

A woman in a dark, long-sleeved dress is walking on a grassy hill, looking down. The background shows a vast ocean under a cloudy sky. The overall mood is contemplative and serene.

Inhabiting the Arts - Local and Global Spaces and Practices for Inhabitation of the Sensuous and Poetic

By Gry Worre Hallberg

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Introduction

Sisters Hope is a performance group and movement, founded in 2007 by Anna Lawaetz and the author of this article, who have led Sisters Hope as artistic director since 2014. In Sisters Hope's performances we explore different aspects of what we term a 'Sensuous Society'. The group has flourished in a Danish and North European context but will unfold their practice on a wider global stage going forward, not at least unfolded through the largescale perennial collaboration with the Danish Cultural Institute (DCI) - *Sisters Sensing (The World)*. Sisters Hope will travel to the countries in which DCI is active, to explore how a 'Sensuous Society' unfolds in cultures as different as China, Brazil, India and The Baltics, which are also the first countries we will visit in the coming years.

In this article I will unpack some of the findings in my artistic practice PhD (2021, University of Copenhagen) and also understand them in the context of *Sisters Sensing (The World)*.

The thesis is titled *Sensuous Society – Carving the path to a sustainable future* and is subtitled *through aesthetic inhabitation stimulating ecologic connectedness*. The latter is of importance as a key finding and an important argument, is that we need to develop 'practices' and create 'spaces' – not only for spectatorship or temporary participation in, but for what I term 'inhabitation' of the sensuous and poetic. As my argument unfolds at the intersection of aesthetics and ecology, the necessity of this new artistic paradigm is emphasized the ability of the arts, the sensuous and poetic to stimulate in its participants a deep sense of connectedness – Both mentally, socially and environmentally (Guattari [1989] 2008), which is vital in the transition towards a more sustainable future.

With 'practices' I mean the development of methods, through which experience and learning unpacked while immersed in the sensuous can be transferred into everyday life. Therefore I continuously focus on practice-method development through our *Sisters Performance Method – Sensuous Learning*. This method has been unpacked through translating the Sisters Hope performance methodology into methods taught for students in both national and international art schools and other international activities. I have often seen how this method transcends geographical, cultural and national boundaries. *Sisters Sensing (The World)* unfolding in the collaboration between Sisters Hope and Danish Culture Institute (DCI) will also work with this potential transcendence. With 'space' I mean platforms that allow for more permanent access to the sensuous and poetic. In 2021, Sisters Hope opened a more permanent art installation called *Sisters Hope Home*, which is a perennial performance art installation – A space for sensuous inhabitation.

In the following I will briefly unpack what we mean by Sensuous Society. Followed by an unfolding of the *Sisters Performance Method – Sensuous Learning* – also perceived as a practice for making art inhabitable. Finally, I will elaborate on the collaboration with DCI and the project *Sisters Sensing (The World)* and its potentialities.

The Sensuous Society

I wrote the *Sensuous Society Manifesto* in 2008 as a response to the financial crisis and

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the ongoing ecological crisis. However, the manifest can also be perceived as a response to the polycrisis of our time. The manifest suggests a potential future world which moves beyond the current governance of economic rationality and instead allows the aesthetic dimension to be the governing principle.

Sensuous Society Manifesto calls for what I term a 'democratization of the aesthetic', by which I mean general access to the sensuous and poetic. *Sensuous Society Manifesto* and its presented visions is the outset Sisters Hope's performance explorations. E.g. in *Sisters Academy* we explore the school and education of a *Sensuous Society*. In *Sensuous City* the city and public space and in *Sensuous Governing* – governing structures. And in our practice we continuously open up new areas of a potential *Sensuous Society* to explore. E.g. we are engaging with new partners to initiate an exploration of the healthcare system in a *Sensuous Society* through the project *White Light * Black Whole – The Healthcare System of a Sensuous Society*, and with public libraries we are manifesting the project *Sensuous Reading*.

In Sisters Hope we often experience, that the participants in our universes express a great longing for returning. What I have come to term a 'post-liminal longing'. That has raised the question of how to move from 'post-liminal longing' to 'constant belonging' where the sensuous and poetic can always be accessed. Even though the sense of belonging is strong qua Sisters Hope's intense participation practices, participation is almost always temporary, which is why I am curious to explore how my art practice and my artwork can develop from 'participation' to 'inhabitation'. Such an 'inhabitation' of the art can, as previously mentioned, be accessed through *spaces*, offering themselves as platforms for permanent access to the sensuous and poetic – and through *practices* from which experiences gained within the framework of the artwork and practice can be transferred into everyday life.

Practice: Sisters Performance Method – Sensuous Learning

Sisters Performance Method – Sensuous Learning can be understood as an inhabitational art-practice method. In the following I will describe this method and explain further how we will expand it globally in the project *Sisters Sensing (The World)* with DCI. As mentioned; In Sisters Hope we have developed our own performance-method: *Sisters Performance Method – Sensuous Learning* (see Hallberg 2021; Hallberg and Darsø 2019; Todd 2021). Even though it was not formulated as a specific method from the beginning, the development of a new art-pedagogical method was foundational to Sisters Hope when founded in 2007. Through the on-going work with Sisters Hope I have further developed and refined the method through, not at least through the continuous training of new performers entering Sisters Hope and established training programs arranged in collaboration with a variety of schools. For example, the method has over a series of years (2018-2021) been taught as a four-month course at Ryslinge Folk High School, where the adult students reside at the school while attending the course.

The Poetic Self

Central to the Sisters Performance Method is what we term the 'Poetic Self'. Every time Sisters Hope's performances manifest the performers rests, sleeps, teaches, fights,

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dreams, eat, lives and exist from the Poetic Self during the whole duration of the inhabitable performance. The Poetic Self is not fiction nor a character, it is a mode of being based on the aesthetic, poetic and sensuous aspects of our lives. Through the notion of the Poetic Self the Sisters Performance Method grants access to our inherent poetic potential which we might or might not unfold in everyday life. Where our everyday self is to some degree shaped by the economic rationality we are born into, the Poetic Self can be perceived as 'the self' of a Sensuous Society.

The first step towards unpacking the Poetic Self is the 'Poetic Self Exercise'. This can best be understood as a kind of facilitated 'dream-journey' happening in an immersive space of the signature soundscape of Sisters Hope and dimmed light or more broadly simply in resonance with Sisters Hope's auditive and visual style and atmosphere. When presence is established, a series of questions is posed to the participants – or rather, to their Poetic Selves; to their inherent poetic potential, the life that already lives inside, but that they may not have been aware of, or paid much attention to, before. After the exercise the participants are asked to write down their reflections – or, for those who may be in a longer process with the method - to compose their own Poetic Self Biography; their Poetic Self's life-story through past, present and future. Often the method of the Poetic Self becomes a practice-methodic tool to inhabit the sensuous and poetic sides of their own being, also outside the space of the art institution or the facilitation of the exercise.

Through previous travels to countries such as Greenland (Tait 2022, 195ff), Norway (Illeris, 2018), Sweden, Iceland, USA, Switzerland and the Czech Republic¹ with the Sisters Hope to, among other, teach the Sisters Performance Method, I have experienced participants from many different cultural backgrounds in dialogue with their Poetic Self. On those occasions I have often shared thoughts on the Sensuous Society as a potential future world rooted in the aesthetic dimension, with the sensuous and poetic as its point of departure. These experiences have made me curious to test how the Sensuous Society and Sisters Hope's sense-based performance method is perceived and what it means in very different cultural contexts. This again is also part of the motivation for the long-term strategic collaboration between Sisters Hope and DCI.

Sisters Sensing (The World) – The concept and method in different geographic areas and cultural contexts.

The Danish Cultural Institute and the performance group 'Sisters Hope' have launched a strategic collaboration. Our dream is to manifest the Sisters Hope's project 'Sensuous Society - Beyond Economic Rationality' internationally and thereby unfold and explore the Sisters' performance method and the concept of Sensuous Learning that they have developed in a variety of different cultures [...] planting of seeds globally for potential new and more sustainable approaches to life in a time of polycrisis where the ground is fertile and ready for completely new approaches to being, being together and human life both mentally, socially

¹ See project overview here: <https://sistershope.dk/projects/> (accessed 16.09.2024).

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and environmentally.

It is an important project for the Danish Cultural Institute for several reasons.

The project contributes to the purpose and strategic aims of the Danish Cultural Institute. The project is in line with the Danish Cultural Institute's original motto, which states that cultures can learn from each other and find each other in art, culture and science. At the same time, Sister Hope's ability to combine artistic ambition with investigative practice in new unseen formats is in line with the Danish Cultural Institute's new strategy, which seeks to create culture 'on the edge', where activism, civic engagement and strong artistic formats create spaces for shared values across borders and new inspirations.

The project is a comparative exploration of the variety of experiences and expressions of different cultures. At the Danish Cultural Institute, we have carefully placed our branches in countries of great importance to Denmark, which are at the same time places where exchange and dialogue is challenged by political and cultural differences. The project offers the opportunity to initiate a joint conversation that on the one hand listens to and examines the differences in how senses and togetherness are expressed in different cultures, and on the other hand maps all the unspoken attitudes and gestures that connect us as human beings².

This is how the new the announcement of the collaboration between DCI and Sisters Hope is initiated. The project and the collaboration will unfold over three phases in each country we visit. In the first phase, we visit the country in question with a 'walking format'. This format is previously developed in collaboration with the performance platform Metropolis, which in response to the Covid-19 pandemic and the social shutdown introduced the 'walking format' with *Wa(l)king Copenhagen*. 100 artists were invited to walk for 12 hours through Copenhagen's corona-extinct landscape. The only premise was that the walk had to start outside one's own home, and that the walk had to be streamed to the online every hour. I was invited to walk on the second day of the project, 2.5.2020. I chose to walk with three other performers from Sisters Hope. I walked and met with them every hour for rituals, which I did not know beforehand, and which were streamed from the very different locations in which we met during the 12 hours. I found that the walk gave me a very strong tactile experience of a landscape in a closed down and therefore different landscape, that I had not tactilely understood before I walked, as I had previously viewed the 'corona landscape' more from the outside and not experienced it the same way from the inside -tactilely.

That way I had the experience of walking 'into' the landscape rather than 'across' the landscape. Researcher in time Christina Berg Johansen explores experiences as these and discuss how our current capital-driven age prioritizes efficiency and valorizes a continued movement forward. She also reflects on how she herself has internalized this value, in that she does not allow herself to move 'into' the landscape, but rather is always on the way 'across' the landscape (C. B. Johansen 2018, 33). To me, this walking

² Do also see: <https://sistershope.dk/projects/sensuous-society-beyond-economic-rationality/> (accessed 16.09.2024).

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format seems like a beautiful 'vertical' way of meeting new and unknown landscapes, which we will do in *Sisters Sensing (The World)*. The format allows for a patient movement 'into'.

The upcoming local walks in radically different global contexts will similarly last 12 hours and will be streamed on an online platform every hour and will thus also be globally accessible. On the walks, we will 'sensuously' move into the landscape, into the culture in question, and the surrounding human and non-human environment. This allows us to have an exploratory experience with the place in question and its surroundings. Because we walk in and from our Poetic Self, we also inhabit the sensuous and poetic sides of our own being as we walk, and we encounter the world from this poetic perspective. This way, the inhabitation of the sensuous and poetic in both the inner and outer landscapes merge and create new spaces of opportunity for being and being together.



Photo: *Sisters Hope Wa(l)king Copenhagen*, Sisters Hope. Foto: I Diana Lindhardt

In the first phase, we will also engage in dialogue with potential local partners to plant seeds that will enable longer-term local collaborations and anchoring. In concrete terms, a collaboration could result in a larger performance manifestation, which constitutes the second phase. The third phase is intended as a longer process in each country, so that we continue the dialogue in each place over several years, which is again done in consideration of moving 'into' rather than merely 'across' the land.

In what follows now, I will elaborate on some of the previous experiences of how Sisters Performance Method and the Poetic Self have transcended national boundaries, exemplified through the Poetic Self exercises in respectively Greenland (2015), China (2018) and Russia (2019) and USA (2022).

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In Greenland, 7th graders from the local Artuafik Hans Lynge School in Nuuk participated in morning sessions during the week that Sisters Hope inhabited Nuuk Art Museum. In addition, approx. 20 local museum guests of all genders and age groups participated during the week. In China, I facilitated the Poetic Self exercise, as part of Assitej's international theater festival for children and young people. About half of the approx. 40 participants were international guests and the other half was local Chinese from Beijing. In Russia, I facilitated the Poetic Self exercise at the Danish Cultural Institute in St. Petersburg as part of a presentation of Sisters Hope's work. More or less all the 30 participants were local Russians. In USA I facilitated the Poetic Self Exercise at Seattle Symphony's Young Composer's Program. All the participants were local or international students living in Seattle. In all four cases, the response was almost the same; that the encounter with the sensuous and poetic awoke a longing for another, more sensuous and poetic way of being in the world, stemming from this initiating encounter with the Poetic Self.



Photo: *Sisters in China* by Sisters Hope. Foto: Sarah Liisborg

In continuation of these experiences, an interesting research question for further investigation in the upcoming collaboration with DCI would be: How does the experience of

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the Poetic Self resonate across national borders? Based on the previous experiences, there is an underlying thesis and assumption that a general longing for more sensuous and poetic spaces that transcend national borders and cultures exists. The project and the research question may give rise to new insights that either emphasize or challenge this underlying experience-based hypothesis. But in addition to the experience of the Poetic Self in different cultural contexts, the project unfolds a larger question about how a 'Sensuous Society' unfolds across cultures. Just as the economic rationality emanating from the Global North dominates globally today, the realities created by this dominant paradigm play out very differently in different nations and contexts. Likewise, one can imagine that the Sensuous Society would not create the same reality in Denmark, Brazil or China. There are different challenges and opportunities in each place, and these will create the foundation for what a Sensuous Society may look like in the respective cultural contexts.

One could also imagine continuously creating scenarios for Sensuous Society in each country we visit, based on the impressions, experiences and the collection of data we carry out in each country. Another possible area of study is the link between the key concept of inhabitation in these different 'spaces' (locations) and the 'ecologic connectedness' that emerge in the different tactile and sensuous encounters at the various locations. As already mentioned, I have used Guattari's three ecologies (Guattari [1989] 2008) in my analysis of the experiences of the participants in Sisters Hope's universes. By extension, can one understand the empirical material produced by *Sisters Sensing (The World)*'s global participants in very different cultural contexts by applying these three ecologies in the analysis of the empirical material they generate? For Guattari, ecology refers to the connection between all elements, which he categorizes as the connection between the environment, social relations and human subjectivity. For each of these three categories he develops an ecology: an environmental ecology (the environment), a social ecology (social relations) and a mental ecology (human subjectivity). They are not separate territories but are formed relationally and transversally. Guattari also argues for the need to develop new social ecologies based on the aesthetic, within which new mental ecologies can be developed and in which a new environmental ecology can be formed (Guattari [1989] 2008). New spaces for inhabitation of the art can be understood as a development of new mental ecologies (fx evolved through the Poetic Self) based on the sensuous and poetic, which can stimulate both social and environmental ecologies.

As outlined in this article, Sisters Hope will follow two parallel tracks over the next decade. One applies to the establishment of local spaces unfolding more permanent access to the sensuous and poetic, such as *Sisters Hope Home*, which is a perennial performance-installation that can be inhabited day and night. At the same time, we are immersed in an international exploration on the meaning and potential of the sensuous poetic in a global context through the collaboration with DCI and the project *Sisters Sensing (The World)*. Through the development of these local and global spaces and practices for inhabiting the sensuous and poetic, we hope to contribute to the establishment of opportunities for a new way of being and being together in the world, that can support the transition toward a more sustainable future.

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Photo: *Sisters Hope Home*, Sisters Hope. Foto: I Diana Lindhardt

Biography

Gry Worre Hallberg performance artist and PhD is the co-founder and artistic director of the award-winning performance group and movement Sisters Hope. Recently published her PhD *Sensuous Society - Carving the path towards a sustainable future through aesthetic inhabitation stimulating ecologic connectedness*, introducing 'inhabitation' as new artistic paradigm. Do also see her two TEDx talks; *Sensuous Society* (2013, TEDxCPH) and *Sensuous Learning* (2015, TEDxUppsalaUniversity). In the board of Performing Arts in The Danish Arts Foundation. Appointed IETM Global Connector. sistershope.dk

Abstract

Based on Sisters Hope's performance practice and methods and the *Sensuous Society Manifesto*, this article introduces 'inhabitation' as a new sensorial artistic strategy that can be established through 'spaces' and 'practices'. Such a 'sensuous inhabitation' is being explored locally by Sisters Hope in the perinial performance manifestation *Sisters Hope Home* and globally in collaboration with the Danish Cultural Institute (DCI) in the project *Sisters Sensing (The World)* over the next decade.

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