



DANCE, PERFORMANCE

MARIA HASSABI—SOLO SHOW: SOCIETY OF THE SPECTACLE

Maria Hassabi (PICA TBA Press Corps)

The stage is bare and black with a square raised platform in the center. **Maria Hassabi** is downstage-right on the edge of the platform. Joe Levasseur's lighting, a duet of diffuse light on the platform and a cluster of intense white light turned on the audience and James Lo's sound (crowd din, thrum, pink n' white noise—matching the white austerity of Levasseur's design) hint at a throng—the adrenal chatter of an art opening/big night, setting us up for Hassabi's unnervingly quiet, intense subversion of show culture and “display” that follows.

Eventually as audience shuffles to seats, Hassabi's stillness gives way to incremental shifts in position, with an almost defiant averted gaze. There's a seductive “part of noise” allure to the soundscape, but at eight minutes in, the audio abates, lights soften, and Hassabi begins to move in static bouts, but the essence is still one of stillness (despite her body shaking from muscle strain). From this point on, the sound is fantastic—almost inaudible—but nevertheless acting as a cushion for the stillness and the static ache—focusing our gaze on Hassabi. The tension is fierce and poetic. Fifteen minutes into the work, tableaux begin to subtly take shape, reminiscent of art-historical poses—with great pause and tension between cells of movement. By the 20-minute mark, Hassabi has risen to her knees, aikido-warrior-like, only to recoil again in vulnerability and surrender.

Originally from Cypress, Hassabi's work has been presented at PS 122, The Kitchen, Dance Theater Workshop, and Ballroom Marfa, among the usual suspects' venues. Solo Show (co-commissioned by PICA) was inspired by Hassabi's fascination with representations of the female body embedded in art history, pop culture, and the “performance of daily life.”

This new work delivers a dizzying, intensely deliberated collage of postures and poses. In steeling herself for the project, Hassabi culled and absorbed some 300 cultural images of female representation (from paintings, sculptures, film stills, etc.) and interpolated them to her body. The meta-choreographic result: a granular shifting through a series of arch poses—struck and held for long bouts of time—before transfiguring into other seemingly improbable contortions and further postures, at times shaking from the strain. Read separately as glacially paced micro-dances, the poses are read as non-idiomatic tableaux vivantes, but at second glance, intuited as an extended sequence, Solo Show's poses begin to jar our cultural memory as Hassabi shuffles visual samples of female forms (is that a bather from Ingres? Delacroix's *Orphan Girl at the Cemetery*? A prone *Balthus ingenue*? Catherine Deneuve in Polanski's *Repulsion*? A *Francesca Woodman* photo?)

TBA Guest Artistic Director Cathy Edwards frames the effect of the work eloquently for us: “As the viewer, I wonder, I question, I resist, and, ultimately, I succumb. ...She is resolute in her intention, virtuosic in her physical control, but not afraid to slow down, to restrict her palette of movement, and to leave aside easy choices. Hers is a dance that lives between object and movement, a dance that conjures a frame and dares you to resist.”

Hassabi ably mined the exquisite tension of, “being inside and outside, fully immersed or at the edges, embodied while remaining subject to the language of images”—this is the balance we find ourselves seduced by—somewhere between her internal and external conflict. Like Kafka' Hunger Artist, you're transfixed, wondering is she beautiful or damned? Current

seemed to run through Hassabi throughout, producing a simmering effect. Her physical and emotion delivery oscillated within a carefully calibrated bandwidth of poles: soft/cruel; posturing/suffering; radiance/emptiness.

As F. Scott Fitzgerald says in *The Crack-Up*, “Of course all life is a process of breaking down.”

The discipline, constraint and austerity and the ultimate resulting poetry of the work was staggering—with an utter minimum of movement and fiercely conceptual drive, Hassabi managed to transcend dance and approach an art-making that was far more steeped in durational performance/installation.

Which is why I found myself contrasting Solo Show with Noelle Stiles' *Blanket* from the day before. While Stiles' performance was billed as installation, the dance was neither dependent or interdependent on Danielle Kelly's installation elements (and in fact the external elements felt superfluous to her otherwise fluid sensibility)—where as Hassabi's pure dance sensibility embodied the rigorous conceptual fervor of the best installations: it was an immersive experience of light-sound-silence-time, it was vividly transformative, it dematerialized “dance” and the body and it demanded that you exist in the room with it.

At its most intense and gratifying, Solo Show could easily have been an answer to Bruce Nauman's 1974 *Body Pressure*.

Body Pressure

Press as much of the front surface of your body (palms in or out, left or right cheek) against the wall as possible.
 Form very hard and concentrate.
 Press an image of yourself (suppose you had just stepped forward) on the opposite side of the wall pressing back against the wall very hard.
 Press very hard and concentrate on the image pressing very hard.
 (the image of pressing very hard)
 press your front surface and back surface toward each other and begin to ignore or block the thickness of the wall. (remove the wall)
 Think how various parts of your body press against the wall; which parts touch and which do not.
 Consider the parts of your back which press against the wall; press hard and feel how the front and back of your body press together.
 Concentrate on the tension in the muscles, pain where bones meet, fleshy deformations that occur under pressure; consider body hair, perspiration, odors (smells).
 This may become a very erotic exercise.

Bruce Nauman, Body Pressure, 1974, (c) 2002 Bruce Nauman /Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York