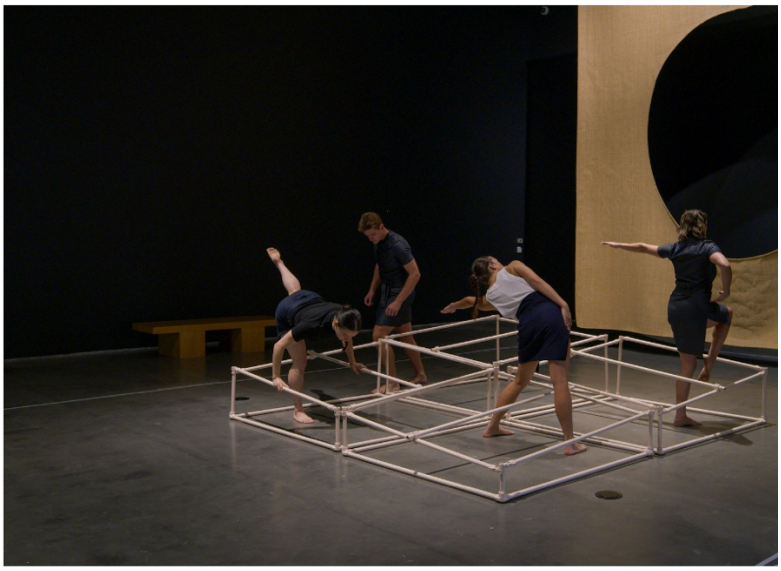
Almajedi, Sanna. “Slow Dance,” *e-flux Criticism,* 7 November 2026.

e-flux Criticism

“Slow Dance”

Sanna Almajedi



Brendan Fernandes, *Inaction*, 2019. Performance for “Slow Dance” at MCA Chicago, 2026. Image courtesy of MCA Chicago.

November 7, 2026

Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago, Chicago
September 12, 2026–March 14, 2027

The lives of artists are often defined by precarious working conditions and unpredictable studio hours, with little distinction between personal life and work. But what happens when everyone else faces the same challenges, as is increasingly the case in today’s flexible, work-from-home, gig economy? “Slow Dance” addresses how the constant demand for “optimization” has led to the commodification of downtime and rest. The works of artists Brendan Fernandes, Gordon Hall, Geumhyung Jeong, Carolyn Lazard, Melanie McLain, and Cally Spooner are placed together in a thoughtful and sparse environment, mimicking at times a children’s playground and at others a hospital waiting room. Each work in the show is accompanied by a performance. These artists come together to ask: What happened to our downtime? And are we working too much?

The way we experience art, particularly performance, today is by consuming, recording, and then re-consuming through our screens. Since the medium of performance is inherently ephemeral, it cannot live true to its full nature within these conditions. “Slow Dance” partially answers these concerns through performances that resist recording and exist, instead, in the state of waiting. Hall’s *Hands and Knees* (2025) is an assembly of sculptures scattered across the room, made of deconstructed Marcel Breuer Cesca chairs with their seats removed. Five sculptures resembling ladders and stretchers lean against the wall of the gallery. Two performers, indistinguishable from

members of the audience, bring one of the “stretchers” inside a private room, and then reappear with a person lying on the structure, which is carefully placed on top of two “chairs,” creating a new unit. The process repeats.

The performance is an act of meticulous and slow care. The audience waits patiently, almost frustrated, for something to happen—first for each movement to begin, then for the slow process to be completed. The atmosphere of the room is that of a hospital waiting room: we wait to be seen and watch others go before us. Meanwhile, Spooner’s performance *Warm Up* (2016) begins without anyone noticing. A dancer stretches on the gallery floor for an hour, preparing for a performance that doesn’t take place. This subtle act challenges the short attention span of the audience and is virtually impossible to photograph or record for social media (I tried). We feel like we’re wasting our time: nothing will come out of watching this except for a moment of stillness, which is the precise point of this show.

Brendan Fernandes offers a vastly different take on the premise. *Inaction* (2019) is an installation consisting of three large sculptures—a circle, a square, and a triangle designed with architecture firm Norman Kelley—that resemble a playground. The dancers playfully and childishly navigate their way around the sculptures as if the installation were an obstacle course. They play games like hide-and-seek and follow the leader, while occasionally making funny faces and touching each other in silly yet affectionate ways. The dancers resemble children in ways that we have been taught to unlearn as adults, even though this is how we learned how to socialize to begin with. We watch them play, like parents watching their children.

Fernandes wants to use play as a tool for people to reconnect with one another and, eventually, to organize politically, positioning it as an antidote to the widespread fatigue of constantly performing toward optimization or protesting with no end in sight. In her catalog essay, Joanna Dee Das states that “[w]e were to be everything everywhere, all at once. If in the summer of 2016 someone decided to post about the devastating flood in Bangladesh, they were then asked why they did not also post about the devastating earthquake in Ecuador.” It is simply impossible to give adequate attention to everything that demands it. This exhaustion extends itself to the art world, where artists are expected to maintain an online presence and constantly remind their followers that their work exists amid an endless stream of exhibition announcements, install shots, BFA party photos, and horrific world news.

While blockbuster shows beg for our attention with crowded salon-style hangings, mirrors and flashy installations, “Slow Dance” does the exact opposite. What makes the show good is also what makes it bad. It is, by design, often slow, boring, and silly, yet the subjects and sensations it brings are certainly relatable. “Slow Dance” doesn’t simply represent rest; it makes us confront the unease of not being productive. We have become so accustomed to measuring the value of our time that simply being asked to wait, watch, and play becomes uncomfortable. In lieu of the playground, perhaps we can gain some agency by wasting time together elsewhere, like in a sweaty no-phone-on-the-dance-floor club, or indeed at an exhibition like “Slow Dance.”