

# The End of Choreography As We Know It

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No Collective and Lindsey Drury, *Vesna's Fall* (Fall Version), Queens Museum, Queens, NY, April 26, 2015.

On January 26, 1972, Vesna Vulović fell from an exploding airplane onto a frozen mountainside in northern Czechoslovakia—and survived. The 33,330 feet physical downfall of the Serbian flight attendant is registered in the Guinness Book of Records as the highest free fall a human has lived through. The reason her JAT Flight 367 exploded that day remains unknown. The local investigation committee claimed there had been a bomb planted by a Croatian nationalist group. Soon afterwards, the Yugoslav government singled out the criminals as the fascist terrorist organization Ustaše, though the group had been dormant since the end of World War II. In recent years, some journalists concluded that the plane was shot down by mistake by the Czechoslovak Air Force—a claim that the Czech Civilian Aviation Authority immediately dismissed as a conspiracy theory. The reason Vesna survived is as controversial as the cause of explosion. Nevertheless, there is a simple explanation for why she fell from the sky, thanks to Sir Isaac Newton: gravity was at work.

Since early 2014, No Collective and Lindsey Drury have been presenting a “dance” piece about gravity whose unifying title is appropriately derived from the 1972 miracle: *Vesna's Fall*. This collaborative endeavor was presented in three different “versions,” each related to a particular season, in various locations throughout 2014: the Winter version at Judson Memorial Church in February, the Spring version at Black Mountain College in April, and the Summer version at the Performatica Festival in Mexico in May. The final version attributed to Fall, however, was shown at the Queens Museum after a yearlong hiatus, and in the wrong season: April. This misplacement had an effect of directing the meaning of the

term “Fall” away from the season of harvest to the descent of body caused by gravity—a perplexing move since the last installment of *Vesna’s Fall* also seemed to have moved away from the investigation of gravity foregrounded in the former three versions. This seeming paradox, however, is seeming only: the Fall version actually pursues the workings of gravity in the most radical manner. The reason it appears otherwise stems from the idiosyncratic nature of the conclusion the project has reached.

All the versions of *Vesna’s Fall* shared a basic mechanism: six female dancers (Lindsey Drury, Kaia Gilje, Molly Schaffner, Paige Fredlund, Laura Bartczak, and Katelyn Hales) each carrying a “magic circle”—a fourteen foot wide circular contraption attached to a backpack frame, swaddled around by shower curtains of different color—that amplified their movement and blocked both their view and the audience’s.<sup>1</sup> This cancelation of the visual channel left the dancers to depend solely on what they could hear to coordinate their movement. Thus, choreography was achieved by each dancer counting, giving instructions, and following commands from others.

The Fall version introduced several changes. The magic circles were reduced to four, and the colored curtains were switched to translucent ones. There were also notable differences between the circles: Two circles contained two dancers attached back to back; and the other two, each with a single dancer, had spoken (misleading) enticements played out from a speaker, often describing what was happening inside and luring audience members to come in.<sup>2</sup> The two dancers in one circle yelled out instructions to each other to move around and try to swallow audience members. These instructions were followed by other circles, even though they were clearly not meant for them. The two dancers in the other circle were in their underwear, reciting enticements into a microphone that was wirelessly transmitted to the speakers in the two single circles. Whenever an audience was lured into their circle, they let out a scream. Except for the two in the microphone circle, all the dancers engaged in a negotiation to exchange their roles whenever an audience member stepped into their circle. When this was successful, the dancer exited the circle and danced, or went into another circle as an audience member.

In short, instructions were unevenly distributed and misinterpretation was fully embraced. As Cody Eikman observed in his review, all movements were dedicated to realizing exchanges of various sorts.<sup>3</sup> But in order to understand the significance of these exchanges and its relation to gravity, it is necessary to examine an invisible layer that operated beneath the mechanism Eikman described.

As I initially suspected from the melodies some of the dancers sang or whistled during the Judson Church performance, and later confirmed with Kay Festa from No Collective, *Vesna's Fall* makes an implicit reference to the most prevalent work of modern dance: *Rite of Spring*.<sup>4</sup> The first three versions actually used materials from Nijinsky's original choreography as movement resources. What sets *Vesna's Fall* apart from myriad other renditions of this classic modernist piece, however, is that it was conceived not as a re-interpretation or homage, but as a resistance and attack to the basic logic of Nijinsky and Stravinsky's creation.

The narrative of the 1913 ballet is, indeed, downright despicable. It is a story of young virgin dancers in a patriarchal tribe, from which one is selected every year by elderly members of the community as a sacrifice for the advent of Spring. The Chosen One is forced to dance until she dies of exhaustion. Adding to the insult is that this ritual is an annual event, something that recurs—*must* recur—every year. The central dogma of modernism is therefore rooted in repetition. Both in the story told as well as in the act of re-telling it, the sacrifice of the female victim is repeated so that patriarchal modernism can be happily prolonged.

What lies at the heart of this modernist fable is an unashamed misogyny. In seeking to dismantle this odious narrative, No Collective and Drury have focused on something that has passed unnoticed in so many interpretations of *Rite of Spring*: the role of gravity. Indeed, the Earth, being the ground upon which the patriarchal tribe is erected and nourished, symbolizes the stability of the community and the nexus of Elders and Ancestors who rule it. Gravity's pull thus represents the reductive force of patriarchy, and as such constitutes the hidden core of Stravinsky's narrative and Nijinsky's choreography.

This can be shown by tracing the original 1913 choreography.<sup>5</sup> Toward the end of part one, the Sage blesses the earth before the dancers break into the powerful "Dance of the Earth" which sanctifies the ground and aims to become one with it. In part two, the power of gravity is no longer merely figurative, but acts as a physical force dominating Nijinsky's choreography. The Chosen One is chosen because she trips and falls, twice succumbing to gravity. The workings of gravity reappear in full force in "Sacrificial Dance" at the end of the piece, in which the entire choreography consists in the Chosen One's desperate attempt to escape the pull of earth. But after five exhilarating minutes, she loses the battle. Although she is offered to the Sun God Yarilo in the sky, it is gravity that brings her down and takes her last breath.



Top: *Vesna's Fall*, Queens Museum, 2015. Photo: Kota Yamazaki. Bottom: Photo: David Ian Griess.

The gravity at work *in* the 1913 piece is the force *of* the same piece that has attracted a century worth of choreographers. We now understand how Vulović's 1972 miracle serves as a strong counter-evidence to the misogynistic logic of patriarchal modernism: A woman, pulled by gravity and brought to the ground, nonetheless survives to tell her story. Since the word "Vesna" means "Spring" in Slavic language, the lesson is all the more apparent: Spring falls but survives. The logic of sacrifice is thus debunked.

But we need not wait until 1972 to subvert the tale of women succumbing to the Earth's pull. A more theoretical solution had already appeared within a couple of years after the notorious premiere of *Rite of Spring*. Einstein's general theory of relativity, published in 1915, discarded the Newtonian view of gravity as an invisible force, and redefined it as an effect of bodies creating curvatures in space-time.<sup>6</sup> As a mass, body bends space and attracts other bodies. In other words, it is not only the earth that pulls—every *body* does. The logic of patriarchal modernism was therefore rendered obsolete as soon as it was born. Its imagination was quite literally primitive. As No Collective and Drury realized, the relativistic view of gravities has critical implications for choreography. For what is choreography, if not the act of one body exercising control over others in time and space? Choreography is therefore an art of gravity. In other words, a choreography about gravity is a choreography about choreography. The criticism of patriarchal modernism has consequently one goal: to dismantle the workings of a *singular* gravity/choreography in dance that the 1913 piece and all its reenactments relied upon.

The mechanism of *Vesna's Fall* constitutes a twofold solution to this problem. First, it multiplies gravity/choreography by having all the dancers instruct and follow each other. Second, it relativizes the singularity of the choreographing/choreographed body by putting all the dancers inside larger bodies: the magic circles. This shift of scale disrupts the very meaning of Chosen "One," since there can always be more than one dancer inside a circle. The first three versions of *Vesna's Fall* explored these principles in various ways, changing the spatial and temporal setting of performance ("seasons"), which inevitably affected the structure and sequence of events. A twenty-minute, well-coordinated, indoor performance for Winter, a two-hour, improvisational, outdoor performance for Spring, and an hour-long parade throughout the streets of Cholula accompanied by a local marching band (inside the circles) for Summer. All these versions retained, however, a non-relativistic attitude concerning the *observer* of the work. A strict division between dancer and audience members was always in place, emphasized by the non-transparency of the colored curtains. Relativization of gravity was merely staged for spectators to observe at a distance.

The Fall version subverted this premise in three ways. First, the exterior walls of the magic circles were now translucent, making an otherwise rigid division more ambiguous. Second, instead of following a universal program, each circle engaged in different endeavors and produced different instructions. Third, despite these differences, the piece had one dedicated goal: the exchange of roles between the dancers and audience members. The basic idea underlying these changes is simple: The only externally visible difference between a dancer and an audience member is that of *costume*, and costume is nothing other than a body outside a body. The magic circles as giant costumes disrupt the delineation between audience members and performers through the invisible exchange of visible costumes. Consequently, the chain of command is not only pluralized, but rendered fundamentally indeterminate. Nobody knows who is being instructed by whom. There is no singular, privileged vantage point from which to observe and control the multiplicity of choreographies. Everybody ends up choreographing, and being choreographed by, everybody else.

*Vesna's Fall* thus helps to dismantle patriarchal modernism's gravity in two steps: through the erasure of a singular choreographic chain of command, then through the erasure of a privileged observer who is unaffected by gravity. More simply put, *Vesna's Fall* exposes the fact that there is no such thing as a neutral body that does not participate in the pushing and pulling of other bodies—a body choreographs other bodies regardless of the choreographer's intention. This discovery of the body that is always embedded in a particular space and time parallels John Cage's discovery of (the impossibility of) silence, and does for dance what the composer of indeterminacy did for music: re-invent choreography as something that exists before the choreographer.

The atemporality of modernism was based on the idea of repetition that is reset for each instantiation. But when the body is inserted into the formula, such constant renewal of repetition no longer obtains since physicality withers and exhausts itself in every reiteration. And the body has always already been part of the formula. Every Spring necessitates a specific virgin, but must obscure the fact that it does. In reality, there is no spring that is identical to any other, and every sacrifice dies a singular death. Patriarchal modernism, in other words, is bound to exhaust itself.

Despite analyzing the piece in detail, Eikman's review disregarded the explicit specification of gender in *Vesna's Fall*.<sup>7</sup> At the Queens Museum, all the dancers started off being female, accurately portraying the group of virgins in *Rite of Spring*. The only male dancer (You Nakai) was given a distinct role: He ran around the magic circles with a harmonica in his mouth. This runner *repeated*

his circular trajectory throughout the performance—a role reminiscent of the Elders who circle around the Chosen One to prevent her escape as she danced to death. But in *Vesna's Fall*, it was not the virgin who died. Through the exchange of costumes, the dancers constantly rejuvenated themselves, relativizing the singular pull of gravity that would have otherwise caused their downfall. Instead it was the male runner who ran out of breath—a physical deterioration that was made audible through the acceleration of the harmonica rhythm. In the end, his body collapsed to the floor, exhausted. After a short moment of hesitation, the remaining dancers/audience members slowly left their magic circles one by one, letting the piece fade out.

Or perhaps it is more accurate to say that from this point on, the choreographies of *Vesna's Fall* no longer needed these circles, these bodies outside bodies. After staging the death of patriarchal modernism through the inevitable exhaustion caused by too many repetitions, choreographies were released from dance, returning to the only place they belonged: the many bodies which filled the Museum foyer, pulling and pushing each other in an invisible, but now slightly more perceivable, manner.

## NOTES

1. The term “magic circle” is derived from another source for the title of the piece: the springtime goddesses of Slavic mythology, also named Vesna, who lived in palaces atop mountains enwrapped in magic circles where they discussed the fate of crops and of human beings.

2. One curious treatment of the work's title in the Fall version was its use inside one of the enticements: It described a piece called *Vesna's Fall* in which dancers wearing magic circles jumped down from the two towers (remnants of the 1964 World's Fair) standing outside the Queens Museum, and danced while falling. This use of the title as a “prop” not only highlighted its formal function—to entice and attract people to see the work—but also the movement of bodies it triggers. In other words, the announcement of a performance functions as a primordial choreography that (usually) moves many more bodies than the ones “inside” the work.

3. Cody Eikman, “Exchange Mechanism,” *The Performance Club*, accessed July 1, 2015. <http://theperformanceclub.org/2015/06/exchange-mechanism/>.

4. Kay Festa, interview with author, April 30, 2015. New York.

5. In 1987, Millicent Hodson and Kenneth Archer reconstructed Nijinsky's choreography for the Joffrey Ballet, using the published choreographic notes from the piano score, Marie Rambert's notes from rehearsals, Valentine Gross's sketches of the dancers, as well as numerous interviews, memoirs and reviews. This is the version No Collective and Drury used. See: Kay Festa, “More than Meets the Ears: An Account on the Shared (Ac)counts of Cage and Stravinsky,” *TDR: The Drama Review* (59:2, 2015): 92–101.

6. Albert Einstein, *Relativity: The Special and General Theory*, Robert W. Lawson, trans. (London: Methuen & Co Ltd, 1920).

7. Eikman, "Exchange Mechanism," *The Performance Club*.

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