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Improvisation and thinking in movement: an enactivist analysis of agency in artistic practices

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Abstract
In this article, we inquire into Maxine Sheets-Johnstone and Michele Merritt's descriptions and use of dance improvisation as it relates to "thinking in movement." We agree with them scholars that improvisational practices present interesting cases for investigating how movement, thinking, and agency intertwine. However, we also find that their descriptions of improvisation overemphasize the dimension of spontaneity as an intuitive "letting happen" of movements. To recalibrate their descriptions of improvisational practices, we couple Ezequiel Di Paolo, Thomas Buhrmann, and Xabier E. Barandiaran's (2017) enactive account of the constitution of agency with case studies of two expert performers of improvisation: a dancer and a musician. Our analyses hereof show that their improvisations unfold as a sophisticated oscillation of agency between specialized forms of mental and bodily control and, indeed, a more spontaneous "letting things happen." In all, this article's conclusions frame thinking in movement concerning improvisational practices as contextually embedded, purposively trained, and inherently relational.

Keywords Improvisation · Thinking in movement · Sense of agency · Interactional asymmetry · Dancer · free improvisation musician

Susanne Ravn and Simon Høffding are both first authors.

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1 Introduction

Throughout her work on movement as the ground of all mental activity (e.g., 1980; 1999; 2009; 2012; 2017), Maxine Sheets-Johnstone turns to dance practices to anchor her arguments. She particularly draws on dance improvisation as a paradigmatic case to show not only *that* but also *how* thinking is movement borne. Improvisation presents, according to Sheets-Johnstone, an example of practical engagement in action in which the cardinal structures of thinking in movement are magnified (Sheets-Johnstone, 2009, p. 29; Sheets-Johnstone, 1999, pp. 484ff). Focusing on how the dancer is caught up in a dynamic flow when improvising, she situates agency in kinesthesia—our sense of movement.

We find her notion of "thinking in movement" valuable and further applaud Michele Merritt's linking of Sheets-Johnstone's account to enactivist theories of agency. For example, Merritt emphasizes that movement, thinking, and our sense of agency are closely connected, and that "by examining dancers we are able to see how meaningful and intentional agency emerges in movement" (Merritt, 2015, p. 97). Yet, as we will elaborate upon in this article, both Sheets-Johnstone and Merritt's accounts of dance improvisation are somewhat one-sided. As current philosophical and practice-informed discussions of the nature of improvisation indicate, the idea that improvisation is based on spontaneous and more or less autonomous acts does not do justice to the actual practices and expertise of professional improvisers (Bailey, 1993, pp. xii, 109–111; Lewis, 1996, p. 109; Peters, 2016, Ravn et al., 2021) or to the widely varying cultural practices of improvisation around the world (Midgelow, 2019; Ravn 2020).

The article makes one negative and one positive contribution. The former is a critical elaboration of Sheets-Johnstone's one-sided notion of artistic improvisation and its connection to "thinking in movement". The latter aims at rectifying this one-sidedness and suggests that artistic improvisation centers upon a process of oscillating agency. To accomplish this, we utilize Ezequiel Di Paolo, Thomas Buhrmann, and Xabier Barandiaran's enactive account, especially of "interactional asymmetry" and "normativity" to explain what such oscillating agency is. Not content with a purely theoretical discussion, however, we present the improvisational practices of two professional and internationally known artists in dance and music, respectively. Both our improvisers actively investigate the suspension of agency and control as an inherent dimension of their practice. In other words, insofar as "thinking in movement" is exemplified in artistic improvisation, we suggest that such "thinking," rather than solely concerning a bodily driven spontaneity, has to do with mastering the suspension of control—that is, with an oscillation of agency. This oscillation, in turn, hinges on previous artistic practice, on an essential relation to one's audience and co-performers, and on a sensitivity to the context in which one is embedded: what we call "poles of otherness."

2 Sheets-Johnstone on improvisation and thinking in movement

Sheets-Johnstone emphasizes that it is central to improvised dancing in particular that we experience ourselves kinetically by turning "our attention away from the everyday world—from external perception—and towards the movement of our own bodies" (Sheets-Johnstone, 1999, p. 149). Improvisation is a kind of dancing that "lives and breathes in

the moving flow of its creation, a flow experienced as an ongoing present" that involves a "non-separation" of thinking and doing (ibid., p. 485). To be caught up in this dynamic flow is "to think in movement," so that the thought itself is kinetic (ibid., p. 486). Using these descriptions of improvisational experience, Sheets-Johnstone concludes that, when one improvises, one does not make explicit choices. Instead, "a certain way of moving calls forth a certain kinetic world and a certain kinetic world calls for a certain way of moving," and, as she sums up a few sentences later, "thinking in movement is an experience in which all movements blend into an ongoing kinetic happening: a singular kinetic density evolves" (Sheets-Johnstone, 2009, p. 34).

2.1 Improvisation in dance

In her presentation of improvisation as a paradigmatic case for thinking in movement, Sheets-Johnstone is careful to differentiate between, for example, children's playful and exploratory involvement in moving and the aesthetic interests of the improvising dancer. She emphasizes that it is possible to "distinguish structures in one kind of experience of thinking in movement that are not present in another" (Sheets-Johnstone, 2009, p. 29). Hence, Sheets-Johnstone does not claim that her account of dance improvisation represents the mother of all possible cases of thinking in movement, noting that it is basically descriptive, and that she is not arguing for any specific conception as such. However, by insisting that she seeks "the essential of a dance improvisation as it is experienced" (Sheets-Johnstone, 2009, p. 31) she sneaks her generalizations about improvisational practices through the back door, so to speak (Rothfield, 2005). Despite claiming not wanting to do so, she comes to articulate a relatively specific, even somewhat narrow conceptualization of improvisation:

> a dance improvisation is unique in the sense that no score is being fulfilled, *no performance is being reproduced*. The dancers who are improvising understand *this uniqueness* in the very manner in which they approach the dance. They have agreed to follow the rules, as it were, of a dance improvisation, rules that might very generally be summed up as: *dance the dance as it comes into being this particular moment at this particular place*. (Sheets-Johnstone, 2009, p. 29, our italics)

Merritt's recent description of dance improvisation rather uncritically mirrors Sheets-Johnstone's account (e.g., Sheets-Johnstone, 2009, p. 30) by stating that, in improvisation, "movement is created in-the-moment, without prior thought and without future plan" (Merritt, 2015, p. 106). This emphasis on a specific kind of temporal awareness is meant to set improvisation apart from choreographed dancing (Merritt, 2015; Sheets-Johnstone, 2009, 2012), a distinction Sheets-Johnstone likewise makes when she states that improvisational dances are choreographed from the inside while non-improvised dances are choreographed from the outside (Sheets-Johnstone, 2009, p. 40).

Such descriptions tend to exaggerate certain aspects of the improvised event at the expense of other kinds. First of all, a brief look at the literature on improvisation reveals that, unsurprisingly, dancers train their improvisational abilities,[1] which would imply at

[1] As do improvising musicians; see examples in Torrence and Schuman (2018, p. 7), Bailey (1993, pp. xii, 109–111), and Lewis (1996, p. 109).

least the possibility of both prior thought and future planning in improvisation. Indeed, dance scholars such as Novack (1990, pp. 128, 133), De Spain (2003, p. 27), Curtis (2003, p. 16), Paxton (2003, pp. 175ff), Forti (2003, pp. 54–56), and Hay (2000, p. 1) describe improvisation as deriving from a curiosity-driven urge to explore the body and our relations to others and as involving a continuous attunement of sensorial awareness, as well as the pursuit of developing different ways of using attention. In other words, when invested with these various frameworks and imperatives, improvisation offers a sustained and specialized way to practice dancing over and above a rather unplanned "letting movement happen."

Second, dance exists in a range of diverse fields and cultures. The ways in which improvisation unfolds and the conditions that frame and constrain its practice accordingly vary greatly, as highlighted by the recent *Oxford Handbook of Improvisation in Dance* (Midgelow, 2019). Improvisation in 1950s solo parts in Mambo dancing (Goldman, 2010), the couple dancing involved in improvising the Argentinean tango (Ravn, 2019), and improvisation in the fields of contemporary dance (e.g., Albright & Gere, 2003; De Spain, 2014) are only some of the fields that have been recognized as improvised in recent decades, and they are only "Western" examples. In highlighting the temporal awareness of the "now" and the individual, kinesthetic body, Sheets-Johnstone seems to focus exclusively on selected contemporary dance styles and related improvisatory ideas (Rothfield, 2005, 2020, Ch. 2), especially those giving priority to temporal awareness in preference to spatial relation (see for example Peters 2009). So, looking at improvisation in, for example, the Argentinean tango, one realizes that the dancers must learn specific repertoires of steps and movement patterns so as to be able to attune their movements to the repertoire of recognizable tango figures when improvising the dance with a partner. Moreover, the specialized bodily awareness characteristic of improvisation is here exercised in venues where tango dancing is embedded very visibly and directly in social, cultural, and political settings—for example, the couple improvising together must be aware of the other dancers on the floor and must handle social interactions off the dance floor so as to successfully invite another or be invited to dance (e.g., Ravn, 2019).

Before pushing on to her comparison of dance improvisation and music improvisation, let us briefly address some fundamental questions to Sheets-Johnstone, while further clarifying the intended scope of our own argument. In continuation of the idea of "dance[ing] the dance as it comes into being this particular moment at this particular place" (Sheets-Johnstone, 2009, p. 29) one of her most striking one-liners is probably that "movement forms the I that moves before the I that moves forms movement" (Sheets-Johnstone, 1999, p. 138). Now, what are the implications of such claims for the relation between improvisation, agency, and identity formation? If improvised dance consists in following some ontologically primary urge to move, without plan and without relying on past experience, and further, if an "I" only is formed after such movement, we would want to know at least three things. Who is the improvising dancer in the moment of improvising (is there even a "dancer" or is there only "dancing"?[2]), what kind of agency is experienced during such movement, and finally how do we distinguish improvisation from random movement on Sheets-Johnstone's account? The first one, concerning the self, engages Sheets-Johnstone's impressive ontogenetic account of the moving and thinking human

[2] See Rothfield forthcoming for an interesting Nietzschean and Deleuzian take on this question.

being, and far exceeds our intended analysis of improvisation. Answering the second question, we find her own account somewhat elusive. In a recent paper, Sheets-Johnstone (2017) criticizes Buhrmann and Di Paolo's (2015) and Gallagher and Zahavi's (2008) account of the experiential sense of agency. She insists that the tactile-kinesthetic body silently grounds it (Sheets-Johnstone, 2017), whereas we would take her interlocutors, generally considered, to claim that the two co-develop. We explicate the sense of agency in section three, where we use the enactivist notion of agency to ground our improvisational cases. Coming from a phenomenological and enactive perspective, we find it hard to conceptualize movement existing prior to a minimal sense of agency and minimal selfhood, but this theoretical discussion, too, is beyond our immediate interest. Finally, to the third question, if dance improvisation is indeed a pre-agential kind of movement without past and without plan, it is unclear to us how to distinguish it from random movement.[3] In contrast, our focus on the improviser's deliberate training in relinquishing control in what we call agential oscillations will allow for a relevant distinction here. Thus, the present article uses a critical discussion of Sheets-Johnstone's descriptions of improvisation as a springboard for inquiring into the connection between improvisation and thinking in movement. Based on empirical grounds, our cases in section five and six describe some of the precise techniques that can be involved in such oscillation and our presentation of enactive theory allows us to conceptualize the practice through the terms interactional asymmetry, normativity, and sense of agency.[4]

2.2 Improvisation in music

Sheets-Johnstone compares dance improvisation with a jazz jam session: an event where a group of musicians "literally make music together" and bring something into being that never was before and "will never be again, thus something that has no past or future performance but exists only in the here and now of its creation" (Sheets-Johnstone, 2009, pp. 29–30). On the one hand, this could, of course, be trivially said of any live dance or music event, because even score-based dance and music performances can be experienced as unique events that only exist in their creation. If this was not so, we would be missing the "live" of "live performance." On the other hand, Sheets-Johnstone's description could inversely be labeled overly restrictive as well, because no performance, improvised or otherwise, ever existed only in the here and now: it always necessarily involves more or less tacit connections to its sociohistorical situation. Furthermore, the dancer or musician's capabilities and habits always already frame how and when they express themselves.[5]

[3] Merritt (2015, p. 102-3) takes Sheets-Johnstone's account to clarify how dancing differs from "thrashing about". Our reading of Sheets-Johnstone clearly differs from Merritt's.

[4] The entire discussion of mindedness in performance has a twin in discussions of expertise. On the one hand, Hubert Dreyfus (2005, 2007, 2013) holds that expert performance is entirely non-minded, while for instance (Montero 2016) claims that experts must have recourse to some form of reflection and planning (2016). While Sheets-Johnstone's notion of thinking in movement could be seen as an attempt to sidestep the dichotomy between thinking and moving, her development of movement as pre-agential, nevertheless suggests similarities with Dreyfus' position. We find ourselves more sympathetic to meshed accounts (Christensen, McIlwain & Sutton 2016) and of course enactive accounts (Gallagher, 2017, chap. 10) that stress the continuity of "mind in life" (Thompson, 2007).

[5] See Linson and Clarke (2017) and Risjord (2014) for analytical distinctions among the kinds of sedimentations out of which musicians perform.

These objections to Sheet-Johnstone's emphasis on the "nowness" of improvisation recall the thinking of several authorities on improvised music. A central figure in the development of free improvisation, Derek Bailey, mentions in his *Introduction to Improvisation: Its Nature and Practice in Music* that many improvisers "express a positive dislike" for the word improvisation because it connotes "something without preparation and something without consideration, frivolous and inconsequential, lacking in design and method" (Bailey, 1993, p. xii). David Borgo, in his analysis of improvised music titled "Negotiating Freedom" (Borgo, 2002), likewise holds that musical improvisation consists of various mental, cultural, and technical negotiations to achieve a freedom that is never entirely without constraint (Borgo, 2002, p. 167).[6] Even more specifically, George Lewis's seminal essay on Afrological and Eurological perspectives describes the notion of pure spontaneity as a Eurological misconception:

> By fixing upon the surface level of immediate spontaneity, unsullied by reference to the past or foreshadowing of the future, the reduction of the notion of improvisative spontaneity to the present moment insists on ephemerality. In its extreme form this notion requires that an improvisation be done once and never heard in any form again. (Lewis, 1996, p. 109)

He further claims that the insistence that an improvised piece cannot be replayed "reduces experienced immediacy on the part of both listeners and improvisers to an infinitely small now, a Euclidean point, excluding both the past and the future" (Lewis, 1996, p. 109).

In the same vein, the philosopher Gary Peters's (2016) analysis of the live event is also worth considering. Peters criticizes the idea that live improvisation should be analyzed and philosophically celebrated as an intended or assumed intensification of experience. Rather than focusing on the liveness of the live event, Peters insists that we should understand the live event as dependent on the condition of rehearsing and as prepared through the practice of the performer. In sharp contrast to Sheets-Johnstone's descriptions, Peters's analysis fleshes out the past and future performative aspects of the improvised performance that are fundamental to the nowness of any performance.

To sum up, we have three principal challenges to Sheet-Johnstone and Merritt's work on improvisation. First, recent research in dance and music demonstrates that improvised performance does not merely, and trivially, derive from and connect to a sociocultural context. Rather this context constitutes an active and operative dimension in improvisational practices and could have been more explicitly treated in Sheets-Johnstone's and Merritt's work. Second, particularly Sheets-Johnstone's focus on kinesthesia as fused with thinking or otherwise limited to one's own movements presents a somewhat solipsistic picture of improvisation that needs supplementary resources to conceive of improvisation as an essentially world-involving practice. Third, describing improvisation as simply being swept into an unplanned now of

[6] We may also see Borgo's analysis of "negotiating freedom" mirrored to some extent in Torrence and Schuman's "tension": "Improvised musical performance (as much other human action) is characterized by a tension between 'fast' and 'slow' thinking processes: in-the-moment composition often requires rapid, pre-conscious, intuitive processing, while players will also need to monitor and control performance using slower, conscious, deliberative or mindfully engaged processing" (2018, p. 8). For an account of how to think about the integration of the "fast" and "slow," see Høffding & Satne, 2019.

kinetic energy does not do justice to the fact that expert improvisation is a trainable skill amenable to sophisticated forms of memory and planning. These three challenges constitute our so-called negative contribution and prepares the ground for the positive account to follow: inquiring into how dance improvisation relates to thinking in movement if we listen carefully to artists describing their practices. In this part of our inquiry we turn to enactive accounts of agency – and 'oscillations of agency' – to rightfully interpret the actual practices of the two artists in focus.

3 Agency and sense of agency: An enactive take

As mentioned, Merritt (2015) has already demonstrated convincingly that Sheets-Johnstone's account of movement and kinesthesia is compatible with and in fact complements the enactive take on movement as meaningful and thoughtful, and as presenting non-linguistic and non-symbolic ways of thinking. Merritt also articulates the importance of intersubjectivity in improvisation. Agency entails not only a "me-driven" sense of action but also a sense of "being-with" others: intersubjectivity offers an "experiential dimension that regulates and modulates [our] interactions and movements" (Merritt, 2015, p. 107). While Merritt primarily draws upon the "radical" branch of enactivism as proposed by Daniel D. Hutto (2011), we will pursue this line of thought via Di Paolo, Buhrmann, and Barandiaran's (Di Paolo et al., 2017) recent investigations into our sensorimotor life.[7]

Di Paolo, Buhrmann, and Barandiaran (Di Paolo et al., 2017) present an enactive understanding of the ways in which meaningful engagement in the world is fundamentally movement driven. By introduction they state that "an agent is someone with the capacity to perform acts" (ibid., p. 6) and that we can clarify this capacity by looking into the sensorimotor engagement with the environment of animated 'systems' – from simple organisms with minimal agency to complex systems like human beings, who all possess what they define as an open sensorimotor agency with an adaptive capacity. Agents "[make] sense of their environment by coupling precarious processes of self-individuation with environmental dynamics. These processes are imbued with value and sensitivities to the potential effects on the maintenance of the agent's identity" (ibid., p. 26). These scholars further define agency as contingent upon three systemic factors: self-individuation, interactional asymmetry, and normativity. Self-individuation concerns the organism's ability to sustain itself as a system distinct from its environment and in so doing define the environment in which it carries out its activity (ibid., pp. 111–12). We are particularly interested in interactional asymmetry and normativity, as these systemic aspects are most relevant to the analysis of sensorimotor activity and agency in cases of improvisation.

[7] It is beyond the scope of this paper to discuss similarities and differences between various forms of enactivism. It is not unlikely that we, like Merritt, could have found important theoretical explanatory resources for our cases of improvisation in Hutto's work. Generally, however, we find Di Paolo's style closer to our phenomenological outlook.

3.1 Interactional asymmetry

Interactional asymmetry characterizes the ability of the organism to regulate the processes of interaction with its environment. This is, in fact, a condition of survival: if the organism is completely open, it will be absorbed into its environment. If it is completely closed, it will perish because it cannot ingest nutrients or procreate. Interactional asymmetry regulates the organism's "boundaries" in terms of openness and manages the energy flows involved in the coordinated processes of the system (Di Paolo et al., 2017, pp. 134–35). In sensorimotor terms and in relation to human capacities in particular, the involvement of interactional asymmetry in exercising one's agency allows one to *not* passively go with the flow, be blown away by the wind, or be pushed off track under the influence of another. Di Paolo, Buhrmann, and Barandiaran frame a cliff diver's forceful engagement with gravity in these terms (ibid., p. 118). The dive begins with a muscle-driven push off the ground and over the cliff, as well as an immediate effort to hold a certain bodily shape as one is pulled into the water. The dialectic between being pulled toward the water and shaping possible figures and moves is entirely based on the diver's asymmetrical capacity to constrain energy flows. Her agency arises in the oscillation between letting herself be pulled downward (that is, being open to the cliff-body-gravity-water system) and changing her form to best suit her act (that is, actively manipulating the system). Similar systemic negotiations arise in the interactional dynamics of two bodies improvising an Argentinean tango: the follower receives the leads of her partner through their contact points in the upper body and allows herself to be guided into the next step backward (Ravn, 2016, 2019). From an enactive perspective, such improvisation involves interactional asymmetry in the follower's dialectical moderation and incorporation of an external force into her own movement. Note, however, that there is a categorical difference in these interactive dynamics depending on whether the external force is another agent or not.

3.2 Normativity

No organism arrives empty handed to an interaction with its environment or another organism. No matter how simply or passively inclined, all organisms bring their own biological makeup and history to the interaction, always already structuring it in a certain way. More complex organisms then shape the interaction further via certain goals, aims, and desires—aspects that differentiate mere organic movements from agential actions (Di Paolo et al., 2017, p. 120). Di Paolo, Buhrmann, and Barandiaran emphasize that being an agent entails our ability to modulate our interactions or couplings with our environments according to individual and internal norms or motivations. In terms of the performing arts, this enactive notion of normativity translates into an agency that is temporally extended and normatively restricted as well as enabled: as we shall see, through years of practice, the saxophone player has built a certain body enabling a certain range of techniques and habits with which he can improvise in a musical situation. Both enabling and constraining his options in a physical and figurative sense, this past is constantly working into the present. At the same time, those options are also subjected to his musical or performative context as well as his general artistic preferences and goals (see also Torrance & Schumann, 2018, p. 9). Bailey notes, "to improvise and not to be responsive to one's surroundings is a

contradiction if not an impossibility" (Bailey, 1993, p. 44). On the one hand, the normativity of the saxophonist's way of playing his instrument and responding to the musical situation while improvising determines his performance. On the other hand, such a performance is never restricted to the simple execution of ingrained techniques and habits.

3.3 Sense of agency

Our world-involving being is permeated by the diffuse, yet ubiquitous, sense that it is we who are initiating and controlling our actions (Gallagher & Zahavi, 2008, p. 158). Di Paolo, Buhrmann, and Barandiaran argue that "the sense of agency presents itself phenomenologically as a *heterogeneous* collection of different ways or aspects of feeling in control that depends on context, the task, and the person's history and capacities" (Di Paolo, Buhrmann, and Barandiaran, 2017, p. 211 Italics in original) and that this heterogeneous collection includes both intentional aspects and "the [systemic] processes involved in forming, selecting, and realizing meaningful sensorimotor schemes" (ibid., p. 187). Most of the time, our actions unfold without requiring either explicit awareness or decision making on our part. So, for example, when one goes for a run, the rough terrain might demand adaptation, acheived by the runner without any conscious reflection unless a boulder in the path demands it (ibid., p. 183).[8] During a run, different intentional acts blend across *thinner or richer layers of agency* in the normal course of engaging in the activity. And even when the unintended arises—the runner trips or takes a wrong turn—this loss of control does not entail a loss of agency or of the runner's sense of agency. Instead, it presents a specific way of and condition for exercising it further.

We now turn to show how the notions of interactional asymmetry, normativity and the sense of agency play out in our improvisational cases, allowing us to understand the oscillation of agency as a central phenomenological structure in music and dance improvisation.

4 Methodology for studying the two cases

Our two cases involve dancer Kitt Johnson and musician Torben Snekkestad. In line with the aforementioned work of Peters, Bailey, Borgo, and Lewis, these cases demonstrate that improvisational practices derive from intensive preparation as well as a continuous process of performance that reenacts a certain artistic tradition.

Our methodology rests on a tradition of *combining* qualitative research methodologies and phenomenological and enactive theory. As we have discussed in depth elsewhere, we conceive of this combination as an interdisciplinary challenge in which the researcher has to both handle the research criteria of qualitative research and of philosophical phenomenology (Legrand & Ravn, 2009; He & Ravn, 2018; Ravn & Høffding, 2017). This interdisciplinary challenge demands answers to how to handle and analyze empirical interview data and how to conceive of, and ensure validity and reliability. We provide those answers in and Ravn's and Høffding (2017) and Høffding

[8] See also Dow (2017) for an informative description and analysis of agency in running.

et al.'s (2021) and only outline the interdisciplinary methodology in the following. The study of the two cases advances in in two tiers (Høffding & Martiny, 2016). In the first tier, we use interviews to elicit rich and nuanced descriptions of the artists' experiences and practices. Each of these interviews was contextualized through different kinds of observations as well as existing and ongoing communication with the artists. The second tier begins with the analysis of the data according to significant indigenous concepts and themes—that is, using an emic approach (Olive, 2014; He & Ravn, 2018). These emic concepts and themes indicate recognizable patterns underlying each artist's practice of improvisation (Stake, 1995, p. 7) and initiate the presentation of the practices in the following analytical sections. Accordingly, in this first phase, the interviews were analyzed on the contextual premises of the cases and close to the logic given within the practices. In this phase both Johnson and Snekkestad were invited to read and comment on the emic analytical outcome. We then continued the analysis and discussed these indigenous themes using an etic approach that relied upon phenomenological and enactive insights (Olive, 2014; He & Ravn, 2018). In particular, we relied on the enactive and phenomenological concept of agency as a theoretical lens to unpack the experiential structures at once underlying and enabling Johnson and Snekkestad's practices. In this part of the analyses we also critically read each other's analyses and in that sense performed an etic oriented researcher triangulation.

Given that improvisational practices respond to their sociocultural contexts, our study contains two rather different cases. Johnson and Snekkestad's ways of improvising differ with respect to both their techniques and their artistic fields. Our study's design, then, acknowledges the fact that improvisation is not a uniform phenomenon. One conspicuous difference between Johnson and Snekkestad's practice is that the latter uses an instrument (a saxophone). In order to justify these two different performative situations as variations of improvisation, one could engage in a discussion of the body schema's ability to absorb external tools, as Merleau-Ponty famously does with the blind man and his stick or the woman with her hat (Merleau-Ponty, 2002, p. 165). This would mitigate the physical separation between body and instrument[9] and put the two cases on par in this regard. We, however, will point to the results of our analyses to explain our use of two such disparate cases. If we can demonstrate that each improviser uses techniques that fall under the umbrella term "oscillations of agency," then we will have *de facto* demonstrated that the variation in the cases was not only justified but instructive.

Besides their focus on the improvisations in question, the interview guides also reflected our pre-existing knowledge of each artist's practice. Accordingly, they addressed a number of relevant themes as well as examples and descriptions from former interviews and/or observations to prompt further reflection from the artists. During the interviews, we practiced attentive listening, using follow-up questions to generate more descriptions of specific situations and artistic practices while allowing the interviewee to dictate the order in which different themes arose (Thorpe, 2012; Thorpe & Olive, 2016).

Before we analyze Johnson and Snekkestad's improvisational practices, let us briefly present their artistic profiles. Danish performer Kitt Johnson

[9] See also Legrand and Ravn (2009) on different kinds of bodies in dance and Høffding (2019, chap. 10) on the constitution of subjects and objects in a musical context.

(www.kittjohnson.dk) is internationally recognized for her unique artistic style, mostly presented in her solo pieces. Her professional practice is related to German expressionist dancing, Butoh-related performance training (especially the "Body Weather" work of Min Tanaka; see Fuller 2017), and "Body-Mind Centering" (Cohen, 2008). That is to say, processes of energy transformation are key to Johnson's practice, and to the research laying the groundwork for her solos (Ravn, 2017; Ravn & Hansen, 2013). The interview with Johnson lasted about seventy minutes and incorporated insights based on the first author's active participation in workshops with her attendance at her performances and several other interviews with her over the past decade.

Torben Snekkestad (http://torbensnekkestad.com/)[10] is a Norwegian saxophonist with an international touring career who has mastered various styles from classical ensemble music to solo free improvisation (not to be confused with free jazz or jazz improvisation; see Lewis, 2009 and, for a more general introduction, Bailey, 1993, Borgo, 2002, and Lewis, 1996). Snekkestad's style would be associated with that Lewis calls the "European free improvisors" (Lewis, 1996, p. 112). He is inspired by musicians such as Joelle Léandre, Derek Bailey, Barry Guy, and Evan Parker, and has performed with several of them. To the untrained listener, Snekkestad's style of improvisation is challenging (see Corbett, 2016 for a helpful manual), not least due to its focus on communicative process rather than aesthetic product. The interview with Snekkestad lasted about ninety minutes and incorporated insights based on the second author's participation in workshops with him as well as a concert observation and a number of informal conversations.

Both artists gave informed consent to the use of their own names in the presentation of the analyses.

5 Kitt Johnson

As already indicated, Johnson is primarily interested in engaging energies and energy transformations in her dancing, while specific steps and movement patterns are of secondary concern. When asked to specify what aspects of movement she includes in her notion of "energy," she explains that it depends in part on the context and actual performance situation, but that the notion can refer to its quality, tension and/or intensity and intentionality. Recent analyses also indicate that the energy in Johnson's work derives from her sense of the current state of her body, the energy to which she connects in the actual situation, and the energy of the imaginary landscapes and themes with which she engages (Ravn, 2017; Ravn & Hansen, 2013;). In her artistic work Johnson uses and relates to improvisation in different ways. In our analysis, we focus on the improvisation she uses when a) performing her solo pieces and b) engaging in the improvisation-based explorative processes when creating new dance pieces. We begin by structuring our descriptions of Johnson's practices using an emic perspective: her approach to improvisation as related to different kinds of practices.

Johnson's solo-performances are based on set movement patterns and sequences. At the same time, she insists that the execution of these performances is improvised. When she started working as an independent artist over twenty years ago, she also improvised

[10] See also Snekkestad (2016) for detailed descriptions of his work.

her movement patterns and the sequences constituting the performances. After a few years, however, she started feeling stuck:

> I devoted too much attention to searching for a form before I could actually begin working with what I found to be essential . . . the encounter and this extra point . . . to reach this extra point. I needed to feel emancipated. I couldn't manage that amount of multitasking, searching for a form, finding it, setting it up, and also exploring what we are to do with this form.

From an etic oriented perspective, her descriptions indicate that she has deliberately chosen to reduce the normative accomplishment she has to deal with while improvising. This choice has allowed her to use her attention in more selective ways. She focuses her attention:

> [on] the way the set patterns of the choreography are executed and the way this [execution] is about energy and quality. [It is about] time . . . temporality and timing . . . that is somehow the same, actually. And if I am to elaborate [upon this] temporality, then it is about where do you hesitate, where will you be quick, and where do you stop. Are there places [in the execution of the work] where you withdraw a bit in space, and are there places where you do the opposite? Stuff like that changes [. . .] being in the live event. This is how improvisation is in the foreground.

Elsewhere in the interview, she explains that she thinks of the choreography of the work as an "empty form"—a kind of "container" that she fills when she performs. She continues: "The set material is just the funnel through which the essential part of this dance piece is to pass." The musician, the light designer, the physical space of the stage, and the audience of the night's performance all present her with interactive possibilities that are central to her way of improvising the performance. Each in its way is a pole of energy to which she actively relates in her enactment of the dance piece.

Johnson has collaborated with a particular musician and light designer for nearly three decades, and she emphasizes that their approaches parallel hers. Here, she describes her artistic relation to the musician:

> We work in a parallel way in our understanding of what it is to perform live. He feels "where I am"[11]—he feels one hundred percent "where he is" himself . . . I mean, we know each other insanely well, so he can sense when I am in trouble. That is, he senses when—arghhh, now she is struggling [laughs quietly]—and it can also be that I feel that he does not really hit the nerve—I mean, that happens as well—or that the costume bothers me.

From an emic perspective – following Johnson's descriptions, she might be the only dancer on stage, yet in the performance she is part of a trio that includes the musician and the light designer as equal partners. When improvising these performances, Johnson engages her partners. However, unlike the kind of partnering fundamental to

[11] That is, how she is coping mentally with her work.

contact improvisation (e.g. Merritt, 2015) and the Argentinean tango ([1] 2019), she does not engage through direct physical contact. The feedback she receives, or the forces she interacts with, do not work through a tactile medium, but are still very much present as structuring her exercise of agency. The trio's history of shared improvised performances represents a continuous line of encounters with performance venues that contextualize their improvisation. Johnson repeatedly emphasizes that the audience is the most important pole of energy in the improvisatory situation for the entire trio. Through their encounter with the audience, the piece is "brought somewhere else": "The audience is the joker—we don't know that card, and every evening that card turns out differently." Johnson seeks to be part of an energy exchange with the audience and emphasizes that this audience dependent energy has a decisive impact upon the performance. As such, using an etic perspective, Johnson couples asymmetrically with the audience and relinquishes some of her agency in that coupling.

Johnson's pieces are both prepared as well as in development. She insists that it is through performing the piece that she comes to understand what it really *is*. In this process, Johnson dialectically both moderates and incorporates the poles of energy offered to her as she is performing – poles that, through the etic perspective of using an enactive and phenomenological lens, co-constitute the field-dependent forces of the performative system. Like the aforementioned cliff diver and tango dancers, Johnson skillfully exercises an oscillation of her agency – including her sense of agency – when moderating and incorporating energies in her unfolding performance. In this sense, her improvisational practices are defined by her expertise of actively partaking in agentive oscillations.

In addition, being faithful to the emic themes identified, we should also pay attention to Johnson's preparatory practices. In the hours leading up to a given performance, Johnson focuses on what her body feels like and whether she needs to stretch, run, or do something else to feel, "grounded and in connection with it all". As discussed in former analyses of Johnson's practices (Ravn, 2017; Legrand & Ravn, 2009) this attunement of her body demands work from her side. Using a dance scholarly interpretation, Johnson deliberately attunes the "matter of her body" so as to be prepared to handle the improvisatory performative encounter in a skillful way, where 'matter' denotes the "live unstable 'body states' of the dancer which are her/his primary material" (Gardner, 2010, p. xv). Accordingly, while improvising the performance of her solo-pieces, Johnson relies not only on the set forms of the piece but also on her preparatory attunement to and manipulation of the matter of her body. Johnson's approach to improvising these performances thereby transcends what Sheets-Johnstone considers underlying techniques for spontaneous creation (Sheets-Johnstone, 2012, p. 50). That is, in writing that certain ways of moving call for a certain kinetic world and that certain kinetic worlds call for certain ways of moving (Sheets-Johnstone, 2009, p. 34), Sheets-Johnstone seems to presuppose a rather homogeneous body. This is challenged by Johnson's "unstable body", and her preparatory attunement to the sensing of her own body.

5.1 Improvisational explorations of unknown landscapes

The explorations that lay the foundation for the creation of Johnson's performances typically extend for three months or more. In these periods of explorations, Johnson

works by herself in the studio for several hours every day and refers to improvisation as a tool to explore and articulate the artistic theme of the upcoming performance. Before entering the studio, she has typically researched this theme thoroughly in more traditional ways, using books, research papers, and the internet. In the studio, she parks her freshly researched insights and relies on what has "internalized somehow." She describes that she seeks to be as "unconscious" as possible when she is in the studio and, thinks of her exploratory work as a kind of meditation during which she feels "like an antenna" that is ready to "receive that which comes". She further describes:

> I refer to it as a private space—and at the same time it feels like anything but a private space. [. . .] But, when I am alone, it feels utterly universal—like I am in connection with it all—and I can't be in connection with it all if I am my social I.

She emphasizes that being an antenna demands patience and the courage to "feel lost and to keep on being open to what might come" over many hours in the studio. Though this formulation resembles Sheet-Johnstone's, it should be pointed out firstly that 'being an antenna' is systematically exercised and secondly, that the description above does not refer Johnson's actual improvisational practice, but rather to a special kind of preparatory attunement. The later phases of reflective labor following her studio work, mostly involve watching videos of her own bodily grounded explorations. That is, she evaluates these recorded sessions of improvisation as possible material for the given dance piece: "After a while, I hold it [that which has come] up against the theme. And then I can see that part of it went off on a tangent and that it does not belong here [in the new piece]. So, I sort through it."

She works with a strict division between "artistic meditating" and "sorting through the material" where the latter approach clearly involves artistic ideas and judgments. The division thereby implicitly accentuates what she means when saying that, in the studio, she puts her "social I" on hold in order to attune herself to the poles of energy that might emerge. This attunement, where she brackets her socially informed ideas, judgments and preferences, takes persistence, investment, and time. For example, on one occasion she undertook her bodily grounded explorations for weeks, without anything of interest emerging. When something does emerge, it can be closely related to a specific way of moving or to an imagined though specific space or landscape that invites a certain energy in movement.[12] Metaphorically speaking, still in line with the emic approach, in Johnson's imaginative work, a landscape of interactive possibilities emerges as part of the improvisational process that drives her artistic meditations.

Continuing this analysis while drawing on the etic oriented perspective (enactive and phenomenological descriptions of agency), in these explorative phases, Johnson attunes herself to a certain readiness to be moved. In doing so, she restrains not only her urge to move in habitual ways but also what she experiences as her normal agential urge. This

[12] The imaginative part of her improvisational practice presents an interesting contrast to the task-based activation of imagination used by McGregor and his dancers (May et al. 2011). While McGregor uses mental representations as a tool for artistic creation and asks dancers to get involved in embodied transformations while they are moving, Johnson waits for imaginings to take shape. Likewise, while McGregor conceives of this work as a creative task for the individual dancer, Johnson insist on bracketing her agential urge. Her imaginative work expresses her dedication to the fundamentally relational conditions in her improvisational explorative practices.

improvisational practice, thereby, represents a radical way of exercising an asymmetrical or outsourced kind of agency. By holding back any urge to move and insisting on waiting Johnson exercises her agency in a way that potentially challenges her habitual ways of moving. In enactive terms, she potentially seeks a break with the normativity characterizing her agency, including the ways she 'normally' starts moving. Compared to her improvised performances where she partners her improvisation with the musician and light designer, she does not merely aim to skillfully handle an oscillation of her agency between poles of energy. Rather, from a phenomenological and enactive perspective, Johnson exercises an expertise in restraining her exploitation of the asymmetrical relations and thus challenges the normativity underlying and supporting the movement preferences and repertoire that defines her as dancer. She engages in a process of experiential thinning of her sense of agency.

6 Torben Snekkestad

Snekkestad's practice and performances derive from his interest in the exploration of musical landscapes, both literal and metaphorical. He might imagine an actual natural scene, a mental act that influences his play. Usually, however, the "landscape" is of certain sonic and rhythmic zones, textures, qualities, passages, and transitions. He sometimes meets in advance with the musicians with whom he is to perform, but not to rehearse as such. While he may know something about their playing from having listened to earlier performances or recordings, Snekkestad prefers to go into the performance with a blank slate, without any particular consensus on specific artistic or technical details. Such an improvised concert is not "result oriented" but rather, in addition to exploring musical landscapes, about engaging in a certain kind of communicative process:

> A concert is more about that everyone [musicians and audience] is in on that process—can follow, can see the communication the musicians are going through—how you are sort of negotiating the material, whether you are in on this journey. And here we are into this, which is about human communication, relation—it is about all sorts of emotions you are negotiating when you are in that space. Not that it is about something in particular. It is about a way of being together.[13]

Snekkestad says that he does not want to *impose* these improvisations upon the audience but to establish a communal sense that they are all in on this joint voyage. This imperative essentially transforms the intention of free improvisation from the presentation of a certain kind of music to a special kind of encounter, or what Bailey calls "meta-music"—that is, "the relationship between musicians" (Bailey, 1993, p. 129). Further, this imperative is a de facto intention of asymmetrically establishing a performative agential system. The following shows how this intention is practically and

[13] Tom Cochrane links cognition, emotion, and music quite succinctly: "[P]laying the instrument cognitively extends the musician's creation of the music . . . [M]ore significantly . . . playing the music cognitively extends the musicians emotion" (Cochrane, 2008, p. 329). In a similar vein, see Krueger (2009, 2014).

technically achieved: in order to sustain the process and optimal conditions for this shared encounter, the musicians must find ways of jointly deciding who does what as they play. This interactive condition involves the establishment of norms concerning what landscapes to build and explore and how best to do so. On the one hand, the performance must be artistically interesting, so it cannot rely on merely revisiting the past or resorting to something as predictable as call and response, for example. On the other hand, the performance must not be completely random or risk incoherence. In the midst of this tension, Snekkestad and his co-performers seek out and occupy zones of "artistic freedom" or "openness" that are once again closely connected to an extraordinary and deliberate relinquishing of control and transcending of musical expectations:

> For instance, with a really good drummer, who can align himself very closely with you and then suddenly create a friction—suddenly he can stop playing at the moment where it is most predictable that we're building to a climax—then he can just stop playing and in that way *pull the rug out from underneath your feet*.

When the rug is pulled, a new landscape emerges that was not foreseen by the improvising musicians. While they have all practiced on their own to prepare for such arrivals of the unknown, the way in which it finally happens transcends the sum of their individual efforts, as Snekkestad relates:

> There is a possibility to work very intensively with some parameters of interaction together with others . . . You have a set of musical materials that you've worked on [on your own], and you've been nerding with some textures. Now you throw it into a setting where it is lit up and where more layers of reflection are added. It is acted upon. Again, it is self-developing. At this point, you develop your material—not alone, but in a setting, so you can return and see, "Ah, ok, it [the material] was also capable of this."

The "lighting up" of existing material is possible because Snekkestad is never in full command of these performances and instead remains deliberately open to the influence of others, much like Johnson's partnering with musician and light designer. In other words, Snekkestad's sense of artistic freedom derives from the oscillation between his prepared material and his surrender of this material to be "lit up" during the shared improvisational encounter with his co-performers and the audience. In short, he enables a condition of constantly oscillating agency. Such an agential oscillation could also be understood as an experiential thinning of the sense of agency for Snekkestad in order to encompass the impulses of the ensemble, the audience, the atmosphere, and so forth.

Given this coupled, intersubjective starting point for Snekkestad's practice of group improvisation, we wondered about his solo work. How does he manage to surprise himself, "pull the rug out" from underneath his own feet, and "light up" his material when improvising on his own? Snekkestad based his response by describing an "extended technique" (see also Borgo, 2002, pp. 182–83), also called multiphonics.

6.1 Improvisational techniques for "pulling the rug out"

Unlike a piano or a cello, a saxophone is a monophonic instrument, built to make only one sound at a time. One may, however, learn to play it multiphonically, producing a number of inherently unstable undertones and overtones. Snekkestad explains: "I usually say that I am actually not playing solo, I am playing a duo. It is me and the sax and we sometimes work together and sometimes against each other." Even with great skill, including contortions of his normal fingering, embouchure, and tongue position, he cannot fully control the multiphonics, so surprising tones or sounds sometimes emerge. As part of his improvisational practice, he often deliberately pushes his playing toward this state of losing control, and the unexpected sounds become a fertile ground for yet other improvisations.[14]

The multiphonics represent one among many techniques that Snekkestad has meticulously developed (see Høffding & Snekkestad, 2021 for more details). While multiphonics relate to how he physically manipulates his instrument, others relate to how he pushes his thinking and imagination. For example, he actively regulates his playing via retention and protention.[15] If his playing becomes too repetitive, he is able to mentally lean forward into future musical possibilities or landscapes.[16] If his playing becomes too unstructured, he is able to mentally lean backward and revisit or reinstate his commitment to what came before—for example, by recalling the landscape he initially intended to explore. He prefers the former, however:

> The best moments of improvisation I have, is when I can hear [for myself] the next five seconds… The short stretches are a result of being able to see, hear the music [for yourself]…you are not making a choice, but it is written in advance in short stretches.

Like when he is working with other performers to "pull the rug out," Snekkestad uses this set of techniques to attain a degree of performative autonomy and discover new musical landscapes, as though the music were writing itself in advance. In fact, he described thirteen distinct techniques he could activate for this purpose.[17] He can meticulously hone some of them on his own while practicing; others can only be activated during performances for an audience. A few are useful only during improvisations with other musicians, but most of them serve to replace the impact of co-performers during his solo work, establishing poles of otherness with which Snekkestad can interact. When he improvises on his own, he can interact with his saxophone (or even simply the sensation of its reed), the audience, and even the room, accomplishing what musician Peter Riley (in an interview with Bailey) calls "the matching of music

[14] We realize that the words "surprising" and "unexpected" are somewhat ambiguous referents here, because, while Snekkestad does intend to produce multiphonics, their nature is inherently unpredictable. We might say that the type is expected but the token, surprising.

[15] Snekkestad even uses this Husserlian reference himself.

[16] Whether this is an actual stretching of time consciousness or an exercise of Snekkestad's imagination is irrelevant here. Note that the sophisticated use of time consciousness is a recurrent theme in writings on free improvisation: see Bailey (1993, pp. 111–12) and Lewis (1996, p. 109).

[17] Bailey characterizes such intensive solo improvisation as a self-evaluative and self-reflective practice (Bailey, 1993, pp. 105–9).

with place and occasion" (Bailey, 1993, p. 103).[18] He can also interact with his own time-consciousness, imagination, and various kinds of reflections. From an enactive perspective, these interactions constitute a performative system that enables him to experiment with his sense of agency. The system serves to direct his attention in relation to the poles of otherness established through the various techniques and this attentional shift changes the music, opening up new landscapes to him. Shifting from an emic descriptive lens to an etic interpretative one, Snekkestad's practice presents a textbook improvisational instantiation of what Di Paolo, Buhrmann, and Barandiaran call an open, sensorimotor agency: "Agents "[make] sense of their environment by coupling precarious processes of self-individuation with environmental dynamics. These processes are imbued with value and sensitivities to the potential effects on the maintenance of the agent's identity" (Di Paolo et al., 2017, p. 26). Here Snekkestad's sense-making is his musical interpretation, developed through coupling his various techniques with the unfolding environmental dynamics of co-players, audiences and atmospheres. These interpretations are not *ad hoc*, but normatively and affectively attuned to the situation allowing him to maintain and develop his specific identity as an improvising musician.

In addition, while he is able to direct his attention among these poles of otherness, he experiences that they possess their own agential force to guide his musical explorations in turn. Asked if he really makes use of all of these techniques on stage, he replies:

> All these elements are actually in play when you are out doing it [performing] . . . you can make hybrids in some way, but I think that all [of the techniques] that you mention are always in play.

Snekkestad determines the extent to which he remains open to the agential pull of these techniques—that is, the extent to which they impact the music and the encounter. His expertise extends well beyond his development of these various interactive techniques to his ability to determine when, where, how, and how much to let them guide his performance through a sophisticated artistic form of interactional asymmetry.[19] The music as heard is then an expression of a relation between Snekkestad, his repertoire of extended techniques, and the encounter of which he is a part when performing with musicians and audience. The musical choices emerge directly from the transactions of and oscillations between the agential pull of this interactive improvisational situation.

7 In Conclusion: Improvisation as Thinking in Movement

Bringing all our theoretical and empirical analyses to conclusion, let us first clarify our term "oscillation of agency", its related concepts and its relation to enactivist theory. Throughout the paper, we have mentioned "poles of otherness", "energy poles", "outsourcing of agency", "thinning of agency", and especially "oscillations of agency" without clarifying

[18] For a lovely embodied, embedded and extended-style analysis of the relation between musical style and acoustic environment in the context of creativity, see Wheeler, 2018.

[19] See, again, Linson and Clarke's (2017) work on distributed cognition in musical improvisation and Risjord's (2014) work on agency in joint jazz improvisation.

the analytical distinctions and connections between them. Our artists' improvisations consist in establishing a performative system in which they can turn to, or let themselves be influenced by, internal and external factors to push their improvisations forward. They interact with these "poles" which, from an emic point of view, are experienced as possessing a degree of agency insofar as they lead the artists to change their performance. From an etic, enactive perspective, however, these poles are not strictly speaking "agential". The sense of agency experienced from the first-person perspective of the improviser(s), is vested in the interactive dynamic itself and, as accounted for in part three of our article, only emerges when self-individuation, interactional asymmetry, and normativity are all in place. So, while not agential, these poles are certainly experienced as causally efficient, full of interactive potential. The exploitation of this potential, the experimentation with moving and being moved by these poles, is what we call oscillation of agency because it is tightly coupled to the oscillating experience of assuming and relinquishing control. Relinquishing control, such that one is more influenced by these poles, corresponds to "outsourcing agency" or "thinning agency". These two terms again refer to the performative experience, rather than enactivist strict terminology, in which agency, *qua* systemic, can be neither outsourced, nor thinned. In orthodox enactivist language, oscillations of agency corresponds to the experience of interactional asymmetry, of opening and closing one's agential borders. Oscillations of agency is a concept we coin, which applies interactional asymmetry to the experience of expert, artistic improvisation. Our core argument is that mastering these oscillations seem to be a condition of possibility of such improvisation.

Johnson and Snekkestad present two different cases of artistic practice, including their artistic traditions, the ways in which they set up performances as events, and their material conditions or modes of expression. Insisting on using and emic approach, we analyzed each based on their own terms of practice and sought to preserve the particular ways in which they describe their improvisational expertise before indicating the possible underlying experiential structure – by using an etic approach informed by enactive and phenomenological descriptions of agency.

Across the two diverse sets of practices and techniques in use, we find an equally compelling exercise of the interactional asymmetry of agency. Both artists improvise based on interactive conditions and form parts of the improvisatory encounter in different ways and with different artistic aims. While Johnson in one part of her improvisational practices strives to reach an artistic expression by forming part of a trio that is closely directed by the energy of the audience, Snekkestad is interested in exploring the implications of the overall encounter as more equally divided between various agential pulls. Interestingly, also when improvising on their own, both artists deliberately "set the stage" for the emergence of interactive forces – different kinds of otherness that supply the necessary starting point for the entire improvisational process.[20]

[20] There is a further distinctively theoretical question about the agential status of the «poles of otherness» established by Johnson and Snekkestad. Do these poles in themselves fulfill the criteria for agency set out by Di Paolo, Buhrmann, and Barandiaran? We tend to believe that the degree of agency of the poles of otherness is dependent upon the affective and intentional engagement of the artists themselves. It is all in all difficult to use enactive concepts derived from basic bacterial or computational systems to directly and fully account for complex, cultural practices and we recognize the need for further theoretical work here. For enactive work on collective agency, see Stapleton & Froese, 2015. For work on creativity in light the extended mind hypothesis and the coupling-constitution fallacy, see for instance Wheeler, 2018.

Sheets-Johnstone's afore-mentioned quotation: "*Movement forms the I that moves before the I that moves forms movement*" (Sheets-Johnstone, 1999, p. 138) is repeated in several of her works (e.g., Sheets-Johnstone, 2012; Sheets-Johnstone, 2017) to emphasize that kinesthesia is fundamental to our mental activity. In close connection, dance improvisation is highlighted as the paradigmatic example of thinking in movement. We have seen related descriptions from our expert improvisers, who engage in kinds of movements or interactions that in turn shape their agency. In contradistinction, however, we have also seen that this is only half of the story, as these artists, in the first place, work hard to establish and attune to their artistic fields of forces in which these movements are made possible. To approach Sheets-Johnstone's quotation: for improvising artists "movement forms their (next) movement" but there is no improvisation without an 'I' deliberately preparing this practice. Furthermore, following our artists' descriptions, the thinking in movement they present is closely connected to the oscillatory process of assuming and relinquishing agency. The central expertise of the improviser is her mastery of this process. That is, negotiating agency is an essential improvisational skill, and when it is applied judiciously, it allows the improviser to navigate numerous poles among self, other, and environment, as well as past, present, and future.

Based on our analysis of the two cases we cannot claim that all forms of improvised dance and music (or other artistic improvisations) are best understood as oscillations of agency. More expansive empirical research might, however, indicate that this is the case. Elsewhere, we have shown that improvisation is not only a specialized, artistic feat, but a pervasive feature of all human life (Ravn et al., 2021). It would take a separate analysis to evaluate if oscillations of agency is applicable to everyday improvisation, as to its expert sibling.[21]

Sheets-Johnstone and Merritt both draw on their personal backgrounds as dancers (e.g., Sheets-Johnstone, 2012; Merritt, 2015) to emphasize how improvisation concerns being caught up into a spontaneous dynamic flow. Sheets-Johnstone links improvisational practices to a phenomenological kind of axiom, namely that movement forms the I before any I forms movement. Hence improvised movement can apparently arise independent of a sense of agency, which leads straight to their claim that dance improvisation is a straightforward and pre-agential "beginning to move" or "letting movement happen." Our account, on the other hand, relies on empirical interview data, which we have analysed moving from emic to etic perspectives of actual improvisational practices. With the theoretical support of Di Paolo, Buhrmann, and Barandiaran's enactivism, we have shown that this apparent straightforwardness disguises three kinds of complexity related to the establishment of an artistic, agential field of forces with its poles of otherness, and the associated negotiation of or experimentation with one's agency: first, that improvisation is normatively imbued and involves a complex sense of time, always with some reference to one's previous practice patterns; second, that improvisation, even when engaged in alone, is relational rather than exclusively oriented toward one's own body; and third, that improvisation is contextually embedded and always affected by its "where" and "for whom," as well as its historical, artistic tradition.[22]

[21] There is certainly more to be said about conceptions of singular and joint senses of agency in artistic practices. For enactive work on collective agency, see Stapleton & Froese, 2015. For work on creativity in light the extended mind hypothesis and the coupling-constitution fallacy, see for instance Wheeler, 2018.

[22] .We would like to thank Ezequiel Di Paolo and 4 anonymous reviewers for their help in improving and clarifying the manuscript. We also sincerely thank Kitt Johnson and Torben Snekkestad for sharing their fascinating, artistic practices with us.

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