

Anti-Gravitational Choreographies: Strategies of Mobility in Screendance

Harmony Bench

From the perspective of the digital choreographies I discuss in this essay, twentieth-century modern and postmodern dance techniques are notable for their shared faith in gravity and weight. From Doris Humphrey's *Fall and Recovery*, to Joan Skinner's *Releasing Technique*, and *Contact Improvisation* developed by Steve Paxton and others, twentieth-century, Euro-American dance techniques cultivate a weight-filled dancing body rooted to or in tensile relation with the ground. This ground, generally configured as a stable field for dancers to push away from, give in to, or move across, is only one option among many in choreographies for the screen, and is often rendered unstable in its appearance. Similarly, weight is treated as more of an aesthetic choice than a physical reality. In screendance, what I am calling anti-gravitational choreographies regard ground and weight with playful suspicion as they replace twentieth-century metaphors of groundedness and rootedness with levitation. Technologically unfixed, anti-gravitational dancers imagine an unpredictable ground over which they hover, glide, suspend, skim, and float; or else they do not imagine a ground at all. Such choreographies thereby give dancers back their lightness but not the gravity-defying escape velocities, for which early modern dancers roundly criticized ballet.¹

Mediations of dance, from print to film or digital video, offer frequent reformulations of dancing bodies' relationships to gravity and ground. They thus present opportunities for re-examining what cultural assumptions underlie the ways dancing bodies inhabit space—they make visible what familiarity has rendered invisible in choreographies for the concert stage. In screendance, for example, exaggerated suspensions, interrupted falls, and other perturbations disturb the presumed solidity of the surfaces upon which dancers perform.

In this paper, I consider the anti-gravitational choreography in Richard Lord's interactive dance on CD-ROM, *Waterfall* (2002),² Liz Aggiss and Billy Cowie's four-screen stereoscopic gallery installation, *Men in the Wall* (2004),³ and Mark Coniglio and Dawn Stoppiello's caffeinated, algorithmically-edited YouTube video, *BKLYN* (2007).⁴ I define anti-gravitational choreographies as the result of a dancer's detachment, excision, or disarticulation from his or her ground, which may be achieved through digital editing or by other means. Antecedents to digital anti-gravity can readily be seen in what Maya Deren describes as the "gravity-free" movements in her film *The Very Eye of Night* (1952–1959),⁵ and in Merce Cunningham's electronic suspensions in the video spaces of *Blue Studio: Five Segments* (1975), a videodance made in collaboration with filmmaker Charles Atlas.⁶ Even so, I argue that anti-gravitational choreographies, like the more common movement metaphor "flow," represent a particular strategy of mobility commensurate with this era of globalization.

When imagining dance without a ground, choreographers and filmmakers locate dance in an empty geometry that I call *no-place*. An attempt at creating a "neutral" site for dance, *no-place* is a void, an evacuated scene. Absent of spatial and political markers and

relations, *no-place* is an anonymous, acontextual, blank space, often visualized onscreen as a smooth, empty field of white or a black abyss in which dancers float. For example, in Gina Czarnecki's experimental digital video *Nascent* (2005), luminous bodies unfurl across a blackened screen.⁷ A dancer hangs from invisible wires, suspended in an endless white in Magali Charrier's *Left or Right for Love?* (2003).⁸ In Alex Reuben's *Line Dance* (2003), motion-captured figures dance to Brazilian music while engulfed in a black that erases both the dancers' geographical as well as physical specificities.⁹ Cari Ann Shim Sham*'s *Are You for Real* (2006) situates a self-duplicating grey-bodied dancer in an unbounded white space.¹⁰ David Michalek filmed some 45 dancers at high speed against black backdrops and then decelerated their motion, suspending them in space as well as time in his multi-screen installation *Slow Dancing* (2007).¹¹ Sited in *no-place*, dancing bodies take on an inhuman mobility. They are unrestricted by physical or ideological boundaries and untroubled by forces such as gravity. Abstracted from built or natural environments that would contextualize their movement, bodies drift across the screen with an illusory freedom.

Of course, the lack of context represented in a screen-based *no-place* indicates a very specific context in which such abstract spaces may be constructed for dance. *No-place* is not the apolitical space it imagines itself to be. Elsewhere, I have argued that a colonial logic underwrites *no-place* and the erasures of topological specificity it substantiates.¹² The enduring, flattening, colonial resonances are a crucial aspect of *no-place*, perennially instantiated in the even surfaces of dance studios, theaters, and screens that are the condition for dancers' unfettered movement in Western dance vocabularies. Nevertheless, I would like to focus in this essay on a secondary operation through which *no-place* enables dancers to appear in any other locale, here identified as *any-place*, in addition to the anti-gravitational modes of performance which carry dancers from site to site in *Waterfall*, *Men in the Wall*, and *BKLYN*.

No-place disentangles choreography from the site of performance; it disarticulates dancers from the grounds on which they stand. In dance onscreen, once dissociated from a particular location, dancers access a heightened, media-enabled, anti-gravitational mobility. *No-place* surreptitiously slides dance into new screenic sites by erasing the specificities of locale. While *no-place* is visualized in the above examples as monochromatic screenscapes, *no-place* functions as a pure, transparent spatiality, revealing whatever image lies behind. Unbounded, anti-gravitational dancing images ease themselves into any available site. Their recurring transitions are smoothed by *no-place*, which sits between locations and renders all potential sites conveniently available.¹³ Dancers extracted from place can exist nowhere and everywhere at once. Radically dis-located, dancers installed in *no-place* are thus able to move into *any-place* whatsoever.¹⁴

Waterfall, *Men in the Wall*, and *BKLYN* follow dance's dislocation into very different technologies and viewing conditions, maintaining the abstraction of a transparent *no-place* while placing topographically-detached bodies in disparate settings. Their focus is not on portraying a dancing body in an empty space, like the films and videos mentioned above, but on superimposing images such that dance can be made to appear anywhere: *Waterfall* stages modern dance choreography on top of rivers and cresting waves; the performers in *Men in the Wall* seemingly travel the world in the space of a condensed day; and *BKLYN* rapidly cycles through a number of shoot locations throughout Brooklyn, New York.

Although their aesthetic, technological, and experiential differences are pronounced, these three works all open geographic sites to dance's aesthetic incursions. As transitory and

contingent sites, *any-places* appear receptive to dancing bodies. However, merging dance with new locations does not produce a seamless fusion in any of these pieces. Whether deliberately or inadvertently, *Waterfall*, *Men in the Wall*, and *BKLYN* reveal the tensions that arise when uprooting dance from one place and transposing it into another. They produce anti-gravitational choreographies where dancing image and screened environment interface, calling attention to their disjuncture. In portraying hyper-mobile performers who move freely from place to place, the artists have also choreographed their performers' unmooring, which, I argue, encourages only the most superficial of connections to place. The dancers' uprooting depicts not a multi-locationality of transnational movement, but rather a dubious form of nomadism.

Waterfall

In *Waterfall*, dancer Emma Diamond sensuously engages water through various explorations: walking along a grassy and windy beach, feeling water pour through her fingers or drip onto her face, and splashing barefoot in puddles. As a CD-ROM, *Waterfall* invites computer users to participate in the piece's explorations by clicking anywhere in the window to activate dancing images or new scenes. Their tactile interactions are incorporated into the onscreen worlds, establishing an intimate, if highly-mediated exchange between viewer and work.

One particular section of *Waterfall* interests me here, where Diamond's luxurious and focused task-like investigations give way to water studies of a different kind. Lord recorded Diamond in what appears to be a dance studio or black box theater and extracted her dancing image, which is projected onto watery environments through which users navigate. Lord has cleverly matched Diamond's movement to each background, suturing them together to encourage an illusory integration of dancer and scene. Diamond snakes backwards over river rapids (see figure 1); rolls in with an ocean tide and washes out with its surf; skips through a cresting wave; and gently glides across an icy glacier. She also walks on a calm lake, dances below an ocean's surface (see figure 2), and alights on tree branches in a rainforest to the accompaniment of chirping monkeys and other jungle sounds.

With his cut-and-paste technique, Lord insinuates dance into places in which "dancing," at least of the sort in which Diamond engages, could not actually occur. Yet, the photographed sites have no identity except as unlikely venues for Diamond's performance. The nameless bodies of water seem to have been chosen for their formal properties rather than geographical significance and thus only signify



Screen shot. *Waterfall*. Dir. and chor. Richard Lord. Perf. Emma Diamond. CD-ROM. Prod. Big Room Ventures. 2002.

generically in Lord's romanticized portrayal of dance and nature. "Arriving" in each new environment, Diamond offers a new choreographic interpretation of the water's movement. While she dances with abandon, however, the oceans, lakes, and rivers behind her remain disturbingly stationary. Confronted with neither the force of moving water, nor that of gravity, Diamond maps the liquid motion onto her body. She does not dance in any of the places represented onscreen, which, in their postcard-like perfection, have already ceased to be places. Rather, she dances in a limpid *no-place* set atop the various waterscapes.

Even with Lord's careful compositing, *Waterfall* struggles to maintain a seamless connection between Diamond and each body of water portrayed. This tension is due in part to the uncharacteristic stillness of each site, but it is also a result of the environmental extraction that allows Diamond to appear against each background. Lord aligned his camera angles to those of the photographs, but the water still repels Diamond, refusing to fully integrate her. Though Lord tightly cropped the footage of Diamond's dancing, residues of the black floor on which she originally danced show through. Her reflections in the shiny surface undermine Lord's photographic sleight-of-hand, reminding viewers that Diamond is located not in the watery venues portrayed, but somewhere else, in some other erased space. Ultimately, Diamond sits in *no-place*, like a cutout on a collage, a dancing image hovering over emptied imaginations of *any-place*. Lord's hyperdance operates under the assumption that dance and dancers can be imagined independent of context—that dance, existing nowhere in particular, can appear everywhere equally.

Men in the Wall

Whereas Lord tries to unify dancer and scene within the spectator's visual field, *Men in the Wall* undermines the continuity that *Waterfall* simulates. Located "in the wall," the men provide viewers with the convenient architectural metaphor of the window, which brings the outlying landscapes into view but keeps both men and audience separate from them. Having been filmed against a green screen, the men clearly dance in *no-place*, excised from one performance context and projected into another. Liz Aggiss and Billy Cowie further situate the men in a liminal space, neither inside nor outside, neither here nor there, but in between.

Four men of different nationalities—or so their caricatured, accented English would seem to indicate—talk, sing, and even dance together over the course of the twenty-five-minute piece. The men remain in separate frames, one man each to four florescent green and yellow boxes projected across a single wall. Viewed through 3-D glasses provided to spectators, the flat stereo projections merge into vistas imbued with depth. Morning, noon, and night, beautiful and inclement weather, urban cityscapes and tropical paradises; the men in the wall find themselves traveling the world, from one scenic but unidentifiable location to another, without leaving the safety of their technologically-rendered window frames. (See figure 3.) Sitting in the gallery, viewers likewise remain safely enclosed in a white box, peering into nameless, people-less *any-places* just beyond.

While *Waterfall* gestures toward the technological merging of Diamond and the environments in which her dancing appeared, *Men in the Wall* plays with the discontinuity between each man and the image behind him. It does not take long for viewers to realize that *Men in the Wall* accomplishes more than the vertigo-inducing novelty of stereoscopic dance-media. Perhaps one man's oddly-crumpled pant leg will provide the clue, or



Photograph of multi-screen video installation. *Men in the Wall*. Dir. And chor. by Liz Aggiss and Billy Cowie. 2003. Photo used with permission.

another's awkward turn, or yet another's less-subtle suspension from the top of his frame. Whatever the telling detail, at some point, viewers will recognize a disconnection between the background images of mountains and buildings and the men in front of them. While the background environments maintain their verticality throughout the piece, presumably corresponding to the verticality of the viewer, the men are disinclined to regard any particular direction as a stable up or down. Aggiss and Cowie have unfixed the performers from standard directionalities, reshaping the relationship of each performer to his ground. They constantly reorient the men along unpredictable horizons, preventing the relative stability of the scenic backdrops from having any grounding effect.

The men forge their own directionalities within the confines of their fluorescent containers, unraveling the magic of their global travels with a heavy dose of irony. The men float across the top and slide down the sides of their boxes. Despite their anti-gravitational dislocation and suspension, the men do not seem disoriented and give no indication that they have lost their bearings. Viewers may try to sort out the directions from which the men were filmed, to realign the men's vertical and horizontal positionings, but they remain defiant. They are not rooted to anything, least of all to the anonymously idyllic views of remote and expensive real estate that remain out of reach for the men perched in the wall. Not that they seem bothered by it; *Men in the Wall* is not a class critique. Indeed, the performance-oriented men remain mostly frontal, doing little to acknowledge the landscapes beyond. Rather, through the men's detachment, *Men in the Wall* questions the very possibility of a stable and uniform ground. Aggiss's and Cowie's gravitational challenge extends beyond the projected images to include the viewers, whose spatial orientations and perceptions are also reconfigured. Donning the requisite 3-D glasses, audience members experience the dizzying effects of artificial depth and become sympathetically ungrounded alongside the men onscreen.

BKLYN

BKLYN likewise overturns the gravitational mandate of modern dance, but dancer Hillary Nanney's release from gravity and place is much more violent than *Men in the Wall's* gleeful upside-down and sideways performers let on. At most, the men in Aggiss and Cowie's piece look uncomfortable, while in *BKLYN*, Mark Coniglio's algorithmic editing inflicts technological whiplash on Nanney's body as she epileptically jerks around the screen. Like *Waterfall* and



Men in the Wall, *BKLYN* locates dance in multiple sites, here distributed throughout Brooklyn, New York. However, *BKLYN* introduces each site at a much faster rate than either *Waterfall* or *Men in the Wall*. It begins with few edits but as it progresses, the cuts between locations dramatically increase. Their density gives viewers a sense that Nanney performs her phrase of choreography simultaneously throughout the borough, which can only be shown linearly as a rapid cycling through each of the sites. The editing thus both creates an impression of Nanney's simultaneous performances, and at the same time organizes her ubiquitous presence into a set of sequentialized images. It further tests viewers' capacity to track a phrase of movement across rapid cuts, multiple environments, and fragmented gestures.

The piece never gives viewers smooth or "organic" movement but offers instead a stuttering phrase that persists across the rapid cuts, advancing only after repeating a few frames in each new site. One step backward, two steps forward. Only Nanney's presence onscreen prevents the images from dissolving into a soup of color and light. Even when the choreography dis-integrates into modules of movement without transitional steps, Nanney's coherence and consistent appearance in each frame carries the movement across the densely-spliced piece. Further, the integrity of her dancing image as the only constant against the swiftly changing scenes radically foregrounds her, pulling the choreography out of the shots as the speed of the edits increases. Nanney becomes isolated from the environments in which she dances through the constant juxtaposition between her image and the relentlessly changing backgrounds. (See figures 4–7.) As with *Waterfall* and *Men in the Wall*, the sites in *BKLYN* remain fairly anonymous—a bus yard, a parking structure, a gas station, a sidewalk in front of a red fence, a park, among other places in which Nanney performs Dawn Stoppiello's choreography. Shots that might successfully communicate Brooklyn as such—a brownstone-lined street, for example, or a view of Manhattan island, pass too quickly to carry much semiotic weight when not accompanied by other similarly distinctive images.

In the first minute and a half, Nanney skims the surface of each site, riding across the cuts until she pauses for a few counts at a gas station. *BKLYN*'s second

Above figures are screenshots of one sequence of *BKLYN*. Chor. Dawn Stoppiello. Algorithmic editing Mark Coniglio. Dir. of photography Ruth Sergel. Perf. Hillary Nanney. YouTube. 2007.

half further distances Nanney from each site by moving into tighter shots that frame only her upper body. Disarticulated from her ground and distributed across an anonymous, changing landscape, she is no longer geographically instantiated in each of these Brooklyn-based sites, but teased out, excised from what are now merely backdrops. As Nanney turns to face the scenes behind her, she mirrors a spectatorial position, and the images seem to hit her body with the same violence and intensity with which they assault our eyes.

Levitating out of the background scenes, Nanney moves from a ubiquitous presence to a singular one, an onscreen duplication of the viewer. But *BKLYN*'s choreographic disarticulation proves more complex than that of *Waterfall* and *Men in the Wall*. Nanney's anti-gravitational choreography operates in proportion to the rapidity of cuts between sites and in relation to her framing. As the edits slow or pause, and as the piece returns to full-body shots, Nanney is pulled back into the bus yards, sidewalks, and gas stations. *BKLYN* makes the relationship between dancer and ground explicitly elastic. Whereas Diamond floats above watery surfaces in *Waterfall*, and the men hover above rotating grounds in *Men in the Wall*, in *BKLYN*, Nanney levitates and then settles. She modulates among possible relationships to the sites in which she performs—now grounded, now gliding, now severed, now re-instantiated, now here, now everywhere.

Nanney's hyper-mobility is marked by a policing of the sites in which she dances, however. Even though the artists have chosen everyday shots rather than iconic images of Brooklyn, they depict a curiously depopulated city. Accustomed to theatrical evacuations of local identities in dance, viewers may not notice the absence of people until an errant man accidentally wanders into the frame. Someone, perhaps Coniglio, can be heard to the side of the camera shouting "Hey!" and the man quickly exists the shooting area upon realizing his intrusion. The shout and the man's astonished and apologetic expression appear repeatedly as the algorithm cycles through its edits. His aberrant presence is a glitch that reveals the assumed emptiness of the sites in which Nanney dances. Through him, a broader Brooklyn-based social landscape momentarily seeps into the *any-place* constructed for the screen. The artists' inclusion of the clip is an admission of the desire for an empty performance area, a *no-place* even in a public space. Paradoxically, the clip is also an acknowledgement of the impossibility and perhaps even undesirability of such evacuation. This double maneuver is commensurate with *BKLYN*'s anti-gravitational choreography, which allows Nanney to rush across multiple sites but requires an occasional pause to ground and reorient, and which depicts her dis-instantiation as perilous rather than idyllic.

Waterfall, *Men in the Wall*, and *BKLYN* supply a number of sites against which dancing images are projected, none of which provides a "home base" for performers. They do not isolate any particular site as the one that enables continuous relocation from one place to another. That site, I argue, is a transparent *no-place*, which invites the projection of anonymous and interchangeable backdrops into its emptied milieu. Dancers disarticulated from their grounds hover and suspend indifferently in sites evacuated of context and meaning. These *any-places* are never specific places with proper names but approximate stock images retaining the anonymity of generality: not this rainforest but a rainforest, not this island but an island, not this gas station but a gas station. It does not matter which; any site will do to frame the dancing images floating therein.

Articulating strategies of mobility alongside globalized imaginings of space, body, and ground, the anti-gravitational choreographies in the pieces I have discussed in this essay

elaborate upon digital visual media as sites through which twenty-first century bodies access remote or disparate geographies. In so doing, they represent ungrounded, ubiquitous, and transposable dances and dancers. The artists' portrayals of globalized subjectivities do not include disaffected or alienated dancers, however. Rather, the performers are merely indifferent—but without resorting to apathy. Indeed, if read in conjunction with current debates surrounding global warming, *Waterfall* could be seen as a politically-motivated nostalgia, a protest against deforestation and pollution. *BKLYN* too could be read as a critique of the ongoing gentrification and suburbanization of Brooklyn. Yet, to one extent or another, each piece depicts a de-differentiation of sites that promotes their serial substitution. Places lose the contours of distinct local identities. They are replaced by *any-places* over which dancers hover as they perform their anti-gravitational choreographies.

The primary question that these pieces collectively raise for me is thus not how do anti-gravitational choreographies revel in or subvert the technological displacements spurring globalization, but rather, how does the inability to differentiate, or the lack of concern regarding such differentiation, lie at the core of Western dance practices' ability to travel the globe historically as well as currently? In pursuing that question, what movement strategies will emerge in addition to the anti-gravitational choreographies I have described here? What kinds of grounds do they imagine? What are the ethical and political ramifications of their choreographic strategies, the dancing bodies they imagine, and the sites in which they appear? And what roles do media technologies play in visualizing, creating, or commenting upon those bodies, grounds, choreographies, and sites? ■

Notes

1. Hillel Schwartz argues that modern dancers reacted against balletic ideals of weightlessness and rediscovered gravity and dynamism. They insisted, Schwartz states, on effort, weight, and torque as forces behind their movements. Their project thus stood in opposition to that of ballet dancers whose "delusions that the law of gravitation does not apply to them" modern dancers disdained. See Schwartz: "Torque: The New Kinaesthetic of the Twentieth Century," *Incorporations*. Ed. Jonathan Crary and Sanford Kwinter. New York: Zone, 1992. 71–126. Print.
2. *Waterfall*. Dir. and chor. Richard Lord. Big Room Ventures, 2002. CD-ROM.
3. *Men in the Wall*. Dir. and chor. Liz Aggiss and Billy Cowie. Perf. Jeddi Bassan, Sebastian Gonzalez, Thomas Kampe, and Scott Smith. 2003. Premiere 23 Feb 2004. ICA, London. 18th Street Arts Center, Santa Monica. 20 June 2007. Installation.
4. *BKLYN*. Chor. Dawn Stoppiello. Algorithmic editing Mark Coniglio. Dir. of photography Ruth Segel. Perf. Hillary Nanne. *YouTube*. 2007. Web. 1 Oct 2008.
5. *The Very Eye of Night*. 1958. Dir. Maya Deren. *Mystic Fire*, 2002. Film. See also Maya Deren: "Adventures in Creative Film-Making," 1960. *Essential Deren: Collected Writings on Film*. Ed. Bruce R. McPherson. Kingston, NY: Documentext, 2005. 163–185. Print.
6. "Blue Studio: Five Segments." *Merce by Merce by Paik*. Dir. and chor. Merce Cunningham and Charles Atlas. Videodance, 1975–76, 1978. Film.
7. *Nascent*. Dir. Gina Czarnecki. Chor. Garry Stewart. Prod. Forma and Australian Dance Theater, 2005. DVD.
8. *Left or Right for Love?* Dir. Magali Charrier. Chor. Maria Lloyd. Prod. Amanda Lloyd; Linda Jasper, South East Dance; Caroline Freeman, Lighthouse 2003. DVD.
9. *Line Dance*. Dir. Alex Reuben. Chor. Afua Awuku and Alex Reuben. Prod. Margaret Williams; Caroline Freeman, MJW Productions 2003. *MySpace*. Web. 20 Jul 2007. [<http://vids.myspace.com/index.cfm?fuseaction=vids.individual&videoid=2001607725>].

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10. *Are You for Real?* Dir. Kyle Ruddick and Cari Ann Shim Sham*. Chor. Cari Ann Shim Sham*. Eyestorm, 2006. *YouTube*. Web. 15 May 2008.
 11. *Slow Dancing*. Dir. David Michalek. Prod. David Michalek and Moving Portrait, Inc. 2007. Installation.
 12. For a more detailed explanation of the parallels between colonial expansion and the imagination of a *no-place* for dance, see my essay: "Media and the *No-Place* of Dance." *Forum Modernes Theater*. 23.1 (2008): 37–47. Print.
 13. In this regard, *no-place* is similar to the non-places Marc Augé delineates. See for example: *Non-places: Introduction to an Anthropology of Supermodernity*. Trans. John Howe. London: Verso, 1995. Print. See also Michel Foucault's discussion of adjacency and convenience, *The Order of Things: An Archeology of the Human Sciences*. Trans. Richard Howard. New York: Vintage Books, 1973. Print. And Giorgio Agamben's short meditation on ease and substitution in *The Coming Community*. Trans. Michael Hardt. Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1993. Print.
 14. The phrase "*any-place* whatsoever" should not be confused with the Deleuzian concept of an *any-space-whatever*, which is specific to his analysis of post-war film. Instead, it should be read alongside Agamben's notion of "whatever singularities." As "whatever" places, *any-places* are in-different and non-specific, neither universal nor particular, but of a type.