Circus as Practices of Hope

Vulnerability as Virtuosity

Research Cluster Vulnerability as Virtuosity 2020-2022
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Background
In December 2020 and throughout 2021, simultaneously with my individual studio sessions, I actively participated in a series of Sustainability seminars organized by a consortium of universities in Stockholm. These seminars culminated in June 2022 at the International Sustainable Development Research Society’s Conference in Stockholm, focusing on culture, art, human rights, and courage. Throughout 2021, I invited and collaborated with researchers from the Swedish Defence University, Stockholm University, Södertorn University, and Stockholm School of Economics to form a cluster, exploring the notion of sustainability through the lens of vulnerability under the provocative title: Vulnerability as Virtuosity.
The invitation to this collaborative endeavor was as follows:

"The invitation is to collectively examine human and more-than-human vulnerabilities within the context of crisis, with a specific focus on exploring the following questions:
- How are human responses and vulnerabilities understood and manifested across different fields and disciplines?
- How can vulnerabilities be addressed fairly and sustainably?
- What insights can be gained from human and more-than-human vulnerabilities?
- How can the diverse knowledge on vulnerability from various fields be shared and leveraged?
- What practices can be initiated to align vulnerability with a more sustainable and just world?"

Focusing on the interplay between theory and practice concerning rhetoric and narratives surrounding climate change and sustainability, we engaged in discursive activities, including lectures by each participant on their practical research and respective fields of study through the lens of vulnerability, followed by discussions among the researchers. After these seminars and encounters from December 2020 to June 2022, I presented a lecture at the ISDRS Stockholm 2021 conference held at Södertorn University on June 22, 2022.

In this lecture, I shared significant insights from engaging with each other’s research practices and topics through the lens of vulnerability. Subjects discussed included the spectacularity of crises, activism, responsibility, accounting for and differentiating vulnerabilities, dignity, virtuosity, exceptionalism, democracy, movement of resistance, and public engagement.

Upon viewing a highly virtuosic and risky acrobatic performance, Frederike Albrecht, Senior Lecturer in Political Science at the Swedish Defence University, who researches risk analysis in situations of crisis at the Centre of Natural Hazards and Disaster Science (CNDS), remarked: "We often encounter crises in fiction, while others experience them in reality. The pursuit of maximum security is paramount in circus performances, with safety measures like mattresses and safety nets, extensive practice, and repetitions. However, in real-life crises, vulnerable groups face extraordinary tasks without such safety nets or prior training."
Sara Bondesson, Assistant Professor at the Department of Security, Strategy, and Leadership at the Swedish Defence University, discussed the participatory processes and power dynamics employed by climate justice and activist organizers in post-disaster contexts. Reflecting on her experiences post-Hurricane Sandy in Rockaway, New York City, she emphasized how differences in gender, race, class, age, able-bodiedness, sexual orientation, or gender identity can lead to situated marginalization. Her insights prompted discussions on the importance of addressing situated marginalization, especially as post-disaster contexts may become increasingly prevalent due to climate change.

Lia Mollvik, a PhD candidate at the Department of Education, Stockholm University, examined the philosophical understandings of human dignity and their implications for education, particularly in child-adult relationships. Her research led to discussions on the relationship between dignity and the virtuosity or capability of students, prompting reflections on the types of virtuosity promoted through pedagogies and research and whether virtuosity should be democratic or exclusionary.

Arita Holmberg, a researcher at the Department of Security, Strategy, and Leadership at the Swedish Defence University, explored children’s vulnerability in the context of the climate crisis. Her research on children’s resistance to climate emergencies highlighted the need to consider responsibility for vulnerability and develop new narratives and forms of engagement to address climate change.

Katarina Wadstein MacLeod, a professor in art history at Söderton University, investigated how climate change is depicted in images and the links between specific historical contexts and knowledge production. Her research raised questions about the representation of climate change in collective imaginaries and the necessity of developing narratives that avoid polarized ideologies.

Emma Stenström, Associate Professor and Director of the Research Center for Arts, Business & Culture at Stockholm School of Economics, introduced the “bubble-hopping” method she developed to bridge differences, emphasizing the importance of specific skills such as listening, questioning, and sharing in working with the development of solidarities.
During my doctoral project, I sought opportunities to collaborate across disciplines, benefiting from insights from researchers in the humanities to ground my project within contemporary contexts. Our collaborative efforts facilitated a rethinking of my artistic practice by engaging it in dialogue with societal issues, leading to the development of a transdisciplinary field of knowledge.

Moving forward, I aim to continue working within this multidisciplinary context, exploring the intersection of diverse knowledge about movement within circus arts, the military, economics, and philosophy. From this multidisciplinary perspective, the focus will be on generating new insights into how collective movement and diverse modes of motion can inform embodied knowledge for processes of change, societal solidarity, and leaderless ethics of movement.