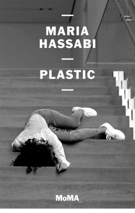

MARIA HASSABI GLANCES

Thomas J. Lax
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You're confronted with someone lying in front of you as you walk up a staircase on your way to the galleries at The Museum of Modern Art. Is she asleep? Is she unconscious? She moves but remains prone and in your way. Do you help? Turn away? Stop and keep looking?

Over the past decade, choreographer and artist Maria Hassabi has developed a distinct movement language she calls the "velocity of deceleration."[1] In *PLASTIC* (2015), Hassabi and her cast of more than a dozen dancers move at a barely perceptible pace down two of MoMA's most visible staircases and across its iconic Marron Atrium, where the artist has placed seating borrowed from across the Museum's public spaces. Shifting from one position to another, the performers recall images of repose, collapse, and transition. A sound score designed by Morten Norbye Halvorsen, with song fragments by Marina Rosenfeld, accompanies their movements. The live installation—a term Hassabi coined—is performed continuously during opening hours, reformatting the duration of a theatrical performance as a month-long museum exhibition. Taking place underfoot in the transitional spaces of a museum known for its crowds, the work can be seen from multiple vantage points and inverts the typical relationship between performer and viewer so that it is the dancer who appears static and the onlooker who moves.

Since 1999, Hassabi's choreography has explored the experience of intense looking: its limits and possibilities. In *PREMIERE* (2013), upon entering the theater, viewers were confronted by five performers in distinct poses, situated between two bright walls constructed of dozens of theatrical lights. Without the performers' entrance, the dance seemed to be already in progress, but in fact it began—indeed, premiered—with the audience's arrival. Likewise, *INTERMISSION* (2013), developed for a former gymnasium that housed the Cypriot and Lithuanian Pavilion at the 2013 Venice Biennale, reflected its title as the dancers stood and stretched according to set choreography, providing pause from the main exhibition's frenetic energy. Like *PLASTIC*, Hassabi's earlier works toy with or erase the

Maria Hassabi. *INTERMISSION*. 2013.
Performed at the Cypriot and Lithuanian Pavilion, 55th Venice Biennale, May 28–June 4, 2013. With Phanos Kyriacou's installation, *Eleven hosts, twenty-one guests, nine ghosts* (2013). Courtesy the artist. Photo by Robertas Narkus

Maria Hassabi. *PREMIERE*. 2013.
Performed at The Kitchen, New York, as part of Performa 13, November 6–9, 2013. Performers (left to right): Maria Hassabi, Andros Zins-Browne, Hristoula Harakas, Biba Bell, and Robert Steijn. Courtesy the artist. Photo by Paula Court

viewing conventions of their sites, encouraging viewers to become more aware of their own experience of looking and the ways in which that act individualizes every performance.

In 2012, Hassabi made *The Ladies*, a short video derived from footage of guerrilla performances that took place over two months across Manhattan. Duos of female performers dressed in black clothing, sunglasses, and bright red lipstick—the routine fashion of New York's art scene—showed up on subway platforms and street corners, in galleries, and at cafés and demonstrations to stand still, look, and be looked at. When they arrived at The Museum of Modern Art, they were asked to leave because their action was interpreted as disruptive. Hassabi's video records the public both ignoring and staring at the performers, apparently finding "the ladies" either alluring or disconcerting. What exactly is threatening about Hassabi's stilled movement?

Hassabi's practice deals with, in her words, "the relationship of a body to images,"[2] and she often composes her work as a pictorial sequence. To make *SoloShow* (2009), for example, she selected over three hundred iconic images of the female figure from across history and mediums—from ancient sculpture to contemporary hip-hop publicity photos—which she then embodied, shifting from one pose to another for an hour on a large black pedestal surrounded with bright white lights. Similarly, in *PLASTIC*, Hassabi and her dancers don't simply move slowly from one pose to the next. Rather, they juxtapose movement with prolonged

stillness, giving us time to consider them as pictures flooded with multiple references. For example, the dancers' rounded torsos and twisted limbs at once resemble images of falling bodies, made readily accessible in a culture saturated by documentation of war, and nineteenth-century paintings of odalisques, Orientalist fantasies of concubines lying on erotic display. Oscillating between these references, the dancers embody power and submission, using banal movement to create spectacular scenes. Like photographs without captions, the performers seem to inhabit shots captured by someone else and projected onto them by the viewer's gaze.

Hassabi's interest in images builds on a history of choreography, particularly in the United States since the 1960s, that is self-conscious about its relationship to photography. In Steve Paxton's *Flat* (1964), for example, which he dubbed a "photographic score-catalogue,"[3] a solo male performer takes on everyday poses, often holding them for up to fifteen seconds. He walks, sits down, gets up, puts on a series of outfits, standing still throughout, and in the process calls into question what constitutes a dance.[4] In Yvonne Rainer's *Performance Documentation* (1968), three slide carousels project documentation of her dance *Stairs*. In a series of photographs, performers are shown climbing and descending a short staircase and interacting with foam props, their bodies resembling the materials with which they interact; they become, in Rainer's words, "theater-objects."[5] Used in this way, photography becomes a structuring paradox, art historian Carrie Lambert-Beatty has argued, in which "the felt body of the dancer is both intensely present and . . . already a trace."[6] The interface of photography and dance

Maria Hassabi. *The Ladies*. 2012.
Performers (left to right): Biba Bell and Sarah Beth Percival.
Still from video, color, sound, 10 min. Courtesy the artist

creates tension between the performing subject and his treatment as an object, between the actual physical form of a live body and her photographic mediation.

PLASTIC's performers extend two-dimensional photographic images into three-dimensional space. Many of their poses can be described using the language of classical Western sculpture, beginning with the figure who stands contrapposto with his weight on one foot, suggesting past and future movement and fusing equipoise with tension. But in its use of space, *PLASTIC* bears the hallmark of modern sculpture: it is meant to be seen from all sides as opposed to frontally, the way it would be in a traditional proscenium theater.

In this regard, it is illuminating to consider Hassabi's work in relation to Auguste Rodin's[7] sculpture *Torso of Adèle*. The artist molded this sensuous headless female figure from clay, by hand, in front of his model, Adèle Abbruzzesi, and then joined her likeness to a wooden base so that the pedestal became part of the artwork. Art historian Rosalind Krauss has described the figure fused with its ground as "nomadic" or "homeless" because it carries its own context.[8] Like *Adèle*, Hassabi and her dancers stay close to the ground, appearing to be absorbed by the floor as their heads are obscured and their limbs often remain out of sight. Rodin's fragmenting of the body was informed by his collection of Greek and Roman figurative sculptures, which were often without their original limbs. Hassabi's work bears a similarly truncated relationship to ancient mythology, in which artists everywhere bring statues to life. In Ovid's *Pygmalion*, for example, the celibate sculptor carves a woman out of ivory. He is so enamored with his own skill that he falls for her and asks the goddess Venus to turn her into a real woman. Ovid writes that Pygmalion "speaking love, caresses it with loving hands that seem to make an impress, on the parts they touch, so real that he fears he then may bruise her by his eager pressing."[9] As "it" becomes "she," the line between affection and harm is as thin as the one between the inanimate and the living. For Hassabi, who is choreographer *and* dancer, artist *and* model, the intimacy between human subject and artistic object is ground zero.

Yvonne Rainer. *Stairs*. 1968.
From *The Mind Is a Muscle*. Photo by Peter Moore. © Barbara Moore/Licensed by VAGA, New York, NY. Courtesy Paula Cooper Gallery, NY

Hassabi's work is filled with the tension between abjection and exaltation. She describes her references in a string of incongruous associations: "junkies in the middle of the street . . . luxurious figures at rest . . . a person forgotten in a corner of the city . . . people simply staring, sitting, standing."[10] What unifies these figures is their unproductiveness: they are avatars of what appears to be a breakdown in

Auguste Rodin. *Torso of Adèle*.
Before 1884. Terracotta, 4 5/16 × 14 3/4 × 6 7/16" (11 × 37.5 × 16.4 cm). Photo by Christian Baraja. Courtesy Musée Rodin

a manufacturing chain. But just as their apparent stillness is an illusion, so is that of *PLASTIC*'s dancers—their seeming passivity is actually the result of physical attention and virtuosity. *PLASTIC* is animated by this kind of artifice. The work's staginess is self-conscious, inviting spectacle in order to exhaust it. For example, the performers' costumes of gray blouses and jeans, to which the collective threeASFOUR applied rhinestones, are both neutral and decorated, giving their glamour an evacuated feel. Likewise, the work neither embraces nor refuses narrative, instead prolonging the viewer's perception of it.[11] It is impossible to anticipate where it is going; instead you experience it as an accumulation of the here and now.

Dispersed to the periphery of the Museum's Marron Atrium and staircases—the frame of the building—the performers repeat the same choreography like automatons unaware of one another. Choreography has long been structured as a series of dance phrases that are performed simultaneously by a group of dancers or repeated over the course of a performance so that they achieve symbolic and dramatic effect. Hassabi, however, sequences her movement on a loop that each performer dances over several hours, making the repetitions nearly unrecognizable. While the choreography is set and reproduced multiple times a day for more than thirty days, at any given moment the dancers nevertheless appear to be distinct from one another. *PLASTIC* thus sits uncannily between multiple mediums—photography, sculpture, the digital loop—as it circulates charged and associative images inspired by the world. Without any contextual information, the meaning of the performers' bodily contortions is plastic. The performers at once embody real scenarios and their representations, making it difficult to distinguish whether they are unconscious or resting, self-sufficient or in a state of crisis. As they move across the floor and down the stairs' vertical pathways, they recall recognizable but absent figures.

He breathes and his muscles tremble. You see tears well up in his left eye as his muscles quiver. He squints. The tremors and quakes are not signs of weakness or vulnerability; they are nonverbal, involuntary surface messages about the physical effects of time and arduous activity on the body. While these gestures may look like pain, they are the dancer's nervous system communicating the physical effects of the duration of gravity and downward motion to anyone who might look long enough to see them.[12] Perhaps you'll have an encounter with the performer; maybe you'll disregard him. But if you glance at the dance, if you become part of it, you might see something made familiar within its loop.

1 See conversation between Maria Hassabi and Victoria Marks, The Herb Alpert Awards in the Arts, http://herbalpertawards.org/artist/chapter-one-0.

2 See Maria Hassabi and Scott Lyall, interview by Lauren Bakst, *BOMB*, February 11, 2014, http://bombmagazine.org/article/1000022/scott-lyall-and-maria-hassabi.

3 Steve Paxton with Liza Béar, "Like the Famous Tree . . . ," *Avalanche* 11 (Summer 1975): 26.

4 Sally Banes, "Vital Signs: Steve Paxton's *Flat* in Perspective," in *Writing Dancing in the Age of Postmodernism* (Hanover: Wesleyan University Press, 1994), pp. 227–239.

5 Yvonne Rainer, "Don't Give the Game Away," *Arts Magazine* 41, no. 6 (April 1967): 47.

6 Carrie Lambert-Beatty, *Being Watched: Yvonne Rainer and the 1960s* (Cambridge, MIT Press: 2008), pp. 158, 160.

7 It is particularly fitting that Rodin's *Monument to Balzac* (1898), which is in MoMA's collection, is often installed on the platform at the bottom of the staircase on which *PLASTIC* takes place.

8 See Rosalind Krauss, "Sculpture in the Expanded Field," *October* 8 (Spring 1979): 34.

9 Publius Ovidius Naso, "Pygmalion and the Statue," in *Metamorphoses*, trans. Brookes More (Boston: Cornhill Publishing Co., 1922), p. 243.

10 Maria Hassabi, e-mail message to author, January 21, 2016.

11 The author thanks Will Rawls for drawing his attention to this point.

12 Victoria Gray makes a similar argument in her article "The Choreography of Anticipation in Maria Hassabi's *PREMIERE*," *TDR: The Drama Review* 59, no. 3 (Fall 2015): 150–57.

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ADDITIONAL INFORMATION

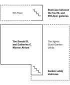
Maria Hassabi is in conversation with Philip Bither, William and Nadine McGuire Director and Senior Curator, Performing Arts, Walker Art Center, on February 24 at 7pm in the Marron Atrium. Please visit moma.org/mariahassabi for video documentation.

Please see moma.org/mariahassabi for a commissioned essay by Tim Griffin, Executive Director and Chief Curator, The Kitchen, and for the performers' bios.

Cover image: Maria Hassabi. *PLASTIC*. 2015.
Rehearsal at MoMA, October 30, 2015. Performer: Maria Hassabi.
Photo by James Fair. © 2015 The Museum of Modern Art, New York

PERFORMANCE LOCATIONS

PLASTIC is on view in The Agnes Gund Garden Lobby staircase, The Donald B. and Catherine C. Marron Atrium, and the wooden staircase between the fourth- and fifth-floor galleries. On Fridays, *PLASTIC* is performed only in the Marron Atrium.



PERFORMERS:
The Donald B. and Catherine C. Marron Atrium and The Agnes Gund Garden Lobby staircase: Hristoula Harakas, Maria Hassabi, Molly Lieber, Paige Martin, and Oisín Monaghan

Staircase between fourth- and fifth-floor galleries: Michael Hall, Niall Jones, Tara Lorenzen, and Mickey Mahar

The Donald B. and Catherine C. Marron Atrium: Simon Courchel, Jessie Gold, Neil Greenberg, Elizabeth Hart, Hennis Hawkins, Niall Jones, Shelley Senter, Roseanne Spradlin, and David Thomson

SOUND DESIGN: Morten Norbye Halvorsen

SONG FRAGMENTS: Marina Rosenfeld

STYLING: threeASFOUR

PRODUCTION ASSISTANCE: Anton Bulayev

ARTIST ASSISTANT: Kate Ryan

Maria Hassabi: *PLASTIC* is co-commissioned by The Museum of Modern Art, New York; the Hammer Museum, Los Angeles; and the Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam.

At MoMA the exhibition is organized by Thomas J. Lax, Associate Curator, with Martha Joseph, Curatorial Assistant, Department of Media and Performance Art, and is produced by Lizzie Gorfaine, Performance Producer, with Kate Scherer, Assistant Performance Coordinator.

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