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BALANCING ACTS IN SPECTATORSHIP: DYNAMICS OF VALUE CREATION IN AUDIENCE EXPERIENCES OF CONTEMPORARY DANCE

The public defence of Saara Moisio's doctoral dissertation of Theatre Research *Balancing Acts in Spectatorship: Dynamics of Value Creation in Audience Experiences of Contemporary Dance* was held via Zoom at the University of Helsinki on 28 January 2022. Professor Ben Walmsley (University of Leeds) acted as Opponent and professor Hanna Korsberg (University of Helsinki) as Custos.

The current Covid-19 pandemic has restricted spectators' possibilities to experience live performing arts freely and collectively for nearly two years now. Artists, producers, and audiences have had to learn new ways of encountering each other, but, at the same time, this situation has made us more aware of the importance of live, collective interaction between spectators, venues, artists, and performances.

In 2015, when I started studying how spectators of contemporary dance performances make sense of and value their experiences, I could not imagine that there would be a day when attending a performance is seen as a health risk. However, now we have lived in a world where you cannot be sure if it is safe to sit with a full audience. Simultaneously, despite the perceived health risk, you could miss the feeling of collectively experiencing a performance happening live in front of you for a certain duration.

In 2015 and 2018 I interviewed twenty-one spectators in three case studies of contemporary dance performances¹ to find out how they create the meaning and value of the art form for themselves. As I wanted to dig deep into the topic, I decided to follow qualitative research methods established in previous audience studies in performing arts and combine them creatively.² In-depth pre-performance interviews together with post-performance collage-making workshops with each participant provided a vast amount of text and images about their experiences with contemporary dance. This research material, together with theories of dynamic systems³ and human mind as enactive, embodied and extended,⁴ took me to a journey into spectators' embodied sense-making⁵ processes.

I analysed the material by focusing on recurring themes and metaphors in the research participants' ways of describing their experiences with contemporary dance. Four themes emerged that I call central dimensions in the dynamics of value creation. Furthermore, when analysing the participants' talk about their experiences, expectations, and impressions of contemporary dance and

1 Maija Hirvanen, *Epic Failing*, Zodiak – Center of New Dance fall 2015; Tero Saarinen Company, *Breath*, spring 2018; Sari Palmgren & co, *Licking Things*, Full Moon Dance Festival, summer 2018.

2 Reason 2010; Johanson 2013; Radbourne, Glow, and Johanson 2013; Gauntlett 2007; Walmsley 2018.

3 Thompson 2007; McConachie 2015; Kemp and McConachie 2019.

4 Varela, Thompson, and Rosch 1991; Varela, Thompson, and Rosch 2017; Gapenne and Di Paolo 2010; Di Paolo, Rohde, and De Jaegher 2010; Sterelny 2010; Colombetti 2014.

5 Colombetti 2014; Thompson and Stapleton 2009.

its makers, it became clear that, to value the art form and its genres, one goes through a process that constantly evolves, changes, and adapts to new experiences and situations. In this process, each one strives to understand oneself, others, and the surrounding world to create meaning for oneself. I call this a process of value creation, where each spectator of performing arts balances between four central dimensions.

These are *expectations of being affected*, *the need for self-development*, *familiarity and recognizability*, and *relationship building*. Together they form a model on the dynamics of value creation.

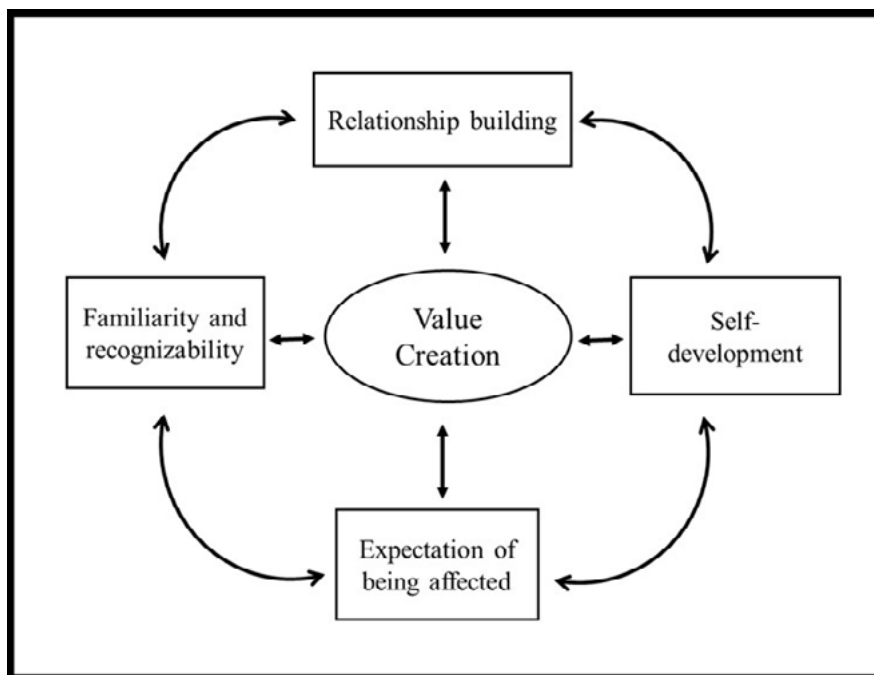


Figure 1. Model on the dynamics of value creation.⁶

The repeated occurrence of certain metaphors in participants’ talk made me realize how embodied sense-making creates tensions between these four dimensions. In the model, *the expectation of being affected* and *the need for self-development* concern issues that matter for spectators when attending performances. *Expectations* become defined by previous satisfying and unsatisfying experiences whereas *self-development* determines the spectator’s motivation to attend a performance. However, in relation to these two dimensions, *familiarity and recognizability* and *relationship building* can further determine which performances spectators end up attending and why, as well as whose work and performances they follow or dismiss.

When I further analysed the metaphors occurring in participants’ talk under each theme, I realized that they repeatedly referred to physical actions, bodily experiences, and spatial dimensions. For example, satisfying experiences were described as ones which “touch”, “move”, “shake” and “captive” oneself, whereas unsatisfying experiences were referred to as “distant”, “cold”, and “unable to move forward”. There was a clear desire to be able to “enter the world” of the performance, “grasp

it” or “get one’s hands on it” and, when the performance had not afforded this, it was described as “empty”, “cold”, or “distant”.

The dynamic interaction between the four dimensions of value creation influences what emerges in the focus of a spectator’s attention, how it becomes affectively framed⁷, and what meaning and value it is given. Therefore, the dynamics of value creation can define which performances spectators choose to attend and how they value these experiences. Contemporary dance as a case study shows how important sensorimotor understanding⁸ is for the art form as well as its genre to become present, available, and accessible for the spectator. The kind of bodies we have and the experiences we have had determine what we can know of contemporary dance and how we can anticipate what it offers for us. The way others’ movements resonate in us and how receptive and open we are for them determines how easily accessible the performances of the genre are for us.

For the research participants, contemporary dance was a promise of experiences in which one does not always know if one likes them. Simultaneously, they experienced it as a genre that enables freedom of movement and breaking boundaries. Contemporary dance can offer intimate experiences that take spectators to abstract areas, but this demands the willingness to take the risk of not knowing if they will like the experience. Spectators are willing to take this risk when they have trust in a performer’s ability to affect them in ways that can take them further, creating valuable experiences for themselves. For participants who felt this way, movement as a means of expression was a counterforce against text and language-based expression.

When anticipating the opportunity to be affected and develop oneself spectators acknowledge the risks involved in watching contemporary dance, they balance trust and distrust, safety and insecurity. One’s relationship with contemporary dance and how well one knows the artists and their work determines how far one takes risks or even desires them. Accordingly, a spectator’s relation to a particular performance, venue, or festival influences how they perceive them and the risks they are willing to take in terms of satisfaction and disappointment in that context. After each performance, whether they liked it or not, spectators have further developed their understanding about contemporary dance, what it means to them and how it affords them an opportunity to maintain and develop their affective and cognitive abilities.⁹ In the words of one of the research participants:

When I study the experience, the inner experience that the performance offered me, then [- -] I look at myself in the first place, so this aspect has opened something in me, it has opened me inwardly one notch to be more freely what I am, and I think that this is priceless because why wouldn’t it be valuable, you could pay any amount of money for that. (Jukka, 43, Zodiak)

However, we should not take it for granted that spectators can always recognize the value of their experiences and are willing to reflect on them. If the performance situation makes it difficult for a spectator to form a relationship with the performers that keeps them captivated, and lets them in the performance, they can become alienated, frustrated and face difficulties of understanding what the performers want to deliver them. These issues came up in all the case studies of the participant’s experiences in performances by choreographers Maija Hirvanen, Tero Saarinen and Sari Palmgren.

7 Maiese 2014.

8 Noë 2012.

9 Colombetti and Krueger 2014.

When analysing the workshop interviews and collages, I noticed that these same four dimensions can influence how the participants anticipated possibilities *to be affected* by these performances. In their experiences, they could balance between familiarity and unfamiliarity depending on their relationship with contemporary dance and the artists. During a performance, the expectation of being affected could emerge as an anticipation of progress if the performance seemed to drag on. If the participants were able to make a personal connection to the issues presented on stage, they could feel affected and experience self-development.

Eventually the kind of relationship and connection they were able to create with the performance determined how the *expectation of being affected* was met. The bodily feelings and tensions that spectators experience define the quality of their relationship with the performance. A sense of progression along with the feelings of captivation determines the balance between the *expectation of being affected* and *self-development* in their experiences. The analysis of the experiences further shows that in a performance situation, the presence of both the performers and spectators is fragile and subject to balancing likes and dislikes. In a spectator's experience the physical and mental abilities and inabilities are the background against which this balancing act happens. They are the basis for expectations of artists' skills as well as for understanding the other's actions on stage from one's own perspective.

When watching the other's movement, spectators are negotiating with their own abilities, disabilities, and inabilities.¹⁰ Through this negotiation, they build their own understanding of what is possible for themselves and others. Therefore, for spectators, contemporary dance can act as a source of meaning and understanding when they can feel that they have a connection to others' actions on stage. Participants' ways of describing how they were either "inside" or "outside" the performance, progressing with it or stuck with it, show how the four dimensions of value creation are interconnected with embodied sense-making that eventually regulate all our interaction with environment.

Although these findings are based on experiences before the pandemic, they make explicit the importance of contemporary dance as a live performing art and as part of human life. This study shows that spectators can perceive dance as a distinctive art form that requires certain abilities of them, such as openness to movement and non-verbal communication to create meaning and value for oneself. The combination of both pre- and post-performance interviews with creative workshops and analysis of recurring themes and metaphors made it possible to rigorously interpret the material and shed further light on the multifaceted processes of value creation within contemporary dance.

Furthermore, regarding performance situations, the collages made in the workshops made visible the traces that performances had left on spectators and what issues had induced their attention. Attention plays a crucial role in value creation and the case studies brought up the challenges spectators face in balancing their attention between competing stimuli, likes, and dislikes. Whatever is the value and meaning of each single experience depends on the spectator, but what is more important is the ability to perceive contemporary dance as a possibility for one's personal value creation process.

For two years now, restrictions to live performances have affected the possibility to test the boundaries of our comfort zone, experience others' abilities, and reflect together with others. There

¹⁰ Garner 2018.

may be new challenges in reaching audiences in the future. These results remind us of what is important for spectators when they can freely enter performances. They remind us that spectators' *expectation of being affected* can guide their desire to attend a performance. Spectators have *a need for self-development* and therefore they want to "grasp" the performance and "get into it." Their *previous relationship* to dance and other performing arts and how it has changed during the pandemic will frame their ability to perceive the performances as opportunities *to be affected and develop oneself*.

What *they can recognize* in the materials of the performances will further influence the level of their expectations. Therefore communications, marketing and audience engagement have an essential role in facilitating the process of value creation and making contemporary dance as well as other performing arts present and accessible again for spectators' perception. Finally, when spectators want to create value for themselves by attending performing arts events, they trust the artists and producers to make it possible for them safely, but they also acknowledge their own responsibility of the experience.

This means that authorities who now restrict live performances should trust that spectators also want to make the experience safe for themselves and others. Whether they like or dislike the content of the performance is another issue, but nevertheless it is part of their personal desire to make meaningful experiences for themselves that negotiate their own abilities collectively with others. The costs of restricting this activity will become clear in the future. Meanwhile, the model on the dynamics of value creation developed in my research shows how, in performing arts, value creation is an embodied process. It shows what matters in value creation for spectators, and how, through their experiences, spectators participate in the creation of the value of performing arts. At the same time, my research challenges the traditional dichotomies between intrinsic and instrumental values of art as well as the hierarchies between emotion and reason in evaluating art. Eventually, the model can work as a tool for developing audience relations in performing arts because it brings the spectator's perspective into the process of value creation.

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