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Deep Flow: a return to bodily experience

Abstract

How to change modes of *looking outwardly* to *looking inwardly*? This paper presents an embodied dance practice *Deep Flow* to disrupt ecologies of attention, in which neoliberal subjects find themselves measured and shaped by numbers, through interactions with online and self-tracking technologies. These ocular centric interactions require one to *look outwardly* that neglects the storehouse of felt and bodily experience that online and self-tracking technologies, used instrumentally, cannot capture nor share.

This study challenges *looking outwardly* by exploring strategies of *looking inwardly*, to change ecologies of attention to ones of experiencing. To do this, *Deep Flow* is presented, a practice as research methodology, using phenomenological methods to; explore whole body experiences; investigate embodied biosensor technology; and to explore human relations with non-human materials. It proposes; *a return* to bodily experience, through states of *flow*, to construct knowledge from a first-person perspective, and to expand an understanding of our bodily experiences in relation to technology, human and nonhuman materials.

Introduction

The *Attention Economy* is framed within *Metric Culture*,¹ *Surveillance Capitalism*,² and the *Quantified Self*,³ where humans are increasingly being measured and shaped by numbers. This is the result of an accelerated growth of networked informational technologies, social media platforms, cloud computing, mobile software, robotics, artificial intelligence, and self-tracking technologies. We live in an increasingly sensor-based and surveillance society, where our movements, choices and behaviour are monitored and controlled by algorithms based on previous choices, movements, emotions, purchases, likes or dislikes, the addictive *Attention Economy*. This uses addictive persuasive technologies requiring ocular centric behaviour based on causality and control, that shapes the user.

To disrupt these addictive tendencies, *Deep Flow*,⁴ is a way to *look inwardly*⁵ at embodied practice *as experience*.⁶ It is framed by a methodological praxis, *Tentacular Worlding*⁷ to explore bodily experience using an embodied meditative practice, and phenomenological

¹ Btihaj Ajana, *Metric Culture: Ontologies of Self-Tracking Practices* ed. (United Kingdom: Emerald Publishing Limited, 2018), 1-9.

² Shoshana Zuboff, *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism* (New York: Public Affairs, 2019).

³ Gary Wolf and Kevin Kelly (2009).

⁴ Jeannette Ginslov, "*Deep Flow: a tentacular worlding of dance, biosensor technology, lived experience and embodied materials of the human and non-humankind*" (PhD diss., London South Bank University, 2021)

⁵ Ginslov, "*Deep Flow*"

⁶ Sondra Fraleigh, *Back to the Dance Itself: Phenomenologies of the body in performance* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2018), Chap 1, 2, 6.

⁷ Ginslov, "*Deep Flow*"

methods. It is an *experiential turn* changing ecologies of attention to ones of experiencing, using two concepts: *relational embodiment*⁸ and an *embodied materiality*.⁹

Bodies in Metric Culture is discussed first to uncover issues about the *Attention Economy* and secondly *Bodies in Embodied Practice* is presented, to challenge those concerns.

Bodies in Metric Culture

Metric Culture escalated through the “accelerated globalisation [and] the concomitant influence of information technologies,”¹⁰ such as networked social media platforms, cloud computing, mobile software, robotics, AI, self-tracking technologies and data generating software. These systems form what Benjamin Bratton calls *The Black Stack*,¹¹ a human and nonhuman interconnected informational pervasive megastructure, where humans are shaped and “over determined by self-quantification.” This has fostered a “culture of measurement [that] is currently on the rise”¹² with self-tracking devices to measure our activity, sleep, health, and performance. Known as the *Quantified Self* (QS), a movement first coined in 2009 by Gary Wolf and Kevin Kelly, it uses the motto, *self-knowledge through numbers*. The QS affords the user ways to optimise their well-being, productivity, and fitness. However, these technologies use biometric¹³ processes that are increasingly shaping our identities and our social interactions that are becoming “more and more perceived in quantitative terms, framed and ranked within a reputation economy (eg. Facebook ‘likes’).”¹⁴

Don Ihde describes the QS as reflecting the self, situated in data that reveals micro and macro perceptual experiences of our embodied relations with technology.¹⁵ Yoni Van Den Eede argues that these relations produce a *data double*, an “othering of self.”¹⁶ For Lorna Moore, this *digital-Other*,¹⁷ is a syncretic self, that is a real self, entwined with a digital self. Consequently, “users become reliant on self-tracking technologies to build a sense of self, based on the digital version that is being shown to them by the tracking device.”¹⁸ Martin Berg¹⁹ believes that we have lost trust in our experiential selves as there is an increasing need

⁸ Ginslov, “*Deep Flow*”

⁹ Ginslov, “*Deep Flow*”

¹⁰ Geoff Cox and Jacob Lund, *The Contemporary Condition: Introductory thoughts on contemporaneity and contemporary art* (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2016), 10, <https://www.sternberg-press.com/product/the-contemporary-condition-introductory-thoughts-on-contemporaneity-and-contemporary-art/>

¹¹ Benjamin Bratton, “The Black Stack,” *e-flux*, no. 53, <https://www.e-flux.com/journal/53/59883/the-black-stack/> (March 2014): 1.

¹² Btihaj Ajana, “Digital Health and the biopolitics of the Quantified Self,” *Digital Health*, no. 3 (2017): 1, DOI: 10.1177/2055207616689509.

¹³ Biometrics is about measuring life, measuring the uniqueness of the body and defined as a technology of identification that relies on physical characteristics or behavioural traits to identify or verify the identity of a person. (Ajana, 2014, p.1)

¹⁴ Ajana, *Metric Culture*, 2.

¹⁵ Don Ihde, *Bodies in technology* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2002), 47.

¹⁶ Btihaj Ajana, *Metric Culture*, 145

¹⁷ Lorna Moore, “Be[ing] You: In[bodi]mental a Real-Time Body Swapping Video Performance,” In *Handbook of Research on Digital Media and Creative Technologies*, edited by Dew Harrison, 18-32. Hershey PA: IGI Global, 2015.

¹⁸ Dorthe Brogård Kristensen and Carolin Prigge, “Human/Technology Associations in Self-Tracking Practices” in *Metric Culture: Ontologies of Self-Tracking Practices* ed. Btihaj Ajana (United Kingdom: Emerald Publishing Limited, 2018), 49.

¹⁹ Martin Berg, “Making sense with biosensors: self-tracking and the temporalities of well-being” filmed June 2017 at The AIAS CONFERENCE - Metric Culture: The Quantified Self and Beyond 7-9 June 2017 (Aarhus Institute of Advanced Studies) Organised by Btihaj Ajana, video, 1:20, https://youtu.be/hZ-0yfbE_5Y

for reflexivity and guidance, that is found in biosensors as *temporary authorities*. However, Deborah Lupton suggests that in recent years there is “evidence of a growing cynicism in some popular outlets concerning the value of the data that are gained from quantifying the self.”²⁰ Knowing your data or numbers may not be enough to change a person’s behaviour as numbers alone tell us nothing.

However, this self-reflexivity raises concerns of privacy and enables forms of prediction. Btihaj Ajana asks why we need to “‘predict’ in the first place? Isn’t prediction a form of control and isn’t control one of the problems.”²¹ we are currently experiencing. This reflects *Surveillance Capitalism*, that Shoshana Zuboff believes is a new form of capitalism that commodifies personal data generated through self-optimisation. It erodes the processes of individual autonomy, where the “message is simple: Once I was mine. Now I am theirs....”²²

These systems of self-measurement require ocular centric behaviour in an age that is obsessed and trapped in its “own present spectacle.”²³ The *Digital Other* has become the purveyor *truth* operating on binary systems. However, no amount of AI and computer programming research, can account for the bodily experiences of an individual. How may it be re-addressed? The *Deep* method of embodied practice attempts to do so.

Bodies in Embodied dance practice

Deep Flow is a method of embodied dance practice that entwines two practices: phenomenological research practice and artistic research practice, that includes the practice of *Deep Flow* and reflective methods such as verbal description, drawings, paintings, and documentary video. These methods enable the researcher to access and interpret the pre-reflective experience through their own *felt-sense*, visual imagery and verbal feedback. A HRM is also used in the practice to measure heart rate variability (HRV) in relation to lower levels of stress induced by the meditative state of *Deep Flow*.

This is framed within a *tentacular worlding*, a phenomenological methodology that is centred on relational bodily experiences as the basis for the creation of knowledge. *Tentacular Worlding* is a unique PaR methodology to *look inwardly*. The term *tentacular* is derived from the Latin *tentaculum*, means ‘feeler’, or *tentare*, ‘to try’ whereas *worlding* describes a way experience *being-in-the-world* or *Dasein*.²⁴ Together they are used metaphorically in this research to *try out* new practices, to *world* and interlace different states of feeling, thinking and *Being*. This *worlding* is a sympoietic system,²⁵ where both the human and non-human engage in processes of *becoming with* a world. To do this, *doing a phenomenology*²⁶ becomes necessary.

Phenomenological research practice: *doing a phenomenology*

²⁰ Deborah Lupton, *You are Your Data: Self-tracking Practices and Concepts of Data*, 6.

²¹ Beer, interview, 6.

²² Zuboff, *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism*, 12.

²³ Joanna Zylińska, *Nonhuman Photography*. (Cambridge: Mass.: MIT Press, 2017), 17.

²⁴ Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 1962).

²⁵ Sympoietic systems are characterized by cooperative, amorphous qualities. They recurrently produce a self-similar pattern of relations through continued complex interactions among their many different components. From: Beth Dempster, “Sympoietic and autopoietic systems: A new distinction for self-organizing systems,” *International Society for Systems Studies Annual Conference*, Toronto: ISSS, 2000 (July 2000).

²⁶ Susan Kozel, “Lecture: Phenomenology – for the course Practice Based Research in the Arts, Stanford University,” last modified March 15, 2013 <http://medea.mah.se/2013/12/susan-kozel-phenomenology-practice-based-research-arts/>.

Phenomenology according to Kozel is centered on the validity of first-person lived experience and may be used for the construction of knowledge. She suggests *doing a phenomenology*, sliding across the words, method and methodology, as the method refers to *how to do research* and phenomenology is a methodology that has at its root: phenomenon, which means something that happens.

It is one of the subjective, experience-based methodologies that is used to anchor practice within research, to overcome unhelpful divides between theory and practice, between the mind and the body and between my solitary experience and shared experiences. ²⁷

Doing a phenomenology, is a way to conduct research as something one experiences on a practical level. It is not a prescriptive as practitioners should set up their own methodology based on the project that they are developing. One starts by *doing*, then one becomes aware of *doing* and finally one selects “a line of thought, or a line of questioning.”²⁸ that uses a process of “describing, not of explaining or analysing.”²⁹ In this sense, it is different from normal analytic thought and operates “through resonance rather than truth.”³⁰ This orientates pre-reflective experience as being unrestricted by universal and abstract rationalist notions of *truth*. It enables the researcher to practice *looking inwardly* and *doing a phenomenology*, to explore phenomenal presences, going back to the body and bodily knowing, the *lived experience* of embodied consciousness, or *the mind in the body*.³¹ This includes exploring the *felt-sense*³² that is a “bodily knowing [that] is not an immediately identifiable specific emotion or sensation, but something ‘fuzzy’ and difficult to pin down, yet also clearly ‘there’ inside you, telling you about your situation.”³³

Methods of artistic research practice

Deep Flow is an artistic research practice that explores bodily experiences, the *felt-sense*, phenomenal and embodied states of *flow*. It is inspired by the embodied method of dance practice, the *Full Drop* created by Margret Sara Guðjónsdóttir, that requires an “intensive deep inner listening and surrendering to inner body systems and rhythms,”³⁴ as well as other known methods such as *dwelling*,³⁵ *listening*,³⁶ *direct experiencing*³⁷, and *flow*.³⁸ This paper

²⁷ Susan Kozel, “Lecture: Phenomenology – for the course Practice Based Research in the Arts, Stanford University,” 4-5.

²⁸ Susan Kozel, *Closer: Performance, Technologies, Phenomenology*, 50-51.

²⁹ Maurice Merleau-Ponty, (1945) *Phenomenology of Perception*. English edition first published 1962, (London and New York: Taylor and Francis, 1945) e-Library, 2005, viii.

³⁰ Susan Kozel, “Lecture: Phenomenology – for the course Practice Based Research in the Arts, Stanford University,” 7.

³¹ Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Primacy of Perception* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1964).

³² Eugene Gendlin, “Beyond postmodernism: From concepts through experiencing,” in *Understanding Experience: Psychotherapy and Postmodernism*, ed. Roger Frie (London: Routledge, 2003), 100-115.

³³ Zoë Boden and Virginia Eatough, “Understanding more fully: A multimodal hermeneutic-phenomenological approach” in *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 11, no. 2 (April 2014): 160-177. DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/14780887.2013.853854>.

³⁴ Margret Sara Guðjónsdóttir, in Kozel, S., Guðjónsdóttir, M. S., Ginslov, J. and Lim, K. *Conspiracy Archives a process archive of an archival process*, 2019. <https://nivel.teak.fi/adie/conspiracy-archives/>.

³⁵ Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 1962).

³⁶ Jean Luc Nancy, *Listening* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2007).

³⁷ Eugene Gendlin, *Beyond postmodernism: From concepts through experiencing*, (2003).

³⁸ Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, *Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience*. London: HarperCollins Publishers Ltd., 1990).

will only address the *Full Drop*. Reading the data from the HRM is part of the practice that is interpreted after the practice.

The Deep Flow Practice

Deep Flow is an embodied meditative practice that synchronises states of *flow*, physiological, implicit and affective states of awareness. By *looking inwardly* directing one's attention to the bodily senses, sensations, feelings, internal visualisations, and thoughts begin to materialise. It should be practiced in a quiet warm room, with comfortable clothing, an eye mask, and a yoga mat. The HRM is started. One begins by deep slow breathing, then a body scan focuses the mind on every part of the body. Then one thinks of *melting the bones* and one feels gravity changing. Time is slowed down by *dwelling* on bodily experiencing. One releases the fascia which relaxes the entire body and suddenly the body is experienced as a whole-body phenomenon, without tension and stress. Sometimes the arms start to float up by themselves, without any effort or control by the conscious mind. This is recognised as being in a state of the *Deep Flow*. When this occurs, one steps onto the yoga mat to further experience and deepen states of *Deep Flow*.

You move extremely slowly, with a minimal amount of effort, feeling connected, lighter, and expansive. This equalises the spatio-temporal dimensions in your body and you are no longer aware of the sensorimotor and proprioceptive systems. Internal visualisations of colour, memories and emotions emerge in your mind's eye; your body sometimes feels like it is melting into the world around you, and you are moving in a thick viscous environment. This fosters a state of calm and flowing relations between subjectivity, the *felt-sense*, the sensorimotor system, the autonomic nervous system (ANS), the fascia, the kinaesthetic, proprioceptive and sensorimotor systems. Attending to every shift of experiencing the body and mind are experienced as a unified whole. The slow deep breathing stimulates the parasympathetic nervous system which lowers heart rate and increases HRV. This implies that *Deep Flow* has activated the “rest and digest” response via the vagus nerve, the body's major parasympathetic nerve.³⁹ This leads to an increase of HRV, making you feel relaxed, focused, calm and in a state of *flow* (Figure 1).



Figure 1. Spikol, D. (2019) Dancer Jeannette Ginslov in *Deep Flow* at the Symposium on Digital Urbanism, Blekinge Institute of Technology, Karlshamn, November, 14, 2019 [Photograph]

³⁹ Rollin McCraty, (2016) “Science of the Heart”, in *Exploring the Role of the Heart in Human Performance: An Overview of Research Conducted by the Heart Math Institute*, 2
<https://search.datacite.org/works/10.13140/rg.2.1.3873.5128>

Movement Hieroglyphs

Movement hieroglyphs are drawn after *Deep Flow* as a form of *writing from the body* to visualise one's internal "body's voices."⁴⁰ They are created by connecting one's body to the pen and allowing "a bit of body energy to move on the page" to draw the "energy you feel in your body."⁴¹ These are single line drawings or glyphs drawn spontaneously without reflection using a pen as an extension of one's body (Figure 3). After drawing you the "read" and reflect on how it was drawn and resonates in your body (Figure 2).

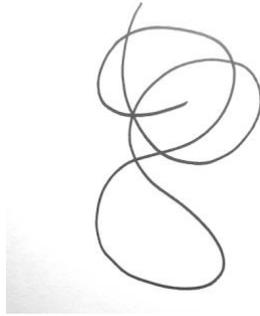


Figure 2. Ginslov, J. (2020) *Movement Hieroglyph* [Photograph]

Figuring-Figures

Figuring, according to Gansterer et al., (Figure. 3) starts in the body by paying attention to the experiential shifts, intensities, sensations or feelings beneath the register of external visibility. Sensitivity to *figuring* gives rise to *figures*, spontaneous drawings-paintings not controlled by a drawer's cognitive abilities but through their body-mind awareness. *Figuring-figures* may be seen as symbiotic and reciprocal, like a *Möbius strip* as "*figuring* gives rise to *figures*, whilst they attempt to activate the *figures*, create the conditions for (further) *figuring*."⁴²



Figure 3. Ginslov, J. (2020) *Figure-Figuring* [Photograph].

⁴⁰ Louise Steinman, (1986) *The Knowing Body: Elements of Contemporary Performance and Dance* (Boston: Shambhala Publications Inc., 1986), 16.

⁴¹ Nancy Stark Smith "Teaches "Hieroglyphs"- Embodied Activity #1 for Meta-academy(at)bates," n.p.

⁴² Nikolaus Gansterer, et.al., *Choreo-graphic figures: deviations from the line*, 75

Verbal description

Verbal feedback may be directed to a documentary camera immediately after the hieroglyph, to “express something fundamental about one’s *Lifeworld*”⁴³ and what you have experienced through your *felt-sense*. It moves the exploration of lived experience beyond the “reflected upon and languaged dimensions of experience” to additionally exploring the “pre-reflective, bodily, felt experience through various means.”⁴⁴

Reading of biometric data

During the practice of *Deep Flow*, the HRM is not looked at as one is blindfolded. This is used as a strategy to subvert *looking outwardly* replacing ocular centric behaviour with experiencing. The biometric data is read after *Deep Flow*, is not treated scientifically and is another strand of description that feeds back into the experience of self as “the perception and interpretation of the biometric data feeds back to one’s embodied being.”⁴⁵ The experiential self is realised through this relational self-reflexive praxis.

The verbal descriptions, drawings and biometric data are analysed using phenomenological methods from Social Science. However, it is beyond the scope of this paper to discuss this.

Deep Flow: relational embodiment

Deep Flow is about embodied phenomenological *morphic intentionalities*,⁴⁶ and may be understood as a *relational embodiment*. This is a concept of synthesis, unifying the material body, the phenomenological, the technological, the imagined, the drawn, the languaged and the practice. The HRV data, bio-mediations, HRM and the experiential are considered as being co-equal and indissociable “complementarities” set in a “perspective of relationism.”⁴⁷ In *Deep Flow*, these entities flow into each other through “relational thinking.”⁴⁸ Here the body and mind exist in relation to each other and the *worlding* in which they exist. This entwinement could be seen as a *chiasmus*,⁴⁹ entangling body-self-world. This collapses Cartesian binaries defining the inner and outer to find relations between self, world and technologies.

Deep Flow: an embodied materiality

Deep Flow is also an *embodied materiality*, a *worlding* of visible and invisible, tangible and intangible, human and non-human materials, technologies, and embodied practices. This *dance of agency*⁵⁰ is reliant on *embodied interactions*⁵¹ that entangle the human and non-

⁴³ Zoë Boden and Virginia Eatough, *Understanding more fully: A multimodal hermeneutic phenomenological approach*, 173.

⁴⁴ Zoë Boden and Virginia Eatough, *Understanding more fully*, 160.

⁴⁵ Yoni Van Den Eede, *Tracing the Tracker: A Postphenomenological Inquiry into Self-Tracking Technologies*, 151.

⁴⁶ Sondra Fraleigh, *Back to the Dance Itself*, 2018.

⁴⁷ Willis F. Overton, “Embodiment from a Relational Perspective”, in *Developmental Perspectives on Embodiment and Consciousness*, eds. Willis F Overton, Ulrich Mueller, Judith L. Newman, (New York: Taylor & Francis Group, 2008), 1-18. DOI: 10.4324/9780203809778-5.

⁴⁸ Tim Ingold, *The Perception of the Environment: Essays on livelihood, dwelling and skill*, (London and New York: Taylor & Francis Group, 2000), 295.

⁴⁹ Maurice Merleau-Ponty, (1964) “Eye and Mind”, in: *The Primacy of Perception*, (Evanston: Northwest University Press, 1964), 121-149.

⁵⁰ Ciano Aydin, et. al., (2018) “Technological environmentality: Conceptualizing technology as a mediating milieu,” *Journal of Philosophy and Technology* 32, (April 2018): 321-338.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1007/s13347-018-0309-3>.

⁵¹ Paul Dourish, *Where the Action Is: The Foundations of Embodied Interaction*, (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2001).

human through a spectrum of sense modalities situated in the body. This writer adopts the definition of *materiality* as being the quality of the experience of materials that are both tangible and intangible, experienced in our material, phenomenal and embodied world that leave remarkable effects on our embodied states of being.

The experience of tangible materials arises through our physical engagements and our *embodied interactions* with them. A potter for example working with his hands, clay and wheel, may be described using Material Engagement Theory,⁵² a synergistic process where bodies, agentic actions and materials merge. This is reflected in the actions of HCI designers who work with digital and analogue materials where the materials “talk back to their hands and thoughts,”⁵³ shaping their designs. In arts practice materiality also encompasses studio practice.⁵⁴

Deep Flow reveals an admixture of materials that are visible and invisible, tangible and intangible. For example, the HRM becomes perceptually transparent when embodied into the *Body Schema*. The HRM becomes materially tangible again after *Deep Flow* and when the biometric data is printed out. However, after its interpretation, the data becomes embodied and intangible again, as the interpretation of the data feeds back into one’s embodied being and into the next session of *Deep Flow*.

Embodied materiality challenges the use of visualising and self-tracking technologies that mediate invisible events such as HRV in the body outwardly, making them visible for the user to interact with. *Deep Flow* rather, allows a practitioner to *look inwardly*, to experience *embodied materialities* of the human and non-humankind as a way to get closer to the *felt-sense* and bodily experiences.

Conclusion

Deep Flow focuses on experiential lived experience by removing the need for ocular centric behaviour. *Deep Flow* unearths the Chthulucene, that is the earthy experiential side of ourselves. This could, in an ethico-political sense, reorientate a person’s visual mastery over things as being the purveyor of unequivocal *truths*. By relinquishing ocular-centric behaviour a practitioner may begin to trust their *felt-senses*. This may lead to a better understanding of our relations with the non-human, that de-emphasises human exceptionalism and visual mastery. By extension *Deep Flow* disrupts actions of *looking outwardly* and addictive tendencies found in the *Attention Economy* and *Metric Culture*. Through the practice one may find new ways of experiencing interiority in relation to materials, technology and the world, embracing the human and non-human, in states of *Deep Flow*, by *looking inwardly*.

⁵² Ciano Aydin, et. al., (2018) ‘Technological environmentality: Conceptualizing technology as a mediating milieu,’ *Journal of Philosophy and Technology* 32, (April 2018): 321-338.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1007/s13347-018-0309-3>.

⁵³ Susan Kozel, *Re-Embodiment: new strategies for teaching Embodied Interaction*. (Denmark: Cumulus International Association of Universities and Colleges of Art, Design and Media, 2017), 109.

⁵⁴ Christina, M. Mills, *Materiality as the Basis for the Aesthetic Experience in Contemporary Art*. (MA Thesis, University of Montana, 2009), <https://scholarworks.umt.edu/etd/1289>.

Bio

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