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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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Chapter 1. Introduction

My research in a few sentences:

In this artistic research, I start with exploring the kinetic/kinaesthetic[1] dimensions of physical play activities of my own children (including friends and neighbour kids). I capture these physical events, which often spontaneously occur but that are also sometimes staged, with my camera, and after an intense process of selecting, ordering and arranging, they become part of a living archive. The living archive then becomes a creative source for dancers, who re-enact the play events based on a set of images. The aim is to transmit initially felt forces/affects that were once present in the physical play events of my children, and that are then re-lived in dance improvisational practice, to gain insight into basic elements of both play and dance improvisation. I use the enactive account and the concept of participatory sense-making as theoretical reference points (De Jaegher & Di Paolo, 2007). Finally, these insights are used for the development of Re-Play/Re-Move, a creative toolkit for children between the age of 4-10 years.

How it started

There is no clear starting point, only many beginnings. Tracing back the origin of my interest in both physical play and dance improvisation is like looking in a family album and trying to make a coherent (and often imaginary) story out of the incomplete fragments of childhood. There are many traces: like my interest in dance from a young age (I was five years old when I started my first dance class) and the fact that movement itself has been a vessel for me to express feelings and to find shelter in turbulent times. Going through major life changes, my deep interest in movement remained. Still up today, I can enjoy simple movements of the body that serve no purpose and that are only done for the sake of enjoyment. Raising my arm in the air for example, softly and gently, following its trajectory, and engaging with what presents itself in the moment.

Besides my personal interest, I also have a long-term professional interest in dance, creative movement exploration, play, children, and pedagogy. I studied dance/choreography as well as pedagogy, and teaching university students has been one of my great pleasures in the past ten years. The same is true for young children. I am fascinated by the way children move through the world. For them, the body is close-at-hand (maybe because they are smaller) and their attention is naturally directed to the sensorial-tactile aspects of their surroundings. Tim Ingold and Jo Vergunst (2016, p.4) state that children focus "on the near-at-end" and they possess "a boundless curiosity in everything in the vicinity – which they want to reach out and touch as well as look at". For young children, movement itself is the vehicle for exploring the world.

I am intrigued by the excessiveness of children's movements (especially in play). It still has fringes and frayed edges as their movements are still *a work in progress*. Not too polished. Not so refined yet. Daily movements easily merge with the imaginary, and children often can find great joy just by moving and playing around. It is not easy to give words to, but I think that 'pleasure in the flesh', 'sense of aliveness', and 'movement as a primary source for delight and joy' come closest to what I try to grasp. I am indebted to the writings of dance scholar and Professor of Philosophy Maxine Sheets-Johnstone here. Not only because she connects movement/dance to phenomenology but also because she tries to find the roots of our bodily being in the world. Sheets-Johnstone (2015a) considers dance as the continuation of children's bodily play, both take the kinetic/tactile-kinaesthetic experience as vital for sense-making processes. She states that "movement produces a high, an elevated sense of aliveness, a delight in the kinetic dynamics that is underway" (2003, p.416). Even more, play and dance improvisation require a readiness for surprise, flexibility and an openness to engage with the possibilities that arise in the moment. Both activities "open up corporeal-kinetic

possibilities and thereby open up space for innovation, a field in which creative energies can surge" (2003, p.418).

I am aware that I sketch a rather romantic image of (physical) play and dance improvisation. However, play and dance improvisation do not always provide positive, or pleasurable experiences. Both can be demanding, there can be social and artistic pressure and it can potentially be risky (in terms of physical injuries). A power hierarchy might exist that excludes some children or beginners from participation. In the case of children's play, bullying might occur or social exclusion. Children who are bullied, more often play alone and they feel unsafe in the playground (Slee, 1995). Even more, unstructured and free play can be risky and dangerous especially when children play with found objects that are sharp, rusty, or that have fractures or splinters. Sometimes the environment is not safe or the action itself is risky (climbing in a very high tree, walking on thin ice, etc.). A young child may not always be capable of making the right decision about safety and group pressure may play a role here too. Some children may have coordination problems or motor problems and as a result, they may not enjoy physical play as much as other children do. Research (Gasser-Haas, Sticca & Seiler, Kennedy-Behr, Rodger & Mickan, 2011; Smyth & Anderson, 2000) shows that preschool children with motor problems significantly spend more time as onlookers, they are more involved in aggressive incidents and they experience more negative and disparaging reactions of their typically developing peers. They show more negative affect during play, and they have lower self-esteem and self-efficacy. Research also shows that children with a disability engage less in free, risky play because of major barriers such as accessibility and an over-protective attitude of the caregivers (Caprino, 2017).

Also, dance improvisation is not always pleasurable or positive. It can be a demanding practice, on a mental, physical as well as artistic level. This may result in injuries and psychological stress that in turn affect general wellbeing in a negative way (Van Winden et al., 2021). Although dance improvisation, and specifically contact improvisation, fosters ideas of democracy, tolerance, and equity by welcoming people of all experience levels, this doesn't necessarily mean that there is no power hierarchy involved. Beginners may look up to experts, and as a result, they only might move at the periphery of the performance space or not at all.

Both play and dance improvisation are creative practices where participants put their own vulnerability on the line. "We learn the vulnerabilities of being a body – our own vulnerabilities and the vulnerabilities of others in our movement interactions." (Sheets-Johnstone, 2003, p. 412). Also, Midgelow (2012, p.9) speaks of an intersubjective exchange that involves risk and ambiguity. The dancers need to "to be vulnerable to the process, open to the consequences and to the effect of each other's responses to the Other and one another". This vulnerability might evoke feelings such as anxiety, fear, and insecurity.

In order to offer the participants positive movement experiences, it is therefore important to create a safe pedagogical environment. For example, guided play or dance improvisation might offer a midway between direct instruction and free play. Guided play allows the teacher/facilitator to monitor and intervene in the social process when necessary (for example in the case of social exclusion and bullying). In free informal play, teachers/facilitators must at all times be aware of the potential risks of a play space (e.g. playing near the water) or a specific play event (e.g. balancing on a wall). Even more, it is important to explicate underlying values such as trust, mutual respect and care.

A safe and stimulating environment triggers the curiosity of children. Throughout this artistic research, the Reggio Emilia approach has been an important source for creating safe, pedagogical environments. In line with Reggio Emilia, I perceive the child (and any other participant) as strong, competent and knowledgeable. The child's contribution is not only honoured but also seen as central to the creative process (Sansom, 2009). I advocate a pedagogy of listening (Rinaldi, 2006) as it is listening that enables me to enter into a meaningful dialogue with the child. To listen is to actively

engage with the child, to be open and sensitive to their needs. Charlotte Svendler Nielsen (2009, p.87) speaks of embodied sensitivity as a necessary quality of anyone who engages pedagogically with children, i.e. "to listen with the whole body through kinaesthetic empathy".

Second of all, in my artistic research observation and documentation are used as pedagogical tools to create a safe and trusting environment. In the Reggio Emilia approach, teachers/artists spend considerable time in observing the child as close as possible. By observing, the teacher enters into a meaningful relationship with the child. Close observation allows the teacher/artist to make careful judgments about when (and when not) to intervene (Rinaldi, 2006). Empowering a child also means that the child needs to find her own solutions. Documentation is another pedagogical tool that is used in the Reggio Emilia approach. Photographs, video recordings, graphic arts, and transcribed conversations are used to understand the learning process of each child, as it "provides an inside view of the interests, needs, and experiences of children" (Yu, 2008, p.35). In this artistic research, I try to intervene as little as possible and in almost all cases I take up the role of observer. Therefore, observation and documentation play a crucial part in my artistic research (see also page 55).

Play, dance improvisation, and diversity
Both play and dance improvisation are cultural activities. They take place in and are an expression of culture. Already Huizinga (1955) stated that play is not an element *in* culture but an element *of* culture. In this artistic research, I started close at home by capturing and examining the spontaneous play events of my own children. As a result, my research on physical play limits itself almost entirely to white, middle-class children.

In my research on dance improvisation, I have collaborated with dance practitioners mainly from Europe but also from South Korea and South America. De Spain (2014) states that although there are many different viewpoints on dance improvisation, the community itself is quite homogeneous. The leading figures of postmodern improvisation are often European descendants, white and well-educated.

Diversity does not only involve cultural background but also gender, disability, and socioeconomic status (SES). Boys and girls, as well as male and female dancers, were involved in my research but no one with a disability or from a low SES. I am aware that this does not do justice to the diversity in our current society. In the future, it would be highly recommended to involve other cultural groups as well and to examine how physical play and dance improvisation takes place across race, gender, disability, and SES.

My artistic work: physical play, dance improvisation, and sense-making
As a mother/pedagogue and dancer/choreographer, I have noticed that children's play and dance improvisation share quite some commonalities. In both physical play and dance improvisation, movement itself is experienced as engaging, delightful, and meaningful. Maxine Sheets-Johnstone (2003, p.3) speaks of "kinetic fun in the flesh", i.e. movement itself is a motivating force and a source of pleasure.

Some authors explicitly draw analogies between physical play and dance improvisation. Play theorist Hector Rodriguez states that play consists of trans individual processes of action and reaction "which often takes on a to-and-fro quality reminiscent of dance" (n.d., p.2). Sheets-Johnstone likewise points to the intimate relationship between physical play and dance. She considers play as a "kinetic happening in which the sheer exuberance of movement dominates and in which a certain freedom of movement obtains" (2005, para. 29). According to Sheets-Johnstone, dance is intrinsically related to play: dance in fact can be seen as the continuation of children's movement-exploration. Even more important, communication in both physical play and dance improvisation takes place

through movement. Some verbalization may occur, but the primary instrument for sense-making remains the body.

In this artistic research, I am interested in the bodily and affective dimensions of play and dance improvisation – specifically in the dynamic entanglement of *moving* and *being moved*[2] (Parviainen, 1998; Sheets-Johnstone, 1999a; Massumi, 2002; Fuchs & Koch, 2014; Mühlhoff, 2015). I will argue, throughout this thesis, that in the intertwinement of the affective and the bodily, sense-making arises[3] Both physical play and dance improvisation are considered bodily practices, where sense-making processes are structured in and around movement. Meaning arises out of corporeality, it bypasses the linguistic, and it takes the intimate relationship between affect and movement as the starting point for the engagement with world, self, and others. The enactivist account of cognition and action serves as a theoretical backdrop for an analysis of both physical play and dance improvisation.

The enactive approach and the concept of 'participatory sense-making'
The enactive account serves as the theoretical backdrop from which I try to gain *an embodied understanding* of both children's physical play and dance improvisation. Embodied understanding or embodied knowledge is understood as the tacit knowledge that resides in the body, it is "a type of knowledge where the body knows how to act" (Tanaka, 2011, p.149). Embodied understanding doesn't require representation because of the pre-reflective correspondence between body and world. Understanding is embodied in "sofar as our conceptualization and reasoning recruit sensory, motor, and affective patterns and processes to structure our understanding of, and engagement with, our world" (Johnson, 2015, p.1).

The enactive approach of cognition and action challenges representational cognitive theories with the core idea that "cognition is an embodied, lived process, based on self-organising and recurrent sensorimotor patterns" (Read & Szokolszky, 2020, p.1). In the enactive approach, cognition is understood as embodied (inter-)action.

> […] by using the term embodied we mean to highlight two points: first that cognition depends upon the kinds of experience that come from having a body with various sensorimotor capacities, and second, that these individual sensorimotor capacities are themselves embedded in a more encompassing biological, psychological, and cultural context. By using the term action, we mean to emphasize once again that sensory and motor processes, perception and action, are fundamentally inseparable in lived cognition.
> (Varela et al., 1993, pp. 172-173)

Cognition, in this perspective, is not about passive information processing that is then translated into internal representations, but cognition requires an active engagement with the environment. Enactivism uses insights from biology, dynamic systems theory and phenomenology (De Bruin & De

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[2] With this, I mean that movement and emotions/feelings/affects are closely linked to each other. According to Sheets-Johnstone (1999a) the kinetic and affective are dynamically congruent. Massumi (2002, p.1) describes the relationship between movement and feeling as follows: "When I think of my body and ask what it does to earn that name, two things stand out. It moves. It feels. In fact, it does both at the same time. It moves as it feels, and it feels itself moving. Can we think a body without this: an intrinsic connection between movement and sensation whereby each immediately summons the other." Movement unfolds in feeling and, vice versa, feeling spreads out in movement. Or, as Fuchs and Koch (2014, p.1) put it: "One is moved by movement and moved to move".

[3] In this thesis, sense-making and meaning-making are used interchangeably. Although conceptually distinctions can be made between the terms, I have decided to use them as equivalents which is in line with how the enactive approach uses the two concepts.

Haan, 2009) to explain that cognition is embodied and situated. Five highly intertwined ideas constitute the basic enactive approach: autonomy, sensemaking, emergence, embodiment and experience (see also page 42).

Human beings (and living organisms in general) make sense of the world by interacting with the world. Sense-making is not a solely individual activity but a shared process in which not only all participants and all their dynamic interactions but also (sociocultural) contexts play a role. Sense-making is thus context-sensitive and always situated. According to De Jaegher and Di Paolo (2007), participatory sense-making is an interactional process where meaning is generated through the (rhythmic) coordination and synchronization of actions and behaviour. In sum, participatory sense-making can be described as the process of meaning generation between two or more relatively autonomous agents through dynamic and rhythmic coupling.

Enactivism has been criticized for not being able to account for more remote, higher-level cognitive activities such as imagination, counterfactual thinking, or reflective problem solving – in other words, cognitive activities that transcend the here and now. This is also sometimes referred to as the 'scaling-up' problem (Gallagher, 2019, p.805). According to Shaun Gallagher, complex cognitive processes are also embodied processes. The challenge for enactivism is to explain how meaning-making takes place in higher-order cognitive activities. One major problem here is that abstract thought often has no locus, it is detached from the concrete situation and the generation of meaning is fluid and ambiguous[4]. Ezequiel Di Paolo, Eleanor Rohde and Hanne De Jaegher (2010) argue that, in order to face this challenge, enactivism therefore should examine activities that are 1) highly embodied and 2) allow for ambiguity of meaning. Interestingly, they state that "dance, music, ritual and play" (p.37) are the best candidates for explaining ambiguous sense-making. Since physical play and dance improvisation are the key concepts of this artistic research, it might very well be possible that both can contribute and enrich the enactive approach when it comes to more complex cognitive activities.

Exploring the relation between physical play, dance improvisation, and the enactive approach might thus enrich our understandings in two ways:

1) First of all, the enactive approach can provide powerful new insights into the core elements of both physical play and dance improvisation when it comes to participatory sense-making.
2) Second of all, physical play and dance improvisation may in turn be considered exemplary creative practices that can deepen and extend the enactive theory.

Phenomenology and Process Philosophy

I use the enactive account and the concept of participatory sense-making (which are both profoundly influenced by phenomenology) as the main theoretical framework of this artistic research. Next to this, I am inspired by affect theory and process philosophy (Gilles Deleuze & Felix Guattari, Brian Massumi, and Erin Manning) specifically when it comes to terms such as affects, intensities, forces, becoming, actual/virtual. In chapter 8 (the second re-enactment) I use the writings of Deleuze and Guattari to understand the transformative forces that are at work in both physical play and dance improvisation. The transformative is here understood as the moment where new registers of meaning-

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[4] According to Lakoff and Johnson (1980), image schemata play an important role in the bridge between concrete experience and abstract thought/mental representations. Image schemata can be described as recurring patterns that allow human beings to meaningfully structure actions and perceptions. Image schemata "operate at a level of mental organisation that falls between abstract propositional structures, on the one side, and particular concrete images on the other" (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980, p. 29). I will come back to this in the conclusion, see also note 81, page 165.

making become available through the actualization of virtuals. In chapter 9, I use affect theory of Massumi and Manning's writings on the not-yet and the interval to understand how affects can travel between bodies. Even more, I make use of the writings of both Erin Manning and Maxine Sheets-Johnstone, although they are somewhat at odds with each other. Manning's work is strongly based on process philosophy (Whitehead's metaphysics) and affect theory while Sheets-Johnstone's work is rooted in phenomenology (specifically Husserl)[5]. Although there are certainly differences between phenomenology and process philosophy/affect theory (specifically when it comes to concepts such as agency and intentionality), commonalities can be found too, for example when it comes to the role of the body and movement in our lived experience. I do believe that phenomenology and process philosophy can enrich each other. In several chapters (especially chapters 2, 8, 9 and 10) I will therefore intertwine these two philosophical strands.

Artistic research: three phases
The research I am undertaking is artistic research, in other words, the knowledge, insights and experience I am seeking are "articulated, expressed, and communicated through art" (Borgdorff, 2012, p.166). Knowledge is produced in two different but interrelated strands: the pre-reflective, tacit knowledge that is articulated in the artwork and the linguistic-conceptual knowledge that is articulated in the written component. The written thesis can be seen as both a verbal reconstruction of the research process as well as an attempt to interpret (and provide an academic context for) the findings.

Artistic research thus operates in two contexts: academia and the art world. As a result, my artistic research consists of two components: the written component and the artwork. The written thesis lies here in front of you. The artistic experiments, or at least the traces of these experiments, can be found in the Research Catalogue[6]. It is important to note that the artistic work is by no means a passive element of the research, but a doing that is at the same time a (pre-reflective and tacit way of) thinking. In line with Ingold (2017), the art materials are perceived as correspondences, as thinking in movement. The making not only *informs* the research process and outcome but it *is* the research. There is thus not a strict division between the academic and the artistic part of this research; the two parts merge, collide, join forces, diverge, split up, re-unite, double, multiply and become plural. In this constant movement, a dialogue starts to take place between different ways of knowing. Even more, artistic research sets thinking and knowing in motion. It finds itself on the edge of knowing, it is "unfinished reflection", a "not-yet knowing" that "lingers at the frontier of what there is, and it gives us an outlook on what might be" (Borgdorff, 2012, p.173).

My artistic work comprises three phases: the living archive, the re-enactment of physical play events through dance improvisational practice and the development of the Re-Play/Re-Move toolkit. The first phase of my artistic research consists of the archive of my children's physical play events (see Chapter 5, page 59). Over a period of approximately five years (from 2013 to 2018), I have collected photographs of the physical play of my own children, sometimes with their friends and neighbor kids. This has resulted in a living archive that consists of more than a hundred photographic

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[5] In 'Wondering the world directly' (2014), Manning criticizes phenomenology for privileging the subject and processes of intentionality. In line with process philosophy and new materialism, she argues that experience is not tied up to the human subject. In the same issue of Body and Society, Manning's line of reasoning in turn is criticized by several phenomenologists, among which Sheets-Johnstone. Sheets-Johnstone questions not only the validity of Manning claims but also the "dazzling new metaphysical vocabulary" that makes her work hard to read (p.198). According to Sheets-Johnstone, Manning opposes phenomenology and Whitehead's metaphysics while in reality, they share substantive commonalities. For example, both are anchored in the relation between process and movement. Sheets-Johnstone (2014) suggests that it would be wise to recognize not only differences but also the substantive complementarities between Whitehead's metaphysics and phenomenology.

[6] https://www.researchcatalogue.net

sequences and stand-alones. Archiving itself can be seen as an iterative process that makes use of the following organising principles: capturing, selecting, and ordering. The process is open and unfinished – any adjustment or change can be made at any time.

The second phase of my artistic research consists of the re-enaction of the physical play events through dance improvisational practice (see Chapter 6, page 77). In this phase, 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 goal is not to imitate or copy the original play event but to grasp the affects, intensities and forces that are still present in the work[7]. The body of the dancer becomes a resonating channel, a passage through which affects, intensities, and forces can travel that are then expressed in movement. Re-enactment is here understood as a performative practice in which the body, with its own movement history and experiences, becomes the frame through which the dancer can access affects, intensities, and forces that are still present in the selected imagery. The improvisation sessions with the professional dancers are also captured with the camera. This leads to the second set of images that is laid over the original set of images, in a process of doubling that never really becomes a doubling (since only differences are produced). I analyse the images in order to understand the participatory sense-making process in both physical play and dance improvisation. Visual analysis is used to expose and critically reflect on several aspects of participatory sense-making in both physical play and dance improvisation.

In this thesis, I discuss three re-enactments (see chapters 7, 8 and 9, page 88, 101, and 119). The first re-enactment explores the role of joint action and joint attention (e.g. synchronization and coordination of movements and intentions) in the sense-making process of both physical play and dance improvisation. The second re-enactment focuses on the transformative, how new values and meanings are generated through the bracketing of experience. The third re-enactment looks at affective resonances, specifically how affects, intensities and forces can travel in-between bodies.

In addition to the three re-enactments, I also discuss the Touch Project (see chapter 10, page 132). The Touch Project is a bit different than the re-enactments since it starts with my own artistic exploration which is then extended to a three-day workshop at Chester University. The three re-enactments have given me useful insights on different aspects of the participatory sense-making process in physical play and dance improvisation - specifically on how affect, attention, and action work together in order to make sense of self, others, and world. But I also feel that something is still missing. In the artistic process, I have noticed that touch seems to play a vital role in both physical play and dance improvisation. However, in the literature on embodied cognition and enactivism not much attention is paid to the role of touch in the participatory sense-making process. I thus feel the need to explore this area a bit more. Although I could have organised a fourth re-enactment, I decide at this point that working with dance experts will provide me with in-depth information on the deeper layers of touch and on how touch constitutes a we-space. In contact improvisation, there is much knowledge and expertise on interpersonal touch. I contact Malaika Sarco-Thomas at the University of Chester, an expert in contact improvisation, and I organise the Touch Project around it. Even more, the exercises and tasks in the Touch Project serve as input for the development of the 'Touch and Tactility' workshop for children (see the Re-Play/Re-Move toolkit, chapter 11, page 149).

The last phase of my artistic research consists of the development of the 'Re-Move/Re-Play Toolkit', an educational toolkit for children between the age of 4-10 years old that consists of a creative card deck and three additional workshops (see Chapter 11). In this phase, the process of re-enactment is reversed since children are now going to re-enact existing artworks (within the field of

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[7] See Chapter 9, page 119 for a definition of affects, intensities, and forces.

performance art and dance). Each workshop has a different theme: one is dedicated to touch, the other to creative movement exploration and the third one to working with objects and materials. The goal of the workshops is not to copy or imitate the dance or artwork, but to use it as a creative source for movement exploration.

Given the above, I explicate the following research question:

> What are the shared elements of participatory sense-making within physical play and dance improvisation?

This research thereby focuses on three areas of investigation corresponding to the three phases of the research:

1) Photography as a medium to explore the elements of participatory sense-making in children's physical play.
2) The use of photographic imagery and re-enactment in exploring the shared elements of participatory sense-making through dance improvisation.
3) The application of the shared elements of participatory sense-making in a toolkit for creative movement exploration for children between the age of 4-10 years.

This artistic research aims to (better) understand the kinship between children's physical play and dance improvisation. The insights will be used to develop the Re-Move/Re-Play Toolkit, an educational package that uses principles of the enactive account to stimulate kinetic/kinaesthetic awareness of children between the age of 4-10 years old.

Related fields

My artistic work falls under a growing tradition of female artists that have incorporated motherhood into their artistic practice, ranging from Sally Mann's project 'Immediate Family' (1992) to Grace Surman's 'Film with Hope' (2016) and Sarah Black's 'Isabel Shoes' (2015). The three art projects are shortly discussed below.

'Immediate Family' is a photography book that was published in 1992, and features Sally Mann's children. The 'Immediate Family' project fits within the late twentieth-century focus in the art world on domestic life – most notable in the tendency of artists to recover old family albums and the revival of past photographic techniques (Goldoni, 2014). 'Immediate Family' consists of large-format, black-and-white photographs of her (often nude) three children. The photographs are taken in and around their summer home in rural Virginia (in between 1984 and 1991). Although the photographs have a glance of spontaneity around them, the depicted scenes are carefully staged (Williams, 2020). Immediate Family is a project that reveals the intimate aspects of childhood (Mann, 1992). The photographs caused quite some controversy with repeated calls for censorship. Sally Mann was criticized of violating the responsibility of parents to protect their children and abusing the power dynamic of mother-child. I will come back to this issue of ethics later on in this chapter when I discuss ethical issues of making art with/about your own children[8].

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[8] It must be noted that Sally Mann published the photographs ten years after taking them, and her children gave permission for publication. Even more, the children held the right to dispute any of the photographs being published. Taking this into account, the question remains if young children can freely give permission. Given the parent-child power dynamics, children might feel that they cannot refuse to participate.

Grace Surman is another female artist that makes work with her children. I met Grace in Leeds at the conference 'With Children: The Child as Collaborator and Performer' in January 2017. There are quite some similarities between my artistic work and her work. Surman (2016) has a background in performing arts (new dance and choreography) and her work includes live performances, installation, and video art. She has made video works with her children (*I love my baby and my baby loves me*, 2010, *Film with Hope*, 2016 and *Games no Games*, 2021)[9]. Her interest in play and performance started already long before having children but intensified when she became a mother. In her artistic work, she explores the concept of playfulness in close collaboration with her own children. Surman's work resonates with my own work: we are both mothers/artists and we explore aspects of playfulness within our own homes[10]. There are however also differences. First of all, Surman uses foremost film/video and live performances while I use photography as a medium to capture the play events of my children. Second of all, Surman is foremost interested in exploring the mother-child relationship and her work often features her whole family. My artistic work is not concerned with motherhood, or parent-child relationships, but takes the physical play activities of my children as the main focus.

Finally, I want to mention the work of Sarah Black (2016)[11]. Her work can best be described as family art, i.e. the making of artworks in close collaboration with all members of her family (including her husband who is a sound artist, and their two children). Black explores the complex process of making art within a family context. She writes:

> This (my) research-practice was born out of motherhood, and as such I seek to make motherhood visible without embarrassment and without the anxiety of sharing personal and family experiences through a considered and ethical artistic practice. Through my mother-art practice I have revealed my own personal journey, my ever-changing and sometimes ailing body and the immediacy of my children. I have been driven by the smaller daily occurrences, interruptions, frustrations, boredom and observations which otherwise would not find a voice. I have dealt with my transient states of being a mother, at home with children, through tracking my ongoing, growing and shifting relationships. (Black, 2016, para.3)

My artistic work resonates with the work of Sarah Black (she also has a background in choreography and performing arts) in the way she combines motherhood with artistic practice, and also because her artwork is deeply embedded in daily life and the privateness of home. The main difference, however, is that Black defines her work as a family practice (in which she also explores her role as a mother and caregiver) and she co-constructs her artwork with her immediate family. My artistic practice is mainly concerned with the exploration of the spontaneous play activities of my children. I do not question or examine my role as a mother. Even more, co-creation (with my children) only happens on the level of spontaneous initiation of play. I find it specifically interesting that Sarah Black refers to her artistic practice as "an ethical concept of caring within a curatorial practice" (2016, para. 10). She is interested in curating/documenting the process of being at once a mother and an artist. Because her art practice takes place in and around her (family) home, she also encounters ethical dilemmas as well as questions about responsibility and care. Since my own artistic work has also raised some ethical

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[9] See https://vimeo.com/193559144

[10] See https://www.researchcatalogue.net/view/1296945/1296946 and https://meettheneighbours.net/artists/grace-surman-gary-winters-children

[11] See https://www.researchcatalogue.net/view/562823/562824

questions, I will explore the notion of ethics about the involvement of children in research a bit further in the next paragraph.

Photographing my own children: some ethical considerations

As I already stated in the beginning, my own artistic practice has made an important shift from performative work to photography as a main tool to capture the affective/kinetic markers of physical play and dance improvisation. In this artistic research project, I have brought several aspects of my personal and professional life together: art, research, play, dance, motherhood, and childhood. More than anything, this project has been an attempt to intertwine my daily, personal life with the artistic.

As a consequence, the research process itself is it at once intimate yet also distant. I am both an insider and an outsider, and especially in the first phase of the research (the living archive), the artistic practice is a home practice. The personal (being a mother of two children) and professional (being a choreographer and a pedagogue) are deeply intertwined. See, for example, the photographs below (Figures 2 to 7). The photographs are taken during our summer holiday (in 2017) in France, Lisseuil, in the backyard of our water mill. In the first photograph, we see Luuk caught in mid-air, the body suspended in the fall, frozen into an eternal falling. The photograph is about movement, fluidity (of being/becoming) and falling. Yet, at the same time, it is a spontaneous gathering of children who are having a good time at the trampoline – and the picture also shows that they are at ease with each other and with me (none of the children is looking directly at the camera, they have forgotten about my presence).

Figures 2 to 8. Playing on the trampoline © Carolien Hermans

In other words, the photographs can only be taken by someone who is an insider, by someone who is part of the community. In examining the play events of my own children, I am at once a mother, an artist, and a researcher.

The advantage of the parent-as-researcher is that it allows me to engage with my children's play in an everyday way. In this artistic research, this is particularly relevant because I am interested in the spontaneous play events of children: any other research set-up would have blurred this notion of spontaneity. Patricia Adler and Peter Adler (1996, p.36) argue that "parents can readily gain entree to the world of children through their own children" by making the community to which their children belong the focus of study. This offers many advantages (Adler & Adler, 1996; Abrams, Schaefer & Ness, 2020; Kabuto, 2008, Fitzgerald et al., 2010). First of all, the parent-as-researcher is naturally part of this community and as a result, the children are entirely familiar with the situation, with each other, and with me. Second, this type of research allows engagement in child research in a range of informal settings (home, playground, holidays, etc.). This allows the parent-as-researcher to engage in child culture in daily-life settings, i.e. to engage with children on their own terms and "to examine phenomenologically the lived experiences of childhood" (p.36). It provides tacit, holistic, and experiential forms of knowledge on childhood where children are not perceived as incomplete adults but as being part of child culture (Mouritsen, 1998, see also page 35). According to Adler and Adler (1996), parent-research offers many strengths such as depth immersion, triangulation, and the naturalness/dailyness of play situations that all contribute to and enhance the ecological validity of this research study. Also, Sandra Abrams, Mary Beth Schaefer, and Daniel Ness (2020) argue that examining meaning-making around the home, with your own children, can provide new knowledge that cannot be reached by more traditional forms of research.

However, there are also ethical arguments against parent-research. What is specifically at stake here, is the double role of being an artist/researcher and a parent at once. This might result in a role conflict since the research interest could undermine the obligation to protect the child's well-being (Resnik, 2009; Hackett, 2017). Even more, the child may also feel that she cannot refuse to participate or stop participating at any time (Resnik, 2009). Given the (possible) power imbalance between parent and child, it might be difficult for the child to decline or withdraw.

Veronica Lambert and Michele Glacken (2011, p.782) take the middle way. They state that in order "to ensure the best interests of children, research must be undertaken within defined parameters of ethical approval". This offers challenges to the research because of the potential friction between participation and protection rights. However, they also state that children are often perceived as vulnerable which might result "in a super-cautious approach to children's participation in research" (p. 782).

I am aware of the ethical considerations that come along when working with your own children, as well as with other children. I think that Lambert and Glacken (2011) provide a middle ground that acknowledges the potential risk of a child's participation, while at the same time they also foreground the strengths, capacities, and expertise of children. Involving children in research and art projects, can only be done within a supportive environment. This means that the agency of the child is valued and respected in all phases of the research. As a parent-researcher, my motherhood is partly overlapping with my role as a researcher. In line with Sarah Black (2016), I consider my artistic research as a practice of care, of being responsible for my children within an artistic research context. One way to do this is to be aware of my double role as parent-researcher, and to question at all times if I am still (as a researcher) making decisions in the best interest of my children. Even more, if role conflicts occur, I need to find a healthy balance between the needs of my children, myself as a mother, and the research needs (Adler & Adler, 1996).

Abrams et al. (2020) propose three ethical guidelines in parent-child research: consent-as-process, critical reflection and dialogical interaction. First of all, consent should be seen as an ongoing process, as "a way of ensuring at each stage that participants are still willing to be involved in the project and reminding them of their right to withdraw at any time" (Etherington, as cited in Abrams et al., 2020, p.22). Even more, when it comes to involving your own child in an artistic research project, the researching parent should not sign the content form, but the non-investigating parent. In this artistic research, I checked the voluntariness of participation of my own children on multiple occasions (from photographing the spontaneous play event to selecting and publishing images). Even more, permission was obtained via a written consent form that was signed by the non-investigating parent (their father) and my children[12]. The consent letter included information on the purpose of the project, how it would be carried out, how data would be safely stored, the right to get insight to the photographs that were taken, the use of images for publication, the use of personal names, and the right to withdraw consent at any moment until the publication of articles about the project. Informed consent was not only obtained from my own children, but from all children, dancers and dance teachers that were involved in this research (see Appendix II, page 199).

The second and third ethical guidelines that Abrams et al. (2020) propose, is critical reflection and dialogical interaction. Again, this is an ongoing process, where both child and parent critically reflect on the research process. In my research, for example, we looked together at the photographs and decided together which ones were included and which ones were not. Photographs that would make my children feel uncomfortable in any way, were deleted. Even more, my children were given a voice in the artistic process. They would give suggestions and share their aesthetic preferences with me.

In sum, there is a growing interest in child-parent research as it can potentially provide experiential 'inside' knowledge on child culture and childhood. However, there are also ethical considerations about hierarchies and power that should be carefully taken into account. Abrams et al. (2020) state that the parent-as-researcher should cultivate an approach that is egalitarian, inclusive, dialogical, and reciprocal. In my research, I have tried to cultivate this approach as much as possible, but there were also moments when I could have been more sensitive to the voice of the children specifically when it comes to their ideas on play and physicality. In my research, I have used photography as the main tool for collecting artistic material. However, there are other ways, to include the child community in my research. Not only photographing them but also giving them a voice and opening up a dialogue with them. In future research, I would like to involve children and other parents as co-researchers. Giving children a voice is not only a way to empower them but also to examine play culture from their perspective. Certainly, there are ethical considerations that should be taken into account such as insider/outsider perspectives, power differentials, safety, and protection. I do believe that conducting research in personal life offers potential as long as ethical challenges are carefully considered. Caroline Bradbury-Jones and Julie Taylor (2015) state that there are many tensions to address and dilemmas to deliberate. When these challenges are faced, it can offer inside perspectives that are often absent or dismissed. Even more, research in personal life might give access to different ways of knowing (tacit, experiential, subjective) that add texture and depth to understanding on how children experience physical play in their daily lives.

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[12] One could argue that the non-investigating father is perhaps too close and as a result, he cannot take a neutral or objective position. However, legal authority rests with the parents and permission for a child's participation in research, so in this case, it was the only (legal) option. Even more, in young children (up to 12 years) the informed consent form is signed by the legal guardian. From 12 years it is common practice that both legal guardian and adolescent sign the informed consent form.