

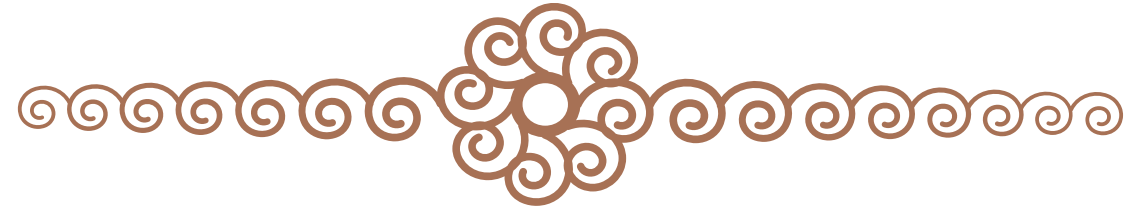
F.L.Y

FLY, LIVE, YOGA

Aerial yoga has been catching on and becoming one of the most “Instagrammable” wellness trends. This new concept is promoted by various Key Opinion Leaders (K.O.L.) as a part of a healthy, aesthetic, and tasteful lifestyle. Scrolling through Instagram, I have been attracted by the elegance of such an activity and aspire to become one who can gain likes by posting videos alike. Being an activity engaging both body and mind, aerial yoga may also interact with various concepts of body politics and give me new insights.

JESS HONG

Aerial Yoga and Enhancing Body




The bodily sensation after the first lesson was tired, if not strenuous. Contrary to my expectation, aerial yoga is more about fitness than aesthetics. The physical requirement for aerial yoga is almost like the gym. The first exercise I was instructed to do was “hammock pull-ups”. I raised both of my hands above my head, grasping the two sides of the hammock tightly, and pulling my body upwards. This exercise aims to train our arm muscles. We were instructed to do it 15 times in a roll. I could feel the increased flow of blood to my arms and later accumulation of lactic acid due to a sudden surge of oxygen demand as if setting my arms on fire. As the instructor counted “15...14...13...”, it is an internal struggle of giving up or going on. However, through the mirror, I saw how fit my instructor was, and she became the driving force that keeps me going.

Here I realized that exercising is a form of “technology of the self”. “Technologies of the self” is a concept put forward by Michel Foucault referring to the practices and strategies by which “individuals represent to themselves their self-understandings and regulations” (Foucault 1977:11). By exercising, I am regulating my muscles to act contrary to their relaxed state. I am also understanding how my muscles generate force to pull my entire body up, as well as cultivating my awareness of the reactions of my different body parts towards different movements.

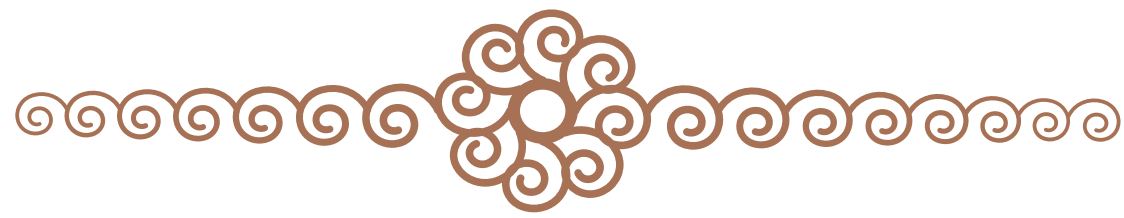
At first, I dislike this kind of “technologies of the self” as I think it focuses only on the scientific aspect of our bodies but neglects our state of mind, which is supposed to be one of the key elements of yoga. However, as I later encounter Reading the Slender Body, the rise of “technologies of the self” could stem from “self-care”. “the firm, developed body has become a symbol of correct attitude; it means that one “cares” about oneself, and suggesting...the ability to shape your life” (Bordo 1993:195). It appears to me that by exercising my body, I am demonstrating my care to my body, hence developing my self-awareness. I feel the enhancement of not only my body but also my mind through aerial yoga.



Getting so tired after class

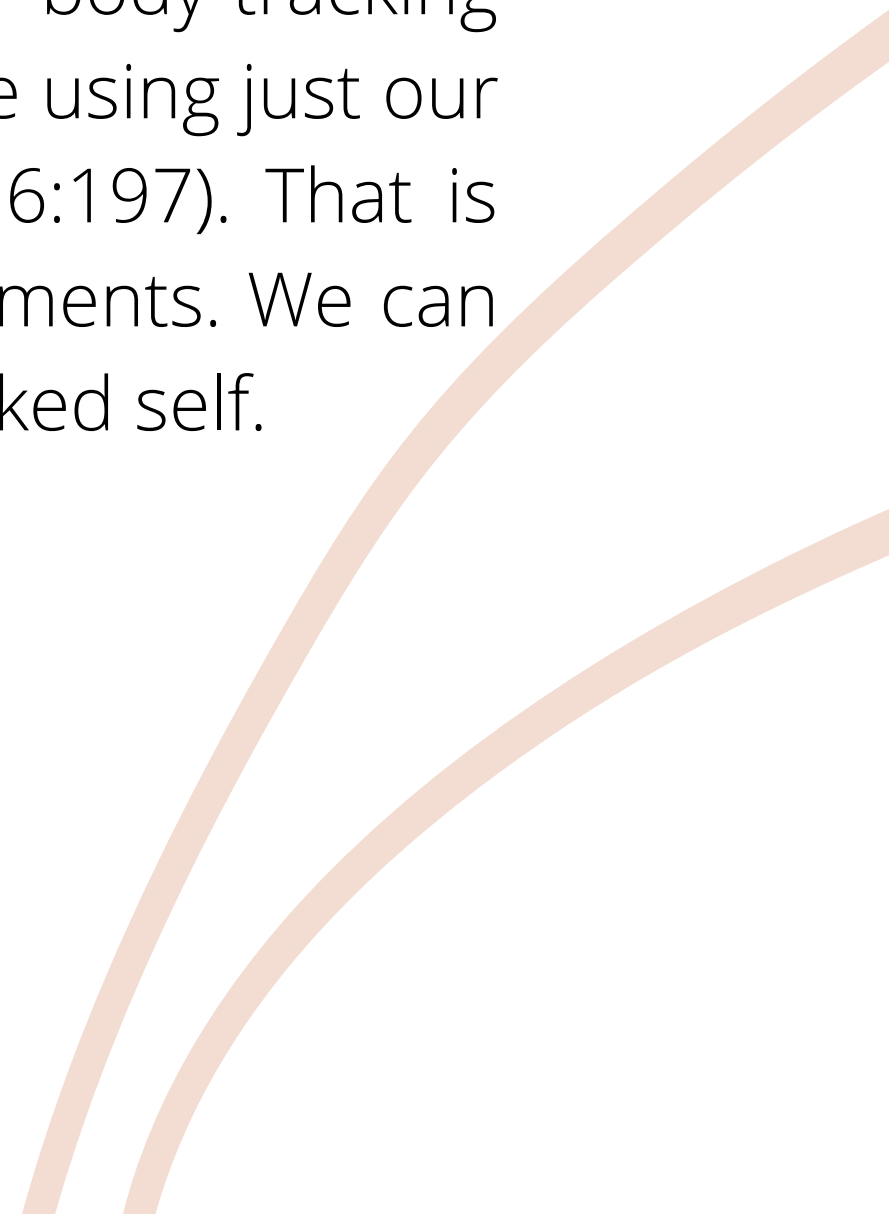
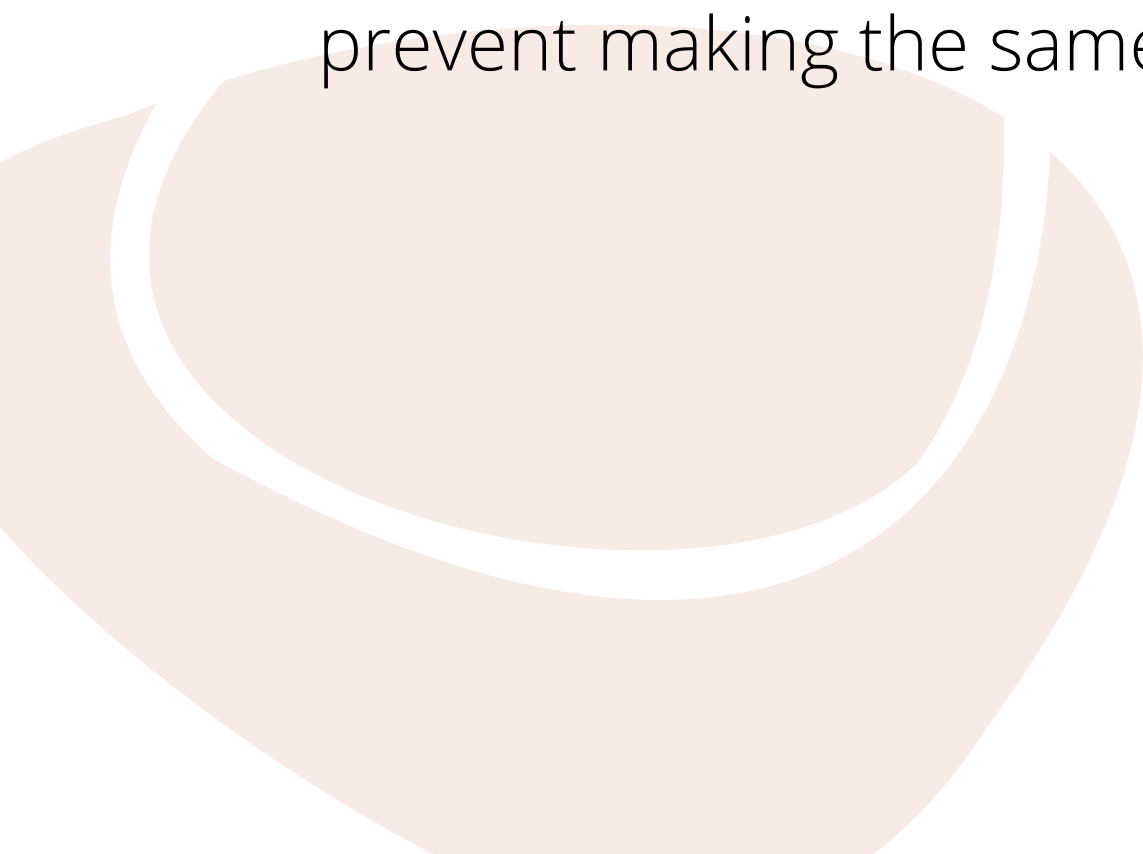


Aerial Yoga and Tracking Body

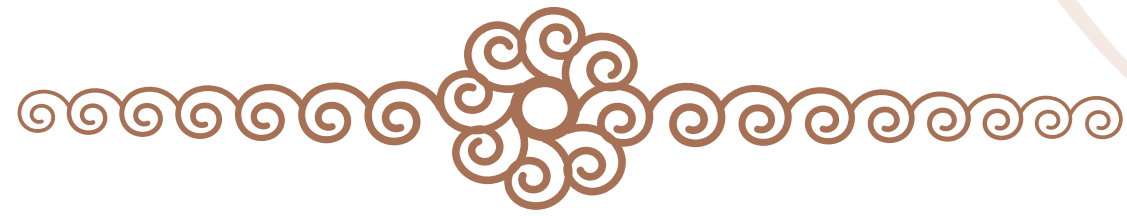


In the last lesson, we were given some time to videotape our performance to keep a record of what we have learned in the term. Recording videos and watching the playback is indeed a means of tracking bodies. At first, I was happy to take videos of myself because I thought that it would be a good way to keep track of my learning progress. As I knew that a camera was facing me, I performed with more caution, for example paying more attention to whether my toes had been pointed, whether my arch back falls into the desired alignment ... and of course, giving a somewhat “pretentious” smile. During the process of recording, I was quite confident in my performance. However, not until I watched the playback did I spot the many flaws that I have never taken notice of, namely the uncontrolled speed of spinning, unengaged abs, the list goes on.

This reminds me of the difference between the experiential self and quantified (or in this case “digitalized”) self. The former refers to the knowledge of our bodies through our experiences, feelings, and sensations; while the latter refers to the knowledge of our bodies through technology, sensor, and data. Putting it into the context, my experiential self is how I feel like I was putting on the best performance; while the quantified self is how my flaws were completely revealed in the video. It is completely normal to have a difference between the experiential and quantified self. As suggested by Schull, body-tracking technology lets us “look at things we otherwise couldn’t see using just our own eyes, and see ourselves more honestly” (Schull 2016:197). That is also the reason why body tracking is essential to improvements. We can prevent making the same mistakes after reviewing the tracked self.



Aerial Yoga and Gendering Body



The third lesson was particularly thought-provoking due to a surprising classmate – a masculine boy. Not only I but also the instructor was surprised by his presence. She said that having taught in this studio for 1.5 years, it was her first time to see a boy coming to class. Throughout the whole lesson, the instructor referred to that boy as “the male student”, while calling the rest of us “students”. It could be observed that boys playing aerial yoga have fallen into the marked category.

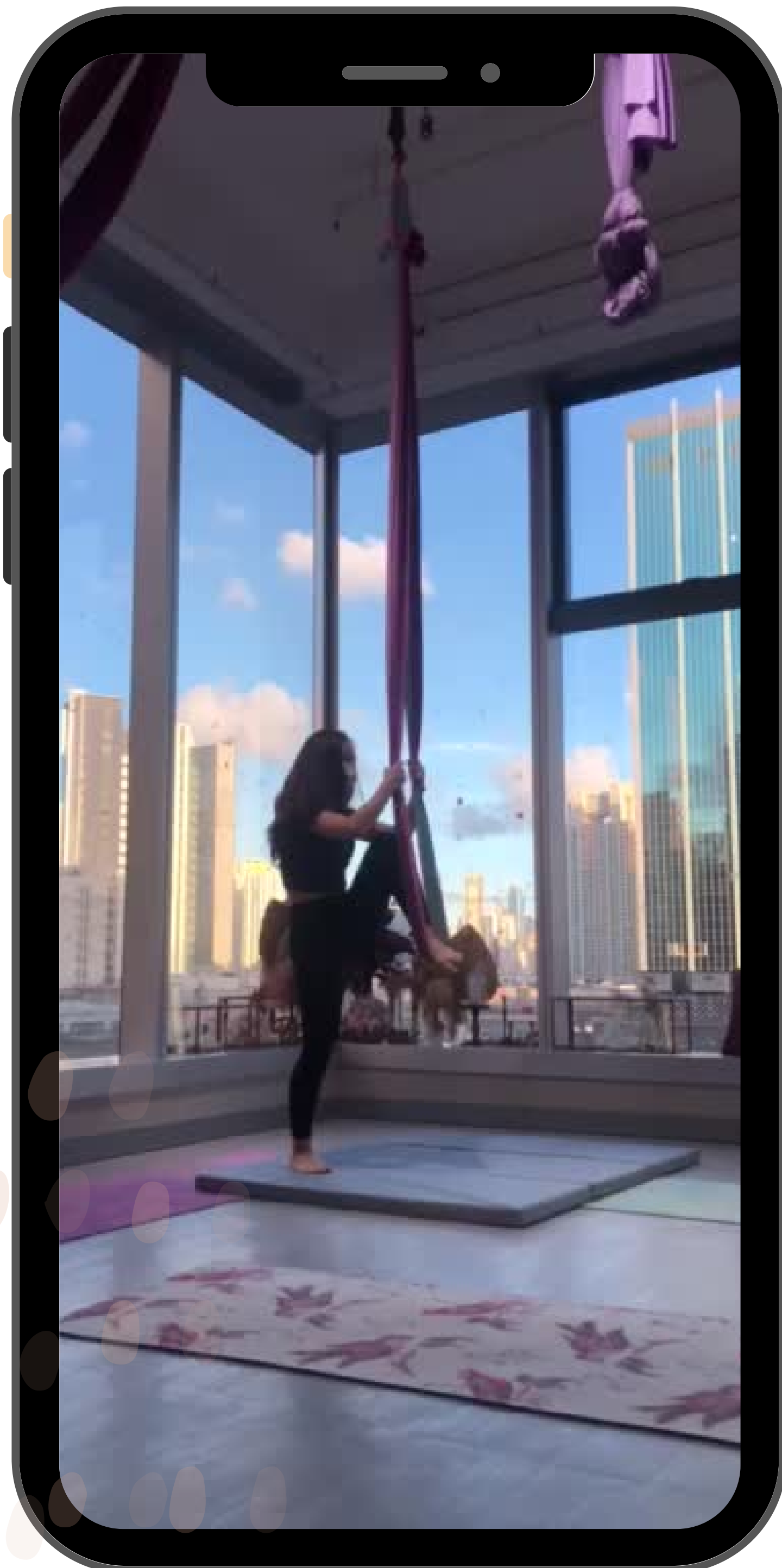
Aerial yoga, or yoga in general, has always been seen as an activity exclusive to females. I think that the studio is playing a part in promoting this idea. For example, the studio’s website features a girl sitting elegantly on an aerial hoop, the studio itself is also decorated with flowery wallpaper in pink. Whether the studio is exerting its institutional power to influence people to adopt a discriminatory mindset might be subject to debate, but I think that the femicentric design does create a certain effect on people’s perceptions.

Of course, the studio is not the sole influencer. Cultural hegemony must also come into play. There has been longstanding hegemonic masculinity under which people generally expect men to be hyper-muscular. When coming across the words “male” and “sports”, our minds would normally be directed towards pictures of men with six-packs doing gym or playing kung fu. The “male student” here, slim and slender, hanging on a smooth, silk-textured hammock, with his toes pointed, is quite contrasting with the hegemonic masculinity. Nonetheless, his performance in class was surprisingly impressive. He has more strength than us and could therefore sustain for a longer time in the air. It is therefore unreasonable to label aerial yoga as “girls’ sports” on the ground that girls are more talented in this aspect.



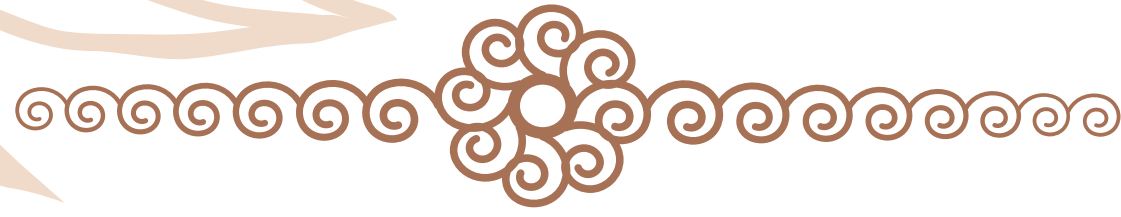
home page of the studio's website

However, body tracking is not without drawbacks. I found that I unconsciously felt anxious and pressured as I took the recording again. The more times I record, the more stressed I am. I wished I could make a perfect video, but it simply sent me into an unending loop of recording, dissatisfaction, and re-recording. This effect has indeed been discussed in the reading as well, that body tracking may invariably lead to self-doubt and distrust towards own selves.



Video of me doing aerial yoga

Aerial Yoga and Desiring Bodies



After class, my classmates and I were all editing the video we have just taken and did not hesitate to post it on Instagram. To be honest, this is one of the reasons why I wanted to learn aerial yoga – it is “Instagrammable”. I realized that making posts on social media is indeed a means to display our taste. Compared to popular wellness activities like jogging or hiking, aerial yoga might be seen as a “high-culture interest” (Iskra 2021), for reasons that it requires more skills, and has a higher cost. By acquiring such a skill, I am incorporating the “high-class qualities” into my body, or in other words “embodying high-class”.

“Expressions of taste are expressions of social power or powerlessness” (Pierre 1979: 76). This may explain the reason why so many K.O.L. are posting their videos of doing aerial yoga online. They are displaying their power in society and reassuring their influence on the social media community. This is also a kind of entrepreneurship of self, with the effort to learn is the cost, and the likes and increase of followers being the benefit. Having realized this, I think next time when similar trends arise, I may think critically if I really enjoy that activity in essence or am I simply enjoying the embodiment of high class.



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