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Material resources as affordances in dance improvisation involving dancers with and without Down syndrome

This presentation examines how material resources—such as fabrics, prompts and spatial arrangements—function as affordances in improvisation practice. I explore how they enable relational epistemic agencies and the emergence of embodied knowledge(s) among dancers with and without Down syndrome. This research is anchored in 2 x 2, the first artistic component of my doctoral research. The artistic research process unfolded over a ten-month period, culminating in a performance. The principles of co-creation and crip time shaped the process.

Dance and other embodied practices involving dancers with Down Syndrome are often viewed from a therapeutic, rehabilitative, or pedagogical perspective. Simultaneously, critical disability studies and other activist efforts in challenging ableism often overlook people with intellectual disabilities. This research intervenes in these narratives by emphasising the relational agency of the dancers and the epistemic richness that emerges from such relationality.

Drawing on the research materials from 2 x 2, the presentation focuses on how materially prompted improvisation practice fosters epistemic agencies and how the embodied knowledge(s) emerge relationally: entangled with materials, space and bodies. Ultimately, it demonstrates how inclusive dance practices have the transformative potential to expand our understanding of embodied knowledge and enrich the broader field of dance research.

Keywords: Inclusive dance, improvisation, materials, epistemic agency, embodied knowledge

Disciplinary field: Dance, artistic research

Format: Paper presentation

Bio: Riina Hannuksela is a dance artist and doctoral researcher at the University of the Arts Helsinki. In her artistic research, she examines the epistemic agency of dancers with and without intellectual disabilities, and how embodied knowledge(s) are manifested and applied in dance improvisation. She is the founder of the inclusive dance company Ihanat. Recently, Riina has co-choreographed and facilitated several works for Ihanat Company and performed in projects that explored the embodiment of social class. She is a visiting lecturer, mentor, and external examiner with expertise in community dance, inclusive practices, and broadened conceptions of contemporary dance.