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**Realigning Vertical Dance on a
Horizontal Continuum**

**Danielle K. Garrison
MFA Dance Candidate-Aerial Dance Track
University of Colorado-Boulder
USA**

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Athens Institute for Education and Research
8 Valaoritou Street, Kolonaki, 10671 Athens, Greece
Tel: + 30 210 3634210 Fax: + 30 210 3634209 Email: info@atiner.gr
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Realigning Vertical Dance on a Horizontal Continuum

Danielle K. Garrison
MFA Dance Candidate-Aerial Dance Track
University of Colorado-Boulder
USA

Abstract

How does an art form become validated? King Louis XIV birthed a model to which Western dance has depended upon to answer this question since 1661. By creating the Royal Academy of Dance, he established an aesthetic split between ballet and acrobatics, causing a hierarchical binary to form in ballet's favor. This aesthetic split between dance and acrobatics is currently alive in the U.S. between aerial dance and aerial circus. Do aerial dance practitioners align their genre with dance rather than circus in order to validate the young art form? Is aerial dance its own genre or a genre of dance?

Aerial dance is a young genre (created in 1976), and is still in the process of defining itself. This genre straddles the worlds of both aerial circus and dance. Although aerial dance uses the same aerial apparatuses and training methods as aerial circus, leading aerial dance practitioners in the U.S. define their work with dance aesthetic.

I will do a genealogic abstraction of the founding, history, and current practice of aerial dance to reveal if the idea of dance, as a more legitimate art than circus, exists within the genre. I will also perform a case study with Aerial Dance Chicago (ADC), shifting my focus to a Marxist economic lens, to analyze if funding determines the validity of the art. Are there economic benefits for this company from shifting its aesthetics from acrobatic to balletic over its existence since 1999?

Through this research, I will provide clarity regarding the aerial dance genre that has never been done, given there is only one book written on aerial dance. It is important to provide more scholarly research into this growing international art form, and to not be afraid to study a genre that is in the midst of forming.

Keywords:

Ballet [is] the most highly codified, highly funded, and perhaps most elite symbol of European derived theatrical dance in the United States.
(Dance scholar, Jane C. Desmond)

How and by whom does a relatively new art form, such as aerial dance, become validated as a “legitimate” art form in the current United States? King Louis XIV birthed a model upon which Western dance has depended to answer this question since 1661. By creating the Académie Royale de Danse, King Louis XIV essentially established an aesthetic split between the Neoplatonic verticality of ballet and the curvilinear quality of acrobatics, causing a hierarchical binary to form in ballet’s favor. This hierarchical aesthetic split between dance and acrobatics within aerial arts is currently alive in the United States (U.S.) between aerial dance and aerial circus and is the cause of tension I have experienced between the genres. I am claiming that leading U.S. aerial dance practitioners align their work with dance rather than circus acrobatics to gain “high art” validation for their genre, detecting a predisposed validation in dance aesthetics rather than acrobatic aesthetics associated with aerial circus. I will investigate how the validation of aerial dance is determined through U.S. academia, critical reviews, and funding and that the language these “gatekeepers” use is dogmatically reflective of this hierarchical relationship existing in aerial arts.

In order to decompact this complex thesis, I will first provide a brief genealogical abstraction of the history of aerial circus, aerial dance, and ballet. Next, I will discuss the modern triangular relationship between these genres. Finally, I will perform a case study with Aerial Dance Chicago to specifically explore the idea of dance aesthetics validating the aerial dance genre. This exploration of the aerial dance genre is imperative due to a limited amount of scholarly work written on the field. I will present new research on the aerial dance genre, and initiate a more complex dialogue regarding how aerial dance is validated. It is important to provide more research into this growing international art form and to fearlessly study a genre that is in the midst of being established as an art form.

For the purpose of this paper, I will use the term “dance” to encompass ballet and Western concert dance that derived from either an emulation of or resistance to ballet in order to focus on the aesthetic hierarchical lineage set forth by King Louis XIV. “Aerial arts” encompass all aerial work. “Aesthetic(s)” are defined as the thematic and definitive visual appearance of an art form. It is essential to note that for this paper “high art” connotes a cultural value of some type of art given by a person or group in power, including but not limited to critics, funding organizations, and higher education establishments. Whereas, “low art” will refer to art that is considered “popular” or entertainment. This paper is not intending to make a personal judgment on the differentiations between “high” and “low” art, but rather to reveal the cultural implications and empirical reality of this schism present in Western art and upheld by its “gatekeepers.”

Histories

It is fair to begin with the history of aerial circus, since it is a genre born one century ahead of aerial dance. In *The Ordinary Acrobat*, Duncan Wall depicts the history of the circus genre and illustrates that the first type of physical theatrics involved acrobatics (30). Acrobatics eventually evolved into the official circus proper in 1768 and was a familial trade (Wall 4). Wall also narrates the history of aerial circus, which is one discipline within the circus genre that focuses on acts performed with aerial apparatuses. Aerial circus first took flight in Paris with the debut of the flying trapeze developed by Jules Léotard in 1859 (Wall 155). While sitting by a pool, Léotard came up with the idea to swing from a chin up bar and drop into a pool. Voila, the invention of the first aerial apparatus, the high-flying trapeze.

The spectacle of the trapeze act has evolved over the century, and contemporary French circus groups such as Les Arts Sauts interestingly perform “aerial ballets,” which are “poetic, open-air spectacles staged above an audience and consisting almost entirely of trapeze” (Wall 153). Aerial circus focuses on performing “acrobatic tricks” in aerial apparatuses and is often described by viewers, critics and circus performers as acrobatic, thrilling, entertainment, skillful, and risky. The history of the circus is too complex and significant to condense appropriately for the purpose of this paper. In short, the history of the circus has had its ups and downs over the last century, especially in the U.S. Circus in the U.S. has primarily been viewed as entertainment and struggles to be seen as an art.

The first aerial dance apparatus was a modified version of the first aerial circus apparatus, yet was created in rebellion of the circus genre. The founder of aerial dance, Terry Sendgraff, was in search of something truer for herself than ballet, modern dance, gymnastics, and circus could provide. Sendgraff took the best elements of her training lineage and exposure that enhanced her vision and went forward and up to create the new genre of aerial dance.

The history of the lineage responsible for birthing the aerial dance genre most widely studied in the U.S. today, begins in the 1970s in a little studio in Berkeley, California called Skylight Studio (latter known as Motivity Center for Aerial Dance). In an interview I had with Sendgraff, she recounts her history with the genre. Terry Sendgraff was teaching a student on a double point trapeze that she set up low enough to the ground that one could reach from standing. The student started to spin, and thus wound-up the trapeze ropes. At that moment, Sendgraff thought about creating the first single point trapeze. She decided to rig a single point trapeze and premiere this new apparatus on a proscenium stage with improvisational dance in 1976 (Sendgraff), and thus begins the official flight of the aerial dance genre. Nancy Smith and Jane Bernasconi, co-authors of the first book on aerial dance titled *Aerial Dance*, define aerial dance as “anything that lifts a dancer off the ground with an apparatus such as a trapeze” (Bernasconi and Smith 12). Experimental aerial work had been performed by different artists of the post-modern dance era, but the authors claim Sendgraff birthed the lineage of the genre, because

her work included the intention of crafting the art of aerial within dance rather than containing aerial work to enhance a certain piece (5).

Sendgraff has a history in both gymnastics and dance. She received her Masters in Fine Arts in Dance from the University of Colorado Boulder (CU). In Denver, she briefly experienced a flying trapeze rigged 40' high, but was not very keen on studying it since she "could not dance with or on it" and "left the circus thing" (Sendgraff). She went on to teach ballet and modern at Arizona State University (ASU). At ASU she presented work that was humorous, acrobatic, and "clownish," but it was not well received by the "higher-ups" in fine arts academia (Sendgraff). She decided not to go the acrobatics route again in choreography. Sendgraff felt that she was not only conditioned by the negative response of her superiors at ASU, but also by her ballet and modern training at CU, which was viewed by academia as the appropriate artistic forms of expression. Sendgraff felt that in order for her work to be taken seriously, her work needed to stray away from the circus and gymnastics aesthetic and utilize dance aesthetic (Sendgraff).

Sendgraff expressed she always had a disdain towards circus, even when first experimenting in the high-flying trapeze in Denver. Sendgraff did not reject acrobatics solely because of outside influences; she personally was not fond of the "tricks, competition, and lack of feminism" in gymnastics and the "tricks, focus on technique, flashiness, and phoniness" in circus (Sendgraff). According to Sendgraff, "circus could execute tricks beautifully, but did them the same way all the time." Sendgraff thought art should fulfill a higher purpose than just entertainment. She wanted to do her own work that was "authentic, organic, different, and not focused on thrill," and coined the aerial dance technique *motivity*, which was influenced by her academic experience as well as the post-modern dance movement (Sendgraff).

The notion of ballet and modern being "acceptable" mediums of dance performance, and acrobatics being scolded in academia, is a testimony to the resonation of Louis XIV's hierarchical aesthetic split between ballet and acrobatics. According to Jennifer Homans, a dance scholar who has written on the classical origins of ballet in *Apollo's Angels*, dance became an academic pursuit through the opening of the first academy of dance, of which acrobatics were excluded (16). Even though dance has not always been accepted as a worthy scholarly pursuit, it is slowly being seen as a valuable "text" to be studied within U.S. academia. Aerial dance is also being taught and is now a part of the Masters in Fine Arts program at CU, ironically, the school Sendgraff attended. Circus in the U.S. is typically not taught in universities, but rather in circus school programs, although there is a collegiate-level circus school projected to open in the U.S in the near future, which would potentially give circus arts a deserved place in U.S. academia. So, how did ballet become regarded as a more worthy pursuit of Western art?

The origins of ballet were unfolding in Florence, Italy during the Renaissance. The revival of Platonic thought that dominated Florence in the Renaissance was tangibly present in the Florentine Platonic Academy that practiced Neoplatonism (Homans 5). The embodiment of the platonic ideals of

symmetry, beauty, and a connection to the divine was being portrayed with significant Renaissance art through the depiction of the human body. According to Homans, Charles IX, who ruled France about a century before King Louis XIV, established the Neoplatonic *Académie de Poésie et de Musique* “modeled after the famous Renaissance Florentine Academy” and believed dance “might break some of the earthly ties and raise himself up, closer to the angels” (5-6). Humanism was being explored in the Renaissance, and therefore, the fascination with artistically expressing the human form was dominant in art and emulated through embodiment by the elite members of society. Paintings by artists such as Michelangelo, Bosch, and Botticelli are usually thought of when mentioning the Renaissance. For example, Botticelli’s *Primavera* depicts idealized forms of women in the contrapposto position that emulates the classical vertical Greek body position. Rab Hatfield, a Botticelli Art Historian, cites Kenneth Clark’s comment considering the three dancing girls in *Primavera* as “one of the most personal and memorable evocations of physical beauty in the whole of art... are light-foot[ed]...and danced before the other gods” (Hatfield 9). These dancers represent an ideal beauty that connects earth to a higher realm and under the absolutist reign of the Sun King, Louis XIV, dancers “were well proportioned and graceful... [and] physical appearance was taken to be a sign of inborn nobility” (Homans 17). Homans explains that, under Louis XIV:

... the emergence of classical ballet as a fully articulated theatrical art... became much more than a blunt instrument with which to display royal opulence and power. He made it integral to life at court, a symbol and retirement of aristocratic identity. (12)

Ballet was necessary to achieve higher social status and Louis XIV stated “the art of dancing ... is most advantageous and useful to our nobility” (Homans 15). Art and dance were purposed to enhance the nobility with a “higher” quality than seemed achievable on earth; the goal of etherealness that was beyond the common human. In ballet, through the Neoplatonic vertical alignment of the spine, reverence offered to the King connotes religious and authoritative symbolism, both which connected and embodied Louis XIV’s power to divine rule. In *Making an Entrance* Adam Benjamin claims:

the rulers of Christendom would refer back to classical ideals particularly when they needed to reinforce a political message (from on high). No one did this more effectively than Louis XIV... [and ballet was] attempting to display the distance between [royalty] and common people who lived on a from the Earth. Dis stance, quite literally - a different standing. The purpose of courtly dance was specifically to establish and physically mark as different those who lived closer to the gods. (26)

Dance could separate social statuses, raising the elite members of society to a more elevated status.

The intention of ballet was considered a more “serious,” “proper,” “elite,” and “purposeful” study than acrobatics in Louis XIV’s court. During the early seventeenth century, acrobatics emphasized spectacle, were not part of an academic structure of training, and were “occupied by a low social caste” (Wall 44). Acrobatics, potentially as seen by King Louis XIV, was too “low art” or less “purposeful” than ballet. Dance was made to be superior to acrobatics; it was an art, not just a craft (Homans 16). This aesthetic hierarchical split between dance and acrobatics created a “high” and “low” art division in Western performance and continues to inform the validity of performance arts in the U.S.

Through the retracing of the history of each genre, it can be understood that each has strong, yet, interconnected roots. With the sense of power the verticality of ballet has accumulated since the Renaissance, it appears reasonable that aerial dance would want to align with dance to obtain validation.

Modern Trifecta

Contemporary aerial circus practitioners in the U.S., such as Shayna Swanson, are redefining their genre by emulating the “new cirque movement” to create more artistic circus work that provides a narrative connecting the individual acts. Swanson is the founder of Aloft Circus Arts (*Aloft*) in Chicago as well as the Chicago Contemporary Circus Festival and demonstrates the shift in aesthetic description that U.S circus is undergoing. Swanson describes her company’s purpose as:

... a collection of earth-bound aerial and circus artists, expressing ourselves without regard to gravity. Aloft reveals more than just the splendor and danger inherent in our art; we construct accessible, purposeful stories, drawing on the juxtaposition of artistic, emotional and physical extremes, and let them loose anywhere between the ground and the sky. The results are acts and full-length productions that are powerful, dangerous, hilarious and passionate; where spectacle lies not in special effects or elaborate sets, but in the intensity, beauty and captivating nature of the human body entwined in circus. (*Aloft*)

This description that Swanson uses to define Aloft, combines the “spectacle” that is often associated with circus in the U.S. with an artistic intention proposed by a meaningful storyline. Swanson sees circus as a profound art form, not merely as entertainment (*Aloft*). Swanson is walking a tightrope between entertainment and “high art” while trying to find a balance or unification between the two. Circus in the U.S. struggles to be seen as an art,

and not merely a form of entertainment, contending it can be both. This is a problem for circus in the U.S., but not for France, where over 150 circus schools thrive and are amply funded by the French government (Wall 13). Circus in France is seen and funded as an art, receiving over 9 million euros per year from the government (Wall 13). Circus was not always valued in France; in the early 1980s a government initiative funding program was started to support not just “high culture, but popular forms as well,” including the almost deadened art of circus (Wall 283). U.S. funding establishments still seem to have more resistance towards supporting “popular arts” such as circus, as will be discussed later in this paper.

In contrast, ballet can appropriate acrobatic and circus elements and have them be considered “high art.” A perfect example is the U.S. ballet icon, George Balanchine’s, appropriation of acrobatic and circus aesthetics in ballet repertory. Not only did Balanchine use acrobatic lines in his work, he also created a “circus” ballet with ballerinas and elephants (Tuley). It is fair to say Balanchine’s work is considered “high art” as the New York City Ballet is one of the most world-renowned ballet companies in the world. It is ironic that Balanchine’s use of circus elements helped make Balanchine’s work stand out and achieve that status for his company, when in U.S. history, circus has been considered a “low art.” But, the power the ballet institution holds in terms of funding and cultural prestige in the Western art realm, essentially since the reign of Louis XIV, has given patrons of ballet the influential authority to determine what is valuable and acceptable as “high art.” On the “flip-side,” Swanson is acculturating elements associated with ballet, such as a storyline, as well as identifying as both aerial circus and aerial dance through two distinct websites promoting each identity to elevate the status of her circus company.

The lineage of aerial dance in the U.S. is more of a scattered diaspora than a tree. Terry Sendgraff is credited as the founder of aerial dance, because she had the most significant impact on the educational process of aerial dance (Bernasconi and Smith 12). Nancy Smith was trained in low flying trapeze from Bob Davidson who was a student of Sendgraff’s. Smith founded Frequent Flyers® Productions in 1988 and the first international Aerial Dance Festival (ADF) in Boulder in 1998. ADF has provided a venue and educational experience for all types of aerialists and has made aerial dance an internationally known art form. I have been a professional aerial dancer since 2007 and have personally worked with some of the leading aerial dance practitioners in the U.S. that have been students at ADF, such as Ninette Paloma (Santa Barbara Centre for Aerial Arts), and Chloe Jensen (Aerial Dance Chicago). I have found that their techniques have extended beyond Sendgraff’s, and often use the same aerial apparatuses, vocabulary, and training methods as aerial circus. However, I have learned from working with these leading practitioners, that their work is defined by dance aesthetics. Both Smith’s and Jensen’s company websites describe their work both on the ground and in the air as dance. Paloma is the exception and describes her work as a blending of aerial circus and aerial dance:

Our philosophy is quite simple: honor the past and explore the uncharted. Embracing the ancient technique of aerial arts and blending it with the exploratory concept of contemporary movement, SBCAA approaches flight as a metaphor for the human condition. Using inner strength, external emotion, and fluid intention, the magical violet hour between floor and air is continuously blurred, leaving a sweeping smudge over rules that traditionally abound in the worlds of dance and circus. (*The Art of Floor to Aerial Dance*)

It is important to note that Paloma was circus-trained in Chicago by Sylvia Hernandez-DiStasi, but decided to venture into the world of aerial dance when starting a company in Santa Barbara, as she realized “funding was going to support aerial dance and not circus” (Paloma).

Aesthetically, aerial circus focuses on the “build up to the trick, and then the ‘ta-dah’,” whereas aerial dance focus on the transitions and “flow of the movements” (Bernasconi and Smith 6). The idea that the dance aesthetic found in aerial dance is superior to the acrobatic aesthetic found in aerial circus is clearly embedded within aerial dance. From my experience the tension between the two genres rests within both ideas: the belief amongst aerial dance participants that they can appropriate aerial circus technique to train, but transcend the training technique to showcase the artistically superior, physically more tedious, and the less accessible dance aesthetic in their work; on the “flip-side,” aerial circus practitioners claim their genre is more codified than aerial dance and claims it is technically superior. There is a struggle amongst the genres to claim an ownership of aerial arts, and aerial dance aligns with dance to maintain a “higher” level on the vertical spectrum of art validation.

Case Study

To explore the influence of critical review and funding in the validation of aerial dance, I will specifically provide a case study of Aerial Dance Chicago (ADC). ADC has been in flight since 1999 under the direction of Chloe Jensen. Like Sendgraff, Jensen has both a gymnastic and dance background and pursued dance at the graduate level. Jensen has had to work hard to prove that ADC is a dance company in Chicago (Jensen). Jensen states that the work her company does is purely dance that extends dance from the ground into the “vertical dance space” (Jensen). ADC’s website emphasizes that it is a dance company and that its work includes a “strong dance aesthetic” and “transcends the assumed limits of dance” (*Aerial Dance Chicago*). Jensen’s work originally had more of an athletic and acrobatic aesthetic to its work as the company was originally named AMEBA Acrobatic and Aerial Dance (AMEBA). Jensen decided to change the name to Aerial Dance Chicago in 2010 in order to move away from the “acrobatic” association with aerial arts and to pronounce its work as dance. ADC became validated by esteemed Chicago critics, Lucia

Mauro and Laura Molzahn, when it changed its aesthetic from acrobatic to contemporary ballet. I will use two different reviews of ADC to demonstrate the language these critics use upholds the hierarchical ballet aesthetic binary when reviewing ADC.

Language is crucial. How a critic uses language can define a piece, company, or an entire genre. Critics can make, break, and define a dance company. If a company gets a “good” review it can elevate the company’s status within its field. The “higher” the status of a company is seen as having within its field, the more it is validated. In ADC’s (known as AMEBA in 2007) 2007 concert, Mauro describes the company’s work as “airborne circus routines with diverse forms of movement.” She continues with this idea and adds “Ameba, overall, is more original in concept than in its actual dance movements -- an area where the artists can be more adventurous. Most admirable is the group's desire to downplay the acrobatic tricks in favor of more lucid dancing” (Chicago Tribune). Mauro clearly prefers the dance to the acrobatic aesthetic in this work. In the first quotation, the acrobatic and more athletic dancing the company does is degraded in description to “diverse forms of movement” and not even acknowledged as dancing (Chicago Tribune). The critic almost begs AMEBA to employ more use of dance and less acrobatics in its choreography. Actually, praise and admiration is made by Mauro when AMEBA used more graceful dancing and discarded the circus-like elements.

In 2014, following the image and name shift of ADC, Jensen premiered “Surge” in collaboration with Chicago’s Elements Contemporary Ballet, and this concert was reviewed favorably by Laura Molzahn. The review opens with: “Imagine a huge canvas covered in human flesh and billowing cloth, combining Hieronymus Bosch's earthbound creatures with the angels of Michelangelo's ‘Last Judgment’” (Chicago Tribune). The opening vision of this collaboration is compared to two pieces of Renaissance “high art.” This demonstrates that the connecting fabric of the Neoplatonic ideals that influenced Louis XIV is still heightened. Unlike in Mauro’s review, according to Molzahn there is no confusion as to what exactly ADC is; ADC is an aerial *dance* company. Molzahn esteems that “(a)erial dance and ballet on the same is a genius move” as their “technique is similar, with extended limbs and taut torso, and so is the aim: to go beyond the human body and everyday life, to approach the magical, even the eternal” (Chicago Tribune). Again, this language depicts the influence of the Neoplatonic ideals and “higher” purpose of dance fashioned by Louis XIV. According to Molzahn, not only is this pairing aesthetically “correct,” but the aesthetic quality both genres share even has the ability to transcend the earthly bounds and transcend immortality.

“Surge” presents success for ADC on various levels. Not only was this collaboration acclaimed by a highly respected Chicago critic, the collaboration with a leading contemporary ballet company was also an official acceptance by the highly artistic and highly exclusive Chicago dance community- a community Jensen has been trying to become a member of for many years. The less aesthetically “confused” ADC becomes with its position in the dance world and sheds the acrobatic and aerial circus qualities it once possessed, the

more it gains ground in the dance world, and therefore the “high art” world in Chicago. Although, Jensen claims “within the context of the contemporary dance work and contemporary ballet work, we actually still incorporate some highly acrobatic elements, not as flashy ‘tricks,’ but as a highly physical means of expression” (Jensen). Again, it appears that Jensen can remain true to her artistic vision and use acrobatics as Balanchine did. ADC is now a “high art” dance company using acrobatic elements for artistic purpose, which makes it “acceptable.” When this virtuosic collaboration took flight and the review solidified ADC’s place in the Chicago dance community, it validated not only ADC but also the genre of aerial dance in Chicago. It also demonstrated Molzahn’s strong-hold to Louis XIV’s Neoplatonic notion of “worthy” and “high art.”

In addition to critic success, ADC also received more funding when it became identified as a dance company. In an email interview Jensen claims:

To one particular foundation, I wrote grant proposals for six consecutive years without a positive funding response! In the year they funded ADC, I was required to submit an extra statement with regard to our work, that we did not participate in circus arts activity, but rather were fully focused on our work from a dance perspective. (Jensen)

This particular foundation would not fund ADC because of its appearance as “circusy.” As ADC became less visually acrobatic and more aesthetically contemporary ballet-like, the company actually received financial benefits. What does this mean for the rest of the aerial dance community? It could mean that aerial dance companies need to define their aesthetic and work as far from circus and as aligned to dance as possible in order to increase funding. Aerial Dance Chicago is syncing its aesthetic to align with a contemporary style of Western dance that combines balletic qualities in order to gain validity through critical notoriety, and funding.

Conclusion

Unfortunately, Jane Desmond’s quote shown at the beginning of this paper is true today in the U.S. and I argue that balletic hierarchy in Western art influences aerial dance practitioners to align with the dance genre in order to validate the aerial dance genre. Why does a current new U.S. genre need to conform to what the “gatekeepers,” who are dogmatically aligned with Neoplatonic artistic ideals, validate as appropriate? Funding organizations and critics should consider their role in determining validation for the arts, and reconsider their values and why they are maintained. There needs to be discussion around both aerial dance and circus in academia, which also needs to consider what its goals are in promoting and maintaining canonical hierarchical structures. Maybe the U.S. arts circle needs to look at France as a

model, which birthed both ballet and aerial circus, but has figured out how to support both, to figure out how to reposition our vertical alignment on a horizontal spectrum. Aerial arts cannot be claimed as having a superior ownership by either the aerial dance or aerial circus genre, but rather the differences of each genre should be acknowledged and celebrated. It is time to fly higher above what Neoplatonists and King Louis XIV defined as “high art.” Art should deconstruct vertical hierarchical notions and set an example for the whole of society the potential for a horizontal value continuum. Aerial dance can be an art that is unbound by vertical ideology and find expression in the three-dimensional realm and do what humanity has always tried to do through dance and art, which is to transcend the constraints of our human bodies and fly.

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