



Gry Worre Hallberg in conversation
with Melissa Van Drie

Inhabitation
Sensuous Society

Moving towards a more sustainable society by inhabiting the arts

MVD: *The theme of the 20th anniversary NXT magazine is 'being of place,' and you responded to this theme with the word 'inhabitation.' Conceptually what does inhabitation mean for you, and what role does it have in the kinds of performance art and activist work you do?*

GWH: Inhabitation was a term that I introduced in the process of writing my artistic research Ph.D. : *Sensuous Society – Carving the path towards a more sustainable future through aesthetic inhabitation stimulating ecologic connectedness* (2021). I introduced it as a potential new artistic paradigm that conceptualises the movement away from spectatorship and temporary participation into a more permanent inhabitation of the arts, and thus an inhabitation of our inherent sensuous and poetic potential. My research unfolds within a theoretical framework at the intersection of aesthetics and ecology. In order to understand more about this intersection, I examined empirical notebook material generated by hundreds of participants who have inhabited the world of the performance group I artistically lead and co-founded in 2007: Sisters Hope. Through my analysis of this vast material it became clear how the aesthetic evokes ecological connectedness, and thus supports a more sustainable future.

Therefore, I argue for the development of both spaces and practices where the sensuous and poetic can not only be witnessed, or temporarily participated in, but rather inhabited on a more permanent basis. By spaces I refer to physical spaces that are entered. By practices I refer to methods to evoke the sensuous and poetic within each of us, independently of surroundings.

MVD: *What does it mean on a practical level to inhabit the arts within Sisters Hope projects?*

GWH: In the past Sisters Hope has created many durational pieces that last for months, in which participants come and join in cycles that last for at least 24 hours. We also have had residency programs, for example within *Sisters Academy* where one stays for at least 48 hours. But in our new manifestation *Sisters Hope Home*, which opened in October 2021, anyone can move in and stay for weeks, months, years – as *Sisters Hope Home* is a 5-year performance that runs night and day for this duration of time.

It is a house where participants can sleep and live, yet it is also an art piece with performance guidelines. So when one lives there, one is literally living inside an art piece. If the central idea is that one can actually move into *Sister Hope Home*, other versions of participation are also possible, such as living in the neighbourhood and stopping by for the morning ritual. So Sisters Hope Home explores how one can create spaces for the inhabitation of the arts. And in terms of

practices within that specific physical and geographical space, we are also exploring the development of practices for people to inhabit the aesthetic and sensuous within themselves – cf. what we call The Poetic Self, which is central to our performance method.

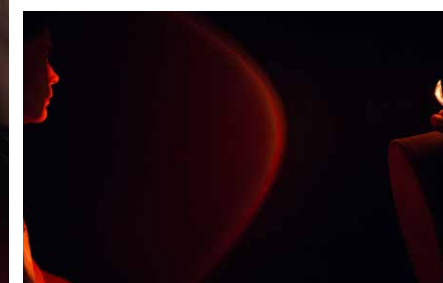
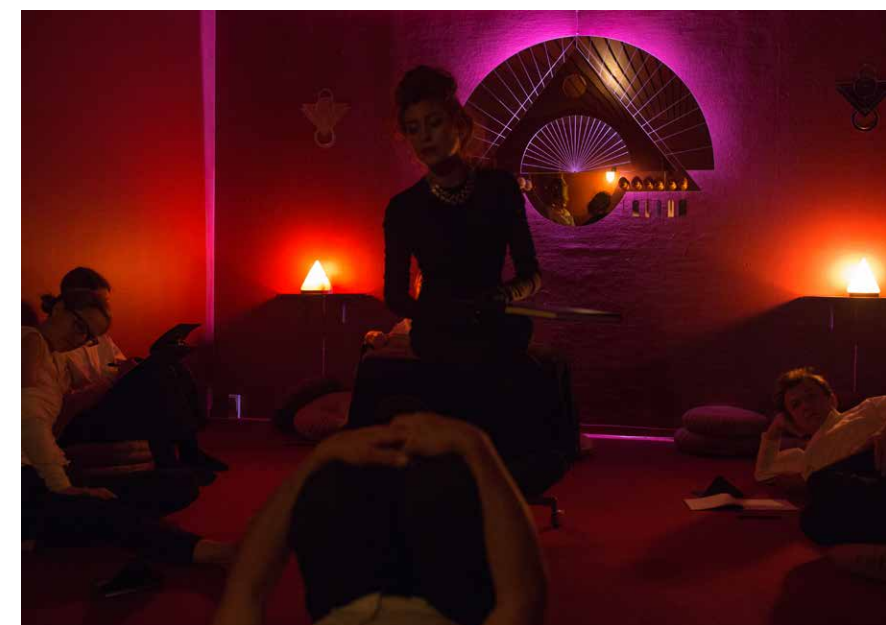
MVD: *Could you say more about the processes of learning to bring aesthetic and sensuous modes, this Poetic Self, more centrally into everyday life? What is the bigger social impact of adopting a sensuous way of inhabiting Earth?*

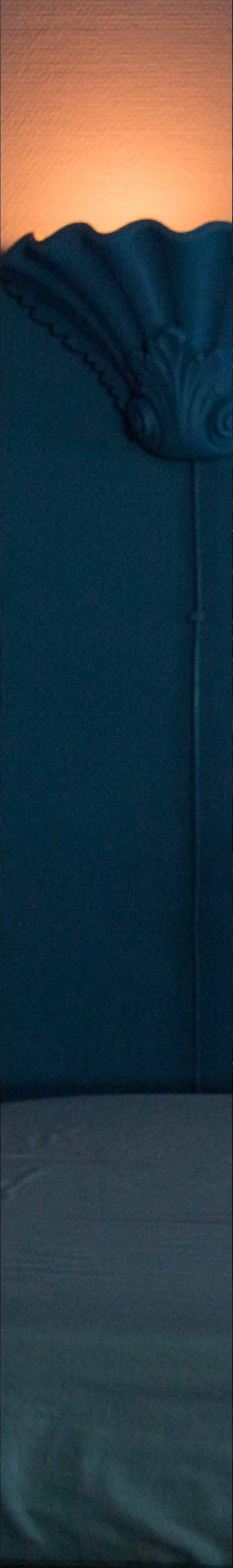
GWH: The Poetic Self is not a character, nor a fiction, but our inherent poetic potential that we explore from within, and which moves around with us. Thus, it may be discovered or unfolded within the framework of the Sisters Hope universe, but it is not limited to the geographical and physical spaces we inhabit. As a matter of fact, the people who find their Poetic Self within the universe of Sisters Hope are encouraged to bring their Poetic Self into everyday life. When we train our inner landscapes and bring forth our sensuous and poetic potential, ecological connectedness is stimulated, and therefore we begin to navigate differently in the world and in the spaces in other places in the world that we engage in.

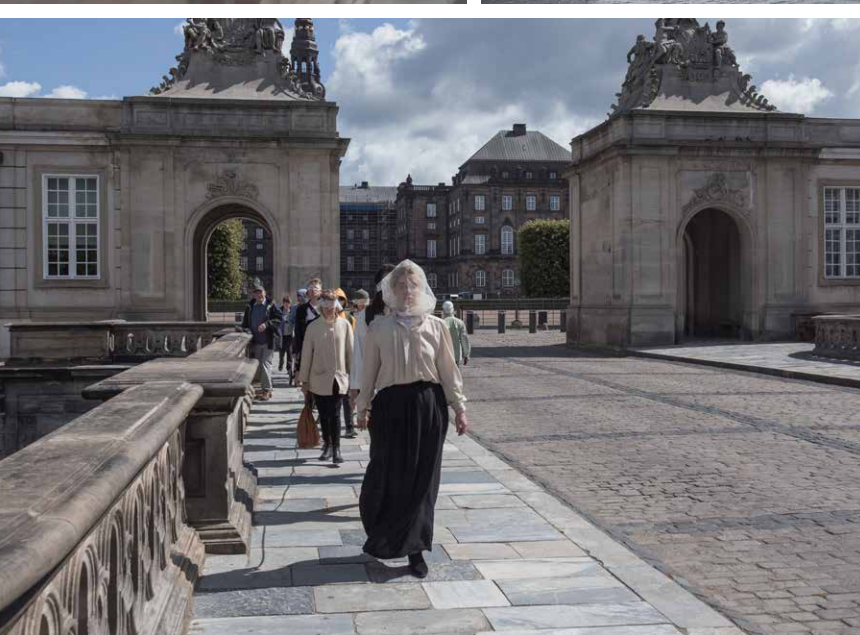
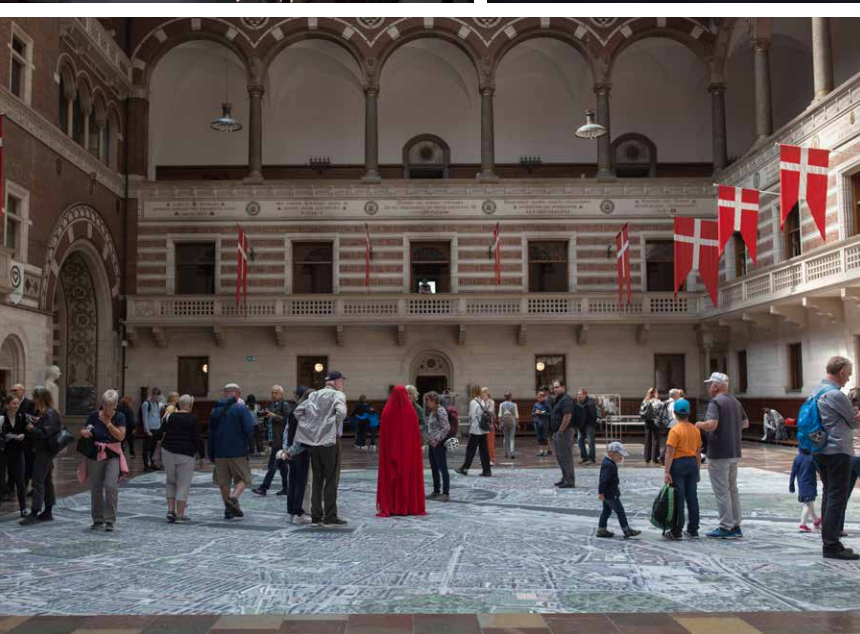
I wrote the *Sensuous Society Manifesto* (2008) as a response to the economic crisis of 2008 and as a response to the ongoing ecological crisis. It perceives crises as opportunities to completely rethink the current paradigm of economic rationality and ask what would happen if the sensuous dimension governed society. By inhabiting the arts through spaces and practices, we might eventually shape society into a sensuous society. Societies change all the time, it happens over centuries, but it will change eventually. So what if society changes into a sensuous society where the aesthetic dimension is governing? What would such a society look like? By inhabiting, we begin to plan the terrain for another mode of being in the world. I think it is an interesting perspective to explore for developing other questions that can support a transition into a more sustainable future. And I'm quite sure there is potential here because a more sensuous and poetic approach contains a lot of the premises that are lacking in today's society. These premises can be addressed within the aesthetic dimension, which is another model that represents a completely different way of being in the world. I'm not saying that this Sensuous Society is a utopia; indeed, it is not without its problems. So maybe it's just a phase that would be healthy to go through to approach a more sustainable society.

MVD: *How do you connect with participants who may not have encountered such ideas of inhabiting the arts, the sensuous self, or an aesthetic dimension before?*

GWH: I've spoken a bit about *Sisters Hope Home*, but we do have other kinds of performance-formats. There are Takeover-formats at the schools in which we intervene into a set context of learning, teaching young people and teachers about our methods, who wouldn't otherwise come to see us or meet our Sisters Hope world. It's really important for us to go out to places where people wouldn't otherwise have access to us. This is an important aspect of democratising the aesthetic as well. In *Sensuous City* (2019, 2021) we intervened in governmental buildings and sites in the public space of the







city of Copenhagen. Some of the modes of participation here included citizens witnessing and others navigating public space differently.

MVD: *Having attended several Sisters Hope 24- hour performances, including the Sensuous City, I have always been struck by the nurturing, detailed care and honouring of the Sisters Hope performers. It is a gift for public participants who do not have an artistic background. One feels accompanied into the realm of the sensuous, which strikes a contrast to the normal rhythms of everyday life.*

GWH: The care work you mention is so central to the Sister Performance method and to nurturing The Poetic Self, if that makes sense. When people enter the world of Sisters Hope that is something they are discovering, and it's fragile and new. The Sisters Hope staff nurtures the seed of the bird itself, and that is so delicate and needs protection, because it's so easy to just transition back into one's everyday habits. We are speaking about changing life habits.

MVD: *The topic of being able to maintain such a big project of inhabitation as an artistic paradigm that impacts everyday life is no small task. It requires resilience on multiple levels. For example, the continued action of guidance that is held by the Sisters Hope performers with participants demonstrates physical, mental, and material endurance. What challenges are you confronted with in relation to the resources needed for such a change in artistic paradigm?*

GWH: There is a presentness and slow rhythm to the Sisters performance method and encountering the sensuous that goes through all the manifestations, and is definitely a part of how we train and approach people who enter the universe. Each Sisters Hope performer has their own Poetic Self, and this comes with modes of engaging with the sensuous in different ways, and this brings different energies and developing practices. So the challenge for Sisters Hope is very much how people have the time to be present. It would be great to have numerous Sisters Hope performers present all the time in *Sisters Hope Home*, doing that care work and finding sensuous resonances in darkness, in movement, in stillness.

This is definitely connected to funding. Because art, in Denmark and many other countries, is currently funded for shorter manifestations and projects. Art is not prioritised or funded like sports, for example, where spaces and activities are always accessible. Art as individual exhibitions and performances is not supposed to last. So in a way with *Sisters Hope Home*, this constant space of inhabitation, we have the opportunity of addressing this problem by dialoguing with politicians and decision makers about the value of the arts and having spaces that are more permanently inhabitable. In this way we are articulating a new path, in which we can carve a more sustainable future through aesthetic inhabitation stimulating ecologic connectedness.

MVD: *In your view, what are the lacking premises or problems with the Western worldview that block ecological connectedness, and which thinkers does Sisters Hope engage with in its work towards a more sustainable future?*

GWH: In my Ph.D. *Sensuous Society – Carving the path towards a more sustainable future through aesthetic inhabitation stimulating ecologic connectedness*, I worked with the writings of G. Bateson, who writes: “There is an ecology of bad ideas, just as there is an ecology of weeds” (G. Bateson [1972] 2000, 492). He argues that the wrong ideas have dominated for centuries, and that it is now time to breed new ideas that will ultimately cultivate an ecology of mind in humans, which understand the deep interconnectivity of everything. This understanding sharply contrasts with a model of separation, which is “the bad idea”, one that has been developed for centuries and can be summarised in idioms, such as: “the environment is against us”; “it is us against other men”; and “it is the individual that matters.” These ideas are still highly dominant as Bruno Latour, among others, reminds us. In Latour's book *Down to Earth*, Trump is portrayed both as an embodied example of the human illusion of separation in its extremity and as the catastrophic outcome of this illusionary understanding (Latour [2017] 2018, 1ff).

Bateson argues that to train humans in an ecology of mind that understands the profound interconnectivity of all things is not only one way out of the ecological crisis, but *the way out*. This is why he goes as far as naming the ‘bad ideas’ evil and proposes active propagation of the ‘good ideas’: “I believe that these ideas are not evil and that our greatest (ecological) need is the propagation of these ideas...” (G. Bateson [1972] 2000, 513). With Latour's Trump-analogy in mind, this work is not yet exhausted. Rather, the effort done to train and share this profound understanding is of the highest necessity in the face of the overarching climate crisis (environmental ecology), the crisis of discrimination (social ecology) and the crisis that each individual faces– often expressed in depression, loneliness, anxiety and beyond (mental ecology). No matter which ecology one is looking at (Guattari [1989] 2008), the healing potential lies in nurturing an understanding of deep interconnectivity, by which the process of repair would be initiated and the training of deep respect for all life would begin. It is ultimately the life-threatening battle between connectedness and separation that we engage in.



SISTERS HOPE operate in the intersection of performance art, research, activism and pedagogy. sistershope.dk

