

Developing body literacies in/through shared creation processes in contemporary dance

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ABSTRACT

This article examines bodily practices in shared creation processes in contemporary dance that engage professional and non-professional dancers in collective meaning-making, developing literacies, and learning as social practice. Individual and collective improvisation practices are shown to be the foundation for developing body literacies, as part of pluriversal literacies (Perry 2021, 2024; Perry et al. 2023). Analysis of guided individual and collective improvised practices reveals that somatic experiences and widening of awareness act as foundations for intersubjective and intercorporeal negotiation of meaning. Attention to reoccurring forms of intercorporeal coordination, such as mirroring, leading and following, the apprehension of proximity and touch, and transposition of movement foster the capacity for continuous adjustment. Processes of shared creation function as a framework for the constitution of systems of intercorporeality, within which relationships between people and with the environment are co-constituted in resonance with dynamics of authority and expertise, and processes of learning intra- and intercorporeal communication. Shared literacies of the body enable an experimentation of forms of being-together that resist rigid hierarchies and communication based solely on word, speech and competitiveness, and become a foundation for collective organization.

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Introduction

Shared creation processes in contemporary dance (or community dance¹) engaging professional and non-professional dancers are processes of collective meaning-making, of developing literacies, of learning as social practice. Building on this main thesis, I investigate how guided, improvised bodily exploration based on contemporary dance methods and somatic practices operates as individual and collective meaning-making practices. In interpersonal and interbodily experiences, the meaning of interaction and movement is itself always in flux. It exists within the intersubjectivity of the dancers and remains, to some extent, elusive – or rather, impossible to put into words by or for an outside observer, and even by or for the dancers themselves. I am therefore interested in the frameworks or situations of interaction, which I consider to be spaces for learning – of knowledge production and transmission – that enable the co-construction of meaning, rather than seeking a method for analyzing individual intentions of representing or expressing non-representative meaning.

My doctoral research and analysis presented in this article are based on multi-sited ethnography (Marcus 1995; Coleman and Von Hellermann 2011) within shared creation projects in Lyon (France), Leipzig (Germany) and Vancouver (Canada). My methodology combines (participatory) observation, interviews and focus groups to varying extent in 8 groups and processes. The case studies are diverse, in terms of the timing of the projects, the institutional and territorial contexts in which they emerged, and the dancing bodies involved. As a researcher and trained contemporary dancer, I have engaged with these projects in different ways, particularly physically: some creative processes are followed from the inside from start to finish; others over an intensive but limited period; and still others involve moving back and forth between presence and absence, whilst altering my positions of observation. Through participatory observation in six out of seven projects, I was able to have bodily experiences, share and discuss them with the other dancers and to confront them with my understanding of contemporary dance. Through external observation in four processes, interviews with all leading artists and focus groups with dancers of five creation processes, I also focus on ways of guiding bodily experiences and narrating them, individually and collectively. By taking different positions in the observed projects – from participating dancer and part of the group, to external observer and

¹ The term community dance is used primarily in my field research in Vancouver. In France, I use the term ‘création partagée’ and in Germany the term ‘kollektive Schaffensprozesse.’ As a small part of participatory art, my interest is more directed towards the actual process of artistic creation, which is shared (to different extent) with non-professional dancers, but always in a long(er) temporality. I acknowledge the different concepts used to describe or define participatory approaches in art-making (e.g. socially engaged arts, co-creation), and situate my use as connected primarily to the ‘extended interaction and shared labor [dimension of the projects] in which the process of participatory interaction itself is treated as a form of creative praxis’ (Kester 2011:9). It is more so a description of a process itself, than a strong positioning of the implications of these processes in the art worlds.

colleague of the leading artists – I identified similarities and differences throughout the processes in an inductive manner. These have been classified along different forms of knowledge: bodily, artistic and of being-together.

For this article, I draw on results from my observation and interviews with the Ageless Dancers group/project in Vancouver, as it exemplifies somatic or bodily approaches identified across the broader corpus. This project is analyzed through a combination of participatory and external observation, focus groups with the dancers, and interviews with the leading artist, thereby engaging all methodological tools.

Ageless Dancers is a weekly dance program, bringing together dancers between ages 50 and 86. The workshops or classes are led by a professional artist, changing every three years. Differently from the ‘transactional way that a dance class [usually] operates’ (Sarah Cavanaugh, Arts programmer at Roundhouse Community Arts and Recreation Centre Vancouver), these processes are based on individual and collective improvisation, as well as movement and choreographic exploration. At the end of the year, the group often presents a choreographic piece created out of the experiences of the year. Heather Myers, dancer and Manager of Outreach and Engagement at Ballet BC at the time, led this group during my field research in 2024.

I identified the following elements in the shared creation projects, that help understand how they can be considered as social spaces and processes for knowledge transmission and development and production of meaning²: (inter-)bodily practices based on improvisation which enable to make meaning from/of/through the body; bodily and discursive processes of sharing and negotiating meaning of movement, gestures and choreography. I argue that meaning is not only “located” in or produced through bodily practice, but also in sometimes rigid, sometimes flexible economies of meaning (Wenger 1997). They imply hierarchies of meaning and of meaning-making processes (literacies), and therefore, the (im)possibility to move towards understanding and possibly recognizing the value of other literacies (of the body, arts, being-together) in contemporary Western – productivist, individualistic, dualistic – societies.

To analyze the relational and impermanent nature of meaning produced in/through body/ies, I draw on phenomenology, socio-semiotics, and enactive approaches in a conceptual framework rooted in communication studies and dance studies. Wenger’s (sociological) concept of communities of practice and economies of meaning (1997) helps to integrate these reflections into a wider social context, considering meaning-making processes as framed by hierarchies of meaning, constantly negotiated in social groups and society. The purpose of my research, and of this text as an examination of one part of it, is to contribute to filling the following research gap identified by De Luca (2017:36, our translation):

² Collective production of meaning and/or production of collective meaning

Once the performative dimension of meaning-making is rethought as the point of convergence between, amongst other things, bodily engagement in action, the unfolding of a course of action as it is intersubjectively constructed, and the more or less temporary stabilisation of meaning within a social field, a theoretical framework capable of conceptualising the emergence and development of semiotic manifestations becomes necessary.

Mia Perry's understanding of (pluriversal) literacies (Perry 2021, 2024; Perry et al. 2023) provides a productive framework to consider the interrelation between experience, meaning, knowledge and power relations. Expanding literacies to include non-textual ones, she shows how recognizing other sign systems – and, I would add, practices to make meaning of those systems – is fundamental to face contemporary crisis, the ecological one especially for her.

1. Literacies in / through shared creation processes in contemporary dance

Mia Perry's conception of literacies goes far beyond the ability to read and write text, and even beyond the communicative process involving symbolic signs encoded within a language system. She acknowledges the importance of semiotic systems or sign systems in our relation to / with / in the world and emphasizes the differences in abilities to make meaning from the plural signs or sign systems we are responding / responsive to. This is what she calls literacies: 'we need to be able to "read" the sign systems, to make meaning from them in order for that aspect of life to impact our understanding of ourselves and our actions in the world. How we relate to things depends on the literacies we have' (Perry 2024:7-8).³ This stance also allows attending to the active dimension of meaning-making: 'As literate beings, we are not simply consumers of sign systems; we are creating and representing, intervening, and expressing with sign systems too.' Agency can be held by sign, signifier and / or interpreter, but is clearly 'entangled in the process of sign systems'; therefore, she argues, 'the literacy that you practice [and I would even say literacies in plural] "does" something; it plays a role' (Perry 2024:65).

Based on these reflections, I propose to explore contemporary dance practices, based on improvisation and considerations of the body as multiple,⁴ as processes of developing literacies. Dancers "read" – sense, experience and understand – the world differently

³ SPerry states: 'Semiotics a[re] the fundamental process underpinning literacies practices' (Perry 2024:141) and 'How we relate to things is determined by semiotic systems, or sign systems. Our literacies determine our capacity to relate, to engage, to de-code, and then make sense of signs' (Perry et al. 2023:168).

⁴ In community dance practices I observed, I discovered that transmitted techniques allow to experience multiple dimensions of the body, which I conceptualize as techniques of the lived, material and performative body.

through bodily practices, produce and negotiate meaning intercorporeally and represent the impermanence and relationality of this meaning through abstract movement.

In my examination of contemporary dance in shared creation processes, dance is not considered to produce literacies analogous to textual forms,⁵ since a gesture does not necessarily correspond to a word, and choreography cannot be read as a text. It is rather a practice that broadens the concept of meaning-making to include non-textual literacies, often overlooked in Western societies. To a certain extent, this also involves learning a system of signs. Contemporary dance emerged from the ever-increasing abstraction of the material representational form of things and thus allows for a multiplication of the meanings of gestures and movements in space: in terms of signifier, it *represents nothing*. Movement and choreography rather express emotional states or abstract ideas. This does not mean that there are no codes, imposed frameworks or bodily forms. Sometimes, contemporary dance as an aesthetic category is criticized for a tendency toward, or an ideal of, universalism, distance from practical contexts, elitism – especially through an over-abstraction or intellectualization of dance –, and the body as a virtuoso image. This also stems from a certain structure within the professional sphere, one increasingly dominated by universalist and productivist paradigms, that overlook diversity of meaning-making processes in contemporary dance as a practice.

My research shows how shared creation processes, although a niche within contemporary dance, resist in various ways the institutionalization and fixation of contemporary dance as a solely aesthetic entity – and thus pre-established codes of expression and interpretation. In this context, I challenge the notion of the choreographic piece as an object with a fixed meaning – in other words a totality of meaning – explicitly shared by all those involved in its production and public performances. Understanding what a particular choreographer intends to convey through their work, an aesthetic approach, is often the subject of study for dance researchers. My research instead shows that the meaning of the work, the movements, and the relationships between dancers transform, even in its (re)production and (re)presentation to an external audience, as does the meaning of the experiences. The social or interactive nature of shared creation processes is conveyed in bodily practices. My analysis focuses on the process through which dancers make meaning from intra- and inter-bodily signs in interactive and collective negotiations.

⁵ I am building on and expanding upon the following ideas of De Luca: ‘Si l’analogie entre danse et langage peut donc être partiellement gardée – dans la mesure où on peut soutenir que dans la danse sont à l’œuvre des relations entre expression et contenu –, l’analogie entre figures/programmes gestuels et faces du signe linguistique s’avère difficilement tenable. Dès lors, il est légitime de se demander: à quelles conditions la danse peut-elle se former comme un langage? Où se situerait la sémiose propre de la danse? [...] Une expression telle que «le langage de la danse» ne risque pas seulement de confirmer la thèse de l’impérialisme linguistique, selon laquelle toutes les ressources sémiotiques fonctionnent de la même manière que la langue (verbale). Le résultat en est également une occultation du caractère spécifique de différentes ressources sémiotiques et de mode de signification (Sonesson, 2009, p. c 2)’ (De Luca 2017: 32 and 34).

2. Intracorporeal communication through somatic practices as foundation of relational conceptions of the body

Practices of shared creation practices almost always start with somatic warm-ups. In the Ageless Dancers weekly workshops or classes, Heather Myers relies strongly on those somatic practices, in the beginning or sometimes even in the middle of a workshop. For example, in the 28/02/24 workshop, after a writing exercise, Heather suggests that people spread out around the room and find a 'place to settle' to 'take some time for yourself and your arrival physically,' because 'you just contemplated something mentally.' She mentions the option of using a mat or a chair to find a comfortable position. In order to 'tune into your internal landscape,' she invites dancers to close their eyes or 'soften the visual sense, [to] lower gaze,' then to begin to 'connect and yielding into gravity' and to 'notice how your breath feels [...] in your whole body,' to feel the inhalation and exhalation and the weight of the body on the floor. In this process, she suggests letting go of the body's weight (mentioning, for example, the feet, the pelvis, the head) and 'letting the idea of softening inform your movement.' As most dancers start swaying from side to side, slowly lifting and lowering their arms, Heather picks up on that and suggests 'maybe a quality of swaying,' then 'beginning to move side to side.' The swaying can then become more expansive, 'exaggerating the movements of ripple,' then 'beginning to stretch out.' She reminds dancers to be aware of 'gravity,' always 'exploring the weight of the body' in relation or tension to a 'sense of growth or expansion.' She invites them to 'dance your way to sitting or standing.' She stresses the importance of 'follow[ing] what your body is guiding you to do.' She then proposes some intentions of movement (reaching arms up, enlightening the awareness to directions they can send their arms to, folding and unfolding knees and elbows, as well as the spine), leaving the response really open to the dancers: 'whatever that means to you.' She suggests transforming this into 'undulations of the spine,' which 'starts at the tailbone and goes all the way up to your skull.' She proposes to explore the 'circulation of feet draw[ing] shapes on the floor, as if it were a paintbrush.' She suggests shifting the focus to the hands and wrists, being 'imaginative' about the different ways of bending and turning them. She then proposes to 'bring resistance into your movement' and then 'introduce pulse or rebound [and] connect to the energy of the music.' The explorations begin within a fixed area, so she invites dancers to start 'travel[ing] in the space by tak[ing] up space.' Finally, she suggests slowing the movement down little by little. This slowing down allows one to 'get back into the sensation of movement.' She then suggests settling into a posture that feels 'resourceful,' for example with one hand on the chest and the other on the stomach.

In another workshop (17/04/24), she offers to 'take in the room visually; see things you don't always see; take perspectives you don't always have.' She then proposes to

‘respond to what you see, feel, hear’ [through movement], to ‘get a little more creatively engaged, beginning to explore the space more physically and interpretatively.’ To go even further, she invites dancers to notice what exists and happens ‘beyond the room and invite that into your dialogue,’ even opening the door, ‘or anybody who would like to explore out here.’

The above excerpts from my field notes illustrate how ways to attend to one’s own material body in relation to the space and material environment are explored in a non-prescriptive manner. The artist offers perceptual frameworks, focuses on specific signs and openings to non-representational movement. Movements are serving a raised awareness on different sensations. These practices of somatic warm-up often become a routine, and are then also explored in more concrete frameworks – or scores – individually, but also collectively.

Analyzing a wide range of such practices or techniques used in shared creation processes reveals that they bring immediate subjective bodily experience to the foreground and foster an attentiveness and openness to intracorporeal communication processes (Martin-Juchat 2020). Guiding artists convey ways of perceiving and physically interpreting a variety of signs that are not usually accessible or central to amateur dance practice. The importance of those practices, which enable dancers to develop an awareness of various sensations in their own bodies, is also brought out in the focus groups conducted with participants in the process. For theorists of somaesthetics, these practices lead to a vision or understanding of the self as situated, relational and transactional, rather than autonomous (Shusterman 2007:20). When bodily techniques are approached from a perspective of autonomy and valuing subjective experiences of the lived body, the practice leads to understanding the body in its multiplicity, as a totality or a whole. This aligns, through practice, with conceptions of the body that are otherwise theorized in complex ways, for example through semiotics:

Yet, even if viable from a functional point of view, a body conceived of and treated [...] as if it were merely an aggregate of organs cannot appear to us – who, from another perspective, “inhabit” that very body – as anything other than irreparably mutilated, as deprived of something absolutely essential – “soul”? “breath of life”? “self-awareness”? presence to oneself? – which, whatever terminology one adopts, makes our own body, for each of us, an irreducible whole, immediately felt as imbued with meaning. (Landowski 2004:78–79, our translation)

According to Landowski (2004), the body cannot be understood (solely) as a surface upon which signs are inscribed to communicate content, for experience itself is already a process of meaning-making. The body is therefore a ‘discursive instance,’

generating meaning whose effects can arise and be experienced only in the present moment. The intelligible can no longer be separated from the sensible, for lived experience is bodily and laden with meaning.

Whilst techniques relating to the individual subjective experience of the lived body are central in shared creation processes, they are interwoven within a collective process. They above all also concern the relationality inherent in the multiplicity and even what I call the porosity of the body: there is not a back-and-forth between a body that perceives, records, interprets, and then produces signs, in a rather simplistic approach to communication, but 'meaning as the product of lived intersomatic relations' (Landowski 2004:78, our translation). Somatic experiences and widening of awareness act as foundations for intersubjective and intercorporeal negotiation of meaning.

3. Intercorporeal coordination routines to develop shared signs

Various forms of inter-bodily coordination are explored and developed in the observed processes, which engage the dancers' communicative possibilities in diverse ways. The perception, interpretation and reaction to bodily and environmental signs (the shape of anatomical parts and the material body as a whole, sensations of distance or proximity, the spatialization of the body, intentions of the addressee, the temporality of the interaction, interpersonal relationships and social contexts) are inextricably linked within a flow of movement. Attention to the different forms of coordination and means of communication - including tactile, olfactory and auditory communication beyond the visual communication - in separate explorations allows 'individuals to become aware that their body is not simply a medium for the expression of signs, but is also engaged in the interpretation of signs' (Martin-Juchat 2020: 34, our translation) and to alter their representations of the body.

For Martin-Juchat, non-verbal communication is fundamental to living beings, particularly mammals. It involves the living body and (partially) dissociates it from the standardized body. In the observed practices, non-verbal communication does not rely solely on the use of signs based on cultural or aesthetic conventions; I propose that these practices should be analyzed from the perspective of a dialogue between the standardized and living body, from a perspective that does not set the immediately perceived sensations and the 'consciously calculated' movements, gestures and postures in such direct opposition to one another.

My research has revealed a certain consistency in the pedagogical methods or frameworks used in the processes of expressing and interpreting bodily signs, across different observed projects. Although the movements and gestures themselves are not entirely codified, since they are based on improvisation, the forms or possibilities

for action and reaction between two bodies engaged in these practices are routinized. Reoccurring practices across the projects are mirroring, leading and following, the apprehension of proximity, then of touch, and the transposition and interpretation of movement.

Mirroring is based on the instantaneous replication of the other person's movement in a face-to-face arrangement, i.e., as if in a mirror. In these explorations, it is impossible to anticipate one's own movement or that of the other in advance; the ability to perceive, interpret and act in the moment is developed. Always observed in an improvisational context, these practices can vary in complexity (static, in motion, using the hands or the whole body, etc.).

A key aspect of mirroring, "leading and following," is also explored more explicitly in certain exercises. The aim of mirroring is ultimately to reach a point where it is no longer possible to determine who is proposing and guiding the movement and to be in a state of give-and-take or co-construction. In contrast, the aim of leading and following is to make each person's roles explicit, so that they can be clearly identified and modified. One person proposes a movement, which the other follow(s) almost simultaneously. These two elements are based on learning by imitation, which is often fundamental in dance classes to incorporate different movement habits or bodily states, but without establishing a single reference point: that of the artist. Mirroring, leading and following, instead, rely on the ability to experiment with the physical proposals of each member of the group through interaction.

The relationship between bodies during interaction as well as the awareness of this relationship is particularly experienced, through the physical or spatial distance between bodies. Interactions involving physical contact contribute to the creation of meaning on various levels: in the refinement of attention to one's own body and in the apprehension of, or interaction with, the other. Exercises, always based on improvisation, are proposed by the artists to reinforce certain sensations and explore the body's reactions to physical interactions and contact with others. This then involves a confrontation between the physicality of one's own body and the materiality of the 'positive' space, yet another way of perceiving the signs of the environment and the body, and of experiencing the physical envelope as a boundary and/or liminal space. The experience of the liminal space between "self" and "other" constitutes, on the one hand, the differentiation of body-subjects, but also allows one to think and feel the complementarity of materialities in the production of movement and meaning: how another body and its weight modifies, supports, leans on, accompanies or resists a bodily impulse. Touch within shared creation processes depends on the artist's proposals and group dynamics, as well as the social and cultural context.

Beyond practices that create movement through mimicry or dependence, the reference to and alteration of another's movements – sometimes referred to as the trans-

position of movement – are very significant in the processes observed. Heather Myers often proposes explorations around what she calls ‘iteration of movement,’ in complex movement structures but also in very simple frameworks. On the 28/02/2024 workshop, she invites all dancers into a circle for a “check-in”: each dancer should propose one movement and/or word to share how ‘you feel physically, mentally, emotionally.’ Others should respond to that in movement – adapting, transposing to another body part, freely interpreting – instead of ‘copying/mirroring.’

In the observed practices, improvisational games or exercises allows dancers to explore and learn plural modes of intercorporeal coordination. These social interactions ‘constitu[te] an emergent autonomous organization in the domain of relational dynamics without destroying in the process the autonomy of the agents involved’ (De Jaegher and Di Paolo 2007: 493). These games or exercises are partly structured and defined by the artist’s pedagogical approach, even though the interaction and the meaning produced differs with each exploration. Nevertheless, I consider those as routinized and learned forms of coordination that enable the development of different ways of making sense jointly (and then collectively articulated) by acknowledging oneself and the other as sentient bodies acting as co-enunciators. They also constitute a shared experience of interacting as dancers and as a group, and, therefore, common knowledge on how to make meaning from other bodies in space.

The observed routines of interaction overlap with the forms of coordination analyzed by enactivists De Jaegher and Di Paolo – mirroring, anticipation, imitation and synchronization (De Jaegher and Di Paolo 2007: 491) – who also stress the relational dimension of intercorporeal interactions (De Jaegher and Di Paolo 2007: 494). In their approach, intersubjectivity is grounded in embodiment as dynamic actions integrated throughout the entire body. In this sense, intentions are expressed through the body (in the expression of bodily signs) and through action; they can be perceived by others and are generated or transformed within this process of interaction (Fuchs and De Jaegher 2009: 469).

Here, bodies are engaged in ‘a reciprocal relationship between immediately perceptible presences, thereby opening up the possibility of meaning in which intelligibility will be mediated as much by intersomaticity as by intersubjectivity’ (Landowski 2004: 91, our translation). For Landowski, the body’s power to signify lies in part in a form of unmediated contagion, provided that room for play is allowed within regulated exercises. The various systems of coordination transmitted in processes of shared creation foster the capacity for continuous adjustment, specifically because they are experienced through improvisation. They are thus experienced without any prior imposition or fixation of the bodily form to be executed; the form emerges from and through interaction with the other.

4. Routines and evolutivity of meaning-making

De Jaegher and Di Paolo analyze social interaction through the concept of coordination, in order to understand it as a continuous or ongoing process:

We must go beyond a view that defines interaction as simply the spatio-temporal coincidence of two agents who influence each other. We must move toward an understanding of how their history of coordination defines the interaction as an identifiable pattern with its own internal structure, and its own role to play in the process of understanding each other and the world. (De Jaegher and Di Paolo 2007: 492)

I propose to consider that literacies of the body are coupled to literacies of being-together: ways of organizing interactions in dance, and collectively in a broader sense. Shared literacies of the body enable an experimentation of forms of being-together that resist rigid hierarchies, communication based solely on word and speech and competitiveness. The shared signs and semiotic systems developed through routines of coordination become a foundation for collective organization.

In the 08/05/24 workshop, Heather Myers explores improvisations involving 'neutral travel': walking through the space with clear stops and changes of direction, generally parallel to the studio walls, without any added dance movements (what a dancer calls 'ornaments'). This exercise, repeated several times in different workshops and later integrated into the final piece, is based on group awareness ('awareness of each other') and clear decision-making regarding stops and changes of direction. I can clearly identify those who have already practiced this exercise: looking ahead with the head following or initiating the change of direction, trajectories with a clear end and stop, compositions with other bodies through shared stops and starts, formation of duos or groups during stops, or variations in orientation or the spaces between bodies. Quickly, these models spread throughout the group, through repetitive bodily practice and the artist's verbal feedback: she demonstrates and reiterates, for example, on several occasions what kinds of creative decisions are possible and emphasizes attention to the spatial constellations of bodies that are developing or are being developed: 'as you travel, allow yourself to see the group; notice constellations or patterns'; 'where are we in space and how we move with others in space?'

Kinesthetic communication (Quinten 2016:40) is a form of nonverbal communication based on processes of empathy or resonance and involving the entire body. It is not only lived, experienced, and structured in the immediate action, but also involves forms of expression and interaction shaped by individual and collective experiences, particularly between the people involved in the interaction – what Meyer et al. (2017:10) call 'dyadic body memory.' We can observe the 'history' of the intercorporeal

and intersubjective relationships within groups of dancers engaged in regular practice. Models of coordination between bodies are part of a set of codes governing the (qualities of) movements or bodily states that are socially and culturally defined. The body, as a semiotic medium, constitutes a phenomenal reality that is meaningful in itself and, at the same time, is embedded within a regulated order of the group and the world (Chave-Dartoen 2024:107). The continuous interpretation of our being and our environment cannot exist outside a network of symbols or signs that constitute our (anthropological) culture (McNamara in Fraleigh 1999:164) and that also constitute an international professional artistic culture.

Intercorporeality can therefore be conceived ‘as an overarching system which over time gains its own pattern, autonomous dynamics, and peculiar history’ (Meyer et al. 2017:16). Processes of shared creation function as a framework for the constitution of these systems of intercorporeality, within which relationships between people and with the environment are co-constituted in resonance with dynamics of authority and expertise, frameworks of being-together, the possibility of acting upon these frameworks, and processes of learning intra- and intercorporeal communication. These are joint processes of meaning-making, which, according to De Jaegher and Di Paolo, are created and transformed by patterns of coordination and disruption, and by the stabilization of models of joint activity: ‘When such patterns lawfully stabilize some invariant relation the perceptual result is jointly constructed, and novel meanings may be established in interaction’ (De Jaegher and Di Paolo 2007:500).

5. Experiencing and knowing other ways of meaning-making

The interconnectedness of bodies in space is also highlighted and brought to life through imagination directly in an Ageless Dancers workshop: Heather asks participants to open their eyes, observe their surroundings as they move, and then imagine that everyone is connected by a web: ‘Everyone is affected by the movements of others.’ She then suggests detaching from this web and observing if and how this feels different. From this awareness of the individual in relation to the collective, interactions in motion can develop, always in interrelation and co-construction with the affordances of the space. In dance, the ability to be open to the co-emergence of movement and meaning is often referred to as *listening* (Brandstetter 2013:164-165).

The inter-kinesthetic field comprises processes of intercorporeal resonance, inter-affectivity and kinesthetic expectations (Greco 2018:172). Within this field various forms of knowledge develop and take shape: complex skills based on the bodily understanding of others’ attitudes, actions and behaviors, transformed into patterns and dispositions (Faure 2000:92), and kinesthetic empathy as a ‘mode of knowledge.’

This knowledge makes it possible to diversify the possibilities of sensations, perceptions, reflections and actions, and to co-create meaning or to experience other regimes of meaning: 'the lived experience, insofar as it makes sense, is not a given [because] it is constructed through interaction, through a (often reciprocal) testing of the subject by the immanent sensory qualities of the other' (Landowski 2004:8, our translation). I therefore hypothesize that the above-mentioned bodily practices bring us closer to what Landowski calls the second, 'union,' strategy or regime of meaning-making:

We can also imagine, at the very opposite end of the spectrum – at least in certain contexts and far removed from any form of instrumentalization – ways in which our dispositions, curiosities, or personal projects might align with those of the entity facing us, which may express itself autonomously. From such adjustments, another status of meaning becomes apparent: that of a meaning which would no longer, by definition, be entirely and unilaterally fixed in advance according to the sole criteria of relevance used by the reference subject, but whose emergence would become inseparable from the reciprocal construction of the two partners in relation. [...] Take dancing, for example: if, while dancing, I want to interact with another person in a way that truly makes sense within my own body, it will not be enough for me to expect the other person to correctly follow the codified 'steps' of the dance we are performing. If that were the case, at best I would only manage to join with a sort of 'dancing object' capable of executing – perhaps perfectly, but mechanically – a predefined generic program, such as that of 'the waltz': in other words, I would in that case be dancing more with an automaton or a sort of robot than with the living body of a partner who is a subject. On the other hand, if I aspire to something more rewarding than that – to a sensitive relationship that creates meaning and value – I must first ensure that my partner, like me, can give their own body complete freedom to express itself as it pleases - for which I must, at the very least, regard and treat them, on the gestural and somatic level, as a true co-enunciator (Landowski 2004:27-28, our translation).

The possibility of experiencing and developing such relationality is based on an attention to the body from a non-dualist perspective. ribed below (Section 2.1).

Conclusion

Enactive approaches help us understand that individuals are always immersed in a network of interactions linked to biological and cultural histories, both individual and collective. In this sense, the world – or worlds – is always co-created through the coexistence and intercorporeality of beings. The perspective of interactional social understanding and socio-semiotics contrasts with representationalist approaches, according to which the social world and the other are pre-constructed, independent of intersubjective interactions and circulations. In relational ontologies nothing preexists the relationships that constitute the individual, and every person – inevitably exist as knots or relies in networks – nay, weaves of relations’ (Escobar 2018:200).

In this article, I argue that participation in shared creation processes in contemporary dance can be a way to make meaning of bodies, spaces, worlds, in forms of resistance to dominant ways of meaning-making or literacies in Western societies. They clearly enable the development of literacies of the body.⁶ Developing those body literacies can lead to physically experiencing the relationality and impermanence of meaning-making of the world, or rather worlds. Interpersonal explorations reveal the multiplicity of the body, the meaning of movement, and the other within an environment whose affordances and possible interpretations are equally manifold. This is a process of learning and developing knowledge that allows us to grasp the other in their entirety – in their sensory, living, and moving dimension – rather than merely as a projection surface to be deciphered (as in reductive semiological approaches). The inherently collective and relational dimension of the techniques is even more evident; meaning-making through/with/on the body is not only an individual process. Literacies of the body and literacies of being-together, when being analyzed in articulation, are a productive contribution to the semiotics of dance: they enable to observe and to study learning and meaning-making through/with/on the body as social practices.

Specific contexts, situations and interactions in my field research also show that bodily practices and literacies are inscribed in economies of meaning (Wenger 1997): meaning-making occurs inside of frames, needing competence to participate to negotiation of meaning and develop ownership of meaning. Meaning is also negotiated through individual and collective verbal discussions, as well as implicit or explicit norms that weight on shared creation projects (such as artistic norms, economic and social value of choreographic pieces, rigid and durable separations between artist and amateur or expert and novice). When we consider these processes through the lens of Wenger’s

⁶ Mentioned observations relate to what Mia Perry calls ‘a curriculum framework for body literacy [in which] learning objectives might revolve around identifying and making meaning from the signs animate in one’s own body. These are also connected and intra-acting with the semiotic systems animating other bodies and materials. The learning objectives then could focus on both self-awareness and relationality with other bodies and materials.’ (Perry 2024: 150-151)

communities of practice and Landowski's regimes of meaning and view them as fostering various literacies, the negotiation of meaning in the production of knowledge reveals itself as a relational and ongoing phenomenon: the meaning of movements is always (re) created in the interaction of sensing-thinking bodies, in reference to a norm of the dancing body established historically and contextually within the group embedded in a local and international 'tradition' of interpreting movements in contemporary dance.

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