



PEER-REVIEWED ARTICLE

EMBODIED KNOWLEDGE AND DANCERS' DANCE-MAKING: SOLO DANCE IMPROVISATION AND PHENOMENOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVES

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CITE THIS ARTICLE (APA7): Rustad, H., & Engelsrud, G. (2025). Embodied knowledge and dancers' dance-making: Solo dance improvisation and phenomenological perspectives. *Dance Articulated*, 10(1), 34-51. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5324/da.v10i1.5957>

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ABSTRACT

This paper illuminates the existing lack of knowledge concerning how dancers work in creative processes in contemporary dance. The material was produced from a period of sharing and elaborating upon dance improvisation practices. Two improvisers used solo improvisation, one performing and one watching, and invited another researcher in when analysing the material. They identified the theme *dialoguing with your material* and two situations called *returning home* and *the eye moment*. Through conceptualising the not-yet conscious, the lived expressive body, the attentiveness and bodily intentionality, the material illuminates the practice as something that dancers could gain new perspectives on. Analysis reveals the knowledge dancers embody as both vague and clear, as well as expressed in the dance improvisations' mutual sharing between the watching of the watcher and the dancing of the dancer. Bodily, social, and inter-affective relationships play out, and the dancer's knowledge is visible in dwelling and expressiveness as a source for exploration of the dancer's subjectivity, voices, and tradition. Phenomenological literature supports how language plays a part in dancers' dance-making. This article exemplifies how creating material from improvisations contributes significantly because it is felt, known, bodily available, and should be pursued, not dismissed. Dance improvisation regarding dance-making needs to be further investigated, discovered, and articulated.

Keywords: Dance improvisation, phenomenology, creativity, shared knowledge

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In this article, we aim to contribute with knowledge about how dancers work with dance improvisation as process and performance format, closely connected with the dance genre contemporary dance, and embedded within the tradition of postmodern dance developed in the U.S in the 1960-s (Banes, 1987). Starting with the dancer's perspective and lived experience offers resources to elucidate how the dancing subject is formed in creative dance-making processes. Such processes, including the dancer's knowledge from the dancer's perspective, are too little researched (Rouhiainen, 2012). Furthermore, improvisation has often been unmarked and has played too small a part in the dance research literature (Foster, 2003; Midgelow, 2019). In addition, Nalina Wait (2019) claims that dance improvisation is under-theorised due to its ephemeral nature and the complexity of composing. One consequence of this is that dancers work in creative processes that are only shared to a limited extent and disseminated through verbal communication and language - something that makes it difficult for dance students, professional dancers, and others to understand these resources that experienced dancers possess. Our purpose is to question, describe, unfold, and theorise some moments in the processes of dance improvisation practices. Through theoretical phenomenological resources, we aim to clarify what happens in the dancing body in such creative dance-making processes.

This article is organised as follows. First, we introduce the knowledge field of dance improvisation research, leading to the research questions. We then continue with the methods and the practising situations in which the dancers created the material through sensing, dialoguing, and writing. The authors have selected two specific examples, characterising them as *high-quality improvisation moments*. The paper concludes that improvisation as a dance genre benefits from being exposed to reflection and analysis, which will help others recognise what qualities and qualifications count in professional dance improvisation.

RESEARCH CONTEXT OF DANCE IMPROVISATION

Improvisation contextualises situations that occur with spontaneity and situatedness at the very moment. However, as researchers in dance improvisation have argued, situations that at first are defined as spontaneous might illuminate what occurs from the dancers' perspective and between dancers, space and time, as well as other people (as audience). To contribute to knowledge on improvisation as a performance format, we decided to elaborate on how and what dancers feel and sense while improvising. Such phenomena are worth articulating and theorising about. Thus, we argue that as an artistic form, the improvisers depend on experiences gained through practising and performing large numbers of improvisations and practising watching improvisation. In addition, dancers share experiences by practising watching and giving feedback to each other. In the next section, we present the relevant dance improvisation research.

Research on dance improvisation practice

Caroline Hermans (2023) places improvisation as the connection between self, others, and the world, contributing to the relational aspects of improvisation. The dancer is not considered an isolated mover in her own world, but rather as participating in the world

with the other. Hermans' work references Hanne De Jaegher and Ezequiel Di Paolo's (2007) concept of participatory sense-making, and she celebrates improvisation in the here and now: being in the present while moving away from what was, and moving towards what will be (Hermans, 2023, p. 10). Moreover, she highlights how decisions and choices are made primarily on a pre-reflective level: By being in the moment, dancers sense and feel what is needed in the situation.

Central to Hermans' take on improvisation is that the kinaesthetic experience and the enactive approach to experience are interwoven with being alive and acting upon the world. Humans give meaning to the world not by an isolated mental act, but by experiencing and interacting with that same world. "The experiencing agent is intentionally engaged with the world through actions and projects that are not reducible to simple mental states but involve an intentionality that is motoric and bodily" (Gallagher & Miyahara, 2012, p. 119). Maxine Sheets-Johnstone (1966) speaks of the lived body and lived experience. To give meaning to the world is to move into the world and act upon it.

A dynamically attuned body that knows the world and makes its way within it kinetically is thoughtfully attuned to the variable qualia of both its own movement and the movement of things in its surrounding world - too forceful, swift, slow, straight, swerving, flaccid, tense, sudden, up, down and much more. (Sheets-Johnstone, 1999, pp. 516-517).

In dance improvisation, the dancers engage with themselves and others through the kinaesthetic. To experience movements of self and others is lived in a kinaesthetic way through the felt qualitative dynamics of movement expressions. This experience is a first-person experience: that is, dancers live the movement, and as they live it, dancers (and others) understand it and give meaning to it. Kinaesthetic experiences are thus always connected with a sense of self (Sheets-Johnstone, 1999, p. 8). Fulfilling one's need through moving is conducted with what Samuel Todes (2001, p. xxi) calls skilful coping, which includes the unified body and its grip on the situation.

Another central part of improvisation is the unexpected. As David Gere (2003, p. xx) writes: "The necessary partner of curiosity, of course, is surprise." A curious frame of mind makes it possible for improvisers of all stripes to be surprised at what emerges from within themselves, from the material of the cogitating body. Susan Foster (2003, p. 3) adds that improvisation contains that which is composed extemporaneously on the spur of the moment. She writes that the unknown

is that which was previously unimaginable, that which we could not have thought of doing next. Improvisation presses us to extend into, expand beyond, and extricate ourselves from that which was known. It encourages us or even forces us to be 'taken by surprise'. Yet, we could never accomplish this encounter with the unknown without engaging the known. (Foster, 2003, p. 4)

Taken together, researchers of improvisation seem to agree that *being in the moment*, discovering what was previously unimaginable and letting oneself be surprised, are some of the ingredients that constitute improvisation as a dance genre. In addition, that spontaneity in improvisation is dependent on, and closely connected to, the

professional dancers' lived experience and embodied knowledge. The literature also indicates that the dancer's knowledge of dance improvisation is, first and foremost, based on her experiences, self-knowledge, and insight into the tradition where she is situated. The potential to gain more knowledge about improvisation exists in how the dancer combines and interacts with her experience, self-knowledge, and tradition. In this article, we ask the following:

1. What does improvisation practice consist of as part of processes and practices in dance improvisation performance contexts?
2. What and how may dancers know due to extensive experience in digging into and practising dance improvisation?
3. What do the articulated experiences from practising improvisation in a shared space illuminate as significant?
4. How does the shared experience between improvisers contribute to the culture within the context of dance improvisation practices?

To illuminate these questions, we will refer to the following practising situation.

PRACTISING SITUATION

In March 2024, professional dancer and choreographer Siri Jøntvedt and professional dancer and researcher Hilde Rustad started a period of sharing and elaborating on dance improvisation practices. They are both experienced improvisers, who have performed improvisation, participated in numerous workshops, and taught dance improvisation to students in higher education and colleges both nationally and internationally.

After decades of practice, the two dancers gave themselves room for further exploration and to explore what a dance practice may be or look like to them now, at this point in their lives. For three weeks they worked 11 days; they improvised, investigated, and shared experiences to carve deeper into both non-conscious and more conscious ways of moving, making choices and acting in dance improvisation. They understood what they did as artistic practice and training, meaning cultivating “a greater ability to improvise, to discern, and to grasp force” (Rothfield, 2019, p. 97). In this article, *the dancers* mean Siri Jøntvedt and Hilde Rustad, whereas *the authors* are identical to Rustad and Gunn Engelsrud. As authors, we aim at articulating the phenomena that become visible through our analyses of the dancers' embodied expression created in Jøntvedt's and Rustad's shared improvisation practice. All the quotes were originally in Norwegian and have been translated by the authors.

METHODS AND MATERIALS

The dancers worked with practising specific entrances and warm ups belonging to dance improvisation practices. Before their first meeting, they had decided to bring notebooks from previous working periods – from performance work and workshops. They exchanged thoughts concerning how they were both dissatisfied with how they had written their notes, as it was often impossible to understand what their

notes referred to and described many years later. However, this setup led to talking, discussing, describing, and trying out dance practices in which they had participated. They elaborated on themes from the improvisation culture. They got the sense that they were revisiting thoughts, ideas, and practices they had encountered through engaging in workshops and processes where improvisation was the chosen performance format.

They organised their practice in the following structure: one dancer improvised solo and the other watched. The relationship between the watcher and the watched relates to the phenomenological ambiguity between the watching subject and the watched object. *Watching* relates, in this article, to whole body activity and how the watching subject, with all her senses and experiences as professional dancer, perceives to understand what is going on. The dancers mostly worked with *open improvisation*, meaning the score was without specific tasks or pre-given instructions on what and how to act. The timeframe was pre-set and varied from five to 20 minutes. During the improvisations, the watcher took notes, made drawings, or silently watched. Each improvisation was followed by reflections both from the perspective of the dancer and the watcher, who were attentive to how interaction between the positions was the structure for the work. In one session, they changed the order of things: one danced, and the other watched - thereafter, both took notes - before sharing their impressions, experiences, and notes with each other.

Figure 1

Siri Jontvedt improvising dancing. © Hilde Rustad. Licensed under CC BY.



▶ These conversations were taped and later transcribed. The week after their work ended, Rustad wrote some short narrative texts about parts of, or moments in, improvisations that she had reflected on and considered significant. As they changed the positions of conducting improvisation and watching, they came to understand these positions as dialectic. The positions were not separated but gained significance and meaning in light of each other (Skjervheim, 1966). Like De Jaegher's (2024) conceptualisation of interaction as a phenomenon between the subjects and the intersubjectivity, the dancers came to regard the improvisation as something brought to life in the in-between and in which they could share their experiences and perspectives.

Based on their understanding of these interchangeable positions, the next step was to expose the research material to an external eye, and Engelsrud was invited as a co-creator concerning the analysis. This means another's *gaze* and new perspectives entered the process. Rustad continued to follow the phenomenon of the improvisation practised as a dancer and researcher into the analysis -and was now co-working and co-authoring with Engelsrud. From now on, *we* refers to Rustad and Engelsrud.

In the following, we have chosen to unpack one theme and two situations that surfaced through our analysis of improvisation practice. We have named the theme *dialoguing with one's material*, the situations *returning home* (described in Rustad's narrative texts) and *the eye moment* (from the transcribed conversation).

DIALOGUING WITH ONE'S MATERIAL

During the working period, the dancers had agreed on what they considered *successful improvisations* and talked about what they experienced as *what happened*. In these talks, they discovered, to their surprise, that both improviser and watcher, on several occasions, concluded this was an improvisation which they experienced as of *high quality*. The discovery of the agreement on *improvisations of high quality* encouraged them to verbalise the *why* and *how* of such experiences, and that recognising such experiences was congruent from both within and outside the dancing situation.

One phenomenon the dancers noted as significant was the experience of *being in dialogue with one's material* while doing it. Such being in dialogue periods were marked by both the dancer and watcher, simultaneously, and in a similar way, perceiving what happened as standing out as *something* related to a shared embodied experience of the situation. It became evident that the doer felt in contact with - and was conscious of -what she was doing as she was doing it. She had a strong sense of being present and felt aware of herself, what movements and actions she was dancing, and *how* she was doing them. She had no thoughts of what to do next and felt thoroughly situated in the present. The watcher's experience of such periods was that they came through to her in a different way than otherwise would be the case. She registered such periods as *different from and more exciting and fascinating than...* Through conversation, it became evident to both the dancer and watcher that they experienced a shared foregrounding of *what happened*. It means that the dancer's improvisation was communicating to the embodied experience of the watcher.

In other words, the impressions and expressions in the improvisation circulate in a dialectical relation, and the dancer registers and knows what is going on at the ▶

same time as it happens. Due to her embodied self-awareness, she can act further upon the impressions and thereby be in dialogue with what she is doing and transfer it into expression.

Dialoguing with our material indicates that being aware and in dialogue – knowing what is going on while it goes on – with and within yourself as a performer connects with interbodily resonance and brings clarity to the moment and movement of improvisation - in a way that reaches out to the watcher, and thereby to an audience. It reaches out in this way due to the resonance that is intertwined between people, which Todes (2001) framed as a sort of perceptual contemplation that is always encountered and unified, and that moving bodies are counterparts for each other. When the (active) dancer and the (active) watcher as the receiver were touched and felt each other and themselves in the same periods, they referred to such periods as being experienced as of *high quality*. The high-quality periods were sensed as congruent bodily sensations. In other words, awareness of what you are doing while doing it, allows the dancer to be in dialogue with herself and is key to understanding the *shared understanding and recognition of high quality* in improvisation.

To highlight awareness - of what is going on during improvising and staying close to it - is a precondition for letting new movements and actions be born from the bodily sensations and the stream of consciousness that floats with and in the body and be in dialogue with the *voices* that are embedded in the improvisation situations. Based on the body's felt sensations, impulses and actions arise, and sensations thus have great significance. Actively practicing the ability to notice such sensations is therefore essential (Rustad, 2021, pp. 204-205). The consequences of being aware and in contact with yourself and your actions while dancing are that you can recollect and retell your experiences of what happened in the improvisation when talking about it afterwards, thereby enriching your knowledge about the relation of being and reflecting.

Knowledge of and in improvisation is developed when dancers share what they discover during dancing and are interested in searching for knowledge in what is momentarily created, and which sometimes opens up new horizons. What has been then changes and continues while the dancer is on her knowledge path and can articulate her knowledge. This means being a knower who knows what she is doing based on having an awareness of the perceived and sensed bodily actions and movements. This way of awareness makes what and how we do while doing it clearer to ourselves and anyone watching. When clear experiences are shared, they open the horizon for more choices, and the clarity already obtained flows further into more specific and surprising choices. This has to do with the core of improvisation, often referred to as being in the moment or being present here and now.

However, *being present* is not an empty and ideological phrase that can be pointed to and fixed. Rather, it is a state that is possible and comes by itself, as something that is always in the person but can be covered by other ideas, for example. Our experience searching for this *dance state* of being present is challenging, and more difficult than it may sound. The idea of *being present* is easily misunderstood – and our example shows that the idea of *being present* relates to and opens for dialoguing with your material - through which experiencing being present and relating dialogically to what goes on in the present emerges as something to thematise and verbalise.

We have applied phenomenological resources to support our analysis, and one branch of thought is, according to Edmund Husserl (Rassi & Shahab, 2015, p. 29), found in the pair of terms “Noema” and “Noesis” to refer to correlated elements of the structure of any intentional act. “Noesis” refers to intentional acts or “act-quality”, and “Noema” refers to the “act-matter”. This indicates here that the embodied consciousness (Rodemeyer, 2020), though the intentional act, is directed towards something, and that includes being also directed towards oneself. In this way, dancers can witness their own actions when they improvise. This quality that consciousness is aware of itself in the intentional act confirms that there is a space to discover while dancing and contains an “I-pole” and an “object-pole”, according to Husserl in Fatemeh Rassi and Zeiae Shahab (2015, p. 29), as an embodied process.

We try to take advantage of the opportunity illuminated by Husserl and use the duality in the pair of terms to count as an analytical pathway for us *to see* what happens when dancers practise improvisation. Dance improvisation depends on the improviser’s interest (reflected in the correlated elements of Noema and Noesis), which operates in herself as the dancing subject. With her embodied consciousness, she is always directed towards and from something, and something in her can register and be in dialogue with herself. For the dancer to listen to and trust, her embodied consciousness supports the awareness of noticing the choices that *happen* while moving in the way she moves. This means not to be ahead of oneself and not behind oneself, but rather to stay with and within what appears in the present situation.

Furthermore, this approach to dance improvisation indicates how being in dialogue with what you are doing keeps the dancer interested in the improvisation itself, in her actions, and what occurs as it is happening. This means that there is no time for and no point in worrying about how what you are doing is perceived, understood, or judged by spectators. The improvisation in itself is all that counts from moment to moment. It is satisfying for the dancer to experience herself and what happens as being clear. To be in dialogue with herself brings and makes her able to respond to impressions that transfer to expressions, and vice versa. As shown in the example of the agreement on high-quality improvisation moments, clarity inevitably reduces self-doubt and increases self-confidence during improvisation. When doubt is reduced or not present, nearly endless possibilities for further action open up for what might happen next.

Being present refers to dance improvisation as being bodily present, a capacity that lives within us when improvising dancing. As Rustad noticed while doing what she was doing, this resonates with former experiences and ideas and brings on a certain kind of bodily dialogue, which leads to what comes next. Such dialoguing with yourself has to do with how the sensing and moving body registers its own production, and in reaction to this it continues its movement. This relates to what Simon Rose refers to as enacted improvisation (Rose, 2017). Undoubtedly, there are many nuances and resonances happening during dances - which manifest themselves as not yet having come into being. This further relates to what Fuchs calls “the not-yet-conscious”, which has to do with the latent potential within us that we carry with us – and which mostly unfolds spontaneously and without a plan (Fuchs, 2024, p. 718). He points out a connection between the not-yet conscious and improvisation when describing it as giving “rise to phenomena such as the striking, the coincidental, the new and the improvised” (Fuchs,

2024, p. 717). Fuchs borrowed the term “the not-yet-conscious” from Ernst Bloch (1959), who coined it. In this section, we have emphasised how being in dialogue with yourself is closely connected to how consciousness is always directed towards or from something, and with being bodily present.

The situation named returning home

One often overlooked phenomenon in improvisation is that dancers, as moving subjects, must wish for or expect something to happen. Their consciousness is directed towards something, and for our purpose it is particularly relevant that the direction reveals itself in movement and bodily intentionality. It further means to be present, not as an opinion, but as an orientation in time and space. This also means that the wish cannot only be a passive one. It is not enough for conducting high-quality improvisation. On the contrary, improvisation acts a direction in space and embodies space as it moves. The dancer gives attention to her sense that something is to become as if something (Noema and Noesis) is brought to life. With its intentionality, the body is directed towards the current moment with its experience and the implicit future possibilities. The possibilities are potentialities that, in the next moment, meet a situation that manifests in the body and sends vagueness into space and time.

When the improviser might have a rather vague sensation of what is going on in the body while improvising, such nebulous sensations are in the next moment, when the improviser finds herself on the verge of doing something. Fuchs’s “protentional cone” (2024, p. 717) is fed by current experiences and bodily tendencies, and is focused to varying degrees by attention. This results in either more focused or rather defocused states of anticipation, with the latter giving space to the not-yet-conscious as “in statu nascendi” (Fuchs, 2024, p. 217), meaning that the expressions are born in the present moment, even experiences of being unable to grasp what is going on, and, consequently, the dancers move in messy and ambiguous ways, and without finding good transitions into what comes next. If these moments are understood, they contribute to knowledge of the conditions for improvisation as art.

However, at other times, moments and movements in dance improvisations are experienced as crystal clear and succinct. One such moment occurred and was reported in the following way in Rustad’s short narrative:

During the second week of the working period, I did an improvisation starting with sitting on the windowsill. After a while, I was moving towards the back wall and ended up standing having contact between my back and the wall. I was moving my back on the wall from side to side.

I had started the improvisation – and kept it going for a while: I was leaning towards the wall and moved my upper body back and forth and the contact between my movements, between my back and the wall, made a swooshing sound. I kept this material going for a long while and developed it by sometimes bending my knees lower, and thereafter straightening my knees somewhat, before coming all the way standing straight up. I was facing directly forwards and felt as if I was in a somewhat aggressive position. My shoulders were raised, and the position I was in gave me a feeling of being almost as if I was a rugby player. When I finally stopped swooshing, I went forward, maybe 6–8 steps, before abruptly turning around and walking straight back to the

wall and placing my left hand upon it with the palm of my hand on the wall and my back towards the audience. I sort of landed there for a while – standing quite still.

The sudden change of direction and returning back came to me “as if” it came out of nowhere. I was on my way, moving, walking straight forwards when this happened. Turning around was a decision I experienced as if “being taken” for me: – and I was acting before I “knew or registered” what I was doing. Impulse and action came together as one. The movements were clear and sharp and were done out of necessity (it felt like there was no other choice).

When Jøntvedt, who was watching, gave feedback on this improvisation, the first thing she said was: the moment you turned and walked back towards the wall – it was like you took the material with you back home! Her response concerning that specific moment, which in my experience of this improvisation was the very moment that emerged from – and in the situation, with its strong momentarily choice – had come through to her and made a strong impression, and as such it was experienced as important to her as the watcher as well as to me as the doer.

In this situation, the dancer experienced an impulse, and even a need (Todes, 2001), to act or move in a certain way. The sensation felt was that there was no interval between impulse and action. She simultaneously noticed the impulse and the acting upon the impulse, and then as registering what was happening - the movement of the body - as it happened.

When *returning home*, communication is open, and something undefined moves/streams/goes on between the dancer and the watcher. In this case, a shared understanding of the *coming home* moment occurred. The moment connected the dancer and watcher in a shared experience. It also confirms that after years of a partly similar history of improvisation and having worked together on and off for many years, they share a common understanding of improvisation. However, this example illuminates how the dancers’ lived space culminated in bringing it all home, and that both the dancer and the watcher recognised a moment of significance as a moment of *high-quality improvisation*.

High-quality improvisation

In this case the existing material is in the format of one specific action that is experienced similarly and simultaneously, and as something the doer and watcher share in the particular moment. According to the dancers, something appeared simultaneously to both of them – which means they were interbodily resonating and registered what happened at the same time in a similar way.

It might be risky to use a concept like *high-quality improvisation*. However, our aim is to elaborate on processes that addressed moments that, unless they are unpacked, risk going unnoticed. For example: concerning the moment when the dancer turned around, walked back, and placed her hand on the wall, the moment of turning was experienced as significant to both the improviser and watcher. We understand this in line with Elizabeth Behnke and the overlapping field of experience between subject and space, and that some moments appear and emerge as energetically kinaesthetically clear. According to Behnke (1997, p. 182), there is something we “want to retrieve

our ongoing kinaesthetic life from its customary anonymity and sense its 'how' from within." The awareness of "these investigations belong to a *special type of experience* that explores certain nuances of bodily movement that we usually take for granted, and in this way allows us to bring into question the very movements we usually simply rely on" (p. 182, original emphasis). In the moments of improvisation the dancers might also feel at one (a unity with the environment at experience-overlapping *spheres of consciousness*).

According to Fuchs, the body "is embedded in intercorporeality, and thus becomes the medium of interaffectivity" (Fuchs, 2013, p. 222). In light of this, and in terms of simultaneous similar understandings, the *returning home* moment might further be understood as having to do with how the being of human beings, who can "feel something 'in the air'" (Fuchs, 2013, p. 222) can sense something in between them as interpersonal. This phenomenon operates in interaction, making it possible for two persons or more to experience the same moment - simultaneously as significant.

Surprise and the not-yet conscious

When this moment occurred wherein Rustad turned around, the response in both the dancer and watcher was a surprise, a little shock and arousal in the nervous system. Rustad, in that moment of her dance, did not identify any conscious intent to turn or return to the wall. There was no preparation, choosing, or deciding. The experience was as if it *just happened*. There was no active doing in action, but rather a way of being left to the space and the movement's own direction and intention. When turning, the moving subject surprises herself with what she is doing. Undoubtedly, there are a lot of nuances and resonances happening during dances - which manifest as not yet having come into being - and elaborate on the surprise in the moment, or the surprising moment.

It is the not-yet conscious that unfolds in the moment when the improviser surprises herself by turning around and walking back *home* to the wall. The action emerges - a creative force is implicit in the actions leading up to and within this moment. In this moment, the improviser is in a state of heightened awareness: "The improviser is at a high level of attention and arousal, aware of the potentiality of the structures at every moment, conscious of all the actions that might follow" (Breyer et al., 2011, p. 187 here in Fuchs, 2024, p. 731).

What action the improviser executes at any given time opens a horizon of possibilities from which the improviser's next actions/responses will continue. Improvised actions succeed each other, which we associate with how Fuchs describes "the articulated and the newly added words mutually determine each other" (Fuchs, 2024, p. 728). Here, we see how what Fuchs writes about speaks to the idea of dialoguing with your material - and that, in a sense, improvised movement actions and newly added actions embody the potential for mutual influence and connection.

The *returning home* moment was experienced as a bodily action entirely. However, in many cases, improvised actions might be influenced by how - according to Fuchs - "experienced space around us is always charged with affective qualities" (Fuchs, 2013, p. 222). We find it likely that such qualities play a part in what choices we make next in our improvisations.

▶ *The situation named the eye moment*

Duration and continuity were one of the themes with which the two dancers were busy, and they reflected on how they often were not able to keep doing what they were doing for what appeared to them as long enough. Their experience was that they often shifted, changed, or transformed what they were doing into something else too quickly and before it got registered properly for the watcher. In this part, we will unpack one moment which appeared to be a clear break with what had been going on so far and, as such, was experienced as standing out because it made the improvisation non-coherent. In the moment in question, the dancer felt herself to be what can be described as *out of track, falling out, not present, in a gap, and not being in the moment*. What happened was also recognised by the watcher. In the same way as with the *returning home* situation, the dancer and watcher simultaneously noticed in this moment that their understanding of what happened was similar.

At one point, the watcher observed how the dancer suddenly looked and acted differently. She moved her eyes in a way that was out of character and seemed separated from what had been going on in this very improvisation. This relates to Gary Peters (2009), who writes of improvisation as “the ability of the improviser to inhabit the given, to make a home and play within it” (p. 118). However, when you have made such a home, you must stay with and within it, but in the case of the eye moment, the improviser stepped outside the *home* she had made, and this made the eye moment a negative experience for the dancer as well as the watcher. It was perhaps disappointing, and it manifested itself clearly and as a sudden break with both the dancer’s and the watcher’s expectations of how the improvisation should have developed, and as a continuation of the track it had started upon. The experience of *the eye moment* indicates how qualified improvisers identify discontinuity and disruption.

The day after this improvisation, the dancer and watcher reflected on what had happened in the following way:

Jøntvedt (the dancer): What I am thinking is that it is in some way possible to notice - to see - whether it is from the inside or the outside. You may see what happens from the outside as spectator. You can also notice it clearly from the inside. One example is - for instance - yesterday, when you pointed out the one place in which I was in such a vague place, and that was exactly at that point I could feel myself being out of focus.

Rustad (the watcher): Yes, that was when you suddenly used your eyes in a different way - when you were standing by the wall. It (being unfocused) is possible to notice.

Jøntvedt (the dancer): I could notice it myself because it was an old habit. My eyes moved upwards and did this in a special way. It was obvious that my focus was not linked to what I was doing. I could notice this as it happened, and you could immediately recognise it.

Doing solo dance improvisation is demanding, and for the dancer to keep herself and her watcher interested, she must stay focused throughout the improvisation. In our case, it became immediately apparent to both the dancer and the watcher when the dancer felt she was shifting into being vague; she was, for a brief moment, dropping

out of the *home* she was inhabiting, out of whatever it was she was in. The fact that the improvisation's continuity was broken negatively affected both the dancer and watcher, which further pointed to the fragility of dance improvisation.

Interestingly, the dancer felt a sense of vagueness at this particular moment. Vagueness can mean that the degree of attention is low or simply that there is a lack of attention concerning what and how one is doing and dancing.

Moreover, the dancer recognised the specific way she was moving her eyes upward as her habit and something she often used to do, but now more or less had stopped doing. The potential for such recognition lies within body memory, which, according to Fuchs (2024, p. 722), can be understood as “the set of all the acquired habituality that allows us to anticipate or enact the immediate future.” In other words, body memory relates to both the past and the future - and is central to our understanding of dance improvisation as here and now and as “coming into being at this particular moment at this particular place” (Sheets-Johnstone, 1999, p. 485).

FINAL REFLECTIONS AND SUMMING UP

This article offers insight into what and how solo dance improvisation practices may look like and gives special attention to one theme and two situations occurring within one specific context. By taking practice into research, we analysed improvisations and reflections to produce new knowledge. The examples provided are part of two dancers' lived experiences while practising improvisation as shared practice and their shared thoughts and reflections.

We have addressed phenomenology and phenomenological concepts as a way of understanding *what happened* in improvisation, and, more specifically, of understanding solo dance improvisation. We have found that it encompasses the improviser, the watcher, and improvisation. Each of these three is separate. They are part of what they create together and are something on their own. They become what and how they are through mutual relationships, and in light of each other (Østerberg, 1966); dialectic relations are what they are due to how people who connect get their significance from each other because the other is who she is, and you become who you are. In this dialectic relation, space is created and lived.

The space holds expressions. In our context, we understand this to mean that the space holds the improvisation, and at the same time, the improvisation embraces and holds the space with the dancer(s) in it. The body as a place for dialogue means that the expressions resonate back as impressions to the dancer. In line with Hermans (2023), we have found that openness towards how the improvisation is unfolding and openness to the world means the world can enter and be made something out of in improvisation. In this way, the skin body is porous, and openness towards the world allows the watcher to be part of the improvisation situation. We relate this to the flesh of the world, which is not an isolated body but belongs to the togetherness created through the flesh. Our point of view creates the gaze through which we have chosen to grasp the material from improvisation. We have used this understanding to create the framework for constructing knowledge based on analysing the empirical material.

Improvisation has the exclusive possibility of being personal and moves in ways

▶ that choreography usually does not inhabit. Emotions are part of being human and are always there. Thus, the improviser must be aware of how emotions may spill out as diffuse bodily feelings and kinaesthetic tendencies that influence and may veil the improvisation with a somewhat ambiguous and unpleasant quality. The dancer controls their own movements and actions and always has the possibility of colouring the improvisation with attitude and personal ways of being. However, for dance improvisation to be of high quality, the improviser(s) must have a professional attitude, which involves being conscious of and in contact with their emotions.

We have shown how trusting experience-based knowledge when improvising entangles with the protentional in the not-yet-conscious, and that the dancer always meets *something*. She gets and creates access to embodied dispositions, which offers possibilities for immediate actions in the meeting with the world, which can be any kind of *content* in the way consciousness is directed. In addition, as we have shown, memories and imaginations are involved in improvisation. This connects with Henry Bergson's (1988) concept of habit memory, meaning "perceptions are prolonged into movements that modify the body organically, creating within its new dispositions towards action" (Bergson, 1988, pp. 81-82, here in Burton, 2011, p. 27). In other words, trust opens possibilities and is a permeable state in which impulses and actions may happen as if by themselves, and the improvisation itself can be brought to life. Furthermore, as habit memory indicates, because of the dispositions layered in their bodies due to past dancing, dancers transcend practised movements and patterns and move in new ways (Rustad, 2020).

What high-quality solo dance improvisation means is addressed through examples of high-quality dance improvisation moments and one theme. As is shown, such moments are characterised by the dancer's ability to be in dialogue with her material and whatever she is doing while doing it. Dialoguing with yourself brings clarity and quality to the improvisation, making it accessible and permeable to both the dancer and the watcher. Furthermore, paying attention to what one is directed towards puts the dancer in the position of noticing bodily sensations and impulses, making it possible for them to kinaesthetically sense themselves in movement and thereby more easily be in dialogue with what they are doing. To be in dialogue, trusting embodied knowledge, being attentive to bodily sensations and impulses *and* acting on them, and having an awareness of dancing for someone (as opposed to yourself) keeps the dancer present and highly communicative. Duration, meaning staying with what the dance improviser is doing long enough for it to be communicated and appreciated by the audience, is important because it gives meaning and significance to the material.

As researchers, our way of exploring and understanding improvisation and finding the language to describe improvisation of high quality - as in moments and actions to be recognised and remembered - has been to step back, contextualise, analyse, and theorise in order to unpack what we define as high-quality moments, moments that open up the horizon of possibilities lying within the still magic world of improvisation. Bringing attention to how the not-yet-conscious and vagueness play a part in improvisation is part of articulating knowledge that gives insight and understanding concerning high quality in dance.

We are using the concept *high-quality improvisation* to characterise achievements in

the moment. By achievement we mean something that happens after *hard* work, but not only that. Professional improvisors know high-quality improvisation exists as it is lived experience and part of their embodied being. High-quality improvisation moments are mutually recognisable by improvisor and watcher - the question is how to get there. As dance improvisors and researchers, we believe there are several ways and possibilities, and one way relates to the thoughts belonging to phenomenology and the possibilities in the doubleness of the witnessing embodied consciousness.

For Rustad, it has been exciting and interesting to participate in both the practice and analysis of this project. The assumption is often that these two are perhaps *too different* and not mutually communicative and collaborative angles. However, by combining theory and artistic practice, they somehow increasingly become part of each other's worlds. The theoretical gaze allows the possibility to develop, elaborate, and unfold significant moments, giving new perspectives of understanding to dance improvisation practice.

AI DECLARATION

No AI was used in this article.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Without the professional freelance dancer, choreographer, and co-researcher, Siri Jøntvedt, and her experience, knowledge, and wisdom, this research project could never have happened. <https://sirijontvedt.com/>

STATEMENT

The authors report no conflicts of interest.

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