

Praxis

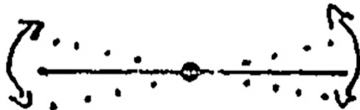
Falling Is Not Collapsing

Falling Is Not Collapsing

A performance lecture by Marwa Arsanios

“The land of Nubia, extending from Aswan in Egypt to Dongola in the Sudan has disappeared, submerged under lake Nasser, the largest man-made lake in the world, formed by the building of the Aswan High Dam. This immense structure, which took a decade to complete, is ‘...modern Egypt’s ambitious effort to harness the Nile for agriculture and industrial purposes...’ The price Egypt paid for the anticipated development of her resources was the total submersion of the Nubian lands. Nubia, renowned throughout the world as an ancient land rich in archeological sites, became the focus of widespread concern and plans were made for the rescue of its celebrated monuments. While archaeologists and engineers worked against time at this task of preservation, and artists and photographers recorded for posterity the beauties of this disappearing land, many people visited the site for a glimpse of Old Nubia....”

This paragraph is taken from Magda Saleh’s thesis, an ex-ballerina from the opera house in Cairo. She started writing her thesis in 1977 when she traveled along the Nile to observe and record so-called ethnic dances that she thought were disappearing. She stopped at different towns along the way, in Nubia, Siwa, Marsa Matruh and others. She recorded the dances using Labanotation, a dance annotation system. (slide 17)

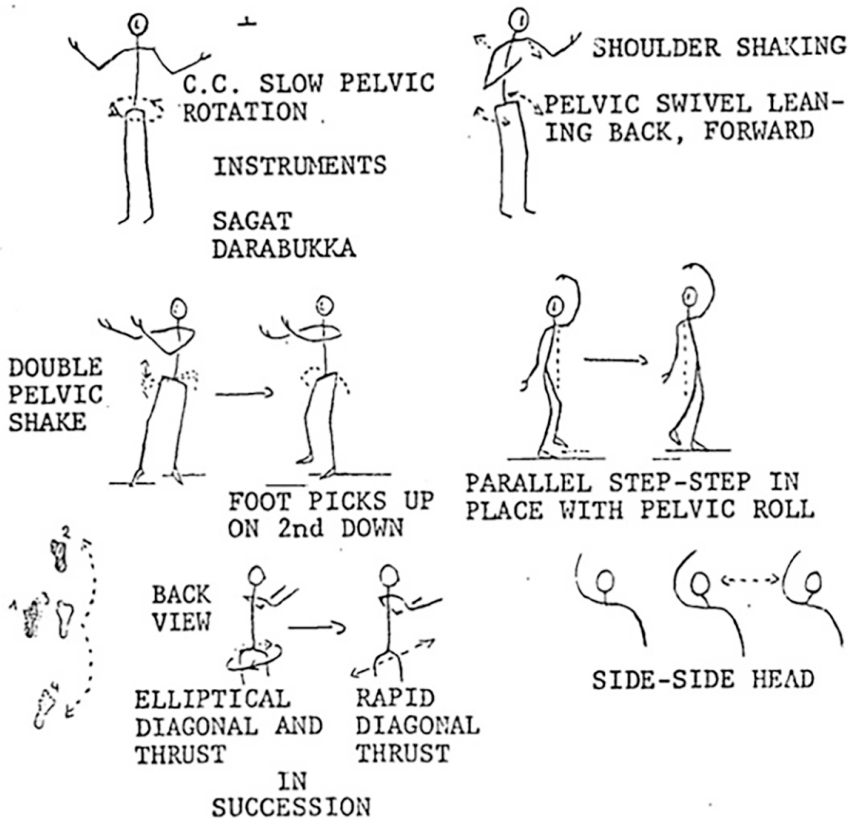
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on the vertical axi
ce:  Fi
for the first quart
lute, then plunges

She also approached each place through its geography, describing the way tectonic plates have moved throughout the years, shifting eastern Africa apart and forming the current geography of the Nile, and how man-made lakes have submerged ancient monuments, displacing towns and whole communities. (slide 10) (slide 12) (slide 13)



In this landscape, she followed the currents of the water moving south. She was mainly concerned with transmitting this embodied knowledge.

She was afraid the kind of dances she sought after were slowly disappearing and would be submerged, just like old Nubia, by the modern dance institution to which she belonged. The dancers who embodied this knowledge were getting older; knowledge dies when the body of the dancer dies and becomes a stagnant entity. Slowly, muscles start to disintegrate and perish, and bones stop their articulations. (slide 18)



Here is a short dance description taken from Magda's thesis:

"I hear from a physician...that a dancing girl can lie on her back, and with a full glass of water standing on one side of her abdomen and an empty glass on the other, can by the contraction of the muscles on the side supporting the full glass, project the water from it, so as to fill the empty glass." (148)

It seems that Magda was looking for the ground, for the horizontal body, trying to get out of ballet's vertical geometry, in order to enter another geometry, a flatland. Her ethnographic work can also be read as a reaction to the rupture from folk dance, imposed by ballet in its self-promotions as the dance that will modernize bodies. (slide 7)

Take for example the article “The most beautiful industry in our country,” published in Al-Hilal magazine in 1958, which addresses the ballet dance school in Egypt:

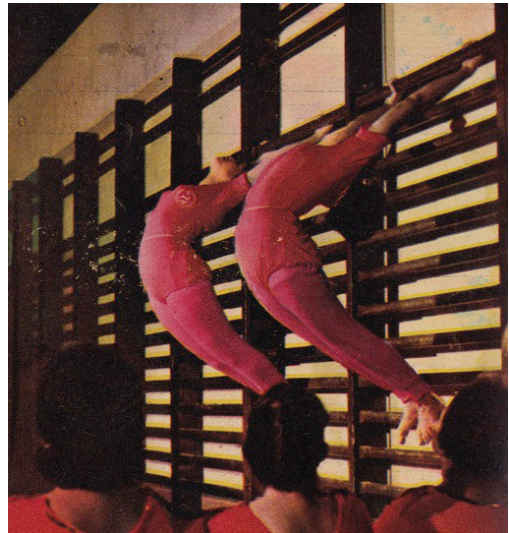
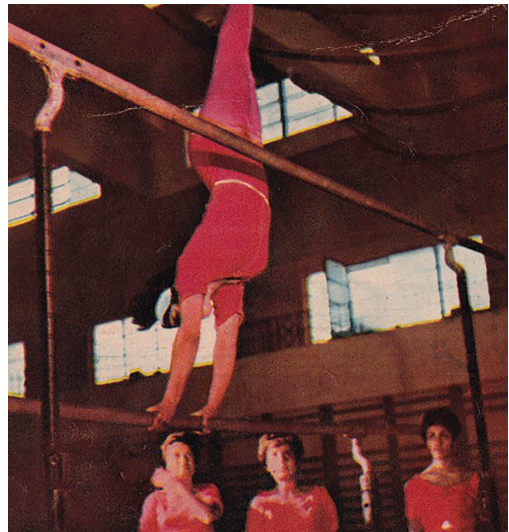
“If you pass next to an industrial building, don’t think this is a new metal or car factory! No! It is a big hangar but nothing of what you expect. It is a place where bodies become trained to dance in a certain manner and join the national troupe.”

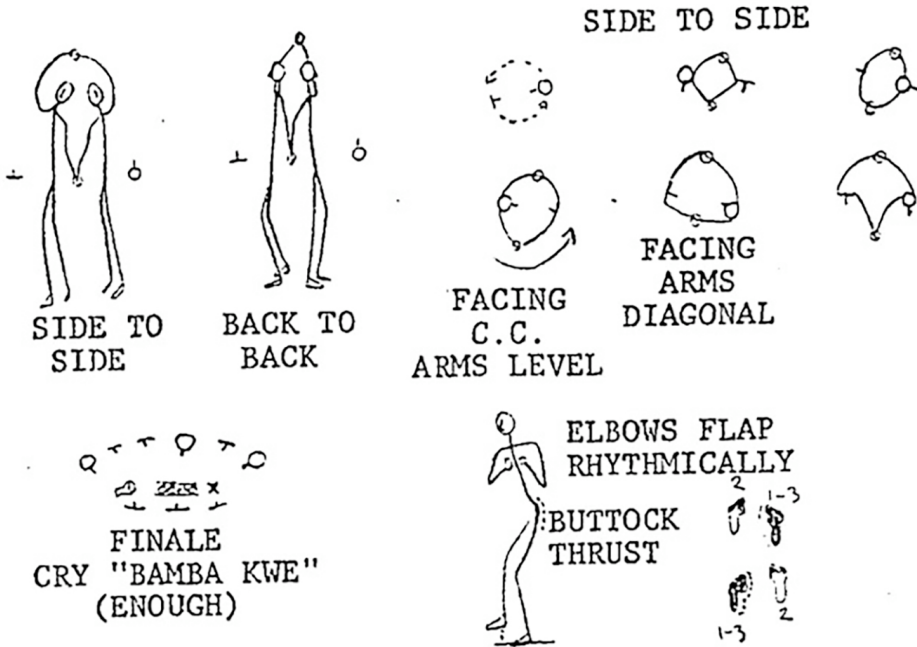
Bodies-en-masse, learning to dance ballet – will they all become ballerinas? These bodies would become representative of a country demarcated by specific borders. A specific gesture or a dance movement becomes representative of a country artificially mapped by human hands and fingers. Colonial hands. The modern body had to learn ballet.

Magda herself joined the ballet dance school in 1958. (slide 2)

In 1966, she danced in the Fountain of Bakhshisarai, directed by Lavrosky, and was awarded the Order of Merit by General Nasser himself, a medal honoring her practice as a dancer. She was the first dancer to be recognized by the state as a national achiever. (slide 3)

By leaving the ballet dance school, following the Nile, and annotating so-called “ethnic dances,” she was actually bringing these dance-forms into the modern institution “heritage,” so concerned with annotation, recording, archiving, and preservation. Maybe Magda thought she was saving them from being forgotten or submerged under the waters, under the lake or under the river, under the modern dance institution; yet she was also saving these from the colonial-anthropological gaze that would categorize them as primitive dances. (slide 11)





At the beginning of her thesis she states: “Early evolutionists contended that because dancing was regarded as a primitive response, it had greater meaning for primitive peoples and would be abandoned with the coming of civilization. That theory having been discredited, it has been firmly asserted: ‘there is no such thing as ‘primitive dance.’ The term is meaningless’...”

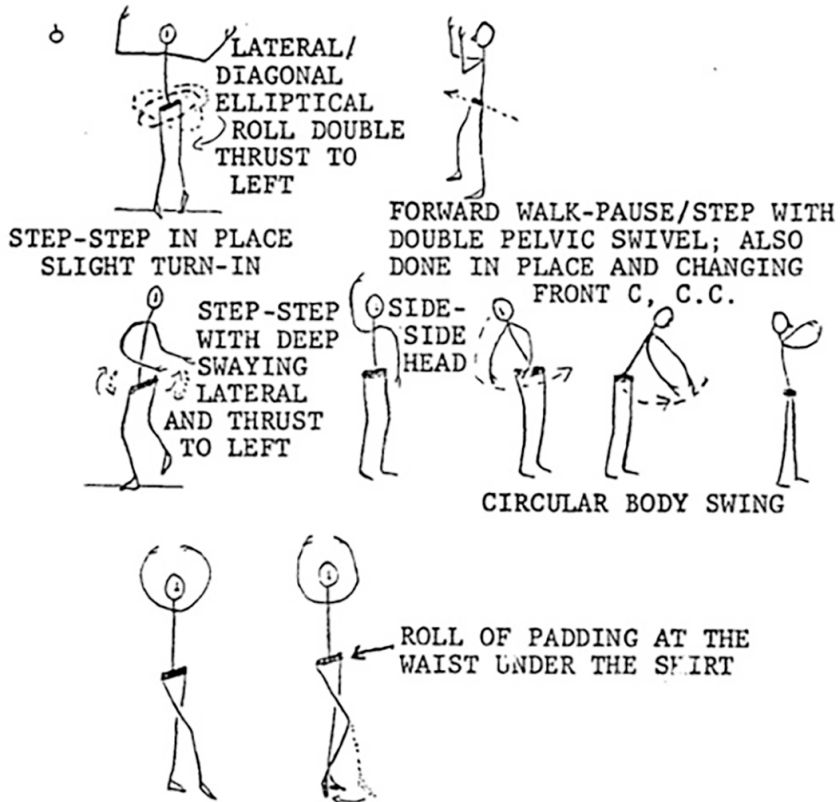
Magda based her argument on this specific phrase: “there is no such thing as primitive dance.” She wanted to liberate these dances from the colonial eye and differentiate her gaze from the colonial-ethnographic gaze, by stating her situated “locality.” (slide 34)



“Local” in her understanding means belonging to the same nation-state and disregards any class, ethnic, gender, or political differences.

While going through Magda’s thesis, I realized that the hip rotation was a recurrent annotation; it was a central movement in her studies, for it seemed that she was looking closely at the horizontal pelvic movement. (slide 19)

TABL
MIZMAR



“How to rotate the hips? In order to do the hip rotation, one needs to consider the pelvis as the center of the body and delineate it from its periphery (legs and torso), creating some kind of disjunction between the pelvis and the torso and disconnecting them from each other so that each part would be working alone, independently from the other. The body stops being a whole and becomes a body of different parts that follows the movement of the pelvis. Unlike the flying movement, where the spine is the center and the body works as a whole.”

Magda seemed to be concerned with transmitting the pelvic movement and hip rotation with all its different variables. It was a way for her to counter her own training as a ballerina with the spine at the center, and re-center the body at the pelvis. She also opened a new sphere of representation in the way she employed the Labanotation system. Indeed, her genderless, unmarked annotations might have been a way to liberate the female dancer, herself included. And yet, these annotations also helped her produce a new fiction of heritage, a new fiction of the nation. A fiction that brought her back to the earth and countered the fiction of flying through which her body was trained. (slide 4



In fact, her move was very simple; she switched positions. She came out of this dancer-image and put herself amongst the audience. She came down from the stage and sat with the audience to look at the ethnic dances, to look at herself dancing. She landed with the audience and left the official stage of representation. The space of dance was not on that stage anymore. The geography of the Nile allowed for a new space to open and a new dance to happen, a dance between the ethnographer and the dancer, between the dancer and the dancer, between the dancer and the photographer, between the traveler and the landscape. Perhaps a combat dance? (slide 22)

SITS TAUNTING OPPONENT



“The object of the combat game is for a player or combatant to seek an opening (referred to as ‘bab,’ which means ‘door’) in the defense of the opponent or antagonist, by means of which a blow may be inflicted while maintaining an impenetrable defense. This is achieved through the circular swinging manipulation of the stick about the body, protecting targets such as the head, neck, torso, back, and knees, while the two opponents circle warily around each other performing feints, thrusts, and parries, all involving jumps and sudden changes of level and directions, occasionally to deliver a resounding blow on each other’s sticks...”

If in the ring two real enemies happen to meet, the game may turn into a feud as the two antagonists and their respective supporters engage in a violent mêlée. In fact, for a viewer to imagine the deadly combat, all that is required is to visualize the stylized, slow motion game speeded up.”

There is always some kind of ethnographic work when one is looking at a dance performance. Or merely an anatomical observation. The difference between a dance performance and the ethnographic work is that the body is taken out of context and put onto the stage. The ethnographer is an audience, but the audience members observing a dance performance are not necessarily ethnographers. Perhaps the audience is simply looking at the dissection of the body and its skeletal articulation.

**PROTECTING
BACK**



**CIRCLING C.C. AND C WITH BLOWS
FRONT TO FRONT, PARRIES,
UNEXPECTED PIVOTING AND LEVEL
CHANGE**



DEFENSIVE/OFFENSIVE POSITIONS



It is one thing to adopt the ethnographer's gaze as Magda did; it is another to be part of an audience; and yet another to be looking at a body with the purpose of dissecting its anatomy. In fact, this is the difference between the viewer, the observer, the audience, the witness, and the ethnographer. Or perhaps the ethnographer is all of those at once. (slide 23)

How can one learn to dance? By observing, following, imitating, and understanding the forces that are pushing you vertically and horizontally, not only the muscular forces but also the earthly forces. Gravity, weight, movements, grounds, slides, hills, earthquakes, mud, bones, articulations, currents, liquids, water... Learning to dance means learning that the earth and the human body are an inseparable entity in their movement, and the mere dichotomy between flying and landing becomes useless. Earth and sky, verticality and horizontality, blood and bones, muscles and liquids.

In every flight there is a fall, in every fall there is a tapping the ground, in every tapping the ground there is a flying again.

Perhaps I should follow Magda along the Nile and go on the trip that brought her back to the earth. And by doing so, I am neither looking for a place outside of modernity nor healing Magda's rupture. Her thesis belongs to the modern institutions that allowed it. I am rather looking for a certain geological movement that allowed Magda to make a leap back to earth, following the water in order to condense her movement and extend it horizontally. In order to extend horizontally, one needs to keep a strong verticality, push towards the floor, feeling the weight in the feet, feeling the heaviness. I can barely move my feet.

If I follow those tectonic plates that pushed her on her trip...

If I imagine the force that is produced by the movement of those tectonic plates...

If I imagine those tectonic plates moving quickly, or imagine an earthquake...

This is what made Magda move. Instead of defying the tectonic plates, instead of defying the force of gravity, I will let them make me move. (slide 24)



Magda's attempt to get out of the nation-state by following a river that cuts through the continent beyond the nation's borders was a failed one. The river had already been nationalized. In Magda's narrative, for that matter a Nasserist one par excellence, the trip took place along the Nile because this is where people have settled since centuries. This is the "natural" configuration of the country. This might be a fact, but in her words, it comes with a strong nationalistic undertone. The post-

independence tone used by the state comes through in Magda's words and movements: pli , chass , pas de deux, grand  cart, pointe, demi pointe, tendu. It resounds throughout Magda's trip along the Nile and her annotations. It also seeps into the Nile's movement and flows, its reflections, streams, creeks, lakes, ponds, and human-made "flood" controls, runoffs, intermittent streams, the surface water, the groundwater. Between the ballerina's movement and the nationalized water's

flows there is the earth's movement. Not only the tectonic plates, but also the liquids flowing within the innumerable geological layers that form its underground.

The point is not to make a parallel between the body of the female ballerina with the flow of water, but rather to look at the way they have both been nationalized in the "statist" project of post-independence, both (re)colonized in the post-colonial period by the state itself.

A body of water! The earth's pelvis, the earth's pelvic rotation. The earth's rotation, not around other planets but upon itself! (image...)

What if we imagine the movement of those tectonic plates speeded up.

"The rivers of this portion of eastern Africa once flowed westward into the mighty Congo basin. Then, six million years ago, the great tectonic plates that form the Earth's crust shifted and began to pull eastern Africa apart. Huge faults formed along the surface, dropping blocks of crust into deep, trench like rift valleys with steep walls. Magma rose from earth's interior through the thinning crust, raising volcanic mountains such as the Virunga. As they rose across the southern end of the Nile drainage, the Virunga Mountains cut off the headwaters of the river, forcing waters that had flowed north into the Nile to flow south into the lakes Kivu and Tanganyika instead.

As tectonic forces rearranged topography along the rift, waters that had drained west to the Congo or east to the Red Sea and the Indian Ocean were gradually directed northward along the through formed by the rift. The rearrangement took time."

The Nile may be moving laterally at rates of up to 9km every thousand years, although this rate includes channel jumps in the area of islands. The direction of motion depends on the curvature of the river; bends tend to move outwards and downstream except where constrained by the desert edge.

These observations place constraints on the geometry of the movement of the Nile but they do not provide time constraints. The migration of the river destroys all the settlements on the erosional side of the river and preserves only sites on the depositional side.

Migration geometry and its rates suggest that the Nile Delta's head was further south in the past. A more southerly ancient Delta head, in the absence of tectonic uplift or sea-level fall with time, suggests that the Nile in antiquity had a higher flow rate and that there were many more distributaries. (slide 25)



[Falling Is Not Collapsing]

How to stumble and fall? I followed the dancer. It was hard to follow her intentional hesitation. Right, left. I thought she was going right when she turns and goes in the opposite direction, unexpectedly turns back again and goes right. It was a game of switching directions. She stumbles as if she will fall, but she doesn't, in fact she will. She stumbles, holds herself and doesn't fall, and suddenly she does. In this twist I followed her back and forth, back and forth, until I learned the move. I repeated it so many times. I learned it well and always got stuck on the stumbling. The fall needs a lot of muscles. To let oneself powerfully fall, one needs a lot of muscles and strength. Without hesitation I followed her. I stumbled; I was not powerful enough to fall. I skipped the fall.

Falling is not collapsing; in the sense of the collapse of the image of the dancer flying.

Perhaps stumbling and falling entail that one can stand up again if they wish to, that one can look at the earth from the perspective of the earth's ground and surface, onto the atmosphere, onto the earth, onto the self. Perhaps it means that one can imagine the self in another position, that is, not a vertical one of walking or standing still or flying, but rather of lying or sliding. One can fall as many times as desired and needed. One can repeatedly fall, if the ground can take it.

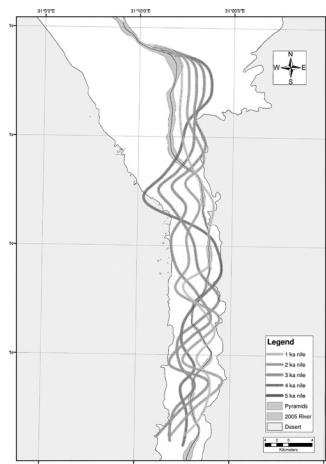
Falling is not collapsing in the sense of the earth collapsing onto itself. Or, in the sense of the earth melting onto itself.

Falling is not collapsing in the sense of the earth falling in a free fall.

Collapsing can be slow, like a slow motion extended over time; collapse can be sudden, but it always means a point of no return. It means that the muscles have deteriorated. It means that Nubia has become submerged under Lake Nasser.

The nation-state, as seen in the image of the ballerina flying, is strong and muscular, defying the earth. The human body is at its center, reaching for more and never stumbling, never falling, at least not inside the frame.

But this was 1958; Magda received her medal in 1966. The story shifts after 1967. In 1977, ten years after 1967, sees the moment when Magda attempts to leave this image and embarks upon her trip. She looks for another fiction of the nation and another representation of the state. The defeated state needs a new dancer; it is not falling, it is collapsing.



Marwa Arsanios

(b. 1978, Washington DC, lives and works in Beirut, Lebanon) received her MFA from University of the Arts London in 2007, and was a researcher in the Fine Art department at Jan Van Eyck Academie from 2011 to 2012. She has had solo exhibitions at Witte de With, Rotterdam, the Netherlands (2016), Hammer Projects (2016), Kunsthalle Lissabon, Lisbon (2015), and Art in General, New York (2015). Her work was also shown at the 55th Venice Biennale (2013), the 12th Istanbul Biennial (2011), Home Works Forum in Beirut (2010, 2013, 2015), the New Museum, New York (2014), M HKA, Antwerp, Belgium (2013), and nGbK, Berlin (2012). Screenings of her videos have taken place at the Berlinale, Berlin (2010, 2015), e-flux storefront, New York (2009), and Centre Pompidou, Paris (2011). In 2012 Arsanios was awarded the special prize of the Pinchuk Future Generation Art Prize.
