

## Can Dance be Performance Art?

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NEW YORK— With the recent surge in popularity of performance art, several artists have been questioning the divide separating the medium from its aesthetic cousin, dance. Earlier this year, Jen deNike brought a troupe of ballerinas to stage a performance in the Museum of Modern Art's atrium that was informed by the formalized movements of George Balanchine; meanwhile Tino Sehgal, a former dancer himself, is perhaps best known for his work *Kiss*, which entwines two dancers in a choreographed embrace. But whereas these artists are weaving aspects of the elegant discipline into their work, Danspace Projects executive director Judy Hussie-Taylor has been taking the opposite route through her Platforms 2010 series: by inviting curators to create choreographed, concept-driven dance performances to be staged in and around St. Mark's Church, she is encouraging viewers to consider dance as art within an institutional context. And if the most recent performance in the program, a collaboration between Maria Hassabi and Robert Steijn, that was curated by Ralph Lemon, is any indication, she's making a persuasive case.



Photo Courtesy of George Kontos

A scene from "Robert and Maria," featuring Maria Hassabi and Robert Steijn and curated by Ralph Lemon

The dance was the culmination of Lemon's "i get lost" series, which asked different pairs of dancer-choreographers to create pieces based around the sensation of losing oneself — a central motif in Lemon's own work as a choreographer. Hassabi and Steijn's interpretation was a dense web of locked eyes and almost imperceptible shifts in weight. It looked deceptively simple: a raised arm, slumped shoulder, or a faintly combative lunge. At times, it was hard to tell whether Hassabi's eyes welled up with tears from unexpected emotion, or from the difficulty of enduring such glacial poses. Though the performance was formally bookended by embraces, first with their backs to the audience, and later facing them, it was a work less concerned with telling a story than the process itself. Hassabi and Steijn were adrift in their own concentration and in each other's gazes, with the viewers equally entranced.

Part of the difficulty in discussing the evolving role of performance art and dance within arts institutions is that the blurred distinctions between the two forms can cause confusion. "I've asked people what's the difference between the performance art and the performing arts," Lemon, who refers to himself as a "movement artist," told ARTINFO, "It seems to me that the difference is between how the visual art world and performance art deal with performance as sculpture, or as part of sculpture in the way it moves. My dance friends are working not so differently in their exploration of the body—they're not working so differently from a Tino Sehgal or early Bruce Nauman or Paul McCarthy's wild stuff." Hassabi, who garnered attention for her work with David Adamo, and in both installments of *PERFORMA*, also sees her work in terms of plastic art. "People call my work life sculpture, I call it images," she said. "My work is very installation-based but it's still dance, the body is still the highlighted object."

It's telling that both Hassabi and Lemon now have projects in the works at museums. "Dance, as it's generically seen and thought of, probably resides in a place closer to theatrical entertainment, versus a space where art is thought about more rigorously in its relationship to material and history," Lemon says. "But there's a new zeitgeist of performance that's opening up."