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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 8. Becoming animal: children's physical play and dance improvisation as transformative activities that generate novel meanings<sup>54</sup>

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

### **Play and dance improvisation as transformative activities**

This chapter looks at the potential of play and dance improvisation as activities that are capable of transforming the sense-making process. Putting the usual associations with risk-taking, challenge, uncertainty, and freedom aside for a moment, my main interest lies in providing an enactive framework that explains transformative mechanisms of both dance improvisation and physical play. Dance improvisation is here loosely defined as “the process of creating and/or choosing your movements as you are doing them” (De Spain, 2014, p. 5) while play is defined as “the exploration of new possibilities of being” (Henricks, 2008, p.159).

Transformation is a complex term that carries different connotations. Hans-Georg Gadamer (1960, p.124) for example speaks of “ecstatic self-forgetfulness” or “self-transcendence”, a state where object and subject have inescapably changed. Psychologist Winnicott (2005, p.11) calls it the transitional space, “a space of experiencing, between the inner and outer worlds, and contributed to by both, in which primary creativity (illusion) exists and can develop”.

Gwen Gordon and Donald Esbjörn-Hargens (2007a, p.9) state that transformations occur “through interactions across boundaries in the back-and-forth movement of encounter and exchange that characterizes most of life, but which is heightened in play and improvisation”. They use the term transformational zones with respect to the possibilities provided by play and improvisation to engage safely with risk, allowing the player to experiment with new ways of being. To transform “we have to loosen our grip on the structures that define us” (Gordon & Esbjörn-Hargens, 2007a, p. 46) and both play and improvisation provide optimal conditions to do so. Play and improvisation take place in a flow of openness, flexibility and full engagement. According to Gordon and Esbjörn-Hargens these are the necessary conditions for the transformative to take place. See Figures 35 and 36.

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<sup>54</sup> This chapter is published in 2019 in the *Journal of Dance & Somatic Practices*, 11(2), 157-175. I made the following adjustments concerning the original article: I revised the abstract and omitted the sections where I introduce the enactive account and the theory of participatory sense-making. I also made some textual adjustments and added a few notes.



**Figures 35 and 36.** The transformative potential of physical play and dance improvisation © Carolien Hermans



Bateson (1972) argues that through play and improvisation we discover new possibilities of thinking. New frames, perspectives and horizons arise out of the playful. Play and improvisation are characterized as “particular kind of leaps across boundaries into and between new frames” (Bateson, 1972, p. 12). Philosopher James Hans (in line with Gadamer) refers to this as “the leap out of the conventional and habitual frame of the self” (as cited in Gordon & Esbjörn-Hargens, 2007b, p.62).

What the authors have in common is that the transformative power of both play and improvisation lies in the in-between space - an experiential space that connects the inner and outer worlds. It is here where the enactive account comes in. In enactivism, every action is inter-action: organisms are embedded in an environment through dynamic coupling. Dance improvisation and play, it is argued, are activities that are not “retrieved from a pre-given world but emerge from our embodied consciousness as it reaches out to, transforms, and is transformed by the ongoing process” of things, surroundings and others (Van der Schyff, 2015, p. 12).

The enactive account offers a holistic perspective in which life, body-mind and environments are deeply intertwined. Sense-making in this respect is not seen as the appropriation of fixed codes of meaning by a stable and unified agent. Instead, sense-making is considered a fluid, dynamic process that takes place in the coordinated and synchronised interaction with things, others and environments. “It is the world of *Becoming*, which includes both relative being and non-relative being taking place in the flux of self-organising, self-renewing processes of the universe.” (Nakagawa, 2000, p. 32)

The enactive account, in line with Eastern philosophy, argues that nothing in the world can exist entirely in and of itself – experiences, things, thoughts, selves and minds come into being in the interaction with the world. Out of this follows that the self is not a singular, fixed entity but a plural and dynamic being. We do not move and engage with the world from a pre-given, fixed stance instead the self is just as much a non-self, floating in between being and non-being (Varela et al., 1991). The same is true for meaning. Meaning is here “understood as ‘knots’ of various relations, which includes the perspective of the experiencing ‘subject’ herself as constituted by a unique and ongoing history of such relational processes” (Van der Schyff, 2015, p. 6). This resembles Deleuze and Guattari’s philosophy of relational ontology (1987). Pairing Deleuze with the enactive account might at first seem at odds, specifically when it comes to Deleuze’s notion of difference (1994) and the enactivists emphasis on autopoiesis (Protevi, 2011)<sup>55</sup>. Enactivism assumes that living systems conserve their organisation (autopoiesis, i.e. an organism capable of reproducing and maintaining itself) and as a result, there is always some kind of identity preservation. Deleuze, on the other hand, advocates towards a dissolution of the self through dynamic series of modifications. The concept of autopoiesis seems to bite with Deleuze’s universe of assemblages, movements of deterritorialization and destratification. However, Di Paolo’s notion of adaptivity is more in line with the writings of Deleuze. According to Di Paolo, sense-making can only occur through the adaptivity of an organism, since an organism needs to sense and make sense of external environmental differences. This requires “a dynamic emergent self” (Protevi, 2011, p. 43). Sense-making in this respect is not seen as the appropriation of fixed codes of meaning by a stable and unified agent. Instead, it is the result of a dynamic series of modifications, a constant rhythmic renewal through which the self becomes undone. It is here where “Deleuze and enactivism can be brought together” (Protevi, 2011, p. 41).

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<sup>55</sup> In the enactive approach, autopoiesis refers to a system that is capable of maintaining and simultaneously producing its own organisation and conditions (internal as well as external). An autopoietic system is organised as a network of processes of production in such a way “that 1) its components continuously regenerate the network that is producing them, and 2) constitute the system as a distinguishable unity in the domain in which they exist (Weber & Varela, in McGann, 2007, p.486).

Deleuze and Guattari (1987), just like the enactive approach, pick up the insights from dynamic self-organising systems and apply this to other kinds of systems (such as linguistic, political-economic and cognitive systems). The result is a decentred framework, a rhizome that resists the organisational structure of the root-tree system and the linear, dualistic thinking that comes along with it. Instead of fixed entities Deleuze and Guattari introduce a world of assemblages, flight, movements of deterritorialization and destratification. Specifically relevant for this chapter is their notion of becoming. Becoming is the process of change, flight, or movement within an assemblage (i.e. a collection of things that have been gathered). It's a process of deterritorialization that generates a new way of being by "removing the element from its original functions and bringing about new ones" (Glossary, n.d., para. 2).

I argue here that play and dance improvisation both carry the capacity to initiate lines of deterritorialization, to create new values within the flux of self-organising processes. In the next paragraph, I will show how play and dance improvisation offer new associative frames, and ways of becoming that are inherently transformative.

### **Dance improvisation and play: sense-making and the transformative**

If we now define the transformative as the infusion of virtual, alienated meaning in an actual situation, then we can easily recognize this as a main feature of play<sup>56</sup>. According to Susanna Millar (1968, p. 21) play "detaches messages, experiences, or objects from their context of origin, creating a new frame that allows for greater freedom, interactivity, and creative possibilities". Play possesses a non-literal, as-if quality (Hewes, 2014). Because play does not serve an immediate useful function, it enables the player to step out of the conventional interpretive frame and to replace it with another, associative frame. Since no sense-making is "directly demanded from the environment or from definite internal needs", play can invest in novel and alienated sense-making (Di Paolo et al., 2010, p. 76).

Gordon and Esbjörn-Hargens (2007b, p. 8) refer to this as the bracketing of frames<sup>57</sup>, i.e. "to step outside of and manipulate interpretive frames from the perspective of another frame". In other words, a concrete, physical event is imbued with alienated, virtual meaning. According to Di Paolo et al. (2010, p. 79), play "is a self-structuring process governed by the dialectics of expansion and exhaustion of possibilities. Its freedom lies in the capability that players acquire of creating new meaningful (not arbitrary) constraints." The bracketing of frames is the moment when new associative frames emerge. Boundaries become fluid and this openness to the surroundings allows the player to engage and experiment with the possibilities that emerge in the moment (Gordon & Esbjörn-Hargens, 2007a). Play creates passages from the actual to the virtual, thereby opening up a continuum of

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<sup>56</sup> In chapter 7, I already discussed the notion of virtual, alienated meaning. See note 50, page 89.

<sup>57</sup> In the original paper, I speak of the 'bracketing of experience' in line with Gordon and Esbjörn-Hargens (2007b). The bracketing of experience is understood as a transformative force that detaches meaning, messages and experiences from the original context. However, the term 'bracketing of experience' might be confusing since one might question how experience can be bracketed at all. I, therefore, have replaced the term 'bracketing of experience' with 'bracketing of frames' (which is also used by Gordon and Esbjörn-Hargens) throughout this chapter. Bracketing of frames refers to the transformation of an existing (or original) frame to a more indeterminate frame that allows for more creative freedom. Dance improvisation and physical play are good examples of how we can throw off the constraints of a specific context and insert new interpretive frames that allow for more creative freedom. For example, in daily life, I can reach to grab something from the top shelf of my closet. In a dance improvisation, this reaching becomes a self-movement (because the action has no immediate daily function): it becomes a creative force through which I explore different ways of reaching (the amount of effort that is attributed to the reaching, what it means to reach, etc.). The determinate frame of reaching (grabbing something from the top shelf) is replaced by an indeterminate frame (exploring the act of reaching as self-movement) that opens up new possibilities of moving and being.

multiplicities. Play enables us to engage with potentialities, it settles itself in the in-between of that which has passed and that which is yet to come. Manning (2009, p. 3) refers to this as “the elasticity of the almost, the intensive extension of the movement, a moment when anything can happen”. By the bracketing of frames, we shift from the actual to the virtual. Openness, engagement in the here and now, flexibility and sensitivity are needed to tap into the stream of potentialities that emerge in the moment.

Furthermore, play is relational. Through play, we connect with the environment and with others. In fact, what is moved in and through play, is not the body, nor the object but the relation (Manning, 2009). Through play we change our relation with our surroundings. By detaching the experience from its context or frame, boundaries shift and fixed frames (i.e. ways of perceiving and sensing the world) suddenly become instable. Play stirs up, sets in motion, and disturbs. Play creates temporal oscillations. In play, a toothbrush can become a flute, a hair comb, a conductor’s pole or a telephone. However, it is not the object or the environment that is radically altered in play (since the toothbrush has not really turned into a flute): what is altered is the relation. Change is even a too big name for what play does. Its aim is not to alter but to move the relation, that is, to produce openings and passages through which intensities and forces flow back and forth. Play thus undermines the stability of fixed objects, states and selves. Destabilization occurs every time the relation is moved.

In play, new associative frames may arise because play itself is inherently ambiguous. Play does not serve an immediate useful function (Huizinga, 1955) and it can move in different directions at once (Spurius, 1989). Play establishes a paradoxical frame because it is play, yet at the same time it is not play (Bateson, 1972). When boys, for example, engage in play-fighting they hit and kick each other, however, they do not exert the same force or intention to the movements as in a ‘real fight’. They are fighting each other, yet they are not fighting each other. The signals are similar to but not the same as those of a fight (Bateson, 1972). Here we see how the players hold at once two contextual frames (the real and the unreal).

In dance improvisation, similar mechanisms are at work. Dance improvisation is also associated with having no immediate, useful function. “Dance improvisation exists outside everyday life, creating its own time-space boundaries, seeking only its own profit and goal’.” (Blom & Chaplin, 1988, p. x) Even more, dance improvisation is concerned with the kinetic-kinaesthetic. It requires attentiveness “to the qualitative realities of movement” (Sheets-Johnstone, 2015b, p. xxix). Language plays less of a role and as a consequence, the sense-making process remains ambiguous. In dance improvisation, multiple meanings may arise that are non-specific, instable and ephemeral by nature.

Dance improvisation is the process of creating movements in the here and now (De Spain, 2014). Sheets-Johnstone (2015b) describes dance improvisation as the spontaneous articulation of sheer movement. Dance improvisation is a “self-structured process governed by the dialectics of expansion and contraction of possibilities” (Di Paolo, 2007, p.1). Its freedom lies not only in the freeing of constraints but also in the creation of novel constraints.

As a result of these two features of dance improvisation – serving no immediate useful function and the creation of movements on the spot – the sense-making process is fluid and instable. Values emerge and are dynamically constructed in the interaction. This is in line with the enactive idea that values organise and emerge from a constantly varying loop between agent and environment (Di Paolo et al., 2010).

Although maybe not so obvious as in play, dance improvisation is also capable of bracketing existing frames. Where in play a toothbrush may be transformed into a flute, dance improvisation is almost always concerned with abstract movements. However, since movements in dance improvisation do not serve an immediate useful function, the movements themselves may transform into something else. Meaning is manipulated on a kinetic-kinaesthetic level. Without resorting to pre-fixed signals and codes, the dancer is engaged with kinetic qualities that emerge in the moment. In

dance improvisation the focus lies entirely on the “dynamically attuned body, that knows the world and makes its way within it kinetically is thoughtfully attuned to the variable qualia of both its own movement and the movement of things in its surrounding world—to forceful, swift, slow, straight, swerving, flaccid, tense, sudden, up, down, and much more” (Sheets-Johnstone, 2009, p. 61).

Dance improvisation, just as play, is highly relational. Manning (2009) explains that dance improvisation, even a solo, is not created alone. Together with the floor, the ceiling, the wall and other things that can be found in the space, new body-environments are created. Manning refers to this as “relational shape-shifting” (2009, p. 14) when bodies, things and spaces together move through dynamic forms. Through dance improvisation bodies become sensitive to the not-yet (i.e. the virtual).

From the above, we may carefully conclude that both play and dance improvisation are self-structuring processes that offer possibilities to detach pre-fixed meaning and to insert it with novel alienated meanings. The transformative is here defined as the infusion of virtual, alienated meaning in an actual situation (Di Paolo et al., 2010). Transformational interactions become possible because:

- Play and dance improvisation do not serve an immediate function.
- Both activities are capable of bracketing frames by temporarily inserting associative; frames over, and on top of, conventional frames.
- New meaningful rules and constraints are generated that regulate the interaction.

The question now is how the theoretical concepts, as discussed above, work in practice. In my own artistic research, I examine basic elements of both dance improvisation and children’s play events from an enactive perspective. Two artistic events are relevant for this chapter: the spontaneous play event of Lisa, my 12-year-old daughter and subsequently the re-enactment of it in an improvised dance solo. Both events will be analysed in terms of alienated meaning, the bracketing of frames and the transformative.

### **1. Physical play event of Lisa: becoming animal**

On a lazy Sunday morning, I am sitting at the table while my daughter is lying on the big blue carpet in our living room. Just lying. Out of the stillness, Lisa spontaneously starts to move. First, she does some rolls, then some stretching and along the way Lisa finds a soft blanket that becomes part of her play. ‘I am a bird’ she says, ‘And birds can do whatever they want’ (see Figure 37).

She stands up, runs and flies. When the running and flying are exhausted, she lands on the blue carpet. ‘Water’ she says in an associative mood. ‘What happens when I touch the water?’ It is not a question that is directed at me since she seems not to expect any answer from me. The question is directed towards herself. ‘I become a fish’, she answers. Immediately she starts to move in a fishy way. The blanket is part of her transformation. Lisa wraps it around her, as a second skin, and soon the blanket and her body transform together into scales, fins and the tail of a fish. The blue carpet is the water: as long as Lisa is in the water, she is a fish. Lisa swims and dives around, and before she knows it, she accidentally rolls off the carpet on the wooden floor. ‘The earth’, she says. ‘What happens when I touch the earth?’ ‘I become a mole’, she answers. Voilà, her body transforms into a mole. She crawls around, blindly, and hits a small wooden table. ‘What happens when I touch wood?’ ‘I become a beaver’, she answers (see Figure 38).





**Figure 37.** Becoming bird © Carolien Hermans

*‘What happens when I touch the air? I become a bird’*

*‘What happens when I touch the water? I become a fish’*

*‘What happens when I touch the earth? I become a mole’*

*‘What happens when I touch wood? I become a beaver’*

The whole event takes no longer than 15 minutes. In this relatively short period, Lisa moves through several animal becomings: from bird to fish, to mole, to beaver. According to Deleuze and Guattari (1987) becoming is a process in which elements are removed from their original functions so that new functions may emerge. One element is drawn into the territory of another element, thereby changing its value as an element and bringing about a new unity. In other words, meanings are detached so that new associative meanings may arise. I believe it is no coincidence that Lisa picks up elements that refer to the animal since children seem to be particularly sensitive to animal becomings (Bond & Stinson, 2000; Stinson, 1990; Anttila, 2003)<sup>58</sup>. Lisa in this case is not imitating an animal and her goal is not to really turn into an animal. In her attempt to become animal, Lisa enters an in-between zone, a zone of proximity that frees her from a fixed form.

<sup>58</sup> Stinson (1990, p.40) also points to the natural affinity that children have with the animal world: “I never ask them to pretend to be squirrels or rabbits. But young children feel their kinship with these creatures and are transformed.”



**Figure 38.** Becoming beaver © Carolien Hermans

The becoming animal is a process that is fueled by desire, a longing for proximity and sharing (Brown, 2007) and a drive to participate in otherness. Becoming animal is a bodily experience: Lisa senses the presence in her of the animal, and she uses her bodily sensitivity together with her imagination to creatively engage with as the animal.

Even more, bodily sensitivity to the environment is heightened. In the becoming of bird, Lisa flies through the air, using the blanket as her wing. When this movement is exhausted, she lands on the carpet. It's the blueness of the carpet that makes the transformation to the sea possible. It is the blueness that makes her decide that the bird becoming is over and she now enters a becoming of fish. We see here how animal becomings are triggered by the surroundings. The increased sensitivity to the environment creates passages and openings for the transformative.

In this sense, it is also not correct to say that Lisa alone moves in a fish becoming. *Lisa + blueness of the carpet + blanket* move together in a fish becoming. Through the intimate connection between space, things/materials and body 'a relational shape shifting' takes place (Manning, 2009). There's no body in and of itself, there's the *Lisa + blueness of the carpet + blanket* connection. That is, body and surroundings are experienced in relation to one another. The space + thing + body connection can be re-organised in infinite ways. Soon, we know now, the fish becoming will come to an end. When Lisa accidentally rolls onto the wooden floor, another connection is established: the *Lisa + wooden floor + blanket* connection. It's the brownness of the floor that triggers in her the image of the earth, and consequently the image of the mole. From this point on she, together with the wooden floor and the blanket, will move into a mole becoming.

The space + object + body connection evokes animal imagery in Lisa. Here we see how sensorimotor processes together with higher-order processes such as imagination and symbolic thought lead to new values and alienated meaning. The experience of meaning is the result of the integration of sensorimotor experience, affects, corporeal connections to the world and our imaginative abilities (Van der Schyff, 2015). New meaning arises through action in the sensorimotor

and imagining sphere. “It is here that the kinaesthetic pleasure turns into make-believe.” (Di Paolo et al., 2010, p. 76)

Finally, new rules and new constraints are inserted in the play that re-structure and re-organise the event and that must be followed strictly (Di Paolo et al., 2010). ‘If I touch the wooden floor, I become a mole. If I touch the table, I become a beaver’. The new constraints are not the result of a stand-alone agent: they are created contextually. Although the new rules seem arbitrary (‘why should you touch a table and not a chair to become a beaver’) and invented on the spot, Lisa willingly submits to them.

In summary, we can distinguish several elements in Lisa’s transformational play. First, new associative frames become available through creative interaction with the direct surroundings. Second, a change in the body + environment connection triggers new animal becomings. Third, through increased sensitivity, sensorimotor engagement and the use of imagery, the play event is infused with alienated meaning. Fourth, new constraints and rules are temporarily generated that are highly contextual and are willingly complied to.

## **2. Re-enactment of Lisa’s physical play event**

Lisa’s physical play event is captured in a series of images. These images serve as an entrance point for my improvised dance solo. The aim is to return to initially felt forces/sensibilities that were present in the physical play events of Lisa, and that are then re-enacted in dance improvisational practice. Re-enactment should be understood here not as imitation but as the embodied actualization of Lisa’s play. The aim of this re-enactment is to identify “non-exhausted creative fields of impalpable possibilities” (Lepecki, 2010, p. 31). Through re-enactment, I want to unlock and grasp the virtual possibilities that are present in the imagery – squeezing out actuals from the virtual as they shape my body in an ongoing movement (Lepecki, 2010).

I develop the improvised solo at the theatre of the Conservatory of Amsterdam. The theatrical setting, specifically the lightning, helps me to engage with the imagery of Lisa’s play event. The shadows and the sharp contrasts between light and shadow bring a certain kind of atmosphere and performativity to the space. Devoid of any daily functionality, the space becomes a zone for experimentation and exploration. The theatre triggers a sense of performativity in me – a state of heightened attentiveness. I notice how I start to ‘stage’ my movements, carefully placing them in space, the head here, my hand over there as if the space is looking at me. The imaginary easily slips in. Tiny shifts in movements awaken tiny shifts in imagery in me.

Where Lisa uses the blanket(s) to cover up loosely different body parts, I keep the blanket over my head all of the time (see Figures 39 and 40). Covering my face helps me in engaging with animal becomings. I no longer register any definite visual shapes or forms in the space. The blanket however lets light through and makes it possible for me to distinguish the spotlights from their dark surroundings. Although this gives me some (visual) sense of direction, I navigate mostly through space by using the other senses. The fact that I now have to trust other senses than sight facilitates the transformations. Where vision structures and fixes the environment immediately, the other senses give more space to the ambiguous (Van der Schyff, 2015). Even more, my awareness of the inside space increases as the outside is covered. Nearness draws me in.

The blankets (I use one, sometimes two blankets) themselves are vehicles for transformation. They offer openings and passages through which potentialities emerge. The soft material easily joins my body. The blankets and my body fold into each other, like porous surfaces, leaking through, pouring in - together holding the constraint. In a continuous embrace, we move together into a form as the blankets react to the movements of my body, while at the same time, my body incorporates the movements of the blanket. My body and the blankets thus move together in a connection that is alive and ever-changing.



**Figures 39 and 40.** Original play and re-enactment of animal becoming © Carolien Hermans

Even more, other animal becomings emerge in the dance improvisation than the four animals that Lisa introduces in her play (the fish, bird, beaver and mole). Lisa's animals float like particles through my body, out again, to a point where something else enters the stage. New possibilities. New animal becomings. An ostrich. An eagle. An elephant. A rayfish. A stork (see Figures 41, 42 and 43). A whole variety of non-existing animals. What I am not aware of but what is captured by the camera, are the animal figures projected as shadows on the white wall. This is not orchestrated, at least not by me. As we can see in Figures 41 and 42 different animal figures are produced by the shadows. The figures resemble the ones that are produced by my body and the blanket, yet they are not the same. Springing from the same source, they take their own course. This is due to the fact that different kinds of connections are established with the environment:

Shadow figures: light + wall + projection of body/blanket connection

Body figures: blanket + body + general space connection

Although different kinds of animal figures emerge during the dance improvisation, my starting point still remains the four animals that Lisa introduced in her play (see Figures 44 and 45). I give myself the assignment to move through these different animal becomings, starting with a bird, then moving to a fish, to a mole, to a beaver, and back again to a bird. During this process, other animal figures may materialize. The fish becoming is the most difficult, it results in lying on the floor in stillness, being unable to use my non-existing fins and tail. The floor is resistant too: the hard surface makes it difficult to drift and swim around. It helps to give myself a clear image, not of a general fish, but in this case of a ray fish (not entirely accidentally since a week before I saw a documentary of the manta ray). The wing-like fins provide an entrance for floating, vibrating sensations.

At a certain point, I also start to speak out loud, in an attempt to give words to felt sensations and "to exert pressure towards" the actualizations of Lisa's original play event (Lepecki, 2010, p. 31). The voice becomes an external guide that narrates and draws lines between the different animal becomings. With words, I try to connect the imaginary with the kinetic-kinaesthetic.

In summary, several elements can be distinguished in the re-enactment of Lisa's play event. First of all, the theatre (specifically the lights and its emptiness) triggers a sense of performativity in me, as I am well aware of staging the movements. Second, the body + blanket connection allows me to access animal imagery. The blanket covers my head: it allows me to experience imagery in a sensorimotor way. Third, I allow myself to deviate from the new constraints that emerge in Lisa's play since there seems no reason to stick to outer cues. Fourth, although I take Lisa's four animals as an initial starting point, other animal actualizations come into being too. Finally, words are used to help bring about the connection between imagery and the kinetic-kinaesthetic.



**Figure 41.** Becoming stork © Carolien Hermans.



**Figures 42 and 43.** Animal figures projected on the white wall © Carolien Hermans





**Figure 44.** Animal becoming in Lisa's play © Carolien Hermans





**Figure 45.** Re-enactment of animal becoming © Carolien Hermans

## Conclusion/Discussion

In this chapter, I examined the following question: How and in what ways can play and dance improvisation be considered transformative activities that generate novel values and meanings? We have seen that sense-making is an interactional and relational activity (Thompson & Stapleton, 2009). Sense-making “emerges from our embodied consciousness as it reaches out to, transforms, and is transformed by the ongoing process of empathic inter(en)action with objects, ideas and other agents” (Van der Schyff, 2015, p. 12).

Play and dance improvisations are examples of activities that integrate sensorimotor experiences with higher-order processes such as imagination. Apparently easy, they are capable of inhabiting two seemingly different worlds, the biological sensorimotor world and the world of language, symbol and representation. Six characteristics of both play and dance improvisation seem to play a role in the capacity to infuse an embodied activity with alienated meaning<sup>59</sup>. Both activities:

- do not serve an immediate useful function;
- cherish the here and now;
- are deeply rooted in the kinetic-kinaesthetic domain;
- require bodily sensitivity, attentiveness and increased awareness of the environment;
- are capable of bracketing frames and contexts;
- generate new rules and constraints to which the participants willingly comply.

As a result, meaning in play and dance improvisation is ambiguous and made-on-the-fly (Di Paolo, 2007). Both activities are capable of temporarily detaching meaning from a situation, attaching new ones and manipulating values and constraints in the moment – and this is exactly where the transformative comes in. Transformation in this context is the infusion of virtual, alienated meaning in an actual situation. It is the detachment of meaning from the here and now.

The concept of transformation resonates with Deleuze and Guattari’s notion of *becomings* (1987). *Becoming* is the process of change in which elements are removed from their original functions and new ones are brought about. In the artistic practice that I presented in this chapter, I specifically looked at animal *becomings*, i.e. transformative forces that open up a field of potentialities between the human and the animal. In the spontaneous play event of my 12<sup>th</sup>-year-old daughter, four different animal *becomings* enter the stage, in my re-enactment even more animal figures appear.

The most important insight when it comes to the transformative potential of both play and dance improvisation is that an agent alone cannot create novel meanings and values. The texture of the blanket, the sharp colour of the carpet and the roughness of the wooden table all play a role in the transformative process. Something evokes a change and as a result, new connections with the environment are temporarily created. The blanket cannot do it alone. The floor cannot do it alone. The body cannot do it alone. But together they can infuse a situation with new values. In this respect, we also may find it not so strange when a child stumbles across a branch and declares ‘it was the branch that made me fall’. Indeed, it was the temporary connection between the branch, the walking child and maybe a distracted mind that caused the stumble. Giving the blame to the branch is perhaps not fair, but we just as easily could say that ‘if the branch had not been there, the child would not have fallen’. The falling is the result of the temporary link that is established between the body and the branch.

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<sup>59</sup> The six characteristics that I describe here, have been used as input for Figure 57, page 165, ‘Value making in the sense-making process of physical play and dance improvisation’.

We must not forget that infinite connections (virtual as well as actual) can be made between an agent and the environment. Even more, we do not only connect, we also dis-connect and re-connect. In between the dis-connecting and re-connecting the transformative takes place.

To understand and grasp the transformative forces that are at work in play and dance improvisation is a job of many years. In this chapter, I have attempted to point to several basic elements that might play a role in the transformative process, such as the bracketing of frames and contexts, the intermingling of the imaginary with the sensorimotor and the role of body-environment connections in the sense-making process. However, other aspects of the transformative process have only been tentatively touched upon. The role of affects and intensities, for example, as well as the experience of presence, forcefulness, vividness and a sense of being alive (Fingerhut, 2012) – as the enactive account clearly states that not only sensorimotor processes but also affective states and bodily feelings play a role in the sense-making processes. New questions have been raised by my theoretical and artistic exploration. What is the role of affects in the transformative process of both play and dance improvisation? What are the differences in play and dance improvisation when it comes to their transformative potential? Can we identify a certain set of conditions under which the transformative can take place? Further research, specifically the type of research that taps straight into the lived experience (such as practice-led research and artistic research) is warranted here. This kind of research allows us to look at the transformative nature of dance improvisation and play from the inside. Tuning into the practice may help us to gain a deeper, corporeal understanding of abstract theoretical and philosophical constructs. A corporeal account of the transformative nature of participatory sense-making should therefore include research that strives for felt knowledge (Klein 2017) so that the lived experience itself is at the heart of our undertaking.