

Surface Tensions | Brendan Fernandes on surfaces, aesthetics, art, race, and play

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June 12, 2016 was Upscale Latin Night at Pulse nightclub in Orlando, Florida, a regular Saturday night party that catered to the city's diverse working-class queer Latinx communities. While patrons danced to a mix of bachata, merengue, reggaeton and salsa, a gunman entered the dance floor and opened fire, killing forty-nine people and wounding fifty-eight others. Ninety percent of the victims were Latinx. At the time, the shooting was the largest mass murder in U.S. history. It is also painful evidence of the pervasive and persistent ways violences and inequities of hetero-patriarchal culture stalk queer People of Color into queer spaces. ¹

During the summer of 2017, one year after the massacre, artist Brendan Fernandes transformed downtown Brooklyn gallery Recess into a site a remembrance and reckoning. On most days, passersby from the street who looked through the storefront window would have seen a number of large flesh-toned panels, lying on the floor and leaning against the walls, imitating in size and posture both minimalist sculpture and human bodies. Every Tuesday and Thursday, these panels served as movable components of the stage on which a group of dancers rehearsed *Hit Back* (2017), an improvisational exploration of queer relationality activated by the colliding and connecting bodies of dance.

Like performance theorists José Esteban Muñoz and Ramón Rivera-Servera, Fernandes views dance floors at queer clubs as communal sites of agency and survival, support-structures that “demand, in the openness and closeness of relations to others, an exchange and alteration of kinesthetic experience through which we become, in a sense, less ourselves and more like each other.”² To be clear, in a field defined by incessant motion, folding and unfolding, rubbing and bumping bodies, “more like each other” is not a fixed position.³

In documentation from the ephemeral performances of *Hit Back*, dancers dressed in identical jumpsuits made by Rational Dress Society can be seen entangled with each other, moving floor panels, constructing, climbing, supporting or being supported by makeshift floors and walls. Every gesture, every movement is part

of a mutually-forming intercourse between the dancers' bodies and the surfaces on which they perform; the profound conflicts, frictions, and bonds produced through these encounters affirm the political dimensions of gesture and form. José Esteban Muñoz's reflections on queer dance are a generative guide to the stakes of Fernandes' complexly pleasurable and painful installation and performance. Gestures, Muñoz writes, have the capacity to "transmit ephemeral knowledge of lost queer histories and possibilities within a phobic majoritarian public culture."⁴

One year after Fernandes' residency at Recess, approaching the second anniversary of the Pulse massacre, I wanted to ask Fernandes to reflect on the gesture of *Hit Back*, and, more broadly, how the interplay between bodies and their physical supports has come to be a critical formal question of his practice. Struggling to put words to my questions, I circled back to Uri McMillan's generative call for papers for issue 28.1 of *Women & Performance*, "Surface Aesthetics: Art, Race, Play," asking Fernandes to consider how each of these terms—surface, aesthetics, art, race, play—interfaces with his work.



Images: John Alix, Khadija Griffith, and Oisín Monaghan in *Hit Back* (2017), uniforms by the Rational Dress Society. (Photo: Wendy Ploger)

Surface: The uppermost layer of something. I immediately think to the surface of the dance floor and how this unnoticed space is such an important structural and architectural element that can assist and dictate the ways a dancer moves on it. The surface of the dance floor is always in question for the dancer. We question the surface in relationship to our bodies and how it impacts on our agency. How does this surface hit or perpetrate the body when it is moving? What is it made of and will that material sustain or perhaps injure my body? The surface is a politicized space: it impacts on our labor, endurance, and our freedoms.

Aesthetics: A sect of philosophy that is concerned with nature and the fundamental appreciation of beauty. The body in art and in dance portrays variations on aesthetic desires and concerns. The body takes on many forms and is in question constantly. At times I get asked “why do you always use such physically fit dancers?” My response is that dancers are artists and athletes at the same time. They are individuals whose work shapes, prepares and conditions their body. Their *labour* over time has created a certain aesthetic. The body in question is one that is also deemed physically beautiful. In dance the physical side of its work is often forgotten or overlooked as we dehumanize the body as it enacts physical acts that evoke wonder and amazement. In my work, I try to enter that labour back into what’s seen and what’s perceived.

Art: I make art and I make dance. They are the same to me. Being at the intersection of these two fields can sometimes confuse my audience. Art and dance have always had a rich historical relationship, but there is still common separation and unknowns that keep them apart. In my work I like to explore these differences using the etiquettes and rules of both to disrupt each other. My work for the most part is durational and takes place in museums, but because I use dance in my work people assume the work will be ticketed and set on a stage. There is a confrontation that happens when watching dance in a museum, where the body of the dancer is in close proximity to the audience. The etiquette of the stage and the etiquette of the museum become conflated. I like to challenge my audience in this way. Where they become as much a part of the space as the dancer, they must negotiate their relationship between both.

Race: Making work about the body, race cannot be left out. My early work focused on Post-Colonial identity. In this early work I was thinking about race in the context of French colonial rule in West Africa. From this context French colonialism removed masks and objects to take to the Western world. Here they became part of the Western art canons, both physically where they have been taken into museum collections and culturally being appropriated by Post-

Impressionism and Cubism. Today these masks remain in museums as commodities, taken away from their place of belonging and away from the cultural dances they once performed. In researching these histories, I question the hegemony of the Western museum and the legacy of French colonialism, even ballet as a form of colonial dance originating in the aristocracy of the French court. In contemporary times, we are now questioning what is a ballet body and how this form (ballet) has carried with it associations of race and social hierarchy. Who can be a ballet dancer? For the most part ballet has been a white dance form, where a certain body type is idealized. Bodies of color have been deemed “too strong” or their musculature accused of not allowing the dancer to perform in ways, distracting from being effortless and free. The narratives of the ballet have also plagued dancers of color, as many roles have been racially stereotyped for white bodies only. Times are changing and we are slowly seeing more diversity in the ballet world. This said, social and economic class still plays a significant part in the definition of bodies that dance ballet.

Play: To find freedom and to have the ability to maneuver or navigate spaces without thought or concern and to feel excitement and joy is to play. This is a privilege that many don't have. In many parts of the world people don't have civil rights or spaces that allow them to be themselves. Too many of us are forced to live under rules or to hide from being who they are. When I am dancing I tend to feel a feeling of euphoria. I recall dancing as a young boy and the feeling of being on a stage giving me an immense feeling of freedom. In my everyday as a boy growing up, being queer and a person of color, I did not always feel that sense of freedom. Dance gave that sense to me. I associate this with being in the club and dancing today as a former dancer. There is a uniqueness to this space. I may be surrounded by people but I am alone. I dance and move without care or concern. I am able to play without concern. This for me is a utopian space where I can feel freedom. In play I am allowed to be myself.

NOTES

1. Paul Siegal, “A Right to Boogie Queerly: The First Amendment on the Dance Floor,” in *Dancing Desires: Choreographing Sexualities On and Off the Stage*, ed. Jane C. Desmond (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2001), 267-284.
2. José Esteban Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia: the Then and There of Queer Futurity* (New York: NYU Press, 2009), 66.
3. In a response to the Pulse shooting published in [The Atlantic](#), Rivera-Servera stressed that Latin Nights like the one on June 12 are sites of generative frictions, between music styles, languages, cultures.
4. Muñoz (2009), 67.