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G . . . on screen.

*Ann Cooper Albright*

The expression, “fall from grace,” becomes an impossible statement when falling itself is experienced as a state of grace.

— Nancy Stark Smith

By the time she wrote these words as part of an editor’s note for the fall 1979 issue of *Contact Quarterly*, Nancy Stark Smith had been practicing falling for seven years. From 1972 and the beginning performances of Contact Improvisation at the John Weber Gallery in New York City, until 1979, her body had learned to experience the momentum of a descent without clenching up or contracting with fear. She had internalized the trained reflexes of extending one’s limbs to spread the impact over a larger surface area, and was able to adapt instinctually to seemingly endless variations of the passage from up to down.

This essay traces falling—that passage from up to down—on screens and in contemporary dance, by looking at examples of screendance from the last three decades of the twentieth century in order to think about the meaning of falling at the beginning of the twenty-first century. The genesis of my inquiry comes from a larger project on contemporary embodiment called *Gravity Matters*. In what follows, I focus specifically on the representation of falling as a state of being suspended between earth and air, the finite and the infinite. I am interested in how falling on screen can help us see the moments of a fall that are often unaccounted for in live performance and how the visualization of that “gap” can be theorized. As Nancy Stark Smith suggests:

Where you are when you don’t know where you are is one of the most precious spots offered by improvisation. It is a place from which more directions are possible than anywhere else. I call this place the Gap. . . . Being in a gap is like being in a fall before you

touch bottom. You're suspended—in time as well as space—and you don't really know how long it'll take to get 'back.'<sup>1</sup>

Because screendance is able to visualize that suspension in time as well as space, it may in fact, help us to think about aspects of falling off the screen, in situations where gravity really does matter.

What I share with my screendance colleagues, whose writing is included in this inaugural issue of *The International Journal of Screendance*, is an interest in delineating the interconnected spheres of screen technologies and dance. Indeed, the parallel development of early cinema and modern dance at the beginning of the twentieth century highlights their mutual influence. As many books and articles attest, both art forms shaped new ways of seeing the kinesthetic dimensions of a visual experience. Oddly enough, at the turn of this century, even as new technologies of editing and distribution were making screendance ubiquitous, an anachronistic nostalgia for the presence of a live, unmediated body took hold in some areas of the dance field and set up an unfortunate opposition between "real" dancing bodies and their filmed images. My research in both early- and late-twentieth-century dance has convinced me that this attitude does not account for the important and fruitful exchanges of movement information between the two genres. I believe that screens can influence how we think about live bodies, just as the dancing bodies have revolutionized movement on camera. One of my purposes here is to chart the ways that film and video help dancers see what they are doing, making visible moments of a fall that were previously unavailable to analysis. This iconography of the space *in between* up and down is elaborated by an approach to falling on screens that shifted historically from act (in the 1970s), to impact (in the 1980s), to suspension (in the 1990s), to a leveling out of the difference between up and down in the (2000s).

The evolution of Nancy Stark Smith's falling paralleled the development of Contact Improvisation. In 1972 when a crew of assorted college students and dancers (including Stark Smith) were experimenting under the guidance of Steve Paxton, Contact looked like an exercise in throwing and catching bodies that mostly crashed to the ground on the large wrestling mat. By 1979, the form had evolved into a major influence on contemporary dance, with a professional group of teacher/performers and an ever expanding collection of skills—falling being a primary one. During the week-long, tenth anniversary series of performances at St. Marks Danspace in New York City (1983), the signature virtuosic moves of Contact Improvisation—spinning shoulder lofts and falls that looped to the floor only to cycle back up into the air—were much in evidence.

Interestingly enough, much of this early work was documented by Steve Christiansen on video (open reel half-inch), and the edited complications of this material in *Chute* (1975) and *Fall After Newton* (1987) are well-known and widely distributed. Although each video has spoken narration by Steve Paxton, describing the development of Contact Improvisation, they differ radically from one another, both in terms of content and editing. *Chute* is essentially a ten-minute distillation of seventy-five hours of practice for the first Contact Improvisation concert in June 1972.<sup>2</sup> The video is grainy black-and-white footage, shot close to the dancers. In this early collection of different exercises, we see a bunch of young people trying out the possibilities of launching one's body into the arms of a partner. These experiments with catching, falling, and dancing in physical contact often end up in awkward positions or clunky splats. The overall feeling of the work has a

palpable sense of curiosity, a frankness with failed attempts that seems to say, "Well, that didn't work, let's try again."

*Fall After Newton*, in contrast, is elaborately and smoothly edited. The video traces eleven years of *Contact* through an almost exclusive focus on Nancy Stark Smith's dancing.<sup>3</sup> The preface to the transcript of Paxton's authoritative narration (included in the commercial video) explains: "The great fortune of having video coverage of performances from the very beginning offered the possibility of examining one dancer's development and looking for corresponding growth in the dance form itself." The video begins with over a minute of Stark Smith perched on Paxton's shoulders as he spins quickly. This long sequence from 1983 sets up the implicit narrative of virtuosity, as both the text and the editing also showcase Stark Smith's spectacular dancing, particularly her falling. As the viewer is treated to an extraordinary series of smoothly layered shots of Stark Smith falling from the shoulders of Curt Siddall, Steve Paxton, and Danny Lepkoff, Paxton notes: "Higher momentum brings new areas of risk. In order to develop this aspect of the form we had to be able to survive it." Stark Smith's falls are looped together into one long sequence, phrases with regular pauses, and then in slow motion, before returning to real time.

The final section includes several slow repetitions of a particularly intense fall where Stark Smith lands directly on her back. Although the fall is slowed down to demonstrate Paxton's narration ("During this very disorienting fall, Nancy's arms manage to cradle her back, and this spreads the impact onto a greater area. And she doesn't stop moving. That helps to disperse the impact over a slightly longer time,") the viewer can still see the impact reverberate through her body, even as she rolls (now in real time) out of it and keeps dancing. Paxton's unintentionally patronizing comment "She doesn't seem bothered," elicits snorts and laughter from my students every time I show the video. And yet, the slow motion repetition, combined with Paxton's articulation of how to survive that moment of disorientation, really help my students to visualize the possibility of expanding their attention within a fall. As Stark Smith relates in her editor's note: "When I first started falling by choice, I noticed a blind spot. Somewhere after the beginning and before the end of the fall, there was darkness." Working backwards from image to sensation, viewers can learn how to stay in the light, from her example.

The slow-motion falling on screen that is a hallmark of *Fall After Newton* has a precedent in televised sports. From the early days of the *Wide World of Sports*, where the "thrill of victory" was always paired with "the agony of defeat"—a shot of a skier or runner wiping out in spectacular manner—to the almost animation-like effect of high definition instant replays, mediatized sporting events have always broadcast slow-motion falls. More and more, these shots, like the slow-motion gunshots in popular movies, transform something essentially awful into an abstractly beautiful effect. In sports, however, the camera usually returns to the live action, with scenes of the player being carted off the field, and pans to the worried look on the coach's or girlfriend's face, before cutting to a beer commercial. Slow-motion replays are now habitual in professional sporting events, especially in basketball, where even at live games, most of the viewers are watching the enormous screens to see what "really happened" in those split seconds before the foul. Early on in the development of the work, Steve Paxton once compared watching *Contact Improvisation* to watching sports, where you watch with a relaxed attention until some exciting move pulls you to the edge of your seat.

This comparison between sports and dance, and their media legacies, is more than coincidental, of course. During the late 1980s and the 1990s, certain genres of contemporary dance (what I tend to call the Euro crash-and-burn aesthetic) highlighted a physically virtuosic, intensely driven body. Édouard Lock's company La La La Human Steps from Montreal is one well-known example of this approach to the human body, this side of the Atlantic. His main dancer, Louise Lecavalier, has the profile and attitude of a prima ballerina cum rock star, and it is her extraordinary dancing that drives his increasingly "mega" media extravaganzas such as *Infante, C'est Destroy*. Produced in 1991, (choreography is much too plebian a term for what actually transpires onstage) this "dance 'n' rock" event toured internationally for several years.

Throughout this nonstop seventy-five minute spectacle, Lecavalier's body—both its hardened aerobic energy and its filmed image—is continuously on display. Pitted against the pounding sounds of Skinny Puppy, Janitors Animated, David Van Tiegham, and Einstürzende Neubauten, her dancing uses the driving beat of the music to stretch dance movements to the outer limits of physical possibility and endurance. Over and over again, Lacavalier launches her body across the stage, flying through the air like a human torpedo. She gets caught by another dancer, thrashes around with him for a while, then vaults out of his arms, only to rebound back seconds later. Her body spends more time catapulting horizontally than it does moving vertically. Sometimes she is caught and guided to the floor by her partner (as in Stark Smith's falls), but most of the time her body is so tightly coiled that she practically bounces off the floor and back into another lateral vault.

In another context, I have analyzed with some care the heavy metal iconography and gender dynamic of *Infante C'est Destroy*.<sup>4</sup> I return to this work now with a slightly different intent. For the purposes of this essay, I am curious about the contrast between Lacavalier's dancing and the filmed images of her naked body falling slowly through the space in the second half of the show. After we have seen Lacavalier and her various sidekicks slam their bodies relentlessly around the stage (think of the physical equivalent of a heavy-metal guitar solo), an enormous screen slowly descends across the front of the stage. At first, the film shows Lecavalier clothed in a medieval suit of armor, complete with sword (à la Jeanne d'Arc), and then later falling naked through a vast, bleak space. There is no coherent narrative in this short surreal film. Jump cuts inexplicably move her from a figure of power (the knight), to a woman bleeding, to a Christ-like transcendence. She is aggressor, victim, and saint; all the while imaged in larger than life celluloid.

Yet in the moments when she is falling through space, there is an otherworldly calm that envelops the audience. These moments are completely detached from the events onstage. Although her blond hair and alabaster skin are recognizable, Lacavalier's body is transformed on the film. She floats peacefully on screen, supported by the digital technology that allows her image to transcend gravity. She is falling on screen, but falling in such a suspended atmosphere that she seems to be evaporating. Then she lands. Shot from underneath a glass floor (à la filmmaker René Clair's *Entr'acte*), the impact is clear. We see her land on all fours, breasts bouncing, hair flailing. The shot is repeated, several times. Although the slow-motion editing mutes the jarring effect of her return to gravity, the audience still experiences a visceral reverberation of that jolting sensation whose effects are nonetheless clearly visible. What makes this sequence particularly eerie is the fact that we do not see the chain of events that led from her floating to landing. We see her suspended,

but we don't see the real momentum of her fall, only the seconds before impact. It is like the story of Adam and Eve, without the apple. The image of her strong, yet vulnerable, naked body resting in air at one minute and then hitting the ground the next is both disturbing and bizarrely beautiful.

The American equivalent of *La La La Human Steps* is Elizabeth Streb's company Ringside. Over the past twenty-five years, Streb has been involved in making pieces that focus the audience's attention on how a human body (or bodies) interacts with various kinds of equipment such as poles, balls, hoops, plexiglass walls, a board-on-wheels, a coffin-like box suspended sideways in the air, two 4'x8' birch plywood panels, trapeze harnesses, various kinds of adult-sized jungle gyms, and a trampoline which can catapult people up to thirty feet in the air. Streb's dancers hurl themselves through space, slamming their bodies into the various pieces of equipment. Although the fierce physicality and built-up muscularity, as well as the way her dancers vault through the air, are analogous to the dancing in *La La La Human Steps*, Streb's work is much plainer, with a lot less theatricality, a lot less "attitude," and a lot less pretension than Lock's mega-spectacles. Typically in a Streb concert, one walks into the theater while the technicians are testing and adjusting the equipment. The dances start with the dancers casually walking on stage, shaking a limb here and there to loosen up, and preparing themselves as if for a race or some kind of sporting event. Once they have arranged themselves and glanced around to see if everyone is ready, the dancers launch into whatever physical challenge is being attempted in this particular dance.

More recently, Streb has been working with layering the movement tasks that are a signature of her work with real-time video projections. Her 2003 piece, *Wild Blue Yonder*, which was commissioned as part of a 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary celebration of the Wright Brothers' first flight, juxtaposes the real flight of the dancers swan-diving off a large trampoline and landing on a thick gym pad with the manipulated images of their shadows.<sup>5</sup> Like many of Streb's works, this dance focuses on bodies flying and falling through the air. The physical stamina of her dancers is breathtaking and yet the relentless repetition of their stunts tends to dull the impact of those extraordinary feats.

*Wild Blue Yonder* begins with the dancers entering the performance space and lining up on a ledge in between the scrim and the trampoline. As they jostle and adjust their spacing, the audience sees glimpses of their shadows projected against the twilight blue scrims. First one, and then another, and another dancer jump off the ledge and onto the large trampoline, which catapults them up high into the air. Arms spread out to their sides, the dancers swam dive down, bracing themselves at the last moment as they hit the crash pad. Their acts are spectacular, but it is the image of the dancers' shadows—those black alter egos—that is most riveting to watch. Suspended in the air for a moment, they really do look like airplanes.

Bit by bit, the dancers speed up, launching themselves one right after the other like the finale of the fourth of July fireworks. As more and more bodies take to the air, their shadows become erratic and unpredictable, often times staying on the screen long after the live body has landed. Sometimes the shadows will introduce a new movement motif, a flip or a pike turn, until eventually the images on screen take on a life of their own. This choreography of shadow and video image is infinitely more fanciful and varied than that of the live dancers, who must inevitably contend with the call of gravity that abruptly brings them

back to the earth. Unfortunately, we never get to see images of this experience suspended in time, for the projected bodies never land, they only fade away. Predictably, the curiosity that fueled the Wright Brothers' ambition to fly keeps the audience gazing at the shadows floating in the sky, while the live bodies drop out of sight.

The context of my investigation of falling on screens is a deeper inquiry about the culture of falling post-9/11. Seeing *Wild Blue Yonder* makes me wonder: "Have the disturbing images of free falling bodies dropped out of our sight?" Are we overly comfortable with a technology that can suspend falling indefinitely such that we never are confronted with that final negotiation with gravity? What would it mean to use the technology of screens not to divert our attention from those spectacular falls at the beginning of the twenty-first century, but rather to examine the spaces in between that past and our future? In other words, how can we use screendance to teach us how to land a fall safely both physically and culturally? Ideally, I would be able to point to a recent screendance that realized a vision of falling that was both suspended and grounded. But that screendance has not yet been invented. ■

## Notes

1. *Contact Quarterly* Spring/Summer (1987): 3. Print.
2. *Chute*. Narr. Steve Paxton. Videoda, 1972. Film.
3. *Fall After Newton*. Chor. Steve Paxton. Perf. Nancy Stark Smith and Steve Paxton. Videoda, 1987. Film.
4. Albright, Ann Cooper. "Techno Bodies." *Choreographing Difference: The Body and Identity in Contemporary Dance*. Hanover, NH: Wesleyan University Press, 1997. Print
5. *Wild Blue Yonder*. Chor. Elizabeth Streb. 2003.