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## Uncovering a genre : the integration of suspended aerial apparatus and contemporary dance practice in Australia

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# Uncovering a Genre: The Integration of Suspended Aerial Apparatus and Contemporary Dance Practice in Australia.



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## **ABSTRACT**

Genres in the performing arts are constantly shifting and changing, with many art-forms evolving into new spheres of performance. It is not uncommon for creators to employ tools and techniques from various disciplines to support their artistic vision and enhance their work. A number of contemporary dance artists have begun to explore movement in the air by adapting skills or equipment from other disciplines and industries to suit their needs. At the same time, some circus artists and aerialists have been lowering their apparatus to incorporate ground-based movement into their work. It is this cross-pollination between art-forms that has formed the basis for this project.

Looking specifically at the borderlines between contemporary dance and aerial arts in Australia, this project seeks to discover whether the work of contemporary dance artists who incorporate aerial apparatus into their practice are contributing to the creation of a new genre, or whether their work remains a facet of contemporary dance.

Using a combination of observation, participation and semi-structured interviews with a small group of key creatives, this ethnographic study reflects on the current situation relating to the use of aerial apparatus in Australia. A framework of classification developed by Kendall Walton (1970) was also employed to gain an understanding of how the careers and creations of these key practitioners are contributing to the performing arts landscape in Australia. Some of the advantages and disadvantages to this system of classification have been highlighted.

A surprising finding suggested that within the Australian context, aerial dance exists as a sub genre of both aerial arts and contemporary dance. This is despite the knowledge that aerial dance in America and Europe is understood to be related to, and have grown from, the modern dance or contemporary dance sphere. This suggests that there is the potential for aerial dance to emerge as a genre in its own right.

## **DECLARATION**

I, Catherine Ryan, certify that this thesis does not, to the best of my knowledge and belief:

- i. Incorporate without acknowledgement any material previously submitted for a degree or diploma in any institution of higher education;
- ii. Contain any material previously published or written by another person except where due reference is made in the text of this thesis; or
- iii. Contain any defamatory material;

## **ACKNOWLEDGEMENT**

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## **INTRODUCTION**

The lines dividing art-forms are constantly being shifted and challenged by directors, choreographers and creators alike. New paradigms of performance are being created and, with this, performers are acquiring a wider variety of skills. The dance industry has not been isolated from this phenomenon with elements of acting, circus, visual arts, and technology becoming increasingly common in dance performances. Sometimes the marriage between art-forms requires only a small adaptation, while others require advanced skills only highly trained performers would possess. My research focuses on two physical art-forms, contemporary dance and aerial arts, both of which carry a high level of technique and physical risk and, therefore, demand specialized skills from the performers and creators.

## **OVERVIEW OF MY STUDY AREA**

This project looks specifically at the blurred boundaries between aerial arts and contemporary dance to discover and broadly document the current usage of suspended aerial apparatus within contemporary dance practice in Australia. By examining a variety of contemporary dance practitioners working in Australia who incorporate aerial apparatus into their practice, my research investigates whether these practitioners are contributing to the formation of a new genre or whether their work remains a facet of contemporary dance. The broader dance industry and other artistic uses of aerial apparatus are also examined to aid in the process of classification and clarification.

## **TERMINOLOGY**

A number of key phrases that are central to this research have been identified. As the meaning of some of these terms can differ based on the context in which they are used, I will offer an explanation of each key term/phrase to assist in the understanding of my research area.

## **GENRE**

The task of defining genre in the arts is one that has been hotly debated for centuries, primarily amongst scholars and academics, but also by arts practitioners and the media. I don't believe that I have the authority to present a thorough and effective definition that relates to genre as a whole. Instead, I will present a definition which reflects my chosen application of the term 'genre', in the context of my performing arts research.

Broadly, genre in all of the arts usually refers to the organisation of "verbal and non-verbal discourse, together with the actions that accompany them" (Frow 2005, 1). Reflecting the "cultural, situational and generic contexts" (Devitt 2004, 89), the idea of genre exists to assist us in understanding and making meaning from the world around us. In this way, categorising by genre "creates effects of reality and truth, authority and plausibility" (Frow 2005, 2).

Used as a framework placed upon the work of dancers, actors, circus artists, playwrights, choreographers, filmmakers and live performance artists (among many others), genre offers a set of conventions that make understanding and appreciating the artwork possible. In the context of my research, I use genre as a tool to group together works of art or artists who work in a similar vein. In doing so, I hope to highlight the core conventions that apply to these artists or artworks collectively. What is the purpose of this? To establish a community or a set of values that are recognisable by those not involved in the arts or not directly involved in the discipline itself.

## **SUSPENDED AERIAL APPARATUS**

The aerial apparatus I am referring to throughout this document are used primarily and often solely in an artistic capacity. Fire fighters, photographers, military personnel, window washers, architects, builders and those working in construction, along with many other industries use what is termed 'aerial apparatus' or 'aerial equipment' but such equipment is usually very different to the apparatus used by dancers and performers. The most common aerial apparatus being used by the subjects of my study relate closely to aerial apparatus used for centuries throughout

the circus world or equipment borrowed from leisure activities such as abseiling and rock climbing. Below are some examples of the kind of suspended aerial apparatus I will refer to throughout this document. It is important to note that these examples are not exhaustive, rather, some of the practitioners I am researching work primarily on unique apparatus that they have invented themselves using anything from long lengths of lace and old tyre tubes, to common household furnishings and specially constructed freestanding metal structures.

FIGURE 1: PHOTO MONTAGE OF AERIAL APPARATUS



Left: Corde Lisse or Aerial Rope (Aerial Angels 2013); Right: Silks or Tissu (Tribe 2007)



Left: The Anchor: an invented apparatus (aerial-arts.tumbler.com 2012); Centre: Lyra or Aerial Ring (Flurry 2012); Right: The Cube - an invented apparatus (Morrison n.d)

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## CONTEMPORARY DANCE

Contemporary dance, from one perspective, can be viewed a broad theatrical genre of physical expression that encompasses live dance created in and inspired by the modern day. As a term, contemporary dance could also be seen as more of a theme,

or an umbrella idea than a specific genre of dance as it houses other genres or genre specific techniques such as Dance Theatre, Improvised Performance and Extreme Dance, among others.

For the purposes of this project, contemporary dance will be considered a broad overarching form used to group together works that have a significant grounding in movement and are created in the modern day. A deeper classification system should then be put into place to distinguish between each of the varied facets under this umbrella term. Therefore, when I refer to contemporary dance, I speak of work that is “representative of dance in this moment in time” (Long 2002, 21) and is using current modes, practices or approaches to dance (Pedro 2010). However, it does not include “ballet, musical theatre, jazz, hip hop, tap, or culturally specific styles such as flamenco” (Pedro 2010). Historically, contemporary dance could be said to have been established in the 1900s with the emergence of modern dance however, the works that I will be studying fit under the category of post-modern dance, that is, dance created from the 1950s and 1960s to the present day (Benjamin 1998).

## **PERFORMANCE AND PRACTICE**

When speaking about individual creatives, I feel it is important to discern between performance (limited) and practice (encompassing all aspects of their work – skill development, training, rehearsal, performance, administration). This is because a singular performance by a choreographer or dancer may not reflect the trends evident throughout that practitioner’s overall practice. I suspect that the difference between the two terms may in fact present conflicting ideas or give inaccurate results when tools of categorisation are applied. For this reason, I will use an integrated approach to my categorisation by combining a detailed study of some individual performances with a broader investigation into the practices of the key creatives.

## **AERIAL ARTS**

In terms of aerial arts, I refer to a physical genre of performance, which is thought to have evolved from the circus. Although it is still usually associated with the circus,

acts from the canon of aerial arts are being performed in a variety of venues, from theatres, to cruise ships, on sporting fields and in small community centres. Categorised through the use of various apparatus, both static and swinging, to suspend performers in the space. The emphasis is usually on showcasing virtuosic physical tricks or stunts, which impress and excite the audience.

## **INTERPRETATIVE PARADIGM**

Personal interpretation will without question play a role in the development of my conclusions and classification choices. Whilst a rigorous and unbiased study is the aim, the topic itself, arguing the existence of a genre, could be seen as biased. Therefore, I will include a brief summary of my collective personal paradigm of interpretation.

A set of beliefs encompassed by epistemological, ontological and methodological experiences of the researcher are said to create an 'interpretative framework' or 'interpretative paradigm' (Denzin and Lincoln 2000, 19). My paradigm is my response to the collection of experiences I have had throughout my life thus far, in particular, the contact and understanding I have had with dance and live performance. This includes undergoing physical dance training, performing dance, watching live performances on stage and in other spaces.

The primary motivation for this research stems from my observation of contemporary dance works that integrate new ideas, techniques, tools and theatrical elements alongside the movement component, setting the foundations for new paradigms of performance to emerge. These additional elements are usually borrowed from other genres or disciplines, such as using spoken text from acting or visual projections from film. This merging of two or more art-forms together to create a performance piece defies conventional methods of identification.

An example of this phenomenon is the integration of aerial arts and contemporary dance. Aerial apparatus is not usually associated with dance, just as moving on the ground is rarely seen as aerial arts, but when both aerial elements and ground-based elements are fluently integrated within a performance, the outcome does not fit within the currently prescribed genres and can create a sense of confusion or a misunderstanding. It may encourage more people to engage with dance but it may

also discourage attendance, as there is no prior understanding of what elements are being presented or how they might be used. There are no conventions on which to assess or understand these works. They challenge the receptive party, both in terms of attraction and repulsion.

## **RESEARCH FRAMEWORK**

My research asks if the professional Australian-based contemporary dance practitioners who integrate suspended aerial apparatus into their practice are creating a new genre of performance? If so, where does this new genre fit within the current performing arts landscape?

To answer this question, I approached my research with a qualitative mode of enquiry, using a combination of descriptive and exploratory research types to achieve my three objectives. These are:

1: to develop a broad picture of the contemporary dance practitioners in Australia who incorporate the use of aerial apparatus in their practice.

2: to look in more detail at the careers and creations of a small number of currently practicing professional artists who incorporate elements of aerial arts and contemporary dance in their practice.

3: to define the core or the boundaries that define work of this kind, thereby establishing whether the work of these dancers could be considered a new genre or whether it remains a facet of contemporary dance.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

### **INTRODUCTION**

The use of aerial apparatus can be traced back to some of the earliest days of the circus (St Leon 2011, 3). Ballet dancers also used harness and wires during the 18th century to create the illusion of weightlessness (Craine and Mackrell 2002). Aerial apparatus has continued to be used throughout history in Olympic sports such as

gymnastics, arguably pole vaulting and more recently in ice-skating competitions (Bernasconi and Smith 2008, 8). The fascination that mankind has with flying is evident throughout society, from a young child on a swing to the multi-billion dollar aviation and space travel industries. Aerial work is showcased on cruise ships, at festivals, large international events like the Olympics, through the media at rock concerts, awards ceremonies, sporting games, as well as in movies and onstage (Bernasconi and Smith 2008, 8). From personal observations, it seems that aerial work has even become a 'trendy' pastime for some young thrill-seekers sprouting the emergence of aerial classes at community halls, in school gymnasiums, warehouses, theatres and dance studios.

The blending, fusing or sharing of ideas and concepts between multiple art forms is becoming increasingly common in contemporary performance. Buzzwords such as interdisciplinary, cross-disciplinarily, and inter-arts are used regularly and often interchangeably but, as Polaine (2010) suggests, these terms each have slightly different insinuations. The Australia Council for the Arts (2012) has established an inter-arts office, which supports experimental and interdisciplinary arts practice. It also supports artists working with professionals from other disciplines and industries, such as science (Australia Council for the Arts 2012). This suggests that the most appropriate terminology to use within an Australian context is that of inter-arts.

## **CONTEMPORARY DANCE**

As the name suggests, contemporary dance has quite a relatively short history and can include any number of choreographic practices, some of which may aesthetically be contradictory, but which fall under the banner of contemporary dance (Naranjo 2012). Contemporary dance is a general term and therefore is not a specific style or approach (Pedro 2010, 10). The Queensland Studies Authority (2012) considers contemporary dance to be a collection of dance methods that originated in the twentieth century as a form of concert dance. Within the dance industry there are a number of commonly understood modes of practice that are usually tied to individuals, groups or periods of choreographic practice (Pedro 2010,10). These modes of practice can include but are by no means limited to



modern dance, post modern dance, contact improvisation, physical theatre, dance theatre, release work and new dance (Pedro 2010, 10).

The academic staff from the Dance Department within the Creative Industries Faculty of Queensland University of Technology put forth a series of ideas to the Queensland Studies Authority Dance Panel around contemporary dance for the purposes of developing a school curriculum. One of their suggestions for a potential definition is as follows:

In Australia, contemporary dance is commonly understood as a form of dance as art, presented in a theatrical setting or performative context. A common understanding is that it encompasses the artform [*sic*], styles, approaches and practices that were previously known as 'modern dance'. It therefore could be said to encompass all that is current practice in the artform [*sic*] of dance that is NOT ballet, musical theatre, jazz, hip hop, tap, or culturally specific styles such as flamenco. However, contemporary choreographers may choose to include, or appropriate, aspects of these genres in their work (Pedro 2010, 10)

The most distinctive periods of radical change in the history of American dance, dance in the United Kingdom, and dance in Europe have also had an impact on the Australian dance landscape. These periods of change primarily involved rejecting or redefining what had previously been accepted as dance. From the expressionistic Dance theatre movement in Germany to the experimental stripping back of theatric element in the United States, the ideas, techniques and philosophical approaches explored around the globe can now be seen embedded in the work of Australian dancers.

The experimental work of the Judson Group in New York challenged the previously conceived ideas of what constituted the predominance of modern dance. This movement spread and influenced many Australian artists, which has in turn shaped our understanding and acceptance of dance today. The technique established by Merce Cunningham in the US forms a significant part of the technical training delivered in tertiary training establishments as well as the choreographic work and associated classes of notable Australians artists. Europe and the UK have also

presented a plethora of new ideas or methods of working before the Australian dance industry. With immensely powerful, energetic physicality's and improvisational practices spreading from the UK, alongside highly visual work involving collaborations with multiple art forms being explored in Europe, all elements have contributed to the development contemporary dance in modern Australia.

From the 1960s onwards, a number of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander dance companies emerged within Australia (Australian Government 2007). Dance is an important cultural tradition of Indigenous Australians and these companies presented an opportunity for some of these dance traditions to be showcased in public theatres as well as in local communities (Australian Government 2007). These contemporary Aboriginal and Islander dance companies often present works that merge western dance influences with Australian traditional culture.

## **MODERN DANCE**

The main body of modern dance work is believed to have been created in the 1920s, 1930s and 1940s (Kraus, Chapman and Dixon 1981, 121). The 1950s saw modern dance "emerge as a recognisable dance genre" (Banes 1987, xiii) however a new movement, post-modern dance was beginning to surface and by the 1960s postmodern dance had taken precedence as the form befitting the current societal attitudes (Banes 1987, xiii).

Aesthetically, modern dance was characterised by a grounded, "primitivist" (Banes 1987, xiii) or anti-ballet movement vocabulary, which placed emphasis on the horizontal plane of the body and the use of "dissonance" (Banes 1987, xiii). Specific stylistic forms of movement and training were generated, such as the Graham or the Humphrey/Limon technique, both of which are still taught today in dance training institutions. The overall aim of this period seemed to be focused on conveying social messages filled with "dramatic, literary and emotional significance" (Banes 1987, xiv). "Myths, heroes and psychological metaphors" (Banes 1987, xvii) were common themes, with the all elements of the overall performance designed to complement one another (Pedro 2010, 2). Harmonisation of music with costumes, lighting, props and style of movement encouraged a particular interpretation of the

work (Pedro 2010, 2). Notable choreographers of this period include Martha Graham, Ruth St Denis, Ted Shawn, Isadora Duncan, Mary Wigman, and Doris Humphrey.

## **POSTMODERN DANCE**

The most fundamental of changes that occurred during the establishment of the postmodern period is the radical rejection of everything theatrical, and the redefining of dance (Banes 1987, xxi). A workshop run in America in 1960 by Robert Dunn, an accompanist for Merce Cunningham, introduced a small group of dancers to John Cage's ideas of composition as a task (Gluzman n.d). Whilst Cage created a piece of music by randomly layering together transparent paper marked with various musical restrictions, the participants used this concept with human bodies and movement to choreograph (Gluzman n.d). Combining the philosophical approach of Cunningham and Dunn, the dancers isolated the components of dance into numerous individual parameters such as time, duration, spatial patterning and gesture (Gluzman n.d). This workshop fuelled the beginning of the postmodern dance movement, allowing and encouraging the dancers to replace the highly technical, highly expressive theatrical experiences of the modern dance era, with more stripped back or simplistic work reflective of pedestrian, non-expressive or mathematical tasks (Banes 1987).

The group of artists that had participated in Dunn's workshop presented their experimental work in New York at the Judson Church and similar places (Banes 1987, xiii). This group included many influential artists such as Yvonne Rainer, who wrote an essay in the mid 1960s containing a passage now known as the "No Manifesto" (Gluzman n.d) which rejected the majority of previously accepted dance ideologies, such as virtuosity, eccentricity or narrative. Trisha Brown, another notable postmodern dance choreographer and original member of the Judson Group is perhaps, one of the strongest exponents of the process of rejection. Brown's work in the early 1970s presented "equipment pieces"(Morgenroth 2012, 60), through which she experimented with unused spaces. Of particular interest to this discussion is her use of equipment to explore vertical space. Harnesses allowed her performers to walk down buildings or dance along rooftops. Whilst they have

expanded upon Brown's early explorations, many aerial dance artists today use similar equipment and ideas when exploring vertical space.

Choreographers of the postmodern period were interested in "redefining dance" (Banes 1987, xxi). The work of these choreographers, usually relied on giving the dancers simple everyday tasks as a way of highlighting each individual movement or bringing attention "to the workings of the body in an almost scientific way" (Banes 1987, xxi). Structure became a defining characteristic of postmodern dance in the States, whereas the heritage of expressionist dance evolved in Europe into reiterations of emotional elements and elaborately staged productions in dance theatre. Influences from visually dramatic, emotionally charged pieces that dealt with the vulnerabilities of human emotions, such as Pina Bausch's work with Tanztheater Wuppertal, as well as the formalism of American postmodern dance can be seen in the work of Australian dance practitioners.

The United Kingdom has influenced Australian dance through the 'New Dance' movement, which began in the early 1960s (Mackrell 1992, 4). Prior to this, long established dance traditions, such as classical ballet were dominant and very few artists worked outside of the company-based infrastructure (Mackrell 1992, 2). Amateur dancers had little opportunity to dance and perform beyond ballroom dance, folk groups, ballet classes, tap classes or "keep-fit class" (Mackrell 1992, 2) and the innovative dance movements in America, such as modern and post-modern dance had barely been heard of (Mackrell 1992). The new dance movement accepted that "dance takes all forms" (Mackrell, 1992, 2) and encouraged everyone to participate "no matter what age, shape or colour they are" (Mackrell 1992, 3). Creatives began to embrace daily life in their performance and choreographic work with society, politics and economics becoming integrated (Mackrell 1992). Artists also began to experiment with "different ways of staging their work" (Mackrell 1992,60) and made use of other disciplines such as music or visual art in collaborative ways. Most choreographers involved in this movement "developed their own unique style" (Mackrell 1992, 58), with a handful of techniques such as contact improvisation and release technique being used to complement their personal stylistic explorations.

## CIRCUS ARTS

Circus as an art-form has a unique and detailed history, which seems to have progressed in various different ways across the world. It is thought that the history of circus began in 8th century BC in the ancient civilizations of Greece and Rome (St Leon 2011, 3). Rome in particular housed large spectacles showcasing “acrobatics, trained animals, rope-walking and clowning, chariot races, athletic contests, wrestling and boxing matching” (St Leon 2011, 3). This ancient circus saw its demise by the 5th century AD, when the Roman Empire was converted to Christianity and the large amphitheatres that use to house the circus were destroyed (St Leon 2011, 3). According to Mark St Leon (2011, 3), it is believed that circus as a form of entertainment virtually disappeared from society and from vocabulary at the fall of the Roman Empire, until its re-emergence in the 18<sup>th</sup> century.

Circus in Australia can trace its beginnings back to England in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, when Philip Astley and his wife began “presenting equestrian and other exhibitions of physical skill in an enclosed arena” (St Leon 2011, 7) as a form of entertainment for the public. This “coordinated performance” (Covington 2010) mixing trick horsemanship with acrobatics and comedy was later defined as the “classic circus” (Covington 2010) and would ultimately contribute to the establishment of circus in Australia (St Leon 2011, 19).

Astley opened his circular arena in 1769 (St Leon 2011) and this amphitheatre stood as a permanent structure in London until 1893 (Hippisley Coxe 1980). During this time he also developed a portable amphitheatre, which allowed him to travel and present his shows around the world (St Leon 2011). Despite this, American entrepreneur J. Purdy Brown is understood to have established the modern day big top circus tent in 1825, creating a covered performance space that was easily carried between towns (Kirsh 1999).

Antony Hippisley Coxe (1980) highlights three potential periods of circus: the “equestrian age,” which featured “horse and horsemanship”(St Leon 2011, 239) took place from the 1770s until the 1860s, when the “music hall age” (St Leon 2011, 239) featuring “acrobats, rope-dancers, jugglers and gymnasts” (St Leon 2011, 239)

took precedence. While elements of horsemanship were still present, greater emphasis was placed on the physical feats demonstrated by human performers (St Leon 2011). The third stage occurred when “wild and exotic animals” (St Leon 2011, 239) were added to the mix, shifting the emphasis away from the human performers and onto menagerie. These periods form what is now known as the traditional circus, which according to Andrea Lemon (2011, 2) “has been active in Australia since the 1830’s.”

In the late 1960s the new circus or contemporary circus movement began to surface in Australia and throughout the globe (St Leon 2011). This could be observed as a fourth stage in the history of circus. The contemporary circus movement in Australia prompted a revival of the prevailing circus methods, fuelling “the development of an Australian voice, group creativity, physicality, spectator-performer interaction, social justice and overt stands on political issues” (St Leon 2011, 239). A youth circus movement also flourished at this point, which allowed young people to develop performance skills as a way to improve self-esteem (St Leon 2011). Contemporary circus’, such as Circus Oz, have removed animals from their productions, focusing instead on integrating elements from related performing arts disciplines into a cohesive production (Tait 2004, 73). In the case of Circus Oz, impressive feats of skill and daring complement “satirical political commentary” (Tait 2004, 75).

Today in Australia, traditional family-based circuses still travel the country providing entertainment targeted at families, although this tradition is in decline (St Leon 2011, 256). Taking centre stage instead is a variety of professional contemporary circus companies such as Circa in Brisbane or Circus Oz in Melbourne. The National Institute of Circus Arts, a professional level circus training institution has been established and many contemporary circus companies have also introduced community arts education programs to their portfolio developing highly skilled performers (St Leon, 256). International companies such as Cirque du Soleil based in Canada, the Great Moscow Circus from Russia and Arkaos from France also present their circus spectacles around Australia, giving audiences access to a plethora of circus experiences (St Leon 2011, 256).

## **AERIAL ARTS**

Aerial arts involve a physical form of performance that uses both static and swinging apparatus to suspend a body in space (Tait 2005). A person who performs aerial acts is usually known as an aerialist or aerial acrobat (Vassallo 2012). Despite commonly being presented in theatres, aerialists and aerial acts became synonymous with the circus during the 20<sup>th</sup> century and have continued that association in modern times (Tait 2005). Commonly lasting six to ten minutes, each aerial act consists of a series of prescribed moves, or tricks that challenge the athleticism of the performer as they explore extremes of height, velocity and dexterity on a piece of equipment (Tait 2005).

Most aerialists in Australia today are graduates of circus training program such as NICA in Melbourne or CircoArts in New Zealand. Many have also started their circus training in a youth circus, such as Circa's youth education arm, Flying Fruit Fly, Flipside Circus, Corrugated Iron, Cirquest, WA Circus School or La Luna Cirque, to name a few. Some Australian tertiary dance institutions have also begun to incorporate aerial classes in their curriculum. This I believe this is an indication of the shifting nature of interest in aerial arts and inter-arts contemporary performance practices.

Prior to the emergence of airborne performances in western society, aerial work was a feature of numerous cultural traditions and ceremonies around the world. The ancient Mallakhamb tradition of India is one such example. Originally developed as a training system for wrestlers, over time it been transformed into a competitive sport (totallycoolpix 2012). Mallakhamb customarily was practiced on a wooden pole, but it has evolved to use a number of other apparatus as well, the most common of which is the rope and an advanced hanging variation of the pole (Burt 2010). Traditionally, the females train on the rope to "execute poses derived from yoga asanas (postures) in the air," (Burt 2010, 1) while the males usually perform grappling movements on the Mallakhamb pole (Burt 2010, 19). There are a number of other variations on the Mallakhamb pole including the use of a tilted pole, a pole balanced on a platform or the advanced variation of a smaller pole that hangs just above the ground and is suspended with a chain causing it to swing (Burt 2010, 20).

FIGURE 2: MALLAKHAMB POLES AND ROPE



Left: Mallakhamb pole (totallycoolpix 2012); Right: Mallakhamb rope  
(Totallycoolpix 2012)

(licence to use images for research purposes)

There are also ancient cultural traditions in Mexico and Vanuatu that use aerial apparatus. Believed to date back to pre-Hispanic times, the Voladores of Papantla, perform a ceremonial dance for the gods where a number of men (usually 5) climb up a large pole and attach ropes to their ankles before jumping off and descending in a circular pattern back to the ground (Stresser-Péan 2009). Also referred to as the Danza de los Voladores (Dance of the Flyers) or Palo Volador (Pole Flying), this ritual was recognised by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation or UNESCO in 2009 as Intangible Cultural Heritage (ITC), which will safeguard the maintenance of this tradition (Anonymous 2009). Figure 3 below is an example of this ceremony in practice.

FIGURE 3: LOS VOLADORES DE PAPANTLA.



(Nichols 2013)

(licence to use image for research purposes)



On the Pentecost Island in Vanuatu, land divers perform an ancient ceremony whereby men as young as 12 climb a “tapering structure... made out of a number of sturdy tree trunks and braches, which are bound together with strong vines” (Ryman 2003). These towers are built on a 45-degree slope, with all members of the community contributing, however, the men that are jumping are responsible for building their own platforms, which supported by three sticks are to be horizontal to the ground (Ryman 2003). These men tie liana vines to their ankles and jump off the edge of the structure as a “symbol of fertility and renewal” (Ryman 2003) before the planting of the new years harvest. During the jump, the sticks supporting the platform snap, helping to soften the impact of the jump (Ryman 2003). Figure 4 below shows a man in mid jump during a ceremony in Vanuatu.

FIGURE 4: LAND DIVING



(Nicholls 2010)

(licence to use image for research purposes)

The Russians also have a history of impressive aerial performances fostered through the family circus tradition, however, the published literature surrounding the Russian aerial practice seems to be quite minimal. I suspect that there is a body of material available pertaining to the topic, however, due to the complexities of language translation, my access was restricted to English based resources. I did come across what could be a number of resources, however, they were written in Russian and any attempts at using translation software proved to be fruitless. My

understanding of Russian based aerial practices extend to the circus act and apparatus established by Alexander Moiseev approximately 30 years ago (Shana 2010). Known as the Russian Bar, this circus act involves two bases each holding one end of a fibreglass pole while a flyer performs a series of balance tricks on the pole before (and after) being launched into the air, allowing for acrobatic flips or tricks (Stewart n.d). Moiseev is currently the Russian Bar trainer at Cirque du Soleil in Canada and is understood to be the first person to design and perform this circus act (Shana 2010). Some texts have hinted at use of poles or bars earlier than the 1970s, however, these accounts have been vague.

## **AERIAL DANCE**

Aerial Dance is an emerging art-form, thought to have been developed in America in the late 1960s (Bernasconi and Smith 2008, 4). There is much debate surrounding what constitutes Aerial Dance, particularly in Australia where the term is used quite loosely, however the most commonly quoted definition is “a movement and performance artform [*sic*] that utilizes [*sic*] suspended apparatus for performance in the air” (Sendgraff 2007). Some consider aerial dance to be a form of circus arts (Cooper 2012, 5), others a form of postmodern dance (Bernasconi and Smith 2008).

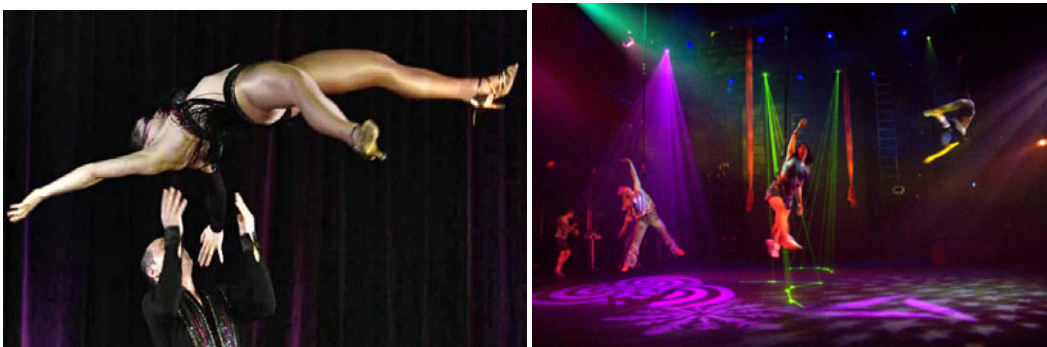
Aerial Dance in America has been quite well documented and as such is deemed to be a distinct genre in itself. This documentation has been primarily through the work of Bernasconi and Smith (2008) who, with their book *Aerial Dance* make a fairly clear distinction between modern dance choreographers who use aerial apparatus to momentarily defy gravity and aerial dance artists “who are making aerial dances as their craft” (Bernasconi and Smith 2008, 5). Chloe Jensen, Co-Director of Ameba Acrobatic and Aerial Dance in America explains that Aerial Dance is “about using the equipment to discover new possibilities of movement” (Jarrett 2008, 3).

Frequent Flyers Productions in America hosts an annual aerial dance festival at their studios in Boulder, Colorado (Frequent Flyer Productions 2013). Known as the International Aerial Dance Festival, this was the first of its kind, and has prompted the emergence of a trilogy of annual festivals held throughout Europe. This suggests that the profile of aerial dance in Europe is of a similar strength to that genre in

America, with Ireland hosting the Irish Aerial Dance Festival, England hosting the European Aerial Dance Festival and France hosting Les Rencontres De Danse Aérienne (LRDA), which translates to The Aerial Dance Encounters.

As yet, it seems that aerial dance in Australia does not have such a strong profile. Ausdance National, the peak body for dance in Australia doesn't appear to recognise aerial dance as a style or genre in their listings, nor is there a festival focusing specifically on aerial dance. There are a number of organisations and independent creatives who identify themselves as aerial dance artists or aerial dance companies however, not all of these groups use aerial apparatus. An example of this is Melbourne Aerial Dance Company (MADC) whose aerial component involves a series of lifts and complex partnering manoeuvres reflective of competitive ballroom dancing and circus related adagio acts, rather than using apparatus suspended from the ceiling. Figure 5 below indicates the difference in aesthetics between an apparatus based aerial dance company and a non-apparatus based company. This suggests that there is a need to clarify what constitutes aerial dance in the Australian context and identify more clearly the aerial dance community.

FIGURE 5: SUSPENDED APPARATUS VS. NO USE OF APPARATUS



Left: Melbourne Aerial Dance Company at Canberra Latin Dance Festival 2012 (Melbourne Aerial Dance Company 2013); Right: Janine Ayres Aerial Dance performing *The House That Jack Built* in 2009 (Findlay 2009).

(licence to use images for research purposes)

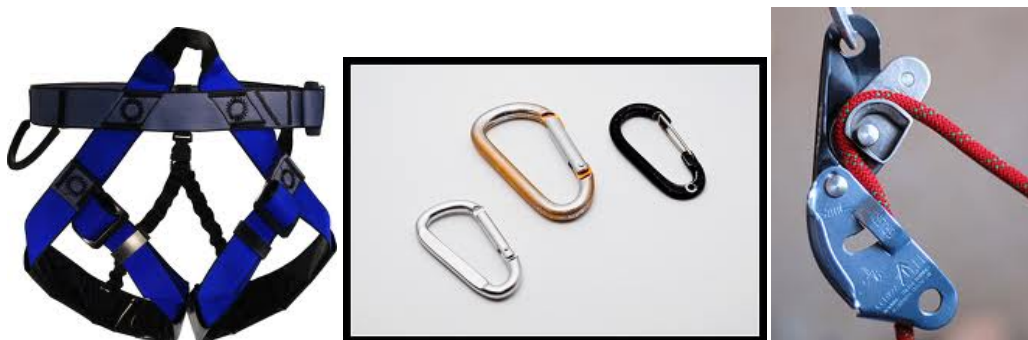
Both companies shown above are Australian and performing in Canberra in the above photographs. Janine Ayres Aerial Dance (JAAD) uses the assistance of apparatus suspended from the ceiling to be lifted off the ground and explore movement while hanging in the space. Attached at the waist by a harness (as shown above), these performers can spend extensive periods of time off the ground,

supported by the apparatus, whereas the performers from MADC are momentarily suspended in the space or lifted off the ground by a partner. MADC appear to have specific roles assigned to men and women in their performances, with the males demonstrating strength by performing techniques of lifting, tossing, sliding and catching, while the women demonstrate flexibility by following the male lead and actively participate in these lifts. With JAAD, both males and females share a similar skill set and can perform similar roles. Whilst the work of both companies require a high degree of strength, power and trust, MADC uses a human partner, JAAD uses equipment as a partner.

## VERTICAL DANCE

Another genre, Vertical Dance, has been coined by Kate Lawrence (2010) to describe work that is performed on a wall usually using abseiling equipment such as a sit harness, grigri, and carabinas. Figure 6 below shows these apparatus individually and when rigged ready for use.

FIGURE 6: VERTICAL DANCE EQUIPMENT



Sit Harness (Adventure Verticale 2013); Carabina (Yau 2009); Gri Gri (Dimitry 2006)

(licence to use images for research purposes)



Climbing rope, Gri Gri and Carabina rigged for use (Wesspur 2010). The carabina is attached to the front loop of the sit harness and locked in position before use.

(licence to use image for research purposes)

Vertical dance is said to differ from Aerial Dance in that an Aerial dancer is completely suspended in the space, whereas a vertical dancer has contact with a wall and uses the vertical surface of the wall as a dance floor (Lawrence, 2010). In this way, the term ‘vertical dance’ refers to the position of the dancer’s body in relation to the wall, rather than the orientation of the dancer’s body (Lawrence, 2010).

As this is a “still-nascent genre” (Lawrence, 2010), and work of this kind adheres to similar criterion as aerial dance, aerial arts and the work that I am researching, for the purposes of my investigation I am incorporating vertical dance in my examination of the use of suspended aerial apparatus in contemporary dance.

## **METHODOLOGY**

This project is driven by an ethnographic research strategy. Hammersley and Atkinson (2007, 3) explain that there are five forms that an ethnographic study can take. The first is that the environment surrounding the study is not specifically set up by the researcher (Hammersley and Atkinson 2007, 3). Secondly, “Data is gathered from a range of sources” (Hammersley and Atkinson 2007, 3), such as participant observation or informal interviews. Thirdly, a greater emphasis is placed on the process of collecting and categorising data rather than on specifying detailed or rigid research plans at the outset (Hammersley and Atkinson 2007, 3). The fourth

form is that the researcher undertakes a detailed study, but selects only a small number of cases to investigate (Hamersley and Atkinson 2007, 3). And finally, the researcher focuses on interpreting the “meanings, functions, and consequences of human actions” (Hamersley and Atkinson 2007, 3) when analysing the data. This usually generates “verbal descriptions, explanations, and theories” (Hamersley and Atkinson 2007, 3).

My research uses elements of all five of these approaches through a variety of methods, such as observation, personal participation, one-on-one interviews with a small number of cases and reviews of the published literature, to gain an understanding of the intersection between aerial work and contemporary dance. Of these data-collection methods, two required me to be working in the field, immersing myself in the environment and practice of my subjects.

Whilst both options would have provided me with similar insights, instead of surveys, I chose to conduct semi-structured interviews with a select number of people who I acknowledge to be leaders or key creatives in their field at their current stage of development. When selecting these key creatives, I limited my study to professional Australian-based artists working primarily as performers and choreographers. The aim of these interviews was to add depth to the observational components of my study and to contextualise the data. During the process of analysing the data, I spent time looking for trends in the function of their works and practices, as well as the consequences (both positive and negative) of their creative explorations. I also looked at newspaper articles, reviews and other press clippings surrounding these creatives, primarily to pick up the terminology used in the media, industry and public sphere surrounding dance and aerial arts. From this process, I am able to offer broad explanations or insights into the work of contemporary dancers who use aerial apparatus and to present a potential location of where this genre of performance might fit best in the performing arts landscape.

I observed a number of performances using aerial apparatus both in Australia and overseas. In Australia, some performances occurred on the street using an outdoor aerial rig, some were performed on a proscenium arch stage in a theatre and others were performed in a traditional big top circus tent. Overseas, I only viewed performances indoors in a black box theatre. When I was viewing the performances

I took note of how much time was spent on the apparatus and how the apparatus was being used. The aesthetics of the work, the techniques used and some background information to the piece was also noted.

In addition, I participated in some aerial classes run by circus artists, through Vulcana Women's Circus in Brisbane and the Western Australian Circus School in Perth, to examine and experience first hand the teaching methods and priorities of aerial work within the genre of circus. I compared these experiences with classes run by Kym Stokes and Les Livesy of Majestic and multiple aerial dance teachers at LRDA in France who identify themselves as dance artists or do not associate themselves with the circus. For some of the non-circus related classes, extensive dance training was a pre-requisite for participation. I took note of the teaching methods, the class structure, the kind of vocabulary that was used during the class and which components of the work were emphasised.

## **DISCUSSION**

### **INTRODUCTION**

Within Australia, aerial apparatus for artistic purposes is used in a very varied manner. In order to gain a clearer picture of how and where aerial apparatus is being implemented in Australia, I have chosen to study six people in detail. All have achieved a high level of skill in their field, completing tertiary level study in one, sometimes two or more areas of the performing arts. These people have been selected because a significant element of their career or practice is quite unique, yet they all share the same interest in using aerial apparatus in their work.

Of the six creatives, Jo Naumann and Jamee Kerroly Campbell I would consider to be 'emerging artists', as they have been involved in the industry on a professional level for a short period of time but can demonstrate that they "seek to make a living from the arts" (Loxton and Loxton 2010, 64). These artists have a "recent track record of some professional work" (Arts Queensland 2012, 20) but have not yet established a strong audience following or a substantial body of work, both of which are indicators for an established creative (Loxton and Loxton 2010, 67). Therefore, the

other four artists, Meryl Tankard, Claudia Alessi, Dawn Pascoe and Janine Ayers, would be considered ‘established’, as they have committed a prolonged or considerable amount of time to their arts practice and have developed skills and expertise to a professional level. They are “recognised by other professional practitioners” (Arts Queensland 2012, 20) who are working in a similar area and have sustained “a nationally or internationally recognised contribution to the discipline” (Loxton and Loxton 2010, 67) in which they are working. I have selected these four creatives based on the varied contexts of their engagement within the performing arts. All six of the key creatives are independent artists, that is, they have “chosen to [or are required to] work outside the company-based infrastructure” (Australia Council for the Arts 2004) in Australia, often funding their own work and practice.

TABLE 1: KEY CREATIVES

	Who	What	Where
Emerging	Jamee Campbell	Currently using apparatus	Brisbane
	Jo Naumann	Currently using apparatus	Adelaide
Established	Claudia Alessi – Company Complesso	Previously used apparatus. May do so in future	Perth
	Meryl Tankard	Previously used apparatus. May do so in future	Sydney
	Dawn Pascoe – Natural Wings Aerial Dance Theatre	Currently using apparatus	Perth
	Janine Ayers – Janine Ayers Aerial Dance	Currently using apparatus	Canberra

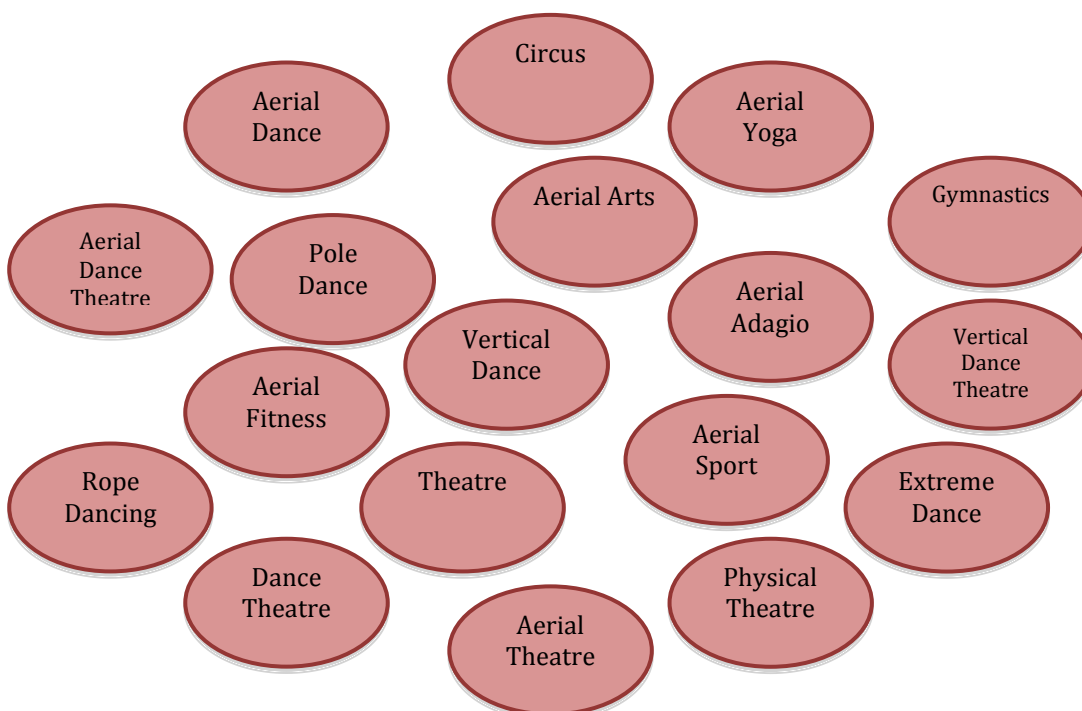


Whilst only studying the above listed people in detail, I feel it is important to note that they are not the only people working in this area. There are companies, collectives, partnerships and other independents working around Australia who all include elements of dance, aerial use and theatre in their professional performing arts work. Such groups include Strange Fruit from Sydney, Legs on the Wall in Melbourne, Strings Attached in Sydney, Majestic in Brisbane, Aerialize in Sydney and Aerial Angels on the Gold Coast. This list is by no means exhaustive, but gives an indication of the variety and scale of the integration of dance and aerial work in Australia.

### AERIAL APPARATUS IN AUSTRALIA

The current use of aerial apparatus takes a number of different forms, with each artist or group promoting their work under various terminology, as listed in figure 7. I have chosen to include only the most commonly accepted terminology applied to artistic or leisure use. Can all of these phenomena be classified under a few main categories or alternatively, can some be discounted as peripheral activities?

FIGURE 7: A VISUAL REPRESENTATION OF THE TERMS USED TO DESCRIBE ARTISTIC WORK OR LEISURE ACTIVITIES.

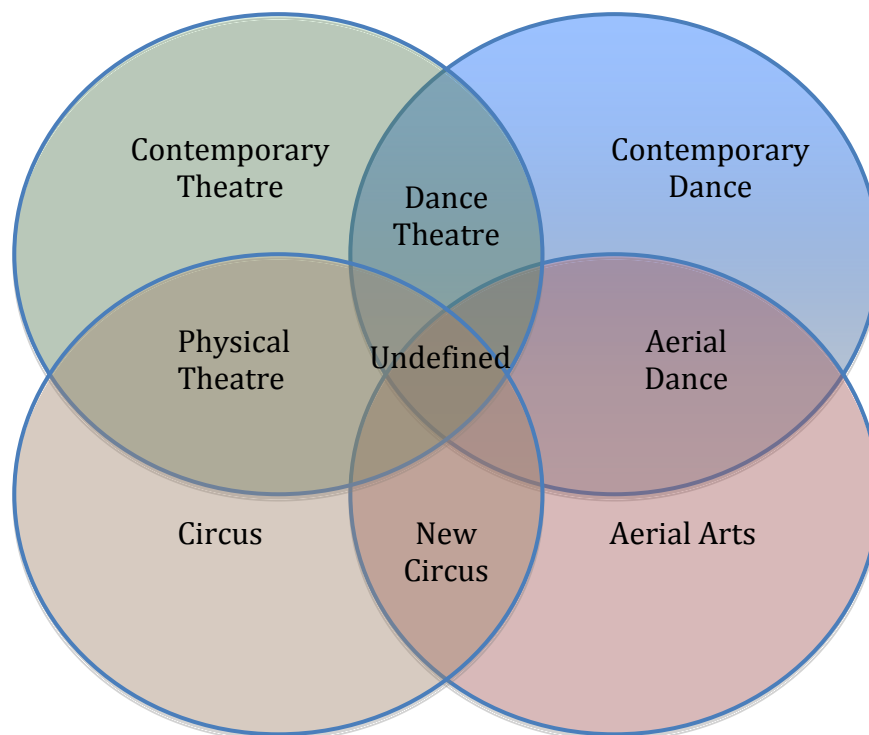


All of these activities exist for a reason. There must be an interest or a demand, regardless of niche market appeal, to fuel the establishment of such named activities. They can assume the status of high art which is usually performed in a theatre or similar cultural venue and uses a formalised ticketing process to sell tickets in advance. Examples of such positioning include aerial dance, aerial dance theatre, dance theatre, physical theatre and extreme dance. Aerial apparatus can also be used in exotic or adulterated arts such as burlesque, pole dance and cabaret performances. These events are more often performed in bars and nightclubs, with the performers dancing on podiums. Entry to these venues often requires payment, however, they are usually not ticketed in the same way as high art events. Instead, a charge is applied to enter the venue and is collected at the door. Community organisations or youth arts organisations such as Corrugated Iron in Darwin and La Luna Youth Arts in Townsville, also use aerial apparatus to improve the lives of local community members. These often take the form of circus, aerial arts, aerial fitness and aerial sport. For the purposes of my research, I will examine more closely the stylised, artistic uses of aerial apparatus or high art as mentioned above. Aerial dance, aerial dance theatre, dance theatre and physical theatre are the styles or genres I will examine in my attempt to provide an adequate explanation for the appropriate categorisation of aerial work that intersects with contemporary dance.

## **PIECES OF A PUZZLE**

For a simplistic view of how the abovementioned performing arts genres fit together, figure 8 below offers a potential explanation. Of course, this is not without its flaws. In fact, the task of clearly showing how I see these genres or styles felt like I was assembling a puzzle where the pieces fitted together, but without quite matching.

FIGURE 8: THE INTERSECTIONS BETWEEN GENRES



Using physical theatre as an example (as per figure 8) would indicate that only circus skills and acting skills should be seen in physical theatre, yet works of physical theatre do not need to use these methods to be considered as such. DV8 Physical theatre in London is one such example, as circus skills are not commonly apparent in the company's repertoire, rather, dance or movement is integrated with theatrical elements to emerge and be celebrated as physical theatre. Similarly, dance theatre doesn't require spoken word or similar theatre processes as a prerequisite, even though figure 8 suggests so. Instead, circus skills such as tumbling or aerial work could be included alongside dance or movement and the piece could still be received and acknowledged as dance theatre. Whilst these examples could be an exception to the rule, is there really such a thing as purity of form in any of these modern genres?

I have chosen to leave an area in the middle of the four originating or influential categories as 'undefined'. This is to indicate that there are crossovers with each and every aspect. Rearranging the four primary genres, contemporary dance, contemporary theatre, circus and aerial arts, so that they are not shouldering the same genres shown above would alter the puzzle again entirely. For the purposes of my study, however, I am going to use this diagram as it stands. I will also be

referring to physical theatre, dance theatre, aerial dance and new circus as sub-genres because they sit within, underneath and between two perceptively distinguishable genres. The main issue that this diagram presents is to which genre does each sub-genre belong? Can it belong equally to both?

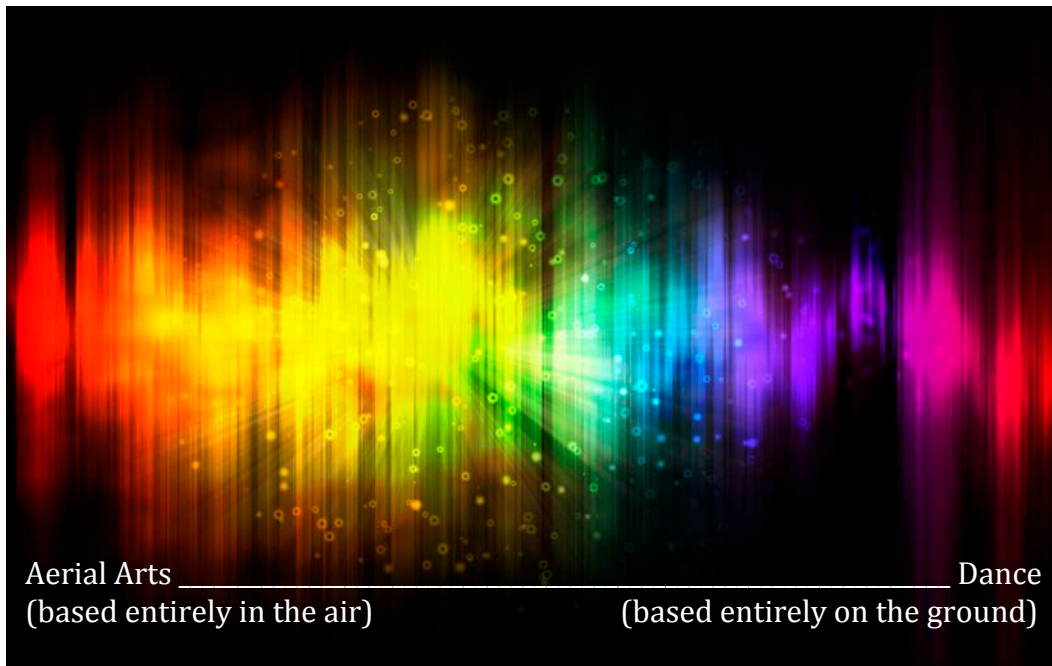
Using the diagram above, I believe the work I am studying could be seen to belong equally to contemporary dance or aerial arts, with minor intersections between other art forms. Is it possible that aerial dance or aerial dance theatre could belong to both primary genres (that of contemporary dance and aerial arts) at the same time? Or is standing alone as a genre or art form in itself also a plausible explanation? Aerial dance and aerial dance theatre seem to be quite heavily interconnected, just as dance theatre and physical theatre appear to be closely related. To find these answers, I need to look to other industries or investigate other categorisations in more depth.

## **SPECTRUM**

Using the idea of the colour spectrum, discovered by Issac Newton in 1672 (Colour Vision and Art 2013) which examines the way that white light is broken up into colours, I believe can be a beneficial approach to apply to the use of aerial apparatus and contemporary dance or indeed any inter-arts form. When the properties of a singular work of art (white light) is broken down and examined, a plethora of styles, techniques and approaches are revealed (the resulting colours). The primary work of art could not exist in its current form without having all these approaches and techniques applied within the work, so it is an amalgamation, just as the white light is the result of the spectrum of colours merging together.

To visually combine the idea of the colour spectrum, and the idea of classifying people or their work along a continuum or scale, I have used the image below. The variety of ways and the extent to which dance artists incorporate aerial apparatus, and aerial artists incorporate dance, could be viewed along a spectrum ranging from purely dance to purely aerial arts.

FIGURE 9: THE AERIAL DANCE SPECTRUM



(Cyberil 2013)

(licence to use image for research purposes)

This figure is a visual representation of how the spectrum idea can be applied to aerial dance. The left hand side (yellow/orange/red) is an abstract visual example of work that is entirely using aerial apparatus and could be seen as mostly associated with the circus. That is, a level of suspense is intentionally created around the execution of a “dangerous stunt [which is primarily designed] to entertain families” (dancing in the air 2013). On the opposite end of the spectrum, (blue/purple/pink) indicates work that is performed entirely on the ground without the use of suspended aerial apparatus. This work is more closely related to dance, with the aerial component a series of complex lifts and partner work. The colour in the middle of the image, primarily green and blue, is an indication of where dance and aerial work intersect. This image suggests that the red-based colours on both extremities of the figure act as the ‘pure’ or most common form of a particular genre, while the pale or white-based colours in the centre represent the indistinct genres, or those which result from a fusion of multiple art-forms. The small dots indicate individual artists or groups of artists who use both aerial apparatus and contemporary dance.

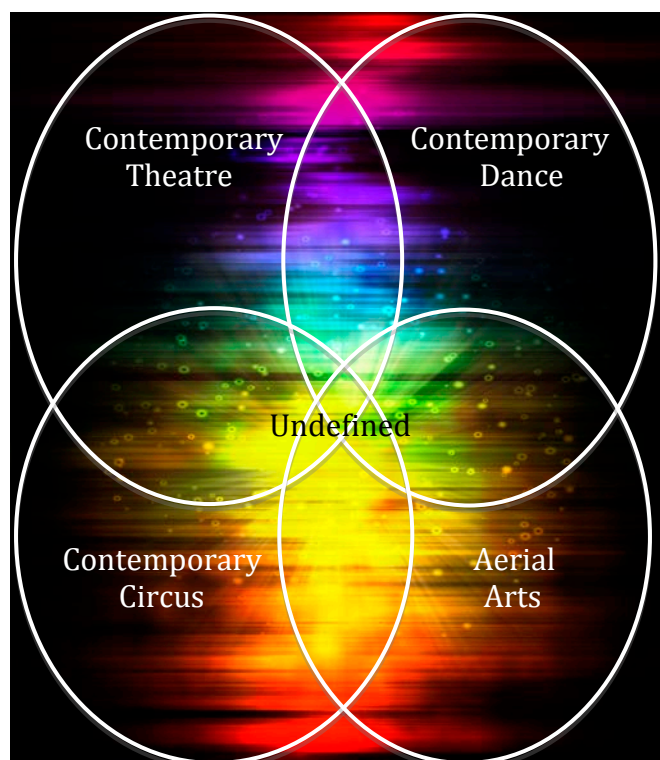
While this image is useful in getting an abstract visual understanding of how the two elements, dance and aerial interact together, the work created in reality also

employs other theatrical techniques such as theatre, acting or film. This diversity cannot be adequately displayed with such a depiction (just as the white light is not seen clearly in the image), as it does not consider the myriad of techniques, approaches or styles all integrated into the work. It also suggests that there are definite edges, definite corners and clear barriers as to what is acceptable and what is not. The artists studied generally work at the edges of genres, so what they create would not be acceptable to a singularly prescribed genre, and cannot therefore, be categorised on a singular, horizontal plane.

### **THE SPECTRUM PUZZLE**

To highlight how the intersections between genres and the colour spectrum relate, I have overlaid two images, one pertaining to the colour spectrum (figure 9) and one pertaining to the genre intersections (figure 8). This image alters the reading of the colour spectrum diagram by allowing the four main high art genres, circus, theatre, dance and aerial arts, to be included on the one diagram. This task, and resultant image, shows more clearly that the undefined section in the middle of figure 8 correlates with the all-encompassing white light from figure 9. This idea, that elements from either three or four disciplines are integrated together in a way that places equal bearing on each discipline is quite rare, just as pure white light in the colour spectrum diagram is quite rare. The main issue I have encountered now when applying this to my key creatives, is being able to determine what genre or collection of genres a singular practitioner is best associated with.

FIGURE 10: THE AERIAL DANCE SPECTRUM PUZZLE



(Cyberil 2013)

(licence to use image for research purposes)

## CATEGORISATION

In his text, *Categories of Art*, philosopher Kendall Walton (1970) develops a criterion for defining the standard properties of art, arguing that each artwork will have a correct way to be perceived or understood. Walton (1970) believes that historical, aesthetic and non-aesthetic notions must all be applied to a work in order for it to be adequately received. To help me unpack the complexity of categorisation, particularly for works that lie on the borderlines of genre or defy common classifications, I have adapted Kendall Walton's idea of art categorisation to the careers and creations of a small number of dancers and aerialists who I see as integral to the intersection between dance and aerial. Despite having limited access to the full body of work and associated careers of my six key creatives, I have used Walton's advocacy for examining the historical, aesthetic and non-aesthetic contexts of the works to help me to establish the core ideas of what constitutes the intersection between dance and aerial work.

Particularly in terms of receptivity of art, genres have the potential to completely alter the way a work is created, viewed and received. A practical application as to the importance of classification, which both supports and complicates the need for genre in the arts, concerns the attendance of live performance. For many, particularly in our current economic climate, making the decision to purchase a ticket to attend a live performance can be difficult. One of the key findings from studies that have looked at audience receptivity and participation has been that “a lack of understanding” (Ali-Haapala 2011, 49) has contributed to a person not enjoying a show. For instance, contemporary dance has been highlighted as a hurdle many face when attending live theatre (Ali-Haapala 2011, 49). As mentioned previously, contemporary dance is a broad and encompassing term, which can give the creator the freedom to experiment, while still maintaining their affiliation with a certain genre. For the audience, however, the experimentation that an umbrella term like contemporary dance allows can be problematic as there are no clear indications as to what the audience can expect to receive for their money. Whilst I don’t believe that creating sub-genres to further define an umbrella genre is the ultimate solution, I do believe that this is one strategy that could improve the situation. As Scollen (2002, 275) has pointed out, audiences would benefit from receiving more information prior to the purchase of tickets and for work that sits on the borderlines of genres. Does Walton’s notion of identifying the elements of a performance or a work of art provide a platform from which contemporary dance artists could use to excite and inform their prospective audience?

## **EXAMINATION OF KEY CREATIVES**

With my examination of these six key creatives, I applied Walton’s categories of art to as many of the individual works made by each creative as I was able to access. Given that a singular work can be viewed in a number of different ways, based on which genre the viewer has adopted, I have considered each work in relation to aerial dance. Walton explains that each work of art contains a series of properties, which can be view as standard, variable or contra-standard.



Standard properties are features of a work that allow it to evidently belong to a particular category. Without these features, the work in question would not assimilate well in that category. To take aerial dance as an example, one core feature would be the use of a suspended aerial apparatus. If no apparatus is used then the work in question becomes something else. Therefore, when examining the key creatives I took a particular interest in how, when, why or if aerial apparatus was employed, and to what extent within their work such apparatus was integrated.

The second of Walton's properties are variable properties. These features have no real bearing on whether a work belongs to a particular category or not. It will exist in that category regardless. An example in the aerial dance field is the projection of film in a live performance of aerial dance. The film is variable because if were to be removed, but the dancer still continued to perform live on an aerial apparatus, it would remain a work of aerial dance. If the aerial work were to be documented on film but not exist in a live format as well, the work would fit into another category.

The final feature that Walton acknowledges is the contra-standard properties of a work of art. These features, if present, would prevent the work from belonging to a particular category. In aerial dance, if a performer was to execute a series of tricks, pausing after each to encourage applause and excite the audience before continuing with their next trick I would consider this work to belong to circus, rather than to aerial dance. In relation to the analysis I undertook with my key creatives, to discern which properties of the work were contra-standard to aerial dance, I found that I had to look to the standard variables of other genres. But that task itself presented a myriad of new questions or issues.

I discovered that each standard variable present in one genre, will act as a variable or contra-standard variable for another genre, and visa versa, but depending upon the personal framework of interpretation applied to a particular genre, a multitude of different responses may emerge. What I consider to be a standard feature, another may believe is variable, just as a singular property can be standard in more than one genre. This made it incredibly difficult to distinguish which properties truly were present in a singular work and how this mixture of properties provided a final outcome.

Each creative I studied has engaged with aerial apparatus in quite some depth multiple times throughout their careers. Considering my belief that aerial apparatus is a standard property of aerial dance and using Walton's idea, (on a simplistic level) the work and therefore, career of these creatives would belong to the canon of aerial dance. This concept was also problematic, however, as using aerial apparatus could also be seen as a standard property of aerial arts and circus arts, meaning that these artists could instead belong better to another genre.

This method of dissecting the work of performing artists didn't give consideration to the depth of engagement of a singular property. It looked only at whether a particular property was present in a yes or no manner, without taking into account the way it was used, how it was applied in the work or how much emphasis was placed on each individual property in the final work. This yes or no answer in relation to inter-arts, genre defying, often idiosyncratic work was, in fact, the greatest issue I came across. It is problematic because much of these practitioners' careers have been driven by experimentation, or not fitting into pre-determined categories. Whilst I was seeking to find a way to understand how these artists are contributing to the development of a sub-genre or genre, the constantly shifting nature of their work, placed alongside this classification framework, has not appeared to function as expected. Walton's framework requires unique creatives to be categorised or packaged up in much the same way as a mass produced consumable would be. Treating the distinctive careers of these creatives as a commodity that can be bought, sold or traded went against my natural understanding and appreciation for art and performance. The process of analysis undertaken, highlighted for me how this theory of categorisation does and does not work when applied to currently practicing performing artists.

Despite the challenges, this exercise did give me an idea about which genre a singular work is most closely associated with so that I had a simple way to view the complex careers of these creatives, although I am concerned that this simplicity is detrimental to accuracy. For the established creatives, who have a body of work and may have dabbled in a number of different genres or used a variety of different techniques throughout the course of their careers it provided a simplistic summary. For the emerging creatives, this task gave clarity to the kind of work they are developing, solidifying which genres they are exploring. My concern with the

accuracy of this method relates to the surprising results I got from some works after Walton's tools of categorisation were applied. A handful of works appeared to belong to a very different genre than what the literature and media-based avenues such as reviews, program notes and press clippings suggested. These unexpected results may have altered my findings when I looked at the overall career of each creative to date, from the kinds of training they have had through to the kind of work they are making today.

## **OBSERVATIONS – TEACHING AND PERFORMANCE**

From an observational and participatory viewpoint, a number of differences emerged between circus artists and dance artists in relation to their performances and teaching. Some differences were subtle, others fairly substantial.

In relation to teaching both dance artists and circus artists adopted a similar 4-step method: explain, demonstrate, attempt, feedback. That is, the teacher explains the workings of the maneuver and how to perform it; demonstrates the new skill, often once in real time, then once in a slower or broken down method; invites participants to attempt the maneuver under supervision; and gives feedback. When participating in classes run by circus artists, I found that specific tricks or skills were taught, with a correct and incorrect way to perform each trick explained. The trick was given a name, but the terminology used when teaching the trick was mostly descriptive. For example, when performing a 'Gazelle' as shown in figure 11 below, instructions such as "sit sideways on the bar, facing me" and "stretch your leg out straight" were given. A number of safety measures were discussed before class and multiple spotters were a priority when first performing a new trick, which gave each individual specialised attention and feedback from peers in addition to the instructor, but less time on the apparatus.

FIGURE 11: GAZELLE



(Richmond 2013)

(licence to use image for research purposes)

In comparison, when participating in classes run by dance artists, terminology from the classical ballet repertoire, or contemporary dance technique was used in addition to descriptions. The same movement wasn't assigned a name by the dance artists. For the 'gazelle,' shown above, one teacher suggested it was similar to performing an upside down stag jump, which is terminology from contemporary dance, while another gave instructions such as "bring your right leg into a high retiré and take your left leg into arabesque", which is terminology from classical ballet. For the classes using classical ballet terminology, having dance training was a pre-requisite. In these dancer-led classes, the participants were encouraged to experiment and find new, more graceful ways of getting into and out of a pose, with some time allocated at the end for a group improvisation using the apparatus and other bodies in the space.

In performance, I noticed the development of some trends that were specific either to dance artists and circus artists. Circus artists seemed to show feats of strength and skill, moving from trick to trick, each seemingly more dangerous and exciting than the last. Their eye line was lifted, as though they were looking out to the back rafters of a large space, so even if the work was performed in a small venue, I found that the space felt large during these performances. The dance artists working on aerial apparatus seemed to move more slowly, demonstrating flexibility and strong,

polished lines. The transitions between poses were much more smooth and whilst their work still required exquisite skill and strength, the performances didn't give off the feeling of danger. I found that these aerial dance artists, if they weren't spinning, made direct eye contact with audience members and had a level, or slightly dropped eye line which made the performance feel more intimate, or in a smaller space. These trends do represent some broad generalisations, as I did also watch performers who were an exception to these patterns, yet as a whole, these trends were common enough to warrant mentioning.

## **FINDINGS AND CONCLUSIONS**

From my research, I have concluded that aerial dance can exist as a sub genre of both aerial arts and contemporary dance. While I personally feel in Australia it has closer ties to aerial arts, the literature suggests that the strongest link worldwide is with modern or contemporary dance. I believe aerial dance in Australia has the potential to emerge as a recognisable genre in itself, gaining a status similar to that held in America or Europe where a number of individuals, partnerships, companies and organisations that are increasingly incorporating aerial elements in their work. One of the main setbacks that I have discovered in this happening is the lack of clarity or understanding in regards to what constitutes aerial dance in Australia, and the confusion this creates for audiences, practitioners and support agencies.

The number of people in Australia that identify as contemporary dance artists that also use aerial apparatus is quite limited, with each of the currently practicing artists that I contacted having only a very small handful of people on their radar as working in the same vein. Very few of these artists have developed their aerial skills without some level of professional instruction delivered by someone with advanced circus training. This finding suggests that whilst some creators may produce work that swings further towards contemporary dance, sharing similar aesthetics, techniques, philosophical practices or training methodologies, the overall majority will use techniques learnt through specialised circus or aerial training. This could be because the circus has a long history of aerial work. Over the years safety protocols and effective work practices have been developed within the circus sphere so for many artists, to work safely on aerial apparatus a level of professional instruction is

needed. This instruction is usually found in experienced performers distilling and passing on their circus driven practices and procedures.

Within the Australian context, particularly, but also applicable worldwide, I have found that the title a creative or organisation uses to identify their work may not align with the common understanding of that title, particularly if it holds a strong relation to an identifiable genre. To use two of my key creatives as an example, Jo Naumann and Dawn Pascoe choose to identify their work as aerial dance theatre, but both have done so for slightly different reasons. Naumann's motivation could be broken up into 'aerial' and 'dance theatre', as she draws from her contemporary dance training but is interested in the storytelling and emotional aspect to the dance theatre tradition, which branched from contemporary dance. The aerial component comes from her interest and subsequent experimentation with aerial apparatus. Pascoe on the other hand, takes a different approach. Her work could be broken up into 'aerial dance' and 'theatre'. The aerial dance component comes from her circus background and her experiences at an aerial dance festival where she discovered that "it wasn't about the tricks, it was about finding movements in the air that sort of flowed from one to another like a dance" (Interview with Dawn Pascoe, March 18, 2013). The theatre component came when she began to integrate her previous theatre training with her circus training. I also discovered that much of the work being created in Australia that merges aerial work with dance or movement, often employs a third or fourth discipline. This work is mostly referred to as physical theatre, and many of the individuals who are working in this way can have their influences traced to two main companies, Legs On The Wall and Stalker Theatre. This I believe also contributes to the fact that in Australia, aerial dance has not emerged as a substantially recognisable art-form as it has done in America and Europe.

I further discovered that whilst genre classification can be beneficial to the performing arts industry, practitioners and audience members alike, it can also be damaging. When art is interpretative, reflective or groundbreaking it often defies classification, and for the receptive party, this can cause uneasiness if not approaching the work with an open mind. Similarly, when applying for funding, scholarships, opportunities and similar support, the body that administers the support often requires the creative to assign themselves to a category and define

their work in a rather specific, tick the boxes, type of way. Whilst I don't feel that Walton's categories of art assisted me in achieving my aims, often feeling counterintuitive or counterproductive, the process of analysis could be useful for artists faced with the task of translating their ideas and interests into an application.

I feel it is important to mention that my findings are speculative, not definitive. As Hammersley and Atkinson (1995, 6) state, "without any control over variables, it is argued, one can do no more than speculate about causal relationships, since no basis for testing hypothesis is available." As my research took on an ethnographic design, I undertook most of my research as a member of the community I was studying. This means that my conclusions may be different to those of someone distanced from the community, looking in, rather than being involved and looking out. The perspective is also adopted from my dance background, yet I feel there is a need to investigate the contribution that aerial artists and circus artists are making to the establishment and instruction of new processes in the area. The artists involved in circus-based aerial practices were acknowledged in my research, but not investigated. These practitioners play an equally important role as the contemporary dance and aerial dance artists that I studied in my attempt at uncovering the sub-genre of aerial dance. In fact, these circus artists or aerial artists may enhance the profile and rigor of such work, suggesting that further research into the area is relevant and significant.

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