

Praxis

Introduction to Falling Is Not Collapsing

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In the article *Falling Is Not Collapsing*, the artist Marwa Arsanios proposes that a vibration of a movement can contaminate from the earth through the national state to the physical body. In the case of Egypt, which the article is centered on, the nation state literally is created from the continental movements allowing for the river Nile to arise and form a society around it. In Arsanios' speculations, the nation state thus has a move and it can have a representation in the pose of a dancer. Going back to Egypt in the 1950-60s at a moment where the then president Gamal Abdel Nasser was creating a new socialist and reformist nation state in pan-Arab alliances, the article explores the dancer and academic Magda Saleh's thesis on ethnic dance traditions in Egypt in the late 1970s in a co-reading with her career as the first national prima ballerina icon during Nasser presidency. Arsanios reads Saleh's flying ballet body in cultural magazines of the 60s as a way in which culture was used to form and represent the state, yet the ethnic dance moves of the earth counter the lightness of the flying ballet body.

But the movements of the dancer are sent speculatively back into the nation state. It is possible to choreograph a fall, whereas a collapse "is interior to a structure that no longer holds". With such reflections the reader is teased to imagine various scenarios. Is Egypt today collapsing? What is the status of the building of nation states in the postcolonial era? What role did culture play? And, by introducing the article in *Peripeti – tiddskrift for dramaturgiske skrifter*, perhaps we can expand such questions into a Scandinavian context of post WW2 in which the welfare state was created and is perhaps falling, perhaps collapsing today. Are politicians in need of choreographic skills in order to give shape to the movement of the state? How are bodies moving in this moment of political change and new climate challenges? Does politics allow for bodies to represent the on-going creation and/or collapse of the nation state or does politics rather instrumentalize those bodies?

2

The first piece Arsanios created inspired by Saleh's thesis was a performance presented in Beirut in 2015 at Home Works 7, a pivotal forum for visual arts and performance in the region and beyond. In it Arsanios performed as well as read aloud the script of the performance while two dancers moved in ways that did neither represent ballet, nor traditional folklore belly dancing from Egypt. Interwoven in the script were Arsanios' reflections on becoming a teenager in post-civil war Lebanon in the 1990's in a moment she in private conversations has described as one with unlimited mobility and excessive parties. Gone were the checkpoints and the city and people were no longer divided by the green line that had prohibited free movement in the city during the war. This newfound freedom was celebrated, Arsanios accounts, by driving around the streets in cars with friends and dancing long into the night as a young teenager. She shows her favorite dance moves in the performance: repetitive hip movements from side to side, feet on the ground and a bent arm with a loosely closed fist going in rhythmical circles in front of the body. The expression was slightly disengaged, cool and controlled. It was created from the sudden unleash from the authoritarian grip in a moment where the new was yet a projection.

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Arsanios has since her early artistic career taken inspiration in historical female characters, such as Djamilah Bouhired, the female fighter of Algeria, who appears in the seminal movie *The Battle of Algier* as a resistance fighter. Or the disappeared dancer of a once paradisaical and futuristic beach resort in the liberal moments of the Lebanese 1960s. Arsánios came of age in the 1990s in a moment, where some of the most progressive artistic research practices were developed around archival works with front runners like Atlas Group, Walid Raad, Rabih Mroué, Lina Majdaleneh, Akram Zaatari and others. However, Arsánios gives us in *Falling is not Collapsing* a link back to earlier practices in the region and brings forth a woman's knowledge, body and voice. Being an active artistic researcher herself, Arsánios shows a sustained practice in bringing about women narratives of a non-European archeology of artistic research. *Falling is not collapsing* is a testimony of the pockets and loop holes of artistic research in a geographical context away from Europe. It might be that European scholars have largely defined the term of artistic research, but Arsánios shows us that practices have existed outside Europe before the term became prevalent and have taken on many shapes. Moreover, the article shows that a thesis and dance career like Saleh's is still relevant today, especially in a re-activation through an artistic research practice like Arsánios', in terms of coming closer to understanding nation state building, the land and their intermingled reverberations with culture and our body movements.