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BODY of KNOWLEDGE

Body memories in artistic improvisation: a dialogical embodied exchange of movement

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When engaging in observations of and interviews with expert artists, such as dancers and musicians, it becomes evident that their practices are, in different ways, focused on developing, adjusting and optimizing certain techniques of the body. In the phenomenological analysis of body memory in dance and musicianship presented in this paper, we contend that it would be a mistake to think of these body techniques – or specialized habits – as a repertoire of more or less automatized movements. Rather, in each repetition, body memories including these habits are to be understood as unfolding in response to the present context and accordingly instantiate a fresh memory of these habits while moulding them at the same time. In that sense, any habit is also always improvised in some degree – adjusted and timed in accordance with the present situation. In recent sociological discussions, several researchers have drawn attention to the facts that when exploring, and possibly changing, habits, we at the same time rely on other habits and that habit does not only include sensory-motor use of our bodies, but also the way we handle our attention and focus our awareness. We argue that dance and musical improvisation can then only be understood when taking into consideration its complex relation to habits and body memory. In the analysis we specifically draw on recent philosophical discussions (e.g. Sutton, Colombetti, Montero; Fuchs) to describe how body memories are not to be reduced to certain internalized dispositions, activated when performing. Rather body memories unfold and find their form in the contextual field of a dialogical embodied exchange of movement.