

Commons

Artist

Project:

Brendan

Fernandes

A CALL AND  
RESPONSE

JUNE 18–  
OCTOBER 13, 2019

Brendan Fernandes's dance-based installation *A Call and Response* explores the movement of bodies in public space. Over the course of the exhibition, the artist works with visitors and professional dancers to examine our everyday actions. Fernandes urges us to consider how a person's movements, like making room for a fellow train commuter, can act as a meaningful kind of choreography. By reflecting on our physical encounters with others, how can we more authentically interact with one another?

The installation includes interactive sculptures such as swings that encourage movement, as well as choreographic prompts. Based on childhood games like hide-and-seek, the prompts encourage visitors to interact with each other in new ways. A group of professional dancers provide their physical interpretation of the prompts in rehearsals every other week in the space.

*The Commons Artist Project: Brendan Fernandes* is curated by January Parkos Arnall, Curator of Public Programs, with Christy LeMaster, Assistant Curator of Public Programs.

MUSEUM OF  
CONTEMPORARY ART  
CHICAGO

220 E CHICAGO AVE  
CHICAGO, IL 60611

Hide Out —

In Seeking —

In Seeing —

In Hiding

# January Parkos Arnall



While moving down the street you encounter a group of people coming toward you from the opposite direction. Who will give way? A series of decisions about movement ensues. This set of gestures is not solely dictated by personal choice but rather a multitude of social constructs and personal and architectural variables. These behaviors are shaped by some of our earliest experiences, say, playground games like hide-and-seek, and extend to the formats of our built environments as adults. There is power inherent in visibility and an assumed right-of-way—but might we also find power in invisibility and in *giving* way?

The built urban environment has, in so many ways, determined our sense of self and of place in the world. In the early 1900s, social psychologists like John Dewey and Charles Horton Cooley proposed a social self determined through our personal encounters and interactions. Cooley's "looking-glass self" posited that our sense of self is primarily defined through how other people perceive us. What we believe someone else thinks of us, as determined by their physical gestures and facial expressions when interacting with us, has an invariable and enduring effect on our development of identity.

At the time Cooley was writing, the urban environment was drastically changing the nature of social interaction. Young people were beginning to more regularly inhabit close spaces with strangers—perhaps working in a factory or moving into a tightly packed apartment complex. With the advent of relationships fostered through online platforms, we again are experiencing an overwhelming change in the way

we interact socially. How can we contend with the new variables affecting our formation of self in today's hyper-social world where our interactions are often limited to virtual, remote correspondence? Can we instead use communicative technologies within the context of the playful ethos of early childhood games like hide-and-seek or follow-the-leader to unlearn inherent biases in our social interactions? If we can replace these technologies with tools toward mutual construction, in Fernandes's words, "we are building a we."

Brendan Fernandes is a fourth-generation Kenyan, born in Nairobi in 1979 to a family hailing from Goa, India. He grew up in Toronto, Canada, and has made art as an adult primarily in New York and Chicago. Uniquely attuned to the transitional nature of identity and cultural performance, for *In Calling* Fernandes uses the space of the MCA Commons to question the ways we move through social space and to encourage participants in his performances to find new muscles for collaborative movement through simple choreographies and calls to action. Fernandes describes the body as both conveyor and conveyance: "endowed with meaning . . . [the body] is our expressive access point to the world, constitutive of our subjectivity and selfhood." Through choreographic prompts, he codes these bodies toward interaction and reflection.

Over the course of five months in the Commons, Fernandes plays with our physical agency, proposing choreographies for visitors alongside professional dancers around the construction of three childhood games: hide-and-seek, call-and-response, and



Brendan Fernandes. *I'm Down*, 2017. Performance, printed matter (t-shirts, banners, placards, and posters), and mural. Images courtesy of the 18th Street Art Centre. Photo: Maria Martin.

follow-the-leader. Through play and social dance, the Commons becomes a transformative playground that empowers visitors to investigate the ways individual movements carry meaning. Dancers and visitors join together to collaborate in generating a set of gestures that move, gather, and attract other bodies in urban environments. The work aims to assert the body's agency in critical mass and to interpret the voice of movement.

Using games to structure interactions, participants explore the body as both a site and a conductor of meaning. One might hide and discover the power in subverting the expectation of seekers. One might call and understand the vulnerability in waiting for response. One might follow and discover a new perspective on the world in choosing to trust in the other.

## ABOUT THE COMMONS

The Commons places artistic and civic exchange at the heart of the museum. Here we encourage formal and informal dialogue as well as interactions among artists, visitors, and communities. The Commons is host to an array of programs, community meetings, and a biannual artist project.

Lead support for the Commons is provided by Rebecca W. Knight and Lester B. Knight, Elizabeth Morse Genius Charitable Trust, and the Thomas Wilson—Jill Garling Foundation.



# Play

Text "I want to play" to 900-900 for prompts and choreographies to enact both on-site at the MCA and in daily life.

# Discuss and Observe

## TALK: BRENDAN FERNANDES WITH JANUARY PARKOS ARNALL

Wed, Jun 19, 6 pm

Edlis Neeson Theater

Artist Brendan Fernandes explores the themes of the exhibition with curator January Parkos Arnall and audiences.

## COMMONS ARTIST PROJECT: BRENDAN FERNANDES OPENING EVENT

Sun, Jun 23, 11 am

Commons

Celebrate the opening of *Commons Artist Project: Brendan Fernandes* with the artist. Visitors will enjoy light bites while being among the first to experience the exhibition. The project invites you to try out a set of choreographies and sculptural installations that the artist specifically constructed for the space.

## PERFORMANCE, OPEN CALL

Fri, Jul 19, 6 pm

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Fernandes asks visitors to answer a "call to movement" and participate in a collectively generated performance alongside professional dancers in the Commons and on the Anne and John Kern Terrace.

## OPEN REHEARSALS:

### CALLING TIME

Tue, Jul 9, 11 am–1 pm

Tue, Jul 23, 11 am–1 pm

Tue, Aug 6, 11 am–1 pm

Tue, Aug 20, 11 am–1 pm

Tue, Sep 10, 1–3 pm

Tue, Sep 24, 1–3 pm

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Dancers work with Fernandes in the space, using visitor observations and the architectural constructions and prompts to create movements toward the final work. The piece is jointly developed throughout the summer, ever changing and playful as the dancers learn codes and conceive movements together.

## PERFORMANCE, CALLING TIME

Fri, Sep 27, 6–7 pm

Tue, Oct 8, 6–7 pm

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Culminating the summer of Fernandes's residency and open rehearsals, the artist presents two performances of *Calling Time*, a new work made in collaboration with professional dancers and through audience interaction in the Commons.

# Listen and Move

In addition to performances and activations, the physical exhibition includes architectural interventions, built structures, designed prompts, cues for movement, and a soundscape.

## INSTALLATION IN COLLABORATION WITH:

### Murals and floor layouts

Platform Design Studio, Chicago

### Plinth and swings

Norman Kelley Studio, Chicago and New Orleans

### Soundscape

Alex Inglizian

### Movement creation

Benjamin Wardell, Michelle Reid, Kara Brody, and Elijah Richardson

### Jumpsuits

The Rational Dress Society