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# Dance as democracy among people 65+

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**ABSTRACT**
This study sheds light on dance as democracy among people 65+. The article presents a study that is part of the project Age on Stage, in which elderly people were offered to express themselves through dance as an aesthetic form of expression. Hannah Arendt and Simone de Beauvoir are applied as philosophical lenses. Elderly people's participation and involvement in dance activities are investigated and discussed. The specific aim is to describe and analyse contemporary dance as a form of democracy among people 65+. The following questions were formulated: What constitutes dance as communication within a group of elderly people? How do the participants internalise and use dance as an artistic form of expression in relation to the possibilities and limitations a workshop provides? A phenomenological analysis based on field notes and video recordings have generated the following themes: a functional body with impetus to move, to embody dance as a form of expression, to use Dance as a Form of Artistic Expression in Aesthetic Communication, and Reflections on life, body and dance. The results reveal existential and aesthetic dimensions of dance activities for elderly people that have not been emphasized to any greater extent in earlier studies.

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## Introduction

Today, in Swedish society, differences are growing regarding who has the right to learn, and use, artistic forms of expression. Where a citizen comes from, socially and geographically, as well as preconditions such as gender and age, to an increasingly greater extent determine available means for handling life (Ferm Almqvist 2016). According to UNESCO's website (20171031), one of the stated millennium goals is a focus on furthering 'a set of practices and activities aimed at making young people as well as adults better equipped to participate actively in democratic life by assuming and exercising their rights and responsibilities in society.' Hence, it can be argued that all Swedish citizens should have the right to learn and use artistic forms of expression, and should be guaranteed access to cultural events and activities. However, because of current societal structures, elderly people are commonly not offered opportunities to express themselves in dance. Therefore, research that investigates situations where elderly people get the chance to internalise dance as an artistic expression is needed.

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Hitherto, research focusing dance with elderly people, mostly conducted within the area of community dance, can be divided into two focus areas, namely, health treatment and wellbeing. Within the area of health treatment, both benefits and effects are brought to attention in research (Alpert et al. 2009; Fernández-Argüelles et al. 2015; Duncan and Earhart 2014; Hackney and Earhart 2009; Merom et al. 2016; Soriano and Batson 2011; Toygar 2018; Ying 2010). In a study by Merom et al. (2016) the benefits of dance are investigated in comparison to more functional forms of training, such as walking. The participants were recruited from the suburbs of Sydney, they had to be over 60 years of age, and be able to walk for at least 50 minutes. The 115 participants were divided into two groups, where one group participated in a one-hour social dance class twice a week, while the other, the control group, participated in functional training. Both of these groups were participating in their respective activities for eight months. The result did not support that multisensory activities (e.g. dance) for elderly people benefited from executive functions, learning, and memory more than from, for example, walking. The result suggested that participating in dance activities might improve visuo-spatial learning and memory more than participating in walking activities. The result also implied that dance activity might include cognitive challenges, which makes it necessary to adapt the activity to the cognitive abilities of the participants. In another study, the research literature on dance and health treatment was explored (Fernández-Argüelles et al. 2015). The result of the analysis showed positive effects on balance, flexibility, gait, muscle strength and physical performance. In a study of jazz dance classes for elderly women (+50) Alpert et al. 2009) showed that jazz dance might improve elderly women's balance. How dance can benefit people with Parkinson disease has been clarified in several research articles (Duncan and Earhart 2014; Hackney and Earhart 2009; Toygar 2018; Ying 2010). Both Tango and Irish Set Dance are emphasized in research to be beneficial for people with Parkinson's disease. A study conducted among people with Parkinson's disease that participated in a dance class in Argentine tango for 2 years showed that participation improved their motor and non-motor symptom (Duncan and Earhart 2014). Another study including tango for people with Parkinson disease also included waltz/foxtrot (Hackney and Earhart 2009). The study was designed as an intervention with 20 dance classes in either tango or waltz/foxtrot during 13 weeks, and also included a control group. The result showed that both groups that participated in the dance classes improved their balance and locomotion, while the control group did not improve these abilities. Participating in tango showed the most significant effects. The study included a control group that did not participate in dance and in total 10 people with Parkinson's disease participated. Research about Parkinson's patients commonly focuses on aspects of health and wellbeing. However, Soriano and Batson (2011) research has shed light on the process of selecting class content for modern dance classes for Parkinson's patients. The modern dance class did involve seated barre exercises, movement across the floor, improvisation and choreography. The participants expressed a developed confidence in the coordination of movements, and repetition made the exercises easier to perform. The participants appreciated the improvisational content in the class.

The second research focus within community dance for elderly people is wellbeing (Fortin 2018; In-Sil et al. 2015; Thornberg, Lindquist, and Josephsson 2012). The field covers research that focuses on the participants' wellbeing in relation to their participation in community dance. A study by In-Sil et al. (2015) aimed to find a relationship

between wellbeing, health consciousness, and life satisfaction among participants in community dance. The informants in the study involved middle-aged to elderly women who responded to a survey. In total 511 survey respondents were included who all were involved in community dance. The result showed that participating in community dance made a difference regarding the women's wellbeing tendency, health consciousness, and life satisfaction. Especially, the hours of participation had significance for the tendency for wellbeing. Thornberg, Lindquist, and Josephsson (2012) highlighted evidence that activities such as dance have positive effects, but that the focus in research on the participants' experiences has been limited. Their study (Thornberg, Lindquist, and Josephsson 2012) aimed to investigate elderly people's own experiences of dance workshops. Seventeen participants were included in the study aged between 61 and 89 years old. Data were gathered through qualitative interviews and DVD-recordings. The result showed that experiences of participating in dance workshops can appear as being beneficial. The participants expressed that it was surprising to experience the body-mind connection that could be seen in relation to memorizing the order of movements, finding a new meaning of memories, and emotional response to the body actions. The result also showed that the participants experienced personal growth, including personal development, being strengthened as human beings, which was unexpected for the participants.

Within community dance, the belief that dance is for everyone and that everybody can dance constitutes a starting-point (Barr 2013; Green 2000). The activity is about expressing oneself in dance and working on finding identity through relationships to other participants in the community (Camic et al., 2014; In-Sil et al. 2015; Pearce & Lillyman, 2015; Phinney et al., 2014). Finding an identity is seen as a process where the participants develop their ability to express their thoughts and values. The process is focusing on harmony and communication with other participants (In-Sil et al. 2015), which is in line with Thornberg, Lindquist, and Josephsson (2012) who highlights evidence that activities such as dance have positive influences. Thornberg, Lindquist, and Josephsson (2012) suggest that there is a research gap when it comes to the participants' experiences. Another missing aspect of the research is the role of the choreographer in the creative process of community dance (Barr 2013).

Hence, community dance for elderly people has primarily been studied from medical, psychological, or therapeutic perspectives. However, existential and aesthetic views can also be seen as relevant from a dance educational perspective. In an earlier study (Ferm Almqvist and Andersson 2019), we investigated the role of the choreographer with the aim of offering participation in dance as an artistic art form to elderly people. In this study, we also shed light on the participant's experiences throughout the dance workshop. The results showed how the choreographer influenced possibilities for participation in terms of how workshops are *designed* and what *inputs* are given in the process, what *atmosphere* is created, how participants are to use their *bodies*, and how *dance as an artistic form of expression* is offered. In this article, the impetus was to go into the actual actions and try to understand how dance activities can be viewed and defined as democracy. A starting point is that human beings are created and re-created in communicative settings and that the right to express oneself and be listened to is crucial in relation to democracy. This article can hopefully contribute to a discussion regarding how dance can enable people to think about their communities, environments, their past

and future, and themselves as human beings. In the following, we present a study which is part of the project *Age on Stage*, in which elderly people, with mixed experience of dance, were offered to participate in a one-week dance workshop series, led by a professional choreographer and her assistant. The attendees consisted of 20 women and 4 men, between the ages 65 and 85, who had never met before. Simone de Beauvoir's view on ageing and Hannah Arendt's thoughts on democracy, including the concepts of *vita activa, vita contemplativa*, and common sense, are used as theoretical lenses.

## Aim and research questions

The specific aim of the study is to describe and analyse contemporary dance as democracy among people 65+. What constitutes dance as communication within a group of elderly people? How do the participants internalise and use dance as an artistic form of expression in relation to the possibilities and limitations a workshop provides? In the following text, we firstly present the theoretical base of the article and define central concepts. Ageing is elaborated upon with the help of de Beauvoir's philosophical thinking, and different levels of action in relation to democracy are conceptualised in relation to Arendt's philosophy. Connections to dimensions of the dance workshops will be drawn to concretise theoretical levels of action. Thereafter, the chosen methodology is described and motivated. The result of the analysis is presented as levels of activities. Excerpts from the video-recorded workshops are presented to exemplify the communicative level of activity and participation, which emanated from the analysis of the generated material. Each excerpt is followed by an analytical comment. Conclusions of the study are presented before a final discussion, where the results are reflected upon, not least in relation to de Beauvoir's philosophy of ageing, and where implications for practice are illuminated.

## Theory

To offer an opening into aging in relation to democracy and artistic forms of expression, Simone de Beauvoir's (1972) thoughts about the situated body are presented shortly. As human beings age, she emphasizes, the body is transformed, not only in the physical sense but more importantly in the sense of restricted existential possibilities. From the outside, aging bodies are seen as deteriorating, according to de Beauvoir. Elderly people ask themselves if they can remain themselves despite becoming different, she continues, and underlines that there is always a risk that human beings see themselves the same way as others see them. As Beauvoir puts it: 'in order to resolve the "identification crisis" we must unresolvedly accept a new image of ourselves.' (de Beauvoir 1972, 296). The question is what consequences a current image of self gives when it comes to possible meanings of life, and how such meanings could be changed in artistic communicative settings.

Beauvoir's memoirs relate to two illnesses of her own and two almost fatal accidents when she was close to death. All this made her realise that a sick person loses individuality, withdraws from engagement with others, becomes an object for others, and is reduced to flesh. In this way, she shows how bodily changes alter human beings' experience of time. Humans act in the present in the light of more or less specific goals relating to the future. This is, according to de Beauvoir, how transcendence is

accomplished. But, for the elderly, the future might look brief. For them 'the world falls silent' (de Beauvoir 1972, 484), she stresses. With age comes the awareness of mortality, leading humans to cognize the human being's limited time onto their own life. 'As the years go by the future shortens while our past grows heavier' (Ibid. p. 542). Elderly people used to identify themselves with the projects they executed in the past. In the present, projects are undertaken by those younger than themselves, while the elderly commonly daydream and think of the past. So, old age, according to Beauvoir, is haunted by the memories of childhood and youth. Because of the shrinkage of the future, the elderly 'take refuge in habit' (Ibid. p. 466), and repetitive behaviour. Memory links human beings to the past. But, in old age, memory is unreliable. So, how can life be taken seriously, and as a possibility for being and becoming, despite a rapidly shrinking future?

While Beauvoir reminds us that ageing is a universal existential process, it is not the same for each person. In addition to conditions of health, sociocultural situations are all important. She exemplifies her own view that a more privileged old age is available to an intellectual, and to the rich, than to the manual worker. As a true existentialist she followed the advice she gave in *Old Age* up to her last year, up to her death, 'to go on pursuing ends that give our existence a meaning – devotion to individuals, to groups, or to causes, social, political, intellectual, or creative work' (de Beauvoir 1972, 540). Her life is an example of her own philosophy that 'one's life has value so long as one attributes value to the life of others, by means of love, friendship, indignation, compassion' (Ibid. p. 541). She surrounded herself with intimate relationships in her old age. To relate de Beauvoir's thoughts to the present study, taking part in dance workshops demands an active choice, but could offer the kind of stimulating situations that de Beauvoir holds as important.

Moreover, her book *Old Age* also has an ethical purpose. The elderly have their own dignity in spite of enduring biological deterioration. In a society based on equal human worth their lives still have meaning and value for us all. She notes that 'old age exposed the failure of our entire civilization. It is the whole man that must be remade, it is the whole relation between man and man that must be recast if we wish the old person's state to be acceptable' (de Beauvoir 1972, 806). Based on the expressions in the policy documents referred to earlier in the text, a society should create situations where old persons can be themselves and where the condition of being old is actually acceptable. de Beauvoir stresses that 'we must live a life so committed, so justified, that we can continue to cherish it even when all our illusions are lost and our ardor for life has cooled' (Ibid. 567). Such an approach demands conscious relation to the awareness of death. de Beauvoir underscores that old humans undergo the deprivation and loss of contemporaries through death. This anguish had always been the opposite side of her immense desire to live and to be happy. She held that the idea of death provokes a reflex to live and that an awareness of human mortality is the basic source of anxiety. de Beauvoir's philosophy of ageing functions as a foundation when it comes to what it can mean for the elderly to participate in dance workshops, and as in incentive to investigate the workshop series as situations where elderly people can be and become what they already are through communication.

Furthermore, we use Arendt's philosophical thinking on democracy, including vita activa, vita contemplative, and common sense, in order to analyse generated material and contribute to the understanding of dance as communication among elderly people from

a democratic perspective. Arendt's thinking helps us to view the dance workshop as a shared space, and to what extent it is influenced by inclusion, equality and, not least, democracy. A crucial starting point in her philosophy was the balance between Vita Activa and Vita Contemplativa. Arendt sought to make connections between the two possible. She maintained that Vita Activa takes place in the world, wherein human beings are born, through speech and action, and where actors and audience depend on each other. To reach common sense, human beings also need to step back, Arendt stresses, and think, imagine, value and reflect – activities that constitute Vita Contemplativa (Arendt 1958).

Vita Activa consists of the following three notions: 1) *Labour* (animal laborans) which focuses on human beings' survival activities; originally, to get food and a place to live, which in this setting could be connected to the quality of life, that is, to maintain a functional body, through healthy training and food, impetus, experience, atmosphere, and space for movement; 2) *Work* (homo faber), which includes the creation of necessary things that can give profit, provides safety but is also mandatory, and is not in harmony with nature. Originally, in her philosophy, work is about production, as, for example, carpenting. In the prest study, work could be said to concern having functional dance equipment, a safe physical and psychological environment, good dance technique, and understanding of dance concepts together with good musical equipment; 3) *Action* – (the political life) is where human beings are seen as political beings. Actions at this level do not have any goals in themselves, they concern economics, politics, and art, and they contribute to something lasting. This can be compared to the workshop where dance is used as a form of expression per se, where elderly people are growing, become themselves, and develop holistic dance competency, in the community, and in interaction with each other. Activities at all three levels take place at the same time and are to some extent intertwined with each other. Dance knowledge, as well as existential dimensions of dance (cf Andersson & Ferm Thorgersen, 2015), develop at all three levels, are always changing and constitute pre-conditions for each other. It can be stated that new pre-conditions for taking part in aesthetic communication are re-created continuously.

Political life is characterised by equality and pluralism (Arendt 1958). Human beings are born into political life; they do not need any other qualifications to participate in the good life. Together people create political and economical institutions in society, which in turn becomes bearers of history. Norms are created in cooperation by active human beings where language functions as a precondition. In political life, human beings meet as equals in a public space where they speak and act, and freely express their opinions. Through human actions and appearance in public, things get 'real,' and through conversations and actions with each other the *who* appears in relation to a common and meaningful world – a world where people are related as well as separated. This should also be crucial aspects of well-functioning workshop weeks, organised in the spirit of equality, where mutual recognition and respect for each other's rights, not only each other's existence, are prevalent. What can Arendt's thoughts contribute with, when it comes to understanding the workshop series? In being with others in the common and given world, individual existence becomes possible, Arendt emphasizes, but there is also a need to reflect upon activities, which she labels Vita Contemplativa, that are important aspects of dance activities that aim for common growth.

Vita Contemplativa (the philosophical thinking life) consists of different ways of thinking considered in terms of thinking, willing, and judging. In 'Thinking and Moral Considerations' (1971), Arendt states that thinking is about dealing with objects that are absent and hence removed from direct sense perception. Thereby, an object of thought is always a re-presentation of something or somebody that is absent, and only present in the form of an image. Arendt underlines that philosophers, who primarily deal with thinking, have separated themselves from the communalism that she stresses as being's most human condition. Furthermore, she underlines that when philosophers turn away from most of the perishable world of illusions to enter the world of eternal truths, they withdraw into themselves (1971). In addition, Arendt states that freedom resides in natality, and the responsibility to respond to the appearance of something or someone new is what she calls thinking. This kind of thinking cannot be acquired in conventional ways; it is not a capacity for reflexive problem-solving, or a skill or a strategy: rather it is a search for meaning (Arendt 1958). Therefore, although it inspires the highest worldly productivity of homo faber, thinking is by no means a human being's prerogative; it begins to assert itself as her source of inspiration only where she overreaches herself, as it were, and begins to produce useless things, objects that are unrelated to material or intellectual wants, to the physical needs of human beings no less than to her thirst for knowledge. Cognition, on the other hand, like fabrication itself, is a process with a beginning and an end, whose usefulness can be tested and which, if it produces no results, has failed (Arendt 1958, 171). In this sense, Arendt underlines, thinking is something that exists within every person and is not a function of intelligence, and by that, once again, it stands in contrast to cognition or knowledge as construction (Arendt 1971). Thinking is no prerogative of the few but an ever-present possibility for everyone.

This is a crucial phase in dance as aesthetic communication, to be curious of the other, imagine possibilities, and then engage in expressions and responses. Thinking can, based on Arendt's thoughts, concern the dancer's life, the body, an artistic idea, or the artistic expression. Time and tools for such thinking might be crucial when it comes to understand and respond to one's own and others' dance expressions. It can be stated that thinking concerns the abstract, non-present, and invisible. Dance has the possibility to make such thoughts visible and present for others, thereby making it possible to react to them.

Through the converging of Vita Activa and Vita Contemplativa, common sense is constituted, and this condition is something human beings strive towards – which is what Holm (2002) calls inter-subjective validity. To reach common sense, humans need to take into account different backgrounds and experiences. Otherwise, individuals can be excluded from traditions, lose their will to take initiative, and feel rootless. Common sense also includes several senses in the interplay of experiencing the world. We need contact with other people's sense-connected common sense, which in turn presuppose curiosity and respect, ability to imagine, and engaged participation in creative processes, where human beings also enter into each other's worlds of imagination. If dance activities should encourage common sense, it seems important that participants get the chance to engage with each other's expressions, experiences, and ideas, and have time to think, imagine, value, and reflect. Such scenarios demand that dancers are stimulated to formulate themselves, to communicate, to become themselves as dancers, in interaction (with each other).

Hence, an important starting point is the right to make oneself heard and listened to, and thus to perform and be viewed as a dancer. Holistic being in this setting is a way of being where Vita Activa and Vita Contemplativa are balanced, which in turn can be seen as a prerequisite for holistic learning, where 'everyone' has the possibility to experience and internalize some form of expression and become able to handle the world. The sharing of ideas, experiences, and expressions, and have time to 'formulate' and share responses, could be a way of creating a space for common sense in a dance studio, seen as a public space.

## Method

The participants applied to attend the workshop individually. The information regarding the workshop was communicated verbally between people, as well as through the choreographer's website and newsletter. To be able to come close to the dancers' life-worlds we observed and documented the workshop series for one week, which consisted of eleven hours of training and one open studio performance. Field notes were taken throughout the workshop series and the activities were video recorded with a stable and a mobile camera, operated by a professional photographer.[1] The field notes were organized, and two 2-hour sessions, together with the final performance, were transcribed. One session was run in the beginning of the week, and one later in the week. In other words, the produced material for analysis included clear field notes and transcripts of about four hours of recorded dance activities. The participants were encouraged to bring written stories based on life experiences that were used in the workshops. These are not taken into account as research data in this specific study (cf Ferm Almqvist and Andersson 2019).

The data were analysed using a phenomenological hermeneutic perspective (Alrø et al., 1997). The process of analysis included naïve reading, structured analysis, comprehensive understanding, and the formulation of results in a holistic manner. In other words, the notes and videos were firstly read and viewed several times by both researchers in order to grasp their meaning as a whole. The naïve understanding of the text was formulated in an Arendtian language whereby the concepts vita activa, vita contemplativa and common sense, enabled reflection and in-depth analysis of the data in relation to the theory of democracy. This naïve reading was followed by a phase of structural analysis, which can be seen as a way of identifying and formulating themes, and which provided opportunities for testing the emerged concepts, and was made by the two researchers in cooperation. A theme is a thread of meaning that penetrates parts of a text in the process of conveying the essential meaning of the lived experience. The process was finished when the themes validated and deepened the naïve reading. Then, the main themes and constituting aspects were summarised and reflected upon in relation to the research question and the context of the study, and finally, the last step concerned formulating the result in a situated language. The last step also included finding holistic examples that showed the different sides of the phenomenon in concrete ways.

## Result

The result, the analysed dance activities, is presented in accordance with Arendt's different levels of action, and reflection, translated to the dance context. The themes that emerged in the study are *A functional body with impetus to move, To internalize Dance as a form of expression, To use Dance in aesthetic communication*, and *Reflections on life, body and dance*.

A Functional Body with an Impetus to move

This theme includes aspects of knowledge that are possible to develop within the level of Labour. Aspects regarding body, space, and time were seen in relation to this level. During the workshop, the participants were offered to use their bodies in various ways aiming to reach or maintain a controlled body. Each day started out with warm-up exercises and the participants were encouraged to close their eyes and get in contact with the floor, so as to feel their bodies. The participants were verbally guided to focus their minds on different parts of their bodies from within, and without using their hands. During these activities, the bodies seemed to be softened in muscle tension, at the same time as the dancers showed a higher level of body control. The participants' bodies were challenged both in already set movement sequences given by the choreographer, and improvisational activities with an already set framework. In order to learn the movement sequences and to become aware of their own performance, the participants were encouraged to use mirrors as a tool during the learning process. The mirrors were used for the participants to develop their bodily alignment and body shapes.

The aspect of space was something that permeated the whole workshop week and included both spatial awareness to the physical room and to other participants. The participants were offered different tools for gaining an awareness of their body in relation to space. They were also encouraged to use various directions in space as a way to control the body in relation to the physical room and other dancers. For example, they used the antipoles up-down to develop their alignment, and right-left to direct the body in the expected direction. During improvisations, spatial ability was emphasised. The participants were encouraged to spread out and use the whole space, to move their bodies in the whole room, and not to be too close to each other.

Time was an aspect that included precision in timing, but also timing in relation to others' movements. Both the warm-up and the already set choreography movements were communicated with timing related to a musical pulse. Each movement had specific counts in the music to relate to. During improvisations, the participants did not have to relate to a specific timing in the music, but to other participants' timing. For example, in order to improvise with body contact, they had to be aware of and adapt to the other dancers' timing.

The basic activity in Vita Activa: *Labour* (animal laborans), which focuses on human beings' survival activities, originally to get food and a place to live, accentuates aspects of dance activities that are important for making dance as aesthetic communication among elderly people possible.

To internalize Dance as a form of expression

This theme includes aspects of how to use one's body as a dance instrument within the level of Work. Framework, dance terminology, and progression are stated as important aspects on this level.

The framework of the workshop included both improvisation and already set movement sequences. Improvisation was inspired by the participants' life stories, music, and body contact, as well as the parameters body, space, and time. The participants' improvisations were based on their shared written life stories that were verbally presented by the choreographer. Various styles of music were used and gave different impulses to movement. The choreographer also encouraged the participants to use the body, time, and space in different ways. For example, it could involve circular movements, and timing, such as slow motion, and movements where participants filled spaces between their bodies. The warm-up included traditional dance warming-up activities, as well as yoga-influenced movements. The movements, both in the warm-up and the choreography, included technical challenges, such as grand plié in second position, and contraction in a turned-out position. The choreographer had an open approach to the different bodies and gave suggestions for modifications to adapt the movements to bodily limitations.

The choreographer used dance terminology, including movement language and technical terms that are commonly used in a dance context. The use of movement language and technical terms gave the participants access and the possibility to gain an understanding of, and use, terminology within a dance context. Movement language included terms such as plié, tendu, and turn out position. Technical terms such as 'cue' were used and gave the participants an indication as to when the movement or exercise should change or stop.

Throughout the week it was possible to see a progression both in memory, awareness, and body control. These aspects were intertwined, although they functioned as a single whole, when it came to the participants' ability to express themselves in dance. The participants had partially memorised the warm-up sequences and showed a developed awareness and control of their body. This was seen both in the warm-up and the improvisation activities. The participants explored various possibilities to use the body and achieved more awareness regarding using different dynamics. In the contact improvisation, a flow had developed, as well as an investigative approach to their movements.

The activity level *Work* (homo faber), which according to Arendt contains the creation of necessary things that can give profit, which provides safety, but is also mandatory, and is not in harmony with nature, offered a lens when it came to production, which is also a necessary level when it comes to offering dance as communication and democracy among elderly people.

To use Dance in aesthetic communication

This theme shows Political life, that is, how the participants communicated and dwelled together in dance as an artistic form of expression, how they communicated and became themselves in interaction in the dance room, seen as a public space, at the end of the week. Individual improvisation, as well as in pairs and groups, together with choreography, constituted the activity frames of this theme. The dancers seemed to learn and develop through exploration, through each other, with images, metaphors, and each other's experiences and stories.

### Choreography – a collective artistic expression

Choreography was rehearsed and developed all through the workshop week. The participants were expected to perform similar movements in relation to the chosen music. They used the choreographer and an assistant, as well as each other and the music, to be able to internalise and embody the prescribed movements. They were encouraged to become 'one' body, which demanded control over one's own body, as well as an agreed-upon expression. The choreographer's idea was implemented and developed through the bodies/expressions of the elderly participants. Spoken language was combined with bodily modelling. This happened the fourth day, and the participants also posed questions to the choreographer. 'This is your own interpretation,' was the answer they got. They did it together, and in groups, and were encouraged to observe each other. The participants seemed to perform the choreography rather controlled, more or less independently. The choreography was loosened up and the participants started to walk around in the room. 'Form pairs. As a transition to improvisation'.

### Improvisation 1

The warming-up was developed towards self-expressions through circular movements. 'Now you can do as you want to' (Choreographer). All participants started to make different circular movements and seemed to go into themselves. The choreographer functioned as a role model for improvisation with circular movements and stressed that all joints should move circles. 'An inner massage'. The music seemed to be an important inspiration as well. Different sizes of the movements were encouraged. Different directions in the room were encouraged and used. In the first phase, the dancers were directed into themselves, and they seemed to try out what they could express with their bodies. The choreographer mentioned the body as an instrument.

Towards the second phase, the participants were encouraged to meet and use each other, which they also did. They got close and danced 'around' each other. 'Also touch' (Choreographer). Even here the music was clearly used. The participants seemed to be inspired by each other. They were then encouraged to use each other's weight, and mix touch with non-touch communication, to fill the gaps between the bodies, and to use breaks. The dancers seemed to 'listen' to each other and to create something new together. When the music changed completely new movements ensued, and they continued to borrow movements from, and inspire, each other. Moving from gypsy music to gospel, and on to more traditional (disco) dance patterns, which were used, but also challenged. Finally, they got back to free dance.

### Improvisation 2

The participants were divided into two groups. A story was read by the choreographer and performed by one group. 'The action creates the sense' the choreographer underlined. Some of them went into themselves, and others discovered each other and created their perception of the story together. Two different kinds of music, in the same style, were used. Smooth, sensible music. In different ways, the participants moved in ways where they tried movements in relation to the story; they also used

their own experiences, the music, and each other. A second story was read about a spiritual experience. Most participants went into themselves, and different expressions of the story were staged. After a while, some of them were forming pairs. They tried movements, used their bodies, and expressed feelings, in different tempi: Intense and sensible. The floor was used, as well as the bodies of the others. It was possible to see that movements trained and used earlier during the week were used and developed in varied expressions. The participants were encouraged to meet each other more intensively and to use their voices.

### *Improvisation 3*

At the end of the fourth day, a large group improvisation was practised, as a preparation for the performance on the sixth day. The choreographer gave instructions regarding how it should be introduced, 'You should go into yourselves, but also use each other', based on a story about a destroyed world. Part of the performance was about how a group was to lie down on the floor. Another part was based on that a group read a silly poem, and the other performed prearranged movements. Then, they changed tasks in free movements. Finally, they were to fall down to the floor again. The dancers also received instructions regarding how to start the movement with circles, then initiate communication, and finish in pairs. The music started, they stood still, started to move with circles, feet still, started to move towards the middle, but left some space to move. They moved individually and autonomously, and started to touch each other, even holding hands in some cases, but also surrounded one another, always close to touch. In the end, they stopped close to somebody. They got further instructions regarding how to look more surprised in the beginning, wondering about what had happened, to 'think the task' and work harder with different qualities of the work, to work with themselves, as well as with the other, and the room. 'In the end you should press yourselves towards the other. Spread out a little bit more'. After that, the dancers tried improvisation number one more time.

### *Performance*

On the day of the performance, the participants were dressed up in nice clothes, chosen by themselves, but based on the instruction that the men should wear a shirt and suit trousers, and the women should wear dresses. The room was lightened in blue by a professional light designer, and an audience was invited. The choreographer told the audience about the way the participants had learned and developed up until the day of the performance. The dancers stood still when the music, a string quartet piece, started. Then, they slowly started to improvise with circular movements. First, just on the spot, and later moving towards the centre of the scene, going into pairs, in touching and non-touching activities. The music shifted to classical guitar music, and the couples started with contact improvisation where weight was shared back and forth, which then developed into different pair improvisations. The assistant came forward and stopped the movement, and slowly the choreography started, performed as one body, led by the assistant, gradually turning into a new free improvisation. Then, the shared group improvisation, described in Improvisation 3 above, was performed. In the next part, couples, in turn, performed movements they got from the audience on small pieces of paper, accompanied by a 'silly poem'. Finally, an improvisation steered by music in

various styles was performed in the large group. Different moods were created and mediated to the audience through how the dancers used and developed their chosen form of expression in relation to the music, to the room, to each other's movements, as well as to personal experiences, imaginations, both gravely and with humour. It was obvious that the audience was touched in different ways during the performance.

The described scenarios of dance as communication show aspects of political life, which is characterised by equality and pluralism. Arendt states, as mentioned above, that human beings are born into political life, and that they do not need any other qualifications to participate in the good life. The described activities show examples of how elderly people are still able, and take advantage of being political. They create the dance situations, they communicate in the present, and make their 'voices heard' at the same time as they are carriers of history. Norms are created by the dancers in cooperation, and dance as language functions as a precondition. In the dance, as in political life, the participants meet as equals in a public space where they communicate, act, and freely express their opinions.

Reflections on life, body and dance

Contemplative activities took place before, during, and after the workshop series, mainly as verbal, written, and bodily reflections. Activities including reflection were encouraged by the choreographer, and also occurred in the dance activities per se.

### *Reflections over life*

Before and during the workshops, the participants were encouraged to write stories based on their life experiences. These stories were later used as inspiration for improvisations. In the process of creating the stories the dancers had to reflect upon their lives, and in the process of creating dance expressions, based on the stories, they had to use their own life experiences to create a feeling that in turn could be used as inspiration in the improvisation. These improvisations influenced feelings among those who had the role of audience. The feelings spanned from tears to laughter to anger. Also, in activities during the workshops, they were to improvise inspired by simple words they made up for each other, and then they used their lived experience to form dance expressions inspired by the words. The dance expressions per se could also be seen as reflections on life.

### *Reflections over body*

All through the workshop week, the participants were encouraged to reflect on their own and others' (old) bodies, both directly and indirectly. Directly, as when the choreographer told them to be careful and take responsibility for how they performed specific movements, and in discovering, partly with the help of the mirror, what they were able to do with their bodies, and how their ideas of a movement really turned out. Indirectly, as metaphors were used for how to think about their bodies' positions.

### *Reflections over dance ideas, expressions and experiences*

The participants had to reflect in, and in relation to, the actual activities, in which the dancers used dance as an artistic expression. They reflected on their own expressions,

also from inside, how it felt to express oneself in, and participate through, dance, and how they, as a group, related to an audience in the actual performance. In addition, they reflected on others' expressions, in, for example, pair improvisation, or group improvisation, where they were encouraged to get influenced by each other, and they gave feedback on each other's expressions when they acted as the audience. They responded by applauds, laughter, tears, and verbal comments. Finally, they were encouraged to reflect by writing comments after a few days and also at the end of the week. Some of them were also interviewed. These reflections concerned what it meant to participate in the workshop activities (which revealed insights at many levels.)

Obviously, the workshop series also included aspects of Vita contemplativa (the philosophical thinking life), which consists in different ways of thinking in terms of reflecting, being, willing, and judging. According to Arendt, such activities are crucial when it comes to reaching common sense, that is, a space for being, where a consciously meaningful life can exist.

## Conclusions

The specific aim of the study was to shed light on contemporary dance as democracy among people 65+. The theory of Hanna Arendt has, in relation to the research data, clarified that varied ways to discover, use, and develop elderly bodies in relation to room and space, as well as flexible processes wherein dance is internalised, constitute necessary grounds for aesthetic communication, through which democracy is executed. The questions we have tried to answer above, were the following: What constitutes dance as communication within a group of elderly people? How do the participants internalise and use dance as an artistic form of expression in relation to the possibilities and limitations a workshop provides?

The dance workshop can be seen as a place where a group of elderly people were to develop technical skills, dance expressions, communicative skills, mutual growth, and functional performances, through sharing each other's ideas, experiences, and expressions in dance. With the help of Arendt's theory, the result showed that dance as democracy demands awareness at three levels, including the basic parameters movement, the use of the body as a dance instrument, and the participants' communication in dance as an artistic form of expression. We have seen how structures for participation, different roles, and approaches created a place for expressions, mutual listening, thinking and common sense. According to the analysis, to make this possible, especially in places that are steered by traditions and strongly agreed-upon norms, demands structures, braveness, engaged participation, and trust. The performance survives the participants, although it has no goal in itself. At the same time, dance learning seemed to take place at all three mentioned levels of activity, in the spirit of common sense, where actions and reflections were intertwined.

## Discussion

In the following, the main results and conclusions are discussed in relation to de Beauvoir's philosophy of aging, which functions as a base when it comes to what it can mean to participate in dance workshops as an elderly person. de Beauvoir's philosophy also functioned as a motive to investigate the workshop series as situations where the elderly can be and

become what they already are through communication. Through the analysis of the dance workshops, it becomes clear that the participants were given the opportunity to discover their bodies, and what they were able to express with and through them, as well as experience and the ability to handle existential phenomena in the world. To a certain extent, to speak with de Beauvoir, they learned to accept their bodies, but they also transcended them, through dance expression and communication. Their bodies seem to be existentially extended.

Instead of remaining objects, or flesh, seen from the outside, they seemed to take care of the past in the present moment, from the inside, and by that they avoided preserving repetitive behaviour. They got the chance to take themselves seriously, and become what they already are in the socio-cultural communicative settings, which were underlined as crucial. They lived to dance, and lived life, despite how much they perceive is left of the future. They got the opportunity to give their lives meaning, in accordance with de Beauvoir, who stated that intimate and intellectual, creative, political relationships and situations are important for a meaningful life. In addition, the participants, not least through their formation of others' life stories, attributed value to the other participants' lives by means of love, friendship, indignation, and compassion.

The design and atmosphere of the workshop series seemed to develop towards an actual cooperative learning setting. There were time and structures for building an atmosphere of common trust, which seemed to be needed for all participators to be able to share their ideas through dance as a form of expression, and by that have the possibility to see and become themselves, to contribute and to grow.

To share ideas and experiences through dance expressions demands braveness. As we mentioned earlier, Arendt suggests that the impossibility of relying on and trusting oneself completely is the price that has to be payed for freedom. When a dancer gives the other participants the chance to enter into his/her dance, to imagine possibilities, and to share them, unknown experiences are encouraged. These are experiences which, in turn, receive feedback of several types. According to Arendt, this is a way to understand democracy as the possibility of transforming the self and of putting the self in question. This is a precondition for the development of the ability to take a stand, to grow as a dancer, and a human being, independent of age. The sharing of expressions, a meeting between individuals as equals in a public space, has already begun before the actual workshop week, where the participants spoke and acted, and (freely) expressed their opinions. At the same time, as they have had to step back and reflect, they were trained in the possibility to share ideas, as well as to give and take in dance as aesthetic communication.

There were possibilities for the dancers to separate themselves from their expectations, experiences, and expressions, through reflections and responses, to see them as something else than a part of themselves, and by that have possibilities to take the perspective of the other. This, in turn, was encouraged by differences when it came to the participants' backgrounds, social cultures, interests, and occupations. Arendt underlines, the importance of contact with other people's sense-connected common sense, which in turn presuppose curiosity and respect, ability to imagine and engaged partaking in creating processes, and an ability to go into each other's worlds of imagination". Hence, the separation mentioned above is also needed to be able to internalise responses and to develop. It seems like the design of the workshop week, and the way the participants dwelled in the setting, has fulfilled the ethical aspects that de Beauvoir accentuates in her book *Old Age*. As mentioned earlier she underlines that the aged have their own dignity in spite of enduring biological deterioration, and the way

they were treated and treated each other, and the possibilities they got to internalise, express themselves, and communicate with and within dance, showed how their dignity was respected and taken care of. There was no hesitation regarding the meaning and value their lives had. The dance activities can be seen as one step in the re-making of human beings, and relations between them, that de Beauvoir stresses as needed if the conditions of elderly people are to be accepted. Death was alive in the workshop series, not least in some of the stories that the participants shared, and performed together. It was perhaps because the participants seemed to live life so committed and justified that they continued to cherish it, just as de Beauvoir advocated.

The existential and artistic dimensions of elderly people in dance as communication could be investigated further to compete with the knowledge that has already been established in research. That could be one way towards a more equal society, not least when it comes to how and on what philosophical grounds dance activities for the elderly are designed and performed.

## Note

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