

Falling Reversely

ISAAC CHONG WAI

Moving on in reverse



Marina Srnka

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What kind of body is a body that falls? What makes it fall? And, more precisely, what does it mean for a body to *fall reversely*? These questions linger at the heart of Isaac Chong Wai's 30-minute performance 'Falling Reversely'. Motivated by his own and the five other dancers' experiences of violence, recurring and intensified assaults against Asian communities, deepened during the Covid lockdown, the performers re-enact and inhabit a wide vocabulary of falls drawn from media footage, especially CCTV recordings of attacks in the US. In this *iconography of falls*, vulnerability and

strength collide, flowing between surge of bodies and sculptural stillness to produce choreography that feels at once weightless and unbearably heavy. To fall upwards becomes a gesture of rebellion, an embodied refusal to stay down, without forgetting the original violence.

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The work emerged from an immersive video installation commissioned by Adriano Pedrosa for the 60th International Art Exhibition of La Biennale di Venezia, titled 'Foreigners Everywhere, Falling Reversely' (2021-2024). One year later, Chong Wai presents the work at the Playground Festival in Leuven, focusing solely on the live, physical component of the original installation: no screens, just bodies and gravity. Although trained as a visual artist, Chong Wai's practice has long been shaped by sustained collaborations with performers across both professional and amateur spheres. For him, bodies function as materials in their own right: malleable, affective, and capable of holding tensions as delicate and responsive as paper. In 'Falling Reversely', the diverse Asian decent backgrounds of the five Berlin-based performers (R*yota Maeda, Selina Shida Hack, Soyeon Shin, Nobutaka Shomura, Vasundhara Srivastava)* subtly inflect the ensemble's relational fabric, shaping how each body meets another.

To fall in reverse is to inhabit instability

The falling body as method, even as therapy, has long resonated in modern dance. For example, Martha Graham's rigorous vocabulary, particularly her 'back fall', her 'hinge', trained dancers to suspend themselves at the brink of collapse and meet the floor with both precision and surrender. Yet for Graham, the fall was never final; it was part of a cyclical rhythm of descent and recovery, a way of accessing visceral and emotional states. Against the verticality and ethereal lightness of classical ballet, Graham embraced gravity itself, cultivating a raw corporeal expressivity grounded in weight and impact. Chong Wai, whether deliberately or intuitively, extends this lineage, translating Graham's methodology into the realm of mediated violence. Dancers do not fall merely to stand up; they fall and stand and fall again, as though the cycle itself has no end. To fall in reverse is to inhabit instability: direction, agency, and intention blur, and the body must constantly negotiate its relation to gravity, to the gaze, and to the histories that press upon it. To fall reversely is to fracture gravity's authority.

Crashing knees and elbows

The dramaturgical arc of the work follows variations of 'attacks' and the corresponding choreography of 'falls'. In the opening sequence, the performers stand in a circle as a relentless soundtrack conjures the march of boots, the distant pulse of war. Staged in a secluded white-box room on the museum's top floor, the empty whiteness of the room heightens the dark, everyday clothing of the performers. They fall one by one, then in groups, then suddenly all at once. They repeat. Some collapses resemble a dull hit to the abdomen; others seem to knock the body sideways; still others convulse or in suspend mid-air before reversing themselves, as if the moment of impact could be rewound. Each fall requires uncanny control, for the flow of movement does not end upon hitting the ground; it ends only when the performer finds themselves upright again. If they do.

Later, the sound of cannon fire cracks through the space. An invisible force, representing systematic injustice and violence, attacks. The sharp sound of shattering glass cuts through the room. One performer reaches a peak of exhaustion, unable to stand, rolling and cramping across the floor. Dancers track one another in subtle glances and micro-movements, as if survival depends on this mutual vigilance. At other moments, a mass of bodies appears to come under attack: the tempo quickens, sounds of bombs and machines fill the space, and dancers drag one another, while a limp, 'dead' body hangs over another's shoulders. Yet even here, amidst the violence, there is a striking lightness and precision in the falls and an unexpected aesthetic drawn from states of physical impairment. The falls are violent, as the bodies thud to the concrete floor, I feel the vibrations of crashing knees and elbows like jolts of invisible pain.

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The work oscillates between the dynamic singularity of an individual fall and the slow, collective descent of many bodies. These bodies are far from neutral: they are full of memories and scars, bodies that remember and endure. In falling together, looking to one another, following shared rhythms, the work suggests that solidarity is not found in transcending gravity but in meeting it, collectively, with care. The falls are sometimes slow down, and in these moments, violent gestures become strangely unthreatening. When stretched in detail, the movements lose their immediacy as harm and transform into archives: something to study, to mimic, to rehearse, to trace. Memory and trauma become flesh's script, etched on and within. Holding a fall takes strength; to reverse it takes even more. In that inversion lies the work's harsh grace.

And when the 'Falling Reversely' ends, what remains of the body? Perhaps it is a body unwound, undone, restored from past suffering and reborn in motion. To insist on reversability is to deny the logic of irreversibilty. Here, where memory becomes movement, and movement - in slow down, in suspension - becomes redemption.