

Global Hip Hop Studies
Volume 4 Number 2

© 2023 The Author(s). Published by Intellect Ltd. Article. English language.

Open Access under the CC BY licence. https://doi.org/10.1386/ghhs_00098_1

Received 3 February 2024; Accepted 3 March 2024; Published Online July 2024

SHOW & PROVE

LA-ONGYOT 'GONZA' WONGNGERN

Bboy and tattoo artist

The Shift

ABSTRACT

Gonza is a highly regarded bboy in Thailand and across the globe. Belonging to one of Thailand's most prominent crews, 99Flava, he has established a legacy across the Asia-Pacific. He is also a tattoo artist by trade and has recently stepped into a coaching role for breakers who will compete at the upcoming South East Asian (SEA) Games. In this short reflection, Gonza decodes his artwork The Shift (featured on the cover of this special issue of Global Hip Hop Studies: 'Breaking and the Olympics 2'), by bringing breaking's past, present and future as an art-form and sport into question.

KEYWORDS

art
breaking
Olympics
hip hop dance
institutionalization
dancesport

So, from left to right, this cover really represents how breaking started as an abstract form. It is something that people don't really understand. When they watch breaking, a lot of the time they might not know what's going on, what is good or what might be considered 'not good'. I wanted to use these intertwined colours to demonstrate that it is hard to define, and that breaking appears to the public in different ways.

But, as we get down and towards the right, the colours are slowly transforming into a more structured form that looks like a graffiti-style human figure. This is to show a developing artform towards something unique. Of course, at this point in the flow of the piece this symbol shows the dance is not broadly understood, but instead highlights how more people are becoming



Figure 1: The Shift by Gonza.

interested in hip hop culture. We can compare this to before there was much support or visibility for the dance in public. And again, this continues to transform into a form where a broader community of people understand more about the dance, its traditions and culture, until it forms up into the embodied breakers who now are representing.

The shining golden eye at the top represents the Olympics to me, actually. It represents the goal, and with it the future, the hope and a destination for all: everyone can strive for this kind of success. The pyramid itself is actually a mountain. It represents the struggle it took to get there (to the top), you know? It took 40 years, or something like that, for this to happen. A lot of OGs had to quit or make it a hobby because they couldn't break and make a life out of it. And a lot of us actually break for nothing. In Thailand, some people street hustle, like busking. They still have these sort of street shows regularly in Silom or Khao San. Some of these dancers have kids to support and it's really hard. There are other major struggles for people who love this dance but cannot always afford to travel; who might come to a competition but cannot afford to get back home. I feel like there are a lot of struggles in this breaking life. I, myself, could not really think of a way to survive through breaking alone. I tried to think of how to incorporate a spiritual or religious element into this piece to capture how we live through this. I used the glyphs on the eye and the pyramid/mountain to highlight how we live: dance is almost religious – through a faith in your practice and sometimes a blind commitment, which can be both good and bad.

Delivered by Intellect to:

Guest (guest)

IP: 86.41.203.156

On: Thu, 27 Mar 2025 07:57:38

But the Olympics has already changed a lot here in Thailand. Now, the government has recognized breaking as an official sport. In each province you can go to your local Khet office (the equivalent of a local council) and register to represent your region in the sport. This also opens paths for coaches who can register up to five students to train. This way, if the government wants to support you, you can be signed and become an official athlete in a national sport. Without the Olympics this would never have happened, but although this is inspired by the Olympics, it is completely separate. So now it is the same as playing basketball between regions – you have a team, you become a coach and you bring your team to another province to play. Then to the next qualifier and then the championship. This national championship is more about representing as a national athlete in major sporting events in the region like the SEA Games. This is really important because getting to the Olympics is very hard: there are only 32 spots, and a lot of competition from the regions that have more support.

For Thai athletes, it is hard to get enough support to collect points to improve their ranking for the Olympics, such as through Breaking for Gold events. And the location is not always in the region, so if you have to go to Ecuador or Poland, who will support you? It is so expensive. Some countries can afford this type of travel; a lot of European countries pay their athletes to travel.

Prior to the whole Olympics thing when my crew were competing a lot more, Chen and I were talking and comparing breaking to other sports. We were saying 'imagine if we were tennis or soccer players, and we were on this level, I think we'd be making a good living already' – these sports have millionaires at the top. But purely because we were breaking, when we were on top, we didn't get anything, you know? That is also the story of breaking for a lot of people here. But the Olympics and this national sport thing will change things. It has already in some ways, at least for the people who are really on top. Now people can actually make living out of it and it can make them proud, or make their parents proud. There is a success they can achieve there.

That is why visibility of the form in the mainstream is important. Now the public can see you more clearly. They might still not understand what is going on in the dance, but at least they see it is a form comparable to other dances or sports – and that is big. I don't know why but, although breaking is one of the hardest dances, people in every country seem to have looked down on it. This is certainly true in Thailand. For those of us within the hip hop community it's okay, but outside of that it's been hard. So, there is this element of pride that comes from the public recognition, and despite the Olympics being a different type of tournament, it can still support dancers in new ways. We have kids now with parents that support them so much, and a lot of that has come through the sporting side of things. For parents, now they realize, 'oh, it's a sport'. It allows them to see some value in what we do without really needing to understand the details of the art form. At least they feel they can be proud of their kids, that their kids are participating in sport.

Thailand is the only place in South East Asia that has the national league. But there are other places that are doing similar things in other parts of Asia like China – China's very organized. They really support the dance and this new dancesport thing. A movie was even released in China about breaking: its struggles, competitions, etc. China has full support for this and the money and are crazy about sport.

There has been such a big change in the last ten years. There have always been a lot of bboys everywhere, but the biggest change has been the bgirl scene here, not just in terms of numbers but in competitive spirit – they really want to get out there, rep and win. And now we have the Olympics. Like with anything there is always good and bad, but I really want people to focus on the good. It's really about squeezing the good out of it and keeping doing what we have always done.

SUGGESTED CITATION

Wongngern, La-ongyot 'Gonza' (2023), *'The Shift'*, *Global Hip Hop Studies*, Special Issue: 'Breaking and the Olympics 2', 4:2, pp. 161–64, https://doi.org/10.1386/ghhs_00098_1

CONTRIBUTOR DETAILS

La-ongyot 'Gonza' Wongngern, is a bboy from Bangkok, Thailand. He has been breaking since 2002 and has become a central figure in Thailand's hip-hop culture. In recognition of his veterancy, Gonza was recently appointed the head coaching role for Thailand's national breaking athletes who will be competing at the SEA Games/Asian Games. Outside of breaking, he is a self-taught artist who has established his own tattoo studio in Bangkok.

E-mail: gonza_bboy@hotmail.com

La-ongyot 'Gonza' Wongngern has asserted their right under the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act, 1988, to be identified as the author of this work in the format that was submitted to Intellect Ltd.
