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

Hermans, C.

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Summary English

Participatory Sense-making in Physical Play and Dance Improvisation: Drawing Meaningful Connections Between Self, Others and World

Physical play and dance improvisation can both be seen as forms of creative movement exploration. Both activities take the body as the starting point for a meaningful experience in which language plays only a secondary role. Several authors explicitly draw analogies between play and dance improvisation. Rodriguez states that play consists of transindividual processes of action and reaction ‘which often takes on a to-and-fro quality reminiscent of dance’ (n.d., p.2). Sheets-Johnstone points to the intimate relationship between play and dance. She considers play as a “kinetic happening in which the sheer exuberance of movement dominates and in which a certain freedom of movement obtains” (Sheets-Johnstone, 2005, para. 29). Both dance and movement are connected to play: dance in fact can be seen as the continuation of children’s natural movement-exploration.

In this artistic doctoral research, I specifically look at the meaning-making process in both children’s physical play and the dance improvisation practice of professionals. In doing so, I make use of the concept of ‘*participatory sense-making*’ developed by Hanne de Jaegher and Ezequiel di Paolo (2007). Participatory sense-making assumes that meaning-making is not a solely individual activity but meaning is generated in the interaction with others and the world.

This philosophical-scientific premise is closely aligned with enactivism, a movement in cognitive science that claims that cognition is not so much an internal, mental phenomenon as it is the result of the dynamic relationship between an organism and its environment. Enactivism offers an alternative to traditional models that conceive of cognition as an internal information processing process in which perception and action serve primarily as inputs and outputs. Enactivism, on the other hand, argues that cognition cannot be separated from our embodied actions in the world. The founders of enactivism, Humberto Maturana and Francisco Varela (1980), use the concept of *autopoiesis* (self-preservation and self-organisation) as the theoretical foundation for their theory. Through a network of processes (at many different levels) the organism maintains itself. In enactivism, sense-making is an interactive and embodied process. Body, context, and (the lived) experience thus play a crucial role in the sense-making process. Sense-making is deeply rooted in our movements: meanings come about through the rhythmic coordination of our actions.

This is where physical play and dance improvisation come in. After all, in both activities, movement is the starting point for sense-making. In doing so, this study focuses on the following main question: *What are the common components of the participatory sense-making process in children’s physical play and professionals’ dance improvisation?* I explore this question from both literature and artistic practice. From the literature review, I arrive at five components. In physical play and dance improvisation, it involves 1) a real-time process in which embodied decisions are made in the moment, 2) the kinaesthetic pleasure in which experience and movement are in constant connection with each other, 3) the rhythmic coordination of movements and actions, 4) creative exploration from rules and structures that are predetermined on the one hand and arise in the moment itself on the other, and 5) an ambiguous process in which meanings are indeterminate.

The main question also forms the starting point for the artistic practice that includes three different phases: 1) the living archive, 2) the re-enactments and 3) the development of Re-Play/Re-Move - a toolkit for creative movement exploration for children between the ages of 4 and 10. Over a period of roughly five years (2013-2018), I built a photo collection of both my children’s spontaneous, physical moments of play in their immediate environment and staged moments of play. In doing so,

my artistic work resonates with, among others, photographer Sally Mann and performance artists such as Grace Surman and Sarah Black. The living archive consists of single photographs (stand-alones) and motion sequences. Archiving is considered here as an iterative, open, and incomplete process that is subject to continuous change.

In the second phase of the artistic research, professional dancers and dance students began working with the archival material. This led to three re-enactments. The goal of re-enactment is not to imitate the original (in the sense of copying or imitating) but to tap into new creative potential. In this study, I have used re-enactments specifically to explore how the participatory sense-making process is established in both physical play and dance improvisation. Among other things, the following were taken into account: shared attention, shared physicality (intercorporeality), the transformative power of both physical play and dance improvisation, how affects and intensities resonate between different bodies, and how new meanings emerge from there. Finally, I developed the *Touch Project*, a project at the intersection of play and dance improvisation that explores the role of touch in the sense-making process.

In the third phase of the artistic process, *Re-Play/Re-Move* was developed, a creative toolkit for children aged 4 to 10. The toolkit takes the already mentioned model of 'participatory sense-making in physical play and dance improvisation' as a starting point and adds a sixth component: qualitative movement dynamics (with the elements of rhythm/time, force and space) to the model. The toolkit has two components: a card set with movement tasks and three workshops with the themes of 'Touch,' 'Creative Movement Exploration,' and 'Materials'. The three workshops will again work with the principle of re-enactment. This time, however, the roles are reversed: children get to work with existing work by choreographers and performance artists.

In conclusion, I maintain that the physical play of children and the dance improvisation practice of professionals offer many tools to explore in-depth the concept of 'participatory sense-making. In both activities, embodied meanings come about through the intimate entanglement between movement and affect. Meaning-making is an embodied process in which values and experiences (affects, intensities, forces) are exchanged, but also generated. The movement itself is the basis for the sense-making process. Creative movement exploration can thus help each person to break the daily movement routine and pay attention to the kinetic/kinaesthetic and tactile dimensions of movement. It offers a powerful opportunity to engage with the body in a creative way and to experience how movement itself is at the heart of all sense-making processes.