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Staging a Queer Relationality: Destabilising Ballet in Brendan Fernandes' *The Master and Form*

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Abstract

In this article, I examine Kenyan-born Canadian multidisciplinary artist Brendan Fernandes' 2018/19 *The Master and Form*, a sculptural installation and performance that addresses mastery, constraint, and freedom within ballet through the artist's experience as a young queer ballet dancer of colour. Pairing Sara Ahmed's phenomenological readings of queerness and whiteness with scholarship on the politics of race, sexuality, and dance, I explore how Fernandes processes the historical forms of ballet that excluded his queer, non-white body and creates a space where a lack of balance can become the norm. Even as his cast of dancers are limited by the installation's rigid structures, I argue that they are given freedom within the largely improvisational performance to generate iconoclastic forms and sustained disorientations as they work with, against, and beyond the sculptures. Fernandes' engagement with ballet in *The Master and Form* displays the discipline's stringency but also its potential for malleability, demonstrating how the 'gray zone' of museum performances can be effectively used to critically explore minority identities. Though the work's austerity and affectlessness could contest its radicality or potential for invoking progress, its visible adjustments to ballet ultimately speak to the power of gestures to craft alternatives to dominant systems.

In a gallery in the Whitney Museum of American Art, two black, squarely cut wooden rods extend upwards to form a V with the support of a triangular base and a third protruding rod. The two tips of the V are wrapped with black leather and the sculpture stands on a circular black carpet. This sculpture, entitled *In First, in Fifth* (2018), is an art object in its own right, with a dark, enigmatic aura reminiscent of minimalist sculpture. But as the title suggests, it is specifically designed to support a ballet dancer in first or fifth position. And indeed, the sculpture can be activated by performance (see fig. 1). But here, the dancer rejects the satisfaction of filling in its negative space with the sculpture's namesake position. Instead, he surpasses its boundaries, barely even touching the edge of its carpet in his extended lunge position.

Fig. 1: Brendan Fernandes, *In First, in Fifth*, 2018. Stained ash wood, leather, and carpet. From *The Master and Form*, 2018/19. Performer: Hector Cerna. Photo by Matthew Carasella Photography. Image courtesy of the artist and Monique Meloche Gallery, Chicago.

This alignment (or lack thereof) is unexpected; the 'proper' position appears obvious based on the sculpture's title and construction. But it is just one of many such misaligned moments that emerge from the fusion of body and object during the one-hour performances that accompany *The Master and Form*, a 2018/19 sculptural installation by Brendan Fernandes, a Kenyan-born Canadian multidisciplinary artist of Goan descent. Over the course of my repeated viewings of *The Master and Form*—I saw the performance once a week for ten weeks as it was presented in the 2019 Whitney Biennial—I never grew tired of it. I would always notice a new spatial configuration achieved by a dancer engaging with—or not engaging with—a sculpture. By combining the constraint of a segmented performance score and a series of largely unpliable objects with the freedom of improvisation, Fernandes allows his dancers to explore balance and disorientation, critiquing the language of ballet by surpassing its restrictions.

The performances are divided into six segments in which the cast of five dancers rotate between three series of objects. They begin on five sculptures (including *In First, in Fifth*) that are arranged around the perimeter of the gallery. Each sculpture reifies a certain ballet position and is individually engaged by a dancer. Working on, against,

and beyond these devices (as the cast and Whitney production staff colloquially referred to them), the dancers fluidly occupy and contest the negative space of each device's respective position. For the second segment, the dancers leave their devices and come together in the large scaffolding-like structure in the center of the gallery, freely weaving their limbs through its forest of rounded metal rods (this structure was colloquially referred to as 'the cage' by the dancers and production team, see fig. 2). For the third segment, the dancers stand around the perimeter of the cage and hold onto vertical rods with one hand to execute archetypal ballet barre combinations in unison: *pliés, tendus, dégagés, rondes de jambes*, and finally *grandes battements*. After returning to the devices and the central cage for the fourth and fifth segment, the dancers conclude the performance by taking to the ten ropes hung along the rear wall of the gallery, with each dancer using two ropes to counterbalance and elevate their bodies (fig. 3). Even as the dancers always follow the fixed device-cage-barre-device-cage-ropes score for the one-hour performances, the only expressly set choreography is the barre exercises.

By staging *The Master and Form* in the museum, Fernandes removes ballet from the spectacle of the proscenium stage and scrutinises it in the intimate proximity of the gallery. Here, he joins a niche yet rich group of artists who work within and with the museum to decontextualise and remix ballet. To present just two brief examples, William Forsythe's popular interactive exhibition *Choreographic Objects*, presented at the ICA Boston and MFA Houston in 2018 and 2019, offered visitors the chance to engage and animate their own bodies with reified choreographic 'technologies' that Forsythe might use when devising one of his proscenium pieces. Meanwhile, for Yve Laris Cohen's 2012 installation and performance *Coda* at New York's SculptureCenter, the artist built a 75-foot-long vertical expanse of sprung marley floor as an installation and then, in a series of six performances, meticulously cleaned it using his own T-shirt, invoking an expanded view of labour in dance.

Fig. 2: Brendan Fernandes, *The Master and Form*, 2018/19. Performers: Tiffany Mangulabnan, Hector Cerna, Charles Gowin, Violetta Komyshan, Josep Maria Monreal Vidal. Photo by Matthew Carasella Photography. Image courtesy of the artist and Monique Meloche Gallery, Chicago.

Fig. 3: Brendan Fernandes, *The Master and Form*, June 7, 2019. Photo by Paula Court. Performers: Tiffany Mangulabnan, Mauricio Vera, Josep Maria Monreal Vidal. Image courtesy of the artist and Monique Meloche Gallery, Chicago.

This range of possibilities for re-working of ballet performance in museal spaces aligns with Claire Bishop's positioning of dance exhibitions in a ripe 'gray zone' between the black box theatre and the white cube gallery (24). Such a space also offers queer artists and artists of colour the opportunity to emphatically assert their live presence in an institution that, as Diana Taylor observes, has 'long taken the cultural Other out of context and isolated it, reducing the live to a dead object behind glass' (66). And even as performers act within and on the museum, rejecting the fixedness of a static object or brief wall label, their presence also extends beyond it. As Erin Silver writes about Fernandes' performance work, 'the deliberate situatedness of the dancer's body… delineat[es] the chasm between bodies and the physical space of the gallery and its invisible structures of organization both within and outside' (96). An essay on *The Master and Form* could disregard this complex 'situatedness' and read the work on a purely formal level as an interrogation of the place of discipline within ballet's ontology. But Fernandes speaks at length to the importance of his non-white and queer identities to his work, and I feel that turning a blind eye to this would neglect the depth of this work.

In my subsequent investigation of race and queerness in *The Master and Form*, I draw inspiration from Jose Muñoz's concept of disidentification and seek to identify moments in which Fernandes slants ballet's line of inheritance, a subject-object relationship I call a queer relationality. This skewed orientation that can be seen in the work of many queer dance and performance artists of colour who configure themselves in relation to canonical works or forms from the white Western cultural canon. I see a queer relationality in Ishmael Houston-Jones' ongoing project *Looking for Laure*, in which he casts various duos, such as one Black and one white male dance artist, in postures that inhabit and rework the racial and gender politics of the nude white prostitute and the subservient Black maid from Édouard Manet's iconic 1863 painting *Olympia* (Houston-Jones). I see a queer relationality in *Séance*, a 2007 performance by Cree Indigenous artist Paul Monkman at the Royal Ontario Museum in which his drag alter-

ego Miss Chief Eagle Testickle resurrects and confronts nineteenth-century 'history' painters such as Paul Kane who painted fabricated inventions of Indigenous people, establishing misrepresentation as fact for generations to come (Monkman). And, in spite of its initial impression of cleanness or austerity, I see a queer relationality in Fernandes' *The Master and Form* by reading it through the artist's more explicitly personal work.

In this article, I center Fernandes' lived experience and locate the origin of *The Master and Form* in the artist's history as a young ballet student and outspoken discussions of how his identity as a queer person of colour influences his work. Pairing Sara Ahmed's phenomenological readings of queerness and whiteness with contemporary scholars working between race, sexuality, and dance, I explore how Fernandes physicalises and expands his dissonant relationship to ballet's whiteness and ultimately creates a space where a queer lack of balance can become the norm. The performance's improvisatory structure and the dancers' unconventional gestures made by Fernandes' diverse cast work to dismantle 'the white swan' as the ideal figure of ballet in the Western imagination, pointing us towards a future where ballet can be a welcoming space for dancers of all backgrounds and identities.

Origin Stories, Re-Worked

I begin my study of *The Master and Form* by pulling away from its present site in the 2019 Whitney Biennial and going back in time to Fernandes' youth. Here, I am motivated by Kareem Khubchandani's resonant declaration that 'origin stories matter [...] to us as queer people' (199): 'As queers, as dancers, as queer dancers, we are success stories, errant futures predicted in origin stories that could not be curtailed by propriety and respectability' (200). Fernandes' resilient origin story encapsulates his journey with ballet. He started dancing in his youth and continued through his senior year of college when a hamstring injury forced him to stop his dance training (Morais). Reflecting on his experience with ballet, he asserts how 'dancing as a young boy and the

feeling of being on stage [gave] me an immense feeling of freedom' that he did not always experience in everyday life as a young queer person of colour (qtd. in Kennedy). But at the same time, Fernandes recalls how 'my feet did not have [the high arches that are considered to be] required conditions of beauty [in ballet] and so I worked on them by wearing the foot stretcher… I pushed my body to reflect the contours of the device' (qtd. in Metcalfe and Mowry). Even though ballet gave him freedom, its entrenched idea of the perfect body also cast him out.

Fernandes confronts the physical and mental legacy of his ballet training in his 2014 performance *Standing Leg* (fig. 4). Dressed minimally in a black tank top and shorts, the artist uses a foot stretcher to re-shape his feet just as he did in his youth; his impossible goal is to stand up while keeping his right foot trapped in the elastic strap of the stretcher. His intense concentration is visible as he rolls on his back and scoots around in circles, but he never defeats the constraint of the foot stretcher and fully stands. This performance brings its audience intimately and brutally close to Fernandes' futile efforts as he reembodies his fraught history with freedom and constraint in ballet. He connects this personal struggle with the broader history of ballet in interviews, pointing to how ballet began within Western hegemony as 'a way to bow to Louis XIV' in seventeenth-century France (qtd. in Welsh). Considered with attention to its own origin story, ballet becomes a non-neutral form of movement that upholds the power of Western patriarchy. Fernandes further names how whiteness becomes valued as a pure mark of untainted, lithe fragility under this framework: 'bodies of colour have been deemed "too strong" or their musculature accused of not allowing the dancer to perform in [certain] ways, distracting [them] from being effortless and free' (qtd. in Kennedy).

Fernandes' critique of ballet's exclusionary conditions aligns with the work of dance studies scholars who scrutinise the medium's troubled relationship to race, gender, and sexuality (Gottschild; Foster; Stoneley). Particularly relevant to the scope of this section is the artist's critique of ballet prizing white bodies more than bodies of colour, a valuation that extends across Euro-American society's maintenance

of whiteness as an invisible yet ever-present standard. Because these racialised frameworks have been absorbed into the dance studio, white bodies are established as the dominant standard unmarked by racialisation while bodies of colour are inescapably racialised and incapable of performing as completely 'ordinary' or 'normal'. From the individual dancing body marked (by race) or unmarked (by whiteness), a broader framework for the studio and stage develops. As Rebecca Chaleff articulates in her article critiquing the whiteness of postmodern dance, '[t]he ordinary body activates an ordinary space oriented around whiteness; inversely, the unseen whiteness of this space determines which bodies appear ordinary within it' (77). The unmarked status of white bodies in dance spaces is an everyday reality for Fernandes and other dancers and choreographers of colour. When Fernandes was on a panel with taisha paggett, a queer Black American dancer and choreographer, they both spoke to how they have struggled to stand in the established (white) lineage of dance history (Silver 86). This uneasy relationship with tradition underscores how bodies of colour cannot neutrally occupy the same lineage as white bodies and further exposes the limitations of labeling the white body as 'ordinary' or 'universal'.

Existing under the invisible standard of whiteness as a person of colour places stress on the body, a phenomenon drawn out by Sara Ahmed in 'A Phenomenology of Whiteness' (2007). She posits the successful body as white and unrestrained by its race, an advantage that is not by any means a measure of inherent competence but rather a gradually constructed 'bodily form of privilege' that comes across as the 'ability to move through the world without losing one's way' (161). The mobility of bodies of colour, in turn, is restricted: 'when someone's whiteness is in dispute then they come under "stress," which in turn threatens bodily motility, or what the body "can do"' (160). This corporeal sensation of difference is readily aligned with the embodied practice of dance, especially vis-à-vis André Lepecki's work on 'choreopolitics'. Following Michel Foucault, he articulates how choreography can be considered 'a site for investigating agency, compliance, the force of imperatives, and the capacity to collectively

Fig. 4: Brendan Fernandes, *Standing Leg*, 2014. Photo by Felix Chan. Image courtesy of the artist and Monique Meloche Gallery, Chicago.

surrender oneself, as dancer, to an outside force' (16). The exclusivity and bodily conditioning of this 'outside force' brings forth pressure. In the case of ballet, a dancer's success is dependent upon how obediently they can align with or 'surrender' to ballet's regime of codified positions, including its invisible yet dominant infrastructure of whiteness—a stressful task, to say the least.

Fernandes' excavation of his own body's history of stress in relation to ballet's invisible whiteness can be seen in the tense exchanges between dancer and sculpture in *The Master and Form*. Standing on

the carpet adjacent to the *In First, in Fifth*, a dancer traces his arms in a broad arc around his body as he moves them to the downward circle of a low fifth position, dutifully following the motion of his limbs with his eyes. At the conclusion of this gesture, his lowered arms curve around the middle of *In First, in Fifth*'s V-shaped extension. There is a pleasing synergy in this final form—the sculpture molds with the dancer's position such that he can directly touch its wooden rods without changing the shape of his arm position. His classically trained body is well-equipped to occupy this position, and he does so with striking grace. But even as *In First, in Fifth* amplifies the elegant precision of his position, it also discourages the dancer from reaching into the gestural space *beyond* his arm's curve in the ordained low fifth position; attempting a different position while remaining adjacent to the sculpture would break the pleasing object-body symmetry. Such a limited alignment—the sculpture can only be properly 'completed' when the dancer wraps his arm around in very precise positions—resonates with the formalised exactitude of ballet's positions that can, under the historical Euro-American logic of ballet, only be achieved in their most ideal state by white bodies.

Standing in Fifth, Queerly

This reification of ballet's exclusionary whiteness is harsh and could even be read as the artist unduly inflicting restraint on his dancers. But returning to Fernandes' voice offers a path forward in investigating what is opened up in such a display. In an interview, the artist states:

> It's all about lived experiences. I'm a Kenyan, Indian, who grew up in Toronto, who lives in the U.S. now, and I've lived in other places, like the Caribbean. Moving into new spaces affect[s] me, whether it's just the daily life experience of being challenged because I'm queer, understanding traditions and relations with my family, or just being in a foreign place and trying to figure out

> if this place is a home for me… It's a hybridization of different experiences that make me who I am. (qtd. in Hochberger)

Here, Fernandes speaks directly to the intersection of identities and experiences that have influenced his life, considering them together as a hybrid group of influences rather than as isolated or unrelated categories. Given how fluidly Fernandes names these points of identity formation, I realise that I cannot read *The Master and Form* as originating in the artist's biography without also considering how his queer identity influences *The Master and Form*.

But rather than distinguish this from my previous discussion of the artist's experience as a dancer of colour, I take up queerness as an intersectional marker of overlapping minority identities, following Clare Croft's acknowledgment that 'queer' has too often been a 'moniker for whiteness, disaggregating LGBTQ subjectivity from race' (5). I am further indebted to Muñoz, whose imaginative meditations on queerness vividly illustrate how the concept can be expansively considered: 'Queerness is essentially about the rejection of a here and now and an insistence on potentiality or concrete possibility for another world' (*Cruising Utopia* 1). In a world still embedded with overlapping schemas of oppression, minoritarian subjects can gain more life by approaching the world queerly and imagining a different one where their persistent vision is no longer a point of stress.

An intersectional look into *The Master and Form* can be initiated through Muñoz's theory of disidentification, which formulates how queer artists of colour work within and against the systems of power that designate them as 'less than'. One key part of this theory is 'the me and the not me': the aspects of the system the artist still identifies with or connects to in spite of it all, and the aspects of the system they seek to subvert (*Disidentifications* 3). In *The Master and Form*, we can see Fernandes' 'me' as his identification with the freedom of achieving elevated positions that ballet enables, whereas the 'not me' is his *dis*identification with the systemic constraints that unduly

restrict his body from fully inhabiting ballet's positions. Following his inability to fully inhabit his own multifaceted identity in the dance studio, Fernandes holds onto ballet's points of constraint but pushes its form to encompass a wider spectrum of identities, forging a queer relationality between its exclusive path and his hope for its future.

But how exactly does he do this? Turning again to Ahmed's critical re-working of phenomenology allows me to appreciate the queer potential inherent in *The Master and Form*'s structure. In *Queer Phenomenology* (2006), she defines straightness as the act of being in alignment: 'Things seems "straight" (on the vertical axis), when they are "in line," which means when they are aligned with other lines [...]. The vertical is hence normative; it is shaped by the repetition of bodily and social actions over time' (66). If straightness can be a normative sexual orientation and a three-dimensional orientation, how can we understand queerness in spatial terms, especially with regards to dance? Thomas DeFrantz's 'Queer Dance in Three Acts' offers a rich template: 'queer being reflects *an orientation to another*: a near and far, rather than an address; **queer doing** assumes an interaction of self and other. **doing queer**, then, becomes something always shared, always interpreted and recognized between/among' (170, my italics, bold in original). Rather than suppressing difficult aspects of self-identity in pursuit of respectable legibility or a didactic 'address' towards others, queer doing and dancing embraces its skewed starting point and follows its slant to a shared commonality and generative embrace of difference.

Thinking about (sexual) orientation in ballet quickly brings up the form's obsession with moments of balance that are achieved in spite of a dancers' limbs' orientation away from the body's vertical axis. In *The Sleeping Beauty*'s iconic Rose Adagio, Princess Aurora (whose heterosexuality is on display as she courts four male dukes) strives to balance and align her body with a vertical axis, even though she is not standing straight up and down—she stands *en pointe* on her right light with her left leg turned out and bent behind her in *attitude*, her right arm holding a series of four suitors' hand for balance, and her left arm curved above her head in high fifth. In these notoriously

difficult sequences, Princess Aurora must prove the persistence of her straightness by ensuring that her body remains stabilised and vertically oriented despite the asymmetry of her attitude position. Straightness is visible in many other places in ballet: recall the dancers whose 180-degree extensions are praised as being 'as straight as a ruler' or the firm ubiquity of the male-female duet in ballets from all eras.

So what happens when queer orientations remain queer and are not re-straightened in a world conditioned by straightness? What happens when—as Ahmed asks—the queer orientation 'does not overcome what is "off line," and hence *acts out of line with others*[?]' (*Queer Phenomenology* 107, emphasis in original). How can queer and non-white dance produce '*counter*moves and *counter*discourses' that resist the default condition of straightness? (Lepecki 18, my italics). In *The Master and Form*, Fernandes embraces the dissonance and opportunity of queer orientations, allowing ballet to fall—and stay—out of alignment as his cast resists the vertical 'pull of straight life' (DeFrantz 175) through disorientated positions.

This queer orientation of the work can be illustrated by once again observing a singular gesture. In the central cage structure, a dancer sits on a rod three feet off the floor that runs parallel to the ground with his back to museum viewers and his legs stretched out in front of him. Hooking his feet onto an adjacent rod to anchor his body, he dramatically bends backwards and drapes himself over the rod so that he looks at the audience upside-down, all while his left arm sweeps over his head and just barely caresses the gallery floor (fig. 5). And instead of just passing through this upside-down position to and from his more stable, vertically-oriented seated position, he mines his new orientation, windmilling his arms and scanning the contours of the gallery from his new vantage point. This dancer could only turn fifth position on its head—in effect, 'queering' it—because of Fernandes' broad allowance for improvisation and freedom within performances. This aligns well with DeFrantz's recipe for making queer dances: 'we create stabilized collections of gestures that are at once precarious and fussy' (174). In the absence of delineated choreography, the dancers naturally use the

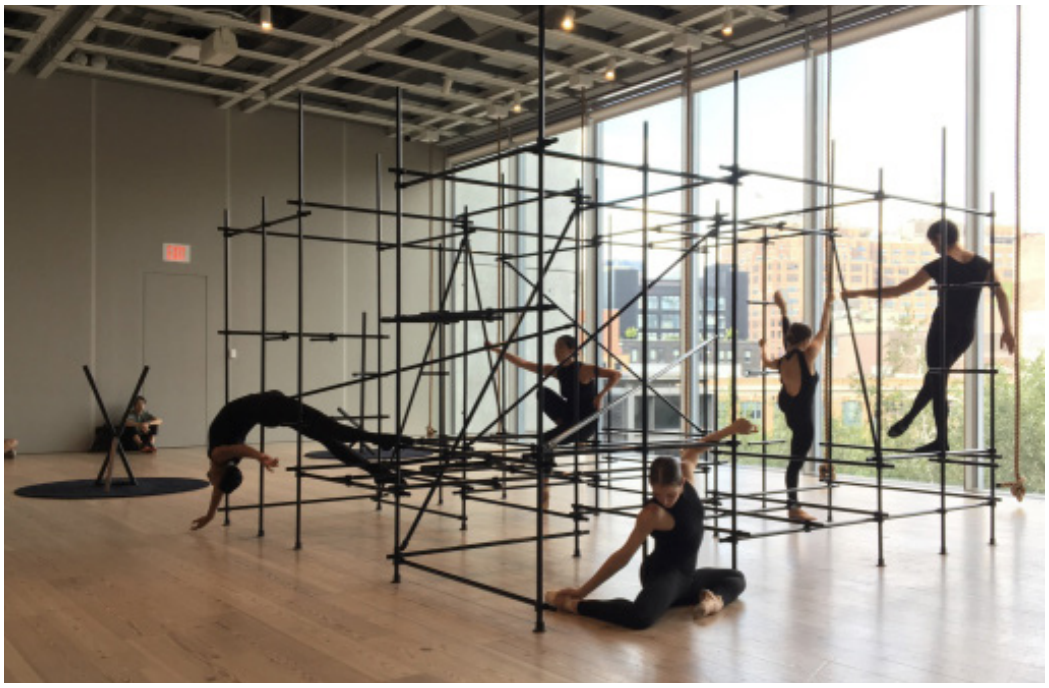

Fig. 5: Brendan Fernandes, *The Master and Form*, August 9, 2019. Photo by Dylan Sherman. Performers pictured, left to right: Hector Cerna, Tiffany Mangulabnan, Amy Saunder, Violetta Komyshan, Mauricio Vera. Image courtesy of the artist and Monique Meloche Gallery, Chicago.

stable structure of the installation as a jumping-off point for generating destabilised and re-worked ballet movements, creating a porous and open rather than restrictive and hyper-specific framework for ballet performance.

The Conundrum of Visibility

The Master and Form's deep engagement with personal sources and embrace of oscillating states of balance reach towards a broader community of marginalised dancers and people in its invocation of a world wherein ballet and other ideologically constraining forces do not restrict belonging based on identity. Those who experience *The Master and Form* as an installation and performance, in Muñoz's words, 'see the past and potentiality imbued within [the] object, the ways in which it might represent a mode of being that was then not quite there but nonetheless an opening' (*Cruising Utopia* 9). Through Fernandes inhabiting and reconciling his own fraught background with ballet and the ways in which he was not included, the personal is opened outwards.

But in staging and reproducing the exclusionary conditions of ballet, especially in the already-exclusive space of the museum, one could justifiably argue that Fernandes is not truly degrading barriers and reaching towards an inclusive future. Moreover, *The Master and Form* is in some ways too willing to fuse the exclusivity of ballet with contemporary art's own fraught culture of impassivity and austerity that, as Jennifer Doyle astutely observes, aligns 'one form of difficulty (in which a work's meaning is not readily available to the viewer) with a regulation of affect (in which opacity, the difficulty of meaning, is packaged as cool, distanced, and anti-emotional)' (8). Perhaps this cool impenetrability is only fair, as it faithfully represents and scrutinises ballet training's emphasis on suppressing pain and 'making it look effortless'. But instead of replicating these stressful conditions of ballet, what if Fernandes had instead *grand battement*-ed them off their pedestal and thrown them into a space that welcomes affect, where dancers can crack their balletic composure and let out screams of frustration in moments when they feel ballet's pain? What if he had embraced DeFrantz's definition of 'queer doing' that calls for an 'extravagance of some sort, an excess so that the queerness will not be mistaken for some brand of errant straightness' (171)?

In response, I invoke the fickle conundrum of visibility. As Joshua Chambers-Letson teaches us in his work on the queerness of Felix Gonzalez-Torres' conceptual art, queer artists of colour often must first perform 'the recognizable role of institutionally sanctioned artist' (135) in order to gain access to art's white, heteronormative spaces and then get to work eroding their exclusivity. Just like Gonzalez-Torres, Fernandes must replicate some of contemporary art's dominant conditions—in this case, its affectless austerity—in order to gain entry to the Whitney and form a queer relationality with ballet. *The Master and Form* does not topple ballet's elitism, and perhaps it does retain too much of its restraining discipline, but at least it does the work of breaking inside ballet in order to mine and adjust its foundational codes. Gonzalez-Torres once said that he wanted to 'work within the contradictions of the system and try to create a better place' (qtd. in

Chambers-Letson 137). The same could be said of Fernandes, who creates a work that can be identified and read within the schema of ballet but ultimately exceeds it through the validation of resonant, off-balance gestures. Working within the contradictions of ballet, he reaches towards a 'better place'.

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