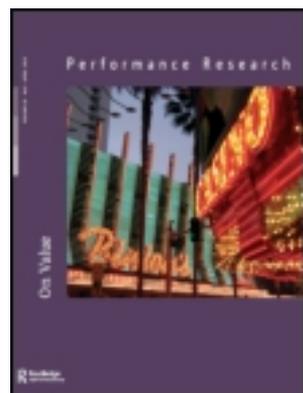


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Editorial: On Falling

EMILYN CLAUD & RIC ALLSOPP

Fall away, fall apart, fall on, fall in, fall back, fall behind. Falling is a movement between one place and another, a process of uncertainty, of risk and exhilaration. With each breath out, with every step we take, falling is so much part of our ongoing daily lives as to go almost unnoticed. The consequences of falling can be devastating, destroying lives, communities and infrastructures. The earthquakes in Hawaii, the collapse of Rana Plaza in Bangladesh, the fall of the Twin Towers, reveal the stark honest reality of gravity, a fundamental natural phenomenon that is mocked or disregarded only at our peril, asking us to beware, notice, respect and to accept. Western culture, for the most part, continues in its endeavor to resist falling, striving towards verticality, linearity and steadfast uprightness with all its moral underpinnings. Political and economic successes depend on rising, not falling and a persistent binary of positive/negative flourishes between the two terms. Not surprisingly the etymology of the term follows two routes, the Latin *cado, cadera* (I fall, to fall) and the Germanic *fall, (fail)*. So falling becomes associated with shame and failure.

And there is an alternative understanding of falling that provides the inspiration for this issue *On Falling*. Post-modern, physical theatre and live art performance, and somatic mind body practices all advocate for an awareness and transparency of falling as a necessary and inevitable actuality of living and being. A core concern in contemporary choreographic performance is the relationship between performers and the ground, working with gravity, falling towards the ground, where letting go becomes a form of recovery; and

where, for a fraction of an instant, falling and flying merge. In the practice of falling we face fear, here-and-now uncertainty and a realisation that a sense of self emerges in relationship with the environment and that letting go (falling out) of a fixed identity taps into a potential for unknown possibilities.

So undergirding this issue of *Performance Research* is a paradox. Falling is fearfully dangerous, the consequences can be devastating, painful if not life threatening and processes of falling offer opportunities for life change, opening up new creative pathways. With this paradox in mind, our call for papers has produced an intriguing range of writings that engage with falling in performance research. We took an editorial decision to group them loosely under three headings: physical risks, performance constructions and metaphorical significations. Grouping them in this way is not cut and dry. Each paper interweaves all three perspectives but with different emphasis. Shaping the issue in this way allows readers a three dimensional panorama of the paradoxical theme.

The first cluster of writings offers a view of acts of falling that carry real physical risk of injury, pain or death. David Woods, in a performance by Ridiculusmus at Riverside Studios, revives his memory of diving into the Thames with no performance devices to save him from drowning. Nicola Heywood discovers her mother on the floor of her apartment where she had fallen two days earlier. Heyward re-invents her mother's fall to create a film about falling and repair. Sally Ann Ness reflects on her own fall in the slopes of Yosemite National Park reminding us of the frailty of human bodies,

the enormity of the landscape and the inter-relational play between bodies and environment. Wendy Hubbard links her experience of fainting and the crisis of spectatorship at a performance of *The Author*. Each writer describes an experience of a single body falling where the consequences could be injurious.

We end this cluster with Chloe Johnston's paper about Phillipe Petit's high-wire walk between the Twin Towers. Johnston's writing describes a triumphant performance, walking between buildings that symbolized Western economic strength – an ironic triumph that becomes more significant 30 years later with the collapse of the Twin Towers and the ubiquitous media image of the Falling Man.

That tight-rope, slung between risk and performance, provides a segue into our second cluster of writings. Performance Constructions describes fallings in performance that are not life threatening but offer an artistic promise of a way of being in the world, contradicting and exposing Western culture's obsession with upwardly fixed things.

Ann Cooper-Albright writes about the practice of contact improvisation and falling into a gap of movement between vertical and horizontal. She makes parallels with Denis Darzacq's photographic images of young people who are suspended just above the ground, caught during their risk-taking falls from roof tops in the outskirts of Paris. Dance performer Blakeley White McGuire, describes the technical skills and choreographic symbolism of falling in early twentieth century modern dance forms such as Graham and Humphrey techniques. She notes how modern dance performers fall in order to recover and post-modern dance performers recover in order to fall. Amy Sharrocks takes us on a journey through an eclectic mix of artists' performed falls, attending to the tension between physical pain and the romantic mythology of falling.

The next three articles are grouped together so readers can consider different interpretations of the work of the 1970s performance artist Bas Jan Ader, a significant and mythologized performer of falling. Pia Brezavšček compares

Jan Ader's performances with those of Yves Klein and Tehching Hsieh, pointing out each artist's differently constructed relationship with gravity. Charlie Fox draws a relationship between Jan Ader's work and that of Soviet writer Daniel Kharms. Avant-garde artists who, in offering subversive practices that accept failure and promote performance as a space of literal reality, challenge the political constructions of their time – for Kharms, Stalin's regime and for Jan Ader, post war empirical fantasy. Francisco Sousa Lobo places Jan Ader's work in relation to the writings of Simone Weill, whose book *Gravity and Grace* (2003) offers a theological perspective on the spiritual significance of falling. Through comparison Lobo deftly emphasises Jan Ader's disruption and rejection of the image of an artist as a sublime figure of high art. It is striking how notions of romanticism, spirituality and existentialism become frames with which to situate and critique Jan Ader's acts of falling in these three writings.

The issue continues with Emilyn Claid's paper on relational falling, an auto-ethnographic account of witnessing another who falls. And the section concludes with a piece by Mark Harvey who reminds us - through reflection on La Ribot, Acconci and his own work - that falling in live art performance is always a promise of failing, a testing of liveness, and therefore a failing at falling.

Acts of physical falling continue to haunt the third cluster of writings. Yet in each instance embodied fallings are displaced into metaphor to reflect an eclectic mix of political, social and cultural concerns. Catherine James writes of vertigo and invokes the filmed performances of Harold Lloyd and Fred Astaire, to illustrate how terror can be turned to humor and how these films offered audiences a chance to integrate their lives within the fast rising, skyscraper landscape of urban New York. Patrice Pavis writes from Korea where the fast speed of life is reflected in the number of suicides and he describes how contemporary Korean artists are exposing, incorporating and accepting falling as way of creative existence.

Arseli Dokumaci describes falling ill and the painful medical condition rheumatoid arthritis. Introducing the term affordances, (Gibson 1986), Dokumaci explains how people in pain come to create different performative day-to-day interactions with their environments. Gigi Otalvaro-Hormillosa's writing takes us on a moving auto-ethnographic account of her visit to Ex-ESMA in Buenos Aires, the memory site where metaphorical falling looms formidably for the 30,000 Argentinians who disappeared during the Dirty War (1976-83). For Peilin Liang falling symbolizes those who are culturally subjugated. Referring to the subversive tactics of palm puppetry in Taiwan, Liang describes how a use of mimicry has developed into a sophisticated form of performance that exposes Taiwan's colonial subjugation under Chinese and Japanese forces. Hari Marini reveals how the architecture of the National Theatre in London is experiencing weathering as its concrete structure slowly transforms through time. Swen Steinhauser brings together two unlikely dancing partners, Walter Benjamin

and the visual artist Edwina Ashton, linking the two through the notion of clumsiness as a metaphorical falling away into ambiguity and absurdity.

The journal ends with a piece by Kevin Mount who highlights Camus' final journey from Provence to Paris and fatal car crash in 1961. It seems poignant to end the journal with Camus and writing that brings this existential philosopher into his own vulnerable body, and existential concepts of death and nothingness into an embodied reality, and to tell the tale with poetic humor.

The wealth of different falling perspectives in this issue is impressive and the writings affect us with a kind of wonder and awe about the theme of falling. These writings emphasize being in our bodies, in relation to the environment, in the actuality of falling, where we come face to face with uncertainty and the loss of empirical self and linear time. Not as a negative nihilistic experience – but rather as a pathway to curiosity - falling to fly.



■ *Who Falls Head-First Rises Upright*, Street Art, Alameda, Lisbon. Photo Ric Allsopp, March 2013