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

Hermans, C.

# Chapter 9. Let's play: re-enactment of affective traces through dance improvisation[60]

This chapter aims to explore the relationship between dance improvisation and children's play in terms of affective resonances. Dance improvisation and play are seen as activities that put the kinetic/kinaesthetic and affective dimensions of experience to the fore. I argue that bodily affects, play a crucial role in organising our lived experiences. Affects and intensities contribute to our feeling of being alive, and it's exactly this life energy that I find evident in both physical play and dance improvisation. The first part of the chapter consists of a theoretical exploration of several related concepts such as affects, affective resonances, and intensities/forces in relation to the moving body. In the second part, the theoretical concepts are applied to physical play and dance improvisational practice. Artistic research is used to shed light on basic elements that children's physical play and dance improvisation share with one another, specifically how affects and intensities that were once felt in a spontaneous play event can be re-lived and re-actualized through dance improvisational practice.

**Affect**

There are many different approaches towards affect (for an overview see the introduction chapter of Seigworth & Gregg, 2010). Roughly, two dominant views can be distinguished. In the first view, which is rooted in psychology and neuroscience, affect is considered an elemental state. In the second view, which is rooted in process philosophy, affect is treated as an intensive force (Ott, 2017)[61]. In this thesis, I follow the second line of thought.

In process philosophy, affect is treated as a force, a prepersonal intensity. Massumi (1995), in line with Spinoza and Deleuze, makes a distinction between emotion and affect. According to Massumi, "an emotion is a subjective content, the socio-linguistic fixing of the quality of an experience which is from that point onward defined as personal" (p.880). Emotion is qualified intensity, while affect is unqualified intensity. Affect is considered a force, "a prepersonal intensity corresponding to the passage from one experiential state of the body to another and implying an augmentation or diminution in that body's capacity to act" (Massumi, 1987, p. xvi). Massumi locates affect in the relational dynamic, rather than the interiority of a psychological subject (while emotion is the interiorization of qualified intensity).

Affects are world-involving, they are directed to our surroundings (Bower & Gallagher, 2013). Affective states are not inside us, hidden in our inner psyche, they are out there and intrinsically related to our surroundings. "The experienced space around us is always charged with affective qualities." (Fuchs, 2016, p. 196) Objects and environments have expressive qualities: some of which we register and some of which we don't. This depends on how valuable and relevant the expressive qualities are to us. In other words, to become part of our perceptual experience, or attentional field, objects and surroundings need to have an affective appeal (Bower & Gallagher, 2013).

[60] This chapter is accepted for Capacious, Journal for Emerging Affect Inquiry, to be published in Fall 2022. I made some textual adjustments and added a few footnotes.

[61] Seigworth (2011) argues that the two dominant views on affect can be traced back to Spinoza who made a distinction between *affectus* and *affectio*. *Affectio* refers to "the state of a body as it affects or is affected by another body" while *affectus* refers to "a body's continuous, intensive variation (as increase-diminution) in its capacity for acting" (in Seigworth, 2011, p. 160). Deleuze is highly influenced by the Spinozian concept of *affectus*, while contemporary views on affect in psychology and neuroscience have further elaborated on the Spinozian concept of *affectio*.

Affects are part of all modes of experience. Affects is what motivates us, thrives us, in its most simple form it is a movement toward (attractive) or a movement away from something (repulsive) that has caught our attention. In other words, "we are moved to move toward or against or away" (Sheets-Johnstone, 1999b, p. 267). Affects and movements are dynamically congruent: we move, are moved and are being moved. We charge our movements with affects, and they motivate us. Affects are thus not understood here as inner feeling states, but as gripping dynamic forces that unfold within the relational dynamic. Affects are moving phenomena that are movingly experienced (Sheets-Johnstone, 2018).

Affect is potential, the pre-personal capacity to become, to act and to be acted upon (Clough, 2008). It exists prior to any individuation or identification, and as such, it includes the nonhuman as well as the human. Seigworth and Gregg (2010, p.1) locate affects in the in-between:

> Affect arises in the midst of in-between-ness: in the capacities to act and be acted upon. Affect is an impingement or extrusion of a momentary or sometimes more sustained state of relation as well as the passage (and the duration of passage) of forces or intensities. That is, affect is found in those intensities that pass body to body (human, nonhuman, part-body, and otherwise), in those resonances that circulate about, between, and sometimes stick to bodies and worlds, and in the very passages or variations between these intensities and resonances themselves.

According to Seigworth and Gregg (2010), affect is born in *in-between-ness,* or to put another word to it, in the *not-yet.* The not-yet finds itself on the passage between virtual and actual, in "an emergent futurity" (Seigworth & Gregg, 2010, p.4) at the intersection of being and becoming. The in-between and the not-yet are specifically relevant to this research. In the next paragraph, I take a closer look at these concepts and their relevance for dance improvisational practice.

**Dance Improvisation**

Midgelow (influenced by the work of Braidiotti and Deleuze) considers dance improvisation in/as nomadism, as coordinated change and transition:

> Improvisers are comfortable with transitions and change; they do not cling to illusions of permanence and stability in their dance. Instead, they enact a kind of embodiment that celebrates processes and emphasizes emergence and becoming. (2012, p.2)

Improvisation, as a nomadic practice, is seen as a practice of change, as a "continuous process of creative transformations" (Smelik, 2016, p. 167). It is a process where dancers participate in movements, in lines of flight that open up new ways of becoming. It is a dynamic, multiple process that sets out a network of relations and connections with others. The dancers attend to what is happening in the moment in order to connect to the present, to what has been and to what is yet to come. This requires an open attitude, perceptual awareness and bodily readiness (i.e. preparedness to respond to the potentialities that emerge in the moment).

Manning refers to this as "the elasticity of the almost", "the not-yet", i.e. the moment "where anything can happen when bodies are poised in a togetherness that begins to take shape. The next movement has not yet come, the past movement is passing. No step is taken and yet in this elastic the microperception of every possible step can almost be felt" (2009, p.4). According to Manning, bodies are not fixed 'things', but bodies are in constant change, in flux. Improvisation, therefore, is an instable and dynamic process, where movements are "on the verge of expression" (2009, p.14), in

other words, movements are always on their way, always becoming. It is the in-between (Manning also refers to this as the "interval", 2009, p.2) that propels and instigates the improvisation.

Manning (2009) considers dance improvisation a relational practice. According to her, there is "no such thing as a body that is not relational" (p. xviii). In improvisation, it is not (only) the body, but the relation (with others, with selves, with the environment) that is being moved. Manning speaks of body-worlding: bodies are always excessive, always more than one, always directly linked to the world. In line with Whitehead (and process philosophy in general) she argues that Western thinking has too long be occupied with identity formation, ego, and a pre-existent, stable reality. Body-worlding refers to the invisible, but palpable link between bodies and worlds.

Through active sensing, the dancers explore the relational dimensions of improvisation. The dancers listen, tune in and respond to whatever pops up in the present moment. The dancers become sensitive to otherness – and this in turn may lead to shared awareness and collective agency. In other words, the interaction itself becomes the source of creative exploration and dancers often refer to this as the moment when the dance starts to unfold by itself. In this process, the dancers don't lose themselves, they are not consumed by this otherness, but they become "part of a shared practice in which risk and ambiguity are possible, in which the dancers implicitly acknowledge the need to be vulnerable to the process, open to the consequences and to the effect of each other's responses" (Midgelow, 2012, p.9).

Mühlhoff (2015, p. 1001) refers to this as affective resonance, i.e. "processes of social interaction whose progression is dynamically shaped in an entanglement of moving and being-moved, affecting and being-affected[62]". Affective resonance is a process that unfolds within the relational entanglement. It cannot be attributed to individual inner feeling states. In other words, affects are "a jointly created dynamic, and shaped within the relational interplay" (p.1002). The relational here must not be understood as solely human. Affects pass from body to body and this includes the human, non-human, part-body and anything else for which there is no proper term (Seigworth & Gregg, 2010). Bennett (2010) speaks in this context of vibrant matter, the capacity of things (materials, commodities, edibles) to affect us. Vital matter flows through bodies, through the human and the non-human. Materials themselves are alive and composed of an energetic play of forces and intensities[63].

Even more, the relational emerges not as clearly fixed oppositional elements (such as body/mind, chaos/order, spontaneous/planned, free/constrained, safe/risky etc.) but as muddy (Seigworth & Gregg, 2010). Manning (2009) sees relational movement as the undoing of dichotomies since movement is always on its way, it never stops, it reaches out to the not-yet. In other words, there are no clear-cut oppositions since the relational is always unfolding. Relationality is not static but a dynamic process that is fuzzy and that shapes and reshapes itself along the way.

[62] See also note 2, page 18.

[63] Bennett (2010) explores the relation between humans and things. Bennett calls this vital materialism – a strand of thinking that shifts away from the human as a central focus of attention and instead turns to matter. Inspired by the work of Bergson, Deleuze and Grosz, life is perceived as something that cannot be reduced to mechanistic processes. Instead, liveness and vitality are seen as an inherent part of matter. Matter itself is a self-organising (impersonal) force of all living systems. Vital materialism stresses the role of vital matter, thereby adopting a post-anthropocentric viewpoint on life (that abandons the humanistic, universalist position). For Bennett, agency is distributed across the human and non-human. See Abadía (2018) for more information on new materialism and vital materialism. In this thesis, I will not further pursue this line of thought. I am aware that within the arts and performance field, this is a promising new way of thinking (about the human and non-human) but in this thesis, my main interest lies in embodied cognition, enactivism and (especially in this chapter) affect theory.

**Children's Physical Play**

Children's physical play is here roughly defined as a creative activity initiated by children that brings the kinetic/kinaesthetic and affective dimensions of the body to the fore (Sheets-Johnstone, 2003). Christopher Harker (2005) considers play as a polymorphous, dynamic process that takes place at the intersection of being and becoming:

> Playing has no identity (being) itself, except as a secondary characteristic of its conceptual differentiation (becoming)—the identity of difference. (p.52)

According to Harker (2005), playing is an activity in which the affective register is heightened. I agree. In my artistic practice, I have captured many spontaneous physical play events of my own children as well as other children – and the thing that struck me the most were the intensities and forces that were expressed in a disruptive and messy way. This has made me believe that play is an activity where movements and affects are pushed to the fore. Play takes the intrinsic relation between movement and affect as a starting point for creative exploration. Stuart Lester (2013, p.137) adds to this, that play may be seen as "desiring to affect and be affected by creating uncertainty and disturbance, and to play with the relationship between disequilibrium and balance". Play breaks up the conventional and habitual: it multiplies, shoots in different directions, connects a multiplicity of meanings, opens the door to the not-yet, and invites participants to dynamically shift from being to becoming.

Play is a transformative act. Play can be seen as a practice of becoming different: it is not a 'becoming adult' (also not when children are playing 'mommy and daddy') but a way to engage with the not-yet (Kane & Petrie, 2014). Children's play "marks a time/space in which ever-present virtuals are actualized, producing moments in which children are *becoming-different"* (Lester 2013, p.131, emphasis in original). Play should not be understood as a fixed phenomenon, but as a fluid, dynamic and relational activity.

Jane Hewes (2014) points to the disruptive dimensions of (physical) play: the rowdy and rambunctious. Where adults move around as efficiently as possible, children slide, jump, gallop, skip and hop around. Children wind their way through the landscape: every obstacle (a bank, a pole, a hedge, a well, a ditch) is dynamically incorporated into their own bodily structure. Movements are stripped down or dressed up with fringes and exaggerations, a too much, a too fast, a too little, or too soon, with an internal logic that is equally disruptive and disturbing. In play, children creatively weave their internal bodily structures into the external structures of the environment. Play, in this sense, is a bodily practice of doing, undoing and redoing. It doesn't exist in a fixed form, instead, it is a fluid practice that is situation-dependent (Mouritsen, 1998).

Helle Karoff (2013) also considers play as a practice, as something that children do. She furthermore distinguishes two dimensions of play: play practices and play moods. "Play practice is the concept of all the doing in the playing activity and play moods is the particular concept of sense and feeling of being, which is what we are drawn to when we play" (p.1).

Play moods can be seen as ways of affective engagement. A play mood is a way of relating to the world: it is not an internal state, nor a fixed entity. A play mood neither comes from the inside nor the outside, but it arises out of our interaction with the world. Play mood is "not confined to a specific meaning, but open and ready for meaning to be articulated as something specific, even though the specification has not yet happened" (Karoff, 2013, p.10). Play mood within this context must not be understood as an internal, mental state (a category, a fixed entity) but as an affective tone that emerges and comes into being within the encounter between self, other and world.

Based on her field research, Karoff (2013) defines four types of play practices as well as four types of play moods. The first play practice is *sliding* which is characterized by a strong repetitive

rhythm, flow, and minimal change (for example stringing beads or puzzling). The second play practice is *shifting* that is again characterized by a strong repetitive, rhythm but this time the rhythm is a catalyst for surprise and chance (for example jumping on the trampoline or a roller coaster). The third play practice is *displaying* which is characterized by change, and showing yourself off (for example a kid's dance). The fourth play practice is *fleeding* which is characterized by excessiveness, and breaking with the ongoing (regular) rhythm of a play activity often leading to crazy, exaggerated forms (for example bending and racking barbie dolls, putting their heads off, etc.). Each type of play practice has its own play mood: *devotion* (flow, concentration, focus) is related to sliding, *intensity* (unpredictability, change) is related to shifting, *tension* (performing, showing off) is related to displaying and *euphoria* (silliness, laughter, exaggeration) is related to exceeding. Karoff's four types or categories of play practices and play moods will be used in the next paragraph as a way to structure and analyse children's play and dance improvisational practice.

At this point, I want to shift from a more theoretical to a practice-led approach. 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 hotel dance of my 10-year-old daughter, Lisa, and subsequently the re-enactment of the event in two improvised dance solos. However, before I discuss the outcomes of the research, I will first provide an outline of the methodological approach.

**Methodological approach**

My artistic practice entails the exploration and examination of basic elements of children's physical play and dance improvisation from an enactive perspective. In this chapter, the spontaneous hotel dance of my 10-year-old daughter at the Brittania Hotel in Coventry, and the re-enactment of the hotel dance by two professional dancers serve as an artistic case study. The goal of the re-enactment is not to imitate or copy the original play event but to grasp and re-actualize the affective traces of the hotel dance – mediated through a set of images. The body of the dancer becomes a resonating channel, a passage through which affects, intensities and forces can travel that are then expressed in movement. The hotel dance is photographed as well as videotaped. After a technical screening, which consists of going through the set of images and deleting the images that are blurry, oblique, over-exposed, too far away or too close by, 243 images remain. The photographs are ordered and arranged around three main themes: 1) building up intensity through rhythm, repetition and variation, 2) heightening – moving towards the excessive, 3) and dramatizing/staging.

The themes are discussed below. Only a small selection of images (15 images in total) is handed over to the two professional dancers. I specifically chose images that display full body movement (like jumping) that have a clear spatial dimension (high, low, on the ground, trying to touch the ceiling) and that are expressive (in terms of qualitative movement dynamics).
Permission was obtained via a written consent form that was signed by the non-investigating parent (the father) and Lisa herself. The consent letter included: (1) informed and voluntary consent, (2) the use of data obtained during the artistic experiments, (3) the use of images for publication and 4)the use of personal names. The professional dancer also signed a consent letter.

**Artistic Insights**

As I already mentioned, three themes are identified in the hotel dance: 1) building up intensity through rhythm, repetition and variation, 2) heightening – moving towards the superfluous, 3) and dramatizing/staging. The themes are discussed below.

*Building up intensity through rhythm, repetition and variation*

The hotel dance starts with Lisa putting on music, *Despacito* by Luis Fonsi, a Spanish song with a strong rhythm and a recurring melody. The song Despacito is several times repeated during the hotel dance event. The song seems to serve as a "refrain", "a kind of sound territoriality" (Deleuze & Guattari, as cited in Seigworth, 2003, p.96) that reassures and comforts Lisa. The ritualistic replaying of the song serves as an organising principle for the hotel dance. It creates "temporary order in the midst of chaos" (Seigworth, 2003, p.96).

Since Lisa is not familiar with the Spanish language, meaning doesn't arise from the words themselves but from the melodic and rhythmic contours of the song. The hotel dance starts with cultural established games and movements, such as the water bottle flip (i.e. throwing a bottle of water so that it does one complete flip and lands upright) and the dab (i.e. a gesture in which a person drops his head in the bent crook of an upwardly angled arm). Lisa puts on the music (Despacito) and begins to make some culturally established dance steps that she has learned in her street dance class. She repeats the dance steps several times and after some time, Lisa starts to add her own movements to the dance steps.

This sequence is all about hopping, jumping and shaking (of the shoulders and upper torso in big circular movements). Lisa explores the possibilities of each movement through repetition and variation (see Figure 46). What is most noticeable in this dance sequence, is the building up of intensity and energy. First, Lisa simply performs dance steps, but gradually she becomes more and more engaged until she fully embraces the movements. The shaking becomes a real shaking. The hopping becomes a real hopping. The jumping becomes a real jumping. Lisa surrenders to the movements, and she finds joy and excitement in this surrender. The dynamic features of the movements are explored through amplification, refinement and repetition. The dance sequence also has a strong rhythmical component (a regular repeated pattern of movement) and a pulse (a regular succession of discrete movements through time) since Lisa performs the movements on the beat.

The building up of intensity and energy through repetition and variation can be placed under the second category of Karoff's model (2013): *shifting* (play practice) and *intensity* (play mood). The sequence is characterized by a strong repetitive rhythm. Over time, the movement itself becomes intensified. This produces a high, elevated "sense of aliveness' where repetition and change/unpredictability go hand in hand.

*Heightening: towards the superfluously*

At the beginning of the hotel dance event, culturally established movements from popular culture form the overtone. Gradually however improvised play takes over and exploration of the room (movements such as jumping, crawling, rolling) and objects in the room (the curtains, window, chair, bed, floor) become the source and inspiration of Lisa's hotel dance.

In the exploration of the room and objects in the room, the following actions can be distinguished: crawling on the bed, sliding off the bed, sliding off the chair, moving on the floor, standing on the chair, jumping from chair to bed, bouncing/falling on the bed, head roll, shoulder roll and handstand on the bed, trying to touch the ceiling, trying to touch the upper side of the doorframe. Every action is repeated, each time performed with small variations and adjustments. Different layers of the space are used: high (standing on a chair), middle (standing up) and low (lying on the bed and sliding to the floor).

**Figure 46.** Repetition and variation in expressive movements © Carolien Hermans

In each successive action, Lisa uses more force, pressure and weight and as result, the falling and bouncing become more intense. The small variations seem necessary 1) to explore the wideness and range of a particular movement and 2) to explore the affective tone of a movement.

At a certain point, however, Lisa abandons the rhythm and skips the beat. She breaks with the flow and continuity of movement, and instead, she challenges herself in making bizarre/creative movements. It is a too much, a too big, and it exceeds habitual and conventional ways of movement exploration. Movements are exaggerated in terms of energy, force and arousal. Examples are jumping, crawling on the floor, sliding from the chair in a clownish way, mowing with the legs, laughing and making faces. Exaggeration in this case adds to the expressivity of a movement.

This theme corresponds with Karoff's (2013) fourth category: *exceeding* (play practice) and *euphoria* (play mood). Exceeding is characterized by bizarre movement forms that contain explosive, brisk and abundant elements. Euphoria is the "intense expectation of silliness where you are ready for both others and your own silliness" (p.9). Laughing, funny faces and absurd/silly movements are certainly displayed in Lisa's hotel dance.

*Dramatizing/Staging*

The hotel dance has a performative character. The presence of a spectator (in this case me) is necessary for the unfolding of the event. Lisa's gestures, expressions and movements are clearly addressed to me. Even more, Lisa is fully aware of the fact that she is being watched. Through the watching and the being watched, the play event transforms into a spectacle where intensities and affects are dramatized and put to the front.

Even more, Lisa builds up tension and plays with the expectations of the spectator (=me). This becomes most clear in the following example. At a certain point, Lisa throws herself unto the bed and when she bounces up, she takes the pyjamas along. At first, she keeps the pyjamas and looks at me in a provocative, secretive way (in an 'I-am-about-to-do-something-but-I-am-not-telling-you-what way). She swings the pyjamas around and then, finally, she throws them into my face. This little sequence follows a dramatic structure (from introduction, development, climax to resolution). According to Delafield-Butt and Trevarthen (2015) the narrative four-part structure reflects "the four states of arousal that regulate the flow of interest and the pleasure of engagement" (p.3). The four-part sequence exhibits an initiation towards the goal (throwing the pajamas), rhythmic timing and a climactic contact with (in this case) the pajamas. In other words, the action chain produces affective valences and opens up the imagination. Throwing the pajamas is a dramatic, provocative and communicative act in which Lisa deliberately invites me, the spectator, to play along.

Lisa incorporates expressive gestures, expressions and pretend play in her movement exploration. She, for example, uses the hairbrush as a microphone and with this gesture, she explicitly stages her play as performative. Finally, Lisa uses the little hallway of the hotel room as a place where she can exit and enter the performative space. In other words, the hallway is used to enter and exit 'the stage'.

This theme strongly resonates with Karoff's (2013) third category: *displaying* (play practice) and *tension* (play mood). Displaying is characterized by "showing off, putting yourself on a stage" (p.8). Tension is characterized by a "readiness to show yourself", and "an awareness that you are looked at" (p.9). From beginning to end, Lisa is aware of my presence. Together, we create a space for playing and watching. Through the staging of the play event, imaginative registers are opened that allow for the experimentation and testing of different selves. The stage exists in the in-between, in the intersection of being and becoming.

**Re-enactment of the hotel dance**

In this phase of the artistic research, I am handing over the photo material to Paula Guzzanti, a dance artist and scholar based in Ireland/Malta. This time I want to explore how affects can travel through different bodies and different media. I am specifically interested in affective resonances, i.e. the affective interplay between two or more bodies (Mühlhoff, 2015). Affective resonance usually refers to the gripping dynamic forces that are experienced in the direct interaction between two or more agents. However, in my artistic research, I am interested in how affects can resonate in different bodies through the re-enactment of a past event. Photography is not only used to capture the affects expressed in the spontaneous play event but it is also used as a medium to transport affects from one body to the other body. Within the re-enactment, the dancer should be sensitive to the affective potentials that arise at the present moment. The photographs contain affective traces, and the task of the dancer is to pick these affective traces up and to let them resonate in her own body. The affective dynamic works on the dancer, it makes her move—not by mimicking or copying movements and gestures but by creating own lines of actualization. The aim is not to fix the hotel dance in its singular, original form but to unlock, release and actualize the affects that are still at work. The re-enactment is an unfolding of differential forces: it is less about imitation, resemblance and similarity but more about affective potential that is re-actualized by the dancer. For this reason, I decide to hand over only a limited set of fifteen photographs (and not the video footage) – so that there are enough holes and gaps, enough in-betweens. For is it in the in-between that affective potentialities may emerge.

**R-enactment: Paula Guzzanti**

I met Paula on two occasions. First, at the ADiE (Artistic Doctorates in Europe) in Stockholm (19 - 23 March 2018) and a second time in Chichester – again in the context of the ADiE research intensive 'researching in/as motion' (25-29 June 2018). I contacted Paula in July 2018 to ask if she would like to participate in my artistic research and when she agreed, I sent her a set of fifteen images by we-transfer[64].

*Dear Paula,*

*It was really nice to see you a second time. In Chichester, I asked if you would like to participate in my artistic research. Underneath I will explain a bit more.*

*One step in my research is to spontaneously capture physical play (and also dance) of children. This material I then hand over to professional dancers, with the aim to re-enact an event of which they initially were not part of. I am specifically interested in energy, intensity, affects, having fun/enjoying, being in the moment and also in excessiveness and overabundance.*

*In your case, I would like to ask to re-enact the hotel dance of my daughter. Last year I went with my daughter (Lisa, at that time 10 years old) to a conference in Coventry where we did a performance lecture together on 'the animal body'. When we were back at the hotel (in Coventry) my daughter spontaneously started to dance and I captured that with the camera. I refer to this little instant dance as 'hotel dance'.*

*What I would like to ask you is the following: look at the pictures first, choose 3 to 4 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, or just something that grabs you and takes you along. It's quite important that you don't think too much about it, so that the body and the affects it produces guide you. The comment can/should be quite short, since I am mostly interested in your initial response.*

*It would be great if you can film or document this response. If you feel any hesitations, please let me know. Kind regards, Carolien (2nd of July 2018)*

[64] https://www.researchcatalogue.net/view/592346/592347

*Hello Carolien, thanks for asking me to do this task. I got a sense of powerful rapture and force from watching the images. I watched them once and responded with an improvisation where I incorporated what there was in the studio. When I arrived there was a theatre setting, and I decide to work with that -in a way it resonated with the hotel space. Then I thought that I wanted to have a second go but without the influence of the furniture. Working in a clear space was an invitation to play with voice, which is very much part of my practice. The material is very raw, as you will see. If I was to create or continue to work with this material, I will be looking at the force and the rapture that I received as a first affect in my body. I found that in the first improv I was holding on too much to the body shapes that I saw in the photos. I feel that the second improv has a fresher approach to the task. Looking forward to hearing your thoughts! Paula (10th of July, 2018).*

As becomes clear in the email exchange, Paula decides to have two improvisation sessions, the first time she is surrounded by a theatrical setting and the second time she finds herself in an empty studio. Paula doesn't use music, instead, she uses her voice and her breathing to engage in rhythm, repetition and affectivity.

The three themes identified in Lisa's hotel dance (that were not communicated to Paula) are also central in Paula's improvisations: 1) building up intensity through rhythm, repetition and variation, 2) heightening – moving towards the superfluous, 3) and dramatizing/staging.

Paula's first improvisation is initially somewhat cautious and explorative. She is searching for ways to tap into the affects that are displayed in the imagery. At first, Paula's movements are organised around elements such as rhythm and repetition. She uses repetition and slight variations to increase the intensity and to sense the affects that emerge within the kinetic/kinaesthetic unfolding of the impro. Only after some time, Paula allows herself to engage with change and the unpredictable – as she starts playing more freely with movement patterns that are initiated by hands, arms, and upper torso (see Figure 47). In Karoff's model (2003), this is called a *shifting* from an initial (careful) exploration towards more surprise and taking chances.

Paula also incorporates elements of the space and the objects in her improvisation. She plays with the cushion, sits in the chair, touches the table with her foot and drops to the couch several times. Excessiveness enters the room. She plumps on the couch, letting gravity do the work while her legs float in the air. She slides off the couch, again with gravity on her side, and ends up to the floor. Sudden ruptures and changes appear – here a foot, there an arm while the head loosely balances on the head. She plays with duration, with direction – prolonging the interval to the max. Karoff (2013) refers to this as *exceeding*, that is, skipping the rhythm, being out of tune and allowing the body to express itself in absurd, creative forms.

Even more, the theatrical space plays a vital role in the improvisation. In her first improvisation, she incorporates the theatrical attributes that are left in the space (such as a couch, chair, lamp, carpet and side table). Paula decides to use this décor, and this contributes to the 'performativity' of her dance improvisation. The objects themselves create a stage, and the only thing Paula needs to do, is to enter this stage and perform her movements in front of an absent audience. The third category of Karoff (*displaying)* is therefore already available to her since it is the theatricality of the space that turns her movements into a spectacle. See Figure 48 for some visual correspondences between Paula's re-enactment and Lisa's hotel dance.

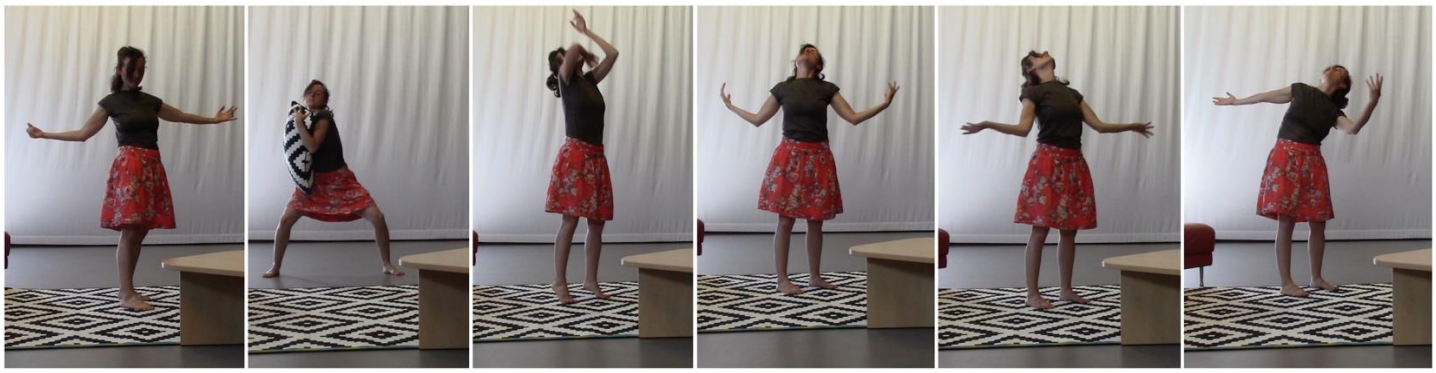

**Figure 47.** Expressive arm movements © Carolien Hermans

In addition, drama and performativity are clearly present in the first improvisation of Paula. Narrative gestures and expressiveness contribute to the felt intensity that is at play here. The voice itself is used to express affects and intensities melodically and rhythmically. Both Lisa and Paula display a "serious attention to having fun" (Hermans, 2018, p.320). Not only do they both laugh out loud, but they also dedicate themselves entirely to this serious, yet playful endeavoor.

In the second improvisation, this time in an empty studio, the improvisation process becomes more internal and less dependent on external cues. Paula now tries to access the affective traces through her voice. The voice becomes an outlet of affects. The vocalizations are delicate expressions and sensitive responses to the affective traces that resonate in her body. The vocalizations are accompanied by movements, and together dramatic structures are created. Paula uses her voice as a way to let affects move through her body. She uses vocalizations to regulate emerging affects and intensities. The vocalizations are abstract actualizations (in terms of timbre, pitch, melody and pulse) of the affective traces that Paula intuitively picks up from the set of images. Or as she describes it herself: *'tuning into the force and the rapture that I receive as a first affect in my body'.*

It must be noted that there are differences as well. Lisa's attention is all over the place. She tends to quickly shift from one thing to the other without giving full (conscious) attention to the affects that are produced. In Paula's case, attention is more directed and channeled. Paula consciously tunes in to the felt dynamics and movements are carefully placed in space, as she listens to what is needed now. In Lisa's case, there is an explosion of affects, an outburst, not yet channeled, with many peaks in her energy while she quickly jumps from one thing to the other. There are leaps and holes, there is sloppiness, there is distraction too in her dance. Both are fully absorbed, yet, in very different ways. They both pick up, gather, listen, collect and express. In Paula's case, there is a trained sensitivity (that is the result of her professional dance practice) while Lisa's sensitivity is rougher and more unstructured. Paula is more aware of the constraints within while Lisa plays with the constraints on a more subconscious level.

**Discussion**

In this chapter, I have explored how affects/intensities can travel through different bodies in physical play and dance improvisation. The artistic research project consists of three phases: 1) the original play event (hotel dance), 2) the capturing, ordering and selecting of a set of photographs and 3) the re-enactment of the hotel dance in two improvised dance solos. Photography is not only used here to capture the affects/intensities expressed in the spontaneous play event, but also as a medium to transport affects/intensities from one body to the other body.

The spontaneous hotel dance of my daughter forms the backbone of this research project. In the analysis of the 243 images, three main themes were distinguished: 1) building up intensity through

rhythm, repetition and variation, 2) heightening – moving towards the superfluous, 3) and dramatizing/staging. Even more, I used Karoff's (2013) theory on play practices and play moods as a tool for visual analysis. The first theme (building up intensity) corresponds with *shifting/intensity*, the second theme (heightening – moving towards the superfluous) with *exceeding/euphoria* and the third theme (dramatizing/staging) with *displaying/tension.* Only one of Karoff's categories was missing: *sliding/devotion*. This category refers to play activities that have a strong, repetitive rhythm, with a minimum of change, a certain quietness and a deep absorption/concentration. Lisa's hotel dance was from beginning to end full of energy, with a high arousal level and rich in "brisk and lively body movements" (Sheets-Johnstone, 2003, p.416). Sliding/devotion often takes place in play activities that have a strong repetitive character such as stringing beads or puzzling. In Lisa's hotel dance, this simply didn't occur.

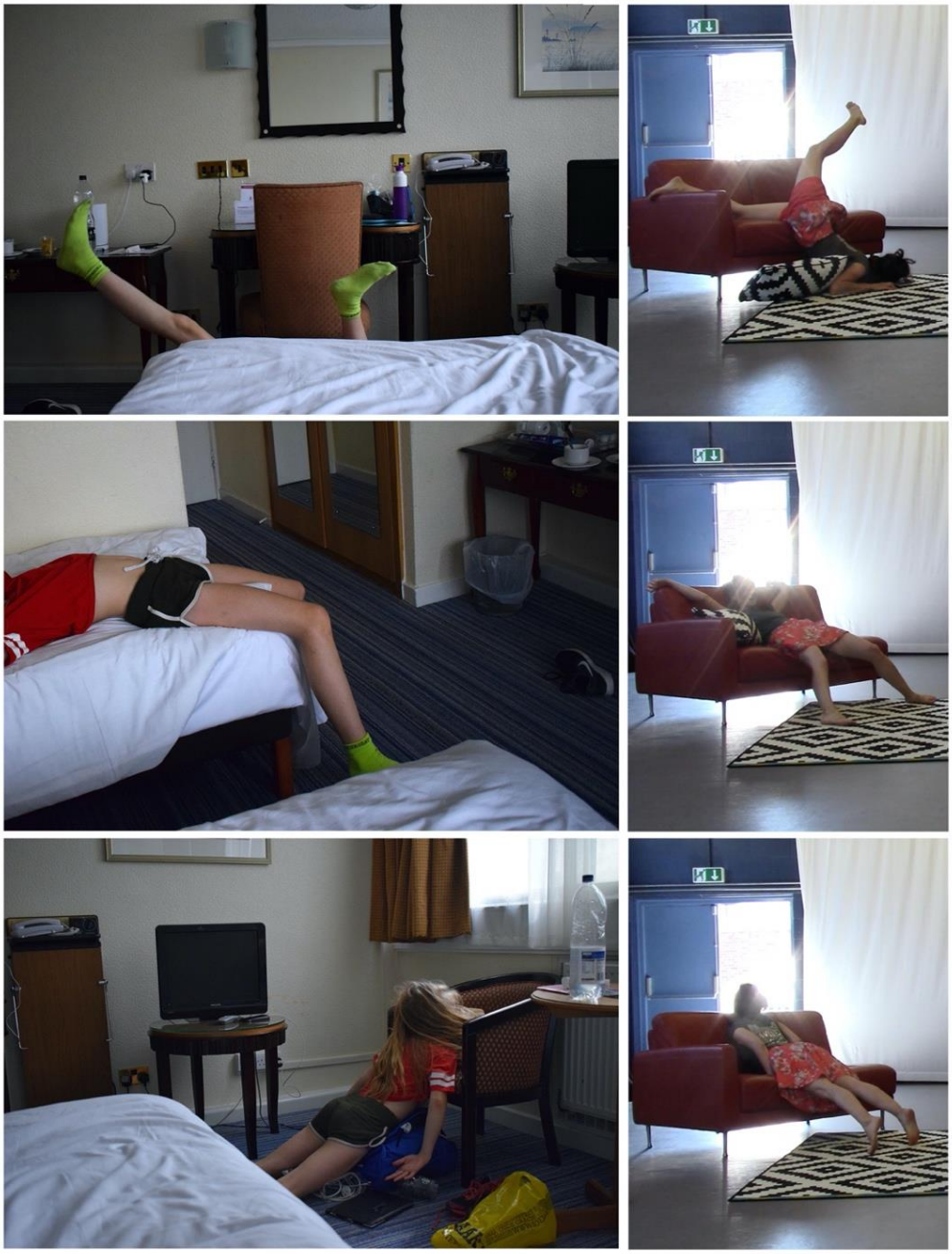

**Figure 48.** Re-Enactment of Hotel Dance by Paula Guzzanti © Carolien Hermans

Although Karoff's model has been very useful, I found the play activities more relevant than the play moods. There are two reasons for this. First of all, the play activities are formulated as verbs (as action and movement words) while play moods are described as nouns (as states of being). Since movements and affects are dynamically congruent (Sheets-Johnstone, 2019b), I prefer to speak in verbs instead of nouns also when it comes to affects and moods. Second, in this chapter, affects (in line with Deleuze and Massumi) are considered prepersonal intensities that emerge at the threshold of being and becoming. Karoff considers play moods as state of beings and although she clearly states that play moods emerge in the *in-between-ness* of inside and outside, it remains unclear if play moods should be considered as qualified or unqualified intensities (emotions versus affects). I, therefore, suggest to speak of 'affective tones' instead of 'moods' and consequently use verbs instead of nouns: *tensioning* instead of *tension*, *intensifying* instead of *intensity* etc. In this case, movement words might help to make the transition between being and becoming.

In this chapter, I used visual ethnography (see also page 55) as a research method to explore how affects can travel in-between bodies (within the context of play and dance improvisation). The visual analysis resulted in the identification of three themes (also referred to as kinetic melodies). In future research, however, I would further elaborate on the email correspondence. The short comments of Paula were very helpful, and in future research this (email) conversations could definitely add to a more in-depth analysis of the re-enactive process and the way affects travel through different (moving) bodies. Questions like 'How did you approach the imagery? Could you describe in movement terms what kind of affects you experienced? Where and how did it resonate in your body?' would be good starting points for such a conversation.

I want to close off this chapter with some final thoughts on the relationship between affects and play/dance improvisation. Affects play a vital role in the way we make sense of the world and of each other: through coordinated patterns we exchange dynamic forces and intensities. Affects emerge in the interaction with the world and with other. Physical play and dance improvisation can be seen as unique examples where affects travel through bodies creatively and playfully. This is because play and dance improvisation are both able to bypass the narratives/habits of daily life and as result, the dynamics of experience (rhythm, repetition, variation) can come to the fore. Affective resonances (Mühlhoff, 2015) usually take on shape in direct face-to-face contact. In this chapter, however, I have argued that affective resonances can also be experienced in our interaction with things and our surroundings. The hotel dance is a good example of how affects resonate in the playful interaction with the room. Even more, affective traces can be picked up by others through re-enactment: not identically or similarly but always in process of differentiation. Enactment must thus not be understood as a rehearsal or repetition of the same, but as the actualization of affective potential. In other words, re-enactment creates its own relational dynamic, as affective traces are picked up and taken further. In the re-enactment, the body of the dancer becomes a vessel through which new affective potential is actualized.