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# Climbing the city. Inhabiting verticality outside of comfort bubbles

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## ABSTRACT

Over the last couple of decades, urban sports have been studied – as well as, in many cases, celebrated – as critical forms of using urban space. Urban climbing, a practice also known as “street bouldering,” “building,” “structuring,” and “stegophilia,” has been much explored in this vein. While we acknowledge the importance of bringing to light the political and playful dimensions of the urban spatial experience, in this piece we would like to focus on a slightly different question. We approach it as a powerful means to probe and understand the finest constitution of urban environments and, more amply, urban morphology. By doing so, we wish, on the one hand, to zoom in as closely as possible onto the actual bodily practice of climbing, and, on the other, to attend its methodological implications in terms of a reflection on bodily techniques in the context of a natural history of the city. We describe urban climbing as a peculiar corporeal operation carried out *at* and, more precisely, *on* the limits of environmental control. In conclusion, the article suggests that, by highlighting the meaning of inhabiting a vertical open space of a peculiar kind, a close-up study of urban climbing might help to develop contemporary urban theory.

## KEYWORDS

Urban theory; urban climbing; urban environment; inhabiting; bodily urban practice; object/environment relations; compositional techniques

## 1. Introduction

Over the last couple of decades, urban sports have been studied – as well as, in many cases, celebrated – as critical forms of using urban space. For instance, in his analysis of skateboarding, Iain Borden (2001), coined the phrase “performative critique of architecture” to explain how skateboarders replace the passivity of the tourist gaze and the consumer shopper with a dynamic, engaged gaze on the urban physical structure. Skateboarders’ active engagement with buildings passes through the development of a different bodily experience. Modernist architecture, in particular, becomes the object of an interpretation which thoroughly challenges the original conception that drove its very design. Incidentally, the realisation that practical actions, such as urban sports reveal a city virtually unknown to planners and designers (Borden et al. 2002) has occurred in relative isolation from earlier literature by social interaction scholars, who had long emphasised the active role of urban passers-by

(e.g. Whyte 1980). Borden's provocative scholarship has displaced the determinism of the mainstream scholarly gaze cast onto urban space. Similarly, Daskalaki, Stara, and Imas (2008) and Mould (2009) have interpreted parkour as a form of urban activism. In another vein, much effort has also been devoted recently to retrieve – as well as revive – the Situationist take on the city as a play-space, emphasising how urban sports exploit the materiality of urban structures as a playground (e.g. Annunziata and Mattiucci 2013; Atkinson 2009) – a tradition that prolongs into what has been called “place-hacking” (Garrett 2013). In a rich dissertation, Nilsson (2010) has explored the power of architecture to – albeit unwillingly – create affordances for various types of urban sport.

As concerns more specifically urban climbing – a practice also known as “street bouldering,”<sup>1</sup> “buildering,” “structuring,” and “stegophilia” – the conquest of a rooftop may in some cases be tied to an open, politically defiant statement, such as when flags and banners are brandished from the top. It may as well be connected to a public celebration, or a contest, as in the recent various street bouldering events held in historic Italian towns, including Sondrio, Montegiorgio, Gubbio, Bergamo, Trento and others. Or it may be “just” a pursuit of thrill and enjoyment, as in the famous Cambridge night-time climbing tradition first documented by Geoffrey Winthrop Young in his classic work *The Roof Climbers Guide to Trinity* from 1899 (Williams 2009). It should also be added that, as the skyscraper ascents performed by stunning climbers, such as Alain Robert, Dan Goodwin, and others, remind us, especially in the more sensational solo scaling of tall buildings and towers, the bodies involved are mainly white and male. Understandably, there isn't a single universal “climbing body,” and, from a Sponizist perspective, different bodies express different experiences and ways of being – as happens for instance, in the case of climbing practiced by blind people (Del Castillo Negrete 2015).

While we acknowledge the importance of the theoretical move consisting in bringing to light the political and playful dimensions of urban sports, it is also necessary to recall that the initial anti-establishment and radical environmental consciousness that drove many of these sports has been diluted and to some extent recuperated, in the measure in which an economy and a new mainstream approach has ensued, which runs the risk of falling prey of spectacular and commodified logic. In any case, in this piece, we intend to focus on a slightly different question. We approach urban climbing as a kind of diagnostic tool – a means to probe the constitution of the urban environments. This fact is even partly independent from the attitudes of individual climbers, which can even be purely hedonistic and conformist. By shifting the focus from intentions and motivations to “pure” practice we wish, on the one hand, to zoom in as closely as possible onto the actual bodily configuration of climbing and, on the other, to attend the methodological implications in terms of a reflection on climbing techniques in the context of a natural history of the city. Of course, different cities and urban sites have their own unique histories, their material build-up, and their explorative traditions. Nonetheless, despite such a diversity, we believe that a close-up study of some essential features of urban climbing might help in the development of a theory of contemporary urban environments that is adaptable to different situations. More amply, although indirectly, this may also contribute to an enrichment of urban theory.

Our inquiry can be framed within the theoretical space first drawn by Deleuze in his reflection on the “new sports” that emerged in the 1960s, such as surfing, skateboarding free-climbing (a posteriori, *parkour* and base jumping can be added). Instead of placing the

sportsman in relation to either an object or the body of another sportsman, Deleuze noticed, the new sports place the sportsman directly in relation to an *environment*. With Spinozist sensitivity, Deleuze emphasised the specific kind of movements peculiar to these sports. First, they are not based on the frontal opposition of two masses that are external to – and thus, bound to clash against – each other. Second, they do not rely on the sportsman's body as the source of an effort that results in a ratio among forces. In the new sports, by contrast, the sportsman directly merges within what Deleuze calls an already “existing wave.” The “wave” is a special type of environment, a particularly lively one. This understanding of sport as the development of an art of being-in-an-environment also shares resemblances with the distinction between intuitive and analytical thinking, where the former is a quintessentially dynamic way of progressing among ideas, while the latter an inherently static one (Deleuze 1990; see also the interesting discussion in Palmås 2009).

While many of the new sports were not initially practiced specifically in urban environments, it is still possible to contend that early on they formed a series of “urban scenes” (Irwin 1973), with a new generation of sportsmen who started experiencing and exploring their own urban and suburban living conditions. Just as cities and environments differ from each other, climbing styles also range widely: indeed, buildings can be climbed with various degrees of intervention, e.g. placing protective equipment versus leaving the building immaculate, with a rope and a climbing partner (aid climbing) or without any rope or help (soloing or free climbing, and bouldering with or without crash pads) – a continuum ranging from aided to unaided climbing. Again, despite the empirical diversity, we seek to zoom in for the basic “intuitive” locus of the climbing act shared by different practices and styles. In other words, we start *right from the middle of things* – *In mitten drinnen*, as the Yiddish expression goes. Rather than from any alleged source of phenomena, we would like to assess urban climbing from a perspective which strives to side-step, if not completely eschew, a theory of action grounded in the western “sedentarist” metaphysics. Without necessarily romanticising the figure of the nomad, adopting a non-sedentarist theory of action means above all observing action – and, more specifically, urban action – in a different key. Perhaps, we suggest, we need to move beyond the notion of *action*, towards that of *operation*. Whereas action remains inescapably grounded in an individualist theory, operation can be referred to the Deleuzian notion of montage, or assemblage with multiple connecting parts and without a subject–object orthogonal relation. Consequently, in the following pages, we propose an interpretation of urban climbing which regards it not so much as an action aimed at controlling movement, as much as an operation carried out in an environment that can only partially be controlled.

The paper is structured as follows: in the first section, the focus goes to the theoretical significance of “the hold” in free climbing, observed as a micro-event that potentially thwarts the subject/object binary introducing a principle of uncertainty. This argument is extended in the second section, where the meaning of inhabiting verticality is explored as related to a “compositional operation” that rejects, or overcomes, the idea of rational execution of a plan. Rather than a *plan*, it is suggested, a *plane* is what is created, where a new specific type of dwelling may appear. Dwelling also comes with a peculiar temporal determination and the advent of subjectivity, which we explore in the third section. In the fourth section, the link between the inhabitation of the vertical place and urbanism is more clearly established, investigating how climbing “the city” creates an encounter which is a direct pantograph of

the personal body onto the “body” of the city. In conclusion, the hypothesis is fleshed out that urban climbing may reveal something of the logic of the urban interior as well as decompose that “object for inhabitation” into sets of movable affordances in an open space.

## 2. The universe in a single hold

La bord de cette table, là où le bois devient de l'air : c'est une surface de séparation, c'est une lieu de catastrophe. La catastrophe est donc permanente, nous n'en avons pas conscience. (Thom 1991, 28) [The edge of this table, where the wood becomes air: it is a surface of separation, a place of catastrophe. Catastrophe is, therefore, permanent, and we are not aware of that.]

The objective of the ascent conflates with the actual fact of climbing. What counts is entirely in what is happening. (Hennion 2007, 99)

Your whole being is completely absorbed in the experience – a moving meditation. (Lynn Hill in Mortimer et al. 2014)

Your sense of awareness just opens up and you feel like you could go on forever. (Yvon Chouinard in Mortimer et al. 2014)

I receive ecology, embody weather, and perform an act whose script I've never read. This performance takes place inside the realm of movement – a third term between body and stone. (Sanzaro 2013, 40)

We are now in the middle of things. The core of climbing resides in the hold and the progressive enchainment of subsequent holdings aimed at progressing along the cliff, the boulder or the wall. The cliff is a crowd of holds, and the wall a crowd of bricks. The cliff and the wall are multiplicities, the hold and the grip are singularities disseminated inside those multiplicities and capable of structuring them. Each hold is an intimate, haptic knowledge. A hold is always an experiment, a sought-for, negotiated encounter, a small discontinuity within the continuous flow of climbing. The hold is, perhaps, a microscopic event of discontinuity – a micro-catastrophe in Thom's sense. Every small object, every small event can thus be imagined as an invisible discontinuity entertaining a hidden collusion with the large-scale continuity of the day, the year and the age – the city.

If so, what is happening inside each single hold? Certainly, from a phenomenological point of view, the climbing body is a living body that unfolds in perception and in a complicitous relation with the world (Merleau-Ponty 1945). But in each single hold there also happens a convergence of all sorts of heterogeneous materials (Barratt 2012; Rossiter 2007). The foot and the hand grasp a discontinuous fraction of the cliff or wall so as to best sustain the body and bring it forward. Such a coupling could potentially be examined in differing ways. One could say, for instance, that a subject (the human climber) grasps and holds an object (the rock). Yet, Deleuze's reading of Leibniz contends that the subject is produced by a point of view rather than vice versa (Merleau-Ponty concurs on this). So, what is an object and how to distinguish it from other non-objectual entities? A basic distinction could be established between an object and an environment: the object is something standing in front of us, whereas the environment is something that envelops us. A priori, a *vertical* relationship is possible only with the object. The environment, by contrast, discourages verticality through slantwise vectors of all sorts, which ultimately conjure up a *rounded* situation. More generally, the distinction between object and environment is not ontological, but

phenomenological. The object is whatever exists upon a threshold of visibility; past that threshold, the object vanishes into the environment: it's no longer before us, rather, it surrounds us.

Now, is the hold an object or an environment? Let's examine more attentively the coupling of the climber and the cliff/wall. In his study of amateur knowledge, Antoine Hennion (2007, 99) makes an important remark: "at the bottom of the route – he writes – the climber is eager to abandon all of the personal attributes that make up his regular identity." While climbing appears as an encounter between the climbing body and the rock, the encounter is in fact so close that the very separation between climber and rock disappears in a "zone of contact" or, with Deleuze, a *zone of indistinction*. Hennion speaks of a "double erasure" of body and rock. The climber gives up his "regular identity," no less than the rock stops appearing in its regular way. On a large scale, climbing appears as the deployment of a strategic plan to climb the cliff and reach the top, enacted through a series of objectual and instrumental relations. But, on a small scale, a completely different scenario appears and a much more "operative" vision concretes. The relation defined by the hold unfolds as an experimental one – it is a relation of immanence which cannot be over-determined by pre-existing identities.

The sequence of hold and the movement from one hold to the next define an "uncertain" contact. As bouldering philosopher Francis Sanzaro (2013) finely describes, climbing means letting the environment enter one's body. The environment is, by definition, open and not controllable as, on the contrary, a single object could be. One cannot grasp the environment. Therefore, the notion of environment encapsulates, and actually embodies, the idea of *the limits of control*. The whole operation of climbing is consequently carried out *at the limits*. The cliff or wall "teaches" that movement is not and could never be free-flowing, in the same way as the wood humbles the carpenter into adapting to its objective lines of flexibility, porosity and resistance. More than a question of *acting*, it is thus, a question of "surrendering to the wood" (Deleuze and Guattari 1987, 408), to the rock, in an operative way. There are walls we can climb, walls we simply cannot, and walls we could hope to climb only by bettering our capacity to adapt to them. Limits cannot be erased, but can be moved, pushed forward. They form *boundaries* of a special kind: they are not just lines, they possess a variable geometry. Operating at the limits of control, moving along a nondescript boundary, installing oneself *inside* the limit – i.e. inside the *liminal* zone – means inhabiting a plane of contingency whose coordinates lie *somewhere* between the necessary and the arbitrary. Such a liminal zone is narrow, given that room for harmless mistake is minimal, yet can be amplified by great climbers. A complicit bodily alliance with materials and gears ranging from simple chalk to special climbing shoes, needs to be established. This condition of inhabiting understood as immediate place-making unavoidably destabilises any a priori plan. Hence, the "seductiveness" of the encounter with the rock for the climber. Like in the Taoist strategy, as well as in all meditative practices, a climbing situation is understood as an "objective configuration" in which the *dao*, the natural course of things, flows uninterrupted, guiding without determining, the possibilities for action (see Jullien 2004). The climbing plane thus differs from a plan; it resembles an *operation* upon a set of floating potentialities that, at each instant, selects a possible link between the necessary (physical constraints) and the arbitrary (psychic wishes).

There is neither determinism nor indeterminacy here, but a contingent configuration of physical and bodily forces bringing with it an inherent potential of the circumstance. The

climber's "duty" is to operate the potential through seduced and inactive gestures. While, differing from the enactment of a plan, neither thinking nor climbing actually exclude forms of composition. On the contrary, climbing *is* precisely compositional. The uncertain encounter between the climber and the cliff is not a sheer effectuation of possibilities, but a *counter*-effectuation that liberates the limits and installs the very domain of the liminal. In this sense, "the uncertain" is the domain that stretches beyond the functional execution of a plan of action. As Canetti (1978) once remarked, the uncertain is the veritable domain of thinking, in that thinking radically differs from the application of a rule to a case at hand. Importantly, though, neither thinking nor climbing are domains where just *anything goes*. The law of gravity reminds the climber that he is risking his life, just as the law of nonsense should remind the thinker that he is always risking his own lucidity and mental health. The question, then, turns into how climbers inhabit climbing, just as thinkers inhabit thinking.

### 3. Beyond the orthogonal plan: inhabiting verticality

All I know about method is that when I am not working I sometimes think I know something, but when I am working, it is quite clear that I know nothing. (Cage 1961, 126)

... in a series of which we do not know the extremes, and believe that it has none. We wake and find ourselves on a stair; there are stairs below us, which we seem to have ascended; there are stairs above us, many a one, which go upward and out of sight. (Emerson 2000, 307)

I have the feeling that I can write on these enormous partitions of 3000 or 4000 meter high, as a professor writes on a blackboard with a chalk. But I don't only make that to write these lines ... imaginary lines, I live these lines. I also have the impression that after, these lines remain there even though I am the only one that can feel them, see them, that I live them and nobody else will ever be able to see them but they are there and will remain forever there. (Reinhold Messner in Herzog 1984)

Like the tool, the sign or the symbol can be conceived as such only in the eyes of a person who relies on them to achieve or to signify something. The reliance is a personal commitment which is involved in all acts of intelligence by which we integrate some things subsidiarily to the centre of our focal attention. (Polanyi 1962, 61)

Climbers, thinkers... as well as music composers. For, what type of operation is music composition? The work of contemporary composers such as John Cage and Morton Feldman offers an interesting attempt at unsettling the dichotomy between control and chance in the creative act. These composers explored a series of "de-familiarising techniques" which Mohaghegh and Golestaneh (2011, 489) have described as "turning the acoustic world of the listener and composer towards vertigo." De-familiarisation entails a process of unlearning one's technical skills (arrangement, etc.) to the point of no longer seeking to "produce" and "possess" a musical sound, and instead resorting to actually and directly *use* it, as much as *being used* by it. Highlighting the condition of "ignorance" in which the act of composition is plunged, John Cage once suggested that the composer is not placed outside of music and is consequently not in the position of controlling it from "above" (vertically). That does not at all mean that the composer is simply deserting his own compositional role. Rather, the composer turns into a *catalyst* or trigger of the composition itself. No longer a subject or agent, he resurfaces inside the emerging work as its *operator*. Here lies precisely the meaning of Cage's otherwise bizarre claim that his famous technique of "chance operations" was a



form of “discipline” to him. How can chance be a discipline? What does happen when one commits oneself (adopting a disciplinary ethos) to *chance* operations?

The first impression in operating such a shift is best captured by the image of the abysmal stairs evoked by the poet Emerson. A step is a trivial artefact that has little meaning in itself. Yet, the series of subsequent steps needs not be too long before the whole stair slips out of grasp, and it is just a matter of degrees before it even slips out of sight. The stair exceeds us thanks to the very simple and elementary operative repetition of trivial and meaningless steps. The steps change scale before our eyes, moving from object (step) to environment (staircase). The stairs already form a vertical plane in the sense fleshed out above. Indisputably, however, the vertical plane of climbing is more radical than that of the stairs. It is interesting how a new form of “horizontality” (instead of having the subject “above” the object) can be achieved by pursuing an uncompromising verticality.<sup>2</sup> Thus our task become to understand how the operation of climbing can create a form of belonging in a vertical plane. Recently, Graham and Hewitt (2013, 73) have contended that “the majority of critical urban writing emerging over recent decades has neglected the vertical qualities of contemporary processes of urbanisation,” charging this type of urban theory of “horizontalism.” In following their invitation to explore verticality, we interpret it as not simply a physical feature of the built environment, but as a form of experience and a relation between the body and the environment. In our view, inhabiting verticality means not simply *attending* the environment, but *receiving* it. Just as the music composer, the climber is open to a certain possible composition, which can only come into being by “ingesting” a certain amount of environment. A composition is not trivial in the measure in which chance does not exclude selection. Selection is a long exploration of the affordances (Gibson 1986) where found spatial and physical elements, far from determining perception and action, are brought to offer a series of pertinences, grips or holds to be activated, i.e. made visible, in local interaction. According to Sanzaro, “it is the boulder that determines how you climb it, never vice versa.” However, as hinted above, such a “determination” is far from amounting to determinism and is instead more akin to a discipline of chance in Cage’s sense. In other words, it entails the delineation and emergence of a “third term” which is neither the body nor the stone, but a specific *coupling* of the two. Ultimately, for the climber, inhabiting verticality means becoming himself a series of ascendant and transversal vectors.

Just as the climber inhabits the vertical environment, she also inhabits her own bodily movements. We have already seen how a vertical relationship is possible only with objects. Now we can also notice how climbing has this peculiar power to transform verticality into a plane of contingency and thus, into a vertical–environmental relation. Not by chance, climbing is often understood by its practitioners as a way to give back to gestures their actual power. Following Canetti’s ([1960] 1984) analysis of the relationship between gestures and power, power is originally and quintessentially power to make gestures. Such power of gestures, however, can never be thoroughly coded or systematised into a grammar. While some gestures can be bestowed an iconic or technically codified meaning, most of them can’t – better, in each single gesture there remains a fundamental indelible residuum which makes their semantic closure and codification ultimately impossible. Something unspecified flows through the forms of the gesture. This is why a gesture could be better defined as a “potency” rather than a “power” in any structural sense. The gestural is a domain which, constantly eliciting attempts at codification, can never be resolved into any of them.



Certainly, there is a rich technical vocabulary of climbing, to the point that the trained eye of the climber comes to know the shape of the rock through the array of corresponding moves in her own body: “two-finger, one-finger, heeling, tendu, hook, dyno, duelfer, Egyptian, bycycle, lolotte, gaston, flagging, knee-bars etc.” (Gori 2014). Yet, Sanzaro describes his own gestures as “unscripted acts.” Where is the space for such single “acts” which cannot be “scripted” or formalised into any figure of the training book repertoire? Where and how does the potency of the unscripted act appear? Reading a cliff or wall is a special type of reading. Its signs convey direct signification – metonymical and not metaphorical, indexical and not symbolic. What they convey is the direct correspondence with the possibilities and impossibilities of the climber’s body on the wall: they are invitations to climb, warnings not to, remarks of critical passages. So, whereas the technical vocabulary of climbing addresses a series of rules to be enacted during a performance, the classic remarks by Polanyi (1962, 49, our emphasis) on personal knowledge help us remember that “the aim of a skilful performance is achieved by the observance of a set of rules which are *not known as such* to the person following them.”

This means that no skill can be exhaustively explained in terms of a sum or a series of atomic constituents – be they technical components or rules. Mastery is only achieved when the rules are either side-stepped (never formalised or explicitly known as such) or even directly overcome (left behind in the attainment of a masterful gesture). In skilful performance, technical knowledge works as a Wittgenstein’s ladder, to be discarded after, or even *during*, use. As other types of crafting mastery, climbing entails the development of proximal knowledge, as opposed to distal. The coupling of the climber and the rock is so proximal because climbing, especially in its rope-less dimensions (free solo and bouldering), reduces the room for error to a minimum. It requires absolute focus on every contact point. Thanks to these requirements, as we shall see below, climbing defines a way of being and moving in the world quite different from the bubbles of comfort within which our daily urban lives are increasingly encapsulated. The special meaning of such focal awareness is the personal reliance on the coupling, the hold itself. Reliance, Polanyi first remarked, is a type of “personal commitment” as the primary condition for the formation of any significance. Significance is thus directly produced by personal reliance within a living, meaningful environment. Neither passive nor active, reliance is an operation that integrates a series of elements as “subsidiaries” to personal focal attention. Polanyi’s notion of focal awareness is a way of reinterpreting the Cartesian motif of “apperception,” and to explain how, in Leibniz’s terminology, a series of uncoordinated “small” bodily perceptions may add up to a single, conscious act of corporeal perception.

Ultimately, we suggest, what lies beyond the orthogonal plan of effectuation is the vertical plane of contingency engaged and produced by the climber thanks to her own *reliance on the special environmental coupling* that is being operated. Which are the dimensions where such a coupling can be established?

#### 4. How to meet time in time

The body remembers the moves geology has produced as sand remembers a rain. (Sanzaro 2013, 43)

Cette rudesse loyale apprend la vérité des choses, des autres et de soi... (Serres 1999, 10) [Such loyal ruthlessness teaches very quickly the truth about things, about the others, and about oneself...]

La machine est ce par quoi l'homme s'oppose à la mort de l'univers. (Simondon [1958] 2008, 16)  
[The machine is what humans can counter to the death of the universe.]

Thought is not necessarily connected with a brain. It appears in the work of bees, of crystals, and throughout the purely physical world... (Pierce, *CP*, §IV: 551)

One must follow what the rock demands. (Takei and Keane 2008)

The encounter between the body and the rock germinates both a specific temporality and a specific subjectivity. As to the former, there is a way in which the climber must meet time *in time*. In a sense, the body of the climber recapitulates the whole genesis of the cliff or wall being climbed. According to Sanzaro, the climber turns into a "recording device" of the temporal layers that lie inscribed inside the terrain, along with the forces that have actively shaped it into its present form. The climber's body is a natural element (a sand) imprinted by another natural element (a rain); at the same time, though, remembrance is an artificial device to maintain the elements of the encounter joined together in a single composition. Such deeply sensuous engagement leads the climber to encounter and recognise "the history of a particular stone by how it feels on our skin, how much friction it has, how its holds are shaped, and so on." Sanzaro's "recording" act thus, essentially means probing the forms and the forces of the encounter that unfolds in the vertical space of inhabitation. It is a natural history which can be indifferently applied to a cliff as well as a building. Indeed, as climbing becomes urban the city concurrently turns into a fossilised entity and a ruin whose temporality is not even, properly speaking, historical, but geological.

This is a first important sense in which time features in climbing. But there is also a second, intriguing connection. The inhabited verticality of climbing may also be understood from a phylogenetic point of view, that is, with reference to human biological descent. Our ancestors were climbing animals. In this sense, Serres (1999) has described climbing as a return to a set of pre-human postures. As they stretch out to touch the rock or the ground, our four limbs form a frame. The body-to-rock connection thus, provides the blueprint for inhabiting a solid square, a sensation providing us with an "intense sense of security." Incidentally, one is reminded of Abraham Poincheval's performance consisting in spending one week crouched in a hole inside a 12-tonne boulder – "I feel completely at ease," the artist declared. In Serres' view, our primate predecessors had no need for a roof, for they were already inhabiting "this elementary and animal relation to the wall." The *homo erectus*, by contrast, emerged out of the destruction of the primary membrane of the four limbs firmly pushed against solid ground. Following an insight already outlined in the classic work by Leroi-Gourhan (1964), Serres argues that through the *liberation* of the two upper limbs the standing position produced at first disequilibrium and insecurity which had major psychological impact. From this perspective, architecture – the quest for having a roof and the undertaking aimed at building it – made its appearance as a largely compensatory move to redress the loss of immediate contact with the cliff rock.

Yet, if climbing means coming back to pre-human states, it also means pushing forward new human potentialities, showing how humans can enter into new assemblages with the materials surrounding them. By pushing the body into a dynamically precarious equilibrium, climbing also conducts an experimental operation on the possibility of reassembling the

human. Simondon ([1958] 2008) described the human being as a creature always existing in *the midst of* his/her own machines. Perhaps, the rock was the first machine the human kind possessed. It is through its machines and the coupling with them that the human stands up against the second law of thermodynamics (entropy) and its universal death sentence. The temporality of climbing can thus be described as a *chronic*, rather than chronological temporality. It is a temporality that does not flow but rather revolves incessantly around given key points.

A radical interrogation into subjectivity ensues. Who is actually climbing? The obvious answer – the climber – no longer suffices, for we still have to understand what *type of operative entity* is the climber. Surely, we can assume the climber has built for herself a meticulously trained body. We can also grant that she possesses a fair determination to get to the top rather than remaining stuck somewhere along the wall. Even so, however, we are still left to wonder which sort of agency is the climber's. We began this article by downplaying the role of subjectivity. It was a necessary step, for subjectivity is a voracious category that tends to swallow up incompatible trajectories – whereas, as we tried to show, it actually covers only a restricted part of the whole compositional game. Yet, the *truth* in climbing – as well as in many other practical domains – can only be produced via the intervention of subjectivity: it is the “parrhesiastic” moment in Foucault's understanding.<sup>3</sup> In the classical practices aiming at telling the truth about oneself, the first person was essential to the type of knowledge to be produced. Contrary to the modern scientific domain and its third-person knowledge, the practice of parrhesia is always addressed in the first and second person, and is inherently premised on the dimension of personal risk. Similarly, the close coupling of the climber and the wall is strictly associated with a practical, “dramatic” production of truth. It is a truth that amounts to neither transcendent revelation nor Kantian transcendental schematics. It looks like an apparently humble “practical accomplishment” (Garfinkel [1967] 1984) deployed by devoted personal commitment. The climber's necessity to be truthful to the rock is a practical accomplishment of largely non-verbal, embodied nature. Interpretative drifting is an unavailable luxury for the climber, whose operations are immediately sanctioned by the rock itself: “if you slip, you will still have three seconds to live.” (Wipplesnaith [1937] 2007).

Such a practical, immediate production of truth ingenerates in the climber a feeling of affection, reverence and respect vis-à-vis the rock and its materials. Climbing knows its *animistic moment*. In an interesting reflection on animism, Kärrholm (2016) refers a famous saying by the modernist architect Louis Khan: “If interrogated, the brick answers that it wants to be an arch.” Together with animation, Kärrholm argues, hybridisation and singularisation of entities are other procedures that concur with the idea of a non-organic life, and even non-organic thought. Such is a type of life that lies scattered in the matter itself. Peirce concurred with this view by arguing that thought is not necessarily connected with a brain, but that what today we would call trans-biological neural networks of thought exist as well. For his part, Sanzaro (2013) easily admits the animistic moment: in his view, the boulder stands on equal ground vis-à-vis the boulderer: “It is impossible to determine who is playing who. It is equally hard to discern who is protecting who. Landscapes use us.” The rock knows its special requirements, the landscape uses us. Enveloped in an environment to be absorbed and ingested, and simultaneously composed, placed before an object which is always more than an object, pressed by the practical requirements of the production of first-person truth, the climber may ultimately long for that type of disappearance which Weil (2002, 42) called

for herself: “may I disappear in order that those things that I see may become perfect in their beauty from the very fact that they are no longer things that I see.” Sooner or later, every climber must come to recognise that his or her own subjectivity, not to speak of his or her bodily presence, is a polluting factor in the great beauty of the pure vertical environment.

## 5. The whole wall, all over the city

Like any artistic process, a boulder provides a seductive material populated with pre-determined behaviours, and boulderers work with that material until a performance is created, a performance that is equal part history, individuality, sunlight, passion and vulnerability. (Sanzaro 2013, 45)

Whatever one considers real history to be, it should – like its spearheads, namely seafaring and wars of expansion – remain an epitome of open-air enterprises. If historical struggles are to lead to eternal peace, however, social life in its entirety would have to be integrated into a protective shell. (Sloterdijk 2013, 170, 171)

To be sure, from the standpoint of that purpose which the spirit has embodied in palace and church, castle and hall, aqueduct and memorial column, the form in which they appear when decayed is a meaningless incident. Yet a new meaning seizes on this incident, comprehending it and its spiritual form in a unity which is no longer grounded in human purposiveness but in that depth where human purposiveness and the working of non-conscious natural forces grow their common root. (Simmel 1958, 380)

Climbing and urbanism have not always made a good match. Lewis (2000), for instance, opposed the climbing body (organic, self-determined, tactile and “off the ground”) to the metropolitan body (inorganic, passive, ocular and groundless). Certainly, for instance, the Californian tradition of free climbing was grounded in the anti-urban attitude of 1960s countercultures (Mortimer et al. 2014). At that time, urban and suburban youngsters were looking for a way out of the (sub)urban landscape. But, what happens when, as occurred more recently, climbing turns to the urban environment? We have begun this article from the “middle of things,” i.e. from that micro living sprout of experience which Whitehead ([1929] 1978) called “feeling” and Deleuze “singularity.” Now, to understand more accurately the specifically *urban* nature of urban climbing, we also need to attend some of those “prolongations” that, like the Emersonian stairs, stretch beyond our immediate present and our contingent bodily grasp. The wall envelops, amplifies and prolongs the brick. The wall is bigger than us, just as the city is bigger than the walls it comprises. What, then, is of interest in a close bodily analysis of the urban dimension of climbing? To begin with, embracing the wall signals the beginning of a whole *urban anthropometry*. In other words, climbing “the city” creates an encounter which is a direct pantograph of the personal body onto the body of the city. This act *measures* the body and the city at once. It is, in other words, an act of *commensuration*, the elementary way in which one can experientially probe the actual scale of one’s city. Interestingly, despite impression of the contrary, the experience of *mediation* works similarly. Indeed, following the recent reflections by Grusin (2015) on a radical understanding of mediation, medial commensuration takes place at the conjunction of radically different scales. For Grusin, mediation – even better, the medial experience – is inherently trans-scalar. To this, we should add that the city and the media are coessential (Iveson 2009). Public urban space always possesses a medial constitution, insofar as it is part of an integral public *domain* that spans the proximal and the distal (Brighenti 2016).

Thanks to its medial connection, urban climbing highlights a particular experience of the urban outside. Sloterdijk's (1998, 1999, 2004) trilogy *Spheres* has provided a bold endeavour to describe social existence as organised around the construction and management of physical and emotional bubbles within which a certain atmosphere or climate can be obtained and preserved. Modernity has increasingly enlarged the scale of such human social bubbles thanks to the construction of ample, air-conditioned interiors. The epoch of audacious expansion towards the outside by modern conquistadores, explorers and missionaries has ended in a legal, technological, affective and physical process of "interiorisation." From a theological paradigm, we have shifted towards an immunological one. Crystal Palace, especially as described in Dostoevsky's *Notes from Underground*, from 1864, marks a crucial moment in the definition of a new immunological "World Interior of the Capital," a giant installation simultaneously climatised by comfort, immunised by security and excited by entertainment (Sloterdijk 2013).

In fact, advanced countries contradistinguish themselves as comfort societies, where technologically equipped walls partition space into incompatible regions, only one of which is supposed to be comfortable and habitable. The wall is not only a physical barrier, but a perceptual, cognitive and axiological selective filter. Window screen-walls may produce scenic vistas over the city but they give no real experience of the outside. The exterior of the building is usually experienced in construction and maintenance work only, such as scaffolding and cleaning services. By deliberately *inhabiting* the "wrong" side of the building, however, urban climbing best reveals the logic of the urban interior, highlighting the fundamental feature of those "inhabitation machines" which are the buildings themselves. The urban climber thus creates a displaced perspective that challenges the enveloping quality of certain "objects for inhabitation." The climber's body decomposes those objects into sets of affordances that look like obstacles and simultaneously allies in the open. By doing so, she recovers the role of the perceptual senses, rescuing them from the general anaesthesia of comfort. More precisely, climbers rescue the senses from the safe bubbles governed by the contradictory interplay of anaesthetic comfort and hyperaesthetic over-stimulation.

By climbing an urban object, the climber achieves a peculiar spatiality whose smoothness and striation have been shaped by formative and medial processes. This is why the vertical plane of climbing cannot be reduced to a phenomenological plane. As just said, the "scenic" may well be ingrained in the building's functions. Only in climbing, though, the fact that the wall is not "artificial," just as the rock is not "natural," can be revealed. To understand both entities, we need to take into account their temporal and organisational prolongations beyond the phenomenal field. In the case of urban environments, such prolongations include order, normativity and functionality. This is why climbing the city entails also climbing its normative rules (splitting what is allowed and what is forbidden), its ordering dichotomies (splitting what is private and what is public) and its functional setup (splitting what is exterior and what is interior). In short, urban climbing is a threshold-practice unfolding between interior and exterior, public and private, object and environment. As argued in the first section, climbing is a compositional operation that is carried out at the limits of control. Now, the contemporary city struggles against conflicts, risks and threats of all sorts. City governance seeks to systematically eliminate all types of danger, while they inevitably resurface surreptitiously at every turn.

By pushing control to its limits, urban climbing questions the false security of comfort and the false freedom of the consumer. The consumer only enjoys an apparent possibility

to do whatever he wants until confined inside the protected, encapsulated bubble of systematic consumption and delegation, while the citizen only enjoys a feeling of security until he refrains from questioning the meaning of that boundary between inclusion and exclusion that makes the sorting of events and situations according to differential risk classes possible at all. So, climbing draws a situation constitutively incompatible with comfort, insofar as it rejects, or eschews or overpasses, a type of inhabiting that mutely accepts those filters which, at least imaginatively, screen citizens from exposed existence. Urban climbing disarticulates the contradiction at the core of liberal societies, namely the simultaneous quest for autonomy and protection. Climbing, let us recall, has not to do with autonomy, but with composition. From its location at the limits of control, it refutes all demands for hypertrophic protection-by-all-means. To the decorative logic of the interior, the climber opposes an ascetic effort that characterises all truthful encounters: the necessity of a strict corporeal discipline, a piercing concentration and focal awareness as well as, and above all, an unconditional reliance on the holds and, if present, the fellow climbers. Climbing the city is inevitably homologous to expressing an *animosity* – something, it should be remarked, very different from a political programme – against the society of comfort and its design of urban space (Brighenti and Pavoni, 2017). It is akin to the development of a “visitor attitude” that enables to grasp how contemporary urban space functions like the inside of a very specific installation. By doing so, urban climbing permits to make explicit the installation’s peculiar topological features. Once the city is revealed as a vertical open high-place, one can see that the outside of buildings is not dependent on the private/public divide, and cannot be captured by it. Rather, the outside is the threshold or membrane upon which the dichotomy is premised. Occupying that space as habitat means shaking the dichotomy to the ground.

Admittedly, all these considerations are, to some degree, independent from the outspoken aims of individual climbers. Such aims might at times be quite conformist, or hedonistically oriented towards thrill and enjoyment, just as they might be more politically defiant and subversive. Regardless of that, what is crucially of interest to us here is that climbing, like other unconventional practices of the exterior, show a possible desertion of life inside urban bubbles, together with the encapsulated dwelling produced by bubbled living. As we have seen, the ensuing urban anthropometry opens up the possibility for a direct, body-to-body (an organic and a mineral body) encounter with the city. For his part, in the late 1950s and early 1960s, the French artist and Judo champion Yves Klein explored the potential of the human presence in space through direct imprints upon materials. Klein’s *Anthropométrie de l’époque bleue* (1960) and subsequent works are the outcome of performances where, under the guidance of the artist, a group of nude female models drenched in paint and serially brushed themselves on canvas. The act of commensuration ensuing from such performance may look simple, yet deceptively so. Just like climbers, Klein was an artist of the outside – nobody can forget his 1960 *Leap into the Void* at Fontenay-aux-Roses. If his blue, gold and rose colours indicate an utter rejection of formalism, the theory of impregnation and the pursuit of a threshold towards the cosmic and the invisible constitute, in our view, the kernel of Klein’s artistic trajectory. There are striking similarities between, on the one hand, Klein’s idea of spatial “impregnation,” and, on the other, the climber’s “ingestion” of the environment discussed above. Both seek to produce that “double erasure” of detached bodies and materials coming into an accidental collision, to reassert that bodies and materials do emerge and can only be known via a necessary encounter to be prepared.



Ultimately, two images of the urban are evoked in both Klein's and the climber's intervention. Benjamin ([1927–1940] 1999) famously called these formations, respectively, the fossil and the ruin. In her great exegesis of Benjamin's arcades project, Buck-Morss (1989) describes the fossil as a manifestation of *natural history* and the ruin as a manifestation of *historical nature*. On the one hand, overcoming the distinction between the natural and the artificial, climbing evokes a natural history of the city; on the other, it casts a regard on urban governance and its associated climatic management in terms of a (ruinous) historical nature or historical becoming of the city. These two directions we have tackled all along this piece. Jointly, the fossil (understood as fixed trace devoid of life) and the ruin (understood as allegorical reality of an undeclared, latent yet effective code) are, for Benjamin, a domain of "pure means," a state of purposiveness liberated from any precise aim, or which can no longer reconnect to its supposed aims. Fossils and ruins are enigmatic because they overlay their sheer physical presence with a secret "key," a special sign which proves to be irredeemably lost (as in Henry James' novella). Beyond the legal and the technological domains, such is also the condition of the urban as a living, wave-like environment – and, as seen above, the new sports' aim is to join an "already existing wave."

## 6. Conclusions

In this article, we have discussed urban climbing as a peculiar corporeal operation which is carried out *at* and more precisely *on* the limits of environmental control. We have emphasised how the climber installs herself inside those limit space and how, consequently, her move determines the medial assertion of a domain of "pure means" in Benjamin's understanding. Urban climbing is one practice among others seeking to immerse the practitioner in a living environment. What is important, in this case, is how the climber accepts and envisages to make the most out of her own condition of ignorance – an ignorance not unlike that of the music composer described above. Just as the composer, the climber is an operator, taken in the experimental relation defined by the hold and the way. That is why the climber is neither properly active nor passive. Proceeding along a non-descript boundary, inhabiting a limit means, we have argued, inhabiting a plane of contingency whose coordinates lie at some point between the necessary and the arbitrary. As we have seen, climbing determines the emergence of a figure of temporality as well as a figure of subjectivity. The temporality of the personal commitment inhabits one's own movements, one's focal attention and reliance in a chronic rather than chronological dimension (Brighenti and Kärrhom 2016). This entails, simultaneously, a leap back in time to pre-human states and a leap forward towards new human potentialities. Temporality, in this sense, is intimately linked to subjectivity. If the climber is not a "subject" in the traditional sense of western philosophy, one might have to venture into the recognition of an "animistic moment" in climbing – the rock, as have said, has its own requirements, it makes its own claims.

In the previous section, we have observed how climbing can give way to an urban anthropometry, a direct act of commensuration of the body and the city, of one's body onto the body of the city. The pantograph-climber experiences a medial trans-scalar encounter. By choosing to inhabit the "wrong" side of the building, the climber reveals as well as puts to test the logic of the urban interior. From the perspectival advantage of such operation, the objects for inhabitation that usually envelop us can be decomposed into sets of affordances, simultaneously obstacles and allies in the open field. The critical potential of this operation



lies in rediscovering some overlooked powers of the body vis-à-vis the urban environment. Hence, the false security of comfort and the false freedom of consumption are exposed as largely illusory, premised as they are on an immense if unseen delegation of existence, according to which the consumer only enjoys a sense of freedom inside encapsulated pressurised bubbles – the citizen, as we have seen, only enjoys a sense of security until the boundary of inclusion itself remains unquestioned. What can a body do as it attempts to inhabit the limits of control?

We do not wish to suggest that urban climbing embodies a merely oppositional stance to the interiorising logic of comfort, security and superfluity that shapes the contemporary city. We take no normative stance with respect to this logic, as we are not interested in celebrating heroism or extremism per se. On the contrary, what might prove more intriguing is the *superfluous* nature of urban climbing, together with the fact that its superfluity differs from that of consumer society.<sup>4</sup> Contrary to what other scholars have suggested, we do not regard urban climbing as per se oppositional. Likewise, we are cautious not to over-politicise its significance and effects, as it is sometimes the case in recent works on urban sports. We recognise that the culture of climbing has itself evolved into a sport surrounded by, if not soaked in, commercial gear and commercial events, thus entertaining a complicated relation to the consumer society. Yet, we also deliberately avoid to frame urban climbing as caught between the promise of political potential and the risk of capitalistic recuperation. Rather than focusing on the intentions and attitudes of the individual climber, we decided to zoom in onto the actual bodily configuration of climbing, an approach that also permitted us to attend to the methodological implications in terms of a reflection on climbing in relation to the production and transformation of urban environments.

By doing so, we emphasised the peculiar relation urban climbing entertains with the paradigm of comfort in the contemporary city. Notably, urban climbing is not a reckless practice, but one that highly values security. Instead of a security-by-delegation, a new value of security-by-composition emerges from it. Instead of a simple refusal of comfort, security and superfluity, here we have to do with a specific act of *visibilisation* of the way these conditions are being currently inscribed in the urban domain. In this sense, urban climbing offers an example among many others of a possible art of thresholds, helpful in the exploration of new commensurations of the bodily and the urban.

The approach we developed indicates a promising avenue for overcoming the rift still splitting urban studies between, on the one hand, the invisible processes, normative tunings and abstract structures of urbanisation and, on the other, the contingency of the everyday life in the city, with its physical and bodily materiality. By joining the phenomenological and the ecological dimensions of urban states, a new terrain of research could be opened up into the connections between, on the one hand, the abstract structures that organise urban life, and, on the other, the bodily ways in which such structures are endured, used and reworked on a daily basis via tangible and intangible interactions, negotiations and challenges.

In conclusion, the case of urban climbing could be expanded into a number of similar explorations on the practical operations carried out by (and on) free bodies in urban space. The study of the new sports as tools to probe the constitution of urban environments and the thresholds of comfort bubbles could be continued in a number of directions. For instance, one could pay attention to the tiniest details of those bodily operations at the thresholds of visibility; one could include the sportsmen's motivations, their perception and conscious

knowledge of the environment; one could specify how different types of performance “in the open” relate to the verticality and horizontality of the urban domain in terms of place-making and sense-making; and one could also explore various urban infrastructures as facilitating, hampering or discriminating devices in terms of the more or less conscious maintenance of atmospheres which can be sustained through object/environment relations. An extremely promising and rich field for investigation, we believe, is ahead.

## Notes

1. Technically, bouldering refers to a practice of climbing performed, like free solo climbing, without the use of ropes and harnesses. Differently from the latter, however, bouldering is done on walls or rocks up to “a height where it is still safe to jump off” [*The Climbing Dictionary*, at [https://www-dft.ts.infn.it/~esmargia/mountain/climbing\\_dict.html](https://www-dft.ts.infn.it/~esmargia/mountain/climbing_dict.html)] For obvious reasons (drilling bolts into buildings is neither practical nor socially acceptable), almost the totality of urban climbing is practiced as bouldering (hence: building) or, in rarer cases, free soloing.
2. Arguably, this notion of verticality also holds for those types of climbing practices where the movement is more sideward than upward, known as “traversing”.
3. We are referring in particular to the courses at the Collège de France Foucault delivered between 1980 and 1984, namely *Subjectivité et vérité* (1980–1981), *L’herméneutique du sujet* (1981–1982), *Le Gouvernement de soi et des autres* (1982–1983) and *Le courage de la vérité* (1983–1984).
4. “The beautiful thing about climbing to me is that you can’t justify it, it doesn’t pretend to be useful” (Royal Robbins in Mortimer et al. 2014).

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No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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