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The Shoestring

The Body Is Still A Political Tool

Mass Moca's "Choreopolitics" asks about our body's allegiances until March 13th

By Sierra Dickey



The black pavement was still hot from the day's sun at 8 p.m. when performers and audience members began to touch it – some falling to their knees, some laying flat upon it, and some brushing it with their fingertips as they hovered in low squats. This was the scene in the back courtyard at MassMoca on Thursday, August 18, 2022. The occasion to hit the ground was offered by *Free Fall 49*, an interactive live performance by Brendan Fernandes, offered for one night only as part of the ongoing gallery exhibit *Choreopolitics*.

Free Fall 49 featured 8 dancers on low platforms, all dancing to house music beneath the watch of a DJ and a projector screen counting down from 49. At random intervals, a gunshot sound would ring out, the music would cut, and all dancers would collapse down onto their platforms, frozen there until the music slowly returned. As the sound came back gradually, the dancers would slowly and cautiously rise to resume dancing. The performance event responds directly to the 2016 Pulse nightclub shooting, where

"49 queer POC bodies fell to the floor and didn't leave that club," said Fernandes when he was introducing the work in August.

Free Fall 49 was an addendum to the ongoing exhibit *Choreopolitics* curated by Williams College graduate fellow McClain Groff. The exhibit, on display until March 13, features two artists in a great range of mediums: performance video, posters, photography, and sculpture. The artists, nibia pastrana santiago and Brendan Fernandes, are two multidisciplinary artists whose work centers on dance. The gallery space opens on a video of pastrana santiago's *No More Efforts*, and ends on a recording of Fernandes's *Free Fall: For Camera*.

The show takes its title from scholar André Lepecki's 2013 essay "Choreopolice and Choreopolitics: or, the task of the dancer." As Lepecki defined it, choreopolitics is dance that highlights or challenges the ways all bodies are choreographed into movement or stillness by the state. As he wrote, "it is the dancer who, in the most policed, controlled spaces, has the potential to activate... the highly mobile political thing." In a world where bodies and movement are increasingly surveilled and policed, Lepecki argues that dance offers specific ways to resist, break, and enact freedom or alternative forms of politics. The potential in Lepecki's theory feels both immensely useful and already terribly outdated in a year like 2022 where more people were killed by police than ever before.

Choreopolitics can be applied to all performance artists, but for Groff, the artists she selected both represented specific elements of Lepecki's ideal. "It's like this reaching towards freedom, in various ways. And on that path, there are all of these blocks and preconditions of our movement. And I think that that's what they're tied up in investigating," she said.

Included in the exhibit are a selection of colorful posters by pastrana santiago. Some look like large format poems, and some look like advertisements for weight loss programs or infomercial products. pastrana santiago is known for curating "site-specific choreographic events," but has expanded her work in text over the years. She began making posters for shows when the Puerto Rican gallery Hidrante held her first solo show and offered her installation space. "And I was like, what do I do with a wall?" she said.

The posters feature lists of assertions and renunciations, and are meant to parallel the video work. "I really love writing. I love the parallels or the dialogue between choreography and writing. So for a long time, I've been making lists of things just as a form," she said.

No More Efforts, the performance video featured inside the exhibition is colorful, comedic, and flows between openness and obstinacy. In it, pastrana santiago asserts different political stances through dance: refusal, rest, and other gestures speak back at overlapping forces like capitalism, neoliberalism, and austerity, particularly as they play out in Puerto Rico, the world's oldest colony and pastrana santiago's home. One poster titled "the lazy dancer manifesto" lays out the vision for a purposefully unproductive practice that says no to the choreographer, critic, audience, and the hustle for a livelihood. "The list for me is like a door for people that are a general audience and also very directed to people in the dance field," said pastrana santiago.

The show's suggestion – that there's something radically necessary in lazing bodies – is a hard contrast to the harried tempo of activist movements which fight against the harms of state violence that Lepecki's theory refers to. However, spending time with these works of refusal opens up somatic possibilities. The way that Fernandes uses dance as a living memorial, and the way pastrana santiago inserts her body in hostile environments, remind viewers that the body is still a political tool, not just a political victim. "Dance is not for your entertainment," said pastrana santiago referring to the things that she and Fernandes have in common. Choreopolitics isn't telling us all to lay down, slacken out of our responsibilities. Instead, the show is shaking us awake to the choreographies of white supremacy and capitalism that we might not know we had been following.

As Goff put it, "These physical actions are pedestrian in some way, like, we all can feel, even if you aren't a dancer, these moments of stillness or rest or laziness. I do feel like we all have these bodies, and we all know what it's like... to not have the privilege of laziness, or you know, to be working all the time, to be exhausted. I do think that is what surpasses dance, you know, and that's the way they're able to communicate it through this physical form."

Choreopolitics is on view at MassMoca through March 13, 2023.