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

Hermans, C.

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Chapter 4. Reflections on artistic research

In this chapter, I describe and reflect upon 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, the role of documentation, and visual ethnography as an artistic research method. 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 open up things (Ingold, 2016).

Artistic research: moving between an insider and outsider position

Artistic research is research that is rooted in the creative/artistic process. The study unfolds *in* and *through* the artistic creative process:

Art practice qualifies as research if its purpose is to expand our knowledge and understanding by conducting an original investigation in and through art objects and creative processes. Art research begins by addressing questions that are pertinent in the research context and in the art world. Researchers employ experimental and hermeneutic methods that reveal and articulate the tacit knowledge that is situated and embodied in specific artworks and artistic processes. Research processes and outcomes are documented and disseminated in an appropriate manner to the research community and the wider public. (Borgdorff, 2012, p.53)

First of all, artistic research takes artistic experience as a starting point for exploration. It produces artistic knowledge, i.e. sensual, physical, and embodied knowledge, or, *felt* knowledge (Klein, 2017). As a consequence, artistic research is always (at least to some degree) tied up with the artist. The researcher is an insider, an embodied participant in the practice (Hannula, Suoranta & Vadén, 2014). According to Borgdorff (2012, p.18) in artistic research, embodied knowledge is “revealed and articulated by means of experimentation and interpretation”.

The researcher thus also takes distance from the artistic research process, and this distance allows the researcher to create not only a meta-narrative but also to intertwine the different building blocks of the research into a meaningful whole (the unifying argument). As a researcher, I move in between an insider and outsider perspective. The insider perspective allows me to zoom in, become intimate with the artistic material, and to relate to the material in a personal way. The outsider perspective on the other hand allows me to take a more reflexive stance.

I thus move back and forth between periods of intensive (insider) engagement and more reflective (outsider) distance-taking. Periods of (artistic) making and doing are interchanged with periods of writing, making drafts, plans, and so on.

In this research process I have created a body of material that is publicly available at all times. On the one hand this body of material consists of the living archive, the re-enactments and the Re-Play/Re-Move toolkit.

Besides the living archive and the documentation of the re-enactment, the body of material also consists of articles and other additional texts. The artistic research is made public in two ways: 1) the documentation of the artistic process and 2) the contextual framework. It is important to note that the products of the research are not separated from the process: “they feed back into it, maintaining and nourishing it, questioning and even possibly jeopardizing it” (Hannula et al., 2014, p.19). Artistic

research distinguishes itself from artistic practice in the explicit contextualization of the artworks. Situatedness and actualizing the context are important strategies in my research. There is a fusion between the doing and the reflection on the doing. This requires a commitment to the conditions of the practice, moving between insider and outsider positions, and contextualizing my artistic practice.

Research as a Re-search

Ingold states that research [in anthropology and the arts] is “not about describing the world, or wrapping it up. It is, in the first place, about attending to presence, about noticing, and responding in kind.” (2016, p.12) The researcher enters into “a relation of correspondence” (p.10) where she responds to things, while at the same time things respond to her. Ingold describes research in terms of mutual involvement, a practice of attention that involves curiosity and care. Research is not about the confrontation between ideas in the head (presuppositions/hypotheses) and the facts out there. It is not about collecting data but about corresponding with the world. Research seeks for openings, for pathways to follow, it engages in the making instead of perceiving the world as already made.

Research in a literal sense is searching again, a re-search, and thus always implies a process of repetition and difference (Ingold, 2018). This is specifically the case in my artistic research. Not only do I capture the living play events of my children, but the play events are then re-enacted by professional dancers. In other words, the initial play event is re-enacted. This re-enactment in turn becomes the source for the development of a creative movement toolkit (the Re-Play/Re-Move toolkit). The whole artistic process is thus at once a search and a re-search - by revisiting the original play events and using them as a starting point for artistic exploration.

Artistic research is an embodied practice that taps into the living experience. “Research in the arts seeks to articulate some of this embodied knowledge throughout the creative process and in the art object.” (Borgdorff, 2012, p. 7). Since my research takes the bodily experience as vital for sense-making processes, it is useful here to elaborate a bit further on the notion of embodied practice and bodily knowing.

Bodily knowledge

Jaana Parviainen (2003) explores the nature of bodily knowledge³³ in her article ‘Bodily Knowledge: Epistemological Reflections on Dance’. She starts by stating that propositional knowledge is inadequate in explaining how knowledge in dance (and lived experience in general) is produced. Propositional knowledge involves the conceptualization of perception through a process of transformation (i.e. the formulation of propositions). Propositional knowledge is objective and impersonal – it does not include the subject, or the lived experience.

Instead, Parviainen (2003) proposes a type of knowledge that is not only situated (historically, culturally, spatially, kinaesthetically, etc.) but also self-referential (i.e. it points to the knower). Parviainen uses Michael Polanyi’s notion of tacit knowledge (1966) to understand the distinction between propositional, explicit knowledge and implicit, tacit knowledge. Polanyi’s underlying assertion is that “we can know more than we can tell” (1966, p.4). He describes tacit knowledge as

³³ In this thesis, I use the terms bodily knowledge and embodied knowledge or understanding interchangeably. However, I am aware that the two terms are not identical. Bodily knowledge involves the living dynamics of movement, the repertoire of ‘I cans’ (Sheets-Johnstone, 2015a, p.30) that is grounded in the kinetic/kinaesthetic, tactile body. Bodily knowledge refers to synergies of meaningful movement created by animate organisms. Embodied knowledge, on the other hand, is often used to describe how our understanding of the world, selves and others is rooted in our bodily engagement with the surroundings. Embodiment thus emphasizes the role of the body in consciousness, cognition and the generation of meaning (Johnson, 2015). Sheets-Johnstone is skeptical about the term ‘embodiment’, because it does not do justice to the living dynamics of movement, to kinaesthesia. In this thesis, I don’t make such a strict distinction between the two terms (bodily knowledge and embodied knowledge) because in my viewpoint both terms take the body, movement and the lived experience as a primary source for the generation of meaning.

personal knowledge that is hidden, and that cannot be easily put into words. For Polanyi, tacit knowledge is an understanding by indwelling. Knowledge is more than a sum of discrete pieces of information: knowledge has to be integrated and interiorized. Even more, intentional action is part of all knowledge. “The theory of tacit knowing [holds that] dwelling in our body clearly enables us to attend from it to things outside [...] We may say that when we learn to use language, or a probe, or a tool, and thus make ourselves aware of these things as we are of our body, we interiorize these things; we make ourselves dwell in them.” (Polanyi, 1966, p.147) Tacit knowledge is implicit, bodily knowledge. It is not only by looking at things but by attending and relating to them (with the whole body), that we gain an understanding of the specific thing or attribute. To dwell is to exist, to reside, or in the words of Ingold (2017) to correspond with the things and with the world. For Polanyi, all skills operate under the structure of tacit knowing.

Parviainen (2003) uses Polanyi’s notion of tacit knowledge and indwelling to understand the nature of bodily knowledge. According to her, bodily knowledge not only involves the doing (in terms of bodily skills that are sedimented in body scheme) but also bodily reflection. Parviainen (2003) considers bodily reflection as something that precedes or antecedes the doing. “It is the possibility of doing” (2002, p.19) while bodily skills refer to the actual doing. There is thus a deep and complex connection between bodily skills and bodily reflectivity. Bodily knowledge is not something that a dancer can learn just by repeating a movement. To learn a dance is a process of indwelling. It is a constant practice in which movements are interiorized. It is a thinking in movement through (heightened) bodily sensitivity and responsivity.

Anttila (2007) considers creative dance practice as a practice where reflection and bodily knowledge are deeply intertwined. She uses the term *bodily presence* to describe the complex relationship between sensory attunement to the here-and-now (i.e. pre-reflective experience) and culturally, historical, and constructed knowledge. According to her, bodily presence is “always tied to bodily consciousness and our historicity” (2007, p.84). Attending to bodily states and sensations, also means that they enter into awareness. Bodily presence thus goes hand in hand with reflective consciousness. Anttila refers to Damasio (1999) who states that language arises from bodily experiences. The nonverbal narratives of our body (the pre-reflective experiences) form our core consciousness: language gives us the possibility to not only reflect on these pre-reflective experiences but to also share them with others. Anttila also makes a distinction between daily activities and dance practice. In daily activities, our bodily states and sensations are on “the fringe, vaguely attended to and articulated” (2007, p.83) while in dance (or other somatic practices) this felt-sense can be heightened. Creative movement practices, such as dance improvisation and physical play, allow us to heighten our attention to the qualities of movement and bodily sensations that emerge in the moment.

In this artistic research, I try to grasp the pre-reflective realm of bodily experience by capturing the experience in images (i.e. photographs). These images are wordless stories: they are seen as records or traces of lived experiences. Parallel to the non-discursive (artistic) practice, I make use of a discursive form of communication (the thesis, and the published articles). Through this double character of the discursive and non-discursive practices, I hope to provide a richer understanding of the role of the bodily, pre-reflective experience in the sense-making process of both physical play and dance improvisation.

Theory and Artistic Practice

According to Borgdorff (2012), theory and practice are intertwined in the arts. Art is reflexive because concepts and theories are incorporated into the artistic practice. “Research in the arts seeks to articulate some of the embodied knowledge throughout the creative process and in the art object” (p.7).

The connection between theory and my art practice is two-fold. First of all, the artworks themselves embody and generate theoretical/philosophical thought. Second of all, written texts are produced to make new insights and knowledge of my research topic available to a broader field of peers, colleagues, and researchers (such as dance and play theorists, phenomenologists, and cognitive scientists). I do think it is important to establish dialogues and exchanges on different levels of knowledge – varying from sensibilia to theoretical constructs. Sarah Rubidge’s notion of “thinking in the work” is useful here (1998, p.3):

Thinking *in* the work is contrasted to thinking *about* the work (either before or after its creation). Thinking *about* the work is articulated in the form of propositions which describe, explain, or otherwise articulate ideas about the work. Thinking *in* the work, whether it takes the form of question or answer, is articulated in and through the act of making or ordering movements, marks, sounds, etc. This kind of thinking can be art specific (to do with the way the materials of the artform, and/or its underlying assumptions, behave, or can be made to behave), or more philosophical, and is, I would claim, in and of itself a research process.

Thinking in the work includes observations, intuitions, analytic thinking, and practical knowing. Intuitions should not be seen here as non-rational thoughts, since it is based on antecedent, tacit knowledge (Rubidge, 1998). I consider my artistic research as a double-edged inquiry, in such a way that the artistic work embodies theoretical concepts and vice versa, the theoretical concepts are fueled by artistic insights.

Documentation, artworks, and visual ethnography

In my artistic research, there is no clear distinction between documentation and art work. The two are deeply intertwined. Throughout the artistic research, I have produced three ‘objects’ (artworks): the living archive, the re-enactments, and the ‘Re-Play/Re-Move’ toolkit. Only the latter can be seen as an independent object. In the case of the physical play events and the re-enactments, documentation plays a crucial role in the becoming of the artwork. The original play events and the re-enactments are captured in photographic sequences. There is no audience or public and the only ‘evidence’ that the play events and re-enactment took place are the photographic records. The play events and re-enactments become artworks through an intense process of documentation. Even more, the documents not only serve as access points to the original events but the documents itself become performative (Auslander, 2008, see also page 65).

The living archive and the use of photography in capturing the spontaneous physical play events of my children, clearly resonate with visual ethnography. Visual ethnography can be described as “the study of visual forms and visual system in their cultural context” (Kharel, 2015, p.153). Visual ethnography makes use of film, photography and other media throughout the whole process of research, analysis, and dissemination (Pink, 2008). It aims to provide a detailed and in-depth understanding of a particular culture, society, or community. Photographs are seen as material traces that not only describe or illustrate a social phenomenon but also open up new interpretations and meanings.

In my own artistic work, I capture and collect imagery of my children’s physical play events. Although I consider it to be my artistic practice, I also recognize and acknowledge similarities with visual ethnography since the photographs are taken 1) in a real-life situation, 2) where (my) children engage spontaneously in physical play and 3) the photographs themselves are not manipulated or edited. In line with visual ethnography, the images of the physical play events are not considered representations of an objective world but they convey and communicate corporeal meanings. Visual ethnography is here understood as an approach that engages with audio-visual material throughout the

whole research process. It often involves reflexive engagement, “a knowing in practice” (Wenger, as cited in Pink, 2008, p.2) that seeks an experiential understanding of social or cultural phenomena.

To a limited extent, my research is also auto-ethnographic. The first phase of my research takes place in and around my own home when I capture the spontaneous and informal play events of my own children. However, I am not exploring my own role as a mother, nor am I interested in my own personal experiences with play. My motherhood allows me to observe and study the physical play of children at close range – and as such, it can offer rich insider accounts of the informal play culture of (young) children (see also page 24). Since I am not a participant (except for the second re-enactment), I believe that my research is mostly related to visual ethnography and not to auto-ethnography. Only the second re-enactment (see Chapter 8, page 101) can be considered an example of auto-ethnographic research.

In sum, my research is artistic and ethnographic. I use photography as a way to document the physical play events of my children as well as the re-enactments through dance improvisational practice. The camera is there, with me, nearby, and an intrinsic part of my daily life (and the life of my children). There is no distance, there is just nearness. The visual imagery is *more than* documentation since its goal is not to lay things to rest but to create openings, to cut across, pass through and engage with what is present.

Documentation, exposition, writing: the production of knowledge

The question that follows logically from the above, is where I situate the documentation: within the art practice itself or in the theoretically framing of the artistic work? The answer is not easy. My artistic research (as often is the case) consists of two elements: an artistic and a written component (the thesis). But this doesn't mean that the artwork corresponds with 'the art' and the 'written component' with the 'discursive component' – since one could argue that all “art counts as discourse” (Schwab & Borgdorff, 2014, p. 11).

Theory and art practice are deeply intertwined, and the idea that only written texts produce knowledge is not tenable. In this respect, documentation can be seen as a form of visual writing. The documentation engages with questions and claims about the knowledge that is produced within the practice itself.

Schwab (2019,) therefore introduces a third term: exposition. The term refers “to the aesthetic-epistemic transpositions of practice aimed at articulating artistic research” (Schwab, 2019, p.32). An exposition operates between art and writing: it creates a reflective distance, it is a way of articulating the artistic research (Schwab & Borgdorff, 2014). The term exposition provides an alternative for the practice/theory model that is functional but also limiting. As a fixed framework it leaves little to no space for the artwork itself to be discursive and reflective.

Schwab and Borgdorff (2014) state that artistic research is research that crosses borders and by doing so it creates new relationships and new knowledge. The term 'exposition' refers to the idea that writing and knowledge are already present in the artistic practice. This type of writing can be non-textual or visual, or it can include interactive elements. In my artistic research, the living archive, the documentation of the re-enactments, the toolkit and the written texts can all be seen as expositions of my artistic research and practice.

Doing, performing, reading, and writing

If I would have to describe my artistic research in a few words, I would say that my research entails 'reading, writing, doing and performing' (the order is arbitrary). My research, and this in line with post-qualitative research, is concerned with practice, action, and performance. I am interested in shared experiences, in fleeting encounters, in affective resonances, in creative movements, and in corporeal concepts.

Post-qualitative research – also referred to as non-representational research – is an approach that takes poststructuralism as the departure point for new ways of looking at research. Post-qualitative research “doesn’t have a pre-existing, formalized, systematic research process that one can follow, thereby guaranteeing validity” (St. Pierre, 2021, p.5). It is a methodology-to-come, it must be invented and created (every time we do research) and should more be seen as an experiment than as a method. It critiques representational logic and states that the research process in conventional research is in itself problematic because of the separation between data and the human/subject/experience (St. Pierre, 2021). Instead, post-qualitative research offers an open research approach by thinking differently about data and data analysis. It proposes an open research approach that starts with curiosity.

I consider my research as an assemblage of tiny experiments that not only involves the diverse (and spontaneous) physical play practice of children but also the re-enactment of these events in dance improvisational practice. Even more, the research method is performative and the research process unfolds through “intra-actions with the world” (Le Grange, 2018, p.8). The performative in this respect not only comprises the artistic making but also writing and reading are conceived as practices - even as performative acts³⁴. Performance refers to the expressive engagement of the body – to the affective capacities that can be expressed in dancing and playing, but also in writing and reading. John-David Dewsbury states that research, in general, should be more performative:

[...] this does not necessarily mean staging research and acting out findings (though given all the performance rhetoric it would be nice if it did, at least *some time*), but in striving to find inspiration in the arts, in the poetics of embodied living, in enacting the very un-actualized expressive and impressive potentials of social-scientific knowledge, in taking dedicated risks, in exercising passion, and in finding ways to re-configure thinking, sensing, and presenting by emphasizing the singular powers of action, locution, and thought.
(as cited in Vannini, 2015, p.16)

Artistic research is creative, practical, and being-with-the practice. What I have learned throughout the process, is that there is no recipe or formula for artistic research. There are guidelines, requirements, and even restrictions, but each researcher has to find her own path. Plenty of written texts can be found on artistic research, and the Research Catalogue³⁵ provides a wide range of artistic research examples. But there are no step-to-step procedures, and as a result artistic research has to re-invent itself constantly.

Artistic research is a methodology-to-come (St. Pierre, 2021). Artistic research does not seek to close but to open up things (Ingold, 2016). It is a form of research that opens up new pathways of doing, thinking and performing. The artistic process begins with curiosity and with addressing questions. Not knowing is just as much a part of the process as is the knowing. Experimental methods are used that straightly tap into the lived experience (i.e. bodily knowledge) and that are then articulated in a series of writings. It is a context aware process that requires both an insider as well as outsider perspective.

³⁴ Here I refer to the work of Judith Butler who states that language itself is performative: language does not simply describe the world but functions also as a form of social action. The performative is here understood as “the performative force of art, that is, its capacity to effect ‘movement’ in thought, word and deed in the individual and social sensorium” (Bolt, 2016, p.130). Performativity thus also may involve speech acts. Austin refers to this as performative utterances. The ‘I do’ in a marriage ceremony is a good example of a performative utterance since the words do not only describe but also perform the action to which they refer. For further reading, I suggest the article by Bolt (2016) on performativity.

³⁵ <https://www.researchcatalogue.net>

Most importantly, artistic research begins and ends with the artistic experience which is in itself a form of reflection (Klein, 2017). Because artistic knowledge is intimately bound to the practice, to the doing, and to experience there is no step-by-step plan that one can easily follow. As an artistic researcher, I have to find my own path and my own voice. In many ways, artistic research is an invitation to explore a rather wild and uncharted landscape full of challenges, obstacles and possibilities. It is from the not-yet knowing that new insights come into being.