

# Equipment Dances:

## Trisha Brown

By Sally Sommer

Trisha Brown began studying dance when she was thirteen—"ballet, tap, acrobatics and modern jazz, as it was interpreted by my dance teacher in Aberdeen, Washington." She also was involved in another physical discipline. "My older brother was an athlete and he was training me to be an Olympic star when I was ten or eleven. I played basketball, football, did tackling, and ran out for passes all the time I was growing up. He trained me in pole vaulting and running. He tapped my physicality when I was very young and pushed me a lot."

She attended Mills College in California where she majored in dance and studied traditional modern dance techniques. "At that time the mode of teaching choreography was to use the Louis Horst forms of theme and development. I never understood it. I always had difficulty because I hadn't developed my own source of movement, so the restrictions of the choreographic forms just got in my way." Following her graduation in 1958 Brown went to Reed College in Portland where she set up a dance department. "I taught-out everything I'd been trained to do in the first three months, and I still had the rest of the year to teach. So I began improvising, and that's when I really began to explore ideas for myself." While at Mills she had gone to Connecticut College to study dance during the summer of 1955, and she returned there for the summer of 1959.

In 1960, she joined a workshop of Ann Halprin's in San Francisco and there she met Simone Forti, Yvonne Rainer, La Monte Young, Terry Riley and Robert Morris. The following January she left for New York and began studying at the Cunningham studio three or four times a week. "Through Simone I got into the Robert Dunn class in composition, so I was choreographing and working with all those people. There was a lot of use of chance and indeterminacy and that opened up many new possibilities. But the thing that was most interesting to me about his class was that he would give a problem that was so vague that it was provocative, like 'make a three-minute dance.' You can think about that for a long time: what *is* a three-minute dance? Once the piece was completed he directed the criticism in terms of how did you make the piece, how did you make your decisions, so the *making* of the dance was important. You could quiz the audience about what they saw versus what you thought they saw and could find out what actually happened. It was a beautiful exchange of information."

The dancers involved in the Dunn composition course went to Judson Church in June of 1962 to ask for space in which to publicly perform some of the dances that had been developed in the class. They quickly became labeled as the "Judson Dancers." A group of young choreographers was structuring and performing dances in a new way, using movement that had not traditionally been seen as "dance". Trisha Brown was one of those dancers.

Since 1960, Trisha Brown's choreography has encompassed a vast range of dance investigations. She has done improvisational pieces; dances that are tape recordings; task dances; dances based on a structure of game rules; dances that involve audience participation; multi-media pieces; leaning, balancing and falling dances; dances in which large constructions and equipment are used. Most recently, she has been developing dances that deal with pure movement and gesture: accumulation dances in which one gesture is added to another gesture until there is a dense and complex accumulation of movement.

The dances that are described in the following pages represent a certain phase of Trisha Brown's work in which she was using equipment to deal with problems of gravity, space, and audience perspective. They are her answers to certain questions that she set for herself as a choreographer: "How can you walk on the wall?" "How can you move while parallel to the ground?" "How can you seem to be doing free-fall?"

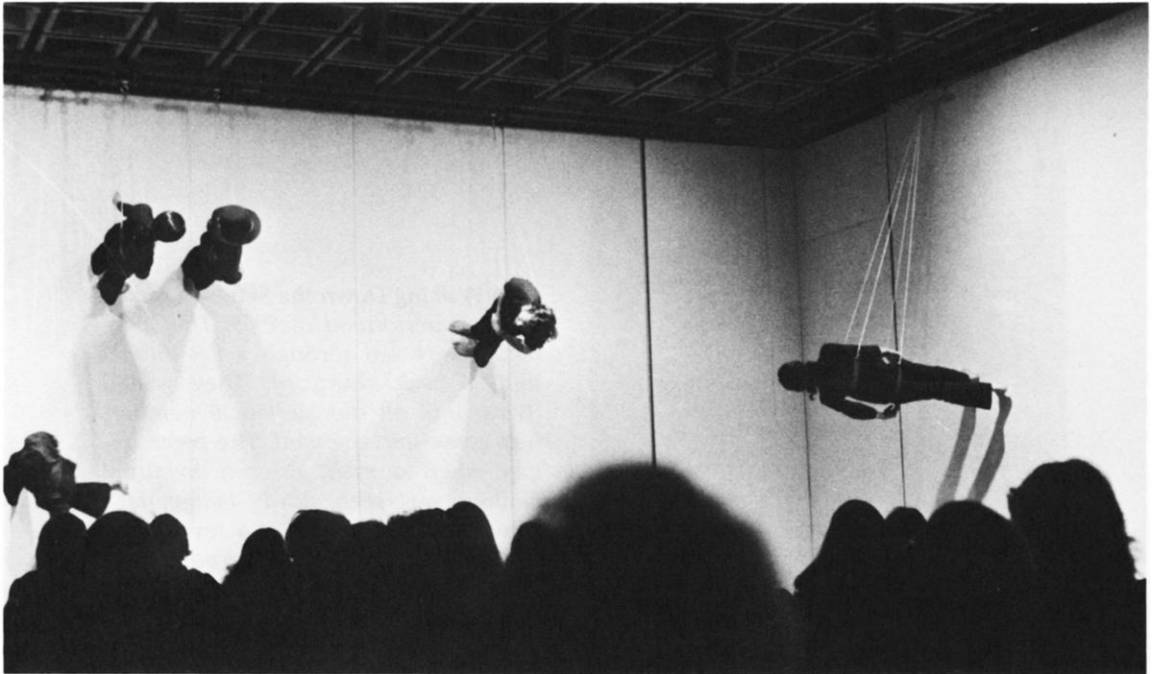
**Title:** *Man Walking Down the Side of a Building*  
**Date:** April 18, 1969 (1st performance)



**Photo Peter Moore**

***Man Walking Down the Side of a Building*** was performed in 1969. The spectators were led through a fire tunnel into a back courtyard. They waited there until all the audience members had come into the yard. The piece began when a man, dressed in street clothes, was seen slowly falling, face forward, from the top of a seven story building. When he was perpendicular to the wall of the building, he began to slowly walk down to the courtyard. When he reached the ground, he was unhitched from his mountain climbing equipment.

**Title:** *Walking on the Wall*  
**Date:** March 30, 1971 (1st performance)

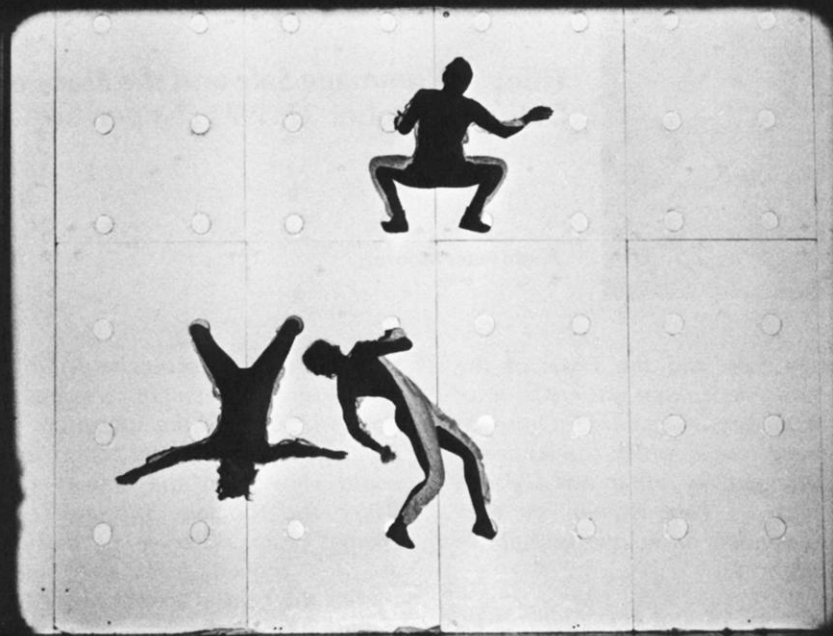


**Photo Michael Kirby**

*Walking on the Wall* was performed for two evenings in 1971 at the Whitney Museum of American Art. Two walls, sharing a common corner, were at right angles to each other. Two tracks were attached to the ceiling, one 21 inches out from the wall, the other 31 inches away. Both tracks extended for 40 feet in one direction, curved around the corner, then extended 40 feet in the other direction. Attached to the tracks were cables that had special harnesses at the other end. On their sides, perpendicular to the wall and

parallel to the floor, six dancers were suspended in the harnesses. The cables were of various lengths so that the performers were at different heights along the wall.

The dancers ran, stood, and walked along the walls. Not all of them moved in the same direction, nor were all of them moving along the walls at the same time. Two ladders at each end of the tracks allowed the dancers to climb up into position on the wall. The dance lasted about 30 minutes.



**Title:** *Planes*  
**Date:** February 24, 1968 (1st performance)  
**Film:** Jud Yalkut  
**Music:** Simone Forti

**Photo Peter Moore**

*Planes* has been performed six times between 1968 and 1971. A white rectangular wall 18 feet by 13 feet had large holes, evenly spaced, drilled across its surface. Behind those holes another white surface was visible. It resembled a giant peg board.

Three dancers dressed in loose fitting black and white jump suits traversed the wall; using the holes as hand- and foot-holds, they slowly climbed across its surface vertically, horizontally, and diagonally. The movement was continual and slow. They would turn around in place, lower themselves toward the floor while upside down, or hang suspended from an arm or leg for one brief moment. Because the quality of the movement always remained the same, whether they were upside down or passing and crawling over each other, the visual impression

was one of weightlessness. The bodies appeared to be suspended in space or involved in a slow motion free-fall.

The music that accompanied the dance was a duet for vacuum cleaner and voice by Simone Forti. Played at a loud volume, the sounds were long and sustained, with the persistent hum of a motor predominating. At the first five performances of the piece, a film of aerial footage was projected on the wall. When the white side of the dancer's costume was exposed, the body would appear to melt into the whiteness of the wall and picture and then would reappear in sharp relief when the black side of the costume was toward the audience. At the last performance, the film was not shown, and the only light was that provided by the white light of a projector being focused on the wall.



**Title:** *Rummage Sale and the Floor of the Forest*  
**Date:** October 22, 1971 (1st performance)

**Photo Peter Moore**

***Rummage Sale and the Floor of the Forest*** was a dance that was made up of two simultaneous activities. One was a rummage sale in which the audience took part, and the other was a dance performed by two women as they were suspended on a rope grid above the selling area.

A 12 foot by 14 foot rectangular pipe frame was hung about seven and one half feet high, horizontal and parallel to the floor. It was strung with ropes which formed a grid. The ropes were threaded through the arms and legs of various pieces of clothing, making the grid look like a crude tapestry. The dancers' task was to move across the horizontal grid by pushing their bodies into the clothes and then pulling themselves out; it was a process of repeatedly dressing and undressing. The dancers would frequently rest as they performed this very difficult task, sometimes hanging down through the ropes so their heads were close to the heads of the spectators beneath them. A few verbal exchanges occurred between audience and performers.

As the dancers pulled themselves up on the ropes to begin the dance, auctioneers began to drag bundles of clothes under the suspended grid. They asked the audience to bid on various pieces of clothing and encouraged them to come over and look at the merchandise. The audience quickly became involved in buying and trying on clothes, and several little auctions went on at the same time in the central area beneath and around the grid. There was a lot of talking and milling about, clothes were tried on

and taken off, vigorous bargaining was going on between buyers and auctioneers. Some of the spectators chose to stand away from the action so they could view both the activity of the dance and the sale. Spectators would change from observer to participant as they moved from the sidelines toward the central area in order to buy something. As the sale became more busy, clothes were left scattered around the floor. Intermittently, buyers would look up to watch and comment on the dance going on overhead.

Gradually, the clothes were sold and the audience began to break into smaller groups and leave the concert. Piles of clothes remained on the floor of the gymnasium.

Trisha Brown has said of the piece: "Hanging upside down in a dress hand-knit by Deborah Hay's mother, looking at some stranger trying on a kimono that my dear friend Suzushi had given me before she had to leave this country, watching the woman preen in it, using that gesture of feeling yourself in your new-bought clothes, wondering what was in her mind—it was just an incredible experience for me. To go a step further, the whole evening was a rummage sale, I was getting rid of my hardware pieces. I don't do works like that any more. I'm working just in movement now. I gave away the wall at the end [the wall for **Planes**]. I really knew that I was getting rid of everything. The piece is still continuing, I still see people in the clothes. For them it's a piece of clothing that they liked, a bargain; for me those clothes are symbols of history. The reverberations between those meanings are so rich."

**Title:** *Leaning Duets Two*

**Date:** March 30, 1971 (1st performance)



Photo Michael Kirby

*Leaning Duets Two* was performed in 1971 at the Whitney Museum of American Art. The dancers worked in pairs, and each of these couples was attached to each other with a rope that encircled their waists. At each of their backs was a flat board. Using the bottoms and the sides of their partner's feet rather than the floor to balance against, they walked forward, backward, and sideways while leaning out and away from each other in a position that was at a 45-degree angle to the floor. The weight of each partner acted as a counter-weight for the other. They would move together with equal balance, or one would act as an anchorman while the other turned to face another direction.

Trisha Brown has described the piece: "The balancing gestures, trying to keep the body straight while leaning out, those adjustments that take place when you're falling or about to fall, were so beautiful. Every time you breathe, balance changes. So we developed this language of three-word sentences like 'give me some [weight],' or 'give me a lot,' or 'take a little'; or shouted 'take more!' It was the very difficult and delicate task of recognizing what your weight-state was and communicating it before it was too late."