

Streb/Ringside
Artography Final Report
By Jeff Chang

In the Williamsburg section of Brooklyn, heroes are being trained. Behind a red-brick façade and roll-up garage door in the heart of a gentrifying neighborhood at 51 North First Street, the kids are swinging—whee!—from trapezes overhead. They are practicing falling on their backs by first running at top speed—splat!—into a wall. They are climbing onto the trusses and belly-flopping off them—wa-pack! They bounce off vaults or trampolines or swing around in body harnesses. There are balls to roll, walls to climb, nets to catch falling bodies. The noise is climbing to 4 bells.

Inside this massive warehouse colored in loud primary red, blue, and yellow—a space that has been named Streb Lab For Action Mechanics or, simply, SLAM—stands the ringleader, Elizabeth Streb, a tall thin woman in black combat boots, black jeans, a black blazer, bold black rectangular glasses and a shocking Mohawk of black hair. Some of the other adults—who in the mornings and evenings may be practicing aerial silk dance 20 feet above the ground, training in tightrope-walking with Phillippe Petit or flying circus arts with the España/STREB Trapeze Academy, or rehearsing Streb's demanding "action" choreography—have become teachers for the afternoon. Streb watches the old and young generations of what she calls "Extreme Action Heroes" with a mix of pride and bemusement.

All of this resembles a circus, a comparison encouraged by Streb—which she says stands for "Strength Trust Risk Energy Body" and which the kids often use as a verb. Streb calls her movements "Pop Action" and they require speed, precision, and fearlessness. A common way for a STREB dancer to stop moving is by slamming into a wall or another immovable object. A common way for a STREB dancer to dismount a piece of equipment is to dive into a face-plant from as high as 25 feet. (Their falls and flops are cushioned by thick mats, if you were worried.)

The company's noisy performances—dancers shout out their cues and sometimes make Twitter-brief comments on the lunacy of what they are about to do—tend to send dancers headlong into plexiglass walls, up and around huge dangerous machines, into oh-no-please-don't games with rapidly spinning steel beams, and over-rotating out of flying flips to land hard onto their backs. (B-boys used to have a name for this last move: "suicides".) Streb's physical language appears to be derived from—in one critic's words—"gymnastics, dance, acrobatics and sheer daredevil insanity", and it has become a language that has transformed the way many think of dance. For her rigorous rethinking of modern dance she was awarded a MacArthur "genius grant" in 1997.

Streb says that "Pop Action" tries to answer two questions: What is movement and choreography? And what can movement say that no other form—painting, music, literature—can possibly say? To answer these questions, Streb says, "We invent action ideas which we think are archetypal, noticeable, understandable."

Increasingly crucial to her is the question of what kind of impact these action ideas have on audiences. So she now asks a third question: "Will these ideas read as language to our audience?" For what would a hero be without the community she serves? To this end, Pop Action shows are not just staged in traditional proscenium spaces, but at Grand Central Station, Major League Baseball games, and before wildly cheering families in the SLAM space itself.

At 60, Elizabeth Streb is no longer actively dancing with her company. Yet, preternaturally social, perpetually curious, seemingly possessed of a multitasking tween's powers of sensate processing, she may be incapable of slowing. ("All those kids who they say have Attention Deficit Disorders," she says, "are just action specialists tied down.")

Lately she has worked to crystallize her philosophy and aesthetic in writing—a compulsively readable memoir and manifesto entitled *Streb: How To Become An Action Hero* was recently published by The Feminist Press. At the same time, she has tried to apply these ideas to the realization of SLAM as a community-building space and STREB/Ringside as an innovative arts organization. The story of Streb's dance company, her organization, STREB/Ringside, and the SLAM space is a powerfully instructive study in how 21st century artistic practice can inform 21st century arts organization practice.

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All these threads, of course, begin with the story of Elizabeth Streb. Growing up working-class in Rochester, New York, Streb applied for the dance program after enrolling at SUNY Brockport in 1968. In her interview, the department chair asked her why she had applied. "I can pick up any disco dance that comes along. I get the rhythm instantly and can teach it to all my girlfriends," Streb told her. The chair replied that such a thing had nothing to do with *dance*. "Twenty years later," Streb writes in her book, "I came to realize that might be exactly what is wrong with modern dance."

By the late 70s, she was working as a cook, studying under Julie Finch and Viola Farber, mastering the work of Trisha Brown and Merce Cunningham, and living in a rat-infested loft on Canal Street and Broadway that she and a classmate had found. With the help of Streb's father, a carpenter, she turned the loft into a dance studio and threw the doors open. "I wanted to run a public space," she writes.

Streb had already begun the experiments that would lead to Pop Action. Why, she asked, was it that the primary way to move was by transferring weight from one foot to another? Why did dance always try to camouflage gravity instead of call attention to invisible forces? Why was grace defined only in terms of music, forcing dance to be durational when movement was more naturally episodic and abrupt? She was trying to locate what she called the "real move", body motions that had "the power and depth to create a movement archetype" that "whack into us like a bolt of a new sort of recognition."

In her performances, she confronted with what one critic called "almost brutal physicality" angled and rotating floors, executing difficult and surprising leaps, flops, and other demanding movements. Later she would create Action Machines, such as large wheels or 20-foot high gyroscopes to extend the performance space. As early as 1981, a reviewer wrote, "One of the most interesting members of the new 'post-modern' generation of choreographers, Miss Streb is adept at turning bursts of pure, athletic energy into witty, risky and surprisingly touching dance." But even this was not enough. "I wanted to fly", she writes.

In 1985, Streb started her company, she writes in some of her most poetic language, "with a dream of flight, rugged and rough, downward-bound, dealing with true space, the sky, an area above the ground." Her choreography would be about "exploding our bodies into the air all at once." It would be unpredictable, extreme, unstopably vertical like Merce Cunningham, intellectually relentless like Trisha Brown. It would not be a solipsistic presentation of skill; it would be an event that was courageous and bracing. It would literally step out of safe space and into history.

Streb's thinking reflected her sense of identity. "Movement," she wrote, "is an oral history, passed from one practitioner to another." Freeing the body to reveal this history was metaphorical. "I think the issue of class is deeply relevant in the practice of movement," she continued. "In everyday parlance, we see that ordinarily, the body as a human animal is protected by degrees of distance. The more privileged the person, the larger the yard, the higher the fence to protect them, and the more numerous the privacy laws which they deem necessary."

This philosophy extended to space. Streb wanted a stage that would be an "un-habitual space", one that would release the body from vertical constraints and release the audience from its normal orientation and relationship to the dancers. "When you change your place in space, new moves become more possible than before, and even look and feel different to the practitioner and also to the observer," she wrote.

In 1993 the company staged a breakthrough performance called "LookUp". Under the Brooklyn Bridge along one of the 40-foot walls that made up the Anchorage, four dancers suspended by gyroscopic harnesses walked, jumped, and somersaulted on the wall. The audience, in effect, was given an aerial view of the performance. The company had physicalized the world of Steve Ditko's hero Spiderman.

Many years later, Streb would write, "I want our performances to be events of desire and purpose, not presentations of skill that could easily be read as privilege. I want the STREB Extreme Action performances to do something to the audience, to cause a physical reaction so strong that they feel that some of the moves have literally happened to them."

She added, "Anyone who has ever tried to travel faster than the speed of sound, like Chuck Yeager, knows that it's not just about where you are, but what's happening to you as you arrive there and exactly what conditions exist there." Streb was describing an

insight into her artistic practice. But one did not need to be a STREB dancer or Chuck Yeager to step into an environment and become aware of a new understanding of place. Her aesthetic philosophy, consciously and unconsciously, would drive the development of the organization and the space that would become known as SLAM.

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The Streb Extreme Action Company was incorporated as a not-for-profit organization in 1985. Streb financed it through arts grants, her restaurant salary, a small inheritance, and mounting credit card debt. Because she lived in her studio, she only paid one rent. In the early 1980s, her landlord sued her to reclaim the loft in a case that would go on for 15 years. But Streb says, "It was a perfect economic model in terms of being the right size for me."

In the late 80s she attempted to secure management, who told her to come up with an annual budget. "I put together a budget that included my cooking salary which was about \$15,000 a year cause I made \$30 a night," she says. The management told her that kind of income didn't count, and she came back a few years later when she had grown a bit larger. While some of her peers immediately jumped into European touring, she produced most of the shows herself. "I stayed in New York, gestating for a very long time," she says. Then in 1993 she hired a top publicist Manny Igrejas to promote the Brooklyn Bridge Anchorage show. Her artistic turning point also became an organizational turning point.

Streb secured a season at The Joyce Theater for the company. Emboldened to strengthen the organization, she hired two development consultants—Susan Meyers and Cathy Einhorn of Mea Management, a move that required her to raise up to \$4,000 more per month. But Meyers and Einhorn helped Streb to bring the organization to a new level of support and high-profile, long-term residencies followed.

Streb, Meyers and Einhorn use the notion of "right-sizedness" to explain the growth of the organization. They refused to take on more than they felt they could handle. "So many times organizations that have gotten into trouble are those that overextend themselves financially in terms of resources and personnel, rather than thinking about it in the opposite sense, which is about gaining stability," says Meyers.

Just as importantly, they felt that the organization should hold fast to its mission. "When organizations grow, they might try to keep the structure going and sort of lose sight of what the original mission was," says Einhorn. "You can't be all things to all people. Stay focused on what you want to accomplish."

And what Streb wanted to do was to explore the idea of dissolving the public and the private in her work. She was interested in placing art right at the crossroads of everyday life. Why should art be accessible mostly via a show that people had to pay to go to see?

Her partner, the Grit TV journalist Laura Flanders had begun asking her what kind of audiences she was attracting, a question Streb had never considered. She began collecting tickets—a subway Metrocard ticket, a movie ticket, a Joyce Theatre ticket, a BAM ticket, a David Letterman ticket. Everyone knew how to get a subway card. Why did it seem so difficult to get a ticket to the Joyce? She wondered, "What is encoded in this piece of paper?"

The answer was exclusivity, which included a whole set of cultural expectations. "Once you get a ticket, you're expected to go into a space where you are not allowed to make noise," Kim Cullen, STREB/Ringside Executive Director says. "What if you're bored to death? You can't get up and leave. Why? If what I'm doing onstage isn't enough to keep your attention, why should I expect you to pay attention? It's *my* problem, not your problem."

Once, when the company was working out of a garage space in a busy red-light district in Brooklyn, someone from the neighborhood brought in a mirror to sell because he had heard a dance company was rehearsing in there. "I said, 'We don't use mirrors but just leave it there, here's a couple dollars.' Next thing I knew the prostitutes heard there was a mirror on Lexington and they would come by to check themselves out," recalls Streb. The line between public and private now dissolved, her company's shows in the garage attracted locals, including homeless people sometimes, along with dance fans from Manhattan, an economic and racial mix that thrilled Streb.

What could it mean for art to truly be "public"? What could it look like to achieve "audience sovereignty"? These questions drove the company to take residencies in the most unusual of places—in front of the Cyclone at Coney Island, in the middle of Grand Central Station's Vanderbilt Hall, outside of Manhattan in the so-called 'outer' boroughs. And here also is where the road to the SLAM space started.

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By now the name Williamsburg is synonymous with what Rebecca Solnit once cleverly named "a real estate history of the avant-garde", that is, a master narrative of how artists herald gentrification. Because of its affordable rents, the neighborhood had become a haven for artists fleeing Manhattan. The future home of SLAM was located not far from the East River in a formerly industrial area transforming into a condo district with a river view.

In 1995, Streb moved out of the loft at Canal and Broadway. Over the course of the next 7 years, the company moved through a number of spaces in Brooklyn. Susan Meyers adds, "The confluence of (doing shows) in the public spaces and then having tremendously successful residencies and then having the financial burden of having to move all the time, it came to a head."

In 2002, Sandy DeSando, then the organization's administrative director, came upon a 5000 square-foot warehouse with 30-foot high ceilings, the former site of the Dutch

Mustard company, at 51 North First Street in Williamsburg. It was housing an Asian food distributor and a car garage. DeSando took Streb to the space, who immediately knew it felt right.

Before long, Einhorn, Meyers, their lawyer Margaret Ratner, and Streb were meeting the building's owner at his home in Westchester. They learned that he planned to leave the entire block—which he owned—to his grandchildren. Streb made an impression on the owner, and they began negotiations for a lease. Streb, Einhorn, and Meyers drew up plans to raise money for capital improvements.

With funding from the Booth-Ferris foundation, a gift from an anonymous donor, and the pledge of three years' rent from another, they locked in a 10-year lease. The deal conformed with everyone's sense of right-sizedness. Except for Streb's. "The night we had a signed lease, Elizabeth said, 'Alright maybe he really wants to sell it to us instead of giving it to his grandchildren. We should buy the whole block'", recalls Meyers.

As it happened, the city then changed zoning restrictions in Williamsburg to allow residency and raise height restrictions. Developers rushed in, transforming the neighborhood from an industrial, working-class neighborhood of artists, and Polish and Puerto Rican immigrants. The owner decided he wanted to sell the block after all. One developer, Doug Steiner, emerged as the main candidate.

Streb, Cullen, Meyers and Einhorn began meeting with the board and non-profit consultants to think through the unthinkable. "*Could* the company buy the entire block? Then get the permits to sell part for condos?" Meyers says they asked. "It became obvious that wasn't realistic. But it was a really big part of the conversation. Dream big, then act appropriately. Then that put us in touch with what would be appropriate."

They began discussing buying the garage space with Steiner, whose family ran the Steiner Studios film and television complex in Clinton Hill. Streb had 7 years on her lease, but still found a willing ear. "Doug really liked Elizabeth's work and he realized that there was really interesting stuff happening in the space that would benefit those who moved into the building," says Meyers. "It exactly echoed Elizabeth's philosophy about art being at the cross-section of everyday life." Steiner bought the block in 2006 and agreed to sell the garage and lot for \$1.3 million if STREB could find financing.

Steiner recalls, "Our idea was: we like that Williamsburg is artsy and edgy and cool, and we didn't want to take away that even though we're building condos and bringing people in. For us, it was a way to preserve what attracts people to Williamsburg in the first place and keep people in the neighborhood while adding apartments or condos." He jokes, "If I didn't love Elizabeth, these would be studios right now."

The organization went to city and borough officials to raise the money. Their pitch was simple—here was a partnership between the real estate developer and an arts organization headed by a visionary artist that would preserve high-quality, public arts programming in a neighborhood undergoing rapid gentrification. It was a win for all sides.

STREB Ringside was able to secure the necessary \$1 million from three sources all dispersed through the Department of Cultural Affairs of the City of New York: half came from the mayor's office, a quarter from the Brooklyn Borough president's office and a quarter from their City Councilmember's office. (The amount was backed by a 30-year bond.) The fact that their books showed a million-dollar annual budget based on 60% earned income and 40% contributed income surely didn't hurt.

They secured a bridge loan from Wachovia Bank and raised about \$400,000 in closing costs through loans and donor contributions. The organization was left with a mortgage loan of about \$300,000 that amounted on a monthly basis to less than a third of what the rent had been. The deal closed in November 2007, about 10 months before the market crash.

Right-sizedness guided STREB/Ringside's approach to deal-making through the entire process. Streb's excellent communication skills were indispensable. Steiner, who now counts himself among Streb's biggest fans, was a fine match. Timing, not unlike in Streb's choreography, played the last crucial factor.

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A decade ago, Elizabeth Streb told a New York Times reporter that her next big plan was to bring the company to Las Vegas, in the manner of the Blue Man Group, with whom she had been discussing the limits of not-for-profit arts organizations. Almost 8 years later, she remained interested in the Las Vegas idea, but the trajectory of the organization and her aesthetics had taken a different turn because of SLAM.

"I was working in a privatized situation," she says now of that time. Yet she adds, "Sometimes the not-for-profit world really heralds this attitude of exclusivity and elitism. But there might be a middle ground or a fusion economy afoot."

SLAM has given her and the organization a chance to develop their inquiry into the notion of the public and audience sovereignty. Kim Cullen came onto staff in 2003, after running a company and a dance education school in Raleigh, North Carolina. She had studied with Elizabeth as a college student, followed her work closely, and after reconnecting with her in New York, came up with the concept for a Pop Action school.

Immediately, she began to visit the local public schools. She told administrators there, "I know there's a lot of gentrification happening. We really want to be a part of the community. I am here to offer free classes."

The Greenpoint YMCA was the first to take up her offer, and have now been sending working-class kids of color to take free classes the SLAM space for 7 years. Three hundred children in 30 classes participate in its Kid Action program, most of them tuition-based and all taught by members of the company, ranging in age from 18 months

old to 19. The young students perform at the company performances held during its home seasons in the winter and late spring.

An unexpected benefit of integrating the students into the SLAM performances was the development of what amounts to a subscription audience—one that mixes young families with children or friends' children in after-school classes to neighborhood locals to modern dance and circus fans, an audience that traverses age, race, and class. Together they cheer on the performers, as they sit in folding chairs set up on the SLAM floor with red-and-white popcorn boxes in hand.

At the beginning of their shows, Zaire Baptiste—who grew up in nearby Bushwick—steps onstage to lay down the audience rules. "People come into a theatre and they don't know if they should react to the energy we're giving them or if they should stay quiet," says Baptiste. "So I set the Extreme Action tone." Audience members are encouraged to make a lot of noise, to take as many pictures and videos as they would like, to make and receive cell phone calls, to essentially transgress many of the expectations that come with the price of the ticket.

Cullen sees in SLAM the creation of a third place, Ray Oldenburg's notion of spaces outside of home and work where community is regenerated. "It was something about doing away with the preciousness, which is why I think the raw garage is so important. It's a place that you can get dirty, it's a place that you don't have to worry about messing it up and wrecking it. American garages have historically been places for invention and SLAM is emblematic of this phenomenon."

Even when the company is not in its home season, the STREB/Ringside staff works to maintain a level of openness. All rehearsals are always open to the public. Wifi and bathrooms are always available. Flat-screens and a popcorn stand welcome people into the lobby. The organization plans next to work with architect Craig Dykers from the renowned firm Snohetta (Alexandria Library, New Norwegian Opera and Ballet) to redesign their façade to be even more inviting. Staffers are trained to be aware of "the little gestures" that signal a welcoming, rather than an excluding presence to those who walk in off the street. Streb is particularly taken by the idea of being interrupted, especially by strangers. She now feels it is an important part of the act of aesthetic inquiry.

All the parts of the SLAM space are in constant motion, populated by aerialists renting space, company members, or students taking classes in Kid Action, Pop Action or the Circus Arts programs. Streb insists that more than one thing should be happening at once. She disdains the fact that many so-called public theaters sit unused during large parts of the day. It is 'frozen real estate' when it is not edifying or profitable. Instead, Streb argues that having a hothouse climate allows new ideas to bubble up. All of this, says company member Cassandre Joseph, means, "The practice is liberating. It's open and safe and encourages creativity."

Streb believes that their experiments can help arts organizations, including dance institutions, to rethink themselves. "We've had a difficult time in the dance world and the art world in proving value. What's our service value to people's everyday lives?" she says. "Now you can see. We are the only thing left standing on the block. We're the most beautiful thing on this block."

"I would be really excited if we affected places like Lincoln Center, the Joyce, and BAM. And I feel like in some mercurial, viral way we do. We are small and mighty," she continues. "We can be just an artist-driven institution, which is always weaker than the big presenters, the monument builders, but I can kick you in the shin hard enough that you're gonna have to look down on me. And that's about practice. It's not about building structures from the top down, it's about artistic practice."