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Participatory sense-making in physical play and dance improvisation: drawing meaningful connections between self, others and world

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**Participatory Sense-making in Physical Play and Dance Improvisation:
Drawing Meaningful Connections Between Self, Others and World**

Carolien Hermans

**Participatory Sense-making in Physical Play and Dance Improvisation: Drawing
Meaningful Connections Between Self, Others and World**

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Artistic Work

My artistic work comprises three phases: 1) the living archive, 2) the re-enactment of physical play events through dance improvisational practice and the Touch Project and 3) the Re-Play/Re-Move toolkit.

The living Archive

Over a period of five years (from 2013 to 2018), I have collected images of the physical play of my own children, with their friends and neighbor kids. The living archive consists of more than a hundred photographic sequences and stand-alones that all serve as kinetic markers/traces of the original physical play event. See: <https://www.researchcatalogue.net/view/1580666/1580667>

Re-enactment of physical play events and Touch Project

In this phase of my artistic work, the archive becomes a source for the creation of new work. A selected set of imagery is handed over to a professional dancer or a group of professional dancers who try to grasp the affects, intensities, and forces that are still present in the imagery. The improvisation sessions with the professional dancers are also captured with the camera. Three re-enactments have taken place: 1) the re-enactment of rough and tumble play of four boys by first-year dance students at the University of the Arts in Amsterdam, 2) the re-enactment of animal becoming of my daughter, re-enacted by me, at the Conservatorium of Amsterdam and 3) the re-enactment of a hotel dance by professional dance artist Paula Guzzanti based in Ireland/Malta.

Re-enactment of R & T Play:

<https://www.researchcatalogue.net/view/592032/592033>

Re-enactment of animal becoming:

<https://www.researchcatalogue.net/view/592694/592695>

Re-enactment of hotel dance:

<https://www.researchcatalogue.net/view/592346/592347>

In addition to the re-enactments, I also initiated the Touch Project:

<https://www.researchcatalogue.net/view/591404/597959>

Re-Play/Re-Move toolkit:

The third phase of my artistic research consists of the development of the 'Re-Move/Re-Play Toolkit', an educational toolkit for children in the age of 4 -10 years old. The 'Re-Move/Re-Play Toolkit' is made up of two elements: a creative card deck and three workshop sessions. See:

<https://www.researchcatalogue.net/view/1291603/1291604>

For insights into the artistic process (the frameworks I offered as well as concrete exercises and instructions):

Photo diary of R&T Play of the four boys:

<https://www.researchcatalogue.net/view/1741927/1741928>

Photo diary of re-enactment MTD students:

<https://www.researchcatalogue.net/view/1742770/1742771>

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The accomplishment of this thesis required significant support from many generous people around me. I take this opportunity to express my gratitude to everyone who supported me throughout this work. It is a genuine pleasure to express my deep sense of thanks and gratitude to my supervisor and mentor, Prof. Henk Borgdorff. He took me along on my first artistic research journey when I just graduated with a master of Choreography, at a moment and a time that artistic research in the Netherlands was still in its infancy. His dedication to artistic research, and his strong belief that artistic research deserves its own place within academia, have been a driving force for many. I thank him for his timely advice and suggestions, his meticulous scrutiny and his belief that I could bring this to a good end – especially at moments when I was full of doubt. I am also profoundly grateful to my co-supervisor Prof. Eeva Anttila for her expertise, guidance, and support. Her innovative approach to children and dance has influenced and inspired me in many ways. I hope that we will keep on collaborating in the near future.

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I am most indebted to all the children that participated in my research, for sharing their informal moments of play with me. I owe the most to my two children, Luuk and Lisa Scheers, who have taught me the incredible fun of play and who took me along in the small adventures of life. Finally, I thank my partner, Benjamin Scheers, for his support and critical mind.



Figure 1. Hide and Seek © Carolien Hermans

Provenance and outline of chapters

Wanderer, your footsteps are the road, and
nothing more;
wanderer, there is no road, the road is
made by walking.
By walking one makes the road,
and upon glancing behind one sees the
path that never will be trod again.
Wanderer, there is no road,
Only wakes upon the sea.

Antonio Machado (as cited in Varela,
1987, p.63)

This thesis consists of a compilation of texts that are written between 2019 and 2022. However, my artistic research has a much longer history, since it is a coming together of my experience for many years as a dance maker on the one side and my motherhood on the other side.

The birth of my first child in 2004 marks not only the start of my motherhood but also my transformation as a maker – from that moment on I slowly moved away from the professional dance scene. My research-practice became something that was deeply embedded in my daily life, a personal journey that took place in and around my home in the direct immediacy of my children. My life became small and big at once. I became absorbed by daily occurrences, the routine of everyday life. Yet, at the same time, this was life. It was big because it entailed all the big themes, such as life and death, sickness and health, love, transition, personal value, freedom, and the loss of freedom.

As probably most mothers would agree, it was a tiresome and exhausting period soaking all the energy out of me, yet incredibly rewarding as well. Motherhood turned out to be all-encompassing, demanding, loud and boisterous. It was there all the time, in the foreground and it pushed my artistic work to the back, until it was barely present anymore, more a desire than reality. But it never really disappeared, it was there although in a vague, indeterminate way.

I became intrigued by what I refer to as micro-adventures, the small little things in daily life that happen spontaneously and that trigger a playful state. My children, walking with boots through small puddles of water on a rainy day, collecting stones and letting them splash in the water, molding clay, jumping over a fence, balancing on a fallen tree, etc. Tactile-kinaesthetic experiences that awaken the body-mind and that draw immediate attention to the experiential dynamics of a movement, of a play event – in many ways similar to what I experienced in an earlier life as a dancer and a performance artist. These micro-adventures brought me back to my artistic work as I started to capture these small play events with my camera, a digital SLR (Single Lens Reflex Camera). This could be anything: from a snow fight, rough and tumble play to a circus act or a spy game. Wherever we would go, I would take my camera along and at home, I always had it at hand. I first and foremost was interested in the physicality of their actions, in capturing the physical play as an event through a sequence of images.

I saw some striking similarities with dance improvisation – specifically how meaning is shaped through the kinetic/kinaesthetic¹ and affective dimensions of our interaction with the world. I position myself as a researcher, an instigator, a facilitator, a thinker, a mother, and an artist of a practice that stays close at home. You could call it a home practice, a personal journey that starts in and around my own home and gradually brings the professional dance community back in.

This thesis describes bits and pieces of this journey. The chapters do not follow a chronological order. The middle part (the re-enactments) was written first and from this middle part, I worked back to the introduction. To provide more coherence, I decided to complement published papers with unpublished chapters, since written material on the living archive (chapter 5) and on re-enactment as artistic practices (chapters 6 and 9) was missing. This way a narrative started to emerge, one that explains and provides insights into the different phases of my artistic research.

The published papers are included in their original form, with only some minor edits to support the line of reasoning throughout the thesis. For this reason, some overlap can be found, especially in the middle part when I discuss the re-enactment of the physical play events through dance improvisational practice. Repetitions and doublings may occur, and I hope this will not be too disturbing or distracting. Each chapter is preceded by a small prelude in which I briefly look back, and recapture the most important insights that will be taken along in the next chapter. It's a journey in the true sense of the word, a path laid down by walking – in the words of Francisco Varela, one of the founders of the enactive account of embodied cognition.

The thesis consists of 12 chapters. Four chapters have been published previously:

- Chapter 7: Hermans, C. (2018). Joint action and joint attention: dance improvisation and children's physical play as participatory sense-making activities. *Choreographic Practices*, 11(2), 157-175. https://doi.org/10.1386/chor.9.2.311_1
- Chapter 8: Hermans, C. (2019). Becoming Animal: Children's Physical play and Dance improvisation as Transformative Activities that Generate Novel Meanings. *Journal of Dance & Somatic Practices*, 11(2), 157-175. https://doi.org/10.1386/jdsp_00003_1
- Chapter 9: 'Let's play: re-enactment of affective traces through dance improvisation' has been submitted to and accepted in *Capacious, Journal for Emerging Affect*.
- Chapter 10: Hermans, C. (2021). To Touch and to Be Touched: Interconnectedness and Participatory Sense-making in Play and Dance Improvisation. *Journal of Dance Education*, pp. 1-12. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15290824.2020.1836647>

Chapter 1 starts with a description of my own research interests. I point to the intimate relation between physical play of children and dance improvisation, as both can be seen as ways of relating in a meaningful way to self, others and world. Consequently, I introduce the enactive account and Hanne De Jaegher and Ezequiel Di Paolo's concept (2007) of participatory sense-making, followed by the three phases of this artistic research, the research question and sub-questions. I furthermore discuss three female artists that combine motherhood with their artistic practice. Finally, I outline ethical issues specifically when it comes to including (your own) children in the research process. I look into informed consent, concerns about privacy as well as potential conflicts of interest.

¹ Kinaesthetic refers to *kinaesthesia*, while kinetic refers to *kinesis*. Kinaesthesia is the ability to sense one's movement of joints and limbs. It stands for the awareness of movement. It is primarily influenced by muscle spindles and secondarily influenced by skin receptors and joint receptors (Smyth, 1984). Kinetic refers to the motion of material bodies and the forces and energy associated therewith. Kinetic refers to movement, while kinaesthetic refers to the (internal) sensing of our movement.

In chapter 2, I further elaborate on the two main phenomena of this artistic research: physical play and dance improvisation. The aim is to give a general overview of the theoretical landscape of both (physical) play and dance (improvisation), as well as some of its most pronounced landmarks. I thereby focus on a phenomenological perspective on physical play and dance improvisation. The lived body itself is considered here as the vital source of experience and sense-making processes. Physical play and dance improvisation are therefore seen as creative practices where bodies and worlds are in constant dialogue with each other. The first part of the chapter is dedicated to play. I first introduce ideas presented by prominent authors of play (Huizinga, 1995; Caillois, 1961; Bateson, 1972). Subsequently, I discuss the difference between play and game and introduce two perspectives on play, an evolutionary (Fagen, 1981) and a developmental perspective (Piaget, 1962; Vygotsky, 2016). In addition, I offer a contemporary viewpoint on play by discussing the writings of Flemming Mouritsen (1998) and Helle Karoff (2013). The second part of this chapter is dedicated to dance improvisation. In this second part, I discuss the following notions of dance improvisation: spontaneity and being present in the moment (Ravn, 2020), real-time decision making (Kimmel, Hristova & Kussmaul, 2018), improvisation as a tool to release habits (Middelow, 2012), and dance improvisation as a relational and attentional practice (Little, 2014; De Spain, 2014). At the end of the chapter, I provide a preliminary definition of both physical play and dance improvisation.

Chapter 3 provides an introduction to the enactive approach, with a specific focus on the creation of meaning through dynamic interactions between an autonomous agent and its environment. I further elaborate on the concept of participatory sense-making (De Jaegher & Di Paolo, 2007) in relation to physical play and dance improvisation. In this chapter, I develop a first conceptual model of physical play and dance improvisation that uses the enactive approach as a theoretical backdrop. The model consists of five elements: decision-making-in-action, kinaesthetic pleasure, rhythmic coordination, creative potential, and its ambiguous, open-ended nature. In chapters 11 and 12, I return and re-shape the model in accordance to new insights and research findings.

Chapter 4 describes the artistic research method. First, I discuss the role of the artistic researcher as someone that is both an outsider and an insider. Subsequently, I discuss the type of knowledge that is produced and the role of documentation and visual ethnography as an artistic research method. Michael Schwab's notion of exposition (2019) is introduced as a way of overcoming the traditional distinction between theory and practice. Finally, I discuss how artistic research can be seen as a methodology-to-come, i.e. a methodology that does not seek to close but to open up things (Ingold, 2016).

In Chapter 5, I discuss the living archive. First, I dive conceptually into what an archive is, what kind of archives there are and if and in what way a living archive can be defined. Second, I relate the archive to the arts, specifically to dance/play. The Dancing Museum of Boris Charmatz, and two other examples of dance archives are discussed - Shioban Dance Replay and Double Skin/Double Mind (DS/DM) interactive installation - followed by an analysis of the Playing the Archive Project. Third, I discuss the complex relationship between photography and documentation. Auslander's valuable work on the performativity of documentation (2006) is used to understand how the photographs co-construct and co-create the original play event. Finally, I describe different ways of ordering and organising the photographic material, in singular as well as sequential way - very much in line with Muybridge's work. I close the chapter off with some final thoughts on the archive as an open-ended, transformative system that does not only have evidential value but is a creative artwork in and of itself.

Chapter 6 takes re-enactment as its central theme. Re-enactment is used in diverse practices, but this chapter is dedicated to the artistic practice of re-enactment in dance and the performing arts. I argue that re-enactment is not a re-production of the past in the strict sense of the word but a re-activation of the creative potential that is still lingering in the work (Lepecki, 2010). In addition, I

discuss how the body can be used to re-enter and re-articulate the archive. The body, as a living entity, has the potential to access the archive in an experiential and affective way. I introduce Mühlhoff's notion of affective resonances (2015) to explain how affects can travel in-between bodies. The aim of the three re-enactments – discussed in chapters 7, 8 and 9 - is to unlock and grasp the virtual forces that are present and still at work in the imagery. I close the chapter with some final thoughts on re-enactment as a double-folded process, an affective doubling without appropriation. Re-enactment is a process in which experience is re-experienced.

In chapter 7, I discuss the artistic outcomes of the first re-enactment. The original play event consists of a rough-and-tumble play of four 13-year-old boys at the Conservatorium of Amsterdam. The play event is then re-enacted by first-year students of the Modern Theatre Dance department, Amsterdam University of the Arts. Dance improvisation and children's physical play events are considered organisational practices (Noë, 2015). Both activities organise and reorganise our lived experience. Even more, both activities are socially shared and culturally shaped – and thus highly relational. According to the enactive approach, sense-making evolves out of self-organisational processes in which the brain, body, and environment are linked. In this chapter, the concept of participatory sense-making serves as an underlying theoretical framework to explore the shared elements of physical play and dance improvisation. The main focus lies on joint action and joint attention. I will specifically look at the co-constitution of meaning through coordination of action, interaction rhythm and shared intentionality.

In Chapter 8, I discuss the artistic outcomes of the second re-enactment. The original play event consists of a spontaneous play event of my 12-year-old daughter in our living room that serves as an entry point to examine animal becomings as transformative forces. In an improvised dance solo, I re-enact the animal becomings of my daughter. The second re-enactment explores the transformative potential of children's physical play and dance improvisation. Using the enactive approach as a theoretical framework, I argue that play and dance improvisation trigger novel sense-making capabilities by a deep engagement with the environment (Di Paolo, 2007). Both activities give rise to transformative forces, ways of becoming that create openings and passages through which one re-engages and re-connects with the environment. Throughout the chapter, I will discuss how transformative forces in both physical play and dance improvisation can open-up new registers of meaning-making.

In Chapter 9, I discuss the third and final re-enactment. The original play event is a spontaneous hotel dance of my 12-year-old daughter (at the Britannia Hotel in Coventry). The hotel dance is then re-enacted by a professional dancer. The third re-enactment focuses on affective resonances, i.e. how affects and intensities that were once felt in a spontaneous play event can be re-lived and re-organised through dance improvisational practice. I use Helle Karoff's model (2013) on play practices and play moods to better understand the role of affects in the sense-making process of both physical play and dance improvisation.

Chapter 10 addresses the notion of touch and its constitutive role in the participatory sense-making process (De Jaegher & Di Paolo, 2007) of play and dance improvisation. Touch is considered a relational activity that continuously changes the contours of self, other(ness), and world(ing). It is therefore surprising that touch traditionally has received little attention in philosophy. Phenomenology and the enactive account however do hint to the vital role of touch in the interaction dynamics. The first part of the chapter consists of a discussion of key concepts, such as the duplicity and ambiguity of touch in relation to the enactive account and participatory sense-making. A short research overview is provided on the role of interpersonal touch in daily life. In the second part of the research I shift to artistic practice. I discuss the Touch Project, a dance improvisation project that is part of my artistic research and that explores the notion of touch in a creative and experimental setting. Through bodily inquiry, I explore how touch contributes to relational knowing. The chapter concludes with some

practical suggestions on enhancing body-mind awareness and encouraging playfulness through the use of interpersonal touch. It offers touch exercises that can be used in an educational setting to promote interconnectedness and a sense of community.

In Chapter 11, I present the Re-Play/Re-Move toolkit, an educational toolkit for children between the age of 4 -10 years old that consists of two elements: a creative card deck and three additional workshops. In this chapter, I discuss the background, objectives and theoretical context of the Re-Play/Re-Move toolkit. The enactive account and the concept of participatory sense-making form the backbone of the Re-Play/Re-Move toolkit. I first return to the conceptual model that was introduced in chapter three. A sixth element is added to the model: qualitative movement dynamics with three parameters (time, space, and force). Then, I introduce the Re-Play/Re-Move toolkit with the different categories, the pedagogical framework, and its main objectives. In addition, I discuss other examples of creative toolkits within the field of play, dance, and performing arts: Sensorium Toolkit for Dance developed by ICK (Internationaal Choreografisch Kunstencentrum, 2016), Play as Radical Practice developed by Albert Potrony (2016-2018) and Playing Up, A Live Art Game for Kids and Adults by Sibylle Peters (2016). I close the chapter with some final thoughts on the role of creative movement exploration in the lives of young children.

Chapter 12 is the final chapter. First, I return to where it all started: close at home, with the spontaneous play events of my children. I describe physical play and dance improvisation as fluid practices where rhythm is intensified and experienced in the flesh. From here, I move to enactivism and the concept of participatory sense-making. I revisit the two research goals that I formulated in chapter one and I reflect on the possible contributions this research study has made on articulating the kinship between physical play and dance improvisation. I then return to the subquestions that I formulated in the first chapter, and I critically reflect on the three different phases of the research process: the living archive, the re-enactments, and the Re-Play/Re-Move toolkit. I close the chapter with some suggestions for future artistic research.

General notices:

- I use APA as the general referencing system. In the original articles, other referencing systems are used (such as Chicago and MLA) but for reasons of coherence I decided to convert them to APA style (in the text as well as the reference list).
- Throughout the thesis, I use female pronouns to refer to researchers, children, dancers, and persons in general. Unfortunately, I was not able to write in a gender-neutral way due to existing guidelines (such as APA) and reasons of readability.
- The introduction paragraph on enactivism in chapter 3 (page 43 to page 45) is borrowed from Hermans (2018).
- Chapters 7, 8, 9 and 10 are published previously. The articles have a similar structure: a first part that describes the research context, the enactive approach and De Jaegher and Di Paolo's (2007) concept of participatory sense-making, and a second part that consists of the artistic research. To avoid repetition, I have skipped the paragraphs on enactivism in the four published papers. Even more, I revised the abstracts of the published papers, made some adjustments in the text to increase readability and added some footnotes. I have carefully looked at these adaptations and I have tried to honour the original version (the published article) as much as possible.
- Throughout the thesis, I use cross-references that link text elements to related information elsewhere in the same document. The cross-references form a network structure of relations existing between the different parts of the thesis.