We started by calling it the summer of two fires and a landslide.
started calling summer two fires landslide.
We started by calling it the summer of two fires and a landslide. It was conceived during a residency at Fondazione Spinola Banna per l’Arte as part of the rESÖ 3 International Network Arts Residencies and Educational Programs in 2013 promoted by the Foundation for Modern and Contemporary Art – CRT Turin.

Emotional Architecture is a project by Nida Ghouse and Malak Helmy initiated in Cairo in 2012.
I see you
and begin to mirror you;
the state sees us
and begins to mirror us.
The Immolation of the Nation
I

It’s almost 11pm and a girl arrives for a drink. She steps out of the elevator, walks past the bar, and into open air. She looks around, then joins two guys sitting together at a table. She had expected only one of them, but then again, they both have exactly the same name.

At some point three turns into two again. He takes his cue to step off stage, calls it a night, exits the frame, as she says, almost inadvertently, to the one who remains, “Won’t you leave this city for a moment?”

Which she could only do for she had insufficient history, and therefore little capacity, to comprehend the implications of what tomorrow might bring.

5 April 2008
We started by calling it the summer of two fires and a landslide. The upper house of the parliament burnt down, and the main stage of the national theatre went alight. On the outskirts a rock face gave way to an avalanche of big boulders that buried people under their own homes. As the rescue operations closed, there was news of a passenger train that had burst into flames. It was on an outbound route, but for some reason our memory is of it coming into the city ablaze.

19 August  
6 September  
18 September  
27 September  
2008

Why do we recall a spectacle that never happened, one which we had never seen?
There was never enough time for artistic justice he had felt. Not during that very first expedition there wasn’t. Most of his drawings were done on his knees. Then some he made standing up. Others while he was still on horseback. Not one of them was completed in the manner he would have desired them to be. He felt ashamed representing such sublime objects with his imperfect designs but he wished to preserve a record of the sensations he was experiencing. He would sketch furiously while the troops were under attack in the desert or when they paused along the Nile for respite. He wanted to take every thing he could on paper and in that sense he was entirely indebted to the obstinate perseverance of the brave Murad Bey in whose pursuit the Armée d’Orient traversed what would become for him the promised land. Captivated by the ancient ruins he discovered, Vivant Denon felt compelled to capture them in turn. But he was drawing in the line of fire, so to speak, and that wasn’t conducive to rendering them accurately in all of their glory.
IV

She flipped open the book from the back and ran her finger down the index. This was the authoritative tome on Cairo's changing urban landscape, covering all the way from the ancient through to the modern-day period, and in that instant of pulling it off the shelf she had hoped that if there were a work of scholarship that could help her situate the burning of the Royal Opera House within a political climate, then this would be it. Her other literary searches thus far had left her feeling empty-handed. And here again, there was only one page she was being told to turn to, so she turned to it.

She scanned the paragraphs and found nothing new of relevance: during the busy phase between 1867 and 1869 the vicinity of Azbakiyah had seen many developments. The rococo style opera house—sanctioned by Ismail Pasha for the inaugural celebrations of the Suez Canal and completed in the remarkably short span of five months—was just one of them. That was it. No mention neither of the claims that the Khedive's pet project had plunged the country some 9 million pounds further into foreign debt. She checked the colophon: the book had been released in 1971, the same year that the theatre in question had gone up in flames. The manuscript would have been submitted to the publishers well prior to the occurrence and therefore obviously there could have been no information to include about it. Now it made more sense. She went back to peruse page 107 just in case.

And that's when she noticed it. On the right hand corner at the bottom, in small type and with a faded pink Post-it alongside, the last sentence of citation number 39 read, almost like a premonition: *The Opera House still stands, anachronistically, in its currently not too fashionable district, but there are rumours of its planned demolition.* She got her phone out and took a photograph.

The building had burnt under mysterious circumstances. Responsibility for the fire had been hinted at, but then more or less deflected. The fumes of conspiracy had formed a thick shroud around what had happened. But the prescient nature of the comment she had just come across seemed to make something legible again. Evidence had preceded the event and Janet Abu Lughod had picked up on it. The position of the warning as marginalia was also indicative: the loss of structure had been relegated to a footnote in the history of contemporary Egypt—despite all the grandeur, a multi-story car park called the Opera Garage now stood in its place.

18 November 2013
V

How does one tell an impossible story? I’ve asked myself for as long as I’ve remembered it by heart. But every time I sit down to it, meaning resists being written.

Saying it out loud, in confidence, I’ve learnt is doable. A late night conversation between no more than two people and they must be midst a crowd. Disguised in chatter, the story stood up on the table and danced itself in the dark. Took years before it even occurred to me to try it out that way.

17 November 2013
Proposal for a Dance Choreography
to be Performed at the Royal Opera House

A woman is having a conversation on a phone. She is a painter and her lover is a young woman named Dalia, who is also her muse. She has just learnt that Dalia is engaged to be married. She pleads with her on the phone. Then, finding no way through, hangs up and has a breakdown.

In the background hangs a large painting of a female nude. Another painting—this one of a bouquet of flowers—rests nearby on an easel. Like the paintings that appear throughout the film, both may have been commissioned from Youssef Francis—artist, scriptwriter, and self-declared failed poet. In an interview with Al-Ahram Weekly, Francis was asked why all the women in his paintings “are always so sad.” “I don't know,” he responded, “but as far as I am concerned only sad women are real. Laughing women do not attract me.”

Two scenes of the breakdown appear here in the form of a sequence of photographs of the film shot on automatic, at half-second intervals. I hoped by way of this approach to substitute the emotional charge and charisma of the moving image, its narrative momentum, as well as the melodramatic appeals made by the original film, with a photographic study of motion. The latter could then be used as the basis for a choreography stripped of any predetermined narrative, symbolism, or even poses.

I sifted through the photographs, selecting those which seem to evade the scene’s narrative nub and its overacted heartbreak, searching for those instants in which the filmmaking and its fascination with the character’s hysteria vanish.

But the material wouldn't comply, and this alternative reading of the scene could not be coaxed or tricked or forcibly extracted. As a result, I’ve accepted that each moment—even when exploded into half-second picture-granules—serves up a story that is already legible and familiar to most viewers. It is impossible to transform the miserable melodrama into a choreography of the everyday.

The scenes are redundant, stupidly stating the heartbreak again and again. A diagnosable state of mind develops in every photograph: the woman’s dawning pain, her shock, her collapse, her grief. Maybe it is inevitable, after all, the way we watch and enact in turn this sort of moment as a tragicomic miming of internal pain. There is nothing unreadable in the photographs, nothing that is not already a sign. Indeed, the current of melodrama seems, at most, to have been redirected towards me, infecting everything, and is accentuated by my attempts to sound as dispassionate as possible. As I haven't succeeded in realising my original aims for the choreography, I present you instead with the entire sequence of photographs, unedited except by the camera.

This choreography was proposed with a specific site and occasion in mind, or as a dance to be performed at the Royal Cairo Opera House, which burnt under mysterious circumstances in 1971. After buildings burn, they transform each into a monument of the event, while still crowded by other, living buildings. No one comes along to paint the walls or remove the broken glass once the looters have evacuated. While the city tumbles along around it with its daily worries, the burnt building stands for years as the husk of an uncomfortably affective event.

Flames seem to evade both authorship and narrative. This is the case even when the arsonist has been identified and even when we understand the fire's role in some larger sequence of personal intrigues, of political or social manoue-
legs in distinct, static configurations. The continuity of her sequence is maintained in the smooth transitions of hands; more complex, subdivided movements are reserved for feet.

Her face seems to transform every time I catch it. I don't understand how she can look like so many different people, men and women. Loose and precise: the fluidity of movement seems somehow to have migrated to the gestalt of her face. Most of the time, her back is to the camera or her face turns away obliquely. Those moments when her eyes, mouth, cheeks, nose are fully available allow a different kind of vision; I can see everything she does more clearly. The face is a unit that offers the possibility of a story and cannot be excised from the dance. Despite their resistance to description, a series of movements occasionally flash into focus “as” something. In these instances, the dance appears inescapably architectural. But the structure disappears just as soon as it comes into view.

The dancer never pauses to frame a pose or fall out of sequence. Certainly, some poses seem to connote states of mind or emotions; the character is whimsical, tragic, distracted, desiring, etc. However, these dissolve subsequently, evening out, losing their ridges. The deadpan quality of the performance allows for a shape-shifting. Recognising individual poses has become futile. I am scribbling a running inventory of phrases but can't keep up. When does a movement begin and end? The immediacy of describing as you watch, of identifying the most salient element of any given movement. The effort of dividing and following is frustrated by a seemingly endless stream of transitions, forever opening onto each other.

I began with photographs. Note-taking offers another attempt at making the movement legible. Neither process depends on the suspension of disbelief usually required of viewers. The aim is to develop a structure through which to transform the scenes and strip them of the demands which

vring. Transfixed, we forget to ask who is responsible, and assume for a moment that it is only the fire itself (or the building) that is responsible for its burning. We watch the flames without the expectation of plot development except, perhaps, to note the time and circumstances of a beginning and an end. Simultaneously, the burning represents a highly emotional or, at least, intensely dramatic event to those present. What I'm saying is this: if a building's burning could be understood as a performance (and a dance performance at that), it would resemble the logic of choreography I originally sought in the scenes of a nervous breakdown.

The question of how the Opera House fire began was never fully resolved. It might have been, as was claimed, an electrical surge: a short circuit in the costumes department. I wanted the dance to be the result of a short circuit. I wanted to dismantle the overacting, to find those seconds buried inside that make the woman and the story of her relationship and of her collapse disappear. I planned to transform her movements into something that frustrates our desire to see beginnings, middles and ends, so that the woman seems to burn like a building: without the need for an external agent and without a story. Ultimately, since you can't see it, I must describe the dance I had meant to compose, and you will have to try to imagine what I had in mind.

The movement is loose and precise. Rather than identifying poses, I watch the seamlessness of the sequences and the dancer's combination of detachment and focus. The transitions are a kind of folding and unfolding. She doesn't seem to think about what comes next and her gaze is unfocused. Each phrase comes after the other, not mechanically, but in a kind of shorthand, a series of markings. Her movements don't originate in her core; she doesn't send energy from her stomach out of her fingertips; she doesn't reach or extend. She leads with hands and feet, head and limbs, but doesn't hold out her arms and
they otherwise force upon us. But I've already conceded that this particular approach will not work here. The photographs only confirm the story. As a result, it's easy to replicate the intended logic of the scenes I'm watching, impossible to escape it. Here is the choreography imposed by the film:

touches her mouth, loose fingers loose like they are forgotten
turn slightly, three quarters
collapsing chest vault
contracting face
glance at the floor
turn to profile
hands hang
head back
throat open
knees folding
hands on knees, prayer-like
folding knees waist neck
kneeling
chest caving continues, head giving way
rendering
screaming
moment of acceptance, rallying
another pillar collapse
surrender
supplication
feel for support
hands to floor
breath
carried by the heat
curve upwards
slight blow from the left, head turn right, hands pause
caving again from waist
head drops almost to the floor

settling here
shaking head
disbelief
sensing someone's approach

The viewer has a different memory. I think I might remember more accurately what the dancer does if I were to copy her. Perhaps there is a slight suggestion here of what I wanted after all.

I don't feel self-conscious the way I used to when attending most performances, especially dance. I have had that same feeling at demonstrations and watching politicians on TV—anyone who asks their audience to suspend disbelief. I've watched for hours and felt a horrible empathy, as if I were on stage too. I wanted to dissolve it into something else, less desperate to speak and signal, to mean something, to secure a place within a story, considered incontestable. I no longer feel that way. Perhaps I've been watching a different species of event.

How does a dancer memorise such a sequence, one without guideposts? The sparks from an electrical short circuit set light to the architecture of approach, the entry, the greetings, the handing of tickets to the attendant, the taking of seats and the arrangement of skirts and jackets, the hush before the curtain, the spectacle that opens upon the audience. All this is replaced with something looking more like a flame.
A Long-Running Joke

It was a long-running joke, the ubiquity of Hassan Hosni. Every time I chanced upon a TV screen, there he was: avuncular, curmudgeonly, befuddled. Never at the centre, never in a star role. Always part of the supporting cast, but always there, in every film and every sitcom and series, as though he were simply a force of nature, a cloud in the sky, built into the inevitable alphabet of television.

One day, I was told the secret of Hassan Hosni, which I will share with you. What I learnt is that there are certain structural considerations that facilitate his omnipresence and explain his peculiar, irreproducible existence within the very fabric of recent film history. Please consider the following four points:

1. When Hassan Hosni agrees to act in a movie, he insists on scheduling the filming of all the scenes in which he appears on the same day or series of days. Consider, by way of comparison, that most actors are required to show up day after day, whiling away long hours after the time announced in the schedule for the filming of their scene has long passed: smoking, drinking tea, chatting. In this way, Hosni is able to be exceptionally productive, moving from the set of one film or TV series to the next. It is an indeterminately extended exercise. In this way, he is able to appear as a never-ending round of stock characters, while others remain beholden to the inescapable messiness of this kind of expensive, collaborative project, sustained by a hundred small hands.

2. Hassan Hosni travels everywhere with his own “caravan” stocked with all the costumes he might conceivably need and staffed with assistants to facilitate his itinerate lifestyle.

3. Hassan Hosni never sleeps. Or, rather, he sustains himself wholly on intensive catnaps stolen between scenes or in the twenty minutes it takes to adjust the lighting. In these moments, it is reported, he dozes in his chair, dreaming (perhaps) and dead to the world.

4. Hassan Hosni’s participation in a film or TV series is considered by those in the industry as a blessing: a beneficent talisman, attracting commercial and popular success.

I wouldn’t know how to develop Hassan Hosni’s behind-the-scenes existence into a reproducible form, but if there is a choreography of the kind I’ve been describing that can be wrested from a filmed performance, perhaps this is it. I imagine it as that sort of restless, deliberate, deadpan movement that is required to sustain the emotional architecture of a nervous breakdown.
Keyword Searches for Dust
I took this image of the site of a forthcoming exhibition on the 20th of July 2008 at 10.02 to scope the grounds for a production.

The following shots were taken of this and this and this and this.

In the 5th image was a shadow of a man in the right 3rd of the room.

He did not look at me and swept for 4 minutes in a square of 3 metres. The dust did not move. He swept silence. Sound billowed from around him producing beige stillness in the air broken by slithering pixels of habaa’ around his self.

While scanning the image’s edges I noticed the room carried calcified dunes in its corner pockets, dunes that this man could not seem to sweep away, leaning gently seaward and leeward, a carved arch like that between the lower back and the tail bone, a curve like the cheek from the ad of that perfume.

So then I got in there and bent my knees, lowered my thighs, leaned my weight, to get near enough for smelling distance, to see closely a hazed edge out of focus, a crest, moving ever so slightly going somewhere else grain by grain.

And as the dune moved I trailed it as it tried to sneak itself away. The sweeping man said, “The building is ill. It’s been sloughing. It’s shedding its own skin.”
In the 10th image was the face of a mannequin in the left 3rd of the room that for 3 years shed 70 to 80,000 skin cells a day, crumbling outer layers to produce an unfocused edge, shedding flakes, diamond pixel tiles around her self.

I asked for a doctor to enquire why a mannequin like the building would be inducing its own destruction.

He got up close to smelling distance, crouched his thighs, traced and tracked the fabric of her plastic limbs and focused closely on her blurred edge, prodded into the absent sections, "Chunks of her have moved away," he said, "tile by tile."

He said she was ill. Looked at me suspicious and asked, "Who started it?"

I said I didn’t know which one of us was the source of the shedding.

I took this image on the side of a window on the 30th of August 2008 at 12 noon to scope particles of dust in the lungs of a chamber that lead me into the city.

The following shots I took were of this and this and this.
He said one of us had dropped a sequence from the verses of our skin and as a mirror
the other translated
another sequence lost
then was reflected back
an absent response
then transferred forth, an absence produced and so on
A sequence, or lack thereof, mutated by empathetic exchange.
He could not say what was absent and what was produced, what was cast and what was amassing, but he was getting ill by over-watching.

“The issue,” he said, “is this empathetic contagion, the potential of an epidemic, of collective enactment by silent overviewing.”
The doctor used luciferase to test my DNA, injected me with the glow of fireflies that would lodge themselves in holes in skin where mine, the building’s or the mannequin’s sequence had flaked off. “The absence,” he said, “is transferrable, fillable, illuminable.”

They tracked me with black light but my pulses were silent. They tracked her with black light and saw the holes where things were missing.

They watched them glow as luciferase seeped into skin cells that cast off as fluorescent dust.

I took this video from the site of an unknown location on the night of the 30th of August 2008 at 11.02 to scope the possibility of personification, the possibility of specular symptoms like the light from fireflies that spontaneously pulse in response to each call until they all pulse in rhythm like this and this and this to make 1000 watts of luciferase as one sheet of white light.
On the mornings of the month of September he took the dust from the site of her body to scope the city for fiery whirlwinds.

The doctor and I blew it into the air to trace pulses with pink markers under black light.

and this

I began to see cars on a highway that signal back and forth while approaching a predator or a lover.
A little off at first, flickering, until it became one synced sheet beating but as it reflected back and forth it over-produced light and the dark fell out of the sequence.

There was no dark All glowed like an unstoppable fire with sparkling diamond-cut reflections, slithering glossy pixels underneath.

But then the pulsing stopped and it became one single tone like one organismic sheet of brilliant white light.

Then the doctor told me, “You know fireflies no longer exist. They died long ago with the darkness. But we extracted their luciferase and we use it to trace a trail of images, to produce each other and to produce seizures.”
Conceived as an exercise in addressing the social, intellectual and psychic legacies of entering and leaving collaborations, Emotional Architecture is a project by Malak Helmy and Nida Ghouse. It was initiated in Cairo in 2012.

In thinking through a range of situations—from minor artistic collectives, and temporary social movements, to grand historical narratives—we began by asking: what happens to knowledge that was borne in collaboration when collaborations break up? (which often they do). We talked together with friends about how certain dynamics of power become apparent—like a ghost of an underlying governing structure—but only in moments of emotional involvement and heightened awareness in which a threshold has been breached. We wanted to articulate what it is that comes be known in these encounters with one’s own ideological and/or physiological limits, specifically in relation to collective contexts in which the soul is at work. What we found instead was that meaning breaks down and that it grows harder to speak with conviction when we no longer inhabit those conditions, and can no longer see the apparition. Our engagement with these concerns (happened to have) developed at a particular political interval during which the ground of our analysis kept moving and the rules no longer applied.

We started by calling it the summer of two fires and a landslide. is the first in a small series of publications borne out of this process. It includes contributions from Haig Aivazian, Clare Davies, Nida Ghouse and Malak Helmy. The second in the series will comprise texts by Motaz Atallah, Lina Attalah and Philip Rizk. It is slated for March 2015.
This version of *The Immolation of the Nation* is the first published iteration of an ongoing writing and drawing based collaboration between Nida Ghouse and Haig Aivazian. Concerned with the notions of spontaneous combustion and material refusal, specifically in relation to the incineration of significant buildings in Cairo at various points in its history, the text begins in the summer of 2008. At a moment that was marked by the absence of a certain possibility of speech, and also a certain possibility of protest, the Shoura Council—or the upper house of parliament, which could be thought of as the corridor of political decision-making—and the National Theatre—or the site of spectacle, arguably one of the more prominent stages of cultural production in the region—both burnt down just weeks from each other. In granting these buildings their own agency, that is the agency of self-immolation, the writing and the drawing come together to assume the gap that opens up between possible and impossible worlds when things light themselves on fire.

**Keyword Searches for Habba’**

*Keyword Searches for Habba’* was originally composed as a video in 2009 for the exhibition *Invisible Presence* in Cairo. It was written in the wake of a two-month period during which animate and inanimate forms in the city began to shed and exchange their properties, performing the behaviour of the other, and possessing its action or colour at will. In a time of total contagion, an avalanche razed a populated residential plateau; a people’s assembly archive and a national theatre spontaneously combusted; a homebound train caught fire in the countryside, all at once. Seemingly orchestrated yet attributable to none, it was as if the mere anarchy of witnessing could cause an accidental, uncoordinated collective event. *Keyword Searches for Dust* is structured around translating the Arabic word *habba’* into English, producing the terms dust, aerosol, vanity and chaos. *Habba’* is generally defined as the moment when one sees individual particles of dust suspended in the air, but is also used in idioms to express the moment when all meaning is lost or when everything goes up in flames.

**Contributors**

Haig Aivazian is an artist, writer and curator based in Beirut. Clare Davies is an art historian based in Cairo and living in Berlin. Nida Ghouse is a writer born to Bombay. Malak Helmy is an artist based in Cairo.
We started calling it the summer of two fires and a landslide.