

The Function of Risk: Breath, Gravity and Play in STREB

“Human Fountain...GO!” shouts Jackie Carlson before she releases her body from its last teetering edge of balance off the side of a large metal scaffolding. She falls through the air, arms pinned to her sides, core muscles wrapped inwards, and eyes trained downwards to the earth. She lands with a “thud” of her body against the gym mat and a grunting exhale as air is knocked out of her lungs. Within seconds she pounces back onto her feet, runs towards the scaffolding, and climbs back up as bodies launch, soar, and land in a precisely choreographed series from the four different levels of the structure. “Ahhh” one dancer seethes after his first fall, as if releasing the initial intensity of impact from his body while running towards even more. After the first few rounds, the dancers stop falling because they slowly edge into the momentum of gravity. Instead, they throw themselves forward to fly through space, landing where and when they want to with precision. They control their movement and expel even the slightest involuntary flinches that would normally occur before the body experiences intense sensation. Their actions call into question the difference between flight and a fall (Albright 2019).

Before I hit play on a YouTube video of choreographer Elizabeth Streb’s *Human Fountain* (2011), I settle into a comfortable position on my couch. I release my weight into the plush cushions and breathe evenly with relaxed muscles. The first “thud” of Carlson’s body meeting the ground resonates through my chest. “Ooof” I exhale to myself after a particularly crashing collision with the mat, squeezing my eyes and turning my cheek as if my own face had felt that crash. After watching fifteen minutes of *Human Fountain*, I lift my eyes over the top of my computer screen to take in my immediate surroundings. I am at home, comfortable, with my body at rest – why do I feel both exhilarated and a bit shaky? Did the experience of watching bodies repeatedly fall, fly, and slam activate something in my own being – even through a

computer screen? Why might a choreographer ask performers to navigate real-time conditions of risk, like jumping off a four-level structure, knowing that they face immediate bodily harm if something goes wrong? What can extreme risk activate in the performing bodies and for those witnessing?

My research analyzes the function of extreme action and risk in the choreographic work of Elizabeth Streb. I question how extreme risk in choreography activates the bodies in the audience, calling them into a deeper empathetic experience than passive observation. Then, in this activated state of witnessing, does the choreography become actionable? Can it shift one's consciousness on a sensorial, embodied level? I begin by tracing Streb's lived experience of performing manual labor and playing extreme sports, which foreshadow her later choreographic investment in weight, momentum, and impact. While Streb distances herself from the aesthetics and priorities of Western modern dance, I argue that many of Streb's critics frame her work inside of the concert dance paradigm. Then, many critics review her work from a visualist bias that only ogles at the work's spectacularity, grisly force, and brutality. Streb advocates for her work as action, not dance, and thus I prioritize the vitality affects, or kinetic elements, of her work to see past the visual spectacle (Sklar 2008). Using the scholarship of Jean Thomas Tremblay (2022), Ann Cooper Albright (2019), and Janet O'Shea (2019), I trace breath, gravity, and play through two of Streb's core action events at opposite ends of her career: *Little Ease* (1991) and *SEA* (2018). This analysis reveals the weighted resilience of Streb's work that does not transcend the inescapable forces laid upon bodies, particularly bodies that experience class-based and gender-based oppression but persists with realism and endurance through them. Streb's work uses extreme action and risk to implicate and charge performing and witnessing bodies towards relentless movement under crushing, halting forces.

Born in 1950 and raised in Rochester, New York, Elizabeth Streb is a white, queer American choreographer whose work exists in the nexus of experimental art, extreme sports, contemporary movement, circus, and Hollywood stunts (Wilkinson 2015). Adopted at age two, her mother was a housekeeper and her father a carpenter and mason. She describes being with her father on work sites as early training for the extreme action and labor of her choreography. She admired his body that came home from work in scars, thick layers of callus, and dust – praising the beauty of a body that could be “all used up by the end of its life” (Gund 2015, 05:40). As an eleven-year-old, Streb accompanied her dad to a construction job to repair a ceiling. He realized he forgot his nails and asked Streb to stand on a ladder and hold up the ceiling, saying he would be right back with the nails. Forty minutes later, he returned and was shocked to find a shaking Streb determinedly holding up the ceiling despite quaking, exhausted muscles. Recalling this memory, Streb remembers telling herself that no matter what happened, she would not get down from the ladder, chanting in her head that she could hold on for two more seconds, then two seconds more, and on and on (Gund 2015, 06:28). This unrelenting endurance that continually seeks more sensation, intensity, and ability is core to Streb’s movement philosophy, which blows past comfort zones in search of the realest, most honest movement.

Streb played basketball in school, bought herself a motorcycle at age fifteen, and learned to downhill ski by pointing her skis directly down the mountain (Blackwood 2002). Her journey from these early kinesthetic experiences to choreography is, perhaps, surprising and she admits to “never being attracted to dance per se” (Blackwood 2002, 9:52). As a senior in high school on her way towards State University of New York at Brockport, she browsed through a college brochure and saw dance listed as a major. She assumed a dance major would allow her to explore

action because, in her mind, she defined dance as a combination of movement and art. At SUNY Brockport, she studied Limón, Humphrey and Weidman movement techniques, describing them as “not a rigorous form of training” (Blackwood 2002, 12:40). Despite receiving a “C” in her first Modern Dance class and feeling that the grace and lyricism of these techniques clashed with her intrinsic understanding of movement, dance hooked her.

After graduation, Streb founded her New York based performance company in 1979 (Wilkinson 2015). Originally called Ringside, they now perform with the name STREB Extreme Action Company. Streb calls her company members action-heroes and describes her choreography as a series of actions rather than dances (Gund 2015). Her movement vocabulary consists of actions that the body must take to sustain through high-stakes obstacles. This philosophy materializes in actions like running to stay ahead of a swinging metal pole, jumping off a high ladder to land with a thud on a mat, or launching the body with a crash through a sheet of glass. Streb developed a training method called Pop Action to develop the raw muscular strength, core connectivity, fast-twitch reactions, ability to experience physical pain, and willingness to bypass fear necessary to her choreography (Blackwood 2002). Pop Action is a method of initiating movement by popping the muscle rather than shifting the weight. In rehearsal, dancers stand with core muscles wrapped inwards, clenching their fists and repeatedly beating their stomach on a driving downbeat (Blackwood 2002, 11:53). This practice forces the core muscles to engage in a swift reaction to impact; a practice that can save the body when it hits the mat after falling from a scaffold onstage. Currently, the STREB Extreme Action company performs extreme actions, stunts, and flights by training their body-minds in the Pop Action technique.

Streb's priorities, training practices, and aesthetics differ from that of her modern dance training at SUNY Brockport. She defines her work outside of the parameters of concert dance, rejecting its expectations and norms. In a 1995 New York Times interview, Streb stated, "Modern dance has spent a lot of time developing private languages that speak to only a few people. That stinks of elitism" (Harris). She further stresses that her mission is different from that of the modern dance paradigm, saying, "Making action is what I do" (Harris 1995). In distinguishing between dance and action, Streb clearly states that her work communicates in a language other than the, in her mind, elitist language of modern dance. This claim yields the question: How do we read Streb's work in its own language?

According to Streb, critics often miss the point of her work (Blackwood 2002). In a 1991 review of Streb's first evening-length work in New York, Jack Anderson said, "Ms. Streb is so obsessed by effort that her creations frequently become nothing but displays of brute force. Yet the huffing and puffing is pointless. The dancers' exertions are not tied to emotional revelations." (Anderson 1991). Anderson witnesses the strength of STREB Extreme Action and deems that this labor is without deeper emotional resonance. In 2008, one critic called Streb's action-heroes "gladiators" with "brawny bodies" but said that, ultimately, the piece "doesn't necessarily add up to art" (La Rocco 2008). In 2007, Roslyn Sulcas wrote that Streb's choreography "evokes the thrills and fun of a circus rather than serious thoughts about her intentions" (Sulcas 2007). Even a more positive review in 2017 calls Streb's work "great fun [and]...funny at times" (Schaefer) which implies an audience that experiences her work while leaning back and only expecting a good time and a laugh. Streb won a MacArthur Genius award in 1997, so her career does have mainstream, well-respected glory. But even after winning this award, many critics have continued to frame her work as a thrill-inducing circus, not art. This common thread reveals a

desire to experience Streb's work as a visual spectacle: something to admire and gasp at, but not a site for intellectual or emotional introspection. But, if we aim to read Streb's work in its own language, is a focus on the visual quality the right approach?

Deidre Sklar demonstrates that the valuation and organization of sensory modalities is culturally specific, citing ballet as an art form coming from the European diaspora that indicates the visualist bias of Western culture (2008). Streb's early training at SUNY Brockport emphasized shape-driven forms of dance that prioritize the visual sense, and thus align with Western ocularcentrism. She learned dance in school by looking in a mirror, rather than asking what she felt. A teacher informed her that her experience dancing at discotheques would not aid her formal technique because "being able to pick up rhythm has nothing to do with real dancing" (Blackwood 2002, 13:24). When Streb distinguishes her work from the language of modern dance, it follows that she then distances herself from the shape-driven, visualist aesthetics of her early training – and, instead, prioritizes the auditory and kinesthetic senses that her teachers taught as irrelevant. Because Streb emphasizes action and claims a desire for her "work to read physically for everyone in the audience," we must prioritize the vitality effects, or kinetic elements, of her choreography to dig past the visual spectacle (Harris 1995). As we turn to *Little Ease* (1991) and *SEA* (2018), we will track what we hear and feel over what we see because this framework organizes the senses in a manner that aligns with Streb's priorities rather than that of Western modern dance.

Streb first performed her seminal solo *Little Ease* (1991) at The Kitchen in downtown New York. She has never changed the choreography since this first year, despite it moving out of Streb's own body and into action-hero Jackie Carlson. The title is inspired by the medieval torture device with the same name, which consisted of a cell that was barely large enough for an

adult human to fit within. Inside the cell, a person does not have enough room to fully stretch out; the body is in a constant state of confinement and discomfort – resulting in little ease. Streb took this concept and created a metal box, enclosed on three sides but open in the front, that is exactly the parameters of her own body. She describes the inspiration for the solo as pure and simple: it is an exploration of how much a body can do in a space that is designed to restrict (Gund 2015).

In its current form and performance by Carlson, the solo begins with Carlson hoisting herself into the box and enacting a series of slams, spins, rolls, and full-body extensions. Her hands, feet, knees, head, and tail all hit various edges of the box, and she moves with a direct force and focus but a quickened sense of time. She delineates the boundaries that enclose her with direct, frantic energy. Once she establishes the edges of her new environment, Carlson explores her range of mobility within her parameters. She stretches her body out on her belly so that her head touches one edge of the box and her toes the other, then uses her hands to push her torso up and fly her head towards the ceiling of the case. The momentum of her upper body crashing back down launches her lower body up, creating a strenuous seesaw between upper and lower body. This movement uses every edge of the box, both horizontal and vertical space, and generates a ride of momentum that vibrates beyond its metal confinement. Throughout the solo, certain actions kindle momentum to build force, power, and a sweeping sense of space that blow up the idea that the body, while under constraints, is muted and diminished.

Building momentum requires suspension: the halting time between the rise of a movement and its fall into a momentum-driven flow. In the seesaw movement, the gap of time when the upper body flies up and before it crashes back down offers a moment to gather potential energy. In other moments, Streb creates suspension by placing the body into perches

that momentarily defy the downward pull of gravity. Carlson reaches her arms above her head and presses them into the wall to walk her feet up the opposite side of the box. On a diagonal angle she then removes one arm and balances for a moment between the counteracting force of the arm and legs pushing in opposite directions. These opposing forces pull her body into a slow rotation that seems to stop time and lengthen space. Finally, at the edge of this rotation, she releases her extremities and crashes back into the reality of gravity, her body slamming the metal floor. In her book *How To Land: Finding Ground In an Unstable World*, Ann Cooper Albright posits that, “Suspensions slow us down enough to feel space enter time” (2019, 80). In both momentums of suspension, the slow, gravity-defying balance and expansive, vibrating seesaw movement, Carlson’s ability to create expansive gaps of time produces a boundless sense of space. Furthermore, these moments of suspension resonate as long inhales that then sink into an exhale. Streb’s use of suspension evokes a visceral sense of inhale for the viewer, inflating the viewer’s lungs and expanding her ribcage in connection with the performer’s body. *Little Ease* carves space by maximizing mobility in a space designed to constrict, and with a suspension that slows time, inflates space, and viscerally tethers the performing and witnessing bodies together through swelling inhales.

In the last moment of the solo, Carlson places her feet on the ceiling of the box, knees pressed to chest, and the top of her head on the floor. She then walks her feet along the ceiling, scraping her head against the floor as she moves forward with each grunting step. If there were a question about the labor of this action, in an interview Carlson shared that this movement causes the top layer of skin on her scalp to peel off (Gund 2015). Unlike other sections of *Little Ease*, there is no momentum in this action – it is pure grit and desire to pull the body forward with muscles gripping, skin scratching, and breath groaning. The physical effort and determination of

this moment call back to an eleven-year-old Streb standing on top of a ladder and holding up the ceiling, chanting to herself to hang on just a little more, then a little more, and more. While the momentum-driven sections used suspension to evoke an inhale, in this grueling moment Carlson punches the breath from her diaphragm.

In *Breathing Aesthetics*, Jean-Thomas Tremblay traces the breath found in the artistic work of Linda Hogan, a Chicasaw poet using an ecofeminist framework, and Black feminist author Toni Cade Bambara (2022, 94-113). Tremblay argues that the work of Hogan and Bambara motions towards a feminist breath that does not turn away from the reality of hazardous environments fueled by colonial violence, patriarchal oppression, and racism. Instead, they situate breath within a world where oppression is unevenly laid onto marginalized bodies. This concept of a feminist breath that does not float above the realities of injustice, but inhales them, is a useful tool to understand how breath operates at the end of *Little Ease*. Carlson breathes with groans of effort, which communicate the physical pain of walking on top of her head. Her fractured breath centers the labor of this solo which connects the choreography more to her working-class upbringing than to the grace and lyricism of her modern dance training. The breath of *Little Ease* illuminates the sociocultural ethos of Streb's work. She roots *Little Ease* in the classist realities of her lived experience and communicates a resilience to sustain through these oppressions with a breath that is arduous but enduring.

In the most grueling sections of *Little Ease*, the audience can hear Carlson's breath not only as effortful but also as fragmented. She heaves in a fractured cadence, unable to maintain a steady metronome. This uneven breath implies precarity; an unevenness between the inhale and exhale cycle gestures towards a balancing act or struggle to fully live into an easeful flow. The precarity of breath in *Little Ease* connects to the precarity of living not only in a classist society,

but also in a body that experiences gender-based oppression. Judith Butler highlights a connection between precarity and gender performativity saying, “Precarity is, of course, directly linked with gender norms, since we know that those who do not live their genders in intelligible ways are at heightened risk for harassment and violence” (Butler 2009, 2). Streb creates from her own queer perspective, and across her library of choreographic work she defies gender norms by having all bodies lift one another and pursue the same strength-based, gritty, belly-slammings movements (Blackwood 2002). “[Streb] embodies that paradox I guess,” says Cassandre Joseph, a Black woman who has danced with the company since 2007 and currently leads as Co-Artistic Director, “you’re a female and your feminine but you’re not trying to be that convention” (Gund 2015, 11:20).

Streb’s female dancers, like Jackie Carlson, buck gender norms and showcase their strength and fearlessness, but in their breath we hear the realities of this exertion. Streb could hide this exertion by concealing breath with louder music, or encouraging her dancers to swallow grunts, moans, and shrieks. Instead, she spotlights the effort to endure. The physical dominance of Carlson over the limitations placed on her in *Little Ease* is not transcendent; instead, it knowingly persists through the confinements she exists within. Thus, the breath of *Little Ease* aligns with the feminist breath of Hogan and Bambara as defined by Tremblay: a breath that declares strength and resilience while also holding the heavy, weighted realities of oppressive forces. As viewers, our bodies inflate with an inhale in moments of suspension and we feel a sense of unease during punched, fractured breath cycles. *Little Ease* uses extreme action to elicit a type of breath in the performing body that reveals a working class and gender norm-defying consciousness. Further, breath functions as an empathetic tool. The performer implicates the

witnessing bodies because we breathe alongside her, sharing her kinesthetic experience in our own beings and thus the laborious but resilient experience of mobilizing through constraint.

The action-heroes of STREB performed *SEA*, standing for Singular Extreme Actions, at the Lied Center in Nebraska in 2018. *SEA* opens with a performer walking onstage with a microphone, welcoming the audience to the show. He asks viewers to ignore the theater's request to silence all cell phones, instead encouraging them to take pictures, post on social media, and make as much noise as they can throughout the experience. The encouragement to bypass the Western theater norms of sitting quietly, observing passively, and silencing any possible distractions immediately frames the experience of *SEA* as something other than concert dance. Throughout the show, the audience cheers when a feat is accomplished and exclaims in fear when an action feels on the edge of disaster. The experience of *SEA* feels more like a sports game or music concert than a typical dance performance because the fans respond kinesthetically and auditorily to their experience. During the second act of the show one of the dancers shoots a T-shirt gun into a crowd of screaming fans – whatever section is the loudest gets the prize. This practice of enlivening the crowd and garnering participation via prizes is common in sports stadiums and, therefore, encourages the audience towards a way of being that is atypical to Western modes of concert dance. The framework of *SEA* loosens the witnessing bodies and encourages our ability to viscerally, kinesthetically respond to our experiences. Then, the choreography can infiltrate our beings, inviting us into the embodied sensations of the work.

The first extreme action of *SEA* involves similar structures of risk as *Human Fountain* (2011). The full company gathers on a bar behind a large trampoline. One-by-one they bounce on the trampoline, fly into space, and land with bodies spread-wide onto the gymnastic mat. They stylize their flights, swinging their arms up and smiling for their picture-moment in the sky

before they “thwack” down onto the mat. This action event is not as immediately dangerous as what *SEA* has in store later. Instead, this event prioritizes gravity and establishes a sense of weight and play that the later action events rely on as meaning-making tools. Performers showcase their individual flair and smiles in these flights, juxtaposed with their repeated body-slams and bounding runs. Even while flying with style, the downward pull of gravity is inescapable. In *How To Land: Finding Ground In An Unstable World*, Albright argues that we shift from seeing an action to feeling an action when we are aware of our own weightiness; when we sense our own weight, we can better feel the weight of others (2019, 127). This repeated experience of gravity in the first action of *SEA* primes the audience members’ bodies to acknowledge weight. A three-dimensional sense of weight opens us to the possibility of sensing the action of *SEA* kinesthetically rather than only visually. Then, we can experience the later action events, which increase in danger, with empathy rather than a detached sense.

In the second extreme action of *SEA*, four dancers crouch behind a gymnastic mat with Cassandra Joseph in front of the pack. The music cuts out the moment Joseph shouts, “Go.” She pounces forward from her crouched position, launching herself forward to fly and land on her stomach. In the silence, the audience hears the “thud” of her body slamming onto the mat. She quickly recovers and throws her body into a series of tightly controlled falls landing with her back, knees, and side body onto the mat. Throughout the series, her arms pierce downwards, her shoulders press down her upper-back, and her core muscles contract with a gripped strength. The audience gasps audibly the first time Joseph shifts her weight into her heels, directs her body as a plank, and falls directly onto her backside without the slightest twitch of fear. Joseph acts decisively throughout her opening solo with clear muscular engagement and direct spatial

pathways. She composes her rhythmic “thuds” into a precise drive, declaring control over how, when, and where she impacts the ground.

Albright proposes a definition of resilience that resists the imagery of bouncing back unscathed, and instead highlights the capacity to recover after the weight of impact (2019, 141). Like the concept of a feminist breath that is not transcendent, but grounded in toxic realities, Albright’s definition of resilience does not disguise the wear of adversity. Streb’s choreography seems to utilize this type of resilience because dancers emphasize their exertion, as we experienced in *Little Ease* through breath. In *SEA*, Joseph does not obscure the realities of weight because we hear muffled exhales when the air is expunged from her chest and see her body convulse slightly after landing, as if registering the aftershocks of initial impact. However, because Joseph exercises control with her precise, direct spatial pathways and rhythmic drives, the choreography communicates a capacity to withstand through impact and, thus, demonstrates a weighted resilience.

Albright draws a connection between the physically resilient connective tissue system in our bodies to our mental and emotional capacity for resilience (2019, 150). Connective tissue is “the fibrous stuff that connects, supports, binds, or separates various systems” in our bodies (Albright 2019, 148). Because this system is both strong and flexible, it can register and absorb impact and then respond adaptively. Pop Action relies on a similar tensegrity. Returning to the scene of dancers training by pounding their stomach muscles, this exercise is not about resisting impact. Instead, the muscles pop so that they can meet impact, absorb it, and distribute it through the core muscles. The action-heroes of STREB utilize their connective tissue and fast-twitch muscles to expand their capacity for physical resilience in the face of impact. In the second Extreme Action event of *SEA*, we witness this individual, embodied resilience during Joseph’s

solo. However, we also witness the metaphorical connective tissue between bodies in a series of duets. These invisible tethers build a weighted resilience between duet partners and between audience and performers.

After Joseph's opening solo, two dancers fly and slam onto the mat in a barely contained structure that feels on the razor-edge between a safe landing and a collision. The dancers cue each other through the series, shouting commands like "crouch, sit, back, up, over, roll," that speak to Streb's emphasis on real movement. If, for example, there was any extra flourish beyond sitting the body up on the command "up," the timing would be thrown off and the two bodies would collide. In these duets, the need for honesty in movement and lack of hesitation in timing are a matter of care – if you get scared and lose your attack, your partners' body that is the one in danger. In a moment of particularly extreme risk, two dancers stand on opposite corners of the mat. They launch themselves into flight with their torsos parallel to the mat, taking a diagonal pathway so that they arrive on opposite corners. In this diagonal pathway, if either dancer paused or took a slightly off angle, their heads would bang into one another in the center. As they cue each other through these jumps, one of the dancers audibly heaves and grunts with effort, demonstrating that each launch comes with more muscular ache and a resistance to pain. In response, his duet partner shouts, "keep going!" suggesting not only a need to preserve to complete the choreographic task, but the raw reality that her body depends on his persistence.

Presumably, the female dancer knows that her partner needs vocal encouragement because she can hear the added strain in his voice and breath. He also slows down as he calls the cues, as if becoming more weighted down and unable to rise to the rhythmic cadence. His increasing sense of weightiness in timing implies a diminishing capacity for resilience that his partner senses and adapts to. Like the strong, flexible connective tissue in a physical body, in the

tissue between the partners' bodies, one being adapts to absorb the weight of the other. The performers create a tensegrity between each other as well as within their individual beings. The audience seems to sense this invisible connective material as well because they cheer with relief and elation at the end of this duet. They respond to the real-time struggle they witness with care; their cheers feel like a cry of exhilaration that we all have survived this moment on the edge. *SEA* positions the audience so that we may embrace our kinesthetic reactions to what we witness onstage. We are invited into the connective tissue between performers, allowing us to sensorially experience the tears and soars of the choreography. The structures of risk, and the dancers' pathways through them, punch us in the chest and we experience the elation of a resilience that bears weight.

SEA is not a meditation on pain or struggle, despite its real-time danger and labor, but celebrates the adrenaline-fueled thrill of continually raising the stakes. In another moment of this duet series, two dancers suspend into a fall together. The dancer in front turns his head towards the audience mid-fall, giving them a gleeful grin. The joke is on the audience, not him, as he knows exactly what he's doing and how it makes the audience's heart drop with fear. He exhibits so much control over the movement that there is space for him to relish in it, even flaunt it to the viewers. Early critics of Streb slam her work as masochistic or abusive (Blackwood 2002). However, a former Streb action-hero says of the work "I felt like a wild horse. It celebrated my most powerful self" (Gund 2015, 30:55). In *SEA*, performers expose the reality of risk in the choreography while also reveling in their ability to move through it. "Why does exposure to danger in a controlled setting create this sense of confidence and control whereas exposure to danger in unmanaged circumstances often produces trauma?" asks Janet O'Shea in her book *Risk, Failure, Play: What Dance Reveals about Martial Arts Training* (2019, 91). Applying this

question to STREB, how do the action-heroes negotiate power through intensively risky physical tasks?

In an action event called “Steel,” one of the most immediately dangerous sections of *SEA*, five dancers surround a large metal bar suspended from the ceiling with a chain. Carlson and Joseph walk onto the mat to stand on opposite ends of the bar. They hit the bar again and again so that it begins to spin with speed and momentum. We hear the bangs of their palms smack the metal. Once the bar has speed, a male dancer standing perpendicular to the bar narrows his eyes, rises onto his toes, and at the exact moment of opportunity strikes forward in a belly-up jump, landing on his backside underneath the bar. He lands with a “thwack” and with his nose inches below the metal. He then wriggles his body underneath the bar in tiny body-rolls, exercising precision so that his range of motion is as big as it can be without slicing his face against the bar. He then pops his head up, eyes the audience, purses his lips, and makes kissing sounds. The audience laughs at his teasing, and the moment is a shocking release of tension after a series that felt on the knife’s edge of harm. “Pleasure comes not from the danger itself but the ability to control it” offers O’Shea, and this moment epitomizes the sense of pleasure, play, and revelry that permeates *SEA* throughout its structures of risk (2019, 97).

Moments like this kissy-faced one could inspire a critic to write that Streb’s work exists in a “relaxed, popcorn-eating atmosphere,” because, on one hand, the audience-teasing may feel silly and gimmicky (Sulcas 2007). Perhaps that is true, but to reduce these moments of levity to only silliness would ignore the sociocultural framework of the work that Streb has already established. Streb situates her choreography in classist and patriarchal reality; she stresses the effort of sustaining in a world where risk and harm are not evenly distributed, but forced onto certain bodies. O’Shea notes that, “For those seen as less vulnerable – primarily white, cisgender,

normative-bodied men – experimentation with risk is lauded” because these bodies are “less exposed to harm and...have the freedom to play with risk” (2019, 96). Bodies who experience disproportionate amounts of danger in their lives are not allowed to play with risk because simply surviving is risk-inducing enough, why add more?

The action-hero who propels himself underneath the swinging metal bar is a Black man, and throughout *SEA* women, like Joseph and Carlson, take leading roles. The STREB action-heroes are primarily people with marginalized identities, and we witness these performers not only wrestle with the labor of resilience, but also relish the joy of circumventing danger. These moments of levity, like throwing your body under swinging steel only to poke fun at the audience, are silly – but to be silly in a world of extreme risk declares vitality and agency. Streb uses humor to trouble the notion of labor in her work because, within the effort, there is play too. The use of play within a framework that highlights the realities of unevenly distributed risk challenges the idea that marginalized bodies cannot demonstrate masterful skill. In fact, they can exhibit so much power that not only can they slide under a steel bar – they can make fun of you while doing it. As an audience, we have felt the weighted resilience of STREB in suspended inhales, the pull of gravity, and fractured breath. Play and pleasure within the structures of extreme action and risk lesson the heaviness of this resilience, and our collective laughter conjures the joy of subverting oppressive forces.

Reading Streb’s work through its kinetic elements allows us to dig past the spectacle and attend to what we feel and hear. The scholarship of Jean-Thomas Trembly, Janet O’Shea, and Ann Cooper Albright frame the devices of breath, gravity, and play as crucial sites of meaning-making that foreground the weighted, yet joyful, resilience of Streb’s work. This resilience holds the realities of the inevitable, inescapable forces acting upon the body. The grisly reality of pain,

the brutish force required of a laboring body, the relentless effects of gravity, and the subjugation of bodies based on class and gender hierarchies can all be found in Streb's work – but so can the ecstatic, humorous thrill in seeking to subvert these realities, stretching the edges of possibility within the confining structures that attempt to limit the mobility of bodies. The extreme action and risk of Streb's work unearths more than a gasp or cringe but also activates a shift or new awareness in the witness's body that is rooted in the queer, working class consciousness of Streb's movement cosmology. Thus, the use of risk becomes actionable – it does not freeze the witness in a stunned state of shock but motivates movement.

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