Catching the Ghost: House Dance and Improvisational Mastery

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Catching the Ghost: House Dance and Improvisational Mastery*

Christian Kronsted

Abstract

I interviewed seven expert house dancers regarding their improvisational practice and discovered several intriguing testimonial consistencies. House dancers articulated a feeling of simultaneously being in control and not in control of their movements. Furthermore, in peak moments of improvisation, interviewees were often surprised by their own capabilities. How do we award artistic credit to someone who is seemingly not aware of his or her own capabilities and reports not being in full executive control? I utilize the theoretical framework of 4E cognition (embodied, enactive, embedded, and extended) to address these philosophical puzzles. I argue that on a 4E reading of house dance improvisation, the standard distinction between control and non-control is not useful, because improvisational cognition is an ongoing enactive loop. Hence, we can credit house dancers on artistic grounds for becoming optimally coupled with the dance environment.

Key Words

4E cognition; affordances; club music; dance improvisation; enactivism; house dance

1. Catching the Ghost.

In the summer and fall of 2019, I conducted a series of interviews with expert and professional house dancers. My aim was to investigate the cognitive mechanisms involved in skilled improvisational vernacular dance performance, especially in

house dancing. Two interesting patterns emerged. First, house dance experts consistently reported that during peak dance improvisation they experience a feeling of being in control of their movements coupled with the sense that they lack executive bodily control. Second, during peak improvisation, dancers are often surprised by their own virtuosity. How can one be a performance expert in a dance genre yet be unaware of one's own bodily capabilities? What does it mean cognitively to be in control and not in control on the house dance floor?

In this dance community, Catching the Ghost is considered the optimal state of improvisation. The phrase refers to coveted and short-lived moments of improvisational mastery. As described by Cody Coflo of the Soul Shifters crew:

> Catching the Ghost is . . . a different plane of your conscious and subconscious . . . I can become hyperaware of [the nuances and rhythmic components of a song and] . . . my body is able to do things . . . I didn't know I was capable of doing (Coflo Interview, 08/13/19).

In Catching the Ghost, improvisational mastery manifests itself on the club dancefloor as a conscious state of intense focus modulated by a form of mental disassociation that can generate self-surprise. On Coflo's telling, to "catch the ghost" is to achieve hyper-attunement to an enveloping environment of throbbing beats, swirling lights, and sweaty bodies to such degree that phenomenologically one loses oneself in it while also being fully agential.

Coflo's testimony, while common among house dancers, is also philosophically puzzling. On one hand, insofar as he is a professional with decades of experience, he knows exactly what he is doing with each step he performs. On the other, expertise in the house dance community is defined by moments in which movers relish being surprised by their own abilities. The puzzle is how to artistically credit experts for the choreographically novel or physically awe-inspiring elements of their performances.

I use 4E approaches to cognition, according to which the mind is embodied, extended, enacted, and embedded, to illuminate the phenomenon of Catching the Ghost and address associated philosophical problems regarding control, self-surprise, and artistic credit. By drawing on key elements of 4E cognition, I outline a case for the claim that house dancers maintain their agency in the senses relevant to being artistically responsible for the outcomes of their peak house dance performances, appealing to the embedded and extended aspects of 4E theory to illuminate how self-surprise and control-non-control are

coherent notions. As we shall see, we can credit house dancers for their artistic achievements because becoming optimally coupled to the environment is a difficult intentional skill.

First, I provide a brief overview of house dance and house dance culture. Then I review the theoretical basics of extended cognition and affordances, framing them with various descriptions of house dance provided by the interviewees. Next, I build on these insights by introducing social affordances and social cognition and illuminating how these 4E concepts apply to the case of house dance, especially in terms of embodied enaction. In the final section, I demonstrate how my picture of house dance as a paradigm case of extended, embedded, embodied, and enactive cognition allows us to assign artistic credit to the dancer.

My aim here is not to defend 4E cognition against other contenders in the philosophy of mind. Rather, I demonstrate how we can apply the tools of 4E models of cognition to a particular dance-related case study to see how 4E theory can illuminate its artistic complexities.

2. What is house dance?

House dance is a vernacular dance form performed to the electronic music known as house. House music gained worldwide popularity in the late 1970s to the early '80s and today is a well-established global phenomenon with numerous regional sub-genres. It is important to understand that house music and house dance are two separate phenomena. House dancing is a dance sub-culture complete with its own spiritual and philosophical system. Casual club-goers and house music listeners typically do not participate in house dance and are not part of the house dance culture (Coflo Interview, 08/13/19). Most casual club-goers and dance professionals are not aware that house dance culture exists or that it has codified steps, rituals, norms, slang, proverbs, a canon of songs, and semi-sacred spaces.

The foundations of contemporary house dance were largely established by a group of key players in the New York City underground dance scene in the early 2000s.[1] However, this potent dance environment gained many of its steps and expressions from West Coast and Midwest Dancers who were in New York City at this time (Poseidon Interview, 08/30/19). What we know as house dance today is a blend of styles from across urban centers in the United States that were codified and became self-aware in New York City around the new millennium. Quickly after its inception, as a self-aware sub-culture, house

dance spread across Japan and France; today it is a global sub-culture with distinct regional styles.

While the focus of house dance is cooperative, often spiritual, fluid crowd improvisation, there are now large international competitions in which the dance takes on a harder, more aggressive look. It is beyond the scope of this paper to fully outline house dance culture and track its history. For my purposes, it is important that house dance is a codified social dance that typically takes place in public dance spaces such as clubs. It is a highly improvisational form that can be performed alone, with a partner, or in large groups. Furthermore, house dance interactions often fluidly switch between these modes. House dance culture has standards for good and bad house dance execution, and dance events center around reaching a semi-spiritual high (Catching the Ghost) through improvisation.

While other popular dance subcultures, such as breaking, are highly competitive, house dancers generally speak of attaining social and metaphysical unity through joint improvisation.[2] The dancers aim to achieve a mental state of feeling merged with the environment or becoming a collective agent: an aesthetic hive mind. In the literature on contact improvisation, dancers often attest to seeking the experience of heightened or merged agency.[3] House dancers seek out and report similar experiences of joint agency. However, house dancers report experiencing a kind of joint agency that stems not only from their exchanges with co-dancers but also from other people in the club, the structural features of the music, and even the physical environment itself. Accordingly, agency in house dance is what cognitive science calls extended, embedded, embodied, and enactive — the four 'e's in 4E.

3. 4E cognition and house dance

I focus here on seven in-depth interviews with expert house dancers using Barbara Montero's definition of an expert: someone who has more than ten years of experience, has outstanding achievements in their field, and continues to improve actively.[4] Each interview lasted an hour and a half and was focused on eliciting careful descriptions of the improvisational process. Without being prompted to do so, every participant repeatedly emphasized the roles of the environment. Participants highlighted as crucial factors the texture of the floor, the layout of the room, lighting, and the presence of non-dancers, sometimes referred to as "civilians." Furthermore, all interview subjects emphasized the importance of volume and base so that they could feel the musical vibrations throughout their bodies. For example, Cody Coflo

described the sensation of feeling the music vibrate through the core of his body: "In house music culture and the dance the music is produced sonically to be felt, not just heard. You don't play this music on teeny tiny speakers. There's meant to be air pressure, there's meant to be low-end frequencies, mid-range frequencies, these things that you can feel course through your body" (Coflo interview, 08/13/19). Similarly, Amy Tsunami articulated how, when improvisation is unfolding in its most successful form, whether solo or in concert with others, several environmental factors structure the engagement:

> All those pieces [of the environment] you know coming in and looking around, even to the point of what is the floor like, how does the floor feel, you know is it sticky, is it slippery, is there a puddle? Did someone spill their drink? Are there bags on the floor? Am I connecting initially from the moment I walk in, do I want to get into the groove here? Am I feeling the DJs, what they're playing right now, you know, or even something like just feeling the temperature of the room. Also, what are the civilians doing? (Ami Tsunami Interview, 08/25/19).

Throughout the ongoing improvisational interaction, the dancers are drawing from various resources in the environment to reign in and structure the movements that can or cannot be performed. The environment as a totality generates the possibilities with which the dancer can interact. Gherik Poseidon, from Detroit, recalls that his best nights of improvisation happened under highly constrained conditions, dancing in a narrow hallway behind a set of trashcans in an above-capacity night club (Poseidon Interview, 08/30/19). Similarly, Mike Sneeks from Chicago describes the fluid dance style and technique that he and his mentors developed from dancing on tightly packed dance floors, reporting, "When I see a lot of the older guys, their bodies just move that way because they learned to dance in a lot smaller space" (Sneeks interview, 10/09/19). Sneeks explains that unlike breakdancing, which always requires a lot of space, house dancers will change the size of their movements as floor space opens or narrows. When describing the ideal improvisational situation, Sneeks emphasizes that the tightly constrained environment of the dance club is what moves him into the ideal improvisational state of mind: "It's almost like everybody just melts away, you know, and all of a sudden you're the only one dancing in the club even though you are shoulder to shoulder with other people" (Sneeks interview, 10/09/19). The club, with its pulsating crowd, is what makes it possible for the dancer to get into the right state of mind in which problems disappear and they are purely improvising, that is, the tight physical constraints of the environment shape the expression of the dance and how it is

executed. Throughout the interviews, the dancers described a plurality of factors, such as floor texture, air quality, lighting, speaker vibrations, physical obstacles, and so on, each of which impacts the body of the dancer encouraging them to express themselves in a specific way.

In the literature on 4E cognition, two concepts are especially helpful in understanding what the house dancers are reporting: affordances and the extended mind. Let us begin with the extended mind. On this model, cognitive processes do not take place solely in the brain; instead, objects in our environments reliably function as cognitive appendages that become part and parcel of our thinking.[5] Notebooks allow us to literally store memories in the environment; GPS allows us to navigate physical space, phones let us communicate over distances; whiteboards allow us to do complicated math; well-designed buildings can make us relaxed or experience awe; and so forth. In dance, as in life, our physical environments, through their capabilities and structure, enable us to do and think things we cannot achieve alone.[6] In this way, "the mind" or "the mental" is extended into the environment; thus, the environment is a constitutive part of cognition. In house dance improvisation, the environment itself both constrains *and* empowers the dancer. Many of the amazing feats of improvisational house dancing are constituted by dancer-environment couplings. House dancers consistently rely on their environments, including other people, to shape and lead the unfolding improvisation. In consequence, if we were to remove the house dancer from their context and insert them into a different context, a different improvisational product would emerge.

At any given moment, an expert house dance performer could be doing any of a thousand steps, so why do they perform the steps that they do rather than some other step? To answer this question, we can look to the concept "affordances." Affordances are typically defined as possibilities for actions within the environment.[7] For example, we experience an apple as edible, a football as kickable, and a door as openable. Another way of conceptualizing affordances is to add "-ability" to the perceived purposes of objects. We typically experience objects in terms of "what we can do with them," so, on this picture, chairs have sit-ability, buttons have push-ability, and hands have shake-ability.

When house dancers improvise in a highly scaffolded environment, such as a nightclub, they do not move around randomly. Rather, the dancers are sensitive to immediate environmentally provided affordances. The multitude of environmental factors limits the range of available affordances

and helps solicit the choice of the house dancer. We can see this role of constraining and scaffolding more clearly when we consider the role of the music. Each of the interview subjects described how the music not only constrained and enabled their movements but also helped shape their affect. The general sentiment is that the music (chosen by the DJ) dictates both what the dancer does and the range of what they should feel. Such reports are consistent with accounts of cognitive science that take music as a reliable emotion regulator, according to which we often use music as an extended cognitive process to regulate and bring forth affective and emotional states.[8]

In house dance, the music is perceived as a person-like entity that directs the dancer and the entire dance ecosystem: "So, as the music plays, it is calling you to do certain things. How do you know what the music is telling you to do? It's the vibrations okay, the vibrations and frequencies, so when the music change, you know what it's trying to tell you" (Leesah Joy interview, 09/08/19). Leesah Joy's description of the baseline vibrations telling the dancer what to do is not only a prime example of experiencing affordances, it is also consistent with the empirical literature on music baselines. This research shows that base significantly affects how much dancers rock their hips and heads without dancers necessarily being aware.[9] Leesah Joy's perspective is common among House dancers. The music is felt and perceived as a person-like entity with a powerful authority that dictates what is happening in the dance improvisation from moment to moment and with what kind of affect.[10] In such an immensely charged space, the music provides the dance ecosystem with a specific set of affordances that guide the dancer's improvisational choices. Thus, dancers can rely on a shared field of musically provided affordances.

However, affordances are also immensely interpersonal; in the act of improvisational dance, the dancers provide each other with, and act upon, social affordances. Here it can be helpful to think about conventions such as the handshake; an outstretched hand affords shake-ability to the other person, under the right cultural circumstances. Similarly, in North American popular culture, kicking one's foot forward and taking a step backward invites one's partner to do the Kid-N-Play. Affordances are socially specific and rely on a shared cultural hermeneutical background.[11] In this same way, subcultures such as house dance have their own history, norms, symbols, and so forth that operate as a shared hermeneutical background facilitating the shared space of social affordances.

Such socially specific affordances become "live" only in the right environments, in which the participants engage in house dance culture and house dancing. This reaffirms the importance of the environment. A house dancer cannot improvise well without a context to provide them with the right affordances. Environments enhance improvisational agency because they provide the dancer with a landscape of affordances to act upon.

4. Social cognition during house dance improvisation

Here, it is worth taking a step back to look at how social cognition is achieved in house dance.[12] Understanding others in a social setting is a process that is brought *forth in and through bodily interactions*. From 4E philosophers of cognitive science Hanna De Jaegher and Ezequiel Di Paolo, we get the following definition of social interaction:

> Social interaction is the regulated coupling between at least two autonomous agents, where the regulation is aimed at aspects of the coupling itself so that it constitutes an emergent autonomous organization in the domain of relational dynamics, without destroying in the process the autonomy of the agents involved (though the latter's scope can be augmented or reduced).[13]

This definition of social interaction stands in stark contrast to the classic contenders on the market of social cognition: theory theory, and simulation theory.[14] On such accounts, to understand others as minded beings is to perform internal computations and then project the results onto the other agent. However, on such accounts we never have actual access to the others' minds. Enactive cognitive science, on the other hand, tells a very different story; we do, in fact, have access to the mental life of other agents. Through bodily social interaction, we gain insight into other agents. The classic Cartesian internal-external distinction is abandoned, and mental states become public events with which we can all interact.[15] We do not build internal models of other people through interaction. Rather, *the interaction itself is the mental state of the other person. Social understanding happens in and through interaction*. Consequently, we get to know people through ongoing participation that, in turn, become increasingly more nuanced and sophisticated as we get acquainted (through enaction, embodiment, and extended cognition as aspects of a single process). This process of knowing in and through social interaction is a form of collective meaning-making known in the 4E literature as *participatory sense-making*.[16]

Importantly, participatory sense-making is a multimodal theory of intersubjectivity. On this model, low-level embodied

processes and higher-level cognitive functions link up to make each participant constituents of a joint dynamic system. Such a system —the ongoing sustained interaction of two or more agents — can do things cognitively that go beyond what each agent can do in isolation.[17] Participatory sense-making takes place as two or more agents each use their autonomy to perpetuate the exchange.

Empirical research has shown that dance interaction is structured by embodied synchrony across various processes and modalities.[18] Here conversation is the paradigm case. Each speaker will naturally begin to synchronize posture, gesture, tone of voice, mimicry, gaze tracking, joint attention, brain activation, and numerous other low-level embodied modalities.[19] As such processes begin to align, each participant in the conversation must keep the participation going by taking turns regulating and being regulated, typically through speaking and listening. In fact, *it is much harder not to synchronize than to synchronize*. In other words, bodies naturally fall into alignment with each other and facilitate the possibility for agents to develop the interaction through autonomous turn-taking. [20]

Nonetheless, autonomous choices are crucial for genuine social interaction. For example, if only one person wants to dance and the other person is dragging their body across the floor like a rag doll, it is hard to call such an interaction a social interaction. [21] Genuine social interactions require that each person use their autonomy to perpetuate the interaction. Thus, participatory sense-making posits an ongoing loop between autonomous choice and low-level embodied alignment processes where each reinforces the other.

As the interaction unfolds, agents become increasingly familiar with one another through the common history of exchange they have built between each other. Knowing other persons, and knowing them as minded beings, is a matter of building an increasingly smoother repertoire of interaction.[22] To dance with another person is also to build such a repertoire of interaction. Consequently, house dance is an acquainting process.

As house dancers begin to align and take turns regulating and being regulated, the repertoire of social affordances begins to develop between the dancers. Through reciprocity, social agents — in this case house dancers — create and act on affordances for one another. This happens in a fluidly unfolding cycle as each agent acts to perpetuate the exchange. Understanding others is a contextual enterprise in which the coupling between

people can be regarded as an environmentally situated dynamic system. The way I understand my dance partner is based not only based on our collective history but also on the situation in which we find ourselves currently, including the physical environment.[23] Each physical environment and situation thus help facilitate the production of different social affordances during participatory sense-making.

With the participatory sense-making loop in mind, we can understand how house dancers achieve a sensation of joint agency or "oneness" through collaborative improvisation. As a result of the ongoing give and take of affordances and various embodied processes aligning into a tightly synchronized system, a state of group agency emerges. Similar cases of joint agency have been reported in the careful study of expert contact improvisers.[24] So, we should not be surprised when house dancers report a sense that their agency merges with others' and with the environment, generating an experience of oneness.[25]

The point is that when we are looking at moments of truly masterful improvisation, at least in house dance, we cannot separate the environment from cognition.[26] The physical environment is constituent of the ongoing action-perception affordance cycle. Cognition is not a brain-bound set of calculations, but a holistic process constituted by and carried out across the brain, body, and environment.

5. Controlled-non-control movement.

Now we are ready to look at "controlled-non-control." House dancers can coherently report being both in control and not in control of their movements because they are simultaneously acting upon the system and also being acted on. The environment of other dancers, music, physical settings, and so is regulating the body of the dancer *as* the dancer is regulating the environment. Accordingly, there is a seamless dual process of movement control-non-control taking place simultaneously.

We have seen that the music, other people, the shared cultural background, and the physical features of the space itself are all responsible for co-constituting house dance improvisation. I am, of course, not claiming that the dancers cannot improvise without the presence of these features. I once danced in a dentist's office waiting room when I thought no one was around. However, the claim is that *peak* improvisational performance is achieved in concert with many factors external to the dancer. This claim is supported when we look at the house dance interviewees' descriptions of the optimal state of improvisation,

a state of complete fluid attunement with the environment and hyper-awareness that, following Coflo, I have called "Catching the Ghost." It is a state of uninhibited creativity through a complete immersion and connection to the music and the dance environment. As Coflo describes it:

> Catching the Ghost is like it's these weird moments. It's a different plane of your conscious and subconscious element; it's like you become so much inside of yourself but so much outside of yourself that you're hyper aware. But you're maybe not necessarily consciously choosing to do certain things. I might become aware of all the nuances and rhythmic components of a song, like I might start hearing things in a song that I would never notice normally. All of a sudden, I can become hyper aware of these things and then there's this weird subconscious component where my body is able to do things and it might be physically stuff I didn't know I was capable of doing. It is just the creative way it comes out, it is almost uninhibited. (Coflo interview, 08/13/19).

While other interview subjects used other terms such as "tapping in," "tapping out," "bugging out," and the like, the notion described is the same. Catching the Ghost is the condition in which, due to the highly scaffolded and constrained environment, the dancer gains increased focus on the dance activity and the dance environment to the exclusion of other things. Importantly, when in the state of Catching the Ghost, interview subjects describe experiencing hyper-awareness and an increased sense of agency precisely because of how much they are attuned to the *entire environment*. Several of the interview subjects emphasized that the state of Catching the Ghost cannot be reproduced outside of the right house dance setting. Catching the Ghost is paradigmatically an embedded experience that provides the dancer with a sense of freedom exactly because the environment is scaffolding many of their cognitive processes.

However, Catching the Ghost is precarious. One can easily lose this precious state: the "civilians" might interrupt, a bad song comes on, someone has bad body odor, maybe a sudden craving for a burrito ensues, and so on.

Using the framework of participatory sense-making, we can clarify the seemingly contradictory report that dancers are fully in control of their movements as creativity is also "pouring out" uninhibited. In line with the model of participatory sense-making, the dancer's improvisational agency exists as a dialectic between the push and pull of the dynamic environmental processes and the agent's affordance choices. The low-level embodied processes of synchronization and the actions of other

agents quite literally regulate the dancer's body and facilitate the dancer's agency. At the same time, the dancer is skillfully asserting their agency back upon the environment, cycling between overt movement control and responsive non-control. Hence, dancers' descriptions of Catching the Ghost fall in line with recent phenomenological research on dance improvisation in which agency is characterized as the ability to transform energy flows from the environment.[27] When Catching the Ghost, even if for a brief moment, the dancer is in near perfect attunement with the various dynamical relations that exist in the dance environment and is therefore scaffolded into a form of agency in which they simultaneously feel the movement pouring out of them while also feeling in control of one's actions.

6. Surprise, control, and artistic attribution

House dance can be thought of as embodied, embedded, extended, and enactive. In house dance, the participatory sense-making loop gives rise to the situation of simultaneously being in control and not in control of one's movements. Next, we will look at the phenomenon of self-surprise and the possibility of artistic attribution.

In the case of house dance, and probably other types of improvisational dance, being surprised by one's own physical abilities is possible due to the heavily extended and embedded nature of the improvisation. Different environments (people, music, space, and so on) will couple with the dancer differently, depending on the plurality of factors present on that night. In cognitive science-speak, house dance improvisation can be seen as a complex, non-linear, dynamic system, that is, a system in which the number of factors impacting the system is so great that we cannot predict how the system will unfold. Rather, we must simply let the system develop and see where it goes.

It follows that it is possible to have artistic mastery in a dance form such as house while also being surprised by one's capabilities. What the dancer is a master of is using their body to dynamically couple to various features of the environment. In other words, the masterful improviser is an expert in coupling themselves to the various systems in the environment that comprises the larger system. We can think of the expert house dancer as someone who is good at letting their body plug into the various energy flows of an environment and functioning as a conduit for those flows. Consequently, one can be a master at a skill such as house dance while not knowing the limits of one's capabilities because it is the coupling between systems that determine how movements unfold. What different couplings will produce is undetermined until it happens in front of our eyes.

This conclusion, in turn, tells us something important about artistic evaluation. We can, in fact, attribute the dancer with artistic credit for the improvisational performance despite the state of controlled-non-control. The dancer has virtuosity in dynamically coupling themselves to the environment. What the coupling produces might sometimes be outside of their control and beyond what was anticipated. However, this does not mean that they should not be credited for their artistic accomplishment; dynamically coupling to the environment in varied ways and maintaining those couplings is a skillful, complicated, and intentional achievement. Often a skillful improviser or a seasoned audience member can roughly predict the direction of unfolding the system will take. However, just as with weather forecasts, due to the complexity of the dynamic system, we often must simply wait to see what happens. Being the optimal conduit for the resonance of the dance environment is a difficult and intentional skill, and it is mastery of this skill that allows us to credit the house dance improviser for the artistic properties of intricate movement passages as exemplified on the club floor.

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Endnotes

*This article received the 2020 Outstanding Student Paper Award from the American Society for Aesthetics. *Contemporary Aesthetics* recommends reading Renee Conroy's article, "Reflections on 'Catching the Ghost: House Dance and Improvisational Mastery,'" following this article.

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[10] Common house music affective soundscapes reported by interviewees include among others; uplifting, angry, aggressive, carefree, spiritual, religious, loving, cool, and "deep," affects.

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