

Racism and Social Space in Canadian Dance: Actants, Structures, and Dancing Differently

Erin Silver

The elevator goes up and the doors open and all the people of colour exit—and that’s the Alvin Ailey School. And then the doors close and it’s me and all other white people and then it goes up and it’s Trisha Brown, and I go, “ok, this continues. So I need to talk about this.”
 ~ taisha paggett, “Experimental Dance”

Introduction

The elevator is but one of the seemingly innocuous yet powerfully governing structures of the built environment. Elevators, entryways, rehearsal spaces, and other seemingly invisible “backspaces” to public-facing movement-based practices—the often overlooked spaces of the everyday—are nevertheless notable as sites of othering and of accentuated embodiments. At a panel discussion I convened on February 9, 2015 at the Doris McCarthy Gallery at the University of Toronto Scarborough entitled, “Experimental Dance: Histories, Politics, Presence,”¹ Canadian artist of Kenyan and Indian descent Brendan Fernandes and queer Black American dancer and choreographer taisha paggett, alongside Toronto-based Black dance scholar Seika Boye and Toronto-based independent curator Jacob Korczynski, considered their practices in relation to genealogies of modern and contemporary dance practices and discourse. What transpired was a recounting of a series of encounters and experiences accentuating bodily specificity based in corporeal hierarchies and orderings within the danceworld, and how pushing up against barriers to access and visibility informs, and forms, distinct embodied practices and politics.

In this paper, I reflect on contemporary dance practices in galleries. I argue that the seemingly benign physical structures that appear as backspaces within the danceworld, and their overlaps within the artworld, enforce dominant social structures, delineating a margin, but also opening up the possibility of making visible historically marginalized subjects. I posit that both spaces of the everyday and the bodies that occupy these spaces can be seen to be actants; however, the dancer as an aestheticized body within the specific space of the gallery punctuates taken-for-granted actant social dynamics within the built environment. As Korczynski commented during the panel, a “privileging of the neutral body . . . is neutral for some, and not neutral for others” (Korczynski 2015). I argue that choreographers, including Fernandes and paggett, among others, foreground aspects of movement through these spaces that are typically theorized as *in support of* a more “central” object, experience, performance, or space, and in so doing, accentuate structures that might typically be considered “backspace” (which here might include the call, the audition, and the rehearsal, as well as physical spaces including the elevator, the hallway, the exit, the bar, among others) but that also disrupt now-canonical histories of art and dance since the 1960s. Tending to both the embodied experiences of occupying these spaces and their discursive as well as social potential when these spaces are made central offers an opportunity to examine how, as Imani Kai

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Johnson writes, “we are socialized to move through our worlds and how one physically moves in dance” (Johnson 2018, 64). Overall, this paper forms part of a broader research project: a critical exploration of the join of the phenomenological and socio-political dimensions of the role of the structural “support,” opening up to a consideration of how the “support role”—a role historically and typically relegated to women and people of colour—as well as various articulations of the supplemental, the marginal, and that which spills out of the frame, can also be positioned as carrying radical emancipatory potential. This paper also confronts the enduring blind spots, both historical and present-day, around racialized and queered bodies and their exclusions not only from participation but also from historical retelling and focuses on contemporary queer artists and artists of colour who reimagine and intervene in this historical terrain. In so doing, I aim to resituate the “backspace” not as inconsequential, but as inextricable to social and political dynamics that play out in the gallery and beyond.

The notion of “backspace” is not merely a theoretical apparatus but, in many cases, an actual physical site that when certain types of bodies occupy it, enforces a mirrored embodied experience of invisibility and otherness; for many, it is a space where certain bodies, notably, bodies that are marked as racialized, have been relegated—if not physically in place, then through its evocation of historical social and physical violence. The elevator is a space of liminality rife with anxious anticipation; its doors open onto distinct environments whose organization often cannot be known prior to entering. Once the elevator closes, those who have disembarked are at the behest of this organization until another elevator door opens to permit escape. The elevator, in paggett’s observation, opened up to different worlds each time the door opened; however, this difference refracted back and accentuated forms of embodied difference vis-à-vis the perceived and actual discordance of space and its historical occupants, and the bodies that have been historically absented or subjugated within these spaces. In the introduction to her article “Dancing with Social Ghosts: Performing Embodiments, Analyzing Critically,” Rosemarie Roberts also finds herself on the elevator at a dance studio with a group of dancers of colour and a white venue representative. She recounts the experience she shared with dance company members of Ronald K. Brown/Evidence of being guided by the representative onto the elevator and through the theatre kitchen, a space historically relegated to Black and Brown kitchen “help,” to which the representative appeared oblivious and, consequently, oblivious to the psychological effects on Roberts and the dancers of being made to walk through this socially loaded space. Roberts argues that “performing Black and Brown bodies bear the burden and embody the weight of history, experience, and affect, moving them out from private and into public spaces. These corporeal articulations are the means through which insights about injustice based on race, class, gender, and sexuality are revealed to a public” (Roberts 2013, 8). I would add to this that in many cases, and as I will go on to show, performing Othered bodies not only translate private experiences into public ones, but also act as punctuations to critically examining the very spaces that demarcate bodies as “Other” within the spaces themselves.

The dancer as an actant in the gallery, rather than as a performer on the stage, occupies a space with historically fixed connotations, in particular in large-format institutions, which have in the last decade turned their attention to movement-based practices. This phenomenon is documented in art historian Claire Bishop’s 2018 essay, “Black Box, White Cube, Gray Zone: Dance Exhibitions and Audience Attention,” where Bishop questions how it is that “so many visual artists are hiring dancers, and so many choreographers are presenting at museums” (Bishop 2018, 24). Bishop’s inquiry concerns the difference between “visual arts performance” and the “performing arts,” issues of spectacle and mediation in relation to audiences, the problematics of movement-based practices and labour, and the economic motivators on the part of the institution to move away from what she

calls “event time” and toward “exhibition time” (Bishop 2018, 29). Bishop describes both the white cube and the black box as “ideologically loaded spaces”—the “white cube” as a “blend of neutrality, objectivity, timelessness, and sanctity: a paradoxical combination that makes claims to rationality and detachment while also conferring a quasi-mystical value and significance upon the work” (Bishop 2018, 29).

Roberts, a professionally trained dancer whose positions as dancer and researcher “afford [her] a particular view and specialized knowledge,” calls for a replacement of the voice with the body, and how the “body acts in ‘dialogic relationship with other bodies’. That is, how dancing bodies relate to audience and how I relate to dancing bodies” (Roberts 2013, 9). I am not a dancer, but an art historian; my white body is “unmarked” by racialization; my gender and my queerness do not block, but inform, my social vantage point, which nevertheless conforms to one of unembodied, “neutral” viewing. The effect the dancer’s body in the gallery has on me as a viewer is one that both reasserts my view of the governing structures and visual organization of the gallery space and in so doing, acts as a corporeal punctuation, drawing my gaze toward the dancer’s body that at once ensnares me but also points to the outside, the “over there,” and back to myself, another body and, therefore, an “othered,” but not “Othered” body, in the space. Distinguishing themselves from other “moving” bodies (bodies at labour and bodies of leisure) within space, “bodies in galleries,” as we might think of bodies on display, work to establish our own distinctness from these bodies and, subsequently, initiate a process of examining the invisible factors that organize spaces as such at work. Like the abstract phenomenological effect of Minimalist sculpture, whereby sculpture signalled as metaphoric bodies that forced an awareness of the relationship of the viewer to space, the dancer’s body triggers a similar effect, however, in de-abstracting the corporeal, confronts more directly the way in which bodies, when faced with other bodies, are defined by difference.

Differencing Minimalism

At the same time as dance was breaking out of its rigid shell and movement-based practitioners began to experiment with everyday movement, other experimental artistic practices were also on the verge of becoming. The history of Minimalism in the United States is well-mined: the legacy of “groundbreaking” exhibitions *Primary Structures* (curated by Kynaston McShine, Jewish Museum, New York, 1966; revisited in 2014 as *Other Primary Structures*, curated by Jens Hoffmann), *The Plywood Show* (the informal title of a show of seven Minimalist sculptures by Robert Morris, Green Gallery, New York, 1964), *When Attitudes Become Form* (curated by Harald Szeemann, Kunsthalle Bern, 1969; revisited in 2013 as *When Attitudes Become Form: Bern 1969/Venice 2013*, curated by Germano Celant with Thomas Demand and Rem Koolhaas), and Morris’s *bodyspacemotionthings* (Tate Gallery, London, 1971; revisited in 2009 at the Tate Modern)—all shows dedicated to Minimalist and Postminimalist sculpture and structures, and all shows curated by men, both in their original installation and their contemporary reenactments.

These exhibitions, taken together, reflect the preoccupation, in the mid-1960s, with the phenomenological encounter and the embodied spectator—more overtly in line with what was concurrently happening at and overlapping with the Judson Dance Theatre in the early 1960s. As Bishop has observed, “it is striking that interest from museums and galleries has focused on choreography belonging only to certain traditions, above all Merce Cunningham and Judson Dance Theatre, both of which fostered rich interdisciplinary collaborations with visual artists” (Bishop 2018, 28). In Sally Banes’s *Democracy’s Body: Judson Dance Theatre 1962–1964*, Banes argues that dance

language at Judson represented “an assertion of the primacy of the body, of the body as the vital *locus* of experience, though, memory, understanding and a sense of wonder” (Banes 1993, 16–17). Iconoclastic experimentation within choreography at this time carried implicit political dimensions and, as was the case of Yvonne Rainer’s work, emphasized a “‘process’ look” (Banes 1993, 16–17).² Banes and others have argued that prior to this historically defining moment at Judson, dancers including the Italian-born, West Coast-based Simone Forti, who moved to New York with Robert Morris in 1959, were engaging in experiments with the everyday in relation to structure-like objects. Forti’s *An Evening of Dance Constructions* (1961), which positioned dancers’ bodies in proximity to and directly engaging with a set of plywood constructions, has been positioned as particularly influential not only to choreography but also to Minimalism. It is important, however, to bear in mind the almost instantaneous intervention attempted by art critic Michael Fried, who, in his essay, “Art and Objecthood,” first published in *Artforum* in 1967, argued against what he viewed to be Minimalism’s “theatricality”—indeed, experimental dance’s overt commingling with these physical structures in order to engage the primacy of the body furthers this argument (Fried 1967, 1998).

However, more recently, art historian Virginia B. Spivey has interpreted the threat posed to Fried by Minimalist sculpture as follows: “Fried . . . perceived a distinct threat in the Minimalist object’s ‘presence’ that implies a weakened, or less authoritative position, than typically afforded the (male) critic” (Spivey 2009, 127). As can be noted in not only the original incarnations of the aforementioned exhibitions but also their more recent re-stagings, the ways in which histories of Minimalism are organized, curated, and presented simultaneously occlude and introduce the threat posed by women artists, queer artists, and artists of colour in upholding the primacy not only of the male gaze, but also of the white male spectator. One need look no further than Robert Morris and Carolee Schneemann’s 1964 *Site*, in which the proto-feminist Schneemann herself became the “support” when her naked body was deemed an obscenity risk (a charge that Schneemann regularly encountered by virtue of her outright visual and performative acknowledgment of the body as a whole, inextricable from its sexual dimensions), leading to her being stationed, immobile, in the background while Morris carried a plank of plywood on his back across the stage. Reflecting on the controversies surrounding her work in the 1960s in the wake of the Culture Wars in the early 1990s, Schneemann astutely observed that censorship requires that a body, a practice, a subjectivity be permitted to come into view in the first place: “Censorship is flexible, responsive, motile, adaptive; boundaries of prohibitions are shifted, redefined. Women artists have been censored by exclusion for centuries. But what about the *other* ‘Others’? What of the artists so socially marginalized, so ignored as to elude acceptable controversy and *its* possible censorship?” (Schneemann 1991, 35)

This is but one genealogy among many developing at this time; however, the marriage of Minimalism and dance has proven a fruitful intersection for thinking through phenomenology and otherness, as well as an acknowledgment of the undeniable influence of these experimental practitioners on contemporary artists fusing formal and movement concerns. Artists working at this time introduced a radical break with modernism and implicit engagements with embodiment, dynamics between viewer and structure held in play invisibly via experience, and structures evoking the body in the absence of any in the space. More explicitly, and historically documented, is the relationship between sculptors and dancers in the early 1960s, with dancers’ props influencing Minimalist sculpture and sculpture spectrally evoking the body in movement. The advent of these structural explorations incited a radical departure with Abstract Expressionism and, as would be felt from the 1960s onward, an inability to continue to not think about the spectator, or to think about a “neutral” spectator—white, straight, cis-gendered male. Within the intersection of Minimalism and dance, a more explicit corporeal form began to emerge. White woman artists, operating under the

feminine rubric of “dance,” were permitted to become visible as makers and collaborators within experimental art scenes.

Just as important is the history of sculpture at this time for how it interrupted what was upheld, until the 1960s, as an uncomplicated relationship between viewer and artwork. The sculpture in the gallery forced a consideration not only of its obstructing and therefore accentuating presence within space, but also of other dimensional objects—actants—in space, namely, the bodies that commingled among the sculptures. In her canonical essay, “Sculpture in the Expanded Field,” from 1979, Rosalind Krauss discusses the difference between monument and modernist sculpture, arguing:

In being the negative condition of the monument, modernist sculpture had a kind of idealist space to explore, a domain cut off from the project of temporal and spatial representation, a vein that was rich and new and could for a while be profitably mined. But it was a limited vein and, having been opened in the early part of the century, it began by about 1950 to be exhausted. It began, that is, to be experienced more and more as pure negativity. At this point, modernist sculpture appeared as a kind of black hole in the space of consciousness, something whose positive content was increasingly difficult to define, something that was possible to locate only in terms of what it was not. (Krauss 1979, 34)

Implicit within Krauss’s articulation of the evolution of the perception of sculpture’s possibilities and limitations is a corporeal preoccupation, both in terms of how sculpture could (or could not) be apprehended in the “space of consciousness” and sculpture as a corporeal proxy and/or bridge opening up “veins” and eventually exhausting them. Krauss’s evocation of a “kind of black hole” introduces metaphorical language intended to signal a space of nothingness or emptiness but also reflects a phenomenon common within art writing at the time to divorce the formal qualities of blackness from its political and social significance (one among many discursive strategies that have been historically employed to reassert white supremacy and patriarchal dominance).³ Krauss goes on to argue that the artwork being produced in the early 1960s operated in a kind of “no-man’s [*sic*] land”: “it was what was on or in front of a building that was not the building, or what was in the landscape that was not the landscape” (Krauss 1979, 34).

Krauss’s essay, and the concept of the “expanded field,” has become a template for testing out the qualities of a plenitude of mediums that remain nebulously defined, defined more by what they are not than by what they are. Krauss evokes Barnett Newman’s notorious observation that “Sculpture is what you bump into when you back up to see a painting” (Newman, quoted in Krauss 1979, 34, 36). In “Black Box, White Cube, Gray Zone,” Bishop discusses how many artists working in the intersection of art and dance in the gallery liken their work to sculpture, an effect, she argues, resulting from what Rebecca Schneider has pointed to as a way of avoiding “the messy, impure, and historically feminized performance-based arts of theatre and dance” (Bishop 2018, 32). And perhaps in illustrating this tendency, Bishop focuses her essay on examples of choreographies that don’t seem to refer to anything outside of themselves, seemingly maintaining a purity of form (in this case, movement) more in line with the modernist preoccupation with medium-specificity in contrast to the experimental dance practices of the 1960s, whereby bodies in movement forced a view to other bodies and the built environment. She considers mediation on the part of the viewer, and other forms of looking *in* at the performance, rather than a view to how dance in galleries might also point *outward*—dance as representation of external realities and conditions, or as retreading, via repetition,

histories of social organization. In considering what distinguishes some moving bodies as dancing bodies and others as not-dancing bodies, we might also think about dancing bodies, those bodies that are conceptually and literally “bumped up” against and therefore punctuate an experience of space and the act of looking, as functioning in a similar vein. Taken in tandem with a view to Fried’s warning against the theatricality introduced by sculpture in the 1960s, bodies define and are defined by the bodies they are not, accentuating distinctness, and therefore, difference, in a literalization of the relational difference that was earlier metaphorically implied by the relationship between sculpture and viewer. Punctuated bodies, those aestheticized moving bodies that share space among bodies and objects, are neither other bodies nor the built environment, yet work to delineate the others’ specificity. The most seemingly benign forms of movement, either durationally or repetitively performed, then, work not to distract the viewer with spectacle, but to redefine, for the viewer, the structures of difference in which each actant—viewer not exempted—participates.

Dancing Difference

Although the conversation that unfolded at the 2015 panel at the Doris McCarthy Gallery did not intentionally centre on race, what did emerge were various experiences of difference and/or differentiation from the expectations of institutionalized forms of dance practice. The dancers at the table represented three entirely distinct practices; nevertheless, each one discussed how space and the negotiation of taken-for-granted backspace also paralleled experiences of embodied difference. Boye identified as a retired dancer and now choreographer and scholar of dance histories, specifically, Black dance histories in Canada, which, though following distinct trajectories from those of the United States, are regularly lumped into the American histories. Boye has worked to delineate a specifically Canadian Black dance history and has recently curated *It’s About Time – Dancing Black in Canada: 1900–1970*.⁴ The exhibition presented archival documents to explore largely undocumented and underrepresented histories of Black social dance in Canada. Working with the uncatalogued holdings of Dance Collection Danse, Boye brought to the fore the influential practices of dancers and teachers including Len Gibson, Ola Skanks, and Ethel Bruneau. At the same time, the exhibition provided visual evidence of the racist practices of blackface and minstrelsy, working not to chart an uncomplicated history but to position dance as a strategy of resistance and community formation. Interestingly, in this exhibition context, visitors did not bump into bodies dancing in the gallery space but, rather, encountered these bodies as historical evocations from another time of Black sociality as expressed through dance. Dancers in the gallery are dynamic but also fleeting; dancers captured on film and in photography make important contributions to the visual archive of dance and, importantly, offer visual evidence of historically marginalized subjects: in many cases, while the names of the white dancers featured in the photographs were known, there was little to no knowledge of many of the Black dancers included in the same photographs.

At the 2015 panel, Fernandes, paggett, and Boye nodded in agreement that they have systematically been directed toward styles of dance deemed to be part of a Black dance genealogy or believed to be suited to a notion of the Black body and what have historically and taxonomically been viewed as its “unique” capacities. Fernandes and paggett recalled instances in which they were directed to Alvin Ailey (whose founding of the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater in New York City in 1958 created opportunities and garnered international recognition for African American dancers in the 1960s), even though experimental practices such as Trisha Brown’s and Yvonne Rainer’s, they asserted, had figured more centrally as influences in their work. Fernandes’s training in ballet was deemed ill-suited to his small frame, and he was encouraged into modern dance for this reason. Age

also factored as a point of difference; paggett spoke about coming to dance later in life, eighteen being considered older than most professional dancers begin their training. She recalled becoming absorbed in the university library's dance collection, and the inspiration taken from experimental practices, including Rainer's. These accounts, taken together, contribute to a growing refusal against the narrative of "neutrality" that has attached to histories of postmodern dance, and many other instances abound. The queer Filipino-American dancer Gerald Casel, for example, wrote a response to having been invited by Hope Mohr Dance's 2016 Bridge Project to respond to Trisha Brown's *Locus*. At once noting the undeniability of "embodied movement affinities and adopted compositional vocabularies" shared in common with Brown, Casel wrote:

Formal constraints have the capacity to invigorate creativity, however, they do not function equally for all bodies. More precisely, there is no such thing as pure movement for dancers of color. In my view, it is difficult to separate structural and systemic power from race. Among other intersectional factors (such as age, gender, class, etc.), dancing by brown and black bodies is read differently than dancing white bodies.

One of the assumptions that postmodern formalism arouses is that *any* body has the potential to be read as neutral—that there is such a thing as a universally unmarked body. As a dancer and choreographer of color, my body cannot be perceived as pure. My brown body cannot be read the same way as a white body, particularly in a white cube. (Casel 2016)

Contrary to racist perceptions as to the physical incompatibility of bodies of colour to certain types of dance practice, these examples emphasize the important distinction between constructions of "race" and occurrences of "racialization" as enacted on nonwhite bodies. As Rebecca Chaleff has argued, "*Any* body does not have the potential to be read as neutral, and so not *every* body has the same access to what is presumed to be ordinary" (Chaleff 2018, 79).

Radical Juxtapositions

American conceptual artist Adam Pendleton works across disciplines and appropriates found texts and images, referring to his process as "radical juxtapositions," a bringing together of seemingly disparate ideas that help to forge new views to the present and future (Pendleton 2016–17). Interestingly, the term "radical juxtapositions" was coined by Susan Sontag in describing Happenings, themselves the interdisciplinary overlapping of various mediums and movement within experimental art communities in the 1960s (Sontag 1962). In the art-danceworld, the term might be useful to artists looking for something beyond what the canonical history dictates as the official narrative; the American dancer and choreographer Trajal Harrell, in *Twenty Looks or Paris is Burning at the Judson Church*, first performed in 2010, engages this practice in his rewriting "the minimalism and neutrality of postmodern dance with a new set of signs" (Harrell 2010). The white filmmaker Jennie Livingston, with her 1991 documentary film *Paris is Burning*, introduced the underground ball culture of queer people of colour—begun in the late nineteenth century in Harlem as "drag balls" and continuing into the present day—to a mainstream audience; however, as Harrell's radical juxtaposition points out, the ball culture of Harlem was well underway by the time the white-dominated postmodern dance community was occupying Judson Church in Greenwich Village. Indeed, a racialized delineation of "uptown" and "downtown" had been well established since the

Harlem Renaissance, when white “downtowners” would make the trek to Harlem to frequent jazz clubs and other spaces of Black sociality.

Just as the Harlem Renaissance’s literary figures walked a tightrope in attempting to depict the social and political realities and potential for emancipated Black life in America at the same time as performing as primitivist “Others” for white audiences, the jazz clubs, which were often white-owned, were transformed from spaces that nurtured Black cultural forms to spaces that tailored to white audiences and, in many instances, where Black bodies were increasingly absented and segregated in a manner mirroring the Jim Crow laws of the South. In *Judson Dance Theater: Performative Traces*, Ramsay Burt has argued that, despite the collaborative work being done at the time between white and African American dancers, writers, and artists, including collaborations by Fred Herko, Amiri Baraka (LeRoi Jones), Diane Di Prima, and Cecil Taylor, the dancers at Judson did not make connections “between avant-gardism and the politics of race,” nor did they recognize “the need to oppose mechanisms that maintained boundaries in terms of race” (Burt 2006, 130). Harrell imagines an inverse of this racialized dynamic, asking, “What would have happened in 1963 if someone from the voguing ball scene in Harlem had come downtown to perform alongside the early postmoderns at Judson Church? . . . [In] the distance between who we imagine a work is being performed for and its actual performance for those present, what kind of new relations can be created, adapted, and reassigned between performer(s) and audience?” (Harrell 2010) In this critical re-imagining, Harrell reclaims an agency denied Black performers in decades past, when Black bodies were subjugated for white cultural consumption at the very moment in which they were forging liberatory cultural forms. Harrell’s choreographies at once trace these historical delineations and critically reconfigure the power dynamics inherent to performer-audience relationships, exponentially so in attending to and foregrounding racialization as further entrenching them.

Echoing the “what if” space that Harrell conceptualizes and then creates, taisha paggett and Yann Novak’s collaborative three-channel installation *A Composite Field* (2014), to my mind, engages this desire to amplify the politics of historically formalist mediums and how the employment of the body as a medium in dialogue with other mediums might respond to and mould itself against political and social realities. Combining concerns for presence, movement, documentation, and witnessing with the historically fraught position of the queer Black body in the gallery space, paggett dances the same dance three times, with slight variations that become noticeable when the three videos are watched simultaneously. Novak provides an ambient score, played at conversation level; his manual manipulation of the lighting in each version of the dance evokes the Light and Space immersive works of James Turrell but here accentuates paggett’s subtle movements as she performs for an audience in the room with her, tangling and untangling from a man’s blazer. On the three screens, the high-tone colours influence and seemingly alter the colour of paggett’s clothing and skin. paggett has claimed Yvonne Rainer as an influence; Rainer’s 1965 “No Manifesto,” with its opening lines, “No to spectacle/No to virtuosity,” can be read, on a formal level, onto paggett’s slow, unspectacular movements. On a sociohistorical level, the impossibility of paggett’s body to be read as unmarked by racialization recalls Roberts’s claim that “In an important moment of knowledge production when words cannot do because we have learned that the risk of speaking is too great, or will not do because corporeal gestures, postures, and movements are more articulate and eloquent than words” (Roberts 2013, 5), paggett’s subtle gestures, stances, and transitions might be seen as forging links between her own contemporary embodiment and histories of the inescapability of visual Othering of the Black body induced by its juxtaposition within the white cube.



taisha paggett and Yann Novak, *A Composite Field*, 2014. Doris McCarthy Gallery, University of Toronto Scarborough. Images courtesy the Doris McCarthy Gallery and the artists. Photos by Toni Hafkenshied.

paggett’s gestures, when read as transposed on and interrupting a history of the formalist mediums she engages with, are at once subtle and powerful; they recall Roberts’s articulation of the need for an “embodied analysis of dance,” which she argues can “harness and expose the excess—the micro-level gestures, postures, and movements, which in turn reveals the felt/social psychological experience of the history of oppression and the acts of resistance to that oppression” (Roberts 2013, 8). What choreography brings to the fore here are the ways in which perceptual and embodied shifts make visible previously unseen dynamics, juxtapositions, and statures.

Philosopher Michel de Certeau’s 1984 *The Practice of Everyday Life* is an underlying guiding text for studies of everyday life, offering a magnified view of how one’s position vis-à-vis the built environment influences a view to power. This position, and attendant perception, extends from the highest highs to the lowest lows (from those in the skyscraper to those underground)—take the city

bus at dawn, or the Los Angeles subway anytime, and note the types of bodies that comingle in these spaces of darkness and undergrounds: labourers, working classes, bodies resigned to the built environment's stranglehold on mobility, robbed of the illusion of a kind of emancipated right to movement. As philosopher Elizabeth Grosz writes, "the city's form and structure provide the context in which social rules are internalized or habituated in order to ensure social conformity or position social marginality at a safe or insulated distance or boundary" (Grosz 1999, 386). These spaces magnify the classed, gendered, and racialized dimensions of everyday movements.

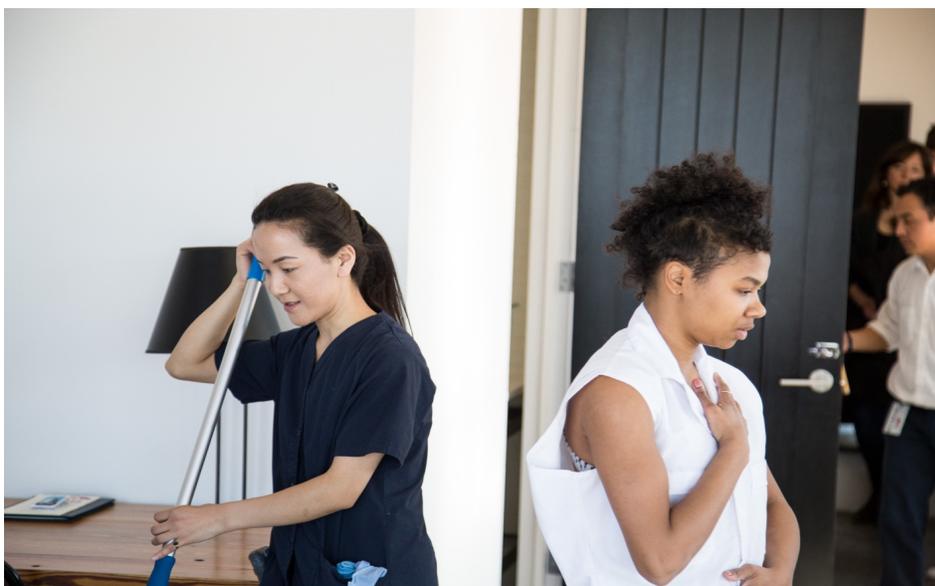
Even within supposed spaces of "representation," bodies nevertheless quietly organize experience and delineate power differentials at the intersecting levels of gender, race, and class; de Certeau proposed the concept of "oppositional tactics" as a strategy for subverting these governing structures via a subversion of their traditional functions. American artist Fred Wilson's institutional Critique of the early 1990s, notably, his work *Guarded View* (1991), is exemplary of this project. The sculpture comprises four Black headless mannequins (we know they are Black by the colour of their hands) outfitted in the museum guard uniforms associated with four major New York cultural institutions. In Wilson's installation, the museum guard's expected stoic, static silence and invisibility is accentuated via stillness; the museum guard is not to intervene in the museum visitor's experience; one's leisure time is another's labour time, and Wilson's headless mannequins also critique the stereotypical perception of the Black body as intellectually removed from the supposedly "heady" ambitions of the white cultural imbiber. The headless mannequins, however, are slightly elevated by their position on a plinth, signalling to the viewer that these are bodies to be looked at. But what do these bodies tell the viewer about herself? Here, the unique embodied subjectivity of the viewer is forced into a more direct and nuanced dialogue with difference. In Wilson's critique, the body, more accurately, its likeness, is static; it is its own form of relic to a past, present, and, likely future regarding the state of race relations and subjugations within white supremacy.

Wilson's static sculptures are evoked and brought back to life in Brendan Fernandes's 2014 *Closing Line*, which also engages institutional Critique and the intersections of race and class as visually organized within the gallery. However, Fernandes's choreographic work directly imposed itself within the viewer's space so as to at once close and widen the uncomfortable gap between viewer and artwork, introducing a more tactile and confrontational discomfort based in touch, force, and insistence. *Closing Line* was performed at the Sculpture Center and mimicked the Metropolitan Museum of Art's 1960s practice whereby guards would usher visitors out at closing time with touch or with speech. Uniformed in grey army sweaters and black pants, a line of dancers slowly encroached on gallery attendees as they either relented or resisted the physical ushering out of the space.

After leaving his dance practice due to injury, Fernandes began to incorporate choreography into his artistic practice, with works that melded the crisp, hard edges and geometric clarity of Minimalism, often juxtaposing the bodies of dancers alongside plinths and other geometric structures to accentuate this connection. Over time, his choreographies began to explore the repetitive gestures of often invisible forms of labour, reflecting a joint engagement in institutional critique and the possibilities afforded for exploring its often overlooked dimensions via performance. *Clean Labor* (2017), performed at the Wythe Hotel in Brooklyn, magnified the labour of hotel cleaners. Visitors were permitted into the hotel room to watch as dancers and cleaners performed together, the trained dancer mimicking the movement of the cleaners. Dressed in white uniform-like jumpsuits, the dancers were distinguished via a kind of visual organization with historical precedence in modern dance, specifically, evoking a form of racialized visual organization, described by Susan Manning as

follows: “Blackness and whiteness became perceptual constructs on stage, ways for linking physical bodies and theatrical meanings, ways for reading bodies in motion. Blackness was a marked category, whiteness an unmarked category in American theatrical dance. Thus the visibility of blackness opposed the invisibility of whiteness, and spectators in the mid-century relied on this opposition to read the meanings of theatrical performance” (Manning 2001, 488). Although the performers in *Clean Labor* were not organized around racial lines, the choice of uniform/costume similarly serves to delineate “marked” and “unmarked” categories of labour, where one is aesthetic and the other is functional. One, it could be argued, has historically made the other possible (i.e., the invisible/behind-the-scenes labour necessary prior to public performances). In *Clean Labor*, the “cleaner,” for better or worse, is foregrounded and instrumentalized to make a point about invisible labour; nevertheless, dance and aestheticized movement reigns supreme. In reflecting on the performance, Soo Ryon Yoon has observed, “These otherwise ‘unremarkable’ movements of folding linens, scrubbing bathtubs, and sweeping floors, became ‘remarkable’ through their incarnation in performance” (Yoon 2018).

On the one hand, this might be seen to extend the legacy of other artists, including Mierle Laderman Ukeles, whose feminist-infused institutional critique took on the form of the performance of domestic labour within cultural institutions, notably, her *Manifesto for Maintenance Art* (1969) and the maintenance performances she undertook through the 1970s. In Quebec in 1975, the feminist performance group Mauve performed a similar gesture at the Montreal Museum of Fine Arts, arriving at the opening of *Femmes 75* in bedraggled wedding dresses and proceeding to scrub the exterior of the museum with their dresses. Returning to Krauss’s notion of the expanded field and its potential use value for identifying otherwise-liminal forms of artistic output, while the work of Wilson, Ukeles, and Mauve operate within the space of not-dance, Fernandes’s choreographies, which mimic and aestheticize everyday movement, are considered dance, perhaps by virtue of this aestheticization and by attempts to intervene in existing acceptable practices both within the artworld *and* the danceworld.



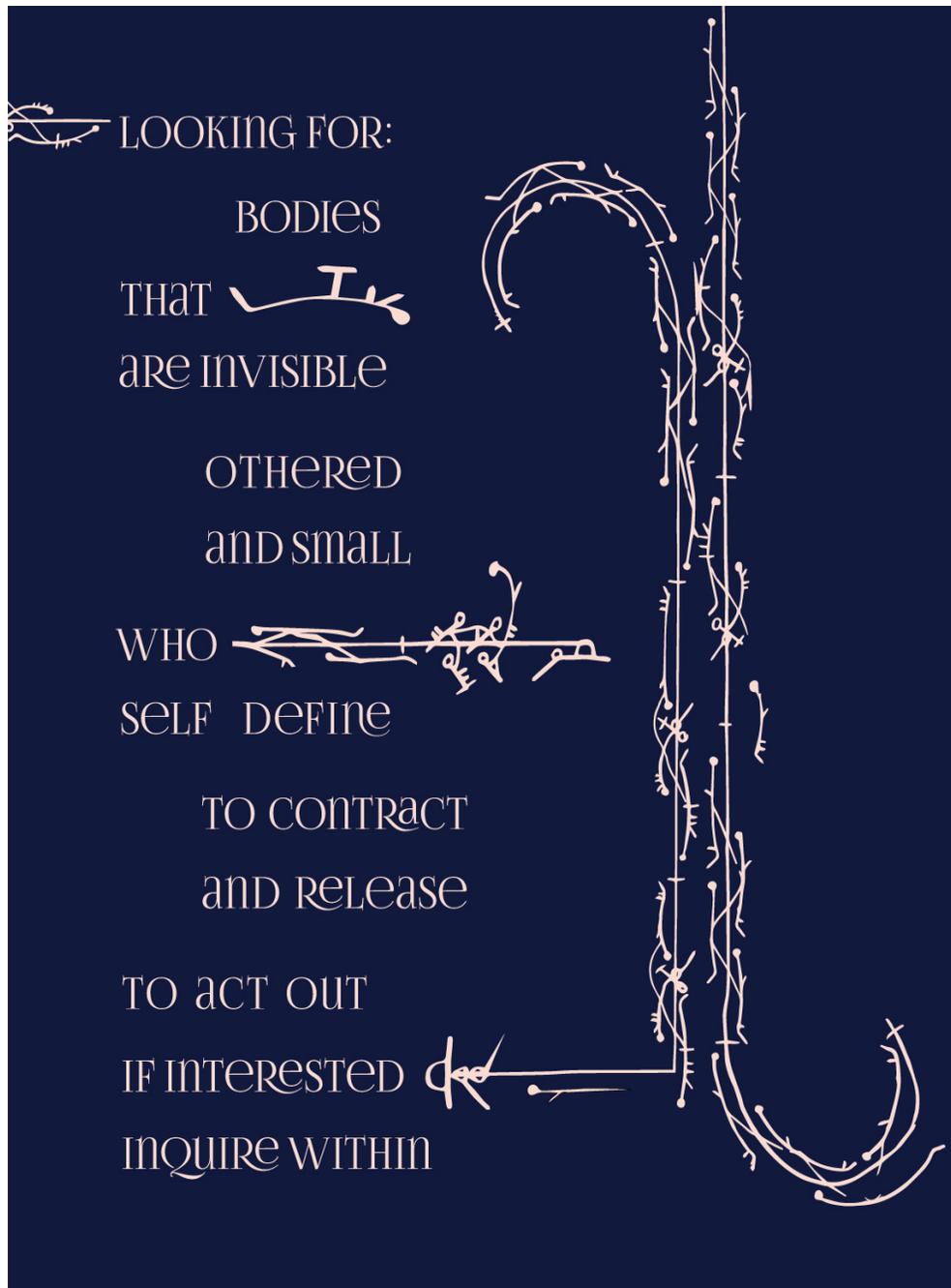
Brendan Fernandes, *Clean Labor*, 2017. Produced in collaboration with More Art. Image courtesy the Wythe Hotel and the artist. Photo by Chester Toye. Performers: Christopher DeVita, Charles Gowin, Madison Krekel, Erica Ricketts, Oisin Monaghan, Khadijia Griffith, and Wythe Hotel housekeepers, Angie Sherpa, Tenzin Thokme, and Tenzin Woiden.

Practices like Fernandes's point to spaces of invisibility and draw them to the centre while simultaneously interrogating the organizational structures and barriers to access within the danceworld itself. In a rare occasion in which Fernandes performs in his work, *Standing Leg* (2014) presents Fernandes on the floor, using what is known as a Ballet Foot Stretcher, in which the ballet dancer's foot, if subjected to the structured form of the stretcher over time, will eventually reform toward an imposed aesthetic ideal.

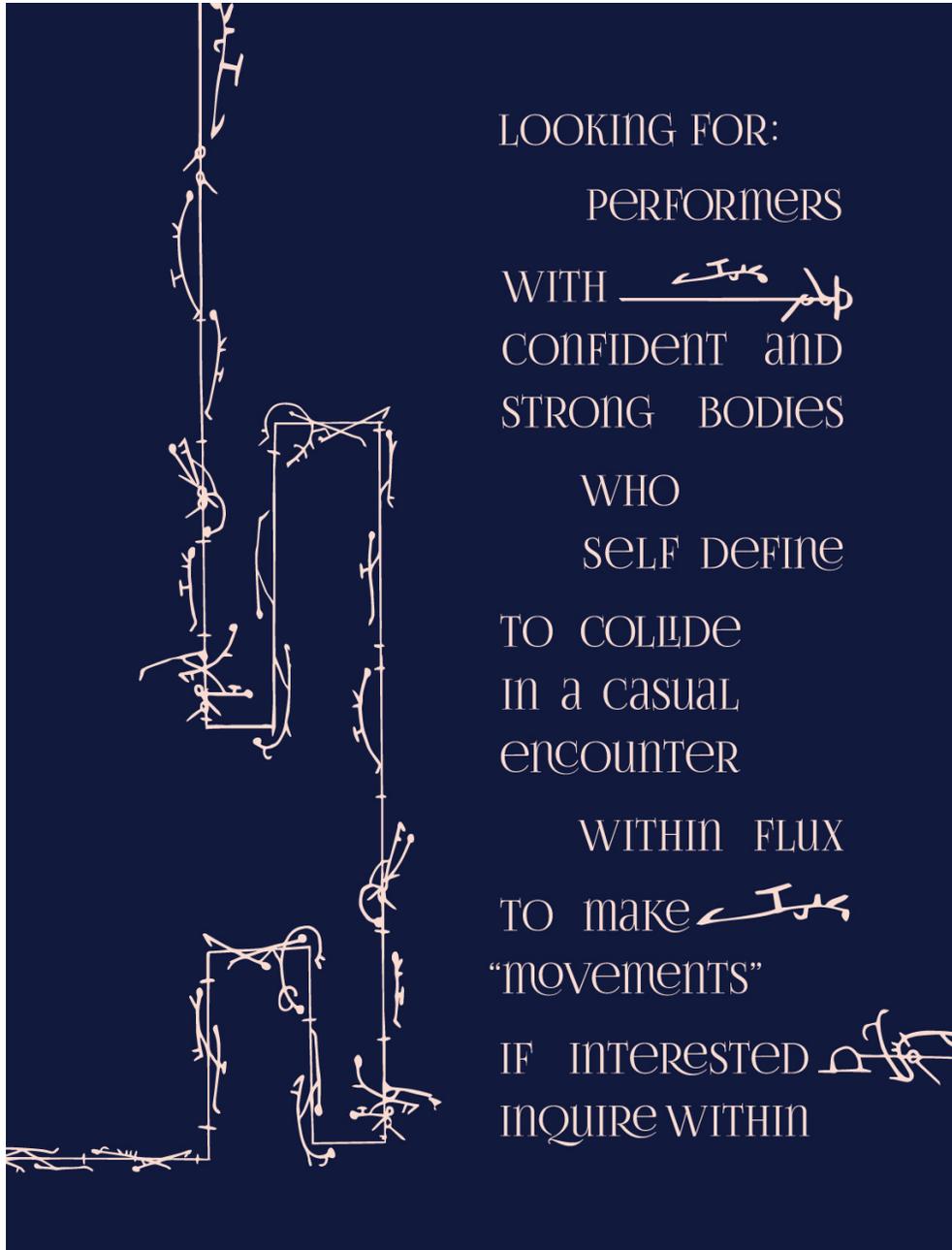


Brendan Fernandes, *Standing Leg*, 2014. Image courtesy of Kitchener-Waterloo Art Gallery and the artist. Photo by Felix Chan.

To this end, Fernandes's *Minor Calls* (2017), a series of vinyl wall works mimicking a call for dancers, also challenges the ideals of beauty as they coalesce on and around the dancer's body. Texts boldly call out for dancers not defined by societal ideals but by internally harnessed states: "LOOKING FOR: BODIES THAT ARE INVISIBLE OTHERED AND SMALL WHO SELF DEFINE TO CONTRACT AND RELEASE TO ACT OUT IF INTERESTED INQUIRE WITHIN" and "LOOKING FOR: PERFORMERS WITH CONFIDENT AND STRONG BODIES WHO SELF DEFINE TO COLLIDE IN A CASUAL ENCOUNTER WITHIN FLUX TO MAKE 'MOVEMENTS' IF INTERESTED INQUIRE WITHIN."



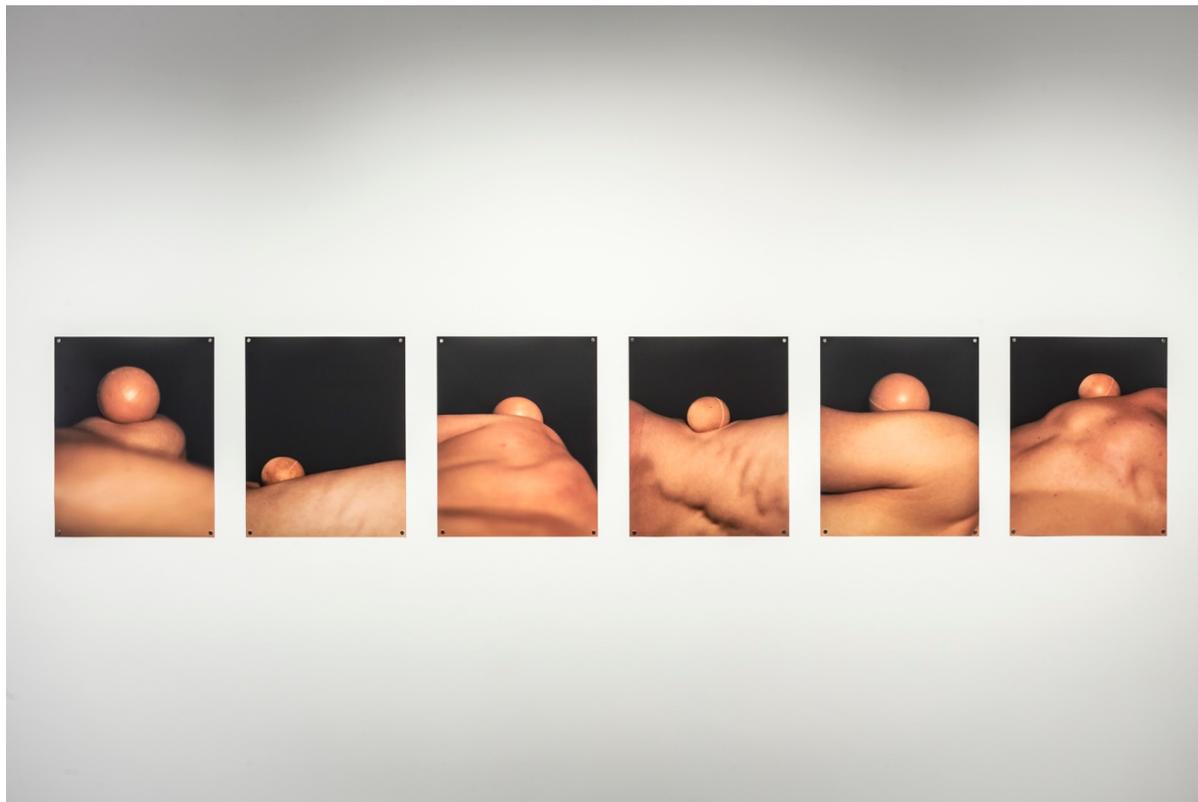
Brendan Fernandes, *Minor Calls*, 2017. Design concept by Brendan Fernandes in collaboration with Joseph Cuillier. Image courtesy MCA Chicago and the artist.



Brendan Fernandes, *Minor Calls*, 2017. Design concept by Brendan Fernandes in collaboration with Joseph Cuillier. Image courtesy MCA Chicago and the artist.

Fernandes's intervention on the scripted language of the dance call that has historically served to describe sought-after body types while discriminating against others illustrates Roberts's claim that "Black and Brown unruly bodies . . . demonstrate that race (among other social categories) and inequality/racism is not only encountered in linguistic forms or ideas and perceptions, it is also encountered intimately and provocatively in and through individuals as well as between bodies" (Roberts 2013, 8). Further fragmenting the conventions of the strength and beauty of the classically trained body, Fernandes's *Still Move* (2014), a set of six C-prints, transforms the beautiful muscularity of the dancer's body into something of a formalist grotesque, pushing the body outside of the frame and presenting a fragmented view to the dancer's muscular cohesiveness. Here, the traditional

perceptions of what constitutes a “dancer’s body” are challenged and in so doing engage and extend the “everyday” of postmodern dance, permitting “Othered” bodies to come into view.



Brendan Fernandes, *Still Move*, 2014. Doris McCarthy Gallery, the University of Toronto Scarborough. Image courtesy the Doris McCarthy Gallery and the artist. Photo by Toni Hafkenshied.

Beyond the physical geography of the studio walls exist other forms of spatial engagement, political geography, and phenomenology of the everyday, as well as spaces of social dance versus the formal training offered in studios, for instance, the gay dance club or disco, notably represented in art by the late Felix Gonzalez-Torres, whose “*Untitled*” (*Go-Go Dancing Platform*) (1991) holds space in the gallery regardless of whether or not one of the go-go dancers is present, the plinth extending both into the realm of the art historical and the realm of the socio-sexual. Gonzalez-Torres was devout in his belief that the audience activated his work. American artists Wu Tsang and Leilah Weinraub, in their respective art documentaries, *Wildness* (2012) and *Shakedown* (2018), offer the dance floor as a social space of worldmaking, notably, as it serves communities of queer people of colour. Fernandes takes up this space in an imagined as well as eulogistic way in his work *Free Fall 49*, which responds to the Orlando Shooting at Pulse Nightclub in Orlando, Florida, on June 12, 2016—a homophobic massacre of attendees of the gay club. Fernandes has stated, “Working with this challenging context, the work makes visible the political dimensions of spaces often viewed as outside of or ignored in contemporary political conversations. It explores the dance floor as both a space and a surface that supports, and also a space and surface that can penetrate, harm and ultimately hold still fallen bodies” (Fernandes 2017). Extending an art historical genealogy concerned with an art of the everyday, Fernandes’s mimicking of everyday movement—here, in the form of social, rather than trained dance—situates his work within the contemporary political moment and its specific

urgencies, where any uncertainty as to the worldmaking potential of the queer dance floor might be assuaged in consideration of the literal world-shaking and life-taking events of Orlando.



Brendan Fernandes, *Free Fall 49*, 2017. Images courtesy of the Getty Museum, Los Angeles, and the artist.

Pulling from a variety of historically specific moments, including institutional critique, critical race, labour, and process, the deliberate situatedness of the dancer's body simultaneously calls all to the fore, both holding the space and delineating the chasm between bodies and the physical space of the gallery and its invisible structures of organization both within and outside. The works discussed in

this essay reveal and critically retread the canons of modern and experimental dance, interrogating dance's own organizational structures as centred on an idea of bodily neutrality—like the neutrality of the art object—that does not disrupt a view to the “pure” act of viewing. In these works, bodies simultaneously direct and point outwards, to spaces underlooked and unseen, and hold our focus inward, not in spectacular elevation of form but in deep introspection around the structures that organize some bodies some ways and other bodies, otherwise.

Notes

1. The panel “Experimental Dance: Histories, Politics, Presence” was organized as part of the programme accompanying the exhibition *TEMPERAMENTAL*, which I curated at the Doris McCarthy Gallery at the University of Toronto Scarborough in 2015. The exhibition featured works by Mark Clintberg, Brendan Fernandes, Kim Kielhofner, Hazel Meyer, Will Munro, taisha paggett & Yann Novak, Elizabeth Price, Emily Roysdon, and Alexandro Segade.
2. Despite a view to an implicit politic within Rainer's choreography, Rainer has also said “ideological issues ‘have no bearing on the nature of the work’ . . . ‘my body remains the enduring reality’” (quoted in Baner 1993, 22).
3. In Canada in 1967, the October issue of the national arts magazine *artscanada* was titled “Black”; however, despite the political climate of the late 1960s and political urgencies surrounding race and civil rights, the issue was heavily weighted toward “the black of outer space, new jazz, and paint,” and prioritized the voices of White artists in theorizing the theme. (Verrall 2011, 541)
4. *It's About Time – Dancing Black in Canada: 1900–1970* was exhibited at Dance Collection Danse Gallery (Toronto) from January 31 to June 22, 2018, and at Ignite Gallery at OCAD University (Toronto) from July 14 to August 12, 2018.

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