AESTHETICS OF AERIAL DANCE AND AERIAL CIRCUS

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The human fascination with escaping gravity exists both in story and in visceral memory, from doomed Icarus's melted wings, to a child's shrieks in the weightless moment at the apex of a swing's pendulum. In performance, the use of an apparatus to make it appear that actors or dancers can fly has long been used to heighten dramatic impact. Peta Tait (2005) cites McKinvin's findings that aerial work existed as part of performance and spectacle in classical Greece and during the romantic era of ballet in *Circus Bodies: Cultural Identity in Aerial Performance* (p.11). For the purposes of this paper, aerial performance is used as an umbrella term for all types of performative events happening off the ground. To this end, aerial is defined by the Oxford English Dictionary as "of or produced in the air, existing or flying in the air, lofty, tall, situated in the sky, of or belonging to air" (Aerial). In the arts, Richard Schechner (2006) states that to perform is "to show off, to go to extremes, to underline an action for those who are watching" (p.28). Under this definition action performed off the ground, aerial flight in theater (eg. Peter Pan), aerial circus acts, aerial dances, and other events can all be considered types of aerial performance.

In this paper, only aerial circus and aerial dance will be addressed and, therefore, require further definition. Aerial circus generally consists of distinct acts, described by Tait (2005) as "composed of a sequence of prescribed moves called 'tricks,' which are

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linked together with freer choreography, in an interpretive artistic routine set to music that usually lasts about six to ten minutes” (p. 2). These tricks are “physical actions performed to the extremes of dexterity, velocity and height…on and off apparatus suspended in the air” (ibid. p.2). Aerial dance is likewise performed on and off suspended apparatus. However as Jayne Bernasconi and Nancy Smith, authors of *Aerial Dance,* state, “it’s not just the liftoff that makes it aerial dance; it’s the intention of the choreographer using aerial and its relationship to modern dance aesthetics” (p.6) that make it aerial dance.

Aerial dance is a relatively young form, and, as such, its contribution to the field of aerial performance is often unseen. In order to facilitate critical discourse, a delineation of the aesthetics of aerial dance as contrasted with the aesthetics of aerial circus is necessary. In this way, the contributions made by aerial dance can become critically and popularly visible, as the field of aerial performance continues to expand.

Aerial circus and aerial dance arise from separate lineages and with particular aesthetic values. This paper will begin by identifying the individual aesthetics and historical roots of both aerial dance and aerial circus, and articulating points of natural conflation. This “blurring” (Bernasconi, 2008, p.6) between aerial circus and aerial dance is perhaps reflective of a similar, global blurring across performance genre discussed by Schechner (2006, p.49). The final portion of this paper will discuss specific examples of this aesthetic blurring between aerial circus and aerial dance. This type of analysis affords greater insight into the diverse influences potentially present in any aerial performance.

Aesthetics

Defining the aesthetic similarities and differences in aerial circus and aerial dance allows more nuanced discussion of the performance examples that follow. The primary similarity is the use of suspended apparatus, and the influence this apparatus has on the physicality of the aerial performance. Likewise, an emphasis on apparent ease dominates in much aerial performance. Cultural and literary scholar Helen Stoddart describes this contradiction in aerial circus, present from the earliest trapeze artists performing in the late 18th century. There is a "tension in the flying trapeze act between a great physical labour which must be masked in the interests of an *impression* of effortlessness and grace" (Stoddart, 2000, p. 170, italics in original). Bernasconi and Smith (2008) identify "effortlessness" as a key element of the aerial dance aesthetic (p. 24).

In spite of these similarities, there are a few key differences in the aesthetics of aerial dance and aerial circus. The aesthetics of aerial dance, as defined by Bernasconi and Smith (2008) include an emphasis on transitional movement and a corresponding lack of emphasis on any specific trick as well as the choreographer's intention and dance-like "crafting" of the work (p23). Two elements often, although not always, arise in aerial dance performance: the incorporation of movement on the floor with substantial transition between the floor and the apparatus, and relationships between the performers that downplay traditionally gendered interactions. Aerial dance occurs in a broad spectrum of locations, from theaters to the outside of buildings to trees, which shapes movement possibility in performance. In contrast, aerial circus occurs in relatively short sequences that build towards increasingly spectacular tricks. As Tait

(2008) states, it uses a “circus format to engage directly with the audience and invite applause for tricks” (p.129). Aerial circus often incorporates traditional feminine or masculine gender representation combined with exhibitions of virtuosic strength and flexibility. This analysis of the gender construction in aerial circus is fundamental to Tait’s writing in *Circus Bodies*, and presents potential opportunities for further study of aerial performance. Aerial circus is generally contained within a larger circus performance, often housed in a self-contained circus tent.

In effect, though aerial dance and aerial circus do share aesthetic qualities, there are elements specific to each. In order to more fully understand these differences, a deeper reflection on the historical evolution of aerial dance and aerial circus follows.

Aerial Dance Aesthetic

Practitioners of aerial dance have developed language to describe the dances they create, in an effort to define this aesthetic. Holly Treddenick and Sabrina Pringle (2012), directors of the aerial dance entertainment company Femmes du Feu expand on Bernasconi and Smith’s above definition of aerial dance in the following way.

Aerial dance is an approach to space using props or apparatuses such as silks, low-flying trapezes, hoops, bungee, harnesses, window frames, chairs, or anything thing else suspended that can be danced with to create an exiting [sic] visual effect or convey an image. What puts it in the category of modern dance rather than traditional circus is the aesthetic, process, transitions and intentions. (web).

Kate Lawrence (2010), author of *Hanging from Knowledge: Vertical Dance as Spatial Fieldwork* defines vertical dance as “dance that takes place off the ground, against a vertical surface (commonly a wall) that becomes the dancer’s ‘floor’” (p. 49), in

this way distinguishing vertical dance from aerial dance, a “dance practices that take place in mid-air” (p.46). For the purposes of this paper, vertical dance is included when speaking of aerial dance. All of this language touches on the aesthetic elements primary to aerial dance, that of transitions, intntion in crafting dance, and the potential in low-flying work to utilize the floor. Vertical dance’s relocation of, and reliance on the floor in, the vertical plane is a twist in this understanding of use of the floor when creating aerial dance.

To more clearly see the establishment of these aesthetics in aerial dance, a brief overview of its historical emergence is necessary. Jayne Bernasconi and Nancy E. Smith (2008) detail this history in *Aerial Dance,* the only book published on the subject. Stephanie Evanitsky and Terry Sendgraff are recognized as the progenitors of aerial dance, as both focused their performance careers in this field. The aerial dances of Trisha Brown and Alwin Nikolai will also be discussed briefly, as their contributions are significant. However while these two choreographers, like others, at times utilized the vertical space in making dances, it was never the focus of their creative careers. For this reason, more attention will be paid to the work of Evanitsky and Sendgraff.

In the course of their training, both Evanitsky and Sendgraff studied with modern dance innovator Alwin Nikolai. Evanitsky stated, “Nikolai taught you how to acknowledge the space around you” (Bernasconi, 2008 p. 15). Nikolai’s investigations into time, space and light led him to create pieces such as “Sorcerer” (1960) (Bernasconi, 2008, p. 4), continuing the occasional presence of the aerial body on the dance stage begun during the time of the romantic ballet. For Evanitsky and Sendgraff,

the contact with Nikolai and the experimentation occurring in the dance world in the 1960's sent their movement research fully into the air.

Stephanie Evanitsky premiered her company Multigravitational Aerodance Group in 1969 in New York City. The first choreographer to focus exclusively on vertical spaces, Evanitsky imagined, drew, and physically realized complex environments for her dancers to inhabit. Though she received substantial funding and performance opportunities, positive critical response was rare. Reviewing one piece, dance critic Anna Kisselgoff questioned the validity of naming the work dance. "They are not, like the dance avant-garde, making a statement about dance itself. That is why a performer lying on a crate for hours is conceptually easier to accept as dance (non-dance as dance)" (as cited in Bernasconi, 2008, p. 15).

Stephanie Evanitsky's 1972 "Sure Was," (Evanitsky, 1972, DVD) performed by the Multigravitational Aerodance Group, it offers the clearest example of the aerial dance aesthetic. The work employed horizontally rigged bungee cords, ropes and sections of tractor inner tubes to create a complex and unstable vertical environment that the dancers traversed. Performers slowly lowered themselves, exploring the bounce and suspension of the set. Various locations offered belt-like points of stability where performers could lean, invert, and partner with each other. The movement was functional and completely un-gendered, with the relationships between performers shifting constantly with changes in proximity rather than narrative context. The painted unitards used for both male and female performers offered a functional, relatively androgynous view of the bodies. Because the environment was so unique, no spectacular tricks to were featured. Movement vocabulary focused almost exclusively

on constantly flowing transitions. This suggests the choreographer's craft and intention in creating a dance with attention to the process of movement exploration, and encapsulates much of the aerial dance aesthetic.

Evanitsky left Multigravitational Aerodance Group, and aerial dance all together, in 1976 "disheartened by the struggle to create work with her particular process" (Bernasconi, 2008, p. 15). Although Multigravitational Aerodance Group continued performing for several more years, none of the dancers remained in the field of aerial dance. This isolated Evanitsky's work, leaving no legacy of choreography or technique. However, Evanitsky remains a seminal figure in aerial dance for beginning the dialog, with audiences and critics, about the potential to create a body of dance work off the ground.

Between 1968-1971 Trisha Brown created a number of aerial dances as part of her "Equipment Pieces," described by noted dance critic and historian Sally Banes (1987) in *Terpsichore in Sneakers* (p.80). Brown's choreographic exploration of the pedestrian body, begun during her time at the Judson Dance Theater, continued into the air with the 1970 "Man Walking Down the Side of a Building" and the 1971 "Walking on the Wall". Banes (2001) notes that the work by the choreographers of the Judson Dance Theater in the 1960's influenced modern dance with their clear message that "not only any movement or any body, but also any method is permitted" (p. 350) when making dances. Experiments with chance, improvisation, scores of instructions handed over to the performers, and the use of objects were among the variety of ways Judson choreographers chose to separate themselves from the "works of 'historical' modern dance" (Banes, 2001, p. 355). Dance scholar Deborah Jowitt (1988) states that by 1966

the “communal spirit that had produced the Judson Dance Theater was waning” (p. 335). However it left behind the enduring values “no grand manners, no pretense, no showing off” (ibid) that echo in a great deal of contemporary modern dance. In aerial dance, balancing the spectacle of being in the air, with this post-modern idea of not ‘showing off’ is individually addressed by each choreographer, but often results in this emphasis on transition rather than on tricks which may be discovered through improvisational research on the apparatus.

The remounting of “Man Walking down the Side of a Building” and “Walking on Walls” in 2010 at the Whitney Museum prompted this response from New York Times reporter Roslyn Sulcas (2010) “(T)hat conflation of the ordinary (movement we all do, quotidian activity) and the extraordinary (the physical skill of gravity imitated yet defied) is at the heart of this work” (p. 1C). Within the descriptions of the pieces (both the original and the restaging) there is an emphasis on transitional (ordinary) movement, on how choreographers crafted dances in new and vertical spaces, that maintained a lack of gendered interaction or specific tricks. By 1971 Brown moved on, feeling she had “plumbed the possibilities of control imposed by equipment” (Banes p.82). These pieces, however, give another example of the roots of the aerial dance aesthetic and its direct relationship to postmodern dance.

In 1976 Terry Sendgraff introduced Motivity to the West Coast. This is style of movement with and around a trapeze bar, suspended at approximately head height by two ropes connected to a single point. For more than 30 years, Sendgraff conducted research and taught students to improvise with apparatus that piqued her curiosity including the Motivity trapezes, stilts and bungee cord (Bernasconi, 2008, p. 12).

Because many of her students formed companies and began teaching, Sendgraff is often known as the “mother of aerial dance” (Bernasconi, 2008, p. 13).

Sendgraff’s work was often feminist and improvisational. In the 1980’s, she began *100 Women Walking Tall*, bringing women of diverse backgrounds together to walk on stilts, a celebration of female empowerment, presence in the community, and the political applications of aerial dance (Bernasconi, 2008, p. 13). Off Our Back contributor Joanne Stato’s (sic) (1992) review of events during the 1992 Michigan Womyn’s Music Festival offers a picture of the impact of Sendgraff’s work with Women Walking Tall.

Continuing another tradition begun last August, Terry Sendgraff and Women Walking Tall opened the Festival ceremonies with their performance on stilts. Truly breathtaking again this year, the procession of women on stilts (bare chested and painted entirely green) emerged from the woods, singing and playing cymbals, to the large tree behind the audience in the Night Stage field. Three women acrobatics twirled from bungee cords hanging from the tree's limbs. This ritual, created for the Festival, appropriates no one's culture, and celebrates women's connectedness to the Michigan land.” (p. 16).

This brief historical overview highlights the foundation of the aesthetics of aerial dance. The focus for Evanitsky, Brown and Sendgraff on improvisation, the simple physicality of investigating objects and human interaction, and engaging dancers and non-dancers in performance is rooted squarely in the post-modern dance aesthetic of the day. Each choreographer emphasized transitions, from the ground to the air or on the apparatus. Together these dances illustrate the aerial dance aesthetic, with a focus

on transitional movement, lack of emphasis on specific tricks, at times the use of the floor, and minimized traditional gender representation, .

Two more contemporary examples show how the aerial dance aesthetic has continued to evolve. *8cho*, created by Brenda Angiel's Aerial Dance Company and Project Bandaloop's *(Bound)Less* each utilize the apparatus to extend the capacity for the human body in dance. Each choreographers' work clearly shows the intention to craft dances off the ground and substantial use of transitional movement that characterize aerial dance. While one exists inside a theatrical setting the other is performed on the side of a building, both show more traditional gender representation in costuming and interaction than the above examples. What follows is a more detailed exploration of the aerial dance aesthetic in *8cho* and *(Bound)Less.*

A portion of Brenda Angiel's *8cho* (Angiel, 2013, web) is an aerial tango, performed in a theater between two men, dancing on the ground and a woman suspended by bungee and harness. The elastic bungee cord attached to a single point

Brenda Angiel
Aerial Dance Company.

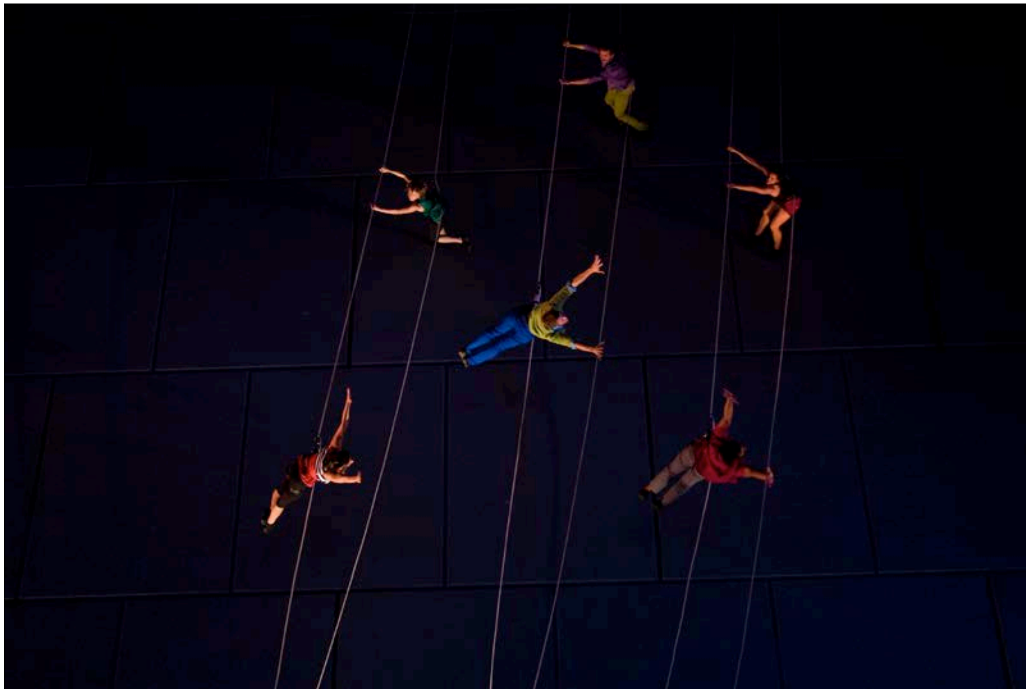
Photo Credit;
James Arias.

Dancers:
Cristina Tziouras,
Viviana Finkelstein,
Ana Armas.

on the back of the female dancer's harness, disguised by her full skirted costume, increased the dancer's buoyancy, as she moves from just touching the floor into the air and back again. The piece gradually escalates from a playful duet into a humorous competition between the two men for the woman's attention, contextualizing the rapidly dynamic changes of partner. The weightlessness of the bungee allows effortless-seeming movement interactions otherwise impossible (or, if possible, extremely strenuous). Tossing and catching the female dancer, the male dancers strive to outperform each other, while the rhythm of the bungee requires constant reaction. As an example of the aerial dance aesthetic, *8cho* exemplifies the use of transitional movement, because movement essentially cannot stop, so no particular trick can be emphasized. The subtly precise control of the bungee requires extensive rehearsal, as well performer's mental flexibility to instantaneously accommodate variations in venue height and bungee elasticity. This piece is a prime example of aerial dance's aesthetic emphasis on using the floor, with two unsuspended dancers highlighting and extending the movement potential of the dancer suspended just above the floor. *8cho's* narrative/character foundation relying on traditional gender representation shows the breadth of the aerial dance form that can encompass this particular piece, as well as the previously mentioned dances.

Project Bandaloop's *(Bound)Less* (Rudolph, 2011, live) is a rope and harness vertical (aerial) dance performed on the Great Wall in Oakland, CA. The flow of movement from beginning to end of each section, as dancers lowered themselves from the top of the building to the ground, pausing to run, leap, flip, and partner emphasized the importance of transitional movement as central to the work, as few individual tricks

were framed to elicit a greater audience response. The shift of the perspective, that causes the wall to become the floor, greatly influences the movement in the piece. As the dancers lower themselves farther from their rooftop anchor points, the longer rope simultaneously increases the potential for loft, the suspended floating quality after the dancer has pushed off of the wall. Rehearsal in the performance environment is



Project Bandaloop.

Photo Credit: Atossa Soltani

Dancers: Anje Lockhart, Roel Seeber, Damara

necessary to calibrate the dance to the actual variations in height and wall texture, all of which can dramatically effect what is possible. While traditional gender performance was reflected in costuming, with women in shorts or skirts and men in pants, as well as in the movement qualities of the female trio which was graceful, effortless-seeming in contrast to the athletic and competitive male duet, partnering interactions did not reflect traditional gender expression.

It is these aesthetic qualities: the craft and intention of creating a dance, an emphasis on transitional movement, and a de-emphasis on specific tricks that are

central to aerial dance. Use of the floor, response to the location of the performance, and a flexible approach to gender representation are more variable aesthetic elements of aerial dance. In critical viewing, the approach to these qualities in aerial performance begins to individuate aerial dance, or its influence, from aerial circus.

Aerial Circus Aesthetic

For the purposes of this paper, the aesthetics of aerial circus that differentiate it from aerial dance are the structure as a sequence of tricks that build in intensity and virtuosity, the attention to eliciting audience response, and often traditional gender performance. Becaus current theoretical discussions of the body in flight exist primarily through analysis of aerial circus, articulating aesthetics of aerial dance and aerial circus can bring both more effectively into critical discourse on the body. A brief review of the history and current theoretical understanding aerial circus and gender representation of the aerial body clarifies the roots of the aerial circus aesthetic.

The late eighteenth through the nineteenth century found the intermingling of dance and circus in the creation of large-scale entertainments. Selma Cohen (1998), author of the *Encyclopedia of Dance* describes the rope dance, an entertainment where acrobats walked and performed folk dances “on a rope elevated above the heads of the crowd” (vol.2, p. 174). The rope dance was a precursor to aerial circus, with full acts taking place off the ground, rather than limited to moments showing “mastery of the air” (Tait, 2005, p. 11) within larger theater or dance works. Jules Léotard premiered his invention of the flying trapeze in Paris in 1859. The act involved releasing one swinging bar, flying to, and catching, a second swinging bar (Tait, 2005, p. 10). This began a steady stream of aerial innovation, as performers sought to best one another by

increasing the acrobatic and technical complexity of their acts, increasing their marketability and audience appeal.

Aerial circus after 1868 showed an “increasing centrality of women” (Tait, 2005, p. 24). Female aerialists achieved a popular status similar to the romantic ballerina of the time, who had become the “rock star(s) of the nineteenth-century bourgeoisie” (Jowitt, 1988, p. 45). Helen Stoddart (2000) credits a portion of the success of these female aerialists to the higher perceived risk in a female performing the same trick as a male (p. 171). The female aerialists’ success and the gender ambiguity resulting from the combination of extreme muscularity in conjunction with the grace and effortlessness in both female and male performers resulted in a number of incidences in which “cross-dressing of young males with the upper-body strength for competitive advantage made the aerial act appear impressive ‘for a woman,’ and ensured its hire over other male acts” (Tait, 2005, p. 67).

Women performed all possible aerial circus roles; working as soloists, as well as innovating and mastering all flying trapeze tricks. Until the mid-1930’s female and male aerialists performed similar roles on the flying trapeze, both flying and catching (Tait, 2005, p. 92). The catcher, hanging by the knees on specialized swinging bars, catches the hands or feet of the flyer as they launch themselves from another swinging bar. The flyers, with their catching partners, worked to increase the number and difficulty of twists, flips and obstructions that occurred during this flight, to achieve renown as the first to master the newest challenge (Tait, 2005, p. 35).

Tait investigates at length the public’s unease with this gender non-conformity of the muscular female aerialist, and the evolution of gender in circus aerial performance.

As early as the 1890's (Tait, 2005, p. 56) aerial ballets were being emphasized as an appropriately feminine aerial role for women in circus performance. *The Encyclopedia of Dance* describes aerial ballet as follows:

> . . . (s)cantily clad girls (or boys in wigs and tutus) clamber up canvas-covered ropes to a point twenty-three feet above ground where they pose, do simple acrobatics, revolve or hang by their teeth, all in unison….These acts are popular with the management because they require minimal training and rehearsal and yet make a vivid impression on naïve audiences. (Cohen, 1998, vol.2, p. 176).

Vander Clyde (aka Barbette, who performed a female impersonation aerial act from1921-1938) "reinvented the aerial ballet and human butterfly chorus" (Tait, 2005, p. 76). This act became a principle venue for female aerial performance. The aerial ballet created a softer, more feminine, and therefore more comfortable, image of the female aerialist (Tait, 2005, p. 56; Cohen, 1998, vol. 2, p. 176). Because "(T)he exceptional, in the realm of female physical achievement, may too easily be classified equally as the freakish or the abnormal" (Stoddart, 2000, p. 176), Tait (2005) argues that "overtly feminine costuming to camouflage muscularity" (p.77) evolved to ease audience discomfort, and created the traditional feminine gender representation found in aerial circus. By the 1950's, though some female aerialists continued to train for the most challenging feats of flying trapeze, most found themselves performing only simple tricks, holding trapezes and decorating the platforms with "sequined bikinis, fishnet stockings, feathers and false eyelashes" (Tait, 2005, p. 90). Traditional, often sexualized, female gender performance became a well-recognized trait of aerial circus.

Though named a ballet, the aerial ballet as described above highlights several aesthetic qualities of the aerial circus, rather than aerial dance. In particular, the intention of the aerial ballet is to create an audience-pleasing spectacle with traditional gender representation. Alluringly clad female aerialists spun from loops for the hand, foot or gripping “iron jaw technology” (Tait, 2005, p. 56) with their teeth. The single, spinning point of suspension created a feminine appearance of graceful, effortless flight. The acts were carefully constructed to be accessible and thrilling for the “mainstream audience” (Tait, 2005, p. 76). The spinning poses offer ample time for audiences to absorb and applaud each image. In contrast to aerial dance’s emphasis on transitional movement, these poses comprise the bulk of the aerial ballet.

The grace and apparent effortlessness of aerial flight served to feminize the male aerial body. This feminization was actively counteracted by the obvious athleticism and muscularity of the male aerialist. Maura Keefe (2009) discusses the ways in which dancers Ted Shawn and Gene Kelly addressed similar challenges to a masculine identity for male dancers in her essay “Is Dance a Man’s Sport Too?” Shawn and Kelly associated themselves directly with sports in choreography to retain masculinity within the feminized art form of dance (p. 98-99). For the male aerialist, masculinization was achieved through the emphasis on the muscular power required to execute an aerial act, to the point that the male aerialist became the “athletic elite” (Tait, 2005, p. 90). Thus a traditionally masculine, and feminine, gendered performance became a cornerstone of the aerial circus aesthetic.

“Much of the desire to behold a spectacle . . . derives precisely from the presence of danger, the possibility of death” (Carmeli, 2006, p. 620). Once, the circus

offered audiences a very real potential to view injury or death, (Stoddart, 2000, p. 26) as performers pushed the edge of technological and human capacity. In contemporary times, the actual risk of death or serious injury is substantially lower, “comparable to extreme sport” (Tait, 2005, p. 93) where broken bones are an expectation. While not inherently freakish, the required strength, flexibility, and perceived danger place aerial circus outside an audience’s everyday experience, as performers craft acts of increasing difficulty.

This attraction for an audience, to safely visit danger, can be explained by grotesque theory. Christina Gouldig, investigating cultural consumption of horror, defines the Bakhtin’s grotesque as those dark or distorted things that lie on the margins of acceptable society (as cited in Gouldig, 2003, p. 116), such as the possiblity of injury or death. The construction of aerial circus to engage audience attention occurs largely through escalating the apparent risk within the act, touching on this darker, grotesque appeal. From this discussion, the aesthetic elements specific to aerial circus are audience engagement and response, escalation of virtuosity and risk, traditional gender representation, and the aerial circus’ presentation occurring largely in a self-contained, tent environment that is temporary and creates a separate and variable audience relationship.

Sites of Blurring Aesthetic: New Circus

The unique aesthetics of aerial dance (emphasis on transitional movement and corresponding lack of emphasis on any individual movement, the choreographer’s intention and crafting of the dance, a relationship to the floor, as well as a diversity of possible venues and often a diminished exhibition of traditional gender performance)

and aerial circus (acts formed from tricks of increasing difficulty sequenced to allow audience response, often with traditional gender representation and occurring in circus tents) have been traced through the development of each form. The shared aesthetic elements are the use of the suspended apparatus and its physical influence and the apparent easeful execution of aerial action. These shared aesthetic values provide a groundwork from which both aerial dance and aerial circus begin to borrow both movement, apparatus and aesthetic qualities from each other.

The almost inevitable “blurring of form” (Albrecht 1995, p.10) that came of the artistic and philosophical re-imagining of traditional circus during the tumultuous social and political climate of the 60’s and 70’s in the United States, created the New American Circus, an ideal beginning for a discussion of the aesthetic borrowing occurring between aerial dance and aerial circus.

Ernest Albrecht is the author and editor of *Spectacle,* a circus arts quarterly journal, in addition to multiple books examining the new circus. Albrecht (1995) asserts that circus performers’ physical achievements were “expressions of what it meant to be human. The circus artist’ “tricks” were, in fact, statements of the universal desire to transcend what are otherwise accepted as the limitations placed on the human condition” (p. 5). The Pickle Family Circus and the Big Apple Circus were the first of the North American new circuses who emphasized “circus performers were artists celebrating human victory over gravity and physical limitations” (ibid p. 9). In contrast to the grand scale of the three-ring circus, these circuses began to explore an “intimacy, artistry, attention to skill and a feeling of ensemble” (ibid p. 7).

Some new circus chose to return to the showmanship and traditional skills of the traditional circus including clowning, equestrian, aerial and acrobatic acts. The Pickle Family Circus, created in 1975, began as a collective of performers committed to creating shows with a political sensibility told through clowning, juggling and acrobatics. Eventually, the Pickle Family Circus included aerial work that did not exploit "women by having them dangle from ropes in scanty costumes" (Pisoni as cited in Albrecht, 1995, p. 31) was woven into the performances.

The Big Apple Circus, founded in 1977, was created as a return to "the one-ring show in which art and individual artistry" were central (Albrecht, 1995, p. 50). Others have found a niche in the "theatricalization" (Albrecht, 2006, p. 22) of circus, exemplified by Cirque du Soleil. Cirque du Soleil rose to prominence from their beginnings in a mix of street theater and circus in the early 1980's (Cirquedusoleil.com). It has become the most visible example of this new form of circus, replacing animal acts with an all human cast of dancers, acrobats, aerialists and clowns, woven together with a "theme or guiding inspiration" (Albrecht, 2006, p. 4).

"In the post-modern age circus has lost the marginality" (Carmeli, 2006, p. 622) of its history as traveling outsiders. It now resides comfortably in theaters as well as tent (Stoddart, 2000, p. 46). The new circus incorporates some elements of the aerial circus aesthetic, while shifting or leaving others behind. Specific examples from Cirque du Soleil and Circo Zero articulate this blending. Aerial performance in the new circus, with its use of transitional movement on the floor and in the air, overarching narratives or themes that indicate broader creative intentions, more androgynous representations of gender, blurs the aesthetic between aerial dance and aerial circus.

The female aerialists in the 1996 *Quidam* (Dragone, 2012, web) are androgynous, consistent with much of Cirque du Soleil's overall aesthetic (Tait, 2005, p. 126). Costuming and make-up for the "Spanish Web Act" indicate an otherworldly theme, weaving the act into the show as a whole. Movement on the ground, and low enough on the vertically hung ropes for the performers to touch the ground creates substantial transitional movement between the floor and the air that is not focused on a specific trick, and much of this low-flying circling does not elicit a particular audience response, much like aerial dance. This transitional movement expands the act beyond a purely circus aesthetic.

Male and female aerialists use the apparatus to swing, be swung, climb and slide on. The unison spinning at the top of the rope visually references another era's aerial ballets in their apparent effortless flight. Though the female performers are not overtly feminized beyond the grace found in flight, the structure of the whole act does frame powerfully muscular male performers, reinforcing the image of the female chorus. Overall, this work is an example of the circus aesthetic: with a structure that pauses for audience response as it builds towards a spectacular finish and the powerful masculinity in the male performers and extreme flexibility in the female performers, and a location within the circus big-top. However, the new circus qualities of androgyny, incorporation of floor and low-flying vocabulary, and a overarching theme that allow extended transitions into and out of the apparatus encourage the acknowledgement of influences beyond the circus on this work.

"Rope Fight" is a duet between a man and a woman contained within Circo Zero's *Sol Niger* (Hennessy, 2008, live). It is an aggressively physical wrestling for

dominance on a rope. Each performer effortlessly mounts the cloud swing, a rope hung from widely separated points on an theater stage, that provides a set and a battleground. The muscularity of the female performer and the violence of the piece is an example of the grotesque potential of circus (Tait , 2005, p.131). At the same time, the movement is completely un-gendered and there are no specific tricks. The strength and skill of the performers is used to create tension, rather than building towards a spectacular event. The swing and instability of the apparatus lend additional risk to a duet that does not resolve, rather it simply continues on into the next section of the work. Though "Rope Fight" is named circus and it exhibits the substantial physical strength, there is no audience invitation to applaud and no emphasis on particular skills or tricks. The entire duet is a transition, from the floor into relationship between the preformers, and on into the following act, every movement within it is a non-specific and particularly functional, qualities emphasized in the aerial dance aesthetic.

Sites of Blurring: Aerial Dance

Aerial dance, continues to evolve as dancers seek aerial training in many places including from aerial circus. The following pieces utilize the corde lisse and the steel hoop, traditional circus apparatus used in ways that exhibit more of an aerial dance than aerial circus aesthetic. Kevin O'Connor's 2012 "rope lab" (O'Connor, 2012, live), was a performance using six corde lisse, vertical ropes spaced across a proscenium theater stage. It was an aerial dance created as part of Frequent Flyer's Fourteenth annual Aerial Dance Festival held in Boulder Colorado. The piece contains aesthetic elements of aerial dance: the prevalence of on-the-floor and aerial transitional movement, and a lack of traditionally feminine movement, or audience pleasing structure. With their faces

covered with stocking caps, in reference to the Russian female punk band Pussy Riot, the female performers spiraled around and swung on the ropes, caught and lifted each other, chaotically crashed into each other, and supported each other's weight in the air. The clarity of specific aerial tricks and tasks, the interplay of physical violence, chaos, and strength amongst the female cast leads to a complex reading of the female body that Tait (2005) describes as characteristic of some new circus (p.131).

Fredrique Debitte's Compagnie Drapés Aériens performs "Woman in the Moon" (Aerial Dance DVD) a male-female aerial dance duet performed with a steel hoop attached to the hem of Debitte's ankle length gown. It is an amusing, lightly romantic dance that involves a number of different methods of flight for the pair using the ropes and the hoop, as they negotiate an onstage counterbalance system visible on stage. Ultimately the hoop is attached at two points directly across from one another, allowing it to tip vertical, or be held horizontal to the floor. The hoop is traditionally an empty ring in or around which the aerialist performs. Disguising it in the hem of the gown creates encumbrances (trying to sit in a ring with a fabric cover pulled taut) and humor (the hem of the skirt is flipped above Debitte's head, so that trunk and legs are fully exposed and framed on one side, while head and arms are exposed on the other. Based on a circus apparatus, and showing moments of audience engagement, there is a reflection of aerial circus' aesthetic and technical influence. At the same time, the aerial dance aesthetic applies largely, as most of the movement was transitional and few tricks were possible. The piece followed a more emotionally narrative structure through traditional gender representation, rather than a growing intensity in tricks to engage the audience. Finally, both performers moved into and out of the floor repeatedly.

Aerial dance and aerial circus performance continue to blur, as more technical tricks and muscularity are adopted by aerial dancers and the inclusion of floor work and greater emphasis on transitional movement is included in aerial circus. The importance of educating performers, audiences and academics about the specific historical and aesthetic contributions made to aerial performance is invaluable. Very little academic writing exists specific to aerial performance, and particularly the relatively young genre of aerial dance. With this clarification of aesthetic similarities and differences between aerial dance and aerial circus groundwork is laid for critical analysis of each, both popularly and academically. I encourage future academic inquiry into the use of spectacle, venue, technique and the complexly gendered body in aerial performance to articulate the human fascination with flight and the extreme capacity of the human body in performance.

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