

‘Plastic,’ at MoMA, Is on the Floor and the Stairs

By SIOBHAN BURKE MARCH 9, 2016



Molly Lieber, far right on the stairs, in “Plastic” at the Museum of Modern Art.

Julietta Cervantes for The New York Times

“Is she real? Is she alive? Does she need help? Call 911. Is she breathing? Is she a sculpture? Is this art?”

The dancer Hristoula Harakas says she gets these comments all the time. They’ve become a kind of background noise to her role in Maria Hassabi’s “Plastic,” a live installation at the Museum of Modern Art through March 20.

Walking around the museum, you can’t miss “Plastic” and its slow progression through some of the building’s most exposed spaces: the Marron Atrium, the main lobby staircase, and the stairs between the fourth- and fifth-floor galleries. At times you may need to step over what seems like a fallen body.

And while plenty of people walk right by the dancers — regarding their shifting, sculptural poses with a hurried glance at most — the constellation of interactions between performers and the public has become a kind of artwork in itself. On a recent afternoon in the lounge-like atrium, one visitor lay down next to Ms. Harakas, posing for a photo. Another visitor, reclining on a nearby sofa, carried on a lengthy phone conversation, as if there were nothing to see. Others, camped out on ottomans and peering down from balconies, seemed unable to look away.

“It was really important for me, while making the work, to keep thinking of the three-dimensionality,” said Ms. Hassabi, who is one of 17 dancers, in a phone interview, “to know there would be people everywhere around us, that people were going to ignore us, and that somewhere in there, somebody would stay and pay attention to us.”

Ms. Hassabi, who has choreographed for theaters, outdoor spaces and the risers of a Venice gymnasium, created “Plastic” at the invitation of the Hammer Museum in Los Angeles, where it opened last year. It also had a short run at the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam. Transitional spaces, like entrances and exits, caught her interest and aligned with her continuing exploration of stillness. The heavy traffic flow of the Modern, especially, inspired “a desire to slow its rhythm down, even momentarily,” she said in an email.

In contexts where living, breathing art is not the norm, the attention paid to performers is not always positive. Ms. Harakas has been approached gently by visitors — someone touching her hand “just to see if I was alive” — but also more aggressively: “At the Stedelijk, I had an old lady poke me with a cane — in a mean kind of way,” she said.

At the Modern, the busiest of the three institutions, the work has taken on a new dimension: the involvement of security guards, who direct traffic on the stairs and intervene in potentially injurious situations. Striking the right balance of performer well being and audience freedom has proved challenging.

“Some guards are very sensitive and so attentive,” Ms. Hassabi said. “They are able to set the limits with the public in a very smooth way.” With others, she noted, the experience is “less enjoyable.”

The dancers look out for themselves, too, though that can be difficult when, say, lying upside down or face down on the stairs. Ms. Hassabi has asked at least one viewer to step away from her: “He said: ‘Why? But you’re art!’ And I said: ‘Exactly. You cannot be as close as you are to the art.’”

Asked if she worried about her safety, the dancer Molly Lieber said no: “Plastic” leaves no room for distractions. “If you don’t do it with your whole body and your whole presence, you can’t really do it,” she said.

One of the greatest breaches of audience etiquette, Ms. Hassabi said, comes from photographers with long-lens cameras, who appear to be doing professional work. As the dancer David Thomson put it, “You run into situations where someone has a camera, and you realize they’re actually shooting a whole portfolio with you, and that’s when it gets a little unnerving.”

“Plastic” is Mr. Thomson’s fourth project as a performer at the Modern since 2010, when he took part in Marina Abramovic’s retrospective, “The Artist Is Present.” That show, featuring nude performers, raised critical questions about touching the art — when the art is human — and other issues specific to live performance.

“I think they’ve grown immensely in how they deal with performers,” Mr. Thomson said. “They have much more knowledgeable staff, who have done performance exhibitions, who understand the questions and the needs of the artists a lot more.”

Thomas J. Lax, a curator in the department of media and performance art and the chief organizer of “Plastic,” said coordinating performance had become a more museum-wide effort. Ms. Hassabi’s installation, in particular, he said, calls for an institutional willingness to adapt.

“Even though we had dozens of meetings with our colleagues across the institution for over a year leading up to the exhibition, on Day 1 we regrouped and thought through all of the basic parameters we had set up,” he said. “Because the work didn’t exist until that first person walked up the stairs and saw Maria lying there.”

In the first week of “Plastic,” Mr. Thomson performed a two-hour solo on one of the atrium sofas, using the time to connect with people around him — or to try to connect.

“Some people can’t deal with eye contact; they don’t want that kind of attention,” he said. “But others really invite it, and when they do, I share that. Because part of my agency is to really engage someone, so that I’m not just an inanimate object, but I’m actually a real person, and I’m looking at you.”