerpt refers to a morning gathering that did not go as planned. As a part of our intention to anchor and integrate the experience and give the school back to the students and teachers, we had planned that all Sisters staff members would be placed in The Grand Hall in the far end of the room, creating an image for the students and teachers as they walked in. Each Sisters staff was supposed to swap places with one random student, visualizing that we would soon hand back the school to them. It was important that we only led one student to our place and furthermore that the choice of student was random to not create a hierarchy among the students. However, one staff member had misunderstood the plan and ended up bringing more, and eventually all, students to the far side of the room. Consequently, one of the distanced students mentioned above felt forced to cross the room (although he did not do it) and was unintentionally put on the spot. It ended up looking like an attempt to convert him more than a poetic handing over of the school. I remember how bothered I was by the unsuccessful event and how regretful it made me feel. Eventually, I chose to approach the boy, taking his hand and apologizing for the situation that we had put him in. He responded by silently accepting my apology, maintaining eye contact and nodding. My point with this anecdote is that the boy and I managed to share a moment of mutual understanding in spite of our differences by opening up to each other and showing and accepting empathy. It was a situation of affecting and being affected (Massumi), and to this day, it is one of my strongest memories from this particular manifestation. Thus, different ways of engaging can and should be able to coexist. Furthermore, the example shows that the coexistence of different modes of being holds valuable potential. It also underlines that the body of a person engaging with a critical gaze can be vulnerable too, which was felt clearly in this situation.

Inspired by the examples and reflections above, I now wish to reflect upon the notion of the critical gaze from a broader perspective and relate it to Adorno's theory of semi-formation. A critical approach also has a potential when rooted in formation to a larger degree, and it is relevant to relate this to the role of the outsider, just as the group of boys became. Thus, if the boys' approach had come from a place of formation rather than semi-formation, they might have had a different role. Then they might have been able to participate and maintain their role as outsiders to some degree; taking it all in, accepting the premise but not devoting themselves in the same way as others might (for example because they are young boys who are not attracted to a feminine space). On a macro-level, the critical outsider can potentially play an important part. We are now moving closer to the intersection of the critical gaze and the devoted body, just as when I unfolded the absorbed body.

To summarize, devoted participants can feel violated by the ones who approach the experience with a critical gaze. Simultaneously, the examples show that the critical gaze can be vulnerable too. Finally, the critical gaze holds potential when moving closer to the intersection, closer to engaging with an absorbed body and moreover when it is rooted in formation to a larger degree than semi-formation (remembering that it is not either or; the cultural industry has not lost all formation but it has turned 'deform' cf. the chapter 'A historical perspective' in the introduction). Having discussed the critical gaze, I will now proceed to explore experiences of devotion from the manifestation.

The Devoted Body



It scares me that I
trust you so much.
I don't trust others
that much. I have
been betrayed to many times.

(Notebook 8/The Untouchable)

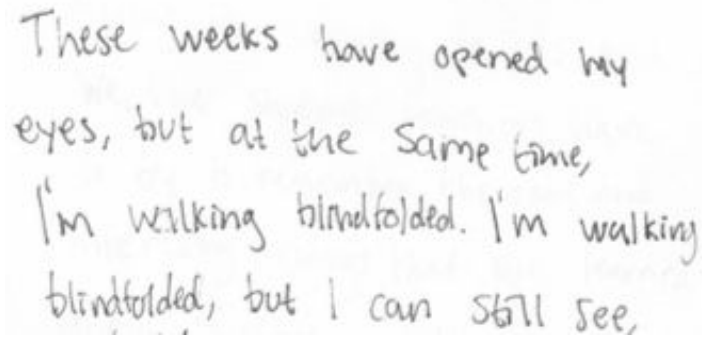
This student expresses that it has not been simple to give in to the experience. It underlines how we strengthen our critical gaze as a protective strategy to avoid potential harmful consequences of devotion, which could also be related to why our critical gaze perhaps is stronger in the West because of our history of mass seduction. In continuation of the quote above, the same student goes on to write: *“I trust you so much that I put myself through my deepest fears and darkest thoughts. That is scary and liberating. I hate it and I love it”* (Notebook 8/The Untouchable). It seems like many thoughts and reflections have gone into the student’s choice to immerse in the universe, and it is characterized by a level of ambivalence. The student has overcome inherent fears, and this has consequently lead to a sense of liberation in line with arguments of Adorno, Horkheimer and Marcuse. Generally, I have experienced that many have approached Sisters Academy as devoted bodies and have had deep experiences. In line with the example above, I will stress that a devoted body can also be a reflected body. The quotes below are a small selection of testimonies that bears witness to this.

For me sisters
Academy is
love
exchange of love

(Notebook 5/Waves)

OPEN
House
I was also open.

(Notebook 1/The Snake Dancer)



These weeks have opened my
eyes, but at the same time,
I'm walking blindfolded. I'm walking
blindfolded, but I can still see.

(Notebook 6/The Wanderer)



this is so real
♥
my feelings
this moment
and
all the moments
don't forget me
I want forget this

(Notebook 5/Waves)

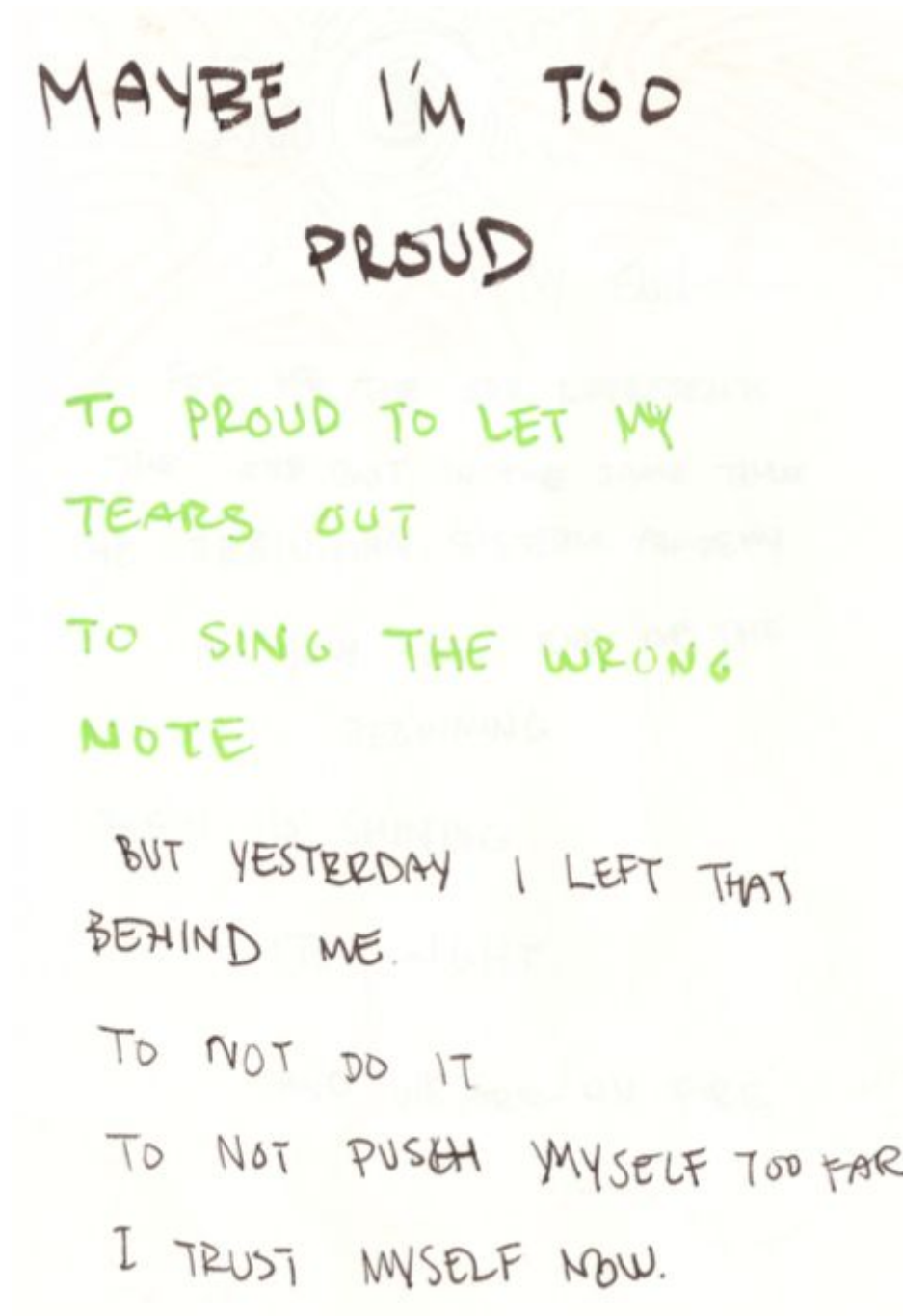
Through performative and sensuous methods, Sisters Hope creates a space that in many cases has a significant impact on its participants, because they are exposed to modes of being that are not stimulated as intensely in their everyday life. My experience is that participants are able to go deeper if they allow themselves to immerse, be open and devote themselves to the experience. This is also at the heart of immersion; to experience more fully (Machon). Furthermore, it resonates with Massumi's intensified presence – it can potentially lead to a sense of being more alive, forcing you to find a manoeuvre you didn't know you had and couldn't just have thought your way into.

According to Massumi, it can intensify our lives, because we are not ‘enslaved’ by our situations. Furthermore, with intensified affect comes a heightened sense of belonging with other people and to other places. In the examples above, the students more specifically express feeling a sense of openness, love, awareness and authenticity. It becomes clear when studying the notebooks of the students, that the experience has had an impact on them, though it is not possible to conclude to what extent they have taken it with them afterwards and implemented it in their everyday life.

Some might be tempted to reflect upon and discuss the concept of devotion in relation to mass seduction, as suggested previously. If we follow Adorno’s theory of semi-formation, we should not fear devotion when it springs from formation (contrary to when it is rooted in semi-formation). Seeing that the aesthetic dimension holds the biggest formative potential in Adorno’s and indirectly in Marcuse’s argument, both claiming that this dimension holds liberating potential, we can perhaps scale down the sceptical approach to devotion within an aesthetic frame such as Sisters Academy, since it springs from an activist intention to democratise the aesthetic (cf. the model visualizing the four logics) and not from the interest of productive forces.

To summarize, engaging with a devoted body holds potential to access new modes of being and being together. It would be too superficial to simply claim that the devoted body is naïve. It takes a lot of courage and willingness to take risks to devote oneself – a devoted body can also be a reflecting body. This also relates to my argument that you might even reflect deeper when being immersed. The examples above support Marcuse’s argument that the aesthetic dimension has transformative potential. Furthermore, it holds the potential to have a formative impact on society. I have experienced how experiences from Sisters Academy have impacted the everyday life of participants deeply in several aspects of life; love, future plans, worklife and beyond. However, naturally, the examples above do not reflect if and how their experiences will potentially manifest in their lives. This would require a follow-up with the relevant students some time after the manifestation, and even then we could not necessarily be sure. We never know which seeds might sprout when, in what situation and in which

way. However, the quotes below give us an impression of how they have been impacted.



(Notebook 1/The Snake Dancer)

FOUNDING MY INNER CALM,
THATS WHAT I'VE DONE.

MY INNER CALMNESS GIVES
ME A MORE OPEN SIGHT
AND I'M MORE WILLING TO
LEARN.

I'VE ALWAYS KNOWN THAT
I HAVE IT IN ME, BUT NOW
I CAN GRAB IT

UNDERSTAND IT

LOVE IT



(Notebook 1/The Snake Dancer)

Impact

We have established that participants can potentially expand their space of maneuverability when being exposed to Sisters Academy's sensuous environment. The quotes above show a student who has discovered a new-found trust in herself, an inner calmness that enables her to be open and a new-found motivation to learn. This is in line with Marcuse's argument that the aesthetic dimension has transformative, liberating potential. The May shares similar thoughts on what impact the space has had on her:

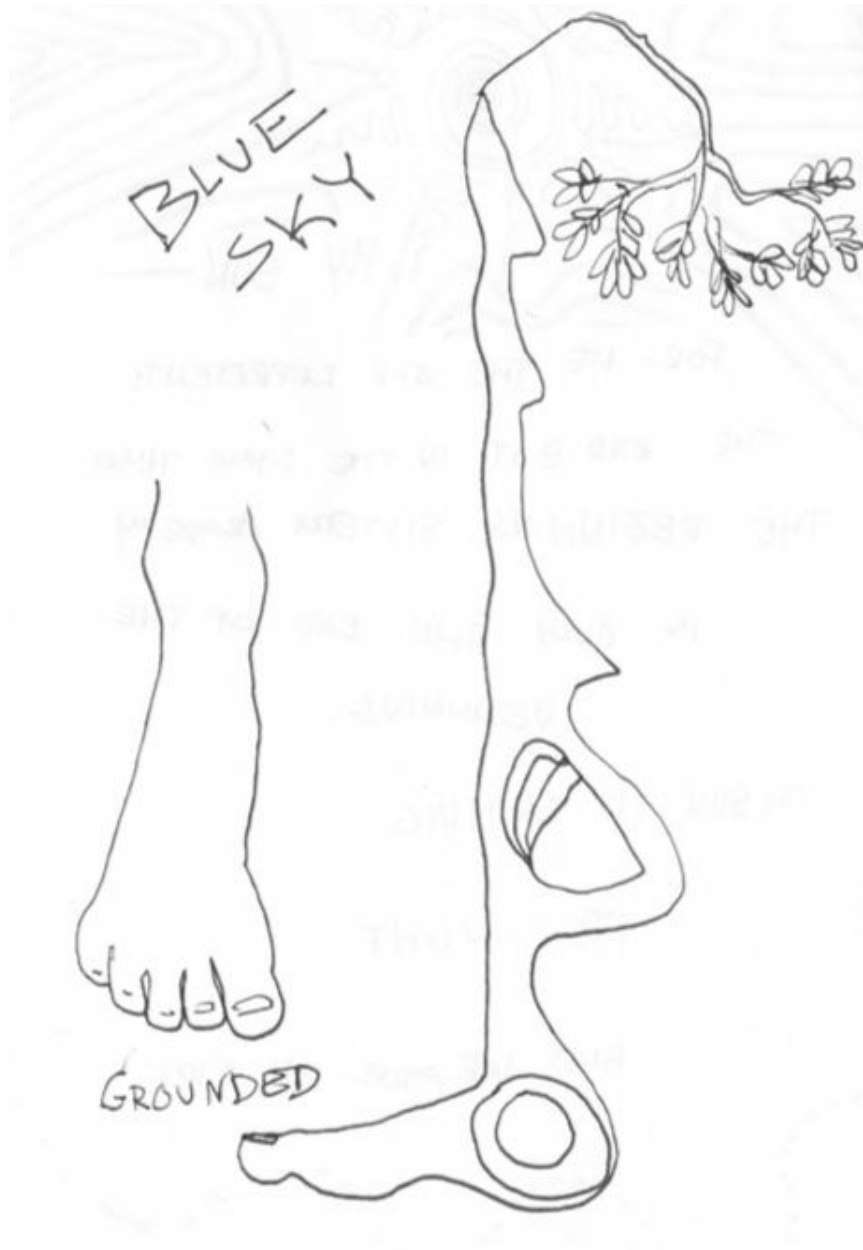
"I feel happy. I feel full of energy. I feel loved, both by others and myself. I feel limitless, infinite. I feel calm. I feel that I can trust others. I feel like listening to my intuition. To what I feel is important. Because in every situation I have so many options. And I need to figure out which one I feel is most important for me. Because life is precious, and time passes quickly, and therefore I need to make the best of it. I feel like I don't have to limit myself to what I think others think I am. I don't need to be anything just because I think that, that is what he or she wants from me. I don't have to please anyone but myself. I don't have to smile, I don't." (Notebook 7/The May)

She puts emphasis on being more present, revitalised, trustful – both in herself and to others – and feeling limitless, which again resonates with Massumi's intensified presence and Marcuse's belief in the potential of the aesthetic dimension. Some have also gained an embodied understanding of the fact that the status quo is not a given: *"I have a new appreciation for what I feel is strange. To change what is normal is not a challenge, it is realizing that what you find strange could become normal at any given time"* (Notebook 17/The Lid). This again resonates with Marcuse's argument, and Sisters Academy's activist intention (cf. the Sensuous Society manifesto), that the aesthetic dimension has revolutionary, radical political and liberating potential, because it can transcend reality and challenge status quo by opening up a new dimension of experience. Below a student describes it as a seed that has been planted inside of her, a seed that will grow and blossom and finally result in a significant change in her life. Thus, the student expresses that the experience has had a transformative impact on her.

■ When I left, it felt like she had planted a seed inside of me. Although I didn't say a word during the whole hour I felt like it gave me so much. She planted a seed in me, and since that day it has been ⁱⁿ there, waiting to grow bigger, and I feel it.

■ I feel it glowing and I feel like this is the time, this is the moment that it finally will grow into something that I already know will be... a change in my lifestyle.

(Notebook 6/The Wanderer)



(Notebook 1/The Snake Dancer)

The examples above strongly indicate that the experience has had a deep impact on them, and in some cases it even seems to have been transformative, at least based on the information that we can deduct from the data available. Thus, I use Marcuse's arguments to conclude that the aesthetic experiences hold transformative potential.

Impact is closely related to anchoring and integration, where Sisters Hope seeks to strengthen the potential transformative impact of the experience.

Anchoring and integration



(Notebook 5/Waves)

Anchoring and integration are central foci in Sisters Academy and directly connected to the post-liminal phase. In The Takeover-format, we usually spend the last part of the manifestation preparing the students and teachers of the school for our departure. We focus on how to land the experience and how to incorporate what has been inspiring to them into their practice and everyday life. The intention is to support that the aesthetic experience does not simply become something that happens within an encapsulated space but potentially becomes a part of their everyday life. This permeates the morning gatherings, classes, interactions and beyond. As a result, it has also naturally become a theme that students reflect upon in their notebooks. One student has written:

“I feel that I need to organize my thoughts to be able to let go of Sisters Academy. I need something that will help me remember. Because I figure that it is real easy to forget. And I don’t want to forget. I want to remember what I am right now, so that I will not lose what I found and go back to old patterns. I don’t want to go back to feeling limited.” (Notebook 7/The May)

This also underlines how it can be fruitful to put focus on anchoring and integration, as you can easily forget to maintain what you have learned from the experience, most likely because it is so different from our habits and patterns rooted in everyday life. Another student, who did not particularly enjoy the manifestation, stated the following upon our departure: *“These two weeks have been crazy, very crazy. Actually I don’t know/understand the meaning of all that we have done. And I want all our stuff back, normal things and normal school”* (Notebook 26). In this case, it seems that the participant who engaged with devotion put more focus on the post-liminal phase. The students who devote themselves typically express either a fear or sorrow related to our departure and/or a sense of empowerment and a feeling of being as prepared as they can be for what is to come:

I don't want to leave.

I don't want to leave Sisters Academy.

I don't want to leave my Comfortable Zone.

I don't want to.

Sisters academy is coming
to an end, but with all ends
there are new beginnings.

Things that I will have to remind
myself of, when the new staff won't
be with me anymore are

that I have to trust my
intuition I have to trust myself,
and I have to trust the ones
around me.

(Notebook /The Wanderer)

leaving this
now
how
i'm grateful
i'm feeling love
I will miss them

but things don't
end
you are not
gods or perfect
you just as us
And the poetic
potential is within
all of us

Now the both
worlds are going
to meet

BOOOOOOM

.....

(Notebook 5/Waves)

The quotes show that many share a feeling of sorrow and sadness but also an awareness of the fact that the end of the academy is merely a new beginning, where they hope to take ownership of what they have learned during the manifestation and to be able to transform their experiences and transport the essences of them back into everyday life. The ones who did not experience a resonance with Sisters Academy seem to simply be relieved that it is soon over. The Conductor, who expressed a feeling of ambivalence in regards to the academy, states that he or she has gained something and is thankful for the experience despite a feeling of discomfort (Notebook 3/The Conductor). Thus, the student, who engaged as an absorbed body, has managed to reflect upon his or her own experiences and has learned something from them although they were not only positive. Thus, it seems that the students who have managed to open themselves up to the experience to some degree also benefit more from it. However, we cannot know this from a long term perspective – we don't know which seeds will blossom when and in which contexts.

In conclusion, I consider the potential transformative impact of the experience to be closely linked to anchoring and integration. Devoted students typically express both sorrow in relation to our departure and a feeling of being ready to transition into a new phase. This also emphasizes how Sisters Hope puts much energy into this phase. I have seen that students who choose, or are were able, to open up to the experience to some degree might put more effort into this post-liminal phase. Anchoring and integration call for participants to put an effort into how they will hold on to what has inspired them and what they have learned during the manifestation, since it is easy to neglect when the wheels of everyday life are turning.

I will now summarize how the critical gaze and the devoted body have manifested in Sisters Academy.

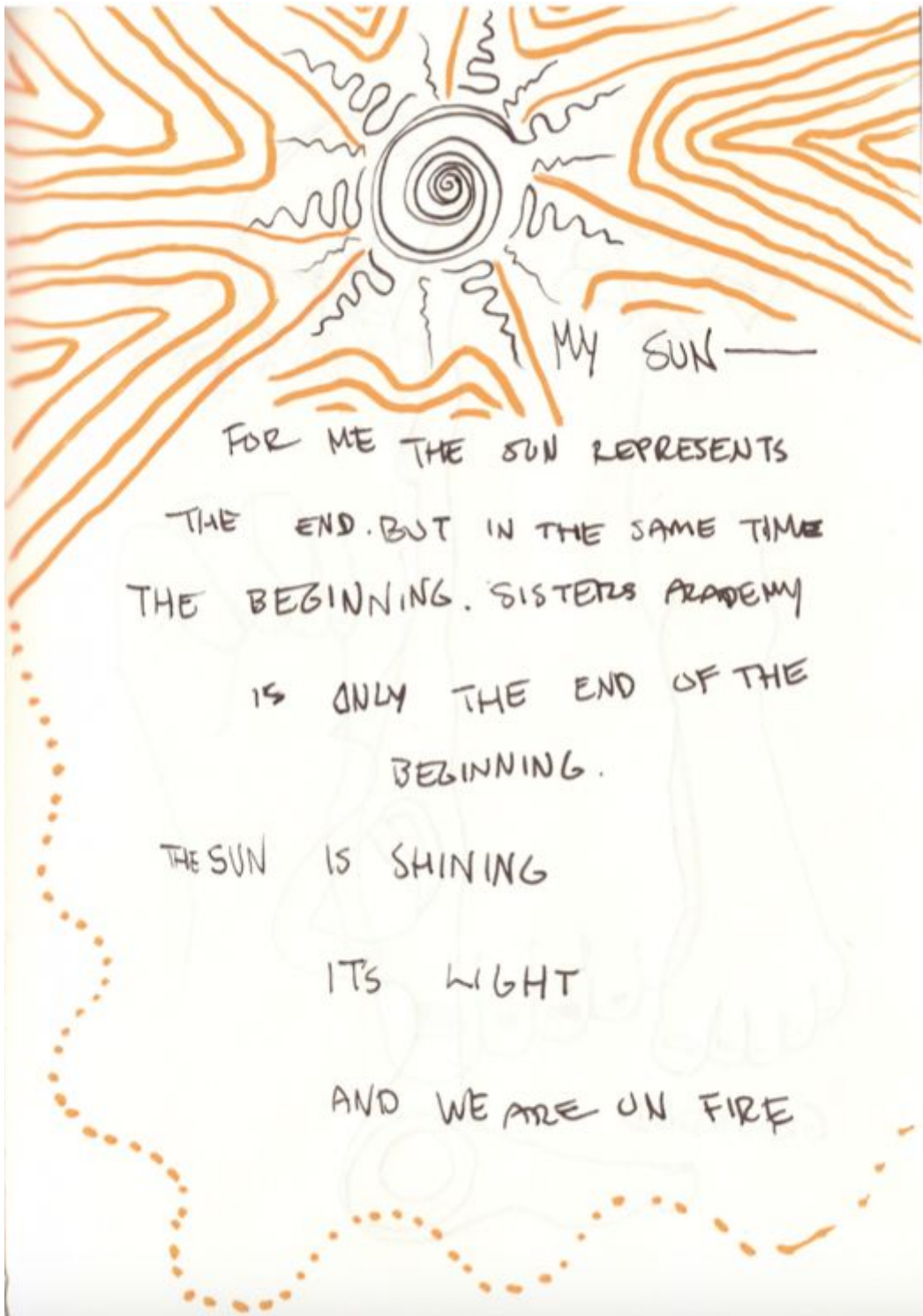
Engaging with a devoted body holds the potential to access new modes of being and being together. Students have expressed a feeling of freedom, playfulness, feeling more alive, and more present and aware. Furthermore, they put emphasis on feeling more self-confident and motivated to learn. It would be too superficial to simply accuse the

devoted body of being naïve. I have learned that a devoted body can also be a reflecting body and might even lead to a deeper level of reflection, because you engage with your entire body. Being devoted can enable you to access the aesthetic dimension, because you maintain an openness to the experience.

The data shows that devoted participants can feel violated by the ones who approach the experience with a critical gaze. Simultaneously, I have learned that the critical gaze can be vulnerable too, and that its distance can be rooted in fear of the unknown. Moreover, it could be related to participants feeling foreign to the frame and perceiving it as a requirement to open up. A requirement that they are not able to, or do not want to, meet. Finally, I consider the critical gaze to hold potential when moving closer to the intersection of devotion and critique.

I have conceptualized the absorbed body, which represents the intersection of the devoted body and the critical gaze. It is characterized by feelings of ambivalence, where absorbed participants feel both sceptical and drawn and manage to maintain an openness to the experience.

Having summarized how the critical gaze, the devoted body and the absorbed body have manifested within Sisters Academy, I will now go on to discuss central elements in my thesis.



(Notebook 1/The Snake Dancer)

Discussion



Discussion

The Hope of The Sensuous –

Understanding the potential greater transformation of society



(Notebook 5/Waves)

Sisters Academy is both a series of productions and a movement, and the experience does not merely revolve around an inner journey but also around the connection with others and an experience of what a sensuous society might be like. We do not know what a society with the aesthetic dimension at the center would be, because we have not lived it, but the experiments facilitated by Sisters Hope give us a way to explore potential qualities and challenges. In this chapter I wish to touch upon central points in my analysis in relation to the potential greater transformation of society. Furthermore, I wish to reflect upon the concept of hope, which has been recurring throughout my thesis because of Marcuse, Massumi, Sedgwick and Sisters Hope. Firstly, I will summarize how Marcuse, Massumi and Sedgwick talk about hope, and then I will try to understand how hope is relevant in the work of Sisters Hope, connecting this to the the potential greater transformation of society.

According to Marcuse, the aesthetic form can create another reality within the established one, and he refers to it as ‘the cosmos of hope’. Massumi also refers to the notion of hope, arguing that hope can be valuable when being placed in the present, because intensified presence can give us a margin of maneuverability that we didn’t know we had by allowing us to focus on the next experimental step over potential future success or failure. Finally, Sedgwick considers hope to be one of the energies that the reparatively positioned reader acts from.

To Sisters Hope, the notion of hope is linked to the Sensuous society manifesto. As accounted for, Sisters Hope is among other rooted in critical theory and considers the aesthetic dimension to have liberating potential. However, Sisters Hope's approach differs radically from critical theory by pro-actively seeking to democratize and open the aesthetic dimension by creating laboratories and experiments such as Sisters Academy, and this is where hope comes into the picture; the aesthetic as the outset for a potential transformation of society. In the manifesto, the financial crisis is described as an opportunity, a crack that has left a gap for the new (Manifesto). This stresses the inherent hope of a more sustainable future. Furthermore, an intention to take this opportunity and support the transition into the new is articulated. There is a clearly articulated vision, which is explored embodied and performatively: *"By putting our flesh to the idea. Embodying future visions to explore what it could be. While we explore we carve the path"* (Manifesto). Although Sisters Hope is rooted in works of Horkheimer and Adorno among others, Horkheimer and Adorno would most likely be sceptical of this approach and consider it to be naïve and opportunistic, since Dialectic of Enlightenment was written during The Second World War, and a level of pessimism influenced their approach as a consequence thereof (Horkheimer & Adorno 2002: xiii). In line with the manifesto, Sisters Hope believes that change can happen through people:

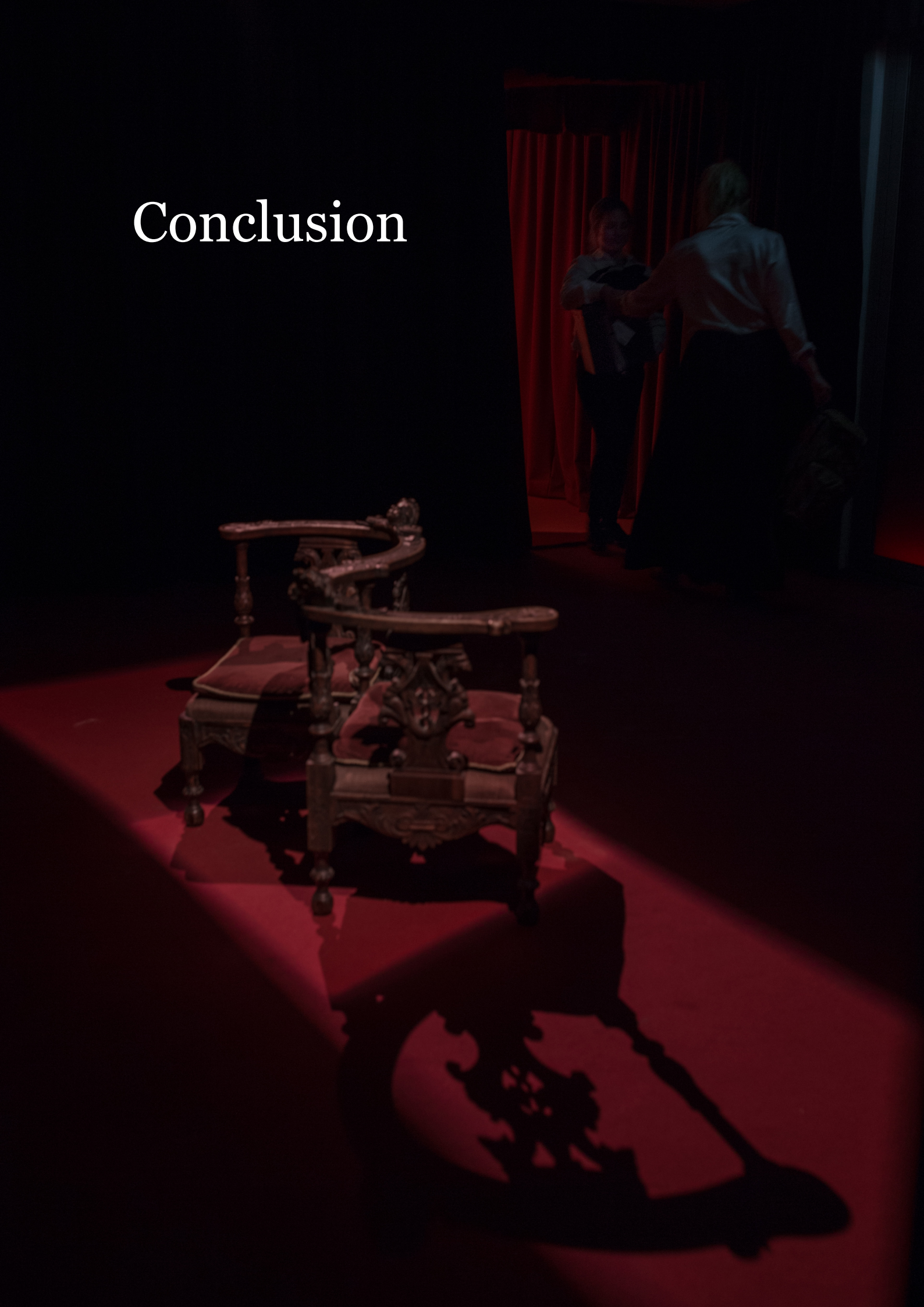
"The road to the Sensuous society is carved with poetic revolution and poetic revolutionaries taking the necessary interventionist steps [...] Step by step those engaged in the movement toward the Sensuous Society will make interventions into the societal institutions. They will move from the crack [...] We become one. But two. But three. But many." (Manifesto)

The intention to democratize the aesthetic, sensuous and poetic is something that could potentially affect society and not merely the participants who take part in the performance experiments. This is ultimately a greater and more complex discussion of how change happens and also whether art matters and can make a difference at all – Sisters Hope believes that it can, and that change can happen through agency. It is difficult to say what makes people change their behaviour, but we can see that there is a

performative force that causes people to act differently – they become aesthetic agents. I see this particularly in the Sisters staff. I have experienced that their experiences from Sisters Academy has empowered and inspired them to open the aesthetic dimension in their own way both privately and professionally. This relates to Sisters Hope being a movement; seeds are planted, and you never know which seed will sprout when and in what situation. It is a model of change, not a reform, since Sisters Hope works performatively, but the group works with the idea of a potential greater transformation of society in mind. Sisters Hope believes that the aesthetic dimension can have a transformative impact. While believing that change can happen through people, we must recognise that change can happen through a structural approach as well. On the last day of every Takeover, all teachers of the school articulate three vows each; three elements that have inspired them during Sisters Academy that they commit themselves to integrate into their practice at least two years after the manifestation. Sisters Hope always sends copies of these vows to respectively The Ministry of Education and The Ministry of Culture. This stresses how the impact of structural change is also acknowledged by Sisters Hope, although it is not something that is focused upon as such in the group. With this, Sisters Hope recognizes that change can happen through both structure and agency. One could also argue that Sisters Hope, through these sensuous experiments, is very far from transforming society when only being able to expose so few to the aesthetic experience. The sensuous experiments can be considered to be one piece in a much more extensive and complex puzzle. Thus, Sisters Hope represents a few out of many co-makers towards the new, represented in numerous fields and approaches, humble to the nuances and complexity of change.

*“**Movement:** When you have a cause and create a vibration centred in a universe and manifested in events that inspire others, the world will move in an assured and desired direction.” (Manifesto)*

Conclusion



Conclusion

In this chapter I will answer my research question:

How does The Critical Gaze and The Devoted Body affect the sensuous experiments conducted in Sisters Academy?

The Critical Gaze and The Devoted Body manifest as different levels of engagement in Sisters Academy, and they affect each other continuously within the immersive framework. Furthermore, the levels of engagement hold different potentials in relation to the sensuous experiment.

The Devoted Body, defined as a body in a state of total immersion and intensified presence, holds potential to access new modes of being and being together. Participants who engage as devoted bodies express that they feel hopeful, free, playful, motivated, present and willing to learn. They have experienced a sense of liberation through access to the aesthetic dimension – their maneuverability has expanded due to an intensified presence provoked by intensified space and interactions. Generally, I have experienced that many have approached Sisters Academy as devoted bodies and have had deep experiences. Moreover, participants express that it is not necessarily easy to devote oneself; the devoted body can also be a reflecting body.

Devoted participants can feel violated by The Critical Gaze, defined as a distanced and deconstructive approach to critique. Simultaneously, the critical gaze can also be a vulnerable body, feeling a requirement of devotion that it is not willing, or necessarily able, to meet, potentially leading it to become an outsider. I argue that this approach can be rooted in fear and fear of the unknown. The critical gaze can appear slightly one-dimensional, but it can expand its potential when the outset becomes more participatory, or when the approach is rooted in formation over semi-formation and fear.

I regard the concept of fear and fear of the unknown to be relevant to both levels of engagement. Simultaneously, their way of responding to fear is also a part of what sets them apart from each other. Generally, devoted students either feel drawn to the

unknown or overcome their fear. They manage to take the leap and expand by stepping out of their comfort zone. Thus, it can lead to a sense of liberation if one overcomes inherent fears. The critical gaze remains in a distanced, sceptical position partly due to inherent fears and discomfort, unable to engage fully in embodied participation. The notion of fear and the unknown relates to one of Sisters Hope's overall strategies, working actively with the unknown to create otherworldliness. Furthermore, Sisters Hope works performatively with the participants' fears during the manifestation.

The two positions meet in the intersection, in a third level of engagement that I have named and conceptualized as The Absorbed Body; an immersed body that is not necessarily in a state of intensified presence. This approach leaves room for surprises and positive affects by daring to take risks and being willing to co-produce through bodily participation. It takes shape as a critical practice that plays out performatively in the meeting between the participant and the experiment.

In all cases, Sisters Hope's immersive light- and sound strategy plays a significant role in the participants' experience and attitude towards Sisters Academy regardless of how they chose, or were able to, engage. It enables some to sink deep into another dimension, and at the same time it might stop movement in some cases by making it more difficult for some students to open up.

I consider Sisters Hope's central method The Poetic Self to be a fruitful method to access the aesthetic dimension and in continuation of this, inner, yet unexplored poetic potential and new modes of being and being together for some participants. For devoted and absorbed participants, examples strongly indicate that the experiment has had a deep impact on them and in some cases, it even seems to have been transformative. I consider the potential transformative impact of the experience to be closely linked to anchoring and integration.

Conclusively, the participants embody the notion of hope that permeates my thesis. Stepping into an aesthetic frame, 'the cosmos of hope' (Marcuse) and a potential outset for transformation of society (Sisters Hope), they show how hope can be valuable when

it is placed in the present (Massumi) and acts as the foundation for participation and criticism (Sedgwick).

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SIGNA, <http://signa.dk/about>

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Appendix

Archive Guidelines

Interview with Gry Worre Hallberg

Manifesto

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