

Sense-making and meaning-making through dance improvisation

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ABSTRACT

This article aims to address one of the gaps frequently identified in semiotics, namely the study of dance, and more specifically of forms of dance improvisation that remain open-ended, in contrast to the highly structured improvisation found, for instance, in Argentine tango. As such, these practices contribute to a reexamination of collective composition in contemporary dance, insofar as choreographers frequently use improvisation as both choreographic material and a compositional tool. From this perspective, I argue for an important distinction between sense-making and meaning-making – a distinction that is rarely made in studies of improvisation – by highlighting the different phases that unfold before, during, and after dance improvisation. I then examine what is typically valued in improvisation, namely sense-making, by analyzing its nature (open-ended, polyphonic, self-referential, autopoietic) as well as the processes through which it emerges (cognitive and intuitive skills; feedback loops). This ultimately enables me to bring to light a cyclical, rather than linear, temporal process, thus offering a renewed perspective on what may be called semiosis.

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1. Points of introduction

1.1. Contemporary perspectives in semiotics: body movements and dance

In semiotics, semiosis refers to the process by which signs produce meaning. Semiotics was initially conceived as a linguistic and lexical approach (Saussure 1983), progressively applied to the analysis of the text (Hjelmslev 1961). When applied to body movements, such as in dance, semiotics shifts from the textual domain to the experiential domain (Landowski 2013),

thereby giving rise to a whole new set of questions. This shift indeed raises the problem of how to objectify this new object of inquiry and, consequently, the question of its scientific validity. Body movement is difficult to distance from lived experience and transform into a scientific 'object.' It also raises the issue of the segmentation, fixation, and codification of signs, as exemplified by a well-established language. By contrast, body movements are ephemeral and involve the active production of sense by agents, often through their interaction with the surrounding environment. Finally, this shift raises the question of how to develop an appropriate discourse on this new object. As lived experiences, body movements resist easy translation into linguistic structures like words, sentences, or texts. Rather, they appear to involve another mode of communication, whether implicit or non-verbal. Applying semiotics to body movement therefore profoundly reshapes several of its fundamental assumptions.

Moreover, when body movements are no longer confined to everyday human activities (Greimas 1983) but become part of dance, a further difficulty emerges. Dance is never simply a sequence of physical movements; it always involves a system of references that can prompt audience interpretation. Maurice Merleau-Ponty draws a distinction between primary actions with a literal meaning (for example, biological actions that ensure our survival) and actions shaped through learned motor habits, which convey a figurative meaning, as in dance (1962). To take a well-known example, in Pina Bausch's *Café Müller* (1978), one of her most iconic works, she stages everyday gestures in a café crowded with chairs: dancers wander aimlessly, crossing the space from end to end. These movements acquire a figurative dimension and may evoke the anxiety of being lost in a fast-paced world where individuals drift (Lebon 2025).

Consequently, body movements drawn from everyday life are poeticized in contemporary dance. For example, a choreographer may work on the amplitude or minimalism of a movement. They could also ask their dancers to embody elements without imitating them, by working with bodily states. Catherine Kintzler terms this phenomenon 'deconditioning' a gesture (detaching it from its ordinary context) and 'reconditioning' it (recontextualizing it by creating a new world and opening a new space) (2006). From this defamiliarization – and consequent opacification – of everyday movement an interpretive opening thus emerges in contemporary dance.

In contemporary dance, the semiosis of dancing would therefore be linked to a 'utopian body,' to use an expression coined by Michel Foucault. It is a body that does not need masks, tattoos, or makeup to be torn away from its own space and projected into another; it is a body that, through its expressive power, combined with lighting and sonic effects, succeeds in creating a new space. It is a 'penetrable and opaque body, open and closed body, utopian body' (Foucault 2006: 231) This production of meaning is, more precisely, not tied to a codified vocabulary of dance, as in classical ballet for instance, but rather emerges from the internal and singular language of bodies, from

what Laurence Louppe (2010) calls a ‘poetics of the body.’ Inspired by François Del-sarte, who in his oral teachings spoke of a “semiotics” of the body to describe the idea that the body possesses its own language (Stebbins, 1886), she turns this insight into one of the foundational aspects of contemporary dance: the symbolization of the body, outside any established framework.

In summary, these considerations make explicit why semiotics ‘has devoted relatively little attention to case studies focusing on dance or, more broadly, on diverse bodily practices’ (de Luca 2016: 13, our translation). Dance continues to represent ‘a kind of black hole for semiotics,’ or ‘the blind spot of semiotics’ (ibid.: 138, our translation).

1.2. Improvisation as a further challenge for semiotics

Dance theorists and historians agree that improvisation is crucial for understanding the emergence of contemporary dance and an indispensable component of it. The advent of postmodern dance in the United States during the 1960s and 1970s – characterized by the unprecedented practice of improvisation as an end in itself (Carter 2000) – paved the way for the development of contemporary dance in the latter half of the twentieth century (Banes 1987). In doing so, it rejects technical virtuosity, reclaims bodily sensations, revalues the quotidian, and cultivates an ability to negotiate with the unpredictable. In this respect, it serves equally in the creation of choreographic material and choreographic tools (Louppe 2010). Hence, the exploration of instability and disequilibrium, the cultivation of embodied attention, and the disarticulation of body movement constitute, for instance, techniques developed within improvisation workshops that can be mobilized in choreographic composition.

However, beyond the challenges inherent in body movement and dance, improvisation introduces additional complexities for semiotic analysis. Greimas indeed emphasizes that ‘in order for an analysis of the arts in movement to be carried out, they must first be immobilized and stabilized; hence the necessity of a writing of dance or a poetics of dance, which constitutes the necessary condition for the study of dance itself’ (1986: 42, our translation). This stabilization of movement may also occur through what he terms ‘gestural programs’ or closed ‘cultural projects,’ (1968) which, in dance, essentially concern the planning of a choreography. These prerequisites for a semiotic analysis of dance consequently exclude more ephemeral and open-ended forms such as improvisation, which is grounded in neither notation nor choreographic planning. This is why, if dance already constitutes a ‘disciplinary and object-related challenge’ (De Luca 2016: 138, our translation) for semiotic analysis, the challenge is even greater in the case of dance improvisation.

In recent years, some scholars have proposed a semiotic analysis of improvisational forms in dance, particularly regarding Argentine tango (De Luca 2016; Kimmel 2019). This form of social dance indeed fosters improvised bodily interactions that, to a certain

extent, reshape the frameworks and norms that structure the practice. Yet, on the other hand, it constitutes a highly structured form of improvisation: Argentine tango is based on a codified vocabulary of steps and postures, with clearly identifiable styles, as well as on the diachronic sedimentation of the practice, which provides a shared memory repository from which dancers can draw. This process has contributed to the recognition of this dance as intangible cultural heritage by UNESCO in 2009 (De Luca 2016). In other words, if improvisation in tango can be understood as a form of ‘joint improvisation,’ the creativity at stake is essentially combinatoric: ‘Improvisation lies in the couple’s ability to combine elements in variable ways and occasionally discover new systemically permissible elements’ (Kimmel 2019: 564). Moreover, there is ‘a clear role distinction’ between the leader and the follower, which limits the follower’s creative contributions to accentuation and ornamentation (ibid.). Consequently, ‘although dancers progressively enlarge their personal repertoire, essential creativity concerning never-tried-before elements is less frequent, especially spontaneously “invented” forms’ (ibid.: 565).

It is precisely this type of improvisation, which is less constrained and more spontaneous, that I seek to examine in this article: namely, forms of improvisation that do not rely on a predefined style, grammar, or lexicon, such as Contact Improvisation (Kimmel and Hristova 2021). These elements further challenge the tendency to associate semiosis with linguistics and body movements with language; it therefore makes it even more necessary to rethink sense-making and meaning-making through dance improvisation.

1.3. Main questions and method

What constitutes both the specificity and the difficulty of less-structured improvisation in dance is that, in its non-verbal communication in real time, it ‘makes use of non-lexicalized body movements’ (Nelson et al. 2024: 2). In effect, ‘it invites a pre-symbolic form of semiosis where multiple voices or narratives can co-exist,’ (ibid.) depending on the proposals offered by partners and the turns taken by the situation as it is being co-constructed. Given the difficulty of this task – namely, tuning, embodying together, and making sense collectively in the present moment – it therefore becomes relevant to ask how this collective sense is specifically generated in improvisation and what its nature is. These are the two main questions that will be addressed in this article: the ‘what’ and the ‘how’ of sense-making in free and loosely structured dance improvisation practices. In this context, I will also take the opportunity to further examine the distinction between sense-making and meaning-making in dance, using improvisation as a primary case study.

To this end, I will explore these questions through a first-person phenomenological approach, illustrating and developing my argument with examples drawn from my improvisation experiences in workshops and performances. My belief is that ‘to

know what dance is or feels like, one must ask dancers what they experience or experience dance oneself' (Warbuton 2011: 68). It is both a way of revaluing situated, embodied, and experiential forms of knowledge, grounded in trust in sensory experience, and also, a way of adopting an enactive approach to better understand how a "thought in action" is created in improvisation, thereby producing sense, and even meaning. I borrow the expression 'dance enaction' from Edward C. Warburton, who proposes 'to understand how experiences of dance emerge from more basic processes, and how dancing shapes the mind, body, and brain' (ibid.: 67). Here, I apply it to the case of dance improvisation, focusing on interaction with the environment and others. This method relies on the collection of experiential data and on reflections derived from notes taken in dance notebooks during practice sessions. It therefore differs from a micro-genetic approach, which analyses dance sequences second by second through video recordings, freeze-frames, and photographs, although I acknowledge the value of such an approach (Kimmel and Hristova 2021).

2. The facilitation, observation and testimony of body language in dance improvisation

2.1. Sense-making and meaning-making

It is common in theories of language to distinguish between codified meaning and the emergence of sense through a lived and sensory experience of the world. Merleau-Ponty, for instance, distinguishes between spoken speech (*parole parlée*), or institutionalized speech, and speaking speech (*parole parlante*), or creative speech, through which the perceived world is transformed into explicit sense – a process that is especially characteristic of artistic expression (Merleau-Ponty 1962, 1964, 1973). This distinction is not confined to philosophy; it also appears in semiotic theory. For example, when Landowski calls for a 'semiotics to be reinvented,' he distinguishes between 'a regime of meaning' and 'another regime of sense' (2013: 21, our translation). In the former, 'the world is approached as a network of signs to be deciphered' (ibid.: 25, our translation), as if it were a text or a narrative. In the latter, sense is not something to be decoded, yet the world is nonetheless imbued with sense. The first thus corresponds to a regime of "reading" the world, in which meanings are already constituted, whereas the second corresponds to a regime of "grasping" the lifeworld, in which the process remains indefinitely open and gives rise to the emergence of sense. Landowski characterizes this second regime as a sense arising in situation, through our interaction with the world, and grounded in an existential mode of being-in-the-world.

This second regime is more representative of what occurs in situations of (dance) improvisation. As a matter of fact, in an improvisational situation, practitioners seek to structure the unknown and the unpredictable, to give form to what is formless, and to

render intelligible what is taking place. To do so, improvisers connect elements to one another and may construct a mental map of the situation. As Kent De Spain asserts, 'if improvisation can be seen as a process of mapping the unknown, tracking is the practice of drawing and occasionally glancing at the map' (2014: 52). This process thus accounts for the emergence of sense that is not pre-constituted but rather comes into being through interaction with the environment: sense does not depend on any single agent. This is what is commonly referred to as "sense-making." The term was first introduced in theories of enaction (e.g. Maturana and Varela 1980) to emphasize the autopoiesis of a living organism as it generates its own environment. It was subsequently taken up, for example, in semiotics by Paolucci (e.g. 2021), who uses it to describe a multiplicity of enunciating instances that collectively produce a semiotic environment which, in turn, through a process of downward causation, produces these instances. This semiotic environment is not merely a system of sense; it is also a system of values, encompassing norms, habits, and other forms of social regularity.

On the other hand, "meaning-making" in dance rather refers to a process through which an element is integrated into a system of values and into already established reference points. For example, Warburton (2011) discusses 'dance marking.' It is a tool that allows dancers to remember choreography more easily: rather than dancing full out, they create "marks," thereby establishing their own vocabulary of reduced movements that stand for fully formed movements. For instance, a finger gesture can be used to represent a turn without executing a full-body rotation. Here we have an example of "meaning-making": something that makes sense for the dancer individually and that is integrated into an already clearly identified frame of reference, the choreographic piece; it is not a tool for clarifying and constructing a situation, as in improvisation.

Although it is clear that, in the course of a (successful) improvisation, a process of "sense-making" emerges among the participants, it is nevertheless useful to distinguish different levels of "sense-making" and "meaning-making," depending on whether one considers what takes place before, during, or after the improvisation.

2.2. Meaning conveyed by prompts

Contrary to common belief, improvising does not mean doing just anything or whatever you want. As noted by the pedagogue, dancer, and choreographer David Zambrano:

what happens is that many times when I go to teach improvisation, for many people, young people especially, it's like they can do whatever. But you can say: 'Where are we going?' and they answer: 'I don't care, whatever,' and they stay here. And then I say, 'okay, it's two of us, where are we going?', and they answer back 'I don't care, every place.' In that case, there is not really a place that we can go... (Randazzo and Zambrano 2023: 6)

Thus, when some do whatever they please in improvisation, they paradoxically risk doing nothing at all – failing to engage the imagination or creativity and remaining within familiar patterns; in short, they risk boredom. This situation may also result in aimless actions that create confusion and disorder, by associating the unpredictable with the senseless. Given these risks, it is clear why there is a need to establish a framework to stimulate and guide improvisers' actions, and to avoid both inaction and indiscriminate movement. Such frameworks are especially designed to disrupt embodied habits and stimulate participants' corporeal exploration.

Most often, they are based on verbal prompts used by the workshop facilitator to provide instructions to the dancers and spark their movements. These instructions are never commands, but always proposals; this is why the facilitator is called thus and not a dance master, and this is why these frameworks are not especially structured but remain open. They support the dancers in their explorations without directing them. In this regard, these instructions never specify exactly what to do: they set a framework, often unusual or unfamiliar, that delimits the action to take place, without indicating how the action should be performed.

These verbal prompts can elicit biomechanical constraints, for instance when practitioners are instructed to 'move while lying on the floor, without moving either the legs or the arms' (a task inspired by the work of Anna Halprin). They can also evoke widely shared images, as in comparisons such as 'moving like a snake' or metaphors such as 'becoming a snake.' Furthermore, they may draw on analogical imagery, for example: 'moving on the floor like water flowing out of a bottle,' whereby the properties of water are transferred to the moving body in order to explore and cultivate different bodily states. Although these verbal prompts are phrased differently, they invite practitioners to explore the same aspect of movement within the body. When used within the same improvisation session, they can help illuminate how language, through its different formulations, may differentially shape bodies in movement.¹ In all cases, verbal prompts convey meaning to participants. Whether grounded in linguistic structures, the body's physical anatomy, or the shared cultural imagination, they draw upon common frames of reference shared by the facilitator and the movers.

These aspects point to a new mode of dance transmission emerging from the twentieth century onwards. It is no longer a scopic model of transmission, based on vision and the imitation of movements, steps, and postures. It is now a pedagogy of movement that has become essentially oratory, seeking the effectiveness of speech on gestures through a crafted verbal language. Some pedagogues speak without moving, while others guide through speech and engage themselves in the play of their own

¹ An experience during which I facilitated two workshops as part of the training program led by Camille Zimmermann for the University Diploma ProPhilia: 'What movements for learning?' (*'Quels mouvements pour apprendre?'*) (May 15-16 and May 22-23, 2025, Université Côte d'Azur).

propositions. It gives room for verbal-gestural triggers. For example, in an exercise inspired by Contact Improvisation, a facilitator improvising in a duet with a participant may intentionally give weight through their head while simultaneously verbalizing this action. This can facilitate the participant's awareness of this quality, providing perceptual information that they can then engage with and integrate into the unfolding movement-based interaction. At times, verbal prompts may also be supported by other media, such as paintings. For example, during a workshop held at L'Entre-Pont in Nice on March 30, 2024, Béatrice Mazalto invited participants to work from paintings by Joan Mitchell. Mitchell's *Champs* (1990) gave rise to the following figurative prompts: 'colors colliding,' (*couleurs qui se cognent*) 'spreading,' (*étalement*) and 'joyful accumulation' (*accumulation jubilatoire*). The aim was to explore color as a means of eliciting specific movement qualities. All these experiences involve different regimes of semiotization: verbal, gestural, and visual. But they all testify to language as a new preferred tool for somatic experience. As Alice Godfroy (2026) aptly points out, this is made explicit through the renewed emphasis of dance on sensations: since the genesis of movements occurs within us, in a felt and therefore invisible manner, transmission can no longer rely on vision solely; consequently, one seeks to develop an effective language capable of resonating within bodies.

2.3. Sense-making in real time composition

While verbal prompts may function as stimuli for dancers' movement, they do not determine it in a linear cause-and-effect relationship. Instead, the sense emerges relationally through the dancers' ongoing co-composition, and in multiple ways. For example, it may be created between partners through a shared object that holds their attention. If someone pulls a chair using a scarf while another adds weight to it (e.g., cushions) in order to slow or stop their motion, when the first person releases the scarf and leaves their hand suspended, a window of opportunity opens, and this gesture may be interpreted by the second person as an invitation to dance.² This interpretation depends on the participant's understanding of the situation. A given object generally affords multiple possibilities for action; for example, the suspended hand shown here may be understood as a gesture of receiving something.

Sense can also arise between dancers and musicians in improvisation. For example, if a dancer strikes the floor with their hands while a bassist is performing nearby, the musician may respond by following and integrating the sounds produced by the dancer.³ In other cases, it may appear as a narrative slowly unfolds. For instance, in

² A moment experienced during an evening improvisation performance before an audience, at the Valcivières Improvisation Encounters (France), held from August 30 to September 3, 2023.

³ A moment experienced during the same evening improvisation performance, previously mentioned, at the Valcivières Improvisation Encounters (France).

a group improvisation involving a musician and four dancers, if the musician leans toward their instrument to begin playing and observes that one dancer is eager to start dancing, they may engage with this dynamic by repeatedly delaying the onset of music, thereby generating a narrative of a 'lazy' musician who withholds musical initiation, generating increasing frustration among the dancers.⁴

Finally, to avoid multiplying examples that could never be exhaustive, sense may emerge when a collective improvisation takes a specific direction through space. Thus, in a framework designed by Emma Bigé, in which the rule of action is (approximately) 'to mirror each another in a state of release, allowing oneself, if needed, to be supported by others,' we initially formed small groups before ultimately merging into a single flowing form, recalling the image of an animal's spine in motion.⁵

In these various examples, a situation becomes meaningful for each case in different ways: through specific movements (e.g., a suspended hand) and their interpretation by the other participants, through shared rhythms, through a form of narrativity, and through spatial displacement. More precisely, these examples highlight various ways of relating to others and co-creating sense together. We can move in opposition to a partner (e.g., as they attempt to move forward, we weigh them down), align with them (e.g., they extend a hand and we take it), extend their actions (e.g., forming the remaining vertebrae of a spine; co-constructing a narrative), repeat and transform what they do (e.g., incorporating into music the sounds produced by a dancer on the floor), and so on. These ways of relating to one another become particularly visible through several core notions, such as playing with spatial distance and proximity, exploring differences in levels (low, medium, and high), and working with variations in rhythm and temporality (moving more or less slowly or quickly), among others. In all cases, these dynamics can be understood either as convergent interactions ("yes, and") or as divergent interactions ("no, but") (Kimmel and Hristova 2021). They allow us to understand gesture as 'this generic activity (...) of the constitution of fields and relations' (De Luca 2016: 149, our translation).

Although sketches often provide a simplified representation of reality, they allow me here to materialize how convergent and divergent interactions, for instance, generate distinct lines of force in space and, in this respect, produce sense. Let's take the example of an exercise called "Flocks of birds" in dance improvisation.⁶ The first action guideline invites participants (approximately ten), walking freely within a dance

⁴ A moment observed during an evening improvisation performance before an audience, at the Valcivières Improvisation Encounters (France), previously mentioned.

⁵ Practice proposed on April 27, 2023, in the village of Recoubeau-Jansac (Drôme, France) during the improvisation lab "Les écotones," devoted to "Replays – Questioning the legacies of Lisa Nelson (and her *Tuning Scores*)," co-organized by Alice Godfroy, with workshop facilitators, Anouk Llaurens, Emma Bigé, and Yaïr Barelli.

⁶ A moment experienced during a workshop "Reflections, dispersions, flights" led by Patricia Machado at the Performance Lab of the Milieu Institute (Concordia University, Montréal), on August 15, 2024.

studio, to follow a person of their own choosing (as illustrated in Fig. 1 below). As this is an improvised situation, the range of possible trajectories remains open. Nevertheless, observations made during the practice reveal a recurring pattern: several participants often choose to follow the same individual, thereby creating a flock configuration around that person. Meanwhile, unless the dancer reciprocates by following one of their followers – thus forming a feedback loop – they may instead choose to follow someone involved in another flock. The first illustration attempts to capture this dynamic by showing how one flock can be drawn along by another, producing an overall impression of collective convergence, with bidirectional arrows indicating that a leader in a flock may also be a follower attempting to join another flock. The second action guideline invites each practitioner to stand as far away as possible from another person of their own choosing (as illustrated in Fig. 2 below). Here again, a wide range of trajectories may emerge. Nevertheless, a recurrent pattern can still be observed: except in cases where two participants mutually move away from one another, individuals tend to distance themselves from someone who has, in turn, chosen to distance themselves from another participant, all while continuing to walk through the dance studio. As a result, the person from whom one is attempting to move away may inadvertently come closer, prompting a renewed effort to increase the distance between them. This ongoing process generates alternating patterns of dispersion and intersections across the space, leading to further dispersions, as the second sketch shows.

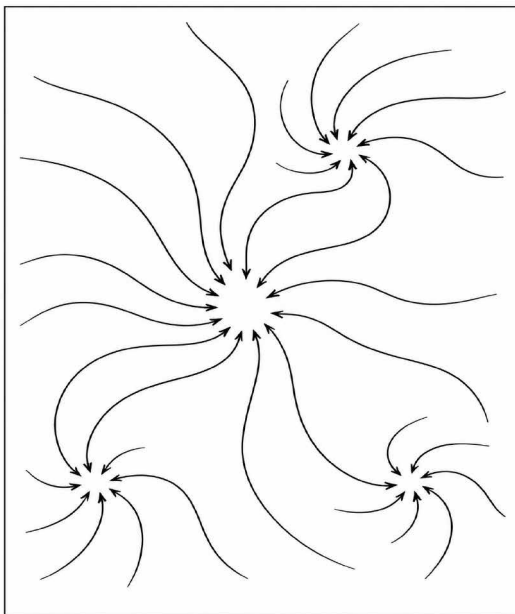


Figure 1. Flocks and collective convergence.
 Action guideline: while walking in the studio, each dancer follows a person of their own choosing.

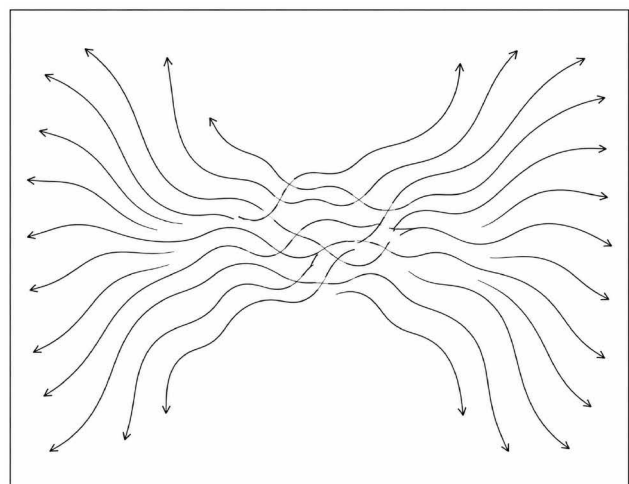


Figure 2. Dispersions and intersections.
 Action guideline: while walking in the studio, each dancer stands as far away as possible from a person of their own choosing.

Finally, we may categorize the principal ways of relating to others – and, in doing so, producing sense – within an improvisational context. Pierre Saint-Germier and Clément Canonne (2022), building on Günther Knoblich, Stephen Butterfill and Nathalie Sebanz’s theory of ‘emergent coordination,’ (2011) mobilize their four sources of emergent coordination to elucidate what is at stake in ‘collective free improvisation.’ As it allows improvisers to coordinate with one another with no plan to perform action together (“joint improvisation”), it may be indeed characterized as a form of “emergent coordination” (on “emergent collaboration”, see also: Sawyer 2000). These four sources are:

- (1) **Entrainment:** It is ‘a process that leads to temporal coordination of two actors’ behavior, in particular, synchronization’ (Knoblich, Butterfill and Sebanz 2011: 63). This occurs when one allows oneself to be influenced by the rhythm of another’s movements, as in the previously described example involving the dancer and the musician. It echoes Landowski’s (2005) notion of “contagion” as a mode of implicit, non-verbal, and somatic communication. This term refers to the immediate, body-to-body transmission of a state, muscular tension, movement impulse, rhythm, emotion, and so forth, leading to the emergence of a shared aesthetic experience among the individuals involved.
- (2) **Affordance:** An object affordance occurs “when two agents have similar action repertoires and perceive the same object, they are likely to engage in similar actions because the object affords the same action for both of them’ (Knoblich, Butterfill and Sebanz 2011). But, when ‘objects have an affordance for two or more people collectively which is not necessarily an affordance for any of them individually,’ (ibid.) it is called a ‘joint affordance.’ The previous chair example illustrates a case of joint affordance.
- (3) **Perception-action matching:** This enables ‘common action representations.’ For instance, ‘observing someone dancing will activate corresponding action representations if one knows how to dance’ (ibid.: 64) and will lead to the mimicry of the observed actions. This source of emergent coordination was certainly activated during the example of the exercise designed by Bigé (asking to “mirror” each other).
- (4) **Action simulation:** This implies ‘common predictive models.’ Here, an observer can ‘apply predictive models in his or her motor system to accurately predict the timing and outcomes of observed actions’ (ibid.). For example, in the previous narrative example, the musician can anticipate

the dancer's movement by understanding that they are about to begin dancing; in particular, they can grasp the pre-movements that underlie the impulse of the dancer's action. This is what subsequently allows them to disrupt those expectations.

In short, implicit and non-verbal communication are at work in dance improvisation, through various tools to attune with others. However, the existence of these tools (or means) does not prevent the outcome from being experienced as 'magical' by practitioners.

2.4. Meaning-making through personal and collective feedbacks

Finally, in improvisation, meaning can be reconstructed afterwards. Indeed, after each exercise or series of similar exercises, participants are usually given time to write, if they wish, in a notebook, what has made sense to them, what they have felt, experienced, and so forth. It takes the form of spontaneous, in-the-moment writing that responds immediately to the lived situation. It is notably characterized by the use of the first person, often in the present tense, and by allowing the writing to unfold freely, without stopping, revising, or attending to the logical articulation between sentences. This constitutes a writing practice that remains grounded in bodily experience while already passing through language, and which could be understood as a form of personal feedback.

To illustrate, at the end of a workshop on "Collective Body" facilitated by Emmanuelle Pépin and the artists of the *DeHor^* project,⁷ we experienced moving as a pack with our eyes closed, lightly touching one another while leaving very little space between us. The exercise began by inviting us to move slowly within the pack before progressing to collective movement through space. Following this practice, the following personal reflection remained with me and continues to resonate:

Lowering many barriers. Sensitive listening creates an atmosphere of trust, without any need to know the people we are with. It is enough simply to be open, to be there, to be present. I experience a profound sense of well-being, something that fills me. I have the feeling of grasping what is essential. (Our translation)

These elements can also be shared orally and collectively. The facilitator often invites participants to gather in a circle to share, if they wish, what they have gone through during the exercises. This stage of collective feedback makes it possible to

⁷ A moment experienced during the Festival GO. Élans, on April 10-12, 2026, Espace Magnan, Nice.

put lived experiences into words, to give them voice – which is not always an easy task – and to observe whether certain experiences converge between participants. In this respect, ‘in describing this process of maturing conceptual understandings of experience,’ (Nelson et al. 2024: 8) Nara Figueiredo identifies three levels, dimensions, or moments of sense-making:

(i) the intersubjective connection, (ii) the ability to bring forth words (and symbols in general) based on our repertoire of verbal practices, and (iii) the ability to actively construct verbal meaning with them, which, I believe, involves a back-and-forth mechanism of checking whether chosen words play a role that engages with (construct with) these experiences. (ibid.) (see also: Figueiredo and Cuffari 2022)

Although, in these remarks, Figueiredo is not only referring to individual and collective feedback, but also to subsequent conceptual elaborations, she highlights how “sense-making” is transformed into “verbal meaning.” Indeed, in retrospect, the sense-making of an improvisation becomes meaning-making through the feedback process. At this stage, the aim is no longer to structure the unknown or to make sense of what is happening in a situation, but rather to understand how it makes sense for me individually and for us collectively. To do so, as Figueiredo has pointed out, we relate our lived experience to words ‘based on our repertoire of verbal practices,’ and thus to a certain system of values. I would add that we also relate this experience to other lived experiences, allowing resonances to emerge. Yet one way of making sense of experience – by integrating it into a particular repertoire of words and experiences – is precisely what I previously referred to as “meaning-making.”

In short, several layers of sense/meaning coexist before, during, and after an improvisation, which may be summarized as follows: informational stimuli (transmitted through verbal, gestural, visual prompts), sense-making (during the ongoing co-composition), and meaning-making (through which the experience is subsequently integrated thanks to the individual and collective feedback).

3. Further explorations of sense-making in dance improvisation

3.1. What? An open, polyphonic, self-referential and auto-poietic sense

We previously showed that a successful improvisation – in which something happens, rather than mere boredom or failure – highlights sense-making among practitioners. What are, more precisely, the characteristics of this emerging sense?

It appears evident that this sense is not pre-given: at the outset, there is no 'sense,' only a void – the void of the play-space – dense with unactualized potential within which improvisation will take place. There may even be a loss of 'meaning,' resulting from the loss of reference points when the improviser chooses to inhibit reflexes, habits, and preferences. Sense is therefore constructed progressively, in real time, among practitioners who share elements of sense when they are attuned with each other, and who might have attuned otherwise, depending on the multiple possibilities of the unfolding situation. I can thus infer a first characteristic: sense-making implies in improvisation an 'open' sense grounded in a 'polyphony of bodies.' The term 'polyphony' derives from music and originally refers to a polyphony of voices (as distinct from heterophony): it involves not the strict dependency between musical lines, but rather 'the independence within the interdependence of the lines' (Sève 2002: 215). That is, 'a plurality of autonomous yet interconnected voices' (*ibid.*: 278) (our translations), which may produce a harmonious effect to the ear, despite their differences. This concept of 'polyphony,' implying simultaneously autonomy and interconnection, was later extended to other fields, for instance in philosophy of language (Bakhtin 1984), or in linguistics (Ducrot 1984; Perrin 2004). Bakhtin, in his analysis of Dostoevsky's novels, theorizes the "polyphonic text": the author is not the sole voice of the novel, as the voice(s) of the character(s) may at times carry as much weight and autonomy. However, in linguistics, polyphony is not limited to enunciative polyphony – that is, the coexistence of multiple enunciative voices (e.g., distinguishing the speaking subject from the speaker) – nor to the coexistence of multiple enunciative levels within the meaning of a sentence (e.g., distinguishing the words uttered from the viewpoints they express) (Bally 1965; Ducrot 1984). It also encompasses a contextual or pragmatic polyphony, insofar as every proposition echoes or refers to another proposition that has previously been formulated (for instance, by negating it) (Perrin 2004). This system of echoes and references helps to characterize more precisely the kind of polyphony at work in improvisation. As we have seen, the propositions advanced by the participants take the form of 'yes, and' or 'no, but' responses that echo earlier propositions and relate to them (Kimmel and Hristova 2021). Improvisation therefore always involves an 'adjustment' to what others are doing, which, from our perspective, necessarily contains an element of unpredictability (Landowski 2005). This is why, drawing on Paolucci's theory, "sense-making" can be understood as an 'addition of subtractions' (2021): here, we may understand it as a progressive reduction of the space of possibilities through the improvisers' mutually constraining choices, which nonetheless gives rise to new possibilities that none of the participants could have envisaged independently.

Consequently, a second characteristic lies in sense-making's self-referentiality. As Christian Béthune underlines, 'in improvisation, gesture and intention coexist

simultaneously,’ (2009: 1) which is why ‘it is always within a semiotic economy that the question of improvisation emerges’ (ibid.: 2) (our translations). Put it differently, ‘improvisation leads on the contrary, to dismissing the idea of a pre-existing expressible prior to what is expressed, and of an ideal meaning external to formulation’ (ibid.: 4) (our translation). The two emerge together: the gesture and the idea it evokes. This could provide a new way of distinguishing between sense and meaning; sense is always situated, whereas meaning may be abstract.

Finally, sense-making in improvisation is not only open-ended and self-referential, but it is also auto-poietic. Indeed, sense is not only devoid of any external referent; it signifies and creates itself. As Henri Maldiney argues, it is not sufficient to assert that a sense is, in the absence of reference, beyond any normative framework (*allégal*), it is also necessary to specify that an unprecedented form emerges – one that is ‘free’ insofar as it constitutes and generates its own ‘signifiante’ (2003; 2022). In this respect, he establishes a distinction between a ‘meaning’ (*signification*) already constituted and a ‘signifiante’ (*signifiante*) as a self-forming process. He further relates this distinction to a difference between what is ‘instituted’ (that is, enduring and codified) and what is ‘improvised’ (that is, momentary and free). Yet he doesn’t discuss dance as a form of improvisation nor, paradoxically, does he undertake a sustained examination of improvisation as an art form. Instead, his analysis focuses on the elucidation of art’s autopoiesis, especially within poetry and painting. In a philosophy of dance improvisation, this amounts to saying that sense-making emerges from the movements themselves as they are executed, becoming gestures, rather than taking shape outside them, within a predetermined (choreographic) project. In the same way that ‘poetry is a perpetual renewal of language’ (of words) (Maldiney 2003: 74, our translation), dance improvisation provides a continual renewal of the vocabulary of body language.

3.2. How? Skills and feedback loops

3.2.1 Cognitive and intuitive skills

In addition to obvious motor skills (for instance, those related to the ‘perception–action matching’ and ‘action simulation’ described above), improvisers also rely on cognitive and intuitive skills to collectively compose a situation and give it sense.

As previously discussed, with reference to Kent de Spain (2014), improvisers construct a mental representation of a situation (mapping), through the process of tracking what they observe, imagine, and retain in memory. Tracking thus constitutes a cognitive activity. As he asserts, ‘by analyzing such patterns [e.g. a pattern recognition or an image recognition] [...] I can choose to join in, or continue with, or develop, or set up a counterpoint to whatever has been created; or to break it off and move into something else’ (ibid.: 136). Tracking is thus intrinsically linked to analyzing. It can

also imply, to a certain extent, planning or what Kent de Spain names a 'predictive understanding,' that is an understanding turned towards the future to analyze what will happen, for instance, if nothing is changed in the situation. In sum, this demonstrates a mode of thinking in action – what might be described as 'thinking in movement' (ibid.: 53) – which lies at the core of improvisational practice and real-time decision-making. As Erin Manning, known for her contributions to research-creation (Manning and Massumi 2014), emphasizes in this regard: thought is not 'proposed' to a movement; 'thought moves a body' (2009: 6). Such thinking in action may therefore be of interest to both enactivist and cognitivist approaches, notably by raising the question of the brain's involvement in this process.

In neuroscience, it is commonly acknowledged that there is a strong relationship between the brain and habits. Because the brain would be overburdened if it had to consciously regulate every action, it tends to operate in an 'automatic mode' supported by habits. This enables savings in time, energy, and efficiency. Conversely, improvisation practice often involves resisting or deviating from established habits and familiar patterns, as outlined previously. In this respect, several tools are used in improvisation to disrupt the brain's usual patterns. As Hagendoorn highlights, when the body persistently alters its leading movement, 'the brain can be put on the wrong track, thus raising the awareness of the viewer, who will have to work harder to follow the movement' (2003: 226). For example, speed also prevents the brain from keeping up with movements, while flow prevents it from overthinking before acting or anticipating the next move. As a result, if the brain is unsettled by improvisational tools, the 'thinking in action' cannot be understood as a predominantly cerebral process, despite its apparent link to situational analysis. For this reason, Kent De Spain argues that improvisation may mobilize other regions of the brain, which are less associated with rational thought and more with instinctive or animal-like responses: 'A portion of this skill is situated in the limbic system – the subconscious, preconscious animal brain – but much of it falls within the realm of consciousness (broadly defined)' (2014: 10-11). These considerations thus invite me to pursue an account of how sense is generated in improvisation by examining other, less rational skills, namely intuitive skills.

This thinking in action indeed comes close to an embodied, sensorial intelligence, one that proves particularly consonant with an intuitive grasp of the situation. Insofar as intuition constitutes a direct and immediate mode of seizing reality in its singularity (Bergson 1912), it facilitates an instantaneous understanding of the situation as well as a heightened bodily responsiveness – not in the form of an automatic reaction but of a singular response. More specifically, since intuition involves grasping reality from within, rather than analyzing it from the outside (ibid.), 'it evolves an expanded state of consciousness' (Hardman 2021: 2), where the boundaries between the self and the

external world become attenuated. Hardman evokes a ‘surrender of the ego’ (ibid.: 1) and ‘a sense of abandon’ (ibid.: 4). However, in improvisation, it is less a question of ego loss than of being ‘ego-less’ (Saladin 2014: 94), insofar as rationality and brain’s activity do not disappear; rather, they learn to recede, to listen, and to render themselves available and open to the situation. This open approach ‘is therefore a way of being in the world which is comfortable with an ever-changing fluidity and uncertainty’ (Hardman 2021: 4) despite our initial plans or expectations, making it easier to form new connections and thus to foster creativity. In short, participating from within in a situation as it unfolds, offering immediate and singular responses that remain open to its fluctuations – and may therefore shift our initial intentions – constitute essential features of intuitive skills, enabling improvisers to create sense together.

Furthermore, the expanded state of consciousness previously discussed in relation to intuition not only facilitates openness to the surrounding world, but also enables participants in improvisation to transition from an individual mode of consciousness to a collective one. As Julien Laroche, cited by Asaf Bachrach, remarks in his report on his experience of The Blind Unison Trio⁸ (a score conceived by Lisa Nelson):

A thing about this moment was an atmosphere of “confidence”, the confidence that I was into “something” (in the sense, a something that is happening at a larger scale than me), that I was following a flow that surrounded me, rather than inside me. (Nelson et al. 2024: 4)

For Bachrach, the experience of Laroche is a phenomenological experience of intuition. It corresponds, more precisely, to the phenomenon of feeling held and participating in, something greater than oneself – a Whole that transcends and encompasses us – thereby forming a sense of unity and a collective consciousness of the situation (Randazzo 2025). This collective consciousness therefore constitutes an important component of the process of making sense together in improvisation and relies significantly on intuitive skills.

Ultimately, through these cognitive and intuitive skills that enable improvisers to generate sense in real time, ‘the dancer’s attention is brought to the multiplicity of feedback loops’ (Nelson et al. 2024: 5) (quote from Asaf Bachrach) between action and perception, as well as between the dancer and others.

⁸ It is a performance score for a group of four or more people. Participants are divided into actors and watchers. Some instructions are given to the participants (and several versions of this score exist). For instance, three people enter a space with the intention of beginning with a visual unison stillness (e.g., they initially share the same shape or contribute to the same image). Then, one of them says “BEGIN,” and the actors close their eyes, trying to imagine what the other two are doing. The watchers are responsible for the safety of the actors and can say “OPEN” (the eyes) or “PAUSE” at any moment. They also can wave their hands when they perceive a moment of unison. Finally, after three minutes have passed, someone says “END.”

3.2.2 *Feedback loops in the autopoietic process of sense-making*

Sense-making does not rely only on the improvisers' skills, but also on the exchanges between them. These exchanges take the temporal form of feedback loops.

In improvisation, participants engage in ongoing mutual responsiveness. The mental map that an improviser develops through successive choices cannot be reduced to a purely reflective process (where they maintain a reflective awareness of their prior actions); it is also a recursive process, in which the outcome or output of an earlier action (for instance, introduced by a partner) becomes the input or the starting point for a subsequent action by another participant. Such elements may be understood as cues that are reintegrated in real time through the recursive interplay of improvisation, contributing to the emergence of collective sense-making. It is in this respect that Alessandro Bertinetto invokes 'an open autopoietic system,' a 'feedback loop' process, or a 'recursive' process (2022). He further argues that it is in this manner that improvisation 'makes sense' as a process of 'sense-making' (ibid.).

More precisely, drawing on Bertinetto's terminology, two aspects may be distinguished within this 'feedback loop' process. First, a process of 'feedforward'⁹ (*retroalimentazione*) supports creativity and the invention of future actions, insofar as prior actions function as emergent conditions for subsequent ones. Second, a process of 'feedback' (*retroazione*) is also at work, whereby actions that emerge at a later stage may retrospectively confer sense and value upon earlier actions, thus operating retroactively upon them. This dynamic is particularly salient in cases of 'error.' For example, an improviser may produce an action that deviates entirely from the established framework for action. If three dancers are moving along a horizontal line on the floor and one decides to explore the surrounding space, this constitutes a rupture with the operative frame and may be construed as an 'error' if it is not taken up by the other participants.¹⁰ However, insofar as the other dancers appropriate this deviation and likewise depart from the line, they retrospectively revalue the initial action: it no longer appears as an error external to the frame, but as a condition for the emergence of a new frame for action.

In fine, although sense-making in improvisation occurs in real time, that is, in the present, the logic of the 'feedback loop' indicates that it simultaneously opens onto other temporal horizons oriented toward both past and future. This is why some scholars argue that improvisation is not something that is constructed in time, but rather that it is itself temporal: 'The time in which everything takes place is now' (Bertinetto 2016: 223) (our translation):

⁹ Bertinetto is not always particularly precise in drawing this terminological distinction between *retroazione* and *retroalimentazione*. Thus, in *Eseguire l'inatteso* (2016), he translates *retroalimentazione* as *feedback*, and this is the term he generally employs.

¹⁰ An example drawn from a moment experienced during an advanced improvisation workshop led by Laura Aris Álvarez at the Circuit-Est choreographic center (Montreal), on May 13-17, 2024.

This ‘now,’ however, is not merely the chronological now measurable by the clock, in which the performance is occurring. Rather, it is the ‘now’ saturated with past and future, the kairological time, that time which is the right time for a specific experience.’ (ibid.) (our translation)

In sum, it is quite remarkable that improvisers, in real time, succeed in ‘making a common sense’ (Bertinetto 2022). This is even more striking insofar as this semiosis here does not conform to a linear logic: it is governed by a circular logic, a ‘feedback loop,’ which destabilizes the distinction between sender and receiver, insofar as improvisers mutually influence and respond to one another.

4. A few concluding words

In the end, I have shown how verbal, gestural, and visual prompts convey meaning to practitioners, before examining how sense-making emerges during improvisation through multiple modes of interaction and mutual attunement, drawing on motor, cognitive, and intuitive skills and sustained by continuous feedback loops. I then demonstrated how meaning-making takes shape through the personal and collective feedback processes that follow an improvisation session. All these aspects shed light on collective creativity, where authorship undergoes a process of diffraction. That’s why it may also be called a form of ‘distributed creativity’ (Sawyer and DeZutter 2009). In doing so, it provides a framework for further interrogating collective composition in contemporary dance, as in Pina Bausch’s *Kontakthof* (1978), which was created from dancers’ improvisations sparked by the choreographer’s prompts – such as ‘Show me how you seduce.’ The piece subsequently takes the form of a montage of these diverse responses (meaning-making), reworked and shaped into a series of short scenes.

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