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Marwa Arsanios

KUNSTHALLE LISSABON



Marwa Arsanios, *Olga's Notes, all those restless bodies*, 2014, HD video, color, sound, 24 minutes.

Kunsthalle Lissabon began the year with a new space, and with the first solo exhibition in Lisbon of Lebanese artist Marwa Arsanios. "Notes for a choreography" presented Arsanios's latest video, *Olga's Notes, all those restless bodies*, 2014, commissioned by Kunsthalle Lissabon and Art in General in New York. The work was projected in dialogue with *I've Heard Stories*, an animation from 2008.

Arsanios's work is rooted in her fascination with place—whether understood by way of an architectural landmark or a historical anecdote—which she links to themes of decolonization, the politics of a nation-state, violence, marginalization, or feminism. Her recent piece is the product of a long-term engagement with the Egyptian cultural magazine *Al-Hilal*. In her research, Arsanios has been focusing on archival issues of the publication, those from the 1950s and '60s in particular, as they provide firsthand documentation of a tumultuous period in Egypt's history. Her film was inspired by an article from the January 1963 issue, which dealt with the establishment of a ballet school in Cairo, the High Institute of Ballet. The opening of this school was understood to be part of Egypt's modernization and the broader project of building a new nation-state. Suggestively, the article even describes the school as a "factory of bodies." It was precisely this understanding of the instrumentalization of the body, its relation to labor, exploitation, institution, and modernity, that can be found at the core of *Olga's Notes*.

The film follows six dancers, each performing a different dance. One is the protagonist in *The Fountain of Bakhshisarai*, a production performed at the dance school in the first year of its existence. Each of the dancers manifests, reenacts, or improvises on a particular dance technique related to her professional history, education, or culture of origin. Remaining silent and anonymous, the dancers speak only through the movement of their bodies. Some follow a predetermined choreography, while others fail to remember or succumb to the pain of their bodies—bodies that have been exposed to the dance industry, where limits are perceived as something to be overcome. Alternating between shots of the different dancers and their dances, the film can be understood as a study of failing memory and the clashing histories represented by the numerous dances performed and by the suggested personal histories of individual dancers. And although poetic in nature, the work can be perceived as a commentary on the instrumental role of culture in the staging of what could be called a political choreography.

Choreography and the idea of reenactment are also constructive elements in *I've Heard Stories*. In this case, what is reenacted is the true story of a politician murdered at the Carlton Hotel, a modernist landmark in the center of Beirut. The identity of the politician remains unspecified; the killer was supposedly his personal driver and gay lover. Before the murder is shown, humorous scenes both animated and featuring real shots of the now abandoned and deteriorating Beirut hotel and its surrounding architecture illustrate the sexual relationship between the killer and his victim. Arsanios presents the architectural context as a testimony to an event in history but also as a platform for reflection and connection with the body. A female figure—a dancer, the narrator whose voice we follow throughout the video—finally appears at the end of the piece. Wandering like a ghost through the abandoned ruins of the hotel, she brings our attention, through her physical presence, back to the body as the central feature of the exhibition; just like an architectural monument, the body is shaped and violated by history and the course of political action.

—[Markéta Stará Condeixa](#)

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