

# ARTFORUM

## Brendan Fernandes

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**Brendan Fernandes, *Hit Back*, 2017.** Performance view, Recess, New York, August 10, 2017. John Alix, Khadija Griffith, Oisín Monaghan. Photo: Wendy Ploger.

Brendan Fernandes's practice straddles the intersection of art and dance, addressing questions of labor, queerness, colonialism, and the formation of identity. For the New York nonprofit Recess, Fernandes has produced *Steady Pulse*, a project which comprises Minimalist-inspired sculptural elements and a series of events that call to mind the Pulse massacre in Orlando and the vitality of the body in times of political precarity. Every Tuesday and Thursday from 3 to 6 PM, through August 26, 2017, dancers will hold open rehearsals of the collaborative dance piece *Hit Back*. On August 19, 2017, from 3 to 5 PM, Fernandes will be in discussion with Kavita S. Kulkarni. On August 25, 2017, from 7 to 9 PM, Recess will host Fernandes's dance performance and party *Free Fall*, honoring the Pulse tragedy and the dance floor as a space of sanctuary, featuring DJ Thomas Ian Campbell. And on August 26, 2017, from 12 to 6 PM, visitors are invited to mark the dance floor in *Make Your Mark*, an event inspired by an AIDS memorial in California. *Steady Pulse* is on view until September 1, 2017.

**TWO EVENTS** that deeply affected me last year were the Pulse nightclub massacre and Trump's win, which still is difficult to say out loud. I began to really think about my political agency and my responsibilities as an artist. The title of *Steady Pulse* at Recess references the Orlando massacre in June 2016, but it also comes out of the idea of the dance floor as a space of agency. The dance floor is a space of support—a physical, architectural support—but also a support system that questions the body's relationship to it as it moves on it. I wanted to create a queer space—a

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space that is constantly in action, in flux, in a non-definitive moment. It's always becoming something else. At Recess, there are dance parties, conversations, gatherings, moments when we're performing, and moments in which the piece acts as a static art installation.

Dancers often speak about how the dance floor hits the body. There's a sensation of penetration, pain, and pleasure, but also one of agency. At Recess there are panels painted in flesh tones. They have rubber spacers beneath them that create resistance—a little bit of a bounce, a little bit of give, so you are not hitting the body as hard when you are moving on it. For me, that question of the barrier is where the social and political aspect of agency comes in. The barrier of the rubber against the floor creates resistance, separating the body from the floor, but also giving the performer the ability to endure longer, to last longer in the action of dancing.

The panels within the installation are painted in flesh tones. Whether or not there are bodies moving within it, the panels act as indexes of bodies. When a dancer is lying on top of one of the panels, it creates an intimate moment as if they were lying on top of another body. It's meant to be a reflection on the different ways a body can be present in space—presence is implied through shape, color, and index, and through the actual physical presence of bodies breathing, moving, or being still. There are also gray felt mats in the installation that become placeholders for the body; they create horizontal spaces where a body could fall, could be held, or could pray.

Video: [Excerpt from Brendan Fernandes's Interview for 500 Words.](#)

Falling and the possibility of falling in this piece are really important because it's read as a sociopolitical gesture. In dance, you can never fall. Falling on stage, unless it is choreographed, is a mistake. In my choreography, there are many moments of falling, of feeling the resistance of the floor. But in the end, there's always that action of standing back up. We stand up even after we fall. So it's never an ending. It becomes an action through which new possibilities for resistance and movement may be found.

The piece I'm currently working on at Recess is *Hit Back*. For me, hitting back is not always a violent gesture. I'm trying to find out: if something hits you, how do you hit back to regain your agency? And can this be done in a nonviolent way? In the piece, I work very collaboratively with the dancers to think about ways of playing with these floor panels that have resistance to them. The gestures have become very interesting. A lot of them have referenced resuscitation movements, where the body is pushing against the floor and the sprung floor panels are pushing back. They reference gestures of intimacy and care, of picking up, and of holding each other.

There are forty-nine coat hangers in the installation, and they reference the forty-nine victims of the Pulse massacre. The dancers wear jumpsuits made by the Rational Dress Society, but not all the dancers are there all the time, so a garment might just be hanging there, without a body. They will take the jumpsuits off the rack, and they will hold them. They will dance with them. They will fold them. I'm playing a lot with gestures of commodification and commercialization. These movements evoke how the body is commodified, even through the means of performing or in the club.

— As told to Wendy Vogel