

FINANCIAL TIMES

Robert and Maria, Danspace Project, New York

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Robert and Maria covers about 6 sq ft of ground – and lifetimes of feeling. In the final offering in curator Ralph Lemon's event series "I Get Lost", itinerant European performance artist Robert Steijn and New York-based dancer-choreographer Maria Hassabi begin with their backs to us and an arm wrapped around the other's waist. They end in the same amicable position, but facing front.

In the hour that separates these mirror images, the large craggy man and the beautiful diminutive woman stand facing each other, their profiles to us; they face each other kneeling; they lie on their sides, face to face. If Eadweard Muybridge had photographed not a horse's gallop but feelings growing, shrinking and wavering across body, face and the space between two people, it might have looked like this.



Photo by: Antoine Temp

The piece progresses via small adjustments in the performers' stances – a hand grazing a cheek or slid into a pocket – executed so slowly that Hassabi shakes and Steijn sways. The dancers are not merely maintaining their emotional equilibrium, they are invoking their feelings through their gestures, like Proust's narrator with his memory inducing madeleine.

Sometimes Steijn becomes Hassabi's inverse, hollowing out his chest so she can draw closer. Sometimes they suddenly draw apart. But they always look into each other's eyes, which often well with tears.

New York has lately become a hotbed of intimate, highly public performance art. To enter the Marina Abramovic retrospective at the Museum of Modern Art, for example, you must pass through a gauntlet of nude bodies. At Tino Sehgal's Guggenheim show earlier this spring, the first piece you came upon was a couple rolling around on the atrium floor. More exhibitionist than self-exposed, these works convert viewers into hapless voyeurs. They throw us back on ourselves when we are at our rubbernecking, vacant worst.

Steijn and Hassabi keep their clothes on and their hands largely to themselves; what they do reveal is a rich inner life, but only as much as they can without distorting it. We wonder why they are crying without worrying that we overstep the bounds.

When I read that the choreographers intended to explore "Eros", as Steijn put it, I rolled my eyes. But Robert and Maria really is full of love. Like all good art – like all real lovemaking – it absorbs you in the experience without making you feel like a creep. (5 star rating)