

Momentum

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Dance is an interdisciplinary performance piece that features Lucinda Childs's choreography, Philip Glass's musical score, and Sol LeWitt's film projection. First commissioned by the Brooklyn Academy of Music and performed in 1979, this piece was remounted in 2009 by the Richard B. Fisher Center at Bard College, in which a new set of dancers was paired with LeWitt's original film. Today, we may view this piece only as an archived video of its revived performance. We experience the (re)performance on a screen, re-iterating the doubling of the original performance. In this form, our experience of this timeless work builds endlessly on the film's multiplicity as it (re)performs its momentum for new spectators.¹

The screen is dark, and the performance begins with the introduction of the musical score. A tiny sequence of sounds repeats and evokes a twinkling, jumping sensation. It immediately taps into a rhythm of repetition, changing in subtle permutations that only emphasize its core integrity. This rhythm declares a ubiquitous presence.

As the stage illuminates, two dancers come flying out from the side curtain, moving in rhythm with the music. The dancers move swiftly across the stage, hopping and gliding, declaring their path in a whimsical flow. Their movements are highly precise and controlled, performing a sequence that echoes the repetitive nature of the musical score. They cross the stage in pairs, left to right interchangeably, in a constant, hypnotizing continuance. Their gestures repeat, like "the outgrowth of one movement traced again and again until it becomes defined in space."² The act of repetition emphasizes a gesture's intrinsic presence on stage.

The stage floor is marked by a network of orthogonal lines, mapping a grid that stretches beyond the platform's edges, pointing to a place beyond the theatre. A few minutes into the performance, the dancers on stage are accompanied by the illusion of another set of dancers. A projection of the original performers from 1979 is superimposed on the stage, creating a doubling of the dancers and of the grid. Our perspective as viewers becomes layered, and further complicated as the projection of the original performance shifts and becomes an aerial view. The grid is lifted off the ground and now also traces vertically on top of the stage. The apparent and virtual ground is penetrated, and the bodies of the dancers seem to float around on a vertical and spatial stacking of the grid matrix.



Fig. 1. Dance revival performance. Photo: Sally Cohn, c. 2009.

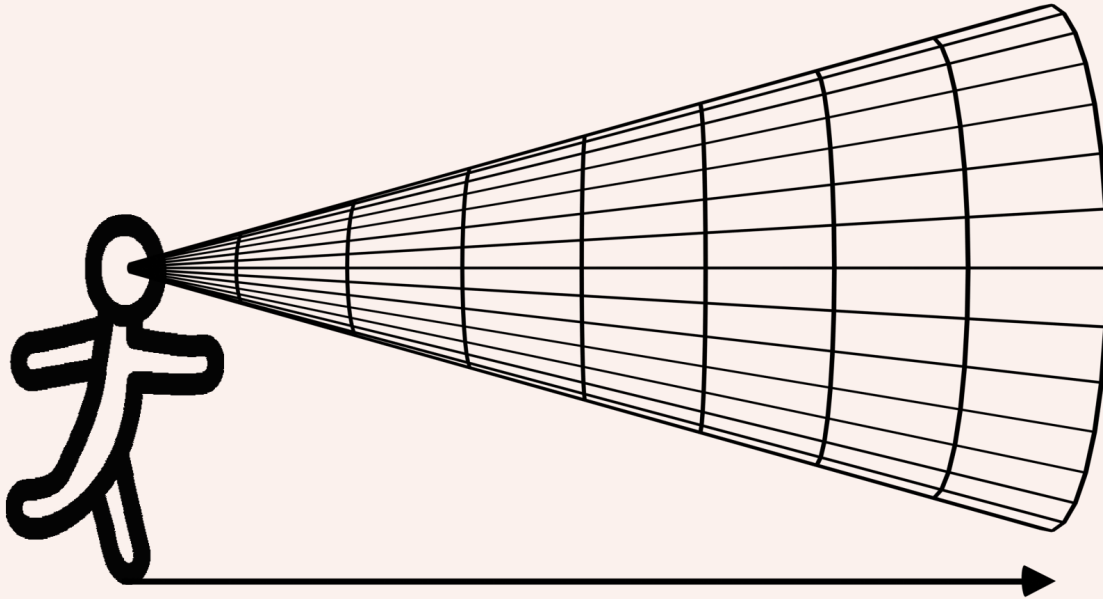


Fig. 2. Linear perspective announcing linear progress. Katja Lichtenberger, *Linear*, 2020.

The dancers and their projected doubles move together in unison, yet their differing scale gives the perception that they are transcending rational time and space. The performance seems to increasingly escape the rational confines of gravity and linear time as the doubling of perception layers multiple temporalities. In tandem, they seem to vibrate the rational fabric of space and time that is proposed by the grid's organized space. Viewers, therefore, also find themselves transcending into a conceptual in-between space. The rhythm set by the musical score and the dancers' movements follow the ever-expanding logic of the grid. The subtle modifications push a sense of undefined acceleration, reaching a crescendo that declares a new realm—a realm marked by an undefined conceptual logic of momentum.

This conceptual and experiential momentum is a condition that functions similarly to the condition of “groundlessness” as described by Hito Steyerl,³ in which a viewer loses stable footing because of the multiplicity of perspectives, temporalities, and spaces present within a singular moment. It is a conceptual “free-falling” that is generated by our continuous acceleration and expansion

toward nowhere in particular. *Dance* demonstrates this as it appears to have no conclusive end. The performance has “no ‘organic’ beginning, middle, or end, no reason why the composition shouldn't go on indefinitely.”⁴

Analyzing *Dance* through this lens helps us to expand upon Steyerl's idea of groundlessness by identifying the free-falling momentum within the visual and non-visual manifestations of the performance, as well as the experience of the contemporary viewer.

The feeling of momentum in *Dance* is a re-articulation of the grid's paradoxical forces. It is an apt metonym of our experience of a “groundless” reality. The expansive, reiterative qualities of the grid, when compounded in *Dance*, create a sense of acceleration. The viewer senses a rising anticipation while simultaneously lifting away from the logical directions of up/down afforded by gravity and a stable perception. Hito Steyerl provides the conceptual framework for us to investigate the manifestation of this momentum through the logic of the grid. Let's first trace the mindful complexities of the grid as it has come to shape our world.

The grid has influenced our perception since the time of Renaissance humanism. The invention of single-point perspective rendered a scientific, rationalized, objective view of representation onto constructed images. By mathematically mapping the image in a perspectival grid, the space became predictable, manageable, and conquerable.⁵ Consequentially, the function of the grid within single-point perspective not only transformed space, but also mapped the notion of linear time into the visual field as a mathematical prediction announcing linear progress.⁶ The grid as an ontological myth became a transcendental tool, positioning “Art” to channel its own self-transcendence and placed the development of artistic practices in linear time, launching thought, innovation, and progress.

The grid exists as a prefabricated system, a methodology. It demonstrates a serial basis for reasoning. The logic within the seriality and repetitive nature of the three-component piece thus shares the same methodology. The logic of the grid registers conceptually through the application of this repetitive structure. This is realized in the realms of dance and musical composition through the formation of a careful synchronization, of which the root principle remains throughout limitless permutations. The grid is based upon repeating forms of its own structure, similarly doubling and multiplying.⁷

The concept that through time our understanding of the world will forever deepen, and that our intellectualism and rationalism will exponentially increase as humanity strives for self-transcendence, is what caused the objective destiny of linear perspective to collapse under its own weight.⁸ Deconstructing the grid thus becomes an abstract method to overcome the limits of our self-awareness and expand our perception of ourselves. It entered Modernism as the activity of a transcendental ego,⁹ becoming a model for consciousness and the systematization of oppositional spaces. It modelled a paradoxical nature. The logic of the grid as ontological tool occupied the space between essence and inessential, truth and non-truth. It remained as a method of the mind. As Suzi Gablik argues in *Progress in Art*, the achievement of abstraction in Modernism is the freedom from the demands of perceptual reality and its intent to reveal the mind to itself.¹⁰ The grid took on an

ambition of demonstrating a “thinking about thinking.”¹¹ The root principle is the analysis of thought itself.

The logic of the grid “is the moment of grasping the idea or theorem that both generates the system and also explains it.”¹² Tracing the development from linear perspective’s ambition to impose a rational system to the grid’s ability to depict the human mind itself brings forth a growing power and emphasis on the deification of human reason. It is as if we are searching for all answers by honing in on the root principle of ourselves, demonstrating humanity’s conquest over nature. The limbo of this paradoxical intersection has no possibility for certainty or truth. It is static in its free-falling, floating state, as Steyerl describes.¹³ Since any ground for truth has been abolished, we are left floating in the matrix as we have imposed it on our world, and here I’d like to propose the theory that we have encountered endless permutations of this state that seem to be increasingly accelerating—accumulating into a radicalization of the system and its logic. It is this accumulation of permutations that marks a momentum that shapes the appearance of the logic of the grid in visual and non-visual practices.

Let us examine how each component of *Dance* plays with this logic of the grid.

Philip Glass’s musical score declares its presence by ingraining a rhythm of perpetual repetition. The subtle variations in melody only highlight the core structure of the sequence as it is duplicated repeatedly, while remaining fundamentally the same. The dance choreography that Lucinda Childs developed similarly demonstrates a rhythmic repetition. The dancers move on and off the stage in a perpetual manner, slightly varying their movement’s tilt, glide, and catch. The flow of their movement gives the effect of a whimsical playfulness, yet meticulous precision and consistent devotion to a core structure make the performance so hypnotic. The rhythm that the music and dancers tap into depends on the same seriality that the logic of the grid rests upon. This serial basis effectively doubles and multiplies the musical and dance sequence endlessly, actuating a ubiquitous presence that propels anticipation and builds an infinitely growing momentum.

Sol LeWitt’s contribution to the performance supports the manifestation of momentum through his

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integration of the grid into his film. The orthogonal lines tracing the stage echo the repetitive patterns of Childs’s choreography and Glass’s musical score. LeWitt pushes this notion further by projecting his original film recording of the dancers that he produced in his studio, thus radicalizing the same methodology by reiterating it across multiple screens. He projects virtual dancers over the live performance, manipulating it by zooming, cropping, and collaging the footage together. In effect, the dancers double and multiply as their counterparts move in unison. LeWitt establishes a multiplicity of perspectives by superimposing a virtual grid atop of the stage, placing it diagonally and vertically, proposing an aerial perspective. Through the overlaying of multiple versions of the choreography and the grid, LeWitt creates a grid matrix that seemingly stretches endlessly in all directions, thus effectively manifesting the patterned accumulation and anticipation that conducts this momentum of groundlessness.

The trio’s combined efforts to demonstrate a synthesis of these methods, from music to dance to visuals, affirm the extent to which the logic is irreducible to the material support. Furthermore, *Dance* exemplifies how this relentless momentum extends into our experience of the performance via the perspective of the groundless spectator.

Let us now consider the contemporary spectator, the one who views the artwork only through the mediation of video documentation.

The perception of this spectator is significant, because it contributes to the disoriented feeling of the present condition. What is evident in the contemporary spectator’s experience of the digitally documented version of *Dance* is that we are in the midst of developing new perspectives and techniques of orientation that Steyerl so aptly describes.¹⁴ The spectator’s experience is marked by mobility—their perspective positioning them as if they are suspended in air, viewing the piece from above and around multiple angles. This articulates a “distanced, superior spectator,” as Hito Steyerl termed in her writing on sovereignty in vertical perspective.¹⁵ The articulation of multiple layers in the structure of *Dance* demonstrates a new method of systematization away from the logic of linear progress and towards a matrix of homogenous space and time—as if time now stands still—halted in the undefined instance of the linear momentum. The spectator’s perspective gives the illusion of a universal space, wherein layers of generation and regeneration and variations are condensed.

Dance is an arena of difference, an interplay of opposing forces. It demonstrates a rhythm of constant generation and regeneration to the extent of the presence of perceptual disorder.¹⁶ It demonstrates the radicalizing momentum of the linear progression of history, and the entropic disorder that our systematization brings forth. Sol LeWitt described this notion of entropy through the logic of his methodology in the grid: “In a logical thing, each part is dependent on the last. It follows a certain sequence as part of the logic. In a logical sequence, you don’t think about it. It is a way of not thinking, it is irrational.”¹⁷

In this way, a logical sequence enacts endless permutation, applying variations irrationally and endlessly. It is entropy, as a gradual decline into disorder, that reigns supreme in the grid’s serial pattern and its avoidance of climax.¹⁸ It gestures toward a crescendo, an accumulation; the subtle permutations build momentum and parallel the expansive progression and the evolution of perception. It executes the notion of entropy in an endless process with no final purpose or final destination. Momentum is anticipation: constant, regenerative anticipation.

Steyerl’s concept of groundlessness and Childs’s *Dance* both make the viewer feel anticipation for something undefined: the climax or resolution of some infinitely illogical thing. In this sense, I argue that while this free-falling sensation may hold us in suspension, it is anything but static. It is buzzing in this momentum, infinitely expanding and accelerating. We are moving with ever-increasing speed, running so fast we’re falling—falling around an unconfined, undefined realm in infinite, intangible orbit.

Steyerl connects the feeling of groundlessness to the present moment and the paradoxical state of our domination over nature.¹⁹ *Dance* was debuted in 1979, yet nevertheless reveals these uncertainties of our present reality by demonstrating the spatial and temporal elements that have propelled us here.

We find ourselves in darkness. The grid has vanished, and only one solo dancer remains on the centre stage. The light is hitting only her figure, floating in dark, suspended groundlessly. Dancing to an endless momentum. Even in its absence the grid continues. ■

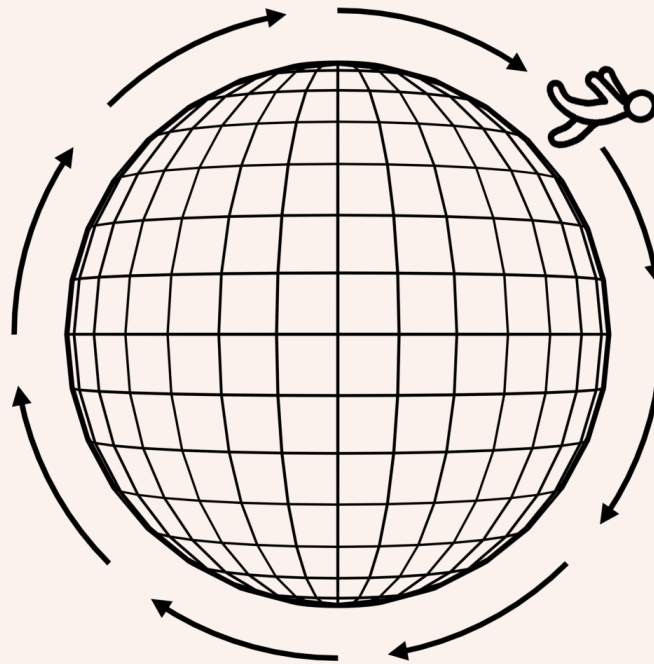


Fig. 3. Katja Lichtenberger, *Free-falling Orbit*, 2020.

EDITORS

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NOTES

1. Unfortunately, viewers can experience only snippets of the archived video online, through sites such as Vimeo and YouTube. My intention is that the analysis of the work in this paper will shed more light on the experience of the piece in its entirety.
2. Amanda Jane Lamarra Graham, "The Myth of Movement: Lucinda Childs and Trisha Brown Dancing on the New York City Grid, 1970–1980" (PhD diss., University of Rochester, 2014), 127.
3. Hito Steyerl, "In Free Fall: A Thought Experiment on Vertical Perspective," *e-flux* 24 (April 2011).
4. Jean Nordhaus, "Lucinda Childs at BAM," *Washington Review* 5, no. 5 (February–March 1980): 7.
5. Erwin Panofsky, *Perspective as Symbolic Form* (New York: Zone Books, 1991), 28–31.
6. Hito Steyerl, "In Free Fall," 4.
7. Jennifer Hasher Goldstein, "Collaboration, Movement, Projection: The Interdisciplinary Structure of Lucinda Childs's Dance, 1979" (MA thesis, Stony Brook University, 2010), 1–61.
8. Jaleh Mansoor, *ARTH 380: Art as Technology* (University of British Columbia, Vancouver, 2018).
9. Rosalind Krauss, *The Optical Unconscious* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1994), 19.
10. Suzi Gablik, *Progress in Art* (New York: Rizzoli, 1979), 147.
11. Mansoor, *ARTH 380: Art as Technology*.
12. Rosalind Krauss, "Grids," *October* 9 (Summer 1979): 50–64.
13. Steyerl, "In Free Fall," 6.
14. Steyerl, "In Free Fall," 6.
15. Steyerl, "In Free Fall," 6.
16. Lucy Lippard, "The Structures, the Structures and the Wall Drawings, the Structures and the Wall Drawings and the Books," in Sol LeWitt, ed. Alicia Legg (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1978), 25.
17. Rosalind Krauss, "Robert Morris: The Mind/Body Problem in Series," in *Robert Morris: The Mind/Body Problem* (New York: Solomon R. Guggenheim Foundation, 1994), 90.
18. Bernice Rose, "Sol LeWitt and Drawing," in *Sol LeWitt*, ed. Alicia Legg (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1978), 37.
19. Steyerl, "In Free Fall," 5.

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