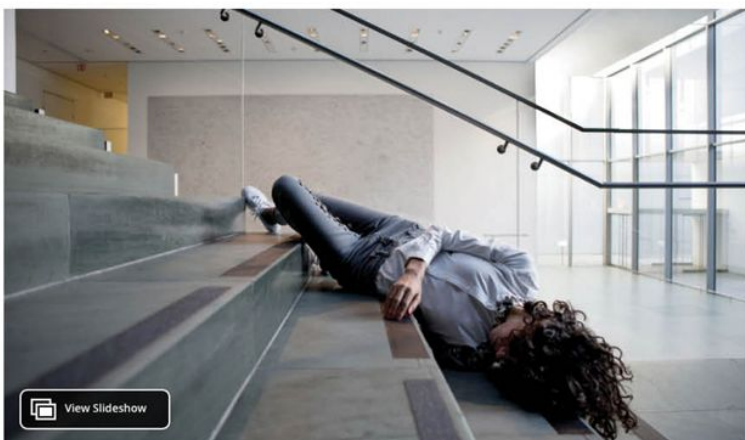


Body Art: Maria Hassabi's MoMA Dancers Discuss "Plastic"

BY NOELLE BODICK | MARCH 15, 2016



Maria Hassabi's "Plastic," 2015, at the Museum of Modern Art in New York.
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Some visitors refer to the dancers scattered across the atrium and stairwells of New York's Museum of Modern Art as the third person pronoun, "it." Others forego language altogether, on occasion, poking and prodding the dancers with infantile glee.

"There is a lot of: 'Is it real?' 'Are they real?'" one of the contemporary dancers in question, Paige Martin, recently told ARTINFO. Sometimes, as a dancer begins to shift her body to the next form, Martin said that viewers "freak out." "Oh my god, they're real. It's moving, it's moving!"

Martin is one of 17 dancers who animate the glacial-paced work "Plastic," choreographed by Cyprus-born, New York-based artist Maria Hassabi. (The piece is on view through March 20, following previous runs at the Hammer Museum in Los Angeles and the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam.) Here, the lack of boundaries between visitor and performer can entail spontaneous intimacy, as well as select liabilities.

"There isn't the same sort of contract that you have in a theater, where your territory is the stage," said another dancer, Shelley Senter, who met Hassabi in 1992 while instructing her as a student at CalArts. Only the dancers' uniform (a denim, rhinestone-adorned getup), their mostly floor-bound movement, and nearby security guards distinguish the artists from the milling crowds.

In other words, the visitors get to share the stage. For the most part, that means quiet, careful looking — often mediated through a digital device — or at least a stolen furtive backward glance. But there are the occasional distractions for the dancers: curious children approach, transfixed, with a guardian usually trailing behind. Meanwhile, Instagram evidences others posing shamelessly, or even joining the dancers on the ground, in mockery. What's more, some oblivious patrons plant themselves down on a couch where a performance is happening, perhaps only to stare into a phone. The audience sometimes steps on the dancers, or even tickles and touches them, according to the dancers interviewed — an issue that plagued the Marina Abramovic retrospective at MoMA in 2010.

This all requires some adaptability on the part of the performer. Michael Helland, a dancer on the wooden stairs between the fourth and fifth floors, has called Hassabi's work the most specific choreography ever demanded of him as a dancer, his movement controlled down to the swivel of his eyeballs, with every second accounted for. And yet, "If I hear someone clumsily approaching, I know I better hold [my position] an extra 10 seconds," Helland said in a phone interview. "There is a physical risk involved, but if I wasn't interested in the vitality that comes from that, I wouldn't be well suited to do this work."

But more distracting than foot traffic might be the ontological questions lodged — in earshot of the dancers — about whether the work is, in fact, art.

"Granted, most of these people are coming to the MoMA as an art mall, and maybe have never seen dance anyway. But absolutely the first thing on their mind is not: 'Dance is at MoMA?' or 'This is considered dance?' The first thing out of their mouth is, 'Oh, I guess this is art,'" said Martin, who performs in the atrium.

"Some people speak disrespectfully about the work or about your own body as if you don't have ears or eyes," said Helland, adding that this potentially leads to a "really dehumanizing situation."

But there is also a tremendous benefit afforded by the close proximity of the dancers. Each breath, swallow of the throat, or twitch of the finger becomes a dramatic event, the artists laboring to suppress inevitable muscle spasms, jumpiness, and tremors. (They're working, more or less, on two-hour shifts, from 10:30am to 5:30pm.)

The minimalist choreography does not overwhelm, and allows for moments when visitors can lock eyes with the dancers and look on, unembarrassed. As Helland said, "One can really see the people working... without being obscured by dance with a capital 'D.'"

Still, the cluelessness of some viewers seems insurmountable. During the work's run in LA, museumgoers reportedly called the police daily. In New York, Helland said there'd been no emergency calls, but that visitors have asked security if a dancer needs help. You might wonder if he or she does the same when encountering a homeless person on the streets of New York, Helland mused. "So I'm a little bit like, 'too little, too late' about [their concern over] someone wearing a sparkly, jewel-encrusted, denim outfit, laying on the stairs at MoMA. It seems a bit theatrical to me."

"And," Helland added, "we're not in a theater."