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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 2. Physical Play and Dance Improvisation

In this chapter, I want to provide a clearer picture of the relationship between 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 (Midgelow, 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.

### Play and Games

The seminal work *Homo Ludens*, first published in 1938, by Dutch historian and cultural theorist Johan Huizinga, is considered a major turning point in play theory. For Huizinga, play is not only an expression of culture but even more important, play constitutes culture. Culture manifests itself in and as play. He refers to play as an element *of* culture and not *in* culture. “Play is older than culture, for culture, however inadequately defined, always presupposes human society, and animals have not waited for man to teach them their playing” (Huizinga, 1955, p.10). Huizinga defines play as:

[...] a free activity, standing quite consciously outside ‘ordinary’ life, as being ‘not serious’, but at the same time absorbing the player intensely and utterly. It is an activity connected with no material interest, no profit can be gained by it. It proceeds within its own boundaries of time and space according to fixed rules and in an orderly manner. (Huizinga, 1955, p. 13)

The work of Roger Caillois, *Man, Play and Games*, first published in English in 1961<sup>13</sup> is in many ways a continuation of Huizinga’s work. According to Caillois, play is an activity that is free, separate in time and space, uncertain, unproductive, rule-driven, and involves make-believe. Caillois (1961, p.x) makes a distinction in four types of play: *agôn* (competition), *alea* (games of chance), *mimicry* (simulation or make-believe), and *ilinx* (vertigo, thrill-seeking and risk-taking)). He also makes a distinction between two styles of play: *paidia* (free, turbulent, carefree) and *ludus* (structured, discipline, convention).

In another seminal work, *The Ambiguity of Play* (1997) by Brian Sutton-Smith, it becomes clear that play is difficult to define because of its ambiguous and diverse nature. Sutton-Smith warns against a narrow definition of play. Instead, he proposes an open and broad description of play. In the

<sup>13</sup> The original French version, *Les jeux et les hommes (le masque et le vertige)*, was published in 1958 in Paris/France by Gallimard.

first chapter of his book, Sutton-Smith gives an overview of different types of play ranging from mind play (fantasy, daydreaming), solitary play (reading, hobbies), contests (games, sports) to risky or deep play (bungy jumping).

In *Steps to an Ecology of Mind*,<sup>14</sup> Gregory Bateson (1972) points to the meta-communicative aspect of play. According to Bateson, playing is a form of meta-communication because the players (children and young animals) communicate to each other that ‘this is play’. Bateson gives the example of the playful nip. “The playful nip denotes the bite, but it does not denote what would be denoted by the bite”. (Bateson, 1972, p.180) In other words, in play we engage in actions that do not denote what they ‘normally’ would denote. Play sets its own boundaries of space/time and its own rules– and what is meaningful in play can only fully be understood within this specific space/time frame. Bateson furthermore states that playing is self-generating and self-motivating, and as such, it can generate positive play moods and affective states.

From the above, I come to the following understanding of play:

- Play is an intrinsic part of culture (Huizinga, 1955). Play is a free activity that takes place within its own boundaries of space and time. Play has no material interest and there is no direct profit (Huizinga, 1955).
- Two types of play can be distinguished (Caillois, 1961): *paidia* (free play) and *ludus* (structured play). Play includes a spectrum of play practices that range from structured/pre-arranged to unstructured/free (see also page 49).
- Play is ambiguous, it is diverse and has a wide range of meanings and connotations (Sutton-Smith, 1997).
- In play, the players communicate on a meta-level with each other (Bateson, 1972).

The play theorists discussed above don’t make a clear distinction between play and games. Huizinga uses the two terms interchangeably and he refers to both play and game as cultural forms of meaning-making that are free and have no material consequences. Caillois examines playing and gaming through a socio-historic lens. He makes a distinction between *paidia* (free play) and *ludus* (structured, rule-governed play) but he does not further elaborate on the distinction between play and game. Sutton-Smith (1997) explicitly refers to games. Games can roughly be divided into traditional games (board and card games but also hide and seek games) and modern, technological-driven games (such as video games). However, he does not pursue a further theoretical delineation of play and games but instead examines the meaning of play through seven rhetorics (such as fate, power, communal identity, etc.). Bateson, finally, is foremost concerned with the meta-communicative aspects of both play and game.

According to Bo Kampmann Walther (2003, para. 9) playing and gaming share the following characteristics:

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<sup>14</sup> This seminal work of Gregory Bateson consists of collected essays in anthropology, psychiatry, evolution, and epistemology. Bateson examines in this book the nature of the mind in terms of a network of interactions. Specifically relevant to this chapter is Bateson’s idea on metacommunication and the transmission of messages. According to Bateson, play can only occur when there is some degree of meta-communication, that is, the players (young animals as well as children) signal to each other that they intentionally simulate an action (such as fighting). Even more, other players recognize the intentional simulation. In other words, players communicate about their communication.

- 1) Play and games are anchored in spatial and temporal settings (in other words, the players are committed to the rules that make up the game or play.
- 2) Play and games are embedded within the realm of cultural dynamics (they generate cultural meaning.
- 3) Play and games create flow states, i.e. states of concentration, absorption, and optimal experience.
- 4) Play and games require certain moods.<sup>15</sup>
- 5) Play and games are meta-communicative acts (in line with Bateson, 1972).<sup>16</sup>

Besides the similarities, Kampman Walther (2003, para.1) also points to the differences between play and games: “Play is an open-ended territory in which make-believe and world-building are crucial factors. Games are confined areas that challenge the interpretation and optimizing of rules and tactics - not to mention time and space”. In addition, Hsu (n.d.) states that play emphasizes spontaneity while in games this spontaneity is interchanged for playful order where participants willingly comply with the rules. Games are rule-governed. The rules dictate a certain structure/organisation that gives room to tactics.<sup>17</sup>

In this research, I will mainly focus on physical play. However, I am aware that the line between play and game is a blurry one. For example, hopscotch is a playful movement but it becomes a game when specific rules and spatial-temporal characteristics are added to the movement (such as a hopscotch diagram, throwing a stone on the first square, hopping on the empty squares (except the one with the stone), jump with both feet at the pairs, etc.). In this research, I will mainly focus on hopscotching (or any other movement such as balancing, running, turning, climbing and rolling) as a verb and not as a game with specific rules. The same is true for hiding and seeking: at one end of the spectrum there is the movement of hiding and seeking, at the other end of the spectrum it turns into a game (such as KickTheCan). In this research I am foremost interested in physical play, i.e. bodily activities that are 1) spontaneously initiated, 2) open-ended, 3) not confined to fixed rules or tactics and 4) that give children the opportunity to explore movements creatively.

### **More on Play**

Play is often embedded in an evolutionary or developmental perspective. Robert Fagen (1981) is most notable when it comes to describing the selective and evolutionary aspects of animal and human play. Within the evolutionary perspective, play is explained as a way to practice and rehearse adaptive responses and a way to increase behavioural variability (in terms of novel or innovative behaviour).

Within the developmental perspective, two major theoretical frameworks are offered by Jean Piaget (1962) and Lev Vygotsky (1967). Both Piaget and Vygotsky situate play in early childhood. For Piaget, play reflects the different phases of cognitive development. He identifies three phases of play: practice play in the sensorimotor phase (0 to 2 years), symbolic play in the preoperational phase (2 to 7 years), and play with rules in the concrete operational phase (7 to 12 years). In other words, the types of play reflect the cognitive phase of development of the child. Piaget’s theory has been

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<sup>15</sup> See page 122 for more information on play moods.

<sup>16</sup> See page 36 for more information on play as a meta-communicative activity.

<sup>17</sup> Sutton-Smith (1997) makes a distinction between traditional games (board and card games but also hide and seek games) and modern, technological-driven games (such as video games). My research focuses on physical play activities that are spontaneously initiated by children in informal contexts and that are not mediated by technology or media. Games, and especially video games, are not part of this research.

criticized by Sutton-Smith (1966) and Nicolopolou (1933) for neglecting the constitutive role of play within thought. Play is only considered as an expression of cognitive structures that are already existing, and as a result, Piaget “closes off any opportunity to see play as a context for new [cognitive] development” (Nicolopolou, 1993, p.6).

Vygotsky, in contrast to Piaget, does not offer a systematic theoretical framework but a set of orienting contexts. In his theory, play is a social symbolic activity. For Vygotsky, play is vital for development in early childhood.

In play a child is always above his average age, above his daily behavior: in play, it is as though he were a head taller than himself. As in the focus of a magnifying glass. Play contains all developmental tendencies in a condensed form: in play it is as though the child were trying to jump above the level of his normal behavior. (Vygotsky, 1967, p. 6)

This developmental perspective however is criticized by Flemming Mouritsen (1998). Mouritsen states that our thinking of play has been greatly conditioned by developmental thinking. He asserts that nowadays play and play activities are increasingly seen “as competencies, as indispensable phases in cognitive development, as transitional stages on the path of development, as precursors of thinking, as children’s ways of learning, and as tools that can stimulate various aspects of the development of personality cognitively, linguistically, motorically, socially, etc.” (1998, p.12).

But play belongs to children, as it peaks before adulthood (Sheets-Johnstone, 2003). Although adults play too, play is the home ground of children. Play is what children do, it is their main project, it is their way to express meaning and creatively engage with the world. For children it is the primary medium, for adults it is secondary. Play does not have to be justified from a developmental perspective. It is not good or right because it contributes to the emotional, physical, cognitive, or social development of a child. Play is a meaningful phenomenon in and of itself. In this thesis, I will look at physical play as an intrinsic part of children’s informal culture, i.e. spontaneous play activities that are initiated by children in and around the home (Mouritsen, 1998).

### **Child Culture / Play Culture**

Play usually takes place within informal social contexts, usually from child to child. Play does not typically exist in a fixed form, but it is a fluid practice that is situation-dependent (Mouritsen, 1998). There is no creative product, as only temporal meaningful moments are constituted that are only relevant in the situation and to those who are present (Hammershøj, 2021). For Mouritsen, play is part of child culture. Children’s culture is understood as “expressions of culture that children produce in their own networks; that is, what with an overall term one could call their play culture” (1998, p.6). This involves (amongst others) games, play activities, songs, rhymes, jokes, riddles, etc.

Play is not something that children know, but it is something that they do. It is a practice, that requires its own skills and know-how. From an educational or developmental perspective, these skills seem not to be relevant or purposeful, however, the skills become meaningful within the play context:

There is status in being a good player or an accomplished spitter. What you are good at may be something that from the educational point of view does not seem to matter. Good at elastic-skipping? Good at talking like Donald Duck? Good at joshing? But it does matter to the children. (Mouritsen, 1998, p.14)

According to Mouritsen (1998), children’s play is based on “simple formulae” (p.14), in other words on a recipe that consists of basic ingredients. Think for example of jumping rope. To do it right, you have to create an ongoing flow between the jumping and the circular swing of the rope. This requires

quite some rehearsal and repetition. The basic movement ingredients are there, but to do it right, you have to find your momentum and rhythm. When you get the hang of it, you can start making more complex variations (such as jumping rope with two feet or jumping rope with a group). Jumping rope is a play activity that finds its origin in repetition, variation, rhythm, and flow. Playing “is a doing and a making, done in a repetitive rhythm” (Schmidt, as cited in Karoff, 2013, p.3).

### **Playing as doing and playing as a state of being**

Helle Karoff (2013) also starts her theoretical exploration of play by stating that we should not approach play in functional terms (developmental or evolutionary) but she considers play as a bodily practice that brings children together in a meaningful way. For Karoff, play is a way of being in the world, i.e. play creates meaning within its own frame of reference. She uses Bateson’s concept of framing (1972) to explain this. As already mentioned above, Bateson perceives play as a meta-communicative act. In play, children step out of the daily (habitual) frame to the frame ‘this is play’. In other words, children know that they are playing (Bateson, 1972). Play allows children to break out from their conventional notion of self and to experiment and engage with new ways of being and becoming.

Karoff (2013, see also p. 122) makes a distinction between play as a practice (as a doing) and play as a state of being (a mood). For Karoff, play is a doing, a practice in which we share experiences with others without having to discuss them or put them into words. In other words, meaning is created in the doing:

When you are playing you create a universe of meaning through your actions or practices, where all other types of meaning make sense in relation to your set-up. Meaning in that sense can only occur within a specific perspective, and it has no reference to anything beyond this (2013, p. 3).

The production of meaning is bound to the doing and what is expressed can only be understood within the specific space/time frame of the play event. Play is a way of being in the world, a way to relate to self, other(s) and the world. This being is affective, it is an attunement to the world from which meaning emerges. Karoff refers to this as play moods: ways of being that are not inner psychological states but that are out there, “in the world, in our doings” (2013, p.8).

In sum, Karoff considers play as a practice, as a doing in which meaning is created through the affective attunement to self, others and world. Even more, the meaning that is produced can only be understood within the specific (time-space) frame of the playing activity.

### **Physical Play**

Physical play activities are activities that take the kinetic/kinaesthetic experience as a constitutional element of the sense-making process. Physical play includes (amongst others): tag, hide-and-seek, chasing games, exercise play, rough-and-tumble play, challenging games, etc. It also includes activities that stimulate the senses (sensorial and exploratory play), require physical collaboration and cooperation (for example, building a den or a snowman together), or provide physical challenges (for example climbing in a tree).

Of all types of physical play, most has been written on rough and tumble play. Rough and tumble play is often referred to as playfight (Pellis & Pellis, 2017) and it includes “vigorous behaviours such as wrestling, grappling, kicking, and tumbling” (Pelligrini & Smith, 1998, p.579). Playfight is generally seen as a nonserious form of fighting (a simulation). Several meta signals are used to communicate playful intent such as facial expressions (smiles, laughing, play faces), self-handicapping (giving the larger/stronger partner a disadvantage) and role reversal (the roles are

interchangeable), as well as the fact that the playfight receives “little attention from outsiders and participants remaining together after the encounter” (Storli, 2013, p. 2). Playfighting is observed among species of mammals, birds, some other taxa, and human beings (Pellis & Pellis, 2017), as well as in children’s free time play ranging from pre-school to adolescence (Storli, 2013).

In physical play, children learn to speak a shared kinetic/kinaesthetic language in which the players kinaesthetically attune to the movements of self and others. Physical play is “a kinetic happening in which the sheer exuberance of movement dominates and in which a certain freedom of movement obtains” (Sheets-Johnstone, 2005, para. 29). Children learn to know their bodies and the bodies of others in an experiential way. Meaning arises through the sharing of corporeal-kinetic experiences.

From the above, I can now come to an initial understanding of physical play as:

- 1) bodily activities that are **spontaneously initiated**, open-ended, not confined to fixed rules or tactics and that give children the opportunity to explore movements creatively;
- 2) an intrinsic part of **children’s informal culture**, it is an activity that is foremost initiated by children in and around their homes;
- 3) a practice, a doing in which meaning is created through the **affective attunement** to self, others, and world; meaning resides in the playful event itself and has no reference to anything outside of it;
- 4) an activity in which movement itself is the motivating force. Physical play activities are activities that take the **kinetic/kinaesthetic experience** as a constitutional element of the sense-making process.

### **Dance Improvisation**

Several studies have been written on dance improvisation (Blom & Chaplin, 1988; Tufnell & Crickmay, 1990; Zaporah, 1995; Cooper Albright & Gere, 2003; Buckwalter, 2010; De Spain, 2014; Middelgouw, 2019; Sarco-Thomas, 2020). However, it is not easy to find an all-encompassing definition of dance improvisation.

Dance improvisation is a broad concept that includes solo and group exploration, studio work, and performative practice. The term covers an entire range, from choreography with real-time compositional elements to open contact jam sessions<sup>18</sup>. Dance improvisation is often discussed in relation to terms such as spontaneity, openness and being present in the moment. Susanne Ravn (2020) however argues that any dance (choreographed or improvised) contains at least some degree of spontaneity and openness. A dance can never be exactly repeated, every enactment produces difference and requires some level of spontaneity of the dancer. It is thus more fruitful to look at *ways in which* openness and spontaneity take on shape in dance improvisation – thereby keeping in mind that dance improvisation itself is a highly diverse practice (ranging from free to structured dance improvisation).

Ravn uses the term ‘body of today’ to point to being present in the moment. In dance improvisation, the dancers need to attune to how the body feels today. The body of today feels different than the body of yesterday and the body of tomorrow. The dancer tunes into the body of

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<sup>18</sup> Both dance improvisation and choreography are plural in their manifestations, and therefore often intertwined. Contemporary choreographers use improvisation as a tool to create dance material and the final performance may also consist (entirely) of improvised sequences. Improvisation and choreography are thus not two sides of a coin, but a continuum. Along this continuum of choreography and improvisation, other forms of dance making can be found too such as instant composition (e.g. Julyen Hamilton) and open form composition (e.g. Mary O’Donell). In this thesis, I restrict myself to dance improvisation although I am aware of the fact that dance improvisation, composition, and choreography are intertwined practices.

today, and this body invites her to “undertake kinaesthetic exploration” (2020, p. 79). Dance improvisation, in this respect, could be described as a kinetic/kinaesthetic discovery guided by sensorial and reflective awareness. In this process, familiar elements blend with unfamiliar elements. Susan Foster (2003, p. 3-4) formulates this encounter between the known and unknown, as follows: “Improvisation can be envisioned as a continuous moving back and forth and blending of predetermined and spontaneously discovered events.” Dancers move back and forth “between the known and unknown, between the familiar/reliable and the unanticipated/unpredictable”. Dance improvisation pushes the boundaries, as it summons the unexpectedness, the surprise and the unknown. Foster embraces this element of surprise. However, she also states that the encounter with the unknown can only be accessed through the known. Dance improvisation can thus be seen as an encounter between predetermined structures/choices, bodily routines, and creative potential (i.e. the unknown, the surprise) that arises in the moment.

For Michael Kimmel, Dayana Hristova and Kerstin Kussmaul<sup>19</sup> (2018) dance improvisation is process-oriented. Decisions are made in the action “without delay, using present resources, and in response to current constraints and adaptive pressures” (p.6). The dancers must respond to what is readily available, finding themselves in a “double loop of simultaneous feedforward and feedback” (p.7). The dancers need to be sensitive to what happens in the moment, while at the same time they anticipate on what is yet to come. This is not to say that dance improvisation is solely an intuitive and spontaneous practice. In order to respond creatively to what happens in the moment, the dancer must have a set of enculturated, situated, bodily routines and knowledge ready for use (Stein, 2011). The experienced dancer has trained and rehearsed these routines over and over. Improvisation thus requires a “state of readiness “(a prepared body/mind) for real- time decision-making and thus cannot do without “cognitive skills such as prediction and anticipation” (Da Silva, 2017, p.127).

Many dancers use improvisation as a tool to release old habits and to experience new ways of moving. For Vida Midgelow, dance improvisation is a somatic practice that takes transition and change as its central departure point. She speaks of “heightened attention to ever-changing details” (Midgelow, 2012, p.4). This heightened attention allows the dancers to register ongoing (micro) shifts in the body in relation to space and other bodies. Through active sensing, the dancers become aware of the familiar and habitual<sup>20</sup> and this awareness allows them to respond in different ways, thereby breaking-up bodily routines. Improvisation then is a way to “experiment and re-invent new ways and different ways of thinking connections” in the body (Ravn, 2020, p. 80).

Dancers not only attune to the internal body dynamics (the kinetic/kinaesthetic dimensions of the body) but also to the relational dynamic (with space, with time, with others, with objects). Just as in play, this can be seen as a skill that needs practice. A dancer becomes responsive and response-able by the doing, by the practice itself. With this practice, dancers develop and fine-tune their “ability to experience the smallest multiply located intervals within the larger action” (Little, 2014, p.251). In other words, dancers develop (throughout their practice) an ability to attend to tiny shifts (micro changes) while at the same time they do not lose track of the overall action. This ability allows them to be “response-able” (Little, in reference to Manning, 2007), i.e. to be sensitive to a multiplicity of relations (with space, with time, with others, with objects).

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<sup>19</sup> Kimmel et al. (2018) focus in their article specifically on contact improvisation but some of their ideas, such as distributed creativity (see chapter 3) and real-time decision making are also applicable to dance improvisation.

<sup>20</sup> Midgelow (2012) describes the familiar as a certain way of moving that is comfortable, familiar, and performed with ease. According to Rothfield (2013) habits are “a form of corporeal scriptwriting, a shorthand for the body. They are dependable, not because they are instinctual or mechanistic, but because they function “as if” they were” (p.100).



Another way to describe this [...] is that our self expands into a sensing, or a self-sensing. We shift as ecologies, interdependent and responsive actions of being. Surfaces now come and go, appear and vanish, and what emerges is a full geometry of spatially thinking relations, potentiating a far broader – and wilder – dance. (Little, 2014, p.252)

For Nita Little (2014) dance improvisation is an attentional practice, since it is attention that makes available new possibilities of relating. Dancers tune into their own bodily felt (internal) dynamic, while at the same time they tune into the relational (external) dynamic of the moment (i.e. the temporary configuration of space-time-bodies-objects). Erin Manning (2007) describes dance improvisation as “relational shape-shifting” (p.279). She challenges the idea of stable bodies that exist in a pre-given space-time but instead argues that movement creates relational intervals.

It is never simply a cue, a direction, a prodding that moves us. What moves us is an intensity alive in the potential of movement moving. Together, we move to movement’s relational taking-form, moving the shape of the dance, not its steps. To dance relationally does not mean to follow in someone’s footsteps. It is not to follow up on a direction already underway. To dance is to move the relation. (Manning, 2007, p.279)

The relational should here be understood as the coming together of places, durations, energies, intensities, and affects. In the unfolding of the improvisation, dancers become sensitive to the new possibilities that emerge in their relation with self, others, and space-time.

Kent de Spain (2014) also considers dance improvisation as a relational and attentional practice. He describes dance improvisation as “the ability to sense how the movements in the present moment relate to movements that have come before, to feel them in space and time, to connect them to the movements of others, to frame the content of those movements in a way that carries humanity and meaning, and to use all of that as the canvas for the movements that emerge to create the next moment” (2014, p.167). His view resonates with my experiences of dance improvisation. De Spain draws a holistic picture of dance improvisation as a somatic practice that is at once deeply internal (i.e. active sensing and heightened attention to ever-changing details that affect the internal bodily constellation) as it is external (i.e. receptiveness and responsiveness to the other and to time-space). Dance improvisation is the willingness and openness to engage with self, others and world creatively. It is a way of sense-making that takes creative movement as its main vehicle of expression<sup>21</sup>.

From the above, we can now come to an initial understanding of dance improvisation as:

- 1) an **ongoing encounter between predetermined structures/choices and creative potential** (i.e. the element of surprise) that arises in the moment and that requires **real-time-decision-making**
- 2) a process of **kinetic/kinaesthetic discovery** guided by sensorial and reflective awareness;
- 3) a somatic activity that increases (kinetic/kinaesthetic) awareness and that allows dancers to respond in different ways, thereby **breaking-up bodily routines**;
- 4) a way to experiment with and **to re-invent different ways of connecting** with the body, with others, with space, with time as well as with things;

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<sup>21</sup> It must be noted here that although dance improvisation is a bodily practice that draws creative connections between self, others and environment, this is not always the case. Moments of connection are interchanged with moments of disconnection. Sometimes there is no connection at all. The dancers thus move in and out of shared moments of sense-making.

- 5) a **relational and attentional practice**, a moment-by-moment inquiry into the moving experience. In improvisation, dancers become sensitive to the relational dynamics of movement.

### **Final thoughts:**

In this chapter, I have explored two key concepts of this artistic research: physical play and dance improvisation. I have first provided a general overview of the literature on both play and dance, and then gradually narrow this down to physical play and dance improvisation. Including the broader field was necessary to situate both concepts and to understand how they relate to other concepts (for example how dance improvisation sits beside choreography and composition).

To do so, I have incorporated theories that range from cultural history to more experimental approaches toward play and dance. My main focus however has been phenomenology. I am indebted here to the writings of Maxine Sheets-Johnstone. First of all, she is one of the few authors that draws explicit connections between bodily play and dance improvisation. Second of all, her writings are deeply embedded in phenomenology, since for her all meaning-making processes are rooted in movement, in animate life. The kinetic/kinaesthetic body is the generative source of corporeal concepts, thinking, and being.

I have also examined opposing views on both play and dance improvisation. On the one side, there are views that associate play and dance improvisation with terms such as risky, freedom, spontaneity, not-knowing, and intuition. Poststructuralism and process philosophy, however, have no interest in static entities and binary oppositions. They consider play and dance improvisation as fluid practices that are at once mindless + mindful, unpredictable + predictable, risky + safe, spontaneous + planned, etc. This view offers in my opinion, a richer perspective because it considers play and dance improvisation as dynamic, relational practices. It abandons dichotomic thinking, as it moves beyond “semantic articulations and sediments ways of thinking and knowing. The stable unified sense of self and a pre-given reality are exchanged for an ever-changing, relational, and interpenetrative experience of being and becoming” (Van der Schyff, 2015, p.8).

In this chapter, I have identified the main characteristics of physical play and dance improvisation. Both can be seen as somatic activities in which meaning is created through the bodily attunement to self, others and world. Movement itself is the motivating force and the sense-making process is deeply embedded in the kinetic/kinaesthetic experience. Even more, physical play and dance improvisation are relational and attentional practices in which the participants tune into their own bodily felt (internal) dynamic, while at the same time they attune to the relational (external) dynamic of the moment.

There are also differences. Physical play is part of children’s informal culture. It is an activity that is foremost initiated by children in and around their homes, whereas dance improvisation most often takes place in a studio - a confined space that is specifically devised for movement/dance. Physical play is part of the lives of all children, regardless of gender differences and age differences. Dance improvisation, in contrast, belongs to a specific community of people (professionals and amateurs) that finds joy in the sheer exploration of movement. Dance improvisation is usually not part of daily life, it is not a home practice (although Covid-19 has turned many living rooms into private studios) and it takes place in a rather homogeneous community.

This chapter aimed to come to a preliminary understanding of the two main concepts of my artistic research: physical play and dance improvisation. In the next chapter, I will further elaborate on the main characteristics of physical play and dance improvisation - this time from an enactive point of view.