

# SMALL GRANT PROPOSAL

## Project: Metaphors of Movement

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*How many facts or propositions are conveyed by a photograph? None, an infinity, or one great unstatable fact? Bad question. A picture is not worth a thousand words, or any other number. Words are the wrong currency to exchange for a picture.*

- Donald Davidson. *What Metaphors Mean.*

## Artistic Significance

### Message and Audience

Once you're considered "a performer", something perplexing happens: people start to ask you what performances *mean*. This question is impossible to answer in a way that leaves anyone satisfied because, in my opinion, it's the wrong question. To borrow an idea from philosopher Donald Davidson, *meaning is the wrong currency to exchange for a performance*. Performances are better understood in terms of *what they do* to the audience: the thoughts they provoke, the actions they inspire, and the feelings they dredge up.

In his paper *What Metaphors Mean* Davidson takes a radical stance on how metaphors work. While previous explanations relied on special "metaphorical meaning," Davidson argues that we mistakenly conflate the meaning of the metaphor with the effect it has. Instead, Davidson sees metaphors as generative tools—more like jokes or dreams than statements with propositional value. Speakers use metaphors to prod, whack, or gently nudge the hearer into seeing something new. Davidson shifts the focus from the medium (the words) to the messengers, placing equal responsibility on speaker and the hearer.

I think a similar shift would help us get more out of performances—aerial hoop performances specifically. When I tell strangers that I "do aerial hoop" the conversation always goes awry:

"What is aerial hoop?"

"It's a steel ring, varying in diameter. It hangs in the air."

"What do you do with it?"

"You can do almost anything: spin, swing, pose, writhe; you're really only constrained by your own abilities."

Though nobody asks me, I'd explain how words work would flow similarly:

"What are words?"

"They're bits of structure, strung together in various ways."

"What do you do with them?"

"You can do almost anything: teach, lie, reveal, propose; you're really only constrained by your own abilities."

The problem in both cases is that *the medium* is not what matters. Davidson's point is that the *combined prowess of the speaker and the hearer* determine the power of the metaphor. Similarly, the quality of an aerial performance has little to do with the hoop. A powerful aerial performance stems from the combined consciousness of the artist and the audience.



### Summary

I want to develop an aerial routine that explores Davidson's view of metaphors as forces, as opposed to metaphors as meaning by developing a piece that strives to do something rather than to mean something. *What can the separation of medium (steel ring) and meaning in aerial performance teach us about the separation of medium (words) and meaning in language?* By testing this connection between language and performance, I might find ways to free both from the constraints of propositional meaning—at least for the length of a hoop routine.

To test Davidson's claims about metaphor in the physical arena will require audience participation. The routine will be a live enactment of a physical metaphor written by the audience. The audience will suggest metaphors of the form "my hoop is \_\_\_\_" and I will execute them, thus directly experimenting with

the idea that metaphors can be best understood by observing what the recipient does with them.

This is a decided break from a more traditional model in circus, where an artist develops a routine with some message in mind, and a desirable outcome depends upon the performer's ability to communicate that prescribed message and the audience's power to discern it.

Ditching the tethers of prescribed meaning may prove more powerful for both parties. According to Davidson, the scope of a metaphor is bounded only by the combined consciousness of the author and the recipient. In this piece the authors are the audience members. For example, one might write, "My hoop is my hometown." In response, I might begin a routine all cradled up inside of my hoop, then slowly explore it, revel in it, find it uncomfortably small, burst out of it, long to go back, and then return to find it eerily unchanged.





## Previous Work and My Aesthetic

This piece will draw on work by many artists. I'll mention three here that will particularly guide my aesthetic for this piece.

- 1) Joanna Haigood, especially *Dances Around the House*
- 2) Les Sept Doigts de la Main (LSDM), especially *Sequence 8*
- 3) Elisabeth Streb, especially *One Extraordinary Day*



### **Joanna Haigood - A Sense of Place**

From Joanna, I hope to learn how to build a sense of place into a routine. Joanna's work is often site-specific, honoring a particular place at a particular time. Because my routines will have an improvisational element, I can't fully leverage research and costumes the way Joanna does to add concreteness to her work. Even so, I'm hopeful that in working closely with Joanna, I can incorporate some part of her world-building abilities into my own act.



## STREB - Radically Accessibility

STREB has found ways to make aerial arts easy to understand for both participants and admirers. She's opened up the discipline and also pushed its limits. On *One Extraordinary Day* (during the Olympics), STREB dancers performed seven events across major London landmarks, ending with thirty-two dancers performing on the spokes of The London Eye. I won't be so contemptuous of gravity as that, but from STREB I do want to take a sense of investigation, and playfulness that comes from believing that aerial work can impact and benefit non-circus-freaks. In a statement about her community rehearsal space in Brooklyn (I cried when I visited), she said, "At the heart of this machine is...the belief that art can provide a service to a community such that voters, taxpayers, and consumers will consider it indispensable." Her commitment to open-access directly informs her practice and aesthetic, and I hope I it can inform mine too.





## LSDM - Intimacy with the Audience

LSDM is at the forefront of bringing intimacy between the audience and the performers to circus, which for years has been dominated by thick makeup, dazzling costumes, and inhuman stunts. I hope to incorporate some measure of the honesty and vulnerability that their performers demonstrate. LSDM don't distance the audience by making circus look easy. They bring the, as close as possible, sharing anecdotes, baby photos, and stories about the performers.



## Project Plan

### Expert Opinions



In developing this project, I've met with experts from across disciplines.

- **Joshua Landy** – As my project mentor, Professor Landy will keep me accountable to the questions I'm setting out to answer. Professor Landy is an advocate for the role of the humanities and the arts in the education of *all* students<sup>12</sup>—including those destined for engineering, law, or business. As an aerialist and a professor of literature, we'll work together to test my hypothesis—that aerial arts can impact and serve a broader audience

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<sup>1</sup> Joshua Landy. *How to Do Things with Fictions*. Oxford University Press, 2012.

<sup>2</sup> Cynthia Haven. *Lit Classes Under Attack? Stanford's Joshua Landy to the Rescue*. Stanford News, 2010.



- than they do today—and his hypothesis—that engineers that engage deeply with literature are way cooler than those that don't.
- **David Kelly** – David, champion of fostering creative expression among the Stanford student population, will help me take this piece from a one-off routine to a capstone project in developing creative confidence.
  - **Robert Moses** – Robert has helped me bridge the gap between athlete and artist. His teaching has helped me develop enormously as a dancer. I will continue to consult with him, as this piece will mean embracing new levels of vulnerability.
  - **Kelly Schmutte** – Kelly is a dancer, and an instructor in the d.school. She's supported the development of this proposal and is willing to contribute her expertise to help me design a better audience experience.

### Timeline

*This timeline (and this grant) focus on the development of the piece only. The performance will require further planning, funding, and will be pursued if all goes well.*

- **April 1<sup>st</sup>:** Begin a regular training schedule.
- **April 4<sup>th</sup>:** Inaugurate check-ins with Professor Landy to discuss emerging challenges and brainstorm ways to leverage the audience.
- **April 6<sup>th</sup>:** Establish a scheduled time to use the Zaccho Theater facility for training. Begin choreography development.
- **April 7<sup>th</sup>:** Meet with Joanna Haigood on building a sense of place.
- **Mid April:** Meet with Kelly on designing the audience experience.
- **May 1<sup>st</sup>:** Apply for funding to perform the piece in, if all goes well.
- **May:** Continue training and regular meetings with Joshua and Joanna.
- **June 10<sup>th</sup>:** Film the piece and write a paper citing Davidson's work and explaining the results.

TODO – explain that I'll be training at Zaccho, which is a professional studio in SF managed by Joanna Haigood where it's impossible to hurt yourself.





## Preparation

### Skill Acquisition

- Aerialist in Crescer e Viver, Rio de Janeiro (in Cirque du Soleil's Cirque du Monde network)
- Aerialist in GravityWorks, San Miguel de Allende, Mexico.
- Instructor in social circus programs in Brazil, Mexico, and the U.S.
- Student in Stanford's Aerial Arts program, 2010-2012.
- Formulated a Stanford ASB on social circus in N.Y.C.

### Progress

- Completed PHIL 81, where I was exposed to Davidson's work.
- Working with Professor Joshua Landy on the development of the routine.
- Working with experience designer and dancer Kelly Schmutte on audience experience.
- Working with Artist in Residence Robert Moses on choreography and music.
- Completed DANCE 140.
- Formed a broad base of support among engineering and dance faculty, as well as industry representatives.