# VERTICAL KNOWLEDGE: EXPLORING THE POTENTIAL OF VERTICAL DANCE AS A SCENOGRAPHIC STRATEGY IN THE PERFORMANCE OF SITE

NATALIE ROWLAND

**Introduction**

In this paper I will discuss vertical dance as a scenographic strategy and the potential that offers for engaging the viewer with the environment in new ways. Focusing on vertical dance, I draw on Lawrence's definition and differentiation from aerial dance which encompasses a wider range of apparatus and technique. Lawrence situates vertical dance as dance that "takes place off the ground, against a vertical surface (commonly a wall) that becomes the dancer's 'floor'" (Lawrence, 2010, p.49). This definition locates vertical dance immediately in an environment that is defined by the perspective of the performer. Our understanding of the location, which may or may not be familiar to the audience, is manipulated by our intuitive knowledge of gravity and relationship with the concept of a 'floor'. Challenging the audience to consider a world where there is the opportunity for an alternative 'floor', to encounter the environment in a new way, is at the heart of this discussion. This paper aims to explore what happens when an audience encounters vertical dance, and what opportunities that presents for performance of site and architectural spaces.

**New Knowledge**

In November 2012 I experienced vertical dance for the first time, as part of a production of the 1589 Florentine Intermedi at the Brighton Early Music Festival. Located in the vast church of St Bartholomew in Brighton, the production featured two vertical dancers who appeared from the upper arches high on the walls either side of the main performance area. As they worked their way down to the ground they performed somersaults and appeared to fly as they ran along the wall and propelled themselves out into the space. In my role as a lighting designer, I was familiar with St Bartholomew's Church as I had lit several productions there. Built in 1874 and designed by Edmund Scott, the brick-built structure stands 135 feet high and comparisons have been drawn with the scale of Noah's Ark as described in the bible. The interior is vast and uninterrupted, with no cross beams, chandeliers or rood screen. The walls seem to extend impossibly high before meeting the eaves of the roof. In previous lighting designs in this space I had used powerful wash lights to illuminate the walls, but had only ever been able to reach the roof with lasers. There seemed a point at which the building became 'untouchable'. It seemed as though human occupants of this sacred space could occupy only the lower half. The performance during the Florentine Intermedi gave me, and the rest of the audience, an opportunity to 'touch' the higher levels of that building. During the performance (by Zu Aerial Dance) as dancers Hazel Maddocks and Lindsey Butcher touched the brickwork with their hands and their feet, I became increasingly aware not only of the height of those walls, but also their strength, their immovability and their texture. My own knowledge and understanding of brickwork, my own encounters with those very walls contributed to an embodied sensation of what it might be like to walk up there, how the bricks were the same. By entering into a kinesthetic awareness and empathy with the vertical dancers that experience was extended to feel the sensation of space between the walls. For the first time I had a sense of scale and a comprehension of the volume of air in the upper section of the building. At the time I couldn't articulate how or why I had gained

Figure 1. The Flock Project view from base of building. An image of 3 of the dancers from SimonÁg DanCircus and Firebirds Productions in a performance of The Flock Project. Viewed from immediately below the dancers and at the base of the building, the dancers use the space around the building tethered by rope lines

that new knowledge. It has only been through my research into scenography, the phenomenological method and a development of my own aerial dance practice that I have reached a point where I feel able to begin to articulate how that knowledge reached me – and how I think vertical dance can affect its audience's understanding of and relationship with site.

**A Scenographic Strategy**

Through a deeper understanding of the scenographic as "place orientation" (Hann, 2019), this paper proposes that vertical dance be considered a *scenographic* strategy that might be employed in site specific performance. Addressing the difference between scenography and the scenographic, Rachel Hann describes the ability of scenographic elements to orientate, while scenography is a crafting of scene or world (Hann, 2019, p.4). Orientation is a fundamental part of vertical dance, whether as a dancer or as a viewer. Both are led to foreground

their understanding of which way is 'up' and where is the ground. Through making those enquiries overt in their thinking, the natural order of the site is disrupted, opening opportunities for thinking about and looking at the site in a new way.

While 'up' and 'down' are clearly aspects of the site that are redefined, vertical dance also invites us to experience textures and structures with a fresh perspective. Batson and Wilson suggest that, "Humans are inextricably linked by their *potential* and what the environment affords them to do (Gibson, 1966). Environmental textures, structures and patterns are affordances" (Batson & Wilson, 2014, p.177). The affordances of site and architecture become extended when vertical dance takes place. No longer bound by the natural laws of navigation, or the architects design for the pedestrian or utilitarian use of the building, the dancer is able to encounter the site in a way not previously designed or considered. These affordances include an experience of surfaces and textures previously only encountered by eye. Meanwhile, the viewer is afforded a perspective that reorganises their understanding of the human/site relationship.

In June 2019 the Prague Quadrennial of Performance Design and Space took place with a site specific performance by SimonÁg DanCircus and Firebirds Productions of Hungary entitled The Flock Project. This vertical dance performance took place on the side of the hotel Mama Shelter in Prague, a 1960s brutalist style building just outside of the city centre. Located at a busy junction, the pedestrian experience of the site is focused on navigating the traffic and pathways and doesn't naturally encourage you to look up. If you do find the opportunity to lessen your focus on the hectic multiple pathways of people and vehicles, a wider view of the area is predominantly occupied by straight lines and blocky shapes. The site affords navigation, direct pathways and a sense of travel. The clean lines articulating direction and a sense of movement through. The hotel itself has landscaped exterior areas that providing seating for the bar restaurant, as well as general meeting grounds. While my experience of this area was very much focused on the horizontal plane and the many pathways,

lines and blocks contained within, The Flock Project extended the viewer's attention upward. In the beautiful June sunshine the towering concrete wall was contrasted sharply against the vibrant blue sky, the lines made crisp and strong. As the performers danced across this strong blocky surface the movement evoked thoughts of swooping birds, the soft edged, flowing, shifting shapes of clouds and the freedom afforded by the space previously unused. Due to the arrangement of the buildings in the area, the performance was visible from quite a distance away. When seen from afar the scale of the dancers against the imposing building reinforced further the sense of birds in flight.

Throughout the performance, the viewer is also aware of the lines that tether the dancers. These both reassure the viewer in regard to safety, but also contribute to the experience of the movement. They become a visual reference to the geometric and gravitational laws that govern the dancers despite their apparent weightlessness and flight. The arcs of rope are tested as boundaries and played against in a duet between air and surface, weight and flight.

As a scenographic strategy the performance serves as a means of animating the solid structures and lines of the site. It invites a reading of the environment that entangles the chaotic, generative shapes of nature with the linear pathways of construction. The importance of movement to this strategy as a processual way of being in and with the world, can be considered to be in the "co-constitutive entanglements of body and world" (Paterson, 2007, p.16) resonating with Doreen Massey's stance that space shouldn't be considered "static, closed, immobile" (2005, p.18), instead proposing a way of knowing that is dynamic and full of potential. A position that echoes site specific dance practice as the "shift in focus from architecture as being concerned with the building, to the intersection between place and event" (Sara in Hunter, 2015, p.64). It is through a concern with what the site *does* rather than what it *is* that the practices of choreography and scenography share a common ground.

Figure 2. The Flock Project view including Hotel Mama Shelter. Performed as part of the 2019 Prague Quadrennial, The Flock Project invited a new perspective on the brutalist structure

**Audience engagement**

As a viewer of vertical dance, I have found that the most effective tool in imparting new knowledge of a site is kinesthetic empathy. Reynolds and Reason's volume *Kinesthetic Empathy in Creative and Cultural Practices* (2012) articulates well the ways in which embodiment, kinesthesia and the science of mirror neurons function in art and performance practices as a means of communication and sharing of knowledge. As Reynolds notes in a previous volume, "Kinesthesia is informed by senses such as vision and hearing as well as internal sensations of muscle tension and body position" (Reynolds, 2007, p.185) and in a practice such as vertical dance, these mechanisms offer the viewer the opportunity to sense and experience in a way that they would not ordinarily encounter the world. Joslin McKinney explains how scenography functions in this way;

> *Recent scenographic practice, therefore, appears to reframe the role of the audience. Audience members are implicated physically as part of the scenic space and can, within limits, construct their own experience as participants through the ways in which they choose to interact with the scenographic environment.* (McKinney in Reynolds & Reason, 2012, p.222)

Through a kinesthetic empathy the viewer is able to project themselves onto the building or site. The movement of the dancers providing clues as to the nature of the surface, landings and momentum expressing the forces at play. As the dancers moved across the walls at Mama Shelter, the viewer became increasingly aware of the scale of the building, the distances involved expressed in the travel and pendulum distances of the movement. In each landing the viewer's body might sense the way that the limbs and torso respond, increasing their awareness of the immovability and strength of the wall and the amount of energy that the human body must dissipate in an encounter of landing. One could imagine what it might be like to jump on that wall, how much the knees would need to bend, what the sensation of pushing off through the feet might be like. This embodied knowledge contributes to the viewer's understanding of the site. Ordinarily unable to interact with the outside walls of the Mama Shelter structure they are provided with new information that helps them to build a sense of the site. In this way, the scenographic strategy of vertical dance contributes to the creation of a sense of architectural understanding. Sara notes the shifting nature of architecture as the location of place and event and the way that "use constructs the function, atmosphere and meaning of a place. When you change the function, atmosphere and meaning of a place then you construct architecture" (Sara in Hunter, 2015, p.62).

Vertical dance changes the function of a place by an irregular use of the space, but through the mode of performance it also changes the atmosphere. Kathleen Stewart writes of the close relationship between movement and the process of atmospheric attunements;

> *I am suggesting that atmospheric attunements are a process of what Heidegger (1962) called worlding – an intimate, compositional process of dwelling in spaces that bears, gestures, gestates, worlds. Here, things matter not because of how they are represented but because they have qualities, rhythms, forces, relations, and movements.* (Stewart, 2011, p.445)

This entanglement between movement, meaning and atmospheres is a key element of the way that vertical dance acts on the space and communicates with its audience. Stewart echoes Michel de Certeau in acknowledging the impact of considering space as a practiced place (de Certeau, 1984, Stewart, 2010) in which our understanding of the space is gathered through our encounters, the movement, the rhythms of the place. But this information is not only gathered visually. As previously mentioned, the effect of kinesthetic empathy enables the viewer to engage physically with what they are seeing, understanding what is seen through their body. While kinesthetic empathy remains a relatively new concept, artists, performers and philosophers have previously discussed the role of embodied knowledge. Brian Massumi notes the connection between vision and the rest of the body, suggesting that, "Vision only actually functions in a mixed or intermodal state. It is always fed into other senses and feeds out to them" (Massumi, 2002, p.154). Tim Ingold invites us to re-think how we understand the nature of vision in his discussion of weather (Ingold, 2011). While touching on embodiment, Ingold focuses on reframing our perspective to include movement as an integral part of understanding what we see. Discussing light as a mechanism for vision he states, "We do not perceive it, we perceive in it" (Ingold, 2011, p.138) and it is this infusion and envelopment that appeals to all of our senses. Massumi relates this to Giles Deleuze's concept of the haptic;

> *Vision has taken up a tactile function. It has arrogated to itself the function of touch. This purely visual touch is a synesthesia proper to vision: a touch as only the eyes can touch.* (Massumi, 2002, p.158)

In this way, through their visual engagement, the vertical dance audience is able to 'touch' the wall, to sense its surface and acquire new knowledge of the site. Drawing attention to the material surfaces, geometry and scale of the site, vertical dance can clearly be considered to function as place orientating, as scenographic.

**Communicating the potential**

But to what extent is this scenographic effect of vertical dance an intentional strategy? Drawing on conversations with vertical dance artists and some limited personal experience of learning basic vertical dance vocabulary, this paper suggests that the scenographics of vertical dance are very much in the minds of the performers and choreographers.

In learning vertical dance my own kinesthetic awareness was heightened in a way that was both physically and mentally demanding. A constant awareness of alignment, relationship to the wall, control of my position, fighting against the natural pull of gravity and inclination of my muscles. Through my own increased awareness of distances, trajectories and the forces of physics I began to understand why landings and interactions with the wall impart such a strong sense of knowledge to the viewer – these elements are all consuming. The dancer must concentrate and be present to these things and in this way I suggest the viewer cannot avoid a degree of understanding of the relationship between the dancer and the site.

Surface and interactions with it were a recurring focus during interviews with vertical dance artists. Thinking about what the surface consists of Chrissie Ardill considers, "ledges, corners, poles, windows" and notes, "I'll be approaching it with curiosity" (Ardill, 2019). Beyond the artistic and choreographic implications of the surface, Kathryn Cooley spoke about the technical considerations such as, "how the surface changes/reacts to heat, water, wind" (Cooley, 2019). Tim Ingold draws on Gibson in his discussion of the energies involved in surfaces;

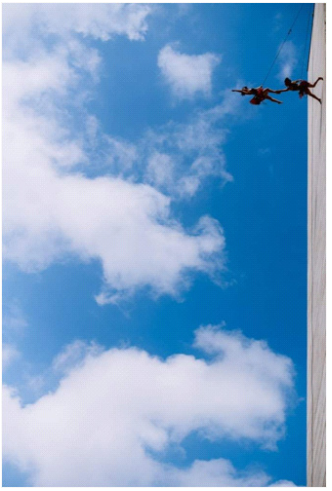

Figure 3. The Flock Project view from across the street. A wider perspective on the performance invites an appreciation of scale, composition and relationship with the wider environment

> *All surfaces, according to Gibson, have certain properties. These include a particular, relatively persistent layout, a degree of resistance to deformation and disintegration, a distinctive shape and a characteristically non-homogeneous texture. Surfaces are where radiant energy is reflected or absorbed, where vibrations are passed to the medium, where vaporisation or diffusion into the medium occur, and what our bodies come up against in touch. So far as perception is concerned, surfaces are therefore 'where most of the action is'.* (Gibson, 1979, p.23) (Ingold, 2011, p.22)

The surface as point of contact for the vertical dancer can be thought of as a 'body' with the particular properties Gibson notes, affecting how the site is approached and interacted with. These decisions and this relationship will in turn affect what is communicated to the viewer.

When asked in what way they felt the site affected how and what they

communicated to the audience, the responses suggested a very strong awareness on the part of the dancers with regard to the way that the whole site is viewed. Recognising the issue of scale, Ardill noted that, "regularly the audience aren't close enough to see our faces very well so that makes us slightly less human to them and makes them look more at the overall scene rather than zooming in on us within it" (Ardill, 2019). Following this vein of thought, Cooley explained the way that she considers the site to often function like "an editing tool or like a camera shot" in the way that the choreography is communicated to the audience. In recognising the way that the structures and layout of the site influence the visibility, scale and perspective received by the audience Cooley is thinking in a scenographic way about the performance. Considering the site as an editing tool invites a framing of vertical dance that is site specific (Hunter, 2015), site responsive (Hunter, 2015) and an act of place orientation (Hann, 2019).
Discussing the specificity of the site, Cooley noted that;

> *The site is everything. Buildings, walls, cliffs themselves can dance, are always dancing we are just there to draw peoples attention to it or to sculpt the movement in some way or another.* (Cooley, 2019)

This choreographic vision of the site begins to articulate the strong connection felt by the dancer to the rhythms and movements of the environment they are in. Movement is the foremost tool in the ability of vertical dance to communicate space and place, but this paper argues that movement does not only belong to the choreographic, but also to the scenographic. In a previous paper I suggested that the differentiation between the choreographic and the scenographic lies in what is being orientated. I suggested that the scenographic is, as Hann (2019) proposes, an orientation of place, while the choreographic is an orientation of the body (Rowland, 2019). Both strategies are at play in vertical dance and navigating these offers a strategy for deciding how and what knowledge will be shared with the audience.

## Conclusion

This research has found that the scenographics of vertical dance are very much in the minds of the performers and choreographers, however the way that this is communicated to the audience often remains as a latent potential. Frequently classified and framed as spectacle, vertical dance is thus limited in its ability to communicate and reinvent place. However, when we consider the experience of watching vertical dance, the audience are clearly engaging with the architecture, landscape or site in a new way. They are encouraged to look up and to frame the location in a way that they are not likely to have done previously. Like the 'camera shot' the vertical dance performance tells the audience something new, it directs their vision and thereby their embodied experience of the site. The challenge facing vertical dance choreographers and artists is in elucidating this new experience of site. When understood not only as spectacle or as choreographic, but also as scenographic, vertical dance has the potential to become a process of worlding that communicates with its audience through a shared reframing of place.

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