

Abteilung für Asiatische und Islamische Kunstgeschichte WS 2018/19

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Modern Postural Yoga in an Expanded Field

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To celebrate its centenary celebrations, in 1982 the Berlin Philharmonic Orchestra invited violin maestro Yehudi Menuhin to conduct its orchestra. Menuhin accepted the invitation. A few months later at a centenary concert, Menuhin first took his place at the conductor's podium, then rested his forearms and the crown of his head at the podium's center and raised his legs from the floor and over his head in *shirsha-asana*. Once perpendicular to the floor, through the actions of his legs he led the orchestra in the first movements of Beethoven's "Fifth Symphony." How did Menuhin come to understand *asanas* (yoga postures) as musical movements? In this talk, I first argue that Menuhin's understanding of *asanas* as art forms -- or as musical movements, if you will, -- was shaped by his longstanding friendship with Indian yoga master B.K.S. Iyengar with whom the musician had studied since the 1950s. Next, I reconstruct the contours of their friendship. Finally, I trace how Iyengar had come understand postural yoga as an art-form and see himself as an artist. My argument is that Iyengar's construction and display of the figure of a yogi as an artist was shaped by developments transpiring in the art world in India in the 1930s and 40s, and developments in Europe and North America in the 1950s, 60s, and 70. Some of these cultural formations were the focus of art historian's Rosalind Krauss's classic essay, "Sculpture in an Expanded Field."

