

Review: Maria Hassabi at MoMA

BY JULIET HELMKE, MODERN PAINTERS | MARCH 18, 2016



Dancers perform Maria Hassabi's "Plastic" at MoMA.
(Photo by Jacqueline Mermea)

NEW YORK

Maria Hassabi

Museum of Modern Art // Through March 20

In our age of shrinking attention spans, audiences, it seems, are ever more enthusiastic for immersive, participatory art-viewing experiences—and willing to wait in snaking museum lines for the chance to take part. Maria Hassabi's *Plastic* has, on paper, some overlap with such an event: a durational, live performance taking place over the course of the institution's opening hours and acted out among the audience in atypical spaces (on the stairs leading from the lobby to the Marron Atrium, as well as the staircase between the fourth and fifth floors). Yet what is absorbing about Hassabi's "live installation," which premiered at the Hammer Museum in 2015, is that even with all of these elements, it is entirely unlike its carnivalesque siblings. A different type of attentiveness is required, swapping out spectacle for stillness.

At any given time, between four and eight performers (or, on Friday, one lone dancer) are scattered around the museum floor, posing precisely, not stationary, but not moving much. On my visit I encounter a woman on the lobby stairs. Clad in gray jeans with bejeweled strips following the inseam, she lies in what appears to be an uncomfortable full-body twist: The lower half of her body falls limp upon the jagged corners of the steps while her torso faces upward, her arms pinned behind her and her head and shoulders making contact with the landing between sets of stairs as her gaze tilts toward the ceiling. Nearby, the atrium is dotted with seating borrowed from the museum's public spaces, all similarly colored, unobtrusive pieces normally meant to blend into the background. A man crouches, then pauses while rolling to his side, as though he has just tumbled from the gray leather sofa behind him. Eventually, he picks himself up off the floor, hauling his body back onto the piece of furniture as though in slow motion.

The positions in which the dancers are caught could be snapshots of extreme actions. Their bodies, whether still or slowly shifting, never appear restful. Even with their emotionless expressions, the performers possess a dynamism—recalling the sculptures and movement renderings of the Futurists, with activity somehow captured in stillness. Watching *Plastic* is a viewing experience more akin to that of looking at a static object, not because the dancers are often static themselves—complete stillness would make it feel like they were imitating sculpture—but because of their movement. Their slow actions reveal that they are still performing, but the conventions of the viewer's relationship to performance come undone: Here, performer becomes object and museum architecture the set, while the audience plays the active role.