

Reflexive Essay

## ***Homemade Hips. Shades of Play within Artistic Research***

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## ***Homemade Hips. Shades of Play within Artistic Research***

Natalie Schiller

With this essay, I creatively and critically celebrate a fusion and confusion of notions of play. Here, I invite you, the reader, to dive into the realm and possibilities of what I call 'shades of play.' I base my exploration of *shades of play* on my performance, *The Washing Machine, the Scythe, and I* (2025). This work is part of my artistic research series *homemade hips*, where I entangle ideas of hips and domesticity. Now, together we (you and I) will slip, sweat, shake, and cut while discovering the manner of *shades of play*.

**Keywords:** artistic research, domesticity, expanded choreography, hips, shades of play

### **Setting up!**



Figure 1. Natalie Schiller, *The Washing Machine, the Scythe, and I*, 2025. © All rights reserved, courtesy of the author.

*I fill my washing machine (which I transported from my home into the dance studio for my performance) with some dirty clothes, right there and then. The four red buckets are filled with water, which I will pour into the drum soon. I will also add some washing powder before I kick off the washing machine. I am wearing my black dancing dress and have an extension lead wrapped around my hips. A scythe lies in the front of the scene. The audience is sitting in a half circle opposite me (us). While witnessing the show, they are eating popcorn and drinking from their fruit juice boxes, which I have provided for them on their chairs earlier.*

The picture and narrative above are an excerpt from my performance *The Washing Machine, the Scythe, and I* (2025). This work is the final showing of my artistic research series *homemade hips* (2020–2025), where I explore what

my hips can uncover when entangled with notions of domesticity through my choreographic practice. This creative and critical investigation takes me on a journey, during which, in a series of performances, I experiment with my perceptions of hips in connection with ideas on domesticity. For example, the notions of hips and domesticity greet and meet each other in my performance *Toaster Salsa* (2020), where I wrap a toaster with an extension lead around my hips. Next, I do the dishes and move my hips in line with belly dance and Latin dance techniques. In my performance *Kopfkino—Headmovies* (2022), I sense my hips fading into the shadows of domestic concepts. There, I sit on a chair in my living room, surrounded by toys from a young child (e.g., soft toys and building blocks), and my mind is very busy while I attempt to reconnect to my dancing hips. Then, in my work *Senses of Selves* (2022), I face the loss of my hips to the domestic field, perceiving domesticity to steal my hips. In this artistic happening, I am lined up on a red blanket in my back yard with my cleaning tools, such as a mop, a vacuum cleaner head, a leaf blower, and two shovel & brush sets. Finally, with the performance *The Washing Machine, the Scythe, and I* (2025), I harvest the wealth of experiences from my artistic practices over the years and add the themes of death and endings.

The motivation for this study has been my engagement—as a learner, performer, and pedagogue—with hip-accentuating dance styles, namely belly dance and Latin dance, for over two decades. I have been mesmerized by swaying hips as ‘hips are bewitching <...> [because] those hips move with an agility, grace and precision that, if you stare at them too long, you get hip-notized’ (Borelli, 2016, p. 5). Therefore, with this *hip-notized* flair in my mind and body, I am determined to investigate the notion of hips with my artistic research. However, and rather unexpectedly, the concept of domesticity buds its presence into my practice. The field of domesticity presents itself as urgent due to my role as a mother, where I experience the socio-cultural and political reality that mothers are delegated to the private and domestic field (Federici, 2004; Friedan, 2013, Rich, 1976). Hence, with the integration of domesticity into my artistic work I aim to subvert the private space as a site of political production to interrupt wider socio-cultural power relations (Ahmed, 2017; Gallagher, 2020). Hence, I am curious what a knotting of these two notions, hips and domesticity, can entail. In particular, I am eager to explore what my dancing hips can be, become, and do in relation to the domestic field.

As the focus of this essay lies with ideas of play, I seek to shed some light on how concepts of play, to which I refer here as ‘shades of play,’ manifest within my artistic research. I open the discourse by slipping and sweating as I attempt to pinpoint if I am playing (yet) in my work and what *shades of play* might be. There, I unearth play’s ephemeral nature: I realize an indefinability of the concept and detect hints of *shades of play* by examining where and when I can possibly ‘see’ play within my work. Additionally, I notice that *shades of play* radiate from the practice, exercise, and training of my body, feelings, and mind, and I perceive *shades of play* to wander on a continuum of instinct and will. Next, I am shaking, highlighting my discovery

of *shades of play* being *intrinsic*, *intra-mixed*, and *posthuman*. Then, I am 'cutting' (imitated physically and conceptually) to expand and blur ideas about hips. I spotlight how the following four aspects—*play instincts*, *urges*, *a leap of faith*, and *to play profound*—inform the proposition of *shades of play*. There, I also ponder on how *shades of play* have the potential to guide my artistic research with and through the unknown and the unfamiliar. There we go, let's play!

### Wanna play (!)?

*Please turn on your washing machine and wiggle your hips while you read this article!*

*In detail: Put on a load of washing, ideally a small wash. Attentively put in your dirty clothes and some washing powder. Next, push the appropriate buttons on your washing machine, which might create some beeping sounds. Then, the water should rush into the drum of the equipment: here, begin to connect to your hips, mentally and physically. Alternatively, please imagine*



*or mimic the previously described actions and enable the following [sound bite](#).*

*Please continue reading this article with the washing machine sound on and your activated hips!*

### Am I playing (yet)?

Am I already playing when I put my dirty washing into my ordinary washing machine in my performance *The Washing Machine, the Scythe, and I* (2025)? Yes?! No?! Maybe?! I seem to encounter a dilemma, where I struggle to clearly decipher when I play within my artistic research work. Thus, I wonder if part of my quandary is the 'slipperiness' (James, 2021, p. 10) of the concept of play and its quality of being undefinable, where definitions of play vary, diverge, and present themselves as inconsistent (Brussain, 2020; Eberle, 2014; James, 2021; Richards & Haukeland, 2020). Therefore, I imagine myself *slipping* when I attempt to answer the questioned posed above somewhat clearly. Hence, I desire to connect to transversal and diagonal ideas on play and call up *shades of play*, which embrace elements of unclarity, ambiguity, and 'interval[s] not of the category but in the pre of categorization where the field is still in formation' (Manning, 2016, p. 123). Moreover, I relate *shades of play* to Sara Ahmed's 'sweaty concepts,' which emerge 'by trying to describe something that is difficult, that resists being fully comprehended in the present' (Ahmed, 2017, p. 12). In this light, my predicament of answering the question 'Am I playing (yet)?' offers me more transparency and confidence because I envision my perspicuity on *shades of play* to emerge on a slippery

surface. There, while I am answering my quest, I stumble and slither, and, additionally, my body builds up sweat and leaves watery patches on my T-shirt under my armpits.

Furthermore, while I am slipping and sweating, I am inspired by the question 'Do you know play when you see it?' (National Institute for Play, 2007–2025). Hence, I wonder if I can understand if I am playing (yet) through the question 'When can I possibly spot that I am playing in my performance?'. The following provides me with some insights:

'The characteristics of play all have to do with motivation and mental attitude <...> the behaviour itself. Two people might be throwing a ball <...> or typing words on a computer, and one might be playing while the other is not. To tell which one is playing <...> you have to infer from their expression and the details of their actions (Gray, 2013, p. 139).

Therefore, I observe that my ambition, passion, and frame of mind during my performance, for example during this mundane act of doing the washing, exhibits glimpses of play. I perceive my inspiration and stance of play as rather hidden and internal components, but nonetheless visible and sensible to me through my body, feelings, and mind. Hence, I propose that *shades of play* can be 'seen,' explicitly by me, through my purpose and attitude. Additionally, acts, specifics of behaviors, and appearance can also be some possible and visible parameters to 'see' if someone is playing. As I translate these observations into my artistic work, I imply that I am playing when I put the washing into the machine in this performance and in the acts of wearing my black dancing dress, being barefoot, and having an extension lead around my hips.

Moreover, I realize that I am playing analytically, due to my conscious and subversive action of exhibiting a domestic and private chore in a public forum. Accordingly, I notice that my performative engagement, the unfamiliar setting of the dance studio, the context of my performance work, as well as my attitude and motivation, while executing this generally dull and mundane maintenance task, give way to *shades of play* within my work. Here, I advise that these conditions are visible and tangible encounters of 'seeing' play. However, I also perceive these described angles of peeking at some *shades of play* within my artistic research as rather ambiguous and ephemeral, certainly contextual and relational, and lastly, absolutely challenging to articulate.

Now, would Stuart Brown's (2010) philosophy of play support my quest to crack if I am playing (yet)? Brown (2010) advocates that play is a 'practice for the body, exercise for the feelings, and training for the mind' (as summarized by Eberle, 2014, p. 217). His idea certainly guides my pursuit but also provokes me to consider that *shades of play* within my context are practice, exercise, and training of my body, feelings, and mind. Hence, the visualization of *shades of play*, and if I am playing (yet), are manifestations of my body, feelings, and mind. Consequently, the moments and aspects of when I am playing within my research are rather idiosyncratic, peculiar, and distinctive.

Still, I remain slipping and sweating while I continue to discover possible articulations of *shades of play* in relation to my work. Especially when I attempt to embrace the proximity of *shades of play* with the seminal utterance by Johan Huizinga that 'if we call the active principle that makes up the essence of play, "instinct", we explain nothing; if we call it "mind" or "will" we say too much' (Huizinga 1949: 1). Hence, I wish to voyage within a realm in which it is possible to recognize *shades of play* in the light of a continuum. There, *shades of play* can excel poles of instinct and mind, and there, I am saying nothing, too much, and everything else that is possible to communicate about *shades of play*. Here, in this domain, I accentuate the plurality of play in the elusiveness and haziness of *shades of play* to create spaces of curiosity, openness, and freedom.

**Surely, I must be playing by now!**



Figure 2. Natalie Schiller, 'Shake off,' from *The Washing Machine, the Scythe, and I*, 2025. © All rights reserved, courtesy of the author.

*I lie with my back on the top of my washing machine. My legs and head, including my hair, dangle down on each side of the machine. I hold a scythe in my hands. The washing machine is on its spin cycle. I relax into the rattling vibration the washing machine has to offer, and my entire body trembles. Here, I also feel my eyelid flapping gently, in tune with the pervasive rumbling of my washing machine. The initiated tremor travels into and through me, spilling over to the scythe, creating ripples far beyond the tip of its blade.*

Besides slipping and sweating while glimpsing *shades of play* within my artistic research, I am also shaking. While I re-sense those motions of

trembling, I realize that *shades of play* have morphed into a second nature within my work: they seem so natural and absorbed. Thus, I understand that my struggles to distil essences of play out of my artistic research stem from the reality that concepts of play disguise themselves as innate parts of my work. Here, I propose that the following dynamics are at work within my research, where 'the notion of "play" <...> [is] something that is invoked within the realm of artistic experimentation and is directly or indirectly implicated in the territories of its production' (Postiga & Loureiro, 2023, pp. 2–3). Hence, I speculate that this (in)direct entanglement of play and art has fostered the inherent perception of play within my work.

Moreover, I perceive play and art as an inseparable and devoted body within my practice, almost so intimate and entangled that there are no clear lines between ideas about play and art anymore. I envision to mix these two categories intensely and fruitfully together, where notions of play and art becoming *intra-active* (Barad, 2007). Here, elements of play and art are so intertwined that they fuse into one assemblage. I imagine this entity to behave like pancake batter, which is runny and yellowish, with the ingredients, such as eggs (play) and milk (art), thoroughly mixed, becoming unrecognisable as separate entities. This imagined batter 'signifies the mutual constitution of entangled agencies <...> [where] agencies are only distinct in relation to their mutual entanglement; they don't exist as individual elements' (Barad 2007, p. 33). Therefore, this experienced *intra-mixedness* of play within my work leaves me slipping, sweating, and now also shaking, while deciphering *shades of play* into expression.

Further, I propose that my perceived *shades of play* adhere to posthuman values. Here, *shades of play* are embodied, embedded, differential, relational, and affective (Braidotti, 2020) within a system of bodies, namely a human body (mine), a washing machine, a scythe, a studio (environment), and an audience (the spectators during the performance and by extension the reader: you). Additionally, *shades of play* differ during the moments of making and performing my work; they are always in a relationship with the complexity of my artistic research practice and affect it by moving and disturbing my doing, moving, feeling, and thinking.

Accordingly, I conclude that my conceived ideas of *shades of play*, specifically them being *intrinsic*, *intra-mixed*, and *posthuman*, contribute to a lively and unfolding dynamic of and within my artistic research processes.

## Wanna play (II)!

Now, I invite you to stand up (if you are not already standing) and stick or wrap something on or around your hips, something that feels safe and comfortable, like Sellotape, sticky notes, or blue tack; or a scarf or an extension lead. Once suited up with some ordinary 'sticky-wrappy' item, shake your body. Choose the speed that you are comfortable with. You can vary the speed if you wish. You might also consider the following questions:

- How does it feel?
- What do you 'shake' off and up?
- What do you 'intra-mix'?
- What have you discovered about your ideas of play with this play invitation?

**Then, I am cutting!**



Figure 3. Natalie Schiller, "With my scythe I am 'cutting together-apart (one move),' " from *The Washing Machine, the Scythe, and I*, 2025. © All rights reserved, courtesy of the author.

*I carefully place the blade of my scythe<sup>1</sup> along my stomach-waist area, so the length of the blade reaches from one hip to the other, approximately. While I am doing so, I am shimmying my hips, a belly dance move, where the hips move fast, but in small, up-and-down motions. Once the harvesting tool is nicely placed on my wiggling hips, I also start moving my hands, with the blade in my hands, from side to side, in a sawing motion. I am starting this movement slowly, speeding up until I am very fast, with my hands swishing the scythe over my body: swish, swish! And my hips are still shimmying: jaga jaga jaga! The metal of the scythe blade scratches on the plastic of my extension cord and on the delicate fabric of my dress: scratch, saw, scratch, saw! I breathe heavily. I can feel the metal blade leaving tender sensations on my skin.*

After I have been slipping, sweating, and shaking, I am also cutting now. The cutting in my work is not literal, for if I were to cut my hips with an industrial scythe, it would be gory and fatal. But with this specific mimic I am playing with concepts and symbols, where I seek to make connections between the notions of hips and domesticity. To explain, I am 'cutting together-apart

(one move)' (Barad, 2014, p. 168) the insights that I have around hips and domesticity. I am *cutting together-apart (one move)* my conditioned and established perceptions on hips and domesticity. I can combine the paradox of *cutting together-apart (one move)* through the utterness of imagined cutting. A contradictory action that seems mind-bending and fascinating, spectacular and exceptional. Although this cutting somehow distances me from my past experiences of my hips, I simultaneously enter a space of togetherness and relationality to my present sensations and understandings of my hips within the domestic field. I am harvesting the constant becomings of my hips and their concomitant loss during these processes of continuous forming. With the scythe, I symbolize these simultaneous events of entangling, harvesting, and passing. Therefore, this connective cutting seeks to emphasize multiplicity within the process of my ever-evolving encounters of hips.

Furthermore, while I am *cutting together-apart (one move)* ideas and concepts, I identify the relevance of *play instincts* within my work. Because 'good art comes <...> from the play instinct' (Rethorst, 2013, p. 71). Unswervingly, I relate *play instincts* to *urges*, where *urges* function as *visceral messages* (Brownlee & Crips, 2016). The idea that my *play instincts* within the performance *The washing machine, the scythe, and I (2025)* can be *visceral messages* excites me. A message from the inside, an insider message, an internal insight, an idiosyncratic and me-specific message, including all my particularities. I also liken these visceral-insider-clues to 'expert intuitive' (Melrose, 2018, p. 51) inklings, which are influenced by my passionately attached engagement during this inquiry. Here, the *play instinct* and *urge* also allow me to extend my movement repertoire by excelling my dance genre-specific conditionings of hips.

In addition, a 'leap of faith' (Rethorst, 2013, p. 71) composes the *play instinct*. Therefore, I suggest that while I am *cutting together-apart (one move)*, I am not only activating my *play instinct* but also actually *leaping* into my artistic research by fully trusting its processes. Here, the *play instinct* highlights that senses of play are essential for embracing an uncertainty of knowing. Now, the idea of a *play instinct* with its attached *leap of faith* activates for me a trust exercise, where I imagine myself falling backwards, knowing that someone or, better yet, something, namely my fused choreographic and academic practice, will catch me. But while I am falling (leaping)—where I am playing artistically and analytically—I am connecting to the realm of unpredictability and unfamiliarity.

Further, not only does a *play instinct* present itself as valuable in dance making, but also the idea to 'play profound' (Rethorst, 2013, p. 71). The thinking and doing of *playing profound* entail a reimagining of rigor (Rethorst, 2013), where I suggest that rigor tightly embraces the idea of attentiveness and diligence. Therefore, the actions of *playing profound* within my research release a realm of expansiveness. In this vein, I indicate that I *play profound* within my research, for I am not only actually playing through my actions, but I am also playing with associations, images, concepts, and perceptions of hips and domesticity. While I *play profound*, I seek to extend

my understandings of my dancing hips, I am unlearning and reconditioning my hips while blending them with domestic notions. I expand and stretch ideas on hips so far that at times I cannot unravel anymore where my hips begin or end.

Hence, I summarize that my approach of *cutting together-apart (one move)* the concepts of hips and domesticity spotlights elements significant to *shades of play*, namely *play instincts, urges, a leap of faith, and playing profound*. Furthermore, *shades of play* within my performance create an affirmative zone of the unknown because I translate *shades of play* to the following ideas on play:

'Play exhausts things as a method for inviting in something new. Its emptying-out of sense or meaning makes a clearing for the unexpected to arise. Making material acquaintance: a getting-to-know things so as to not-know, familiarity for rendering strange' (Cocker, 2021).

Therefore, *shades of play* within my performance can trigger new, diffracted, surprising, and unknown ideas of hips. Here, I can experience my habituated dancing hips through an exciting, disturbing, unfamiliar, and reassuring path. In addition, *shades of play* offer me access to performative knowledge, which is enriched with unfolding research acts in the process.

#### Finally, I put the washing on the line!



Figure 4. Natalie Schiller, 'Putting up my washing to dry,' from *The Washing Machine, the Scythe, and I*, 2025. © All rights reserved, courtesy of the author.

*After my 'cutting together-apart (one move)' journey, the extension lead lies on the floor, close to the scythe. The washing machine has finished its work and its lid is open. I have started to put the clean and wet washing on the line. First the T-shirts, then the socks, with matching pegs (in color and shape). I am indicating the ending of my performance, a little domestic ritual, to bring my performance to a closure, as well as the ending of*

*my artistic research project. I am ending one cycle, like the spin cycle of the washing machine heralds an ending. I indulge in the ephemeral and transient moment of finishing a job while I am holding these clean and wet clothes in my hands. And then for them to be worn again, to get sweaty again, when I am figuring out the un-forming of concepts, categories, and ways of doing, being, and becoming my hips in future moments. An act signaling an end and at the same time starting the next cycle. Over and over, and again and again...*

This exploration of *shades of play* has been based on my artistic research and, more specifically, on my performance *The Washing Machine, the Scythe, and I* (2025), for which I have intertwined the notions of hips and domesticity. During this investigation, I have been slipping and sweating to illuminate some snippets on *shades of play*, which have presented themselves as fluid, unsettled, and vague. Nonetheless, *shades of play* could occasionally be visualized and articulated from the inside, like a motivation or attitude, and from the outside, through actions. Additionally, I have cartographed *shades of play* as a practice, exercise, and training of my body, feelings, and mind, and I have proposed their dance on a continuum of instinct and will to highlight their promises of multiplicity and novelty. Then, I have been shaken by the trembling of the washing machine into realizing that *shades of play* manifest as *intrinsic, intra-mixed, and posthuman* happenings within the system of my artistic research project. Lastly, I have encountered the sensational and paradoxical gesture of 'cutting together-apart (one move)' (Barad, 2014, p. 168) notions of hips and domesticity to realize how *play instincts, urges, a leap of faith, and playing profound* have accompanied my work. Furthermore, I have discovered that *shades of play* could catapult my work into the enriching realm of the unknown and the unfamiliar. Now, I admit that I have felt clumsy and clunky while attempting to articulate the evanescence of *shades of play*. They remind me of my breath, which is barely apparent and lacks consciousness of its presence, but under the 'perfect' conditions, this air is obvious, such as when I am breathing out my warm breath on a cold winter's day.

### **Wanna play (III)?**

*Your washing should be finished by now too. Hence, I encourage you to put your washing on the line, the 'real' one or the imaginary one. While you execute these actions, I invite you to ponder on the following reflective questions:*

- *What 'shades of play' have you encountered while reading this article and engaging in the participatory elements?*
- *Did you play?*
- *Did you have fun?*
- *What else has emerged for you?*

1. The scythe I am using is bespoke, its blade blunt for the purpose of this work. The fabricated blade combines one metal piece from my grandmother's scythe, which would be around 100 years old by now (the dark brown part), and a new metal part (the shiny part). The handle has been made from pine.

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### Author's Bio

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