



## **BOOM! Turfing Against the World**

by Brandon Brown

September 15, 2014

In 2010, the annual juried show at Southern Exposure was titled BOOM! Thinking back on it now, I love that curator Astria Suparak called it BOOM! It was a little melodramatic for a few rooms of generally non-explosive works of art, but prescient in a way. BOOM! – the beat comes in and everybody moves. BOOM! – fireworks and their long echoes across town. BOOM! – A brick through a Foot Locker window. Soon enough the whole world would seem to go BOOM! – from Tahrir Square to Oscar Grant Plaza to Ferguson.

One of the pieces in BOOM! was a video shot by Yak Films featuring Oakland turf dance crew Turf Feinz. The video, RIP211, was posted to YouTube on December 17, 2009, a few days after Kenneth “211” Ross was shot and killed by police in Oakland. Ross was a charismatic and popular person in the neighborhood. After his death, the OPD attempted to depict him in the media as a dangerous villain. RIP211 is shot in an abandoned house in Oakland, and emphasizes the East Bay both in its literal locale and in the unique style of dance it features. Just as the video translates the foundational scene of the dance (the street), seeing the video in a gallery context isolated the video from its other “natural” habitat (the internet.)

In its specific documentary impulse and content, RIP211 was unique among the works in BOOM! I guess that uniqueness might be expected for a work so tied to Oakland—a prominent mytheme of Oakland suggests that it is a place where unique forms of sensibility are born. One recalls that if rap music was born in New York City, many of the essential idioms of breakdancing have their origin in the East Bay. East Bay verbal slang is a legendary influence on global forms of rap. And radical politics find their singular form in Oakland. I’ll never forget flying back from the Midwest the day after the George Zimmerman verdict returned: I watched a little newscaster on the back of the seat in front of me say, “Peaceful protests around the USA...but in Oakland...” as the screen shifted to an image of a burning trash can perforating the windshield of a cop car.

Yak Films produced two other RIP videos, RIP RichD Dancing In The Rain and RIP Oscar Grant. Like RIP211, both have been viewed hundreds of thousands of times. All three videos are elegies for young black men who’ve died in Oakland (RichD passed away in a car accident; Oscar Grant, of course, was murdered by police.) One common element of the RIP videos is that while they are ostensibly works of mourning, the dancing itself frequently models affects of pleasure and delight.

Turfing has an extremely broad palette for the dance traditions it cites. In RIP 211, the viewer will recognize gestures that one finds in breakdancing, popping and locking, ballroom, hyphy, pantomime, classical ballet—almost anything one can imagine. What is more difficult to parse are the particular street traditions that inform each dancer individually—dance moves can differ block to block in any number of Bay Area towns—there are as many ways to move as there are cultural traditions in the neighborhood.

But the diversity of moves in turf dancing is not simply a matter of classically postmodern bricolage. Turf dancing is rooted to place not only by inherited dance moves which young dancers appropriate and innovate, but also by its special link to the East Bay. The fact that most if not all of the RIP videos include lingering shots of police cars is an indication that the site where the dance occurs is not a neutral site, but a site inflected by the continual threat of violence. Naomi Bragin, writing about RIP 211, suggests, “The RIP videos locate the practice of turfing within the political context of deaths of young black men in East Oakland. As a mode of witnessing, turf style supported the dancers’ immediate embodied response to local events...the interaction between police and turfers sets the scene of a performance perpetually in crisis.”

The video opens on a street in Oakland, where four young men are joined by two others. They greet each other, confer, and then take a walk. After jaywalking across the street, a shot shows one of the dancers making a clapping motion with one hand as a cop car passes. Perhaps, as Commune Editions have suggested, the “cop must depart before the dance can begin.”

They enter a house. Someone has written HOUSE / RIP211, an in situ title shot. Whether or not the cop must disappear in order for the dance to begin, there is a specific set of devotional practices which precede the dance in RIP211. The dancers run their hands over the many messages of mourning and remembrance that cover the walls of the house. They add their own. A repeated camera motif causes their images to appear and disappear in the blink of an eye, miming the quickness with which life dissipates in the encounter with police violence.

The camera pauses in various rooms of the house as each dancer solos. The stillness of the shots as these solos unfold is in counterpoint to the extreme movements of each dancer—popping, locking, gliding, contorting, stretching. Turfing. The mood isn’t uniform—long, melancholic looks into the camera suggest the sadness of the occasion for the dance, but are succeeded by smiling and playful contortions. Turf dancing is too fun to reduce to one long note of lament. Its narratives are nuanced. That being said, the pleasure these dancers exhibit in movement is bounded by the walls of the house. On the walls we see “211” in some form written everywhere—a movable epitaph that inflects the meaning of each individual move. In the end, the dancers gather together in front of a wall outside. An AC Transit bus passes, they disappear for the last time. The messages remain.

We’re left without the dancers, but linger for one last moment in the “scene of crisis” that Bergin refers to. Both RichD Dancing In The Rain and RIP Oscar Grant focus on a place, on the scenes, on literal sites where these bodies were disappeared. That these sites become the transformative locations for both lament and play is a powerful affirmation of dance as an intervention. They also constitute a contribution to a long tradition of dance that includes social critique. These are not just “any deaths” that the dances mourn, but deaths specifically brought about by systemic racism and violence perpetrated by the police. Dance won’t solve the “perpetual crisis” of that racism and violence—but it bears a powerful witness to the conjuncture of those oppressive forms and the tempo of potential resistance