

Dancing in the Vertical Plane:  
An exploration of vertical expressivity, interdisciplinary collaboration,  
and site-specific performance.

OSU Distinction Project

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by

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Traditionally, dance is bound by gravity. Vertical expressivity can only be achieved by how high a dancer can jump, reach, or be thrown into the air. In traditional dance studio and theatre spaces, a large amount of vertical space above the dancing body is underutilized. Movement on the vertical plane fascinates me, and I have always searched for alternate ways to expand my movement vocabulary vertically.

I consider myself not only a dance artist, but also a dance athlete. I express my love of movement artistically through dance and athletically through a myriad of other physical practices I participate in: running, swimming, biking, hiking, canoeing, yoga, and climbing. I find climbing to contain the most parallels to dance. I often find myself voyeuristically watching other climbers. I am not attempting to memorize the particular techniques behind the difficult route they are ascending. Rather, I watch the aesthetics, qualities, and unique rhythm each climber possesses. After spending a great deal of time at climbing gyms, I have discovered that climbers have access to a broader range of vertical expressivity than dancers. Climbers are not limited to horizontal expression because they utilize the wall as a tool to project the body upward, to discover new movement patterns in the vertical plane, and to appear to defy gravity.

Dance studios and traditional theater spaces limit the possibilities of movement and choreography because gravity limits the vertical expressivity of the dancing body. To truly investigate artistic vertical expression, I broke dance out of its traditional confines. I conducted my creative research with Project Bandaloop in Oakland, California and at The Ohio State University's Outdoor Adventure Center at the Tom W. Davis Climbing Wall. I investigated movement in the vertical plane, combined the athleticism of climbing with the creativity of dance, and broke dance out of the confines of a theater space. My research culminated in evening-length performances on May 11 and May 12, 2012 at the Tom W. Davis Climbing Wall. The performances were free and open to the public. My goal was to change the audience's perception of space and to expose a new population to dance performance.

Five main questions fueled my creative research: How can dancers move in the vertical space? What techniques allow dancers to move vertically? What are the similarities and differences between the athleticism, artistry, aesthetics, and techniques of climbing and dance? How will the audience react to a dance performance on a climbing wall? Can these elements be combined into successful choreographic expression and performance?

From these questions, I began physically researching vertical expressivity by studying, watching, and participating in climbing and contemporary dance techniques. I received funding through the Undergraduate Research Fund, which gave me the opportunity to study for a weekend with the world-renowned aerial dance company Project Bandaloop in Oakland, California. I began my interdisciplinary research by combining the movement forms of climbing and dance—both contemporary dance and aerial dance. I assembled a cast of both climbers and dancers. These performers aided my personal interdisciplinary research by bringing their collaborative voices, opinions, aesthetic preferences, and diverse movement backgrounds to each rehearsal. When I began to create a site-specific performance piece for the climbing wall, I encountered surprises and setbacks. The upper management and staff at the Outdoor Adventure Center were extremely supportive of the project, but getting rehearsal space on a day-to-day basis proved to be a challenge logistically.

For my research regarding vertical expressivity and interdisciplinary collaboration, I explored dance aesthetics and climbing techniques. I applied this research to the specific space of the climbing wall. I discovered two methods whereby dancers could move vertically in a climbing gym. First, they could use holds on a climbing wall to project their bodies upward. Secondly, they could be suspended from a rope from a top anchor. Both of these techniques presented their own successes and failures.

I explored the first method of using holds on a climbing wall in parts of my choreography. As a climber on a climbing wall, I approach a climbing route as a problem to solve. Bouldering, a

type of climbing that moves the body horizontally across the wall, is actually referred to as a “problem.” When climbing, my actions are dictated by function—I move efficiently to solve the physical problem of ascending a climbing route or completing a bouldering problem. As a choreographer on a climbing wall, I approach the climbing wall as an empty painting to fill with the color of movement. My actions are dictated by form—I move to create aesthetically and artistically pleasing shapes and motions. I move to tell a story, embody a feeling, or explain an emotion.

The duality of these movement practices in my body caused a problem when I first set out to choreograph. I first approached the wall as a climber. I tried to give my cast open scores or problems to solve on the climbing wall. The climbers in my cast embraced this idea, but the dancers moved awkwardly and without their natural ease. I then attempted to choreograph specific movement sequences using the holds on the wall. This time, the climbers in my cast struggled with memorizing sequencing while the dancers felt more comfortable with the structured climbing dance.

From these observations, I made a hybridized form of solving a climbing problem while having a strict musical phrase or wall movement pattern to follow. Within the strict parameters, both the climbers and dancers found success. I used contemporary dance vocabulary of expressing specific weight or rhythmic qualities while climbing. I used specific climbing techniques in dance choreography. I taught the dancers how to utilize small footholds, the technique of smearing, how to fall safely on crash pads, and how to safely spot someone who is bouldering. Several members of the cast mastered the “figure four” move during a bouldering section. In another bouldering section, I combined dance partnering with bouldering, using safe supports of the human body to leverage weight and using climbing holds to leverage weight. It turned into a sequence of trios between two cast members and the wall.

Many dancers still struggled to master the physicality of climbing vertically and horizontally using all limbs as weight bearing supports. During one section in the bouldering “cave,” the dancers

in the cast expressed success when they mimicked the climbing holds used by the dancer directly in front of them when progressing horizontally across the wall. The dancers' bodies were programmed to mimic movement—a practice utilized in traditional dance technique class and in traditional dance choreography. Therefore, the dancers were having trouble physically solving climbing or bouldering problems. The climbers never expressed concern with which climbing holds to choose, because they already programmed the problem solving aspect of climbing into their bodies.

On the other hand, the climbers were concerned with “flow” because they had never approached climbing aesthetically. One climber approached me with the concern, “I just don’t have the pretty flow you dancers have.” Yet, when he climbed without any strict parameters or choreography he had a rhythmic, smooth flow to his movement. He searched for—and eventually found—a balance between making his naturally graceful functions while climbing into a purposeful form while dancing.

The second way I explored vertical expression on the climbing wall was utilizing gear, harnesses, and ropes, to suspend the body in the air from a top anchor. I approached movement in the harness two ways: imagining the wall as the floor and being suspended with little or no connection to the wall. I found the former most challenging to embody and interesting to analyze.

When imagining the wall as the floor, the dancer’s body is perpendicular to the wall and parallel to the floor. Although the dancer feels weightless, the goal of this work was to make the dancer seem weighted. The dancers created the illusion that gravity was being applied from the wall, rather than the ground. Although the dancers appeared weightless when flipping or jumping, I wanted to find moments of gravity for the dancers to feel and the audience to see. My goal was to redefine the dancers’ relationship with the ground and the climbing wall. This type of work I learned while working with Project Bandaloop in Oakland, California. Here, my biggest challenge

was to teach my interdisciplinary cast vertical dance harness techniques and how to reorient the body in space.

At first, the climbers in my cast adapted to the style of movement with ease. They were comfortable being in a harness and manipulating their bodies while suspended from ropes. However, their alignment was not anatomically correct. It takes an incredible amount of core strength and body awareness to have the correct skeletal alignment when standing perpendicular to the wall. The dancers, although unskilled in harnesses, took verbal feedback and applied it more efficiently to their bodies than the climbers. I had to find vocabulary compatible with both dancers and climbers to give alignment and movement feedback during this type of research. I found it most successful to give clear, directional feedback rather than images or descriptions of how it should feel.

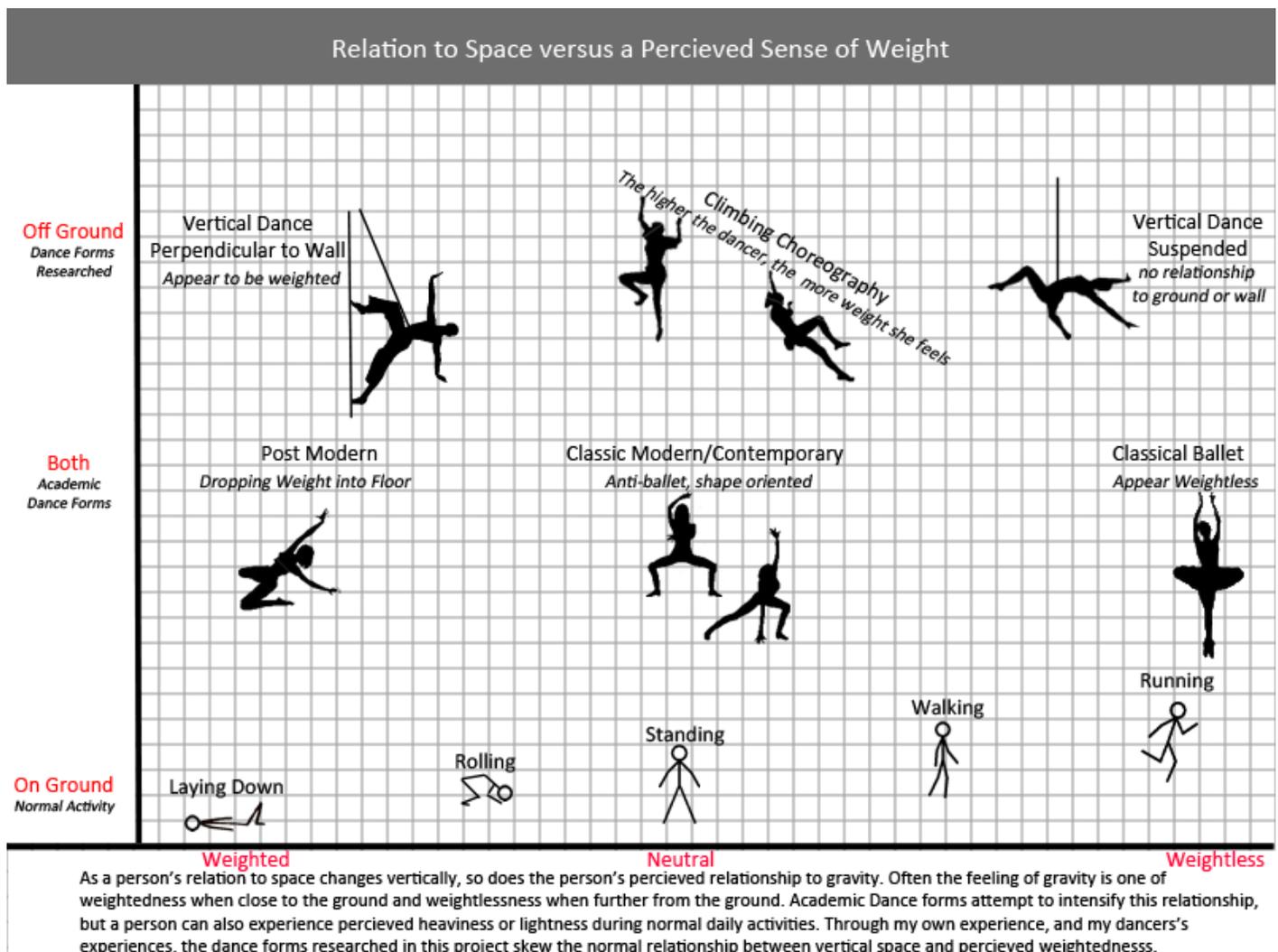
One section of my project had three dancers and one climber suspended from ropes adjacent to the wall. I initially thought this was a failure because the cast kept reverting to sitting in the harness rather than standing on the wall. The act of sitting in a harness appeals to the climbing aesthetic, because climbers “sit back” when they descend down a wall, or take a break on a long ascent. Eventually, short moments of reorienting the body perpendicular to the wall to appear weighted accented the “sitting back” technique. Therefore, as the choreography expanded, the cast used both sitting and standing techniques to make a more aesthetically dynamic piece.

Overall, this type of vertical dance not only changed the cast’s concept of space, but also the audience’s concept of space. The concept of down or up, left or right, and forward or back was redefined when the dancers and climbers were in the harnesses. Important choreographic choices included slow movement phrases and repetition. I wanted the audience to get acquainted with the new relationship I created between the performers and the wall. I wanted the audience to perceive the performers as appearing weighted when standing perpendicular to the wall. It easily became overwhelming conceptually as an audience member watching this type of work for the first time.

Audience feedback included “I have never seen this type of dancing before” and “I did not know someone could do that on a wall.”

As part of my research to redefine the relationships between the performers and the climbing wall, I compared the performers’ relationship to the ground and concept of perceived weight. Please refer to graph “Relation to Space versus a Perceived Sense of Weight.” As a person’s relation to space changes vertically, so does the person’s perceived relationship to gravity. Often, the feeling of gravity is weighted when close to the ground and weightless when further from the ground. The concept of feeling weighted or weightless varies from person to person, so this assessment contains my personal perception of weight and my cast’s perception of weight.

A person experiences perceived heaviness or lightness during normal activities. I used a control of standing on the ground as having “neutral” sense of gravity and lying down on the ground as “weighted.” Running is “weightless” because the body experiences moments of being out of



contact with the ground and flying forward in space.

In traditional academic dance forms, movement attempts to over-emphasize the dancer's relationship with gravity. I defined dance movement as both on and off the ground. In post-modern dance, dancers are supposed to appear and feel weighted. In classical ballet, dancers are supposed to appear and feel weightless when the dancer is actually weighted. In between those polarities, classic modern dance is more shape oriented and less aware of appearing weighted or weightless.

Through my own and my cast's experiences, I discovered the dance forms researched in this project skewed the normal relationship between vertical space and perceived weight. Vertical dance suspended perpendicular to the wall is far off the ground, yet the dancers appear weighted and find moments of actually feeling weighted. Vertical dance suspended off the ground with no relation to the ground or wall feels weightless. On the other hand, during climbing or bouldering choreography the perceived sense of weight increased as the higher the performer climbed. This is related to the fact that the body feels heavier when the risk of falling further to the ground increases. I became so immersed in my project of changing perceptions of weight and space, making this comparison between spatial relationships and perceived sense of weight helped me step outside of the process and understand how an audience member would react to the performance. Through this analysis, I believe that I successfully challenged and changed the audience's perception of space in relation to the dancing body.

By bringing dance outside the dance studio and theatre, I also successfully challenged and changed the audience's perception of space in relation to where dance performances can occur. The Outdoor Adventure Center Tom W. Davis Climbing Wall is not synonymous with art. It is a recreation facility, a gym, and a gathering place for people of similar interests, but never a performance site. I was constantly surprised and extremely grateful for the support of the director and staff of the Outdoor Adventure Center. I was able to have full artistic freedom when I produced

my project. By having my project and performance at the climbing wall, I brought art outside of its typical confines, challenged my choreography, and exposed a new population to dance.

The site where I decided to have my project and performance dictated how the audience would watch the performers. Instead of having the audience seated in chairs throughout the performance, the climbing wall became an installation or gallery. The ability to move around the space to get a better view of each particular section was a new concept for many audience members. The cast and Outdoor Adventure Center staff helped guide people around the space during the performance. Some people in the audience had never been to the climbing wall before, so the tall ceilings, thirty-foot walls, bright climbing holds, and large windows were both visually interesting and distracting. The space was transformed from a gym or recreational facility into a place of artistic performance.

As a choreographer, I challenged myself by creating pieces that were artistically and aesthetically pleasing, choreographing on parts of the climbing wall that could be seen by the majority of the audience, and finding transitions that would help direct the audience's attention between sections. Amanda Platt asked to join her project, *Contact Improvisation and Choreography*, with my performance at the climbing wall to add yet another collaborate layer to the performance. The integration of Contact Improvisation was informative to my research with dance and climbing, because it used weight and momentum to move in and out of the floor. It made the performance a true exploration of gravity with movement occurring on the floor, on the wall, in the air, and everywhere in between. We also took two sections outside of the space, in a lawn directly outside a wall of windows. This placed a literal fourth wall between the audience and performers and further challenged the audience's perception of space. They expected a performance on a climbing wall; instead we performed at and around the climbing wall including the outdoor space surrounding it. The audience had to turn their backs to the climbing wall, a space just redefined as a performance space, and look outside to continue to watch the performance.

I believe that the site specific and installation style performance would appeal to an audience that has never experienced dance. The performance was free and open to the public, so this attracted community members and college students who cannot afford expensive art performances. The best advertisement for the show occurred at rehearsals during “open climb” hours. During these times many climbers—non-art patrons—asked what we were doing. The interdisciplinary movement ideas of both climbing and dance appealed to the recreational climbers. These people came to the show, and for several of them it was their first dance experience. The space they typically aligned with recreation transformed into a performance space.

Reflecting back on the entire process I learned how to direct, teach, and organize a large group. I had 10 people in my cast and, combined with Amanda Platt, we had a total of 13 performers. I had to be clear, consistent, and calm when directing a large group. In the large space at the climbing wall my voice was often lost. I struggled with maintaining the attention of my large cast at the distracting recreation facility. I had to teach what I learned at Project Bandaloop and my own physical research to my cast of both dancers and climbers. Therefore, I had to utilize a type of teaching that appeals to both sets of movement vocabularies, learning styles, and aesthetics. I had to find a way to teach and cultivate a middle ground between the raw physicality of climbing and the artistry of dancing. The organizational skills and flexibility required to put on a site-specific performance with 13 performers seemed a bit more than I could handle at times. The first time we had the entire cast at the climbing wall was four days before the show. Next time I direct a large group, I need to be clearer about my expectations and consistent with how I handle unreliable performers.

This was the first time I was involved in the creation and performance of a site-specific dance piece. I discovered some challenges while working and creating at the climbing wall. We often rehearsed during “open climb” hours and were unable to utilize specific sections of the wall. Staff members and patrons were often confused or concerned with the work we were doing. I think

this is a common drawback when working in any site-specific place, but can inspire creative thought if dealt with in a positive manner. The positive feedback and constant audience received when the patrons and staff discovered what we were doing, helped fuel productivity and creativity. This project placed me outside my comfort zone as an artist, yet satisfied me as a choreographer and performer.

That being said, I still feel unfulfilled. My creative process is not over. I was successful in thoroughly exploring different modes of vertical expressivity, collaborating between dancers and climbers, and exposing new people to the broad spectrum of what can be considered dance performance. However, I think I could have delved deeper into all aspects of my research concerning vertical expression. If I were to do this project again, I would have worked with more climbers because I think their physicality is more conducive to the type of choreography I was creating. I would have set more structured choreography in collaboration with more climbing techniques. Although specific choreography challenged the cast of climbers, it would have been easier to clarify and rehearse. I would also try to promote and advertise the performance more. Although the performance had a large audience both nights, I would have liked to reach out into the greater Columbus, Ohio climbing and outdoor community to expose more people to the arts.

This is significant to The Ohio State University community, The Ohio State University Department of Dance, and the Columbus, Ohio dance scene. Through audience feedback, I discovered that the Ohio State community has never experienced this type of performance. Site-specific work is a growing trend within the ever-changing dance world, and I am glad I shared my climbing wall dance performance with the Ohio State community. The Department of Dance currently encourages undergraduate dance majors, graduate students, and faculty to think creatively to make site-specific works. My project embraces the idea of site-specific work, helping keep the Department of Dance current and prominent within the field of dance.

Most importantly, this project will affect the Columbus, Ohio dance scene because upon graduation I will be spending several more years in Columbus. As stated earlier, my creative process is not over. I hope to continue expanding my knowledge of vertical dance, to explore the collaboration between dance and climbing, and to produce and participate in more site-specific works. Currently, I hope to find a place to create and perform another interdisciplinary climbing, contemporary dance, and aerial dance performance. This time, I want the entire performance to be outside. I have considered looking into a performance at the climbing wall at the Scioto Audubon. However, gear, performers, and space rental are expensive. This project taught me how to write a successful grant, and I will utilize that knowledge in the future as I continue to search for funding for my artistic endeavors.

This project appealed to me as both a dancer and athlete, and I am not done exploring the possibilities of interdisciplinary performances I can create. The connection between a dancer and an athlete has constantly been a question for me as an artist. These continue to be my challenges: learning to combine my passions for different types of movement, choreographing more interdisciplinary work in the vertical space, and bringing my art out into the community to entertain, educate, and inspire.

I think more and more dance performances will occur outside of traditional theater spaces, and the possibilities for types of performance, movement, and audiences are endless. My project has helped prepare me for my future in the world of dance. In my profession as a dancer, artist, educator, and creator, adaptability is the key to having a successful creative career. I proved my adaptability by choreographing, creating, and performing in a site-specific space. By combining two movement aesthetics, my project presented dance in a new interdisciplinary medium, challenged the performers' and audience's perception of space, and brought art to a new population. I can see the dance world heading down a pathway toward more site-specific performances, and I just made the choice to move vertically.