



LORETTA FAHRENHOLZ
Reena Spaulings, New York

The Ringmasters debuted their self-taught street style of “flexing” to a mainstream audience in 2009 on *America’s Best Dance Crew* (MTV, 2008–2012)—a short-lived, B-boy-friendly version of *So You Think You Can Dance*. In their introductory routine, two members of the all-male group were smuggled onto the stage, packed tightly into the sort of knock-off rolling luggage one finds at bargain stores. When the cases were unzipped, dancers Slick and Nugget emerged, synchronously “bone-breaking” on the subsequent beat—a motion that involves the removal of arm joints from the shoulder sockets so as to twist the torso and upper body into variously angular, surprisingly elastic and inorganic-seeming forms. With its roots in Jamaican “brukup,” the style developed at dance battles in Crown Heights and Flatbush in the mid-2000s, many of which were recorded and broadcast as *Flex N Brooklyn* on public access cable and YouTube.

As performed by the Ringmasters, flexing involves feats of bone-breaking, combined with waving, tutting, gliding, and other acrobatics, its deconstructive fluidity more amenable to reggae and dancehall beats than hip-hop. Its fresh gruesomeness physicalizes an out-of-body experience that is circumscribed by the particularities of hardwired urban space—an effect evident in abrupt switches between constrained and explosive motion, parkour-like stunts, and theatrical narrative scenarios that parody gunplay or police brutality. Flexing might well be understood as a representation of the contemporary subject’s physical and psychological dislocation—one wrought by unstable social and economic conditions in the inner-city milieu from which it arose.

By the time the German artist and filmmaker Loretta Fahrenholz met the Ringmasters in 2012, Slick and Nugget had appeared in a Nicki Minaj music video directed by Hype Williams, whereas Corey and Spyda had choreographed hat tricks for an ad campaign. The indie documentary *Flex Is Kings* (2013) had already been produced and hailed by *The Hollywood Reporter* as an East Coast version of David LaChapelle’s krumping feature, *Rize* (2005). Screened at Reena Spaulings in September 2013, Fahrenholz’s *Ditch Plains* (2013) follows Corey through dead nighttime landscapes from

Brownsville to SoHo to the Upper East Side, a geography punctuated by footage from the Rockaways and a powerless lower Manhattan in the wake of Hurricane Sandy, which surged through the region after shooting had wrapped. *Ditch Plains* navigates corporeally through liminal (if concrete) spaces of the city where flexing best articulates its macabre disposition.

Fahrenholz’s sensitivity to the productive weirdness of flexing and her wariness of coherent narrative mostly prevent *Ditch Plains* from fetishizing its performing subjects, either somatically or biographically. Slowly jerking after muscular contortions with close-up shots that thread through tangles of limbs, Fahrenholz’s camera irrationalizes the spatial logic of the screen as much as the improbably twisting bodies do. Her syncretic technique affords a point of view that would be impossible in a live performance. *Ditch Plains*’ climax might be the thrilling, decisive cut in a street fight pantomime between Corey and Marty McFly: when the latter winds up an invisible hand grenade and releases it in the direction of the camera, a jump-cut splices the former back into frame, as cars on the perilously nearby road zoom past—uniting auteurism and playful vaudeville showmanship in a seamless sequence. Consistently smart sound editing by Steffen Martin draws out the frenetic or elsewhere slowed-down rhythms of the performers’ motions.

Unfortunately, the *Ditch Plains* screenplay belies the complexity of its technical accomplishment, by stitching together a comfortable mediating device through which the very analog actions of its dancers can be read as the virtual progression of video game avatars through a sci-fi future New York. Artful establishing shots featuring bodies splayed across curbs and chain-link fences parallel an inconsequential dialogue of talking heads (lit up on scattered iPhone screens) periodically woven through the dance material. In the film’s denouement, Corey and Marty McFly enter a Park Avenue apartment where various friends of the artist appear in an unconscious state. Protected by surgical and gas masks, the undead flexers mime a resuscitation ritual on the corpse of Marie Karlberg—an episode that reads semiotically as the apotheosis of American white fear, if only as an accidental result of costuming.

While *Ditch Plains*’ photography activates unruly corporal gesture, its plot mechanism traps the flexers’ motion on a metaphorical plane, much like the metaphysical interpretations of dance within modernist poetics that idealized transcendent balletic beauty—acknowledging neither the pain of its performance nor the social potential of its choreography.

A more generous reading of the undesirably neat conclusion to *Ditch Plains* may in fact be its most destructive: capitalism, its oppressions, and by extension the art world are irretrievably dead. Flouting injunctions by Kathy Acker (eat your mind) and cultural criticism by bell hooks (eat the other), Fahrenholz’s takeaway message may yet be meaningful. If the only way to escape the matrix is to destroy one’s own avatar, then the painful bacchanalian performance of eating your iPhone might square with the transportable physical feats of flexing and the critical coping device of her film, as a “malware download” of social interactivity and normative control through the digestive tract and straight into the bloodstream—instead of waiting for the batteries to expire, shitting excess electricity.

—Kari Rittenbach

ABOVE, LEFT + RIGHT: Loretta Fahrenholz, stills from *Ditch Plains*, 2013, HD video, 29 minutes [courtesy of the artist and Reena Spaulings, New York]