

# Falling Away

**A public symposium held together with the exhibition of Catherine Yass's film works in Ambika P3**

The symposium will bring together researchers and practitioners from a diverse range of disciplines to discuss the agency of falling in contemporary culture. Metaphors of falling are often evoked to describe the current period of insecurity and instability. At the same time, the built environment reflects and in turns reproduces this state of suspension: while high-rise construction reshapes the landscapes of cities around the world, including London, its impact on our perception of gravity is yet to be understood. Typically defined as 'the force that makes objects fall toward the earth', gravity is so pervasive that we may overlook the multiple ways in which we rely on, and resist, it on a daily basis.

How do creative practices engage with the perception of gravity, balance and falling? Can they mediate our fears and desires to lose the ground? What links can be drawn between the vertiginous spaces of our cities and the conditions of social instability in which we live? These and other related issues will be addressed from a variety of perspectives drawing on art, architecture, design, geography, psychology, and dance. Structured around a series of conversations, the symposium will conclude with a panel discussion with the artist Catherine Yass.

The event is organised in conjunction with Falling Away, a major exhibition of Catherine Yass's work in Ambika P3. Curated by Davide Deriu and Michael Mazière, the exhibition comprises seven vertiginous films of modern architectural structures that embody the institutions which built them. Spanning the past two decades, it is the first retrospective of the artist's extensive body of film work in the UK. The joint events are aligned with the Vertigo in the City project based at the School of Architecture + Cities, University of Westminster.

## PROGRAMME

Friday 22 October, 2021

University of Westminster, School of Architecture + Cities, Evans Room (M/416)

Registrations: <https://www.eventbrite.co.uk/e/falling-away-symposium-tickets-180076031257>

- 10:00 – 10:30     **Daive Deriu** (University of Westminster)  
*Introduction: a cross-disciplinary project*
- 10:30 – 11:45     **Brendan Walker** (Middlesex University London)  
in conversation with **John Golding** (University of Westminster)  
*'Goneness Within': riding on a swing with a virtual reality headset*
- Panel chair: **Josie Kane** (Royal College of Art)
- 11:45 – 13:00     **Andrew Harris** (University College London)  
*Failing up and falling down with London luxified skies*
- Amy Butt** (University of Reading)  
*'His feet lost weight for an instant': Falling away in science fiction*
- Panel chair: (TBA)
- 13:00 – 14:00     Lunch break
- 14:00 – 15:15     **Emilyn Claid** (Dance artist, director, performer and educator)  
*Falling through dance and life*
- Catherine James** (University of the Arts London)  
*Inclining to the fall*
- Panel chair: **Julie Marsh** (University of Westminster)
- 15:15 – 16:30     **Ruth Anderwald + Leonhard Grond** (University of Applied Arts Vienna)  
*Falling away? States of dizziness and vertigo as the possibility of possibility*
- 16:30 – 17:00     Tea/coffee break
- 17:00 – 18:30     **Catherine Yass** in conversation with **Michael Maziere** and **Daive Deriu**, curators  
of *Falling Away*
- Panel chair: **Lucy Reynolds** (University of Westminster)
- 18:30 – 19:30     Drinks reception

NB: Light lunch and refreshments will be provided for in-person attendees.

## ABSTRACTS

### **Ruth Anderwald + Leonhard Grond**

#### *Falling away? States of dizziness and vertigo as the possibility of possibility*

States of dizziness, vertigo, confusion, uncertainty, and unpredictability are used to describe the state of today's *conditio humana*. But thinking dizziness with Søren Kierkegaard, not only as a state of unbalance and insecurity but as providing the possibility of possibilities, as creating a compossible space, is the outset of our artistic research reflection. Based on the concept of the compossible space and augmenting this concept by involving the fields of somaesthetics and somatic practices, such as Feldenkrais, this contribution traces dizziness, instability, and unpredictability as the core of an intra-active growing together, based on the premise that animate beings and inanimate elements permeate and co-constitute each other.

### **Amy Butt**

#### *'His feet lost weight for an instant': Falling away in science fiction*

'As Spinel stepped down the exit ramp, he surveyed the surface below. It looked like hard crusted soil, with a sort of evergreen matting, yet it could not be 'land' underneath. His feet lost weight for an instant...' (Joan Slonczewski, *A Door Into Ocean*)

This paper will focus on the experiences of vertigo within the worlds of science fiction (sf). It will dwell in the dizzying heights of the sf megastructure, a site so ubiquitous that for urban theorists such as Stephen Graham it is 'almost a cliché', but it will also consider the narrative experience of falling from ground level. In sf, experiences of vertigo often resonate with the falling away of pre-existing frameworks of spatial understanding. Without such grounding certainty, those who walk across the landscapes of these strange new worlds are dislocated and disoriented. In these science-fictional settings the imagined structures and surfaces of the built are pulled out from underneath our feet.

### **Emilyn Claid**

#### *Falling through dance and life*

Dancers and movement-based practitioners understand the necessity of working with gravity as a source of creative potential and change. The book sets these practices of intentional falling – which reflect my own history – against our human resistance to falling, which is associated with danger, fear and failure. Furthermore, in Western culture, falling conjures shame and the existential void of nothingness. Out of this tension a paradox emerges: falling, we are powerless subjects *and* agents of change, a dynamic distinction that enlivens discussions throughout the book. I will describe how an act of falling, as simple as breathing out, builds momentum through eclectic discussions, uncovering metaphorical and philosophical connections between falling and laughter, thrill, trauma, ageing, queering, and the fixation of Western culture on individualism, uprightness and supremacy.

### **Andrew Harris**

#### *Failing up and falling down with London luxified skies*

Twenty-first century London has been marked by new high-rise construction. Not only have taller skyscrapers been added to the financial bastions of the City of London and Docklands, but locations such as Nine Elms, Elephant and Castle and London Bridge are now dominated by clusters of recently

built luxury towers. This new high-rise landscape is indicative of how, facilitated by willing planning regimes, London's sky increasingly provides an important spatial fix for globalised capital speculation. In terms of addressing – or rather starkly and repeatedly failing to address – pressing issues in London around housing affordability, environmental sustainability and the public realm, this might be understood figuratively and literally as 'failing up'. But how to best resist and reimagine these damaging trajectories to contemporary London's vertical growth. This presentation draws on Catherine Yass's *Descent* (2002) and *Last Stand* (2019) to place notions of failing and falling as central to developing alternative yet carefully ambivalent responses to London's new luxury skylines.

### **Catherine James**

#### *Inclining to the fall*

Practices of falling have emerged as a trope within art and performance since the 1960s in a studied insurrection on normative assumptions of verticality. Gravity and verticality are the rules and habits that encode architecture and therefore our own spatial behaviour. If, as Michel Serres notes, the body inhabits a 'fault line', leaning in and out of an imagined vertical, then why are these states of physical indeterminacy so little reflected in the built environment? Artists such as Gilbert & George, Bruce Nauman, Bas Jan Ader, Wood & Harrison and Rodney Graham have used their bodies to probe the space between vertical and horizontal planes in various attitudes of collapse. In these performances, the ground is consciously used as agonist to the body so that the body's associations with 'will', agency, and subjective power are questioned. By testing states of physical imbalance, these artists mediate ideas of Gnostic doubt and productive failure.

### **Brendan Walker**

#### *'Goneness Within': riding on a swing with a virtual reality headset*

A patent for the first Haunted Swing-style ride was granted in 1893 to Amariah Lake, an inventor from New Jersey. The patent describes 'an apparatus of such nature that the occupants will be subject to the illusion that they are swinging to an extreme height, or even that the swing is turning completely over'. The ride was featured in *Psychological Review* in 1895, in an article by R.W. Wood who reported: 'the curious and interesting feature however, was that even though the action was fully understood, as it was in my case, it was impossible to quench the sensations of "goneness within" with each apparent rush of the swing'. In this session, Thrill Engineer Brendan Walker will present his own patented experimental apparatus combining the millennia-old swing with 21st-century virtual reality technology. Joined by Professor of Psychology John Golding, this new ride will be a starting point for exploring the blurred boundaries and shifting interplay between science, technology and culture which characterise experiences of vertigo past and present.

## CONTRIBUTORS

**Ruth Anderwald + Leonhard Grond** have worked collectively as a duo since 1999 and in teams with others as artists, artist-curators, and artist-researchers. Within their co-creative artistic-research practice, they develop practice-led, theory-led and process-oriented artistic research, with a particular focus on the topic of dizziness. Together with philosopher Karoline Feyertag, they co-edited the reader *Dizziness—a Resource* (Sternberg Press, 2019). Their works have been shown internationally, e.g. at Centre Pompidou Paris, ÉCAL Lausanne, Herzliya Museum of Contemporary Art, Himalayas Art Museum Shanghai, Kunsthaus Graz, mumok Vienna, Tate Modern London, Ujazdowski Castle CCA Warsaw, Wien Modern Festival, Whitechapel Gallery London.

<http://www.on-dizziness.com>

**Amy Butt** is a practising architect and Lecturer in Architecture at the University of Reading with a specialization in architectural representation and communication. Her research explores the way the fictional worlds we construct influence and reflect the world we inhabit, writing about utopian thought and the imaginary in architecture through science-fiction literature and film. Recent publications include the articles “‘As Plain as Spilt Salt’: The City as Social Structure in *The Dispossessed*” in *Textual Practice* (2021), and ‘The Present as Past: Science Fiction and the Museum’ in the Open Library of the Humanities.

**Davide Deriu** is Reader in Architectural History and Theory at the University of Westminster. His research explores critical intersections between spatial and visual cultures, and is published in books and journals such as *Architectural Theory Review*, *The Journal of Architecture*, and *Emotion, Space and Society*. He previously curated the exhibition ‘Modernism in Miniature: Points of View’ at the Canadian Centre for Architecture (2011) and edited several works including *Emerging Landscapes: Between Production and Representation* (2014). The Vertigo in the City project he leads at Westminster has received funding from the Wellcome Trust and British Academy.

**Emilyn Claid** started her career as a dancer with the National Ballet of Canada and went on to co-found X6 Dance Space in London. A former artistic director of Extemporary Dance Theatre, she made choreographies for companies such as Phoenix Dance and CandoCo Dance, and led choreographic research projects in Auckland, Hong Kong, Singapore, Berlin, Helsinki and Beirut. After doing a PhD she worked as a professor at Dartington College of Arts and at University of Roehampton. Today she continues her free-lance career as dance artist, educator and psychotherapist. She is the author of *Yes? No! Maybe...* (2006) and *Falling through Dance and Life* (2021).

**John Golding** is a Professor of Applied Psychology at the University of Westminster. He originally trained as a biochemist at Oxford, where he became interested in psychology and went on to complete a DPhil on the physiological and psychological effects of smoking. His current research interests are in vertigo, spatial disorientation and motion sickness in the context of virtual reality and modern transport environments. John holds the posts of Professor of Psychology (Honorary) at Guys & St Thomas’s Hospital, Kings College London, and Visiting Professor at Imperial College London.

**Andrew Harris** is an Associate Professor in Geography and Urban Studies at University College London, where he convenes the interdisciplinary Urban Studies MSc. His research develops critical perspectives on the role of art, creativity and culture in recent processes of urban restructuring, and on three-dimensional geographies of contemporary cities. He is Co-Director of the UCL Urban Laboratory.

**Catherine James** is Lecturer in Academic Practice at University of the Arts, London and Fellow of the Higher Education Academy. Since completing her doctoral studies at the London Consortium in 2004, she held the post of Lecturer in Modern & Contemporary Art at Christie's Education for many years and has contributed to a variety of conferences and journals related to her research on gravity in art and performance. She published her book *Falling for Gravity: Invisible Forces in Contemporary Art* with Peter Lang in 2018.

**Josephine Kane** is a design historian with a special interest in experiences of pleasure, modernity and the built environment since the nineteenth century. She has written about the history of urban thrill-seeking and the design of early amusement parks and co-edited 'Vertigo in the City', a special issue of *Emotion Space and Society*, with Davide Deriu (2018). She teaches on the History of Design master's programme run jointly by the Victoria & Albert Museum and the Royal College of Art.

**Julie Marsh** is a Senior Lecturer and researcher in the School of Arts at the University of Westminster. Julie specialises in interdisciplinary practice, exploring the intersections between film, installation, performance, interactivity and site-specificity. She engages with collaborative and knowledge-led approaches to field research, from moving image to emergent technologies and data collection. Her works investigate how technical machines can perform site, creating critical experiences that open debate and question social spaces. Her films and installations have been exhibited internationally, lastly at Venice Architecture Biennale (*Three British Mosques*, 2021).

**Michael Mazière** is an artist and curator, and Reader in film and video at the University of Westminster. His practice encompasses the production of artworks, the curation of exhibitions, lecturing, and writing about artists' film and video. He is the co-founder and curator of Ambika P3, an experimental research space for international contemporary art, an active member of the Centre for Research and Education in Arts and Media, and co-editor of the *Moving Image Review* and *Art Journal*, a peer-reviewed scholarly publication devoted to artists' film and video and its contexts.

**Lucy Reynolds** has lectured and published extensively. Her research focuses on the moving image, feminism, political space and collective practice. She edited the anthology *Women Artists, Feminism and the Moving Image*, and co-edits the *Moving Image Review and Art Journal* (MIRAJ). She runs the MRes in Creative Practice at the Centre for Research in Education, Art and Media (CREAM) at the University of Westminster. As an artist, her ongoing sound work *A Feminist Chorus* has been heard at the Glasgow International Festival, the Wysing Arts Centre, The Grand Action cinema, Paris and Grand Union galleries, Birmingham.

**Brendan Walker** is a Renaissance Showman – a technology-inspired performance artist described by *The Times* as ‘the world’s only Thrill Engineer’. His multi-faceted Thrill Laboratory performances have provided popular entertainment for audiences from the Science Museum to MoMA. Brendan trained as an aeronautical engineer, before practicing as a digital artist and ride designer. In recent years, he has developed a Virtual Reality swing project called *Volo: Dreams of Flight* (<https://studiogogo.ltd/volo/>). His latest entrepreneurial venture, *Ride with VR*, opened on Brighton Palace Pier this summer (<https://studiogogo.ltd/ride-with-vr/>). Brendan is an established TV broadcaster and regular public speaker, and Professor of Creative Industries at Middlesex University.

**Catherine Yass** is an artist living and working in London. Her films and photographs explore the often disorientating and vertiginous sensations engendered by the built environment. Treating the camera as much as a protagonist as an onlooker, her work confronts buildings that embody past utopias or contemporary institutions. Major recent commissions and solo exhibitions include *Legacy*, for the UK’s Supreme Court (2019) to celebrate 100 years of women in the Law, *Royal London* (2018) for the Wellcome Trust, and *Aeolian Piano* (2017) to mark the departure of the former BBC TV Centre. In 2002 Yass was shortlisted for The Turner Prize.