



18 down, 17 up: a pause with Maria Hassabi

Born in Nicosia, Cyprus, Maria Hassabi is a New York-based director, choreographer, and performance artist. Hassabi's work has been presented at venues in Austria, Belgium, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Brazil, Cyprus, France, Germany, Greece, Israel, Italy, Mexico, the Netherlands, Portugal, Russia, Slovenia, Spain, Switzerland, and the United States. Hassabi recently participated in oO—a group exhibition curated by Raimundas Malauskas for the joint Lithuania and Cyprus pavilion in the 55th Venice Biennale. Hassabi presented *Intermission*—an eight-hour live installation, involving more than three performers in the risers of the Palasport gymnasium building where the exhibition is sited. Objectif Exhibitions director Chris Fitzpatrick speaks with Hassabi on a vaporetto about *Intermission* and intermissions and ends up two-and-a-half hours away, 30 minutes later.

Chris Fitzpatrick: Over the years, I've seen you perform in different conditions. The first time was at an opulent Fundación/colección Jumex event in Mexico City, where you pushed past the plastic surgery and bow ties to unroll a rug and put yourself into various positions for what seemed like uncomfortably long periods of time. Yet all of the previous performances I had seen have had discernible durations. Watching you perform this time in oO—all over the risers of the Palasport—in Venice, you seemed to have slowed down to the pace of sculpture. How can you move so slowly for so long?

Maria Hassabi: I don't think of my work as "slow." What I am attempting is stillness, even though this is impossible to achieve for any breathing thing.

CF: Stillness is beyond slowness, but aren't the two entangled? Actually, I wonder if stillness could exist outside of a temporal scale, or exist without being wholly dependent on a temporal scale.

MH: Does such time really exist? I hope not, as one is at least (hopefully) always breathing.

CF: Right, you're alive. Appearing live, your stillness complicates what normally constitutes action and, with it, how we perceive time. You're pointing to a very specific unit of time in the title of this new work, which you call *Intermission*. It suggests a break or an interlude, an interstitial period of time, or an absence of activity—even if the latter is, as you said, impossible to achieve.

MH: Yes, the work's title is *Intermission*, and it functions as a signifier for the time in between the parts of "a show." During an intermission, the viewers' attention can wander away. They can rest. They can take a breather.

CF: Is an intermission an active stasis for you because the lungs always follow a different time signature than the limbs or brain, for example?

MH: In general I like to exaggerate whatever concept I'm working with in order to make a point. For *Intermission* my approach was also an exaggerated interpretation of the term, with both its time and physicality expanded and stretched out. The only restraint was to remain active and present while attempting stillness, and never to become sleepy or spacey. When you consider actions on this scale—resting, stretching, wondering, breathing—activity is constantly ongoing, even while the actual "show" is paused for the intermission.

CF: So there's a temporal overlay. On some level, doesn't your "intermission" overlap completely with "the show" due to its extensive duration? Neither is distinct. They're collapsed. Was that intended?

MH: Yes, it was intended. After visiting the Palasport in February, I decided to create an eight-hour, ongoing performance—what Raimundas Malauskas has referred to as "extended living sculptures"—that would take place on the risers. Being this long, *Intermission*

revealed behaviors around the Palasport that could have passed unnoticed during a "show." And the duration also deprived my work of the nuances with which I usually flirt and like to produce.

CF: Which nuances?

MH: This format removed typical theatrical parameters that I would otherwise be dealing with, such as a distinct beginning and end or a dramaturgical arch. Though my works often remain abstract and non-narrative, this format produced even less expectation for a narrative to unfold. Yet time, space, and physicality are what I dealt with in *Intermission*. It's patient. It's made out of pauses, interruptions, loops, and delays.

CF: It's quiet.

MH: Yet never frozen or ambivalent.

CF: And you're of course quite aware that eight hours is a duration extending well beyond what most can, or will, invest. This duration also seems related to the medium you chose to describe your work. It's not performance or choreography, but "live installation." You installed yourself, two others, and more, but even once installed you're never fixed in space or time. It's deceptive at first. You trail each other—circularly, up, through, and around the Palasport—around works, through them, in various proximities to visitors, janitors, athletes, and so on. You're a still life, but still living, and living quite still, as an installation that moves.

OPPOSITE: **Maria Hassabi.** *Intermission*, 2013, live installation, 8 hours, oO at the Cyprus and Lithuanian Pavilions, 55th Venice Biennale 2013 [images courtesy of the artist; top photo: George Kantos, bottom photo: Gabriel Lester]

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MH: The decision to call the work a "live installation" was connected with the expectation that the visitors would not sit and watch the entire work. Rather, their attention would be akin to looking at a flat image, a sculpture, an installation, which is generally quite different than the amount of attention expected for a time-based work. My installation is "live" because the performers are in constant motion, even while attempting to be paused, to achieve stillness: their muscles twitched, their eyes blinked, tears even formed. There were also the bigger—or, "slow," as you called them—shifts in space, which created the spatial trajectory of the work.

CF: Right, and locating yourself in the risers affords the rest of us the proximity needed to see those movements. What sort of directives did you give to the performers?

MH: Go down 18 steps, walk across the basketball court and pause, arrive at the other side and go up 17 steps, exit, use the bathroom, smoke a cigarette, return and begin again. The various volunteers—"the living sculptures"—who were installed in different locations throughout the Palasport were also on pause. During my exits I was often caught by surprise when approaching one of them, who had each been given a different task, time, and date to be present. Most of the volunteers were cast in Venice, apart from a few artists I invited: Iris Touliatou, Ben Evans, KroOt Juurak, and Alisa Snaider.

CF: What sort of actions do the volunteers and artists perform? Or what lives are these living sculptures living?

MH: Everyday actions and postures, like standing, sitting, and lying down. They were meant to be comfortable with just being there, and not to feel pressured to be overly "active" in order to prove their significance. When their bodies started to feel numb, they could shift, quietly, from one posture to the next. Their primary direction was: "Don't interrupt the image; instead keep the transitions smooth." Their eyes remained open and actively seeing, and hopefully avoided spacing out. And they could defend themselves, if necessary.

CF: Against the visitors?

MH: Yes. For example, if hassled, they could pierce the visitor's gaze and hold it. This simple gesture can be very powerful.

CF: How did you communicate the choreography to the other two performers you're working with? Is it different with them than with the volunteers and artists you cast and invited? Is there a certain sensibility you tap them into, or is your collaboration with them based on their already being tapped into a certain sensibility?

MH: The other two performers you're referring to are Hristoula Harakas and Paige Martin, who were involved with the work on the risers specifically. Of course risers don't exist in my studio in New York. So the entire work was to be made on my sofa. I placed two sofas next to each other and began. With this spatial configuration, and with limited development time ahead, I realized that it was best to work first alone—make decisions, create the choreography, understand and digest my choices both physically and mentally—and, afterwards, teach the material to Hristoula and Paige. Hristoula has worked with me since 2002 and is in tune with my style of work and the philosophy behind it, so the process for *Intermission* was not so unusual. For Paige this was our first collaboration, so this approach was altogether new.

CF: Imaginative sofa rehearsals—what was that process like? Comfortable?

MH: It was hilarious and often quite maddening: down the sofa, up the sofa, over and over, with an imaginative spatial trajectory of 18 steps down and 17 up. All the while wondering, "Hmmm ... am I on step 13 now or 11?"

CF: You mentioned the philosophy behind your style of work. What is your philosophy?

MH: I like the idea of luxury. I find it luxurious to take one's time—to be, to take time to notice, to see, think, rethink, interrupt, and come back. No rush. This type of luxury costs no money.

CF: And from there you developed your technique?

MH: As I began inserting pauses between actions and then sustaining them, I noticed the parade of

representations the body constantly creates in space. It's a series of discernible images—both theatrical and quotidian. Embodying these images became an objective of my work, and uncovering how they could be supported in live performance led me to develop my technique. Over the years it's developed into a sculpture-esque approach to movement, which is precise and detailed-oriented. For a performer to be involved in this style of work, it is very important to understand the philosophy and the engine driving it—both mentally and physically.

CF: And once there's an understanding do they embody it easily, or does it take time? Is it mimicry or interpretation?

MH: Once the concepts and the physicality are digested, the performers find their own way through the work and the rehearsed material becomes the tool for being in time and space in this particular way. This is not an easy task of course and it does take time. One has to become adaptable, constantly aware of oneself and the kind of representations the body is producing within each moment in space, and be able to shift to a new place. Apart from this process, the score was very simple—a two-and-a-half-hour-long solo that repeated on a loop for eight hours, with each performer starting thirty minutes later than the previous person.

CF: You mentioned how the length of *Intermission* revealed behaviors that might normally go unnoticed. Within the conditions you've created and, more generally, the conditions of the Palasport and the exhibition you're responding to, anything anyone is doing, anywhere, is potentially choreographed. Or actions you choreographed could be perceived as coincidental. We don't know. For example, I saw a custodian sweeping and it seemed perfectly choreographed—her pale green uniform, her broom, her measured movements, her placement on the risers, and her placement in time. Was she part of *Intermission*?