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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 6. Re-enaction of physical play events through dance improvisational practice

The next phase of my artistic research consists of the re-enactment of the physical play events by professional dancers. Re-enactment is used in diverse practices, but this chapter is dedicated to the artistic practice of re-enactment in dance and the performing arts. I argue that re-enactment is not a re-production of the past in the strict sense of the word but a re-activation of the creative potential that is still lingering in the work (Lepecki, 2010). In addition, I discuss how the body can be used to re-enter and re-articulate the archive. The body, as a living entity, has the potential to access the archive in an experiential and affective way. I introduce Mühlhoff's notion concept of affective resonances (2015) to explain how affects can travel in-between bodies. The aim of the three re-enactments is to unlock and grasp the virtual forces that are present and still at work in the imagery. I close the chapter off with some final thoughts on re-enactment as a double-folded process, an affective doubling without appropriation. Re-enactment is a process in which experience is re-experienced.

Artistic re-enactments

When I think of re-enaction, the first image that comes into my mind is that of large groups of amateur hobbyists or history enthusiasts that wear costumes and that want to recreate aspects of a historical event – in most cases battles and wars. Re-enactment has a long history, the Romans already re-staged famous battles as a form of spectacle. Although re-enactment mainly has an educational or entertaining purpose, it is also emerging in scholarship as a potentially productive way to increase historical understanding in a corporeal way (see for example the RRR Network)⁴⁵.

In this research, I mainly focus on artistic re-enactments within performance arts and dance. Performance arts and dance can both be seen as time-based arts, and as a result, ephemerality and intangibility are central elements in both art practices. Both do not produce commodities or material outcomes. The performance ceases to exist after its execution. Re-enactments however provide possibilities to re-access the 'original' performance. They do not duplicate or imitate the original performance, and therefore are not identical to the original event (Westgeest & Augusto, 2020).

The core of artistic re-enactment is in general not to re-construct the original as truthfully as possible, but to grasp the creative potential that is still present in the work. Re-enaction is never an exact repetition of the original event. Re-enactment can thus not solely be understood as a return to the 'original'. The initial event has already taken place, and can never be repeated or re-enacted in its original form. "Those watching a re-enactment of this kind run no risk of confusion, knowing that the event has already happened and cannot therefore be replaced by another event, merely re-evoked, alluded to." (Caronia, 2014, p.13-14) In other words, the re-enactment itself cannot be confused with the original event.

Even more, artists in general are not so much interested in the exact re-construction of the event but in the exploration of new possibilities and the generation of new meaning. "Artistic re-enactments therefore do not view the original event as something singular and irreducible, but on the contrary, as a complex set of elements that can be interpreted in various ways." (Caronia, 2014, p.14) The aim of artistic re-enactment is not to reproduce the event in a similar way, but to re-experience the potential of the original event in all its immediacy (Quaranta, 2014). By doing so, the re-enaction becomes in itself a new art work.

⁴⁵ <https://rrr-network.com>

The role of the body in artistic re-enactments

Lepecki (2010) argues that within the performing arts and dance field, every will to archive necessarily includes the will to re-enact dances and performances. The body offers the most potential when it comes to recording and storing a performance action since the “body, as a transformative entity, is capable of functioning as a site where knowledge can be placed” (Griffiths, 2014, p.88). Laura Griffiths also refers to this as dancerly knowledge, i.e. the body of the dancer/performer serves as a vehicle for tacit knowledge. She argues that the dancer’s body can be used as a three-dimensional vessel, a vehicle for knowledge, through which we can access and capture “the ephemeral attributes that otherwise go missing as a result of performance’s disappearance” (p.92).

Because of its ephemeral nature, it is difficult to archive a performance in traditional ways. Conventional archives cannot capture the performance/event in its fullness, and as a result, archival gaps emerge. With archival gaps, I refer to the gaps between material and immaterial traces, records and the event. Conventional media (like texts/documents and audio-visual media) are perfectly capable to capture the material traces of a performance. However, when it comes to immaterial traces (such as affects, dynamics, flow, breath, energy, sensorial experiences) media fall short. It is here where the living body comes in. The living body can serve as a place “where non-verbal practices can be actualized through re-enactment” (Griffiths, 2014, p.96). Within this perspective, re-enactment is understood as a corporeal (trans)formation of past work.

Lepecki’s (2010) notes an increased interest in the contemporary dance scene in Europe in the re-enactment of some well-known dance works of the twentieth century. According to him, this return to dance history is not so much led by a cultural critique on archival (bureaucratic) institutions (as is the case in Hal Foster’s notion of archival impulse) but an artistic desire to unlock the creative potential that is still present in a past work. Through re-enactment, the body itself becomes the vessel for actualizing this creative potential. The dancer’s body becomes a place, a zone, a system where the original does not rest, but is formed and transformed over and over again. Lepecki (in reference to Deleuze) considers re-enactment as a process that produces differences, an act of transfer in which possibilizations are unlocked and actualized. The actual field of a past dance work is always surrounded by virtuals that can be activated through re-enactment⁴⁶.

Lepecki discusses three examples of re-enactment within the dance and performing scene: Julie Tolentino’s *The Sky Remains the Same*, Martin Nachbar’s *Urheben Aufheben* and Richard Move’s return to *Martha Graham*. In all cases, the work is re-enacted in a body different than the body that originally performed it. The archive thus passes through a different body, and in this act of transfer, the work is actualized. Griffiths (2014) points to the difference between a dance practitioner that re-enacts repertoire that is already settled in the body and a performer or dancer that is not familiar with the work and thus has to re-construct the work from archival traces such as video footage, written texts and notes from the choreographer. In the first case, the dancer is re-calling and re-awakening traces that already reside in the body. In the latter case, traces are picked-up by another body that infuses the work with new life.

In my artistic work, I am interested in re-enactments done by performers that were not part of the original event. The aim of my artistic research is to transmit initially felt forces/affects that were once present in the physical play events of my children and that are then re-enacted in dance

⁴⁶ Lepecki here follows Deleuze who uses the term ‘virtual’ to point to the creative potential that surrounds the ‘actual’. The virtual exists in a preindividual reality that is distinct from but nevertheless interacts with reality. Actualization is thus not “the becoming-real of possibilities, but the becoming-actual of the virtual which coexists alongside it” (Bluemink, 2020, para. 9). For the virtual to be actualized, there needs to be a differential change. The virtual can be understood as a force, as a tendency for life to diverge, to create and to adapt to its environment. The virtual is an active field that causes the actual experience to happen.

improvisational practice. I want to explore how affective traces can travel from one body to another body through the use of photographs. I am not interested in re-staging the original play event and to re-work it into a dance performance. My interest lies solely in capturing and documenting the affective resonances in photographic scenes.

Re-enactment: form and affective resonances

The question now is: what is precisely re-enacted in the re-enactments? What kind of traces are picked-up and what are the instructions that the professional dancers receive? To answer these questions, I must return to the initial research sub question that I formulated at the beginning of this thesis:

How can professional dancers use photographic imagery as a tool to re-enact children's physical play events and explore the elements of participatory sense-making through their own practice?

In this phase, I want to explore how affects, intensities and forces can travel through different bodies in physical play and dance improvisation – through the mediation of a set of images. The aim is to get a deeper understanding of how participatory sense-making processes take on shape in both physical play and dance improvisation. I am specifically interested in the affective traces, the leftovers, that are still present in the set of images and the way these traces are picked up by professional dancers.

In other words, the set of images is actualized by the dancers, not only in form and shape but also in dynamics, flow, rhythm and the sensorial. The images are actualized through the senses, through the flesh. In this phase of my artistic research, I am interested in how affective traces can be used as a creative source for movement exploration. I use the term affective resonances (developed by Mühlhoff, 2015) here to explore how affects can travel through different bodies through the use of a set of imagery. Affective resonance (developed by Mühlhoff, 2015) usually involves the direct interaction between two or more agents. It refers to the gripping dynamic force, the affective interplay that is experienced by the interactants in face-to-face contact. It involves mutual attunement of facial expressions and gestures, interactional synchrony and the coordination of actions. Affective resonance as a concept is closely related to enactivism and the interactive social cognition theory of De Jaegher and Di Paolo (2007)⁴⁷.

In my artistic research, however, there is no direct contact or interaction between the professional dancers and the playing children. The relation is mediated by documentation (the photographic sequences). The dancer is asked to respond to the affective traces captured by the set of images – allowing it to resonate within their own bodies. The body of the dancer is not a passive receptor but an active force that creatively explores and attunes to the affective traces within the set of images. Re-enactment can thus be seen as a performative practice in which the body, with its own movement history and experiences, becomes the frame through which the dancer can re-enter the living archive.

The dancer doesn't just look at the visual imagery (well she does that too) but she establishes sensible connections between her own body and the archive. The dynamic of the affective traces (rendered visible by the photographs) acts on the dancer, it makes her move, not by mimicking the

⁴⁷ The concept of affective resonances (Mühlhoff, 2015) brings together insights from affect theory, phenomenology and enactivism. Mühlhoff uses De Jaegher and Di Paolo's notion of participatory sense-making to explain how affects emerge in processes of social interaction. Deleuze comes into the picture when Mühlhoff explains the being-in-resonance "as the actualization of [virtual] forces that are inscribed in the relational space" (p.13). For Mühlhoff affects are jointly created in the interaction dynamic, unlike Daniel Stern who acknowledges the social interaction in affect attunement but still considers affects as internal feeling states.

original play event but by dwelling in them (Polanyi, 1966). The dancer thereby creates her own line of actualization.

Each re-enactment is a singular event since each dancer connects to the living archive in her own way. Re-enactment is a double process: the dancer is not only moved and affected by the archival material but she also moves and affects the archival material. Suzan Kozel (2017) refers to this as affective doubling: the dancer not only picks up on the affective residues but also carries them further. The living archive is thus re-articulated by the bodily actions of the dancers, it is charged with new affects and new layers of meaning are added on top of already existing ones. This is done in two ways. First of all, the re-enactments themselves can be seen as actualizations of the living archive (and as such they produce affects, forces and intensities). Second, the re-enactments are captured by the camera and added to the living archive. They communicate with the photographs of the original play events and as a result, new layers of meaning are produced.

The re-enactments are not an imitation or a duplication of the initial play events. Re-enaction is not about resemblance. However, form and structure do play a role. In ways that are similar to Martin Nachbar's *Urheben Aufheben*⁴⁸ and Richard Move's impersonations of *Martha Graham*, the re-enactments in my artistic research start with a literal doubling, as dancers incorporate a specific gesture or pose (see Figures 18 to 25).

However, the outer congruence is only relevant because it allows the dancers to establish sensorial connections between their own bodies and the imagery. Their own bodies become the frame through which they re-actualize physical play. The pose serves as an entrance, a way in. By stepping into the pose, in a quite literal way, the dancers can experience the qualitative kinetic dynamics that are enclosed in the pose.

According to Sheets-Johnstone (2012, p.53) "all movement has an inside and an outside". Movement is both a kinaesthetic as well as a kinetic reality. By moving into the kinetic configuration of a movement or pose, the dancers also gain access to the kinaesthetically felt dimensions of the movement. Affect and movement are deeply intertwined, and affective resonances are experienced by moving through the exact form of a pose. Or even better said: "the dancers are not moving through a form, the form is moving through them." (Sheets-Johnstone, 2012, p. 51)

The dynamic of the pose acts on the dancers, "it makes them move—not in an externally determined way, but in their own way—, and thereby it gets enacted by them, they carry it further" (Mühlhoff, 2015, p.101). The immediate experience of being-in-resonance with the original pose is that of a present force, a force that takes hold of the dancers in a double dynamic of *moving and being moved* by the imagery of the original play event. The dancers are not only moved by the set of imagery but they also, in turn, *move the living archive* by adding new layers of meaning on top of already existing ones.

The dancers do not only attune to the affective traces of the specific pose that is displayed in the image, but they also attune to their own bodies (their own memories, movement history and bodily configuration), to the other bodies and to the present situation (being in a studio, with classmates, early in the morning so the body still needs to wake up). The unfolding of forces, intensities and affects is the result of this relational and situational configuration.

In sum, re-enactment is viewed here as a field of differences from which more than one meaning can be extracted (Caronia, 2014). The dancers bring their own bodies and histories along. Temporal lines are drawn between the archive, the body and the situation in which the body finds itself. Bodies, spaces and images together move through dynamic forms. The dancers are not only responding but also initiating movements, they pick up traces, enter somewhere in the middle, slip in

⁴⁸ I refer to the article of Lepecki (2010, pp. 40-41) for examples of doubleness in both Martin Nachbar's *Urheben Aufheben*⁴⁸ and Richard Move's impersonations of *Martha Graham*.

and also slip out again. The dancers thus create their own lines of unfolding. They not only re-construct the original play event, but they also add new layers of meaning on top of it.



Figures 18 and 19. Original rough-and-tumble play and re-enactment by dance students at the Amsterdam University of the Arts © Carolien Hermans



Figures 20, 21, 22 and 23. Original rough-and-tumble play and re-enactment by dance students at the Amsterdam University of the Arts © Carolien Hermans





Figure 24. Rough-and-tumble play of two boys © Carolien Hermans



Figure 25. Re-enactment by dance students at the Amsterdam University of the Arts © Carolien Hermans

Photography and Re-enactment

The working sessions with (emerging) professional dancers are captured by the camera. In this stage of the artistic work, another set of imagery arises – this time however from the dance improvisational practice. Selecting, ordering and classifying are once again used as organising principles. The selected set of images is added to the living archive.

Just as with the play events of the children, it is difficult to tell how and in what ways the presence of the camera affects the behaviour of the dancers. In general, I would say that the dancers professionally relate to the camera. They consider it a part of the artistic process and they understand the importance of capturing and recording the workshops. In contrast to some of the children, they do not look directly into the camera or show in an explicit way that they are aware of the camera. I believe this is trained. First of all, dancers are accustomed to look in the mirror in a dance studio. At the start of a lesson or training, they will perhaps fix their hair or their clothing, but as soon as they engage in the dance, their attention is drawn to the movement and not so much to how they look (although they can swap this gaze instantly in the break or a transition moment). Second, dancers are used to performing for an audience. They are thus aware of the presence of an audience, which is in many ways similar to the eye of a camera.

This doesn't mean that they are not affected at all by the camera. Just as with the children, I notice that if the camera is introduced from the beginning on, the dancers are more at ease. Duration plays a role here too. After a while, the dancers seem to forget about the camera, or at least, the camera shifts to the periphery of their attention. With the first-year students from the MTD (the first re-enactment), I notice that when I come close with the camera, in a way that I enter their personal space, it becomes harder for them to ignore the camera and to be fully present in the moment. The workshop with the MTD students is the only workshop where we close off the day with a presentation. This final showing makes it more formal. Performing for public (even if the public consists of fellow students) also gives the camera another status. The camera is no longer there to capture the artistic process but now it gains a performative value.

In the second re-enactment, the becoming of animal, I am the performer. Interesting enough, I am overly aware of the camera. Pretty much all of the time, I know where the camera is and I turn to the camera whenever this is needed (to get the best angle). Although the blankets cover my face, and I am thus without sight, I use my other senses (sound but mostly proprioception and kinaesthetic awareness) to locate the camera. I constantly shift between inner sensing and outer appearance. This is something that probably all dancers do, even when there is no mirror or camera around: being aware of inner sensations, yet at the same time also being aware of the outer configuration of a specific movement.

In the third re-enactment, I give the dancer (Paula Guzzanti) the assignment to film herself. Since Paula always uses a camera when she is rehearsing, I think the impact of the camera is reduced to a minimum. Finally, I should mention here the Touch Workshop at t Chester University. Although I check with everyone if it is okay to use the camera, I am still hesitant in using the camera. I sense that the camera is perhaps too intrusive and that it is enough for me to just be present. As a result, I return to writing down my impressions and sharing these impressions with the participants. The writings and not the photographs become the most relevant input for analysis of the Touch Workshop.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I have explored the concept of re-enactment within the field of dance and performing arts. I hope to have shown that re-enactment is not a re-production of a past event but an attempt to grasp the creative potential that is still present in the work. Re-enactment is “a privileged mode to effectuate or actualize a work's immanent field of inventiveness and creativity” (Lepecki, 2010, p.45).

Re-enactment is the actualization of past work: although it rests on the original work, the act of re-enactment activates affects, intensities and forces already present in the work but that have not yet been realized. Re-enactment is a re-turn to the past work, but a return only so far that differences are found and produced.

The past work is re-actualized through the bodies of the dancers. The aim is to gain a tacit understanding of the forces, intensities and affects that are still present in the past work. In this phase of the artistic process, the visual material is handed over to professional dancers. The instructions are quite simply: take a look at the set of images, choose a few images that resonate or appeal to you (in whatever way, you don't have to explain this, the resonance can be entirely on an affective non-linguistic level) and then you try to recapture the energy, the affects/intensities, or just something that grabs you and takes you along.

The process of re-enactment often starts with form and outer congruence. Through literal doubling, dancers can establish sensorial and kinaesthetic connections between their own bodies and the imagery. The outer form provides an entrance, a way in. But as soon as they are in, new connections and new virtuals arise. In this process of moving and being moved, the experience itself is doubled. Re-enactment, we could say, is an experience of an experience (Massumi, 2002).