

Interview

MARIA HASSABI

By CHRISTOPHER BOLLEN
Photography: PHIL PORTER

Published 02/26/14



It would surprise no one that the most provocative art in New York this spring will be exhibited at the Museum of Modern Art. But what might come as a shock is that it will appear not in the museum's galleries but in its stairwells and atrium. That's because, for 29 days, the 42-year-old artist and choreographer Maria Hassabi is unleashing her latest project, *Plastic*, on the in-between spaces of the institution; here, she and her performers will move in choreographed states of tension, distortion, and extreme physical demands.

Stillness and slowness are hallmarks of Hassabi's recent performance pieces, and they are liberating and unpalpable to watch. In one sense, they join our current reality of time on overdrive—a Paul Verhoeven-esque hyper-obsession with speed and technology (later being the selling agent of today's experienced). The fact that the Cyprus-born artist is staging *Plastic* in spaces devised for public convenience further clashes with our understanding of what it means to arrive. But Hassabi's work doesn't simply serve as counterpunches to our ADHD-driven acceleration culture. After years of working on projects that leaned in to the brutal economy of downtown New York in the early 2000s, the artist formulated a far more paired-down formalist vocabulary. There is the almost minimal elegance of an Agnes Martin or Barnett Newman painting to her productions, but one that never loses the sense that her material is the human body, the muscular, water-bloated veritable form. Thus, what seems like very simple gestures in choreographing almost eye contact for nearly an hour while reciting a series of calibrated poses, as she did in her 2000 piece *Robert and Maria*—becomes wrenched by emotional and psychological strains. The audience becomes prisoners, voters, winners, bystanders, and ultimately (as all great art should do) collaborator in the invention. Hassabi, who still lives part time in New York, is one of the most interesting and exceptional artists of her generation. I spoke with her by phone this past January, when she was in Brussels rehearsing for the MoMA show.

CHRISTOPHER BOLLEN: Of all art forms, dance and performance might be the one least shackled by questions of regionalism or dialects. But I did want to ask you about growing up in Cyprus.

MARIA HASSABI: I was born in Nicosia. But when I was 2 years old, I moved to Dubai for about six years, then back to Nicosia. So I grew up in both places.



BOLLEN: But I specifically was curious about how the Green Line—the Berlin Wall-like separation between the Greek and Turkish sides of the island—impacted you as a child.

HASSABI: I'm not sure exactly. I think the kids of my generation, we had a lot of nightmares. It's not like we understood what was happening. But the Green Line was very close to the house where I grew up. And there was almost like a phantom on the other side—as kids we have no idea. We didn't know what was going on on the other side.

BOLLEN: And there was no crossing?

HASSABI: No, not then. It opened up more after I left, but I moved to Los Angeles when I was 16, so I wasn't really present for all of the political changes that have happened since. I have such a thick accent still, but I don't have as many ties to Cyprus.

BOLLEN: I just wondered if growing up in a divided city had anything to do, even subconsciously, with your interest in the restrictions and tensions of the human body. I might be taking this biography idea a bit far. [laughs]

HASSABI: I'm more subconsciously there in. I have said jokingly that growing up with such a strict line around you, you become more of a formalist. But I also went to CalArts, so that might have more to do with it.

BOLLEN: Did you go to CalArts specifically for performance?

HASSABI: Yeah. But then being at CalArts, I ended up being very much around visual art. Most of my friends came from that department.

BOLLEN: Looking back on your work, I kept thinking that Pina Bausch might have been a big early influence.

HASSABI: My inspiration kept changing. But, yes, Pina Bausch was a big inspiration. I first saw her when I was in my early teens, when they came to perform at this big, beautiful theater in Athens. I was blown away. In CalArts I was most influenced by what was happening at Judson Church [New York's Judson Memorial Church, home and namesake of the avant-garde dance collective, Judson Dance Theater, 1962-66]. And then when I moved to New York in 1994, I was more interested in my contemporaries, the people around me who were making work at the moment, much more so than previous generations. My friends were more visual artists, so I went to openings and followed an closely. Also at that time in New York, it was a big rule, but in terms of the art world, dance wasn't a very clear form. I was very active in downtown dance in New York, but that felt very much in its own little box.

BOLLEN: Right, Judson Church and folks like Yvonne Rainer broke down so many of those barriers separating dance and visual, object-based art, and it seems like the walls went right back up again by the '90s. In my mind, the art world of the '90s felt particularly absent of performance work. Video art, yes. Dance, no.

HASSABI: It was completely closed off. There was a lot of dance happening in New York, but it was in its own world. Of course, you would go and see your friends' shows and they'd come and see yours.

BOLLEN: But really it wasn't until Performa started that you felt like the art world was tracking performance.

HASSABI: Well, Performa really blew this whole thing wide open and made it very, very present.

BOLLEN: I know fashion has been important to you, and there is an element of fashion in your work—although it's incorporated in such a way I can't even call out here.

HASSABI: It's also another thing that came as an influence from my friends. It's the same with art. Most of my friends have been visual artists or fashion designers, so I can't help it. It was part of the conversation I had. But personally, I always felt that dressing up was such an important part of image-making. It's so much a part of social status as well.

BOLLEN: When you're working a piece, how much attention goes into the clothing the performers are wearing? Is it part of the initial visual in your mind or chosen at the end?



HASSABI: Well, since about 2009, when I started wearing dresses in my work, that's made it a bit more simple. But even when I know in dress, there's the question of color and styling.

BOLLEN: Why dresses? Did it seem like a neutral fabric?

HASSABI: It felt natural and very human and going away from this idea of dancers always in tight. I want the performers to very much have the feeling of everyday people.

BOLLEN: And the formal classifies it too much as a dance from the outset.

HASSABI: It can be beautiful. There's one piece of Merve Canatlingham's where they're all wearing simple leotards of different colors. It's gorgeous to see. But it's not the direction I wanted to go.

BOLLEN: When I was looking back on your career, it felt to me that there was a division between the work you were doing in the early to mid-2000s and the pieces from the last seven or eight years. Would you disagree with that?

HASSABI: No, I agree. It started in 2007 with my piece *Gloria* and then really much more defined with *Solo* and *Solo/Show* in 2009. I think before those works, I was more interested in imitating the rhythm of the city and getting the sense of all my friends and the music and the clothing and everything that was happening all around me.

BOLLEN: You were looking more outward then. There are pieces like 2006's *Sell Smoking* that feel very much like a tableau of downtown New York at the time—that strangeness and reflection and roughness.

HASSABI: And also *Dead Is Dead* in 2004, which was the first big piece I did in New York. We had so many people help, like Daria [Seuss] and his crew came and did the graffiti on the walls in the back of the theater. That was amazing. It was in the old DFW [Dance Theatre Workshop] that's now New York Live Arts. And with all these graffiti kids coming and going, people couldn't stay in their offices to work. [laughs] So that was about community. And gradually I kind of went off on my own way.

BOLLEN: Was that a natural progression or a decision to step away from that earlier work?

HASSABI: There was an attraction to image-based material in my work. And then I just went all the way there. And by image, I mean that it took me awhile to understand how I was going to support image-based work that did not rely on any theatrical tricks like change of light or change of costume. And that's when the stillness started coming more and more into my work—the effect of stillness and how you transfer from one pose of stillness to the next, without making it look like a tableau where just keeping it a consistent flow.

BOLLEN: I want to talk about stillness and slowness. The immediate vocabulary is speed and the frenzied of technology. We don't really experience slowness anymore in our interactions. Even paintings today look fast. It's such a scarcity in our current climate, so I wonder if it was actually harder for you—emotionally, mentally—to do the work required for slowness. Because not as people don't even work slow anymore.

HASSABI: We don't work slow, and I'm pretty fast too. I walk really fast. I do lots of things really fast. It's not my natural response to be slow, unless I'm on the beach and the sun is really hot. But it was a response—I wanted more time to sit and be with things. And I could not ask other people to go more slowly to let me look at them, or to let me be with an art piece longer, so I had to do it in my own work.

BOLLEN: I'm curious, how do you prepare for stillness? Does your heart rate have to drop?

HASSABI: In theater it is very different than when I'm doing museum or gallery work. Gallery work is there all day long, which I call live installations. In theater, the amazing thing that happens is that your adrenaline is so high because the audience is there. It generally makes your heartbeat fast, and you're moving slow, and you're holding a position for a constant of minutes, and your body starts twitching. And the adrenaline can take an hour to go away. In a normal dance performance, when you're moving normally, there's adrenaline for the first few minutes and then it goes out of your body. With stillness and slowness, it stays with you. So it becomes very much part of the choreography: those twitches and tremors coming from the eyes, and people think, "Oh, we're just being dramatic." But it's just physical reactions of the body.

BOLLEN: I did yawn once—once. And my entire nervous system was on the edge of collapse. I couldn't stop shaking by trying to hold the poses.

HASSABI: The other thing that's interesting is what it is we're portraying. So there's an inner dialogue you have with yourself. You're not just holding a position and feeling it internally—you're also concerned with what you're projecting outside as a shape, a world. So, as a performer, it's not only about how you're feeling inside.

BOLLEN: Let's talk about these almost intervention-like performances that you did at the Vendor Biennale in 2003 or here at MoMA with *Plastic*. Is the relationship to the audience different when that slowness is more of a depending than in a more conventional setting? All of your pieces are choreographed, but do you shift them based on your interaction with the viewer?

HASSABI: There's always a strict script, so we have to remain honest to the script. Because there are so many eyes among the performers or among the sound or light or whatever. But there are reactions by the viewer of the museum that are beyond whatever we choreographed or scripted in advance. So we have to respond without losing go of the structure of the work.

BOLLEN: How strict is that structure? You're rehearsing *Plastic* now. Is it a case where every single breath, every move is set?

HASSABI: I hope so, but I don't think that's 100 percent possible. But that's the beautiful thing about live performance—things happen right in the moment that you cannot know. Like we say, "Okay, when you hold this position, you take five deep breaths." But let's say I cough in the middle, so there it goes [laughs] one breath of that. Now that's a silly example. But maybe somebody comes and sits next to you and doesn't let you move to the right because they're sitting to the right of you. So you're having to delay that until the viewer moves. Maybe say something to them: "Can you please move?" And that takes you a little bit out of your script. But you know the script well, so even if you make changes, you know how to catch up.

BOLLEN: How much does the setting matter? You performed *Show* [2011] in a theater, and then you actually brought it down to Wall Street and performed it on the street. Does that entirely transform the piece?

HASSABI: Yes. That particular piece was made with the audience being around us. It was made for a theater. But it was built very close dramatically, so it's one of the works that is easy to place in many different contexts. We've performed that work by the sea. We've performed it in a sculpture garden, in Wall Street, in galleries, in theaters. It does change every time when the work is shown. But it doesn't really because of its nature and the relationship that we and the other performer, Hristocho Maraka, have between us. It's so tight. And what you end up remembering from the work—it is the sculpture that we create between us and the rhythm of the work, the slowness. And placing it in a space like Wall Street, where everybody's moving so fast and they don't even look at anything, is going to make the work stand out even more than in a theater. I very much like placing my work in a different context. And architecture is really important. So even most of the works that I create for theaters, they play with the idea of what theater is in the space of theater, the audience, the relation between audience and performer and work. When I went to Venice, I came much earlier to see the space. I chose to do it on the Mezzanin of the generation. The title *Intervention* came much more to my mind, like, the back of watching open like you. And when we first did *Plastic* in the Hammer, the work was very, very much aligned to the architecture of the Hammer Museum in L.A., and then now at MoMA it's changing because of how the museum is.

BOLLEN: Would you say it intersects with the art that's there as well? You've previously done work based on the poses of women in art history and pop culture. Are you addressing the female body in the museum?

HASSABI: Well, it is because it's part of my vocabulary, but this piece is not specific in that way. The work is so much more about using formal poses. So we're not in conversation. We're not in conversation with other art works that are in the museum because we are not in the gallery space for *Plastic*. We're in the stairs or the balconies or the atrium, spaces that you use to get somewhere, to see the art.

BOLLEN: So there's a level of surprise on the part of the audience.

HASSABI: Sure. Except a place like Wall Street is completely a public space. MoMA is one of the most prestigious museums. So even though we're not in a gallery space, still someone has invited us to be there. [laughs] I couldn't be doing a graffiti performance like that long. I've done that at MoMA before.

BOLLEN: Wait. You've done a graffiti performance at MoMA before?

HASSABI: Yes. [laughs] It's this piece called *The Ladies* [2012]. It's a film actually, not a live performance, but it takes place as a performance. Women split into pairs and they walk around the city. They walk around very slow but not in slow motion. And they wear black clothes, black sunglasses, bright lipstick and they have their hair pulled back. And they walk into MoMA a few times. Sometimes they were asked to leave and sometimes nobody noticed. And they were doing an art piece in there. The camera was completely camouflaged so a thief or nobody knew we were filming. You only could see these two girls walking around basically very slow and stopping, lying on the floor, sitting on the staircase, in the garden. *Plastic* is not like that.

BOLLEN: *Robert and Maria* is one of your most epic works—you and Robert Seijo building a stage for almost all of the hour-long performance.

HASSABI: Robert and I met a long time ago and decided we wanted to work together. We would always meet and talk about this collaboration but we do one day. And then we ended up getting a show together. When we started working, there were so many ideas that we wanted to explore. And slowly we threw everything away and we stayed with this relationship of looking at each other in the eyes and seeing what that would bring—again, with the idea of sculpture and the idea of image and being very aware of our physical as two people. We also wanted to be present and capture ourselves.

BOLLEN: In many ways, a looked state is such a romantic gesture.

HASSABI: It is. But again, there is a structure, a script that we spoke about.

BOLLEN: How do you feel about the renewed cultural interest in performance in the past decade? Older artists are being asked to re-stage earlier performance pieces. And there's a young crop of performance artists who are more so favored by the art world. Why do you think there's this return to the form?

HASSABI: It's exciting, this live aspect. Whether it's fashionable or not, I'm not so sure. But I'm still fond of the visual art, also, so I don't see it as a conflict. I use as many shows as possible because it's a part of my work. Although it's not always easy for me to make the time. For instance, now, rehearsing for *Plastic*, I have to be at the theater from this time to that time to work on the show. It used to be the most beautiful thing for me; I loved so much to go to the theater, close the doors, and we're in here and watch watching. But at some moments, it became very uncomfortable for me. I love the openness, having the freedom to go in and out, and going to see static work or performance work on my own. [laughs] That's really what I'm saying.

BOLLEN: No, it makes perfect sense. Only I imagine that static artists—painters and sculptors and the like—might be jealous of your arrangement. So many painters I know are completely disconnected from their audience. They finish a painting, it leaves the studio, and they don't really participate in its movement through the world. It sort of disappears from their lives. Maybe they go to their opening, but that's about it. Time, however, are right up against the audience's immediate reaction.

HASSABI: In a very capitalist way, it's a great benefit that a visual artist has, to be done with a work. It's not theirs anymore. On they go to the next one. And you, with us, we cannot do that. You're staying there. You're there until your work is done. And once you're done, nobody else is seeing it. There are moments, at least for me, when I'm performing a work, creating it, and my mind is already thinking about the next work. It would never happen the first couple of months I'm performing the same work, but after a while, I'm already on the next piece, and I have to perform this other piece. That can be a constraint. And some moments I feel, "Okay, it would be great if I'm not in my work anymore." Because I see it's commitment of the performers, and they can be so much more present than I am. [laughs] And sometimes you're reached whatever you had to reach from that given place. That's a difficulty of performing.