

home • artnews • artists

How Jonathan González Became the Performance Artist of the Moment

BY ALEX GREENBERGER

August 6, 2026 10:18am



Jonathan González.
PORTRAIT RUDY GERSON



Listen to this article now 12 min listen

00:00

Powered by [Trinity Audio](#)

11:38 1.0x

This past May, on one of the first warm days of an unusually frigid spring in New York, two friends seized on the good weather and decided to have cocktails on the Whitney Museum’s eighth floor terrace. They chatted and laughed—and then were quickly interrupted by a woman in a white leotard that looked as though it had been splashed with paint. The woman got up on their table and gleefully pretended to tap dance, drawing an amused crowd of onlookers. “A typical Friday night in New York,” one security guard drily mused to another before walking away.

The friends eventually grew bored and went back to their cocktails, but the rest of the viewers continued watching as the dancer descended the museum’s outdoor staircase and linked up with four others below. The performers staged what appeared to be some kind of dance battle, creating a circle near sculptures by David Smith and Barnett

Newman. One by one, the dancers extravagantly performed in the center of the circle. Then they appeared to teach each other their moves. “Oh, okay, okay, I get it!” one of the dancers exclaimed, leaping around with a smile. Less than a half hour later, all of these dancers disappeared without much explanation.

What was this? A flash mob, a rehearsal of a sort, some kind of prank? It turned out that one of the onlookers, dressed unostentatiously in a deep blue T-shirt and a brown jacket, was masterminding it all: **Jonathan González** (<https://www.artnews.com/t/jonathan-gonzalez/>), whose performance *magic hour–golden time*, was premiering that night as part of the 2026 **Whitney Biennial** (<https://www.artnews.com/t/whitney-biennial/>). The thrilling, beguiling work lasted for a hypnotic three hours; this was merely its second act, with the third, a 60-minute-long bow staged in a part of the Whitney that’s inaccessible to the public, following afterward.

Speaking in July by Zoom, González told me that they designed *magic hour* so that its dancers start apart and gradually come together. The second hour, they said, was called “archive body.” The dancers “try to recall every dance they’ve ever danced over the course of their life. It can be very playful, because they’re remembering doing a ballad when they were five, or doing a very serious modern dance when they were 10, or doing a West African course in college, or [referencing] the random scenarios of a life of labor of being an artist. They’re also sharing in the game of telephone gestures with each other from afar.”

In González’s words, *magic hour* asked: “What is the choreography of the group? How do we consider the psychology of the group?”



Jonathan González, *magic hour–golden time*, 2026
PHOTO JULIETA CERVANTES

These are the questions that have animated many of González’s performances of the past half-decade, which have often centered around the power of Black collectivity. The performances have gained the artist a loyal following within the New York art world, with works staged in venues ranging from MoMA PS1 to the Kitchen, where González debuted a new commission, *Swerve Fatigue*, earlier this year. Later this month, González will premiere another commission, for Pittsburgh’s **Carnegie International** (<https://www.artnews.com/t/carnegie-international/>). Their participation in that show makes them the only artist to appear in the current editions of both the International and the Whitney Biennial, the two top recurring art exhibitions in the US—a feat, considering that González has yet to turn 40.

Often unfurling over the course of entire afternoons and evenings, González's knotty, hypnotic works typically test the expectations (and patience) of viewers, who are left to figure out what's improvised and what isn't. The dancers move without much regard for the audience, and the performances can, at times, seem to be more for González's troupes than the people watching them.

Viewing one of these works can be frustrating and electric simultaneously, especially because the performances ceaselessly switch form and genre as they churn on. *PRACTICE*, a 2022 work staged outside the Clemente in the Lower East Side featured dance, poetry, and DJ sets in a broader exploration of "the critical through-lines of creolized expressive arts formed within the greater Caribbean and Turtle Island," as González's description put it. (Turtle Island is the name some Indigenous peoples use to refer to North America.) *Spectral Dances*, a 2023 commission staged Uptown, at Arts and Letters, took place partially in a library, suggesting a connection to the written word that extends throughout González's practice. (They have written one book, titled *Ways to Move: Black Insurgent Grammars*, and are working on another, planned as a travelogue, a memoir, and a theoretical tract all in one.)

González is "singular in transmuting language, movement, sound, touch, atmosphere, durational recurring collaboration, intellectual entanglements (like questions of Black life, dance theory, and queer study, which includes queer nightlife), and the archival record," said Angelique Rosales Salgado, an assistant curator at the Kitchen who worked closely with González on *Swerve Fatigue*.



Ananda Naima González, India Lena González, Marguerite Hemmings, Kingsley Ibeneche, and AJ Wilmore in Jonathan González, *Swerve Fatigue*, 2026.
PHOTO ELVIN TAVAREZ

Danielle A. Jackson, a curator at Artists Space and an organizer of this year's Carnegie International, recalled the thrill of seeing *PRACTICE*, saying, "What excited me most was never knowing when an action would emerge. The audience's movements and conversations also felt folded into the work rather than existing outside it. *PRACTICE* seemed to be breaking open form, disrupting conventional ideas of the stage and performance. It had already begun before I arrived, and I imagined it continuing long after I left."

Despite the epic length of these works and their unusual locations—one from 2023 took place in a gallery of Anselm Kiefer's paintings at MASS MoCA in North Adams, Massachusetts—the performances resist becoming the kind of sprawling, theatrical pieces that go viral on social media. Most of the time, González's performances consist of

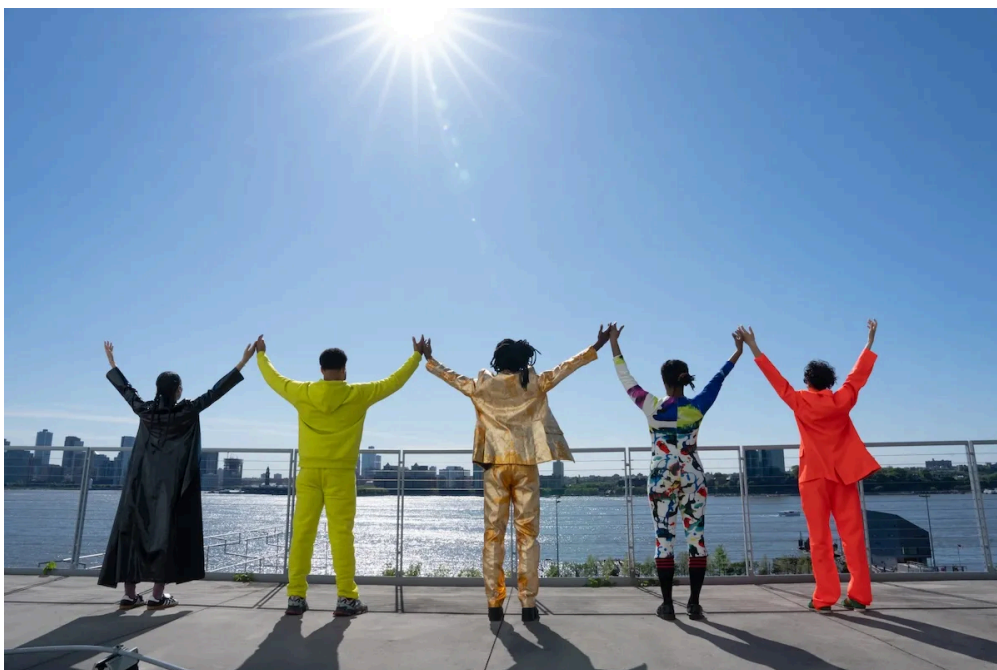
little more than a few committed dancers, without any elaborate sets or noisy music to accompany them.

Name-checking a range of influential Black theorists, from Fred Moten to Tina Post, González said their work was opposed to the sense of “spectacle and virtuosity” that many people associate with dance, and that they instead cast dancers who exhibit “a level of transparency and sincerity when that’s asked for, and a level of austerity when that’s asked for.” (Displaying what González described as “idiosyncratic behavior” is also a plus.)

“How can I create an experience where the performers can feel a sense of liberation, that they actually are able to work with Black mundanity, Black quietude, Black abstraction, stillness?” González asked. “Slowness, mundanity, ineptitude, boredom: these are things that they’re typically not given as qualities to work through. Duration allows them to access that, and it tends to be extremely liberating for them.”

Threaded through these works is also an interest in what can and cannot be seen. In *magic hour*, the Whitney performance, dancers would frequently point at nothing, as though they were calling attention to invisible spirits. And speaking of invisibility in a different sense, Drew Sawyer, co-curator of the Biennial, also pointed out that the last act of *magic hour*, the “extended bow,” could only be viewed by leaving the museum and crossing seven lanes’ worth of traffic. The performance “aligns with their general interest in this tension between what is visible and what is invisible. What does it mean to be seen, especially within, say, an art historical tradition, and especially within the history of Black visibility?”

González cast the work in terms that some might use to describe a haunting, asking: “How do you pay attention to all of this life in the air? There’s ghosts, there’s futures, there’s residue in this building—there’s sweat from colonial histories that reside in brick and concrete for centuries. What would it mean when you’re watching my work to see that?”



Jonathan González, *magic hour—golden time*, 2026
PHOTO JULIETA CERVANTES

Born in 1991 in New York to a family with Cuban and Dominican heritage, González trained as a classical musician and attended a visual arts program at Trinity College, where they took courses in anthropology and architecture. Finding themselves “intrigued by how the body was a political site,” González began crossing disciplines, turning to the work of an array of Black thinkers from a spread of fields, from the choreographies of

Ralph Lemon to the writings of architecture historian Mabel O. Wilson. “I was always trying to understand: What is the role of the written word, what is the role of the performing body, what is the role of the object?” González said. Their MFA studies in dance at Sarah Lawrence College and subsequent performances became a way to answer those questions.

González’s work took a turn with *Looking for Lucifer I* (2018), a performance and installation commissioned for MoMA PS1’s courtyard. During the making of the work, González traveled to the Caribbean and visited ritual spaces associated with Santería and Candomblé, two Afro-syncretic religions. According to both belief systems, there are “forces that allow you to enter into the space of spirit,” González said. They realized their performances could allow dancers to act as vessels for a similar kind of spiritual experience.

In particular, González’s works enable his performers to obliquely animate histories of resistance and refusal. *Looking for Lucifer I*, as well as a similarly titled sequel made for the Abrons Art Center, was in part a tribute to CHARAS, a Puerto Rican community organization known for building geodesic domes in the New York neighborhood of Loisaida. González also studied the poetry of June Jordan, who called for the creation of more green space in Harlem. In weaving their ideas into a dance performance, González was trying “not to impose this linear, rational idea that we know everything that’s here with us and everything that’s ever come before.”

Their Carnegie performance, a four-hour piece about Black steel workers in Pittsburgh that’s called *The Strikebreakers*, continues the artist’s research-heavy process. With Jackson, the Carnegie International co-curator, González visited Carrie Furnace, a disused site once used by a steel company owned by Andrew Carnegie, whose arts patronage gave the Carnegie Museums their name; González also interviewed Black steel workers’ families and Tony Buba, the documentarian behind several films about steelworks in the Pittsburgh area.



Jonathan González, *Spectral Dances*, 2024.

AMERICAN ACADEMY OF ARTS & LETTERS, NEW YORK, 2026

How exactly will that performance, which will debut on a sprawling staircase inside the Carnegie Museum of Art on August 14, play out? González didn’t provide many details, but if it’s like their past work, *The Strikebreakers* will reflect all their research without ever explaining it away. Of their process, González said, “It’s a commitment to understanding that history can be qualitatively, instead of quantitatively, reperformed. It can be sensed.”

They continued, “There are always gaps when you try to represent Black life, and I think the quantitative and qualitative thrust, sociologically, when we think about Black life, is to talk about its victimization. What I’m actually trying to insist upon is the history of collectivity, life, and possibility that is always occurring under dispossession. Dispossession is the condition, but there’s also all this life that is happening there.”



ARTnews is a part of PMX Global, LLC, a subsidiary of Penske Media Corporation. © 2026 Art Media, LLC. All rights reserved.
Powered by WordPress.com VIP