

# Free Fall, for Camera Selections from a Dance Dramaturg's Notebook

Amanda Jane Graham

This essay was commissioned as a response to Brendan Fernandes' exhibition, *Inaction*.

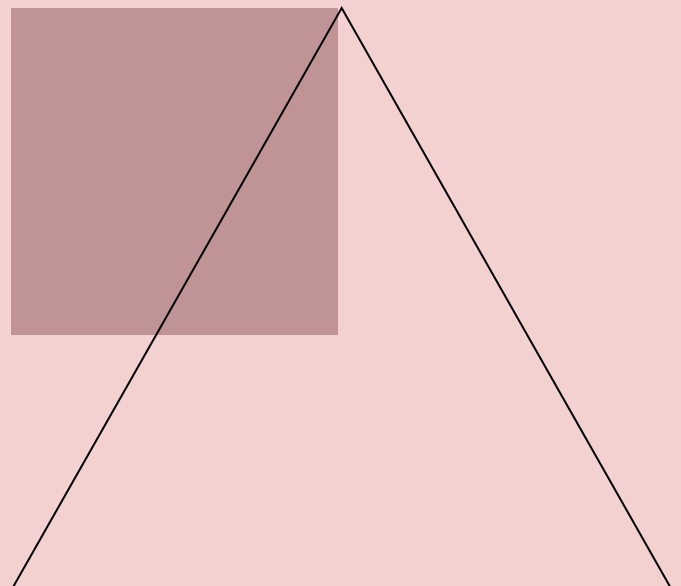
## 1. Lineage System

I travelled to New York City to spend a week with artist-choreographer Brendan Fernandes and dancers John Alix, Khadija Griffith, and Oisín Monaghan. At the time, Brendan, John, Khadija, and Oisín were developing a sculptural and performance-based installation in a street-level SoHo storefront. Over the course of the summer the narrow room, provided by the non-profit Recess, became their multi-use space for rehearsal, discursive exchange, and presentation. Every day, the dancers (re)arranged large, rectangular "dance floor" panels into different configurations, which, in turn, determined the limits and possibilities of their dance. The dancers' durational improvisation yielded, as Brendan put it, "a vocabulary of movements and gestures [...] developed to explore the social and political implications of the fallen body and the dance floor as a space for resistance." This work-in-process, *Hit Back*, was an artistic response to the mass shooting at Pulse Nightclub in Orlando, Florida, that transpired on June 12th, 2016. It functioned as an experimental space for queer community making. It was a stage, backstage, and an after party all in one.

Brendan asked me to spend time at the Recess residency because we were in conversation about two other related pieces that were also dance-responses to the Orlando tragedy: *Free Fall 49* and *Free Fall, for Camera*. *Free Fall 49* premiered in June of 2017 at the J Paul Getty Museum in Los Angeles. During the performance dancers grooved on raised platforms to DJ'd House music that stopped and started again 49 times. With each of the 49 pauses in the music the dancers fell to the floor. After each fall, they

rose resiliently in honor of the 49 victims of the fatal nightclub attack. *Free Fall, for Camera* (2019) was initially conceived of as a film adaptation of *Free Fall 49* but transformed into a large-scale, multimedia dance and video installation with its own unique aesthetic and affective life.

The development of *Free Fall 49*—specifically the dramaturgical exchange that informed *Free Fall 49*'s choreographic and visual landscape—is the focus of this essay. But often I find that focus is overrated, especially when it comes to my artistic relationship with Brendan. More often than not, our conversations are rambling, piecemeal, messy, and passionate diatribes and listening sessions full of emergent ideas and personal anecdotes. Getting somewhere usually means wandering around everywhere: newspaper headlines, art world gossip, movie recommendations. Our process involves making connections between bits and pieces of cultural material and our everyday lives. For me, it also requires understanding that Brendan's current work (and, for that matter, his work yet to be imagined) arises out of work that came before. For instance, *Free Fall, for Camera* is indebted to *Free Fall 49*, which contains echoes of *Hit Back*, and so on. To know Brendan's art...to talk about Brendan's art with Brendan...is to know all of Brendan's art, to treat his body of work as a lineage system with a common ancestry. That said, while this essay may be "about" *Free Fall, for Camera* I also feel obliged to mention the works that led to *Free Fall, for Camera* and some of the important, invisible marginalia: Busby Berkeley, the kaleidoscope, modes of indirect looking, and President Trump staring at the sky during the solar eclipse.



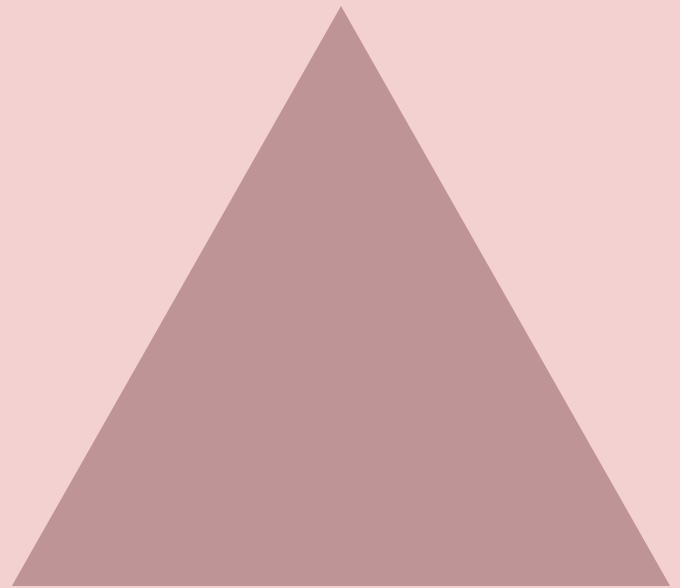
## 2. Aerial Observer

"The eclipse! Remember how we forgot to go outside for the solar eclipse?" (Brendan Fernandes, phone call with Amanda Graham, November 25, 2020). It's true. On August 21, 2017, while the rest of North America was testing out homemade pinhole cameras, Brendan and I were inside a Brooklyn apartment alternately pacing and populating a shared google doc with images. (Our very own junk drawer version of a Pinterest vision board.) At some point we realized that we had missed the eclipse and were mildly disappointed. The next day we saw pictures of President Trump squinting up at the sky, looking directly at the sun. Headlines like "Did Trump Damage His Eyes During the Great American Eclipse? New Cellular-Level Technology Could Find Out" (Newsweek) pervaded the internet. Of course, looking straight at the solar eclipse (or, for that matter, looking at the sun on a normal day) can damage your eyes. Finding indirect ways of looking (i.e. the pinhole camera) helps us see a more accurate, complete eclipse. This may be a lesson gleaned from an eclipse, but it can be widely applied. Coming to understand a thing often involves looking through a lens (microscope, telescope, X Ray) or from a vantage point: overhead, for instance.

In the 1930s the aesthetics of overhead viewing were synonymous with the filmmaking style of director and choreographer Busby Berkeley. Berkeley, who had served as an aerial observer in the U.S. Air Corps during World War I, went on to make movie musicals known for their aerial shots of large-scale choreographies. Berkeley's cascading chorus lines and elaborate patterns of interlocked bodies were spectacular indeed. Many critics have described them as kaleidoscopic. Like a kaleidoscope, Berkeley's choreographies were composed of lots of discrete parts (bodies to be sure, but also associated arms, legs, and shiny costumes) that, when combined, offered a fantastical view of changing, repeating, ornate, embodied patterns. These choreographies often consumed the individual performer into the spectacular collective. Glamorous excess overwhelmed subjectivity. Berkeley's films, and his hypnotic dance numbers in particular, were a welcome escape for viewers who turned to movie magic as a diversion from the Great Depression.

But what if collectively dancing, and watching a collective dance, were a way to acknowledge the fault lines in our social fabric, and the lives we have lost in these cavernous cracks? What if Berkeley's go to tools—kaleidoscopic choreography and aerial shots—

were stripped down and employed to lay bare human intimacy, to create a feeling of closeness rather than distance? The Berkley-esque scenes in *Free Fall, for Camera* do just that. Although Brendan and I turned to a wide range of still and moving images for inspiration - Merce Cunningham and Elliot Caplan's *Beach Birds* for *Camera* (that Brendan pays homage to with his title), Trevor Paglen's *Untitled (Reaper Drone)* (2010), and Barbara Moore's photographs of Martha Graham - Busby Berkeley's films were central to our conversation and to the choreographic and filmic design of the end work. *Free Fall, for Camera* is then a multimedia dance experience that is at once citational while being a queer, contemporary departure. It encourages us to consider the relationship between dance practices and practices of looking, for they are entwined, much like the choreographer and his dramaturg.



**Amanda Jane Graham** is a dance cultural historian and performance curator. She is currently Associate Director of Engagement at Carolina Performing Arts at University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, where she is also an instructor in the Department of Communication. Graham oversees The Arts in Public Service Fellows Program and Feedback: The Carolina Performing Arts Performance Institute. Graham has taught at Hobart and William Smith Colleges, University of Rochester, and Northwestern University, where she served as the Andrew Mellon Postdoctoral Fellow in Dance Studies. Graham's writing on dance, art, and politics has appeared in *Art Journal*, *Dance Chronicle*, and *The Futures of Dance Studies*. She has served as Brendan Fernandes's dramaturg on and off since 2016.