

Chapter IV: Breaking in Times of Crisis

At moments when the world is on fire, both literally and metaphorically, art can feel insignificant. In the face of humanitarian disasters, political extremism, and environmental collapse, even the most devoted practitioners may question the value of their craft. To dance while the world suffers can seem like an act of privilege, or worse, indifference. Yet history repeatedly proves the opposite. Art does not merely survive crisis; it is born from it.

Breaking, perhaps more than any other contemporary art form, emerged precisely from crisis. It was created by children in a city collapsing under poverty, gang warfare, and political neglect. New York in the 1970s was a site of arson, blackouts, and systemic abandonment. Out of this wreckage, breaking became a declaration that joy and imagination could still exist amidst despair. The dance itself was a rebellion against hopelessness. It was never a luxury, but a survival mechanism.

Today, we face a different but equally volatile landscape. Climate change accelerates natural disasters across continents. Authoritarianism and nationalism spread through misinformation. Wars in Ukraine, Gaza, and Sudan displace millions. In the United States, democratic institutions erode under polarization, while hatred and conspiracy flourish in algorithmic echo chambers. To create art in this moment is not escapism; it is an act of moral resistance.

Breaking, with its physicality, community, and direct confrontation of fear, carries lessons uniquely suited to our age of anxiety.

Healing Through Creation

In times of collective trauma, the first casualty is often the mind. Anxiety, hatred, and alienation rise in tandem with political instability. The act of breaking, as with its origins in the Bronx, becomes a psychological necessity: a ritual of transformation. When the world feels uncontrollable, the body becomes the last domain of freedom. To dance is to reassert agency. The cypher becomes a temporary utopia, a space where hierarchy collapses and movement replaces ideology.

The fact that breaking's creations vanish the moment they occur only deepens their therapeutic value. Unlike a painting that endures, breaking is impermanent. It demands that the dancer practice non-attachment. We create, release, and move on. This impermanence teaches us to let go, an essential skill in times of fear and loss. Through this process, breaking provides the courage to affirm life despite chaos.

Empowerment Through Confrontation

Breaking is not merely expressive; it is confrontational. Every battle stages a symbolic clash between self and other, between identity and opposition. In the cypher, fear becomes visible and therefore conquerable. This facet of breaking rejects the notion that the dance exists merely as means of escapism.

To face an opponent is to rehearse the act of facing power itself. This structure is not incidental; it is political. Hip-Hop was born as a non-violent alternative to gang conflict, transforming confrontation into creativity. A battle, therefore, is a miniature model of activism: you stand your ground, expose your truth, and refuse to be silenced.

The psychological courage developed here is transferable. Those who learn to hold their ground in the cypher can hold it in life, whether confronting systemic injustice, personal trauma, or social pressure. Breaking therefore trains not only the body, but also the will to resist. In the same way that jazz musicians in occupied France played to maintain cultural dignity, breakers dance to preserve the soul of their community.

Jams as Sites of Social Healing

In an age of hyper-individualism and digital isolation, breaking jams remain among the last truly communal rituals. Social media has divided the public into ideological tribes, each trapped within its algorithmic bubble. Jams, by contrast, demand physical presence and dialogue.

A cypher unites people across race, language, class, and belief through rhythm and shared physical space. These gatherings create an environment where individuals reveal themselves through action and movement. In a divided society, the jam becomes a rehearsal for empathy and coexistence.

Supporting local events, even as a spectator, carries social weight. It keeps alive an environment where disagreement and understanding can coexist without hostility. In the cypher, one learns that even opponents are collaborators in creation. Two breakers exchanging ideas without words, might be one of the few remaining forms of real-world dialogue left in our time.



"Force of July 2025" by McClaran Shirley

Breaking as a Mirror of Society

Breaking's internal struggles often replicate those of the larger world. The infiltration of corporate sponsorships, the commodification of individuality, sexism and the struggle for masculinity, and the glorification of competition all echo the broader forces of capitalism and American exceptionalism.

Yet these reflections are not failures. They are opportunities. Just as Andy Warhol's Campbell's Soup Cans held up a mirror to consumerism, breaking too can expose the absurdities of its time. When a dancer performs under blinding LED lights, for viral clips instead of genuine communion, that very condition can become part of the artwork: a critique of spectacle culture.

Breaking is a living microcosm of global society. It contains both beauty and exploitation, solidarity and competition. By observing it critically, we gain insight into the systems that govern our lives. A dancer aware of this reflection can choose either to reproduce or to resist it. *Both are valid artistic statements.*



Left: Red Bull BC One World Final 2025 flier, Right: Andy Warhol's "Soup Can"

Dias and the Politics of Time

Few contemporary breakers embody this awareness more clearly than Dias from Kazakhstan. His elongated rounds reject the shrinking attention spans fostered by social media. In a cultural economy obsessed with immediacy, Dias slows time. His dance becomes a protest against acceleration, a call for presence. This gesture resonates with larger artistic movements that resist speed, from slow cinema to durational performance art. Dias' work tells us that to

move slowly in a world that demands speed is a radical act. His global recognition signals that audiences, too, crave stillness amidst chaos.

Breaking, through artists like him, becomes a form of time activism. It reminds us that attention is the new site of struggle. To sustain focus, to move intentionally, and to breathe fully in front of others is no longer a neutral act; it is resistance.

“Life Flows”: Breaking and Impermanence

Few moments in recent memory have captured the spiritual essence of breaking’s impermanence as clearly as the passing of Drop Jules from the Mighty Zulu Kingz. Jules was not only a respected dancer but also a producer, a creative spirit who often said, “Life flows.” At the MZK anniversary 2025, the community gathered to hold a celebration of life cypher in his honor.

<https://youtu.be/bmID-8VI1HU?si=3MeRikESmh-bFi9Q>

They danced to the music he had produced. The energy in that space was not mournful, but luminous. Every round that day became a prayer, each movement a brief expression that vanished as soon as it was created, echoing the very phrase he lived by. “Life flows” embodies what breaking has always taught us: that nothing in this world stands still. Every move, every beat, every exchange is temporary. The beauty of the art lies precisely in its transience. To dance is to acknowledge that we are here for only a moment, and that this moment, fleeting as it is, still matters.

That cypher was not simply a memorial; it was a revelation of what the culture truly is. Breaking exists in motion, in impermanence, and in constant rebirth. Jules’ philosophy reminds us that when we dance, we are not trying to escape death, but to understand life.

Conclusion

We are now entering an era when breaking can speak louder than ever, artistically, philosophically, and politically. The dance has the potential to address issues larger than itself: inequality, identity, isolation, and the ongoing erosion of empathy in modern life. Every movement carries the possibility of revealing something true about our condition.

But for that to happen, we as practitioners must stop diminishing what we do.

Stop saying, “It’s just breaking.”

Those words are the quickest way to strip the culture of its power. No great art in history ever began from that kind of apology. If you treat your practice as small, the world will follow your example. But if you understand that this dance was built from crisis, forged through oppression, and sustained by creativity, you will see that it already carries the DNA of change.

Breaking is not “just” anything. It is rhythm, philosophy, rebellion, and healing all at once. It is both mirror and weapon, meditation and movement. When you take it seriously, not as self-importance but as self-respect, you reveal what this culture has always stood for: transformation. So keep dancing when the world burns. Because the world has always been burning. And breaking, since the beginning, has always been our way to turn fire into light.