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# Toying with the laws of physics: Elizabeth Streb's latest dance performance

By [George Musser](#)



The last time I slammed into a wall, it hurt. I'm not too fond of falling off three-story buildings, either. The laws of physics can be so unforgiving. But two weeks ago I went to choreographer [Elizabeth Streb's](#) latest work, "Run Up Walls," in which dancers slammed into panes of glass without uttering a single expletive and dove from a truss 30 feet high as though they were flopping onto a bed. Rather than bemoan the laws of physics, Streb celebrates them. Knowing how the human body responds to impact, her dancers have figured out how to do things that seem

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Stumble!

superhuman.

I heard about Streb's work last month from Harvard physicist Lisa Randall, who has acquired some renown in artistic circles for her [opera](#) inspired by the concept of extra spatial dimensions. After meeting last summer, Randall and Streb -- the physicist turned artist, the artist turned physicist -- began a wide-ranging dialogue about everything from the nature of space and time to how to remain balanced on a spinning wheel. Streb and I met for coffee last night and, before we knew it, two hours had passed, in which we talked about everything from dance kinesthetics to string theory.

Streb distinguishes her work from ballet and modern dance, which, she says, seek to camouflage the forces of nature. Those forces are the whole point of her performances. Instead of carefully planning and coordinating the dancers' movements, she sets up general situations, such as mounting a big pane of glass on the stage, to see what will happen. I'm not sure I entirely agree with her description of other dance forms: one of my side interests in graduate school was modern dance, working with choreographer Jim Self, and we, too, played with spontaneity, forces, and the internal logic of movement. It's true, though, that Streb takes the modern aesthetic to its logical extreme. She has no interest in telling a story or developing a theme; movement is all.

The [parkour](#)-like acrobatics weren't even my favorite parts of her show. In the titular piece, dancers on belay ropes walked up and down a wall, as if it had become their floor (see photo above). Then, inverting the idea, the dancers lay on the floor and a video camera projected their silhouettes on the wall. The dancers squirmed around to make it look like their images felt the force of gravity. It was a case of imitation is flattery: you never fully appreciate the laws of physics until you have to figure out how to mimic them.

*Dancers walk up a wall in Elizabeth Streb's latest show; courtesy of George Musser*

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