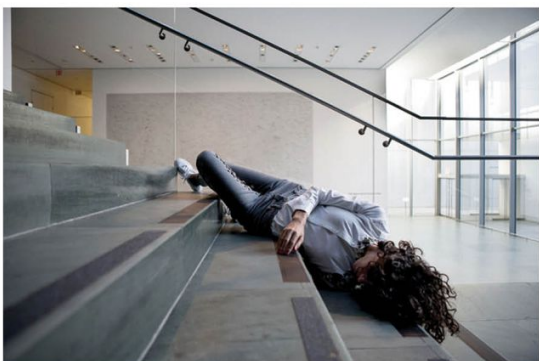


## Present Tense

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Maria Hassabi, *PLASTIC*, 2015. Rehearsal view, Museum of Modern Art, New York, October 30, 2015. Photo: Julieta Cervantes.

*Claudia La Rocco*

THE WOMAN IS sitting on a couch in the museum. She is only sitting. She isn't looking distractedly at a brochure, or taking a picture of art, or herself, or herself and art. She isn't doing anything with her phone, even just holding it like a talisman, and in fact it appears that she doesn't even have a phone. In a room full of chaotic, barely-there bodies, she simply and powerfully is.

Soon enough she will not be sitting. She will, slowly and with a coiled, liquid purpose that seems to originate at a cellular level, flow into less conventional poses, coming up for air periodically to level her makeup-smudged gaze at people who, inevitably, will return that gaze through electronic mediation.

The woman is the singular, gorgeously intelligent American dancer Kennis Hawkins, who is these days based in Brussels and seen all too rarely in New York. Hawkins is part of a continual rotation of dancers: Each performs a two-hour solo on and near a sofa, one of several pieces of sleek furniture placed in the atrium. And the solo is part of Maria Hassabi's *PLASTIC*, installed through March 20th in the Museum of Modern Art's atrium and the lobby and fourth-floor staircases. Accompanied by Morten Norbye Halvorsen's atmospheric sound design, studded with Marina Rosenfeld's lushly romantic song fragments, it features some of the most compelling dancers currently working today.

In other sections of *PLASTIC*, these dancers are more obtrusive than the sofa solo, their focused movements forming slowly migrating islands within heavily trafficked pedestrian passageways. They wear uniforms (by threeASFOUR): pristine sneakers, and shirts tucked into tight jeans bedecked with jewels. And they are watched over by another uniformed ensemble: the museum guards, who attempt to balance traffic flow with access to and protection of the artists. I've never been told I couldn't do so many seemingly innocuous things: No sitting on the floor near a sitting dancer, no leaning against a wall bare of any art save a leaning dancer, and, most absurdly, no pausing on the stairs unless I was doing it to take a picture. Museum guards, for me, are always on the side of the angels; but it's feeling increasingly urgent that museums figure out what kind of public spaces they want to be beyond staging sites for Instagram.

A finely honed work like *PLASTIC*, the latest iteration of Hassabi's sustained investigation of presence, brings such twenty-first century dilemmas to the fore. I don't think of Hassabi as a political artist, but the steady insistence of this piece feels like a political gesture in a way that, say, Marina Abramović's *The Artist Is Present* never did.



Maria Hassabi talks with artforum.com about *PLASTIC*.

*PLASTIC* endlessly rewards attention, creating a sort of spectacle of intimacy both generous and radical. Yet it also allows for a porousness of viewer focus, creating a continuum in itself, and with past Hassabi creations. Spending time with it in its opening week, I thought of something the choreographer Rashaun Mitchell said to me days earlier when we were at the Joyce Theater to see Pam Tanowitz, and the lights went down before we could see what the first work on the program was: "It doesn't matter. It's all one dance."

Mitchell, who has performed with Tanowitz, meant it as a compliment, and he's right, I think: Tanowitz and Hassabi, like many mature artists, have found freedom in working and reworking the same plot of land. True to its title, the story progresses as if in a dream of glittering surfaces, Tanowitz's latest premiere, is an unknown but familiar world, one that, in ways not so dissimilar from *PLASTIC*, delights in its attention to detail while permitting—perhaps even asking—its public to move in and out of its formal parries and thrusts.

The performers are, as usual, studded with alumni from the Merce Cunningham Dance Company—no surprise, given the exactitude and speed of Tanowitz's phrasework. There is in every moment (and echoed by Reid Bartelme and Harriet Jung's jauntily understated costumes) a juxtaposition or witticism to delight the eye. But it's saved from being clever eye-candy by its fierce, singular concentration; there is something worked out here in the doing, as the dancers attack along and within Davison Scandrett's subtly shifting planes of light, and terrifically spiny music that moves from Julia Wolfe's "Four Marys," performed live by the FLUX Quartet, to Dan Siegler's luxuriously mercurial score.

Watching Tanowitz's concert, I had, as I invariably do when watching her work, an insistent question in my head: Why on earth isn't this woman choreographing for New York City Ballet? I've asked this before in print, I'm pretty sure in this column. Tedious repetition! Sorry. But it's tedious to keep seeing the utter lack of gender (and etc.) diversity on ballet stages. The night before Tanowitz, I caught a City Ballet bill featuring the founder George Balanchine, and present-day makers Peter Martins, Justin Peck, and Christopher Wheeldon, and the only thing that stood out as remarkable difference is that Peck is the sole American—which, yes, when we're talking talented ballet choreographers these days, counts as a serious minority in an already tiny group.

Peck is abundantly talented. He is also very young, just twenty-eight, and still making more than one dance. His contribution to the bill I caught is *The Most Incredible Thing*, a splashy premiere with involved décor by Marcel Dzama. It's a big departure for Peck, and what doesn't work about this ballet, namely its muddled but thin telling of an actual story (by Hans Christian Andersen), underscores his proclivities. Like Tanowitz, Peck communicates through structure, working within and around, and sometimes momentarily resisting or reorienting, a highly codified movement language.

He pulls drama from friction of textures and from buoyant flows of material; and it's clear that he's still studying, digesting the steps he continues to dance as a City Ballet soloist, and appropriating them for his own purposes, within ridiculous fishbowl conditions. That's not derivative, it's apprenticeship—something that's important to keep in mind as the ballet industry pushes to make him its next great heir apparent. He's twenty-eight. He has time. How good that we get to watch him figure out how to spend it.