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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 10. To Touch and to Be Touched: Interconnectedness and Participatory Sense-making in Play and Dance Improvisation<sup>65</sup>

This chapter addresses the notion of touch and its constitutive role in the participatory sense-making process (De Jaegher & Di Paolo, 2007) of play and dance improvisation. Touch is considered a relational activity that continuously changes the contours of self, other(ness), and world(ing). It is therefore surprising that touch traditionally has received little attention in philosophy. Phenomenology and the enactive account however do hint at the vital role of touch in the interaction dynamics. The first part of the chapter consists of a discussion of key concepts, such as the duplicity and ambiguity of touch in relation to the enactive account and participatory sense-making (De Jaegher & Di Paolo, 2007). A short research overview is provided on the role of interpersonal touch in daily life. In the second part of the research, I shift to artistic practice. I discuss the Touch Project, a dance improvisation project that is part of my artistic research and that explores the notion of touch in a creative and experimental setting. Through bodily inquiry, I explore how touch contributes to relational knowing. The chapter concludes with some practical suggestions on enhancing body-mind awareness and encouraging playfulness through the use of interpersonal touch. It offers touch exercises that can be used in an educational setting to promote interconnectedness and a sense of community.

### Introduction

In daily life we hug and caress our dearest ones, we accidentally or purposefully touch other people, but when it comes to public places we tend to avoid touching (in buses, metro, shopping malls, etc.). In daycare and elementary school, touch is often regulated and marginalized because of the negative associations with abuse and violence.

On top of this, the COVID-19 outbreak has led to a collective fear of touch. People suddenly have become overly aware of their touch habits. This includes not only the touching of others and the touching of surfaces but also self-touching. We avoid shaking the hands of others, many wear gloves and/or face masks, we wash our hands regularly, and we keep a distance of at least six feet. We are rapidly developing a culture of no-touch (Psypost, 2020) out of fear of getting infected by COVID-19.

In this pandemic culture, our relationship with our skin and the skin of others has become troubled (Hamilton, 2017). Touch is now associated with contagion, possible infection, and disease. It has led to a touch crisis and has caused ruptures in our daily touch rituals. However, we must not forget that touch is vital for our contact with the world and with others. Research shows that affective touch fosters cooperation and well-being and reduces stress (Saunders et al., 2018). Mark Paterson, Martin Dodge, and Sara MacKian (2012, p. 7) state that “[t]ouch is the most intimate spatial relationship between people, and a vital and subtle communicative practice”.

Touch is the first sense to develop in human life, and it is the sense that is vital for our contact with the world and others. Schanberg points out that “touch is ten times stronger than verbal or emotional contact, and it affects damn near everything we do. No other sense can arouse you like

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<sup>65</sup> This chapter is published in 2021 in the *Journal of Dance Education*. I made the following adjustment 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. For reasons of consistency, I replaced the term play|dance improvisation with dance improvisation. I also made some textual adjustments and added a few notes.

touch. We forget that touch is not only basic to our species, but the key to it.” (as cited in Field, 2001, p. 57) It is therefore surprising that touch is a neglected area in scholarship.

Touch differs from the other senses in that our whole bodily surface is involved in touch. “To put it very simply, when we are touched, our body appears to us; it appears as our lived body in a way that it cannot appear in vision.” (Mattens, 2009, p. 101) Tactile sensations are spread out over the entire body surface. Touch is everywhere. We could not think of a life without touch.

Touch plays a vital role in the somatic interconnectedness with the world and others (Montagu, 1984). Touch creates an affective dynamic between two agents. In premature infants, for example, skin-to-skin contact, also referred to as kangaroo care, is beneficial for the health of the young baby. Skin-to-skin contact has positive effects on “temperature, respiration, heart rate, oxygen saturation, weight gain, breastfeeding status, mortality and morbidity” (Chiu & Anderson, 2009, p.1). Even more, it fosters mother-child interaction and promotes healthy attachment and social-emotional development (Chiu & Anderson, 2009). Touch is also used in therapy, for example in haptotherapy, massage therapy, or the use of touch robots for children with autism.

According to Maurice Merleau-Ponty (1968), touch is ambiguous: it is active (sentient) and passive (sensible). He explains this through “the double sensation” of touch. When my right hand touches the left hand, it feels as if my left hand is an object. The left hand however receives and feels the touch from within, as a subjective experience. The left hand in this case is both the object and subject of touch. Merleau-Ponty speaks of the reversibility of the flesh, “my hand while it is felt from within, is also accessible from without, itself, tangible for my other hand” (Merleau-Ponty, 1968, p. 133). It is not that we have both sensations at the same time, but each hand can shift from the position of toucher to the position of being touched:

[...] the two hands are never touched and touching at the same time with respect to each other. When I press my two hands together, it is not a matter of two sensations felt together as one perceives two objects placed side by side, but of an ambiguous arrangement in which the two hands can alternate in the role of “touching” and “touched.” What was meant by talking about “double sensations” is that, in passing from one role to the other, I can recognize the hand touched as the same one that will in a moment be touching. (Merleau-Ponty, 1968, p. 93)

We are not only actively touching the world but we are also passively touched by the world. “Touchable things in the world constitute our touching bodies as much as our touch reveals them.” (Maclaren, 2014, p. 97) We are equally constituted by touching as well as by being touched. A good exercise to practice this awareness of double sensation in dance improvisation is when one student initiates and directs the movements of another student by touching/manipulating her different body parts (like the hand, chin, chest, knee). This exercise is done in pairs: one student is the toucher and the other student receives the touch and uses it as a movement impulse.

The prerequisite of touch is movement. In absolute stillness, we would not be able to have any tactile experience. This is because movement registers relative changes, micro changes through which we can make contact with others and the world. In other words, we can sense textures because of the force, pressure, and direction we exert on a touchable thing. Sitting still, for example, is never a complete act of stillness. We make tiny adjustments in our posture (often unconsciously), shifting weight and renewing our contact with the chair constantly. One could say that the chair presses upon our body and our body, in turn, presses back upon the chair. A double force is at work here: we constitute worlds while at the same time we are constituted by the world.

Thus, though it is true to say that our bodies are requisite for revealing the world, this is only a half-truth, for these bodies are equally shaped by this world that they are to reveal. We learn to see because the things call from us certain movements not yet acquired. The world induces in us new bodily powers and thus develops for us a new body, a new way of being in the world. (Maclaren, 2014, p. 98)

Sensing and being sensible are thus intertwined. We develop a sense of self through an active engagement with the world (to touch upon the world), but also through a passive registration (to be touched by the world). It is important to note that passivity is never entirely passive: any passive registration requires some form of active engagement. The intertwining of the sentient and sensible becomes most evident when we hold our hands in a prayer position. In this position, both hands can alternate between the role of touching and the role of being touched (Merleau-Ponty, 1968). Even more, the touching hand feels the latent presence of being touched, and vice versa. Each hand is “ambiguously sentient-and-sensed, with, at different times, one side of the ambiguity coming to the fore and the other becoming latent” (Maclaren, 2014, p. 99).

Kym Maclaren (2014) differentiates between touching an object and touching a living being. She gives the example of petting a cat. When I pet a cat, the cat reacts to my soft strokes, for example by nudging me with her head or rubbing her cheeks against my body. The question is: Who is petting whom? I am petting the cat but the cat is petting me as well. In other words, the petting exists between us. The cat responds to my movements while I respond to the cat’s movements. Together we create a we-space, a space in which petting becomes a coauthored activity. Touching a living being differs from touching an object in this respect. Leaning into a wall is different from leaning into a dance partner since in the latter case we engage in each other’s flesh. We co-constitute the movements because two agents are involved. The touch exists in-between us.

Touch, we could say, is contact, is being with, is to co-exist with the other and the world. To touch is to communicate, to exchange affects, intensities, and forces. Within the enactive account, this is a form of participatory sense-making, “the coordination of intentional activity in interaction, whereby individual sense-making processes are affected and new domains of social sense-making can be generated that were not available to each individual on her own” (De Jaegher & Di Paolo, 2007, p. 497).

Participatory sense-making is an intercorporeal process: meaning is generated and transformed not only by the agents but also by the interaction process itself. As a result, the interaction process flows not in a pre-defined direction but finds its own course. The interaction process thus carries out its own autonomy (De Jaegher & Di Paolo, 2007). In dance improvisation, this is often described as the moment when dancers no longer know who initiated the action. The dance starts to shape itself. Sense-making is thus not ascribed to each of the participants but dynamically arises out of the interaction itself.

The in-between becomes the place where sense-making takes place. Even more important, the interaction itself is formative and transformative for the sense-making process. Together the participants move into a shared nomadic territory, a we-space, a third party which Hubert Godard and Romain Bigé (2019, p. 97) describe as “neither you, neither me, neither us, but at the interstice between these three pronouns, a third-included”. The participants expand their corporality to include the third party. In dance improvisation, the third party is the rolling point of contact between the dancers, i.e. the dynamic and ever-changing point around which the dance unfolds (Dey & Sarco-Thomas, 2014).

Touch plays a vital role in the constitution of a we-space, i.e. a space in which the lived bodies of the participants expand to form a common intercorporeality (Fuchs & De Jaegher, 2009). In this holistic experience, the in-between becomes the source of the sense-making process. It is this

mutual incorporation that provides the basis for social bonding, coordinated empathic understanding, affect regulation and shared expressivity (Cascio, Moore & McClone, 2019).

### **Social Touch over a Human Lifespan**

As stated at the beginning of this chapter, touch is the first sense to develop in life. Through sensory scaffolding, we come to know ourselves, the world, and others. Long before eyes and ears have developed, the human embryo responds to stimulation of the skin through amniotic fluid as well as touch and pressure of the womb (Montagu, 1984). Interpersonal touch is considered the earliest form of communication (Gallace & Spence, 2008). Birth intensifies this contact, and after birth, attachment is fostered through breastfeeding and skin-to-skin contact. In the first year of life, tactile stimulation plays a vital role in the social, emotional, and motor development of the infant.

Caregiving touch is not only “vital for growth and development but also has been actively used to calm infants in pain and discomfort” (Field, 2010, p. 368). The infant can “read” the way he is held or cuddled, and he immediately knows if he is held by a stranger or a familiar person. The attachment theory of John Bowlby (1973) suggests that affective touch promotes attachment, it allows infants to feel secure and safe. According to Winnicott (in Maclaren, 2014), touch provides a holding environment. The attentive holding by the main caregivers supports the infant, physically as well as emotionally. Through this holding infants feel safe: they implicitly and subconsciously learn that their caregivers will hold them, contain them, and catch them when they fall. In this respect, bouncing can be seen as a powerful soothing practice since it contains all aspects of trust: the holding, the falling, and the catching. Contakids, an organisation that specialized in contact improvisation between parents and young children, offers a whole range of exercises that stimulate deeper levels of corporeal communication between parent and child. In the “grab and climb exercise,” for example, the child must hold on to the parent’s leg, neck, or back. While moving together, the parent and child go through all aspects of trust: the holding, (potential) falling, and catching (Yatuv, 2016).

Interpersonal touch remains vital in adulthood. Research suggests that skin-to-skin touch from a partner activates the reward system in the brain, which in turn results in pain and stress reduction. Married women who hold the hand of their husbands have smaller threat-related neural responses than women who hold the hand of an anonymous male experimenter, or no hand at all (Coan, Schaefer, & Davidson, 2006). Touch plays a role in romantic couples. Andrew Gullledge, Michelle Gullledge, and Robert Stahmann (2003) found a high correlation between affective touch and overall relationship and partner satisfaction. People may also experience comfort from the touch of non-romantic relationships such as peers and friends, and even pets provide social and emotional support for their owners (McConnell, Brown, Shoda, Stayton & Martin, 2011). Even more, research shows that touching an inanimate object, a teddy bear, fosters pro-social behaviour in participants who are socially excluded (Tai, Zheng & Narayanan, 2011).

In elderly people, touch deprivation may occur as a result of loneliness and social isolation. The absence of human touch can harm physical and mental well-being such as anxiety, depression, and decreased awareness of the senses (Singh & Misra, 2009). In elderly people with dementia, a brief hand massage can reduce the levels of agitation while a foot massage can promote physical relaxation, sleepiness, more positive communication, and the stop or decrease of abnormal behaviour (Malaquin-Pavan, 1997).

The research reviewed here shows that touch has a powerful effect on health, well-being, and social bonding. Through touch, we encounter a meaningful world. Godard and Bigé (2019, p. 95) describe it as follows: “I cannot touch the world without being touched by it, and I cannot touch the world without being changed by it.” Through the synchronization of our moving bodies with other bodies and the surrounding world, we experience a sense of connection. Through touch, we can participate in a joint sense-making process.

Until here, I have mainly explored the notion of touch in a broad sense. There are however situations where touch is practiced more deliberately, for example in therapy (haptotherapy, massage, etc.), contact sports (wrestling, martial arts, rugby), physical play (rough and tumble play, tactile play), partner dance (tango, salsa, folk dance), and dance (contact) improvisation. From these examples, I will take physical play and dance improvisation further on. Both practices can be seen as relational, experiential practices that cultivate kinetic-kinaesthetic inquiry, perceptual sensitivity, and interpersonal contact. Even more, both physical play and dance improvisation can be seen as unique examples of participatory sense-making since they integrate sensorimotor experiences with higher-order processes such as imagination (Hermans, 2018, 2019).

In my own practice, I used a methodology known as artistic research to examine how touch contributes to participatory sense-making processes in play and dance improvisation. My artistic research can be described as an integrative practice that uses a set of rules, structures, and scores for creative movement exploration. Keywords are creativity, personal expression, challenging the self, and inventing new worlds. Principles of both play and dance improvisation are used to facilitate spontaneous movement creation.

Artistic research is rooted in the creative/artistic process. The research unfolds *in and through* the artistic creative process, with the purpose “to expand our knowledge and understanding by conducting an original investigation in and through art objects and creative processes” (Borgdorff, 2012, p. 53). In artistic research, experimental practices and critical reflection enter into a meaningful dialogue. In line with Nikolaus Gansterer, Emma Cocker, and Mariella Greil (2018, p. 19) artistic research is perceived here as a “mode of researching our relationality, our being-in-the-world”.

Permission from the participants was obtained via a written consent form that was sent to the participants after the Touch Workshop. The consent letter included: (1) informed and voluntary consent, (2) the use of data obtained during the workshop, and (3) the use of images of the workshop for publication.

In the next paragraph, I describe the outcomes of the Touch Project, an artistic research project that explores the vital role of touch in the participatory sense-making process of dance improvisation (see Table 3 for an overview of exercises). The Touch Project consists of two phases. The first phase entails a preliminary, personal examination of touch at a dance studio of the Amsterdam University of the Arts. The second phase consists of a three-day workshop at Chester University, Department of Music, Media and Performance, with ten professional dancers and theater-makers.

Tactile exploration	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• collecting touchable materials, i.e. materials that hold multiple tactile cues and textures</li> <li>• tactile panels: sorting materials in textures and surfaces (rough, smooth, hard, and so on)</li> <li>• traces of touch: working with clay</li> <li>• tactile education (Marinetti, 1921) with exercises such as; 1) take a walk outside on bare feet, 2) take a shower with a raincoat on, 3) wear socks in the night, when you go to sleep, 4) find two contrasting surfaces and touch them first one after the other and then simultaneously, 5) hold your right hand under a cold tap while you hold your left foot in a bucket with warm water, etc.</li> </ul>
Touch in relation to space	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• exercises: moving in a very tiny area or covering the entire floor with your body, touching the floor and walls with a specific body part (the right knee or left pink) or with the whole body, the difference between a slow touch and a quick/sudden touch, touching with eyes closed and with eyes open, etc.</li> <li>• game: the floor is lava</li> </ul>
Interpersonal touch	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• games: ninja slap game, chain tag game, thumb war game, hand slap game</li> <li>• touch inquiry in pairs: simple contact exercises (only hands in contact, solely arms and shoulders, only the torsos etc.)</li> <li>• head-to-head dance</li> <li>• back-to-back dance: rolling on the floor in duos</li> <li>• exercises on leaning and counterbalancing, not using full body weight</li> <li>• rolling on the floor in a group, like waves in the sea</li> <li>• table-top exercise (one person in a stable position supports the other person)</li> <li>• set of touch questions (see table 4)</li> <li>• touch score (see table 5)</li> </ul>

**Table 3.** Overview of touch exercises

### Phase One: Molding Materials, Spaces, and Selves

The first phase consists of a tactile inquiry into materials and spaces. In this preliminary examination, I work alone at a dance studio at the Amsterdam University of the Arts. I am interested in the tactility of materials, spaces and also in my own tactility. To do so, I collect “touchable materials,” i.e. materials that hold multiple tactile cues and textures such as feathers, cotton balls, sponges, sandpaper, leaves, and pineapples.

Next, I sort the materials in shape, size, and texture (rough, smooth, hard, and soft). I examine the knowable and unknowable surfaces, familiar and unfamiliar angles, and curves of the materials. Through touch, I become intimate with the materials, as the interstices between me and the tactile surfaces become intensified. In line with Marinetti’s Futurist manifesto “Tactilism: Futurist Manifesto” (Milan & Tommaso, 1921)<sup>66</sup>, I develop tactile panels with materials and textures that can only be understood by touch.

<sup>66</sup> Marinetti was an Italian artist and leader of the Futurist movement. In the manifesto, first published in 1909, Marinetti rejects the art of the past and celebrates the energy and strength of the modern, industrial world. As part of the manifesto, Marinetti has developed tactile panels/boards that consist of different textures and colours. The panels should not be experienced through visual contemplation but through touch. Marinetti writes: “These tactile boards have arrangements of tactile values that allow hands to wander over them, following coloured trails and producing a succession of suggestive sensations, whose rhythm, in turn languid, cadenced, or tumultuous, is regulated by exact directions” (Marinetti, as cited in

The tactile experiences allow me to penetrate deeper into the materiality of things. The materiality of a thing is not pre-given or determined beforehand but emerges in the tactile interaction. “The properties of materials are not fixed attributes of matter but are processual and relational.” (Ingold, 2007, p. 1)

From the tactile panels, I switch to working with clay. I am specifically interested in how my fingers (hands) knead the clay, how they press themselves into the matter and how my touch is imprinted in the clay (Figure 49). Sarah Christie (n.d., p.1), a sculptural artist that works with clay, describes the process as “exploring the traces and expressions of touch, recording and materializing imprints and passages formed by touch in movement.” I knead myself into the clay, leaving visible traces of my finger movements behind, impressing myself onto the material. The clay affords the kneading. Clay, one could argue, is a substance that resists my touch to a certain degree, while at the same time it provides tactile passages for the self to move through. Even more, the materiality of the clay confronts my creativity. Through the encounter between fingers and material, non-verbal narratives come into being<sup>67</sup>.



**Figure 49.** Clay as an expression of touch © Carolien Hermans

From the clay, I move to the space. The last experiment involves the exploration of touch in relation to architectural space (walls, ceiling, floor, and objects such as chairs in the space). I am interested in how the floor and walls make contact with my body—how I can rest on the floor, in the walls and how to find comfort in them. And the other way around. How to remove my body from the floor as much as possible by using objects that support my weight and guide me into gravity (see Figure 50), I sense the persistence of the floor and the wall, as they resist my weight and force. They are solid, with a distinctive shape, and my body is not allowed to move through. However, I still experience the sinking into the floor and walls, relatively speaking then, as my body surrenders to gravity and finds relaxation in the floor and walls. Although vaporization and diffusion into the medium are not possible, my body rubs against the floor and the walls. The rubbing produces intensities and affects as my body relates sensitively and sensibly way to the floor and the walls. Tiny movements cause great

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Antonello, 2014, p.38). For an example of a tactile board, see <https://www.guggenheim.org/audio/track/filippo-tommaso-marinetti-sudan-parigi-1921>

<sup>67</sup> By this I mean, that clay is a stiff, sticky and fine-grained material that allows for movements such as kneading, squeezing, wringing and moulding. The clay receives and resists (in a similar gesture) my tactile impressions. I press myself into the material, while at the same time the clay presses back on me. Together, we (the clay and me) create narratives that are in the first place sensorial and tactile.



shifts in the way I relate to the floor and the walls. Once again, sense-making arises in the interface between my body and the surfaces of the floor and walls.



**Figure 50.** Resting Places for Potential Body Parts © Carolien Hermans

### **Phase Two: Touch Workshop**

I was invited to Chester University, to give a three-day workshop to ten dancers and theater makers (three male students and seven female students). The first day is the introduction day: the participants work alone on simple exercises that involve tactile awareness of (architectural) space and surroundings (such as objects in space). The second day involves exercises on interpersonal touch and a touch inquiry. On the last day we work with a touch score (see Table 5). Each day is described in detail below.

#### **First Day of the Touch Workshop**

We start the first day by exploring the notion of touch with the surroundings: the floor, the walls, corners, and objects in the space. The aim is to raise awareness of the way that the body is supported by the floor and the walls. A set of exercises is used to explore individually the points of contact with the surroundings: moving in a very tiny area or vice versa covering the entire floor with your body, touching the floor and walls with a specific body part (the right knee or left pinky) or with the whole body, the difference between a slow touch and a quick/sudden touch, touching with eyes closed (see Figure 51) and with eyes open, etc.



**Figure 51.** Sensing the floor and the wall with eyes closed © Carolien Hermans

We reflect on each exercise and share experiences:

- One participant mentions the difference between a continuous touch and a sudden or even unexpected touch. For example, laying with your back on the floor is a continuous touch while stamping with your feet on the ground is a sudden touch. The latter reaches awareness immediately while the former slumbers around in the mind.
- Another participant states that “*attention is not only given to the touch points at the surface of the body, but it also travels to the deeper layers of the body.*” For example: touching the floor with the hand, is not only felt at the surface of the hand but all the way up, to the wrist, elbow, and upper arm. Awareness of touch is thus not restricted to contact points (i.e. the body surfaces that are in direct contact with the surroundings). We experience touch much deeper, as touch travels through the body and reaches organs and the internal tissues of the body (from epithelial tissue to connective tissues, muscle tissues, and nervous tissues).
- In the exercises, participants not only experience a heightened awareness of the sensation of touch, but also of the intention that guides the touch. Different intentions lead to different engagements in the touch experience.
- “*Tissues of the body are more sensitive when they encounter soft surfaces*” is another comment by a participant. Soft surfaces embrace the body, they are soothing and comforting. The body opens up to soft surfaces while it tends to shut off from sharp surfaces.

- One participant points to the difference between skin-to-floor contact and contact that is mediated by clothes. Touching the floor with bare feet or feet covered by socks provides an entirely different experience. “*Clothes make the touch experience more fuzzy.*”
- In the exercise with the eyes closed, a participant mentions haptic experiences that exceed the architectural features of space (such as walls and floor). “*My body is touched in several ways not only by the contours of space but also by light and by temperature.*” The warmth of the theater lights or draft near the windows are examples of haptic experiences that exceed the architectural.
- Attention magnifies the touch experience. “*It doesn’t physically matter how small the space is that you touch: it is magnified internally, it grows because you attend to it.*” The touch-field grows because attention is drawn to the micro experience. Another participant compares it with playing an instrument. “*When you play an instrument with your eyes closed, the instrument seems bigger.*”
- The participants agree that moving with eyes open or eyes closed changes the experience of touch drastically. “*When I open my eyes, I notice that I approach touch more externally. It helps to close the eyes to internally locate and sense the touch,*” says a participant. With eyes closed, we navigate with our proprioceptive system. With eyes open, we navigate visually through space using external cues and cognitive maps (Massumi, 2002).

### **Second Day of the Touch Workshop**

On the second workshop day, we work on interpersonal touch. We begin the day with touch games, such as the “chain tag game” (for further explanation see GamesWiki, n.d.). These type of games requires a *serious attention-to-having-fun*, a dedication to the rules of the game on the one side and a flow of energy and excitement on the other side (Hermans, 2018). The touch games create a sense of connectedness: the set of rules serves as an internal structure around which we structure and re-structure our bodies.

We continue the day with simple contact exercises where only hands are in contact, solely arms and shoulders, only the torsos, etc. We pay attention to leaning and counterbalancing while not using full body weight. In the afternoon we do a touch inquiry in pairs (see Figures 52 and 53). Several assignments have been written down on small pieces of paper. Each duo can choose what to work on. They can move to another assignment whenever they feel ready for a new challenge (see Table 4 for the written assignments). We reflect on the touch inquiry and share experiences.

First, we notice that in contrast to daily life we hardly use the hands in dance improvisation, but rather everything else from head to feet.

Second, in dance improvisation, the listening takes place with the whole body. It is as if eyes and ears are situated everywhere in the body—in your knee, in your toe, in your shoulder. This tactile awareness is a mode of seeing and listening with the body, an “embodied listening that turns the skin, fascia, organs, bones and fluids into ears” (Little, 2014, p. 249). Even more, touch cannot be reduced to the tactile sphere. “It courses through all senses as a modal relation. Haptic and visual, seeing and touch, fold into one another creating an assemblage that moves through [...] the dancers.” (Egert, 2019, p. 2) Some participants mention that they need visual guidance to fully engage in the touch experience.

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1. Stick to one touch, repeat it, over and again and find something new in the repetition.
  2. Absorb proximity. Take it in, spit it out.
  3. Shift from a continuous touch to a sudden or unexpected touch. And the other way around.
  4. Shift from local to global touch, and from global to local touch.
  5. Can you be in a tactile nowhere? Try it.
  6. How does touch travel through you?
  7. How much weight can you take in?
  8. How many layers or textures can you distinguish in the touch?
  9. Return together to the first touch. And the second touch. Revisit it.
  10. Be aware of micro-adjustments in the touching.
  11. Find gaps and holes in bodies or space. Fill it with touch.
  12. Touch without touching.
  13. Decompose the touch: bring it back to its essence or its most basic 'form'.
  14. Shift awareness from surface to depth in the touching (and the other way around).
  15. What is the absolute minimum of touch (where you can hardly sense it anymore)?
  16. What is the absolute maximum of touch (where you can hardly sense it anymore or take in)?

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**Table 4.** Touch Inquiry



**Figure 52.** Hands only exercise © Carolien Hermans



**Figure 53.** An assemblage of body parts © Carolien Hermans

Third, tactile awareness is not a constant, stable process. During the touch inquiry, tactile awareness shrinks, grows, shuts down, opens up, etc. This depends on the intensity of the touch, as well as the location, scope, and duration of touch. Touch, we could say, is a manifold of movements. “Touch is neither linear nor uniform; it cannot be reduced to one movement, one relation or one sensation. Rather, it forms an assemblage of manifold relations, differences and events.” (Egert, 2019, p. 2) One participant describes it as follows: “*Touch is far more fluid than I initially thought.*”

Fourth, sometimes the touch is too much to absorb. This happens mostly when full body weight is used (for example, when you lie under a pile of bodies). A more experienced participant mentions that when the weight becomes too much, it helps to create a small space between your body and the other bodies to control the amount of weight that presses upon you. In full body contact, *it is impossible to attune to all individual touch points at once*. The touch experience becomes more holistic in full-body contact.

Fifth, the body is never in a tactile nowhere (Ratcliffe, 2008). Touch is always with us. In fact, the only moment when I am free of touch is when I jump in the air. In this micro-moment, I experience a sense of freedom: no ties, no connections, just temporarily floating in the air. However, even in this jump, I am not entirely free since I am still touched by the air that surrounds me. Don Ihde (1983, 99) speaks of a touch field, as a way to indicate how we are connected with the world: “When the world of my touch field touches and is touched by the surrounding world, I realize how intimate is the I-world relation in touch. Through touch, I am constantly in ‘touch’ with that which surrounds me.”

Finally, we notice that dance improvisation itself magnifies the touch experience.

Although we are surrounded by touch in daily life, we are often not consciously aware of the touching and the being touched. In dance improvisation, the sensations and affects move into the foreground. According to Gerko Egert (2019, p. 2) “dance [within which I include dance improvisation] intensifies touch, it is not about variables such as speed or acceleration increasing linearly, but rather the relations and tensions that deepen.” Tactile knowing and tactile sensing are a vital part of dance improvisational practice.

### Third Day of the Touch Workshop

On the third and final day we work with a touch score (see Table 5). Some parts of the score have to be performed alone, some have to be executed with a partner, and some involve the whole group. Two important insights result from the touch score.

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1. Give the floor a big hug. Alone.
  2. Try to touch as much of the floor as possible. Cover the floor with your touch. Work together. Do it systematically: start from the left corner behind and end up in the right corner in the front.
  3. Make a pile of bodies. Move into a pile and move out it again. Repeat.
  4. Work together in a whole group. Bring one person to the other side without her touching the floor. No one is allowed to stand on his feet.
  5. Pushing and pulling game: wrestle with another partner.
  6. Whisper-game: someone starts with a touch, and hands it over to the person next to her, who hands it over to the person next to her – so that a chain of touch starts to evolve. In a circle or a line.
  7. In-between the other scores: Try to touch someone without the person noticing it.
  8. Return to the floor. Alone. Let the floor hug you.
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**Table 5.** Touch Score

First of all, by using a touch score, the dance becomes more performative, as if the dancers are performing for an invisible public. Movements are framed within a set of rules, a score, and as a result sensations and perceptions intensify (Egert, 2019). The touching becomes a theatre of touching, where intensities and affects are dramatized and put to the front.

Second, all participants engage in the sense-making process. Bodies resonate with each other through coordinated interaction, and this process results in an intercorporeal dialogue, the intertwining of living and lived bodies on a pre-reflective level (Merleau-Ponty, 1968). A participant describes it as follows: “*The skin grows, it starts to include/incorporate others.*” Another participant refers to it as “*shared elasticity.*” A form of bodily communication arises, a relational knowing, as we move with and are moved by others.

At some moments in the dance, the participants can no longer tell who initiates the action: who is leading and who is following. The participants navigate together, guided by implicit relational knowing (see Figure 54). In this delightful confusion, the interaction itself starts to take over. One participant describes her experience as follows: “*I no longer initiated my movements, I was moved by*

others.” This “being moved” breaks up movement habits and patterns, it awakens curiosity and creativity.



**Figure 54.** Rolling on the floor © Carolien Hermans

Together the participants create an interval, a third party. In this interval, the lived bodies of the dancers “extend and form a common intercorporeality” (Fuchs & De Jaegher, 2009, p. 465). The third party is the in-between space where the potential resides. The potential exists in between bodies, in between movements. It is not something that a dancer can create alone, since it exceeds the body and is experienced at the threshold of inward and outward forces, intensities, and affects.

In the third party the relation is moved<sup>68</sup>(Manning, 2007). The participants mould and sculpt their bodies to become a multisensed organism (Hermans, 2018). Together a shared body of experience is created. “Each lived body with its sensorimotor body schema reaches out, as it were, to be extended by the other.” (Fuchs, 2016, p. 199) Boundaries expand, open up, and passages are created between the interiority and the exteriority of the body. A participant describes the experience as “*extending my body in such a way that it includes others, space and objects.*” Another participant refers to this as “*incorporating others in the dance.*” The body reaches out to embody the other, the space and objects in the space. Mutual incorporation is thus a process where bodies extend and reach outwards to orient themselves relationally in the world.

## Conclusion

I have shown that touch is a relational act. To touch is to re-organise space and time, to invent worlds. Manning (2009) refers to this as “body-worlding,” being and becoming one with the world through

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<sup>68</sup> In contact improvisation, the third party refers to the rolling point of contact between two or more dancers. Through this rolling point of contact, the dance unfolds and a shared body is created. Any movement not only affects the individual constellation of the two dancers, but it foremost affects the relation.



movement and touch. In line with Egert (2019), we may conclude that three elements can be distinguished in the concept of touch: multiplicity, autonomy, and productivity. First, touch is not linear or uniform. It is manifold and always in a process of becoming. Second, touch resides in the in-between space, also referred to as the third party. Touch is autonomous, it flows between two or more agents. It does not belong to the individual agents, but it emerges in the interaction. Third, touch produces affects and intensities that do not find their origin in separate entities (agents).

In this chapter I have argued that dance improvisation brings attention to the tactile: creative movement practice requires sensitivity to the surfaces and textures of body-worlds. In dance improvisation, participatory sense-making takes place on a bodily level. Language only plays a subordinate role. Dance improvisation creates good circumstances for intercorporeality to occur, i.e. a dynamic coupling of living bodies through which shared sense-making arises. Affects, percepts, and knowledge intermingle in the experience of touch. Boundaries expand and bodies move into an ambiguous state, fluctuating between self and otherness.

Although the concept of participatory sense-making is usually restricted to human agents, I argue here that it can also take place between living beings and non-living beings. We move into a dialogue with the materiality of the world. The materiality of a thing is not locked inside the thing: it comes into existence through tactile encounters. It is in the interaction between my body surface and the surface of materials, that sense-making starts to arise. Ingold describes it accurately when he says that we are immersed in the materiality of the world. Human beings “swim in an ocean of materials” (Ingold, 2007, p.7). Even more, things can act back. The power of their agency lies in the materiality itself. Non-living things can thus participate in a shared sense-making process.

Dance improvisation has much to offer when it comes to the vital role of touch in sense-making processes. In educational terms, there is much to learn from creative engagements with touch, as touch is “one of our most refined senses of perception” (Bannon & Holt, 2012, p. 2). As previously stated, dance improvisation intensifies touch. It produces relational intensities and transforms the interaction process dramatically and radically.

The touch exercises mentioned throughout this chapter can be used in a diverse array of dance classrooms and are suitable for K-12 teachers as well as studio teachers. The advice is to structure the classes in a threefold way. First, start the workshop or class with tactile exploration (i.e. collecting tactile materials, tactile panels, working with clay or other sensorial materials, and a set of tactile assignments). In the second phase, the teacher introduces touch exercises in relation to space and objects in space. Games such as “the floor is lava” are good starters. Once the children are comfortable in touching their surroundings (i.e. rolling on the floor, sliding, using the wall as a counterweight, etc.), the teacher moves to interpersonal touch. Again, different kinds of games can be used (slap game, chain tag game) as a group warming-up. The class is then divided into smaller groups so that children can explore simple contact exercises in pairs. Playful pedagogical elements, such as “bring the balloon in pairs to the other side without using the hands,” can be used to increase attention and motivation, and to bring a sense of joy and excitement in the classroom (Cohen & Waite-Stupiansky, 2011).

This chapter highlights the value of touch in a dance educational context and promotes to practicing and exploring touch in a creative way. This also means that ethical considerations should be taken into account. Within an educational context, touch should always be practiced in a safe and respectful way. Teachers should be sensitive to the needs of each child by maintaining integrity at all times and checking regularly with the children if they are still okay. When it comes to consent, children should be made aware of the right to refuse touch at any time and the teacher should discuss ways to communicate consent and non-consent, both verbally and non-verbally (Courtney & Noland, 2017; Risner & Schupp, 2020).

This paper has been written amidst the COVID-19 pandemic times. The outbreak has put an entirely different perspective on this research. We are rapidly developing a culture of no-touch. In public life, we do not only take a social distance of six feet, but we also hesitate to touch surfaces and objects such as door handles, desks, handrails, lift buttons, shopping carts, groceries, packages, communal surfaces at work, etc.

However, people are also becoming increasingly aware of the fact that touch is truly fundamental to humans. We cannot live, nor survive, without touch. Research shows that touch has a powerful effect on health, well-being and social bonding (Saunders et al., 2018). Through touch, we encounter a meaningful world. Through touch, we participate in a joint sense-making process. Touch itself has become a threat to our health. The longer the pandemic continues, the more likely it will be that we collectively develop negative associations with touch. Even when the virus fades out, this negativity will remain part of our collective memory.

It is therefore wise to invest in an education of touch—in touch that is safe and that is to be trusted. We need to learn to respect social distance in daily life while at the same time we should not become fearful of touch. COVID-19 has led to new social norms of haptic etiquette that focus on “distancing, on buffering touch, on layering skins” (Hamilton, 2017, p. 65). In this new situation, we should however not forget the importance of touch for human beings.

Touch is vital for growth, for developing a sense of self, for being and relating to the world. It is from tactile experiences that we learn to endow the world with meaning (Montagu, 1984). By stimulating awareness of the skin, we stimulate self-awareness and awareness of the world we live in. Touch experience is fundamental to our bodily self-understanding in relation to the world. In these changing times, we need to invest in a new culture of touch, one that is at once sensible and sentient.