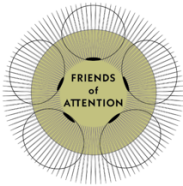


Chat Thread –
Friends of Attention
“First Friday” of 1 October 2020
On “The Handbook”
(With everyone from the August “Politics of Attention” Workshop)



14:07:03 From Sal Randolph (she/they) to Everyone:

I abandoned my japanese class for this

14:07:19 From stevie knauss to Everyone:

Wow!

14:07:19 From Jesse Prinz to Everyone:

arigato!

14:07:21 From Zach McLane to Everyone:

I've always been "at work" during these meetings

14:13:21 From stevie knauss to Everyone:

Thank you graham!

14:45:07 From Sal Randolph (she/they) to Everyone:

What is our prompt? Key focus?

14:45:18 From D. Graham Burnett to Everyone:

<https://docs.google.com/document/d/17EQzei-xEcs2hiAE-iNG17CfQt-iYYIYutuTDgxhsvo/edit?usp=sharing>

15:05:26 From Sal Randolph (she/they) to Everyone:

Do you also want our direct notes from the conversations?

15:09:53 From D. Graham Burnett to Everyone:

Ok! Just another minute.... Do start to drop stuff in here....

15:10:06 From D. Graham Burnett to Everyone:

I am dropping a thing sent by Akua Banful, for starters:

15:10:22 From D. Graham Burnett to Everyone:

“One of the things I was most struck by as I read and meditated on A Handbook for the Attention Liberation Movements was the extent to which it is a text of loving refusal. By 'loving refusal,' I mean that it offers a compelling and heartfelt case for why a reader who finds themselves in possession of this text should/ is right to question the rules of engagement of a sick and sad world and how they might go about refusing these terms. Here, love, the crucial component, enters the picture.”

15:11:33 From D. Graham Burnett to Everyone:

and, further, she writes:

15:11:56 From Jeff Dolven to Everyone:

Commodification: it's such an important idea. But I can see how it limits our vision to say that decommodification is an END. Perhaps an emphasis on the characteristic experience of an attention that has been successfully captured by the attention economy, and exercises in alternatives. Unsalability is not the END but it can be a kind of TEST.

15:12:29 From D. Graham Burnett to Everyone:

"Where love and compassion prove crucial is in encouraging others to follow you out into an existence that might, because it is unknown to them – and perhaps to us all – be a fearsome prospect. A few moments in the handbook gesture, I believe, towards such a recognition when they point out that among the powers of radical human attention are "the freedom to make new worlds;" "to create the possibility of a better world;" or, more thrilling (and probably even more cause for fear to some), "it actually brings a better world into being." (7 & 9). "

15:12:36 From Sal Randolph (she/they) to Everyone:

Brad, Luca, Sal

Our conversation focused on the language of commodification and whether another language might get closer to the idea. Luca proposed "optimization" as what we were opposed to (as in: the way mindfulness can be used to try to optimize the self or optimize the worker). Sal suggested non-instrumentalized attention as the alternative to un-commodified attention (though that language is already in the handbook). Brad proposed "curious attention." We also talked about how to describe the many forms of "free" attention we might find desirable and whether it would be good for the handbook to spend more time articulating these specifically - creating an ecology of desirable attentional forms (drifting or diffuse attention, sustained attention, absorption, love, etc.).

15:12:41 From Sal Randolph (she/they) to Everyone:

Within all this, Luca had a metaphor of soil and gardens - somehow a baseline of this non-instrumentalized attention might be free to grow into these many specific forms. Could we develop that metaphor further? Or find another equally rich?

15:12:49 From Sal Randolph (she/they) to Everyone:

DIRECT NOTES FROM OUR CONVERSATION

Luca

"optimization" vs commodification

mindfulness is organized towards optimization

Sal

do you mean what we might call in Zen, "gaining mind"?

Luca

undoing the meta-frame getting the place where attention is diffuse

Brad

aka Silicon-valley mindfulness, think better, function better in capitalist society

Luca

these practices have a narrowing effect

15:12:59 From Sal Randolph (she/they) to Everyone:

Sal

which kinds of attention does this group value? sustained attention or diffuse attention?

Brad

drifting attention diffuse attention

Luca

a soil or baseline of free attention which is like the soil of the flower

Brad

are you wanting to shift the discourse from Marxist to a broader idea, the non-optimized attention

Sal

To me it's about instrumentalized and non-instrumentalized, which includes both this question of the optimization and also commodification

15:13:05 From Sal Randolph (she/they) to Everyone:

Brad

What other words?

non-instrumentalized attention?

non-optimized attention?

curious attention?

non goal-oriented attention?

Sal

Is it worth trying to articulate in this handbook some of the specifically non-instrumentalized forms of attention we find desirable? There are many!

absorption (falling in love, flow, loving a book)
drifting, diffuse
post-meditation attention - the world is vivid!
curiosity
sustained attention
love

15:13:13 From Brad Fox to Everyone:

Notes on that same conversation with Luca and Sal:

15:13:15 From Brad Fox to Everyone:

How do we get beyond the economic language of commodification to describe what's going on with attention in the world of corporate optimization and proliferating and mutating mindfulness practices?

We thought it was about instrumentalized attention—where even in meditative tradition there might be a goal. We were interested in attention with no goal.

We thought about the language we use to talk about that.

Attention might be diffuse, free, unfocused, daydreaming. It might be a baseline, the soil in a garden.

But it can also be sustained, durational, without being instrumentalized, because it's curious and receptive more than goal-oriented, it's open to a fresh view of the world, a renewed vividness of experience.

This language could be expanded and explored.

I also thought humor and playfulness were good ways to interrupt instrumentalization.

We also talked about involuntary attention. About falling in love. That kind of absorption.

15:13:18 From D. Graham Burnett to Everyone:

And Akua finishes: "My point is that although the worlds that radical human attention open up are undoubtedly better, they are also (for many) unknown and, therefore, perhaps, daunting. And, to ask people to break with or refuse the worlds they do know, even if those are grinding them down, is to ask them to jump into the unknown. In the face of the fear that many might feel when faced with such a task, one answer, in my view, is to guide them towards this leap with compassion and with love – I think the Handbook does just that. "

15:13:22 From lucarade to Everyone:

The flowering metaphor can be extended into the soil, into grounding. The cultivation not of any specific, 'grasping' attention to replace the commodified forms of attention, but of foundations, pervading continuously throughout our ongoing experience, that form the soil for

flowerings. Such as: receptivity to involuntary attention emerging from mundane experience (curiosity, love, oneness, confusion), meta-level awareness of attentional hijackings, space for non-instrumental attention without 'non-productivity' guilt, etc.

The "commodification vs freed" attention axis can become co-opted into the same kind of narrow and constricting attention we seek to overthrow, this time in an 'anti'-direction: constantly straining towards freed attention in rebellion, instead of the receptivity and 'thorough' attention we're wishing to cultivate. Less revolutionary language, and a broader term for the insidious life-destroying forms of attention we're fighting beyond its financialized form, would help avoid this.

15:13:31 From Ana Marques to Everyone:

The fear that placing the commodification of attention against the wall is pointless (considering that rad. h. att is beyond) or that it will bring some non-desired Marxism into the picture, for me, only makes sense because it invites to go deeper in the handbook's argument. What is **really** the problem with commodification? It's not merely that it takes place of true attention (even if there is a time scarcity regarding what to we choose or blindly choose to attend to). The problem is that it imposes a cultural paradigm of separation, scarcity and colonization by which everything (inside, "I", and outside, the "Other") becomes a thing — and not a living system with inherent value on its own path to evolution. So the commodification of our attention de-sensibilizes us of our power of creation, of the magic of our autopoiesis (Maturana's notion of becoming) as individuals and as groups, and of our collective pursuit of actually (and not possibly) bringing a better world into being.

15:13:40 From Sonali Chakravarti to Everyone:

The most important thing to add is a greater integration of the reflections on friendship at the end. The gesture to sociality and friendship bears so much weight of the project, it is the poetic horizon to which so many of the mini-practices look. Yet, the complexity of friendship, the way attention can become short-circuited and distracted, even within relationships we want to be based on care and love, should be given more space in the document. What has been happening in our friendships? What are the signals that we are missing the attentional mark of what we can do together?

15:13:50 From Jessica Gallucci to Everyone:

Alyssa generously took notes during our breakout session! So I'll leave most of it to her. But to restate a few of my points:

- it is a total pleasure and an indulgence to read—and even inspiring. Stylishly, idiosyncratically written; seems to have a kind of tongue-in-cheek academic slant.
- the above is also a sticking point: I was reminded of something Lex Brown brought up in one of our sessions about who we are speaking to (or with). Is the language inclusive/accessible enough? Can we get to the point sooner, make it more handbooky?

* Jesse Brought up Yoko Ono's book of conceptual art prompts, which reminded me of Hans Ulrich Obrist's "Do It"; maybe we need something in that vein or in between it and the Situationist International's manifesto (I agree too w/Jesse's points about leaning into political/activist rhetoric)

15:13:53 From Kyle Berlin to Everyone:

Julian, Federica, Adam, me: The power of the text is how it provides an umbrella to describe and convene activities, sensations, desires that are everywhere already extant. Approaching a more reparative and less paranoid mode. Consider a skateboarder. Can we name the attentive flow she accessing when in the throes of skating? Can others recognize their own smooth-rolling “skateboards” within that same description? Revolving around this word “radical”—could the skateboarder see her attention as counting or “radical” just another line that narrows the community?

15:14:00 From Catherine Willett to Everyone:

For some reason I’m having trouble pasting into this

15:14:22 From Jesse Prinz to Everyone:

As a political text, meant for activists, the current draft is lacking. It doesn’t clearly identify the problems, it doesn’t concretize a solution, it doesn’t call people to collective action, it doesn’t credit the people (fan women of color) who have challenged the attention economy or algorithms injustice. AN activist version could be written but it would be very different. This I think would work best as a set of attention practices. Keep the manifest part shot, and dedicate most of it to page-length practices. These need not be political at all. They can be written in different styles, and can be playful. poetic, or political. Then it becomes a real handbook without incurring the burden to appeal to those who want an activist manifesto....

15:14:35 From Jesse Prinz to Everyone:

There is some of that already, I think it leans too heavily on certain themes (friendship especially) and would benefit from a greater plurality of strategies, exercises, interventions, games, pranks, meditations, absurdist acts, contemplative excursions, and ways of seeing. Like 50 or so. We could each generate one. But it should say at the start it is not a political or activist text. There are serious and long-standing problems with the forces that manipulate attention. These are serious forms of oppression. They are classed and raced, and are a source of injustice and inequality. Any serious reckoning with those would take a very different form.

15:14:52 From Julian Chehirian to Everyone:

We discussed the distinction between the exigent tone / urgent quality of the manifesto, and the idea that practices of undivided attention are already immensely popular all around us. These are people who we can organize with, who we do not need to educate/awaken, but are already fellow travelers.

Federica mentioned fishing with her father, and how she experienced this as a meditative practice. Kyle mentioned Adam's exercise of opening one's hand over the course of seven minutes.

We discussed the question of radical attention, and how that might be different from forms of undivided attention that people already engage in. i.e. flow state, "being present".

15:15:04 From Catherine Willett to Everyone:

Our breakout group talked a lot about how we are going to get this document/message out in a way that echoes the document/ALMS’ aim itself. We talked a bit about the Birds aren’t Real movement (no relation to us, as far as I am aware) and the spirit of playfulness they embrace and how it is an example of an effective social organizing tactic even if (again as far as I am aware) it’s more of a meme than an actual social movement. We thought it would be great

to make stickers/posters to post around in public - what are playful/subversive yet meaningful ways to bring new people into the fold? And how can we get this out quickly (a focus on: this text is great, let's get it into the world asap)? We also talked about audience for the piece, and thought the document could be its best self if the audience was clarified (and a couple of us are of the opinion that it's okay that this isn't for everyone, that it's for people who may have a predisposition to engage with this already

15:15:05 From Catherine Willett to Everyone:

— and then those people can in turn reach attentional niches of which they are part and better communicate this with them in that niche/context.)

15:15:13 From Catherine Willett to Everyone:

Small thorns included: some of the practices seem less developed/more flip than others & would be good to integrate the friendship aspect more thoroughly.

15:15:33 From Julian Chehirian to Everyone:

The handbook could use some additional practices that move OUTWARDS rather than calling people to attend. In other words, ones that call on us to go out and gather new forms of connection/new networks.

From Kristin: "Pleasurable activities bind people together in unalienated activity. We call these groups subcultures. And these subcultures generally have already existing communication channels that facilitate messaging and mobilization".

For an example of this exercise, see: "Appendix - Attention as solidarity: a reconnaissance exercise" from "Comments on ALMS handbook" from the Attention as Anticapitalism working group.

15:16:32 From Sal Randolph (she/they) to Everyone:

Just on a personal note, I love the poetic-zany aspects of the text, and I don't mind being broadly Marxist in orientation. Happy with the manifesto energy. Again this raises the question of several books with different aspects, valences, styles, audiences, purposes.

15:17:44 From Jeff Dolven to Everyone:

Another thought: I think in relation to Bird practice this text shifts the emphasis from the OBJECT to the COMMUNITY. I love that, but I wonder if it works for *developing* radical attention. Beginning with objects, growing community around them, is so powerful. Absent the object the practice can be abstract. A clearer template for exercises—how to make your own—might be useful. The beautiful button-pushing exercise—is it an attentional practice, as opposed to a practice of affective self-reorientation?

15:18:09 From Ana Marques to Everyone:

However, I regard that the practices at the end are yes beautiful, but are not as directive and could be and would need to be for a call-out handbook. Would love some metadesign indicators of true attention experiences that people who get the material could get inspired by!

15:18:09 From Sal Randolph (she/they) to Everyone:

^^^^^ Jeff yes!

15:18:51 From Sal Randolph (she/they) to Everyone:

@ Stevie, love love love mimeographs

15:20:06 From Julian Chehirian to Everyone:

Jeff's question: "is it an attentional practice, as opposed to a practice of affective self-reorientation?" — so interesting, and could help us think through what we mean to say on the

meditations (versus?) mindfulness question. is affective self-reorientation really bounded / containable to the self? I would say, no!

15:20:18 From Sal Randolph (she/they) to Everyone:

This also makes me think of the techniques of Hercules Florence

<https://aperture.org/editorial/light-writing-tropics/>

15:21:10 From Jesse Prinz to Everyone:

sadly that message is still radical

15:21:23 From D. Graham Burnett to Everyone:

^^^^^

15:23:00 From Sal Randolph (she/they) to Everyone:

This might also be a good resource:

15:23:03 From Sal Randolph (she/they) to Everyone:

<https://soulellis.com/writing/tdc2021/>

15:23:17 From Sal Randolph (she/they) to Everyone:

and <https://soulellis.com/writing/feb2021/>

15:23:23 From D. Graham Burnett to Everyone:

Super interesting book on the history of this kind of radical publishing, and its micro dynamics: THE MAKING OF OUR BODIES OURSELVES: How Feminism Travels Across Borders (by Kathy Davis)... 2007

15:26:02 From Jesse Prinz to Everyone:

I thought there was too much on friendship :)

15:26:07 From Julian Chehirian to Everyone:

Kristin's sociological contributions!

15:26:44 From Jesse Prinz to Everyone:

More birding, less friendship :)

15:26:58 From Sal Randolph (she/they) to Everyone:

Birding is friendship