

## LOST IN TRANSLATION: MARIA HASSABI AND ROBERT STEIJN

by Erika Eichelberger

In Robert and Maria, at Danspace Project April 15-17, collaborators Maria Hassabi and Robert Steijn begin in a long embrace, their backs to the audience. A low vibratory sound fills St. Mark's Church, my organs, and my brain. Microphone feedback surfaces and subsides. Slowly, slowly, they glance towards the audience, register us, implicate us in the unfolding of their grueling experiment.

Gradually they walk to center stage and gaze into each other's eyes, reflecting the theme of the series of performances in PLATFORM 2010: i get lost, curated by Ralph Lemon.

They gaze for minutes. Maybe five. Hassabi's eyes are huge, dark, and searching. They quiver as they dig behind Steijn's pupils for a glance at his soul. Steijn's gaze is more

impassive. Excruciatingly slowly, Hassabi raises a hand to her neck, never dropping the lock-gaze. I squirm a bit in my seat. Uncross and re-cross my legs. Almost imperceptibly, she cranes her neck towards him. Her eyes well with tears. Microphone feedback wells. Nausea wells in me. I wonder if the show might be half over. Or at least a quarter. With incredible restraint, they lower slowly to their knees, eyes locked. I feel the tenseness of their muscles in the pit of my stomach. It makes me nervous and angry. I glance around. The rest of the audience looks intent and composed, but a couple next to me is passing notes and quietly joking. I'm jealous of their commiseration.

I wonder if mine is Hassabi and Steijn's intended audience response. If it's about our terror of emptiness. An experiment in coping. But program notes say, "They ask themselves where outside differences meet inside similarities. Desperately they want to know when opposites become the two sides of one coin, called love." Clearly this is their mission: experiencing connection as love. Strange that they produce in me the polar opposite: alienation and isolation.

The vibratory sound drowns the space quietly. As they gradually recline on the floor Steijn's gaze is steady and quietly loving behind his beard, but Hassabi's face is still the focal point. Her cheeks flush, her nose reddens, her eyes almost spill over, her eyebrows quake. She is absolutely experiencing her experiment. It is beautiful. I take five-second power naps and resist the urge to cry.

The act of staring into another's eyes for over an hour is unquestionably a transformative experience. I've experienced it between audience and performer in both roles. But observing is nothing like experiencing. Also, the layer of "performance," and the knowledge that these two are good friends, keeps the intimate encounter from feeling unnerving and thus intimate for the audience.

As they make their way back up to standing, there is a moment where she cradles his face and he holds her behind the knees. The lady in front of me is annoyed at my fidgeting.



Robert and Maria

Photo by: George Kontos