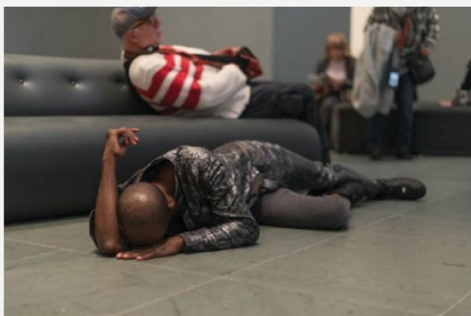


The Kinetics of Stillness: Maria Hassabi at MoMA

by Jessica Holmes (Class of 2013)



Maria Hassabi. *PLASTIC*. 2015. Installation view, The Museum of Modern Art, February 21–March 20, 2016. Pictured: David Thomson. Photo: Thomas Poravas. © Maria Hassabi

On a recent Saturday morning at the Museum of Modern Art, I witnessed a witnessing. Looking down from an upper floor into the Marron Atrium below, I saw a small boy running to and fro across the expansive floor. As it was still early enough in the day that the inevitable crowd had yet to surge, he proceeded unobstructed, save for several leather sofas and circular benches scattered about. Suddenly, he stopped and leaned on one jaunty elbow against an empty bench, his eyes transfixed on a loveseat six or eight feet away. A woman was draped across that loveseat, seemingly immobile, her feet kicked up on the headrest, and her head and arms dangling towards the floor. Watching the boy watch the dancer was my introduction to *PLASTIC* (2015), a performance coined a “live installation” by its creator, artist and choreographer Maria Hassabi.

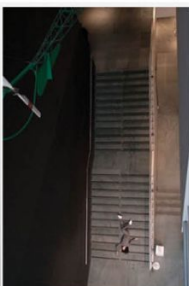
For *PLASTIC*, Hassabi commandeered three distinct and heavily trafficked locations in MoMA’s building—the Marron Atrium, the Garden Lobby staircase, and the wooden staircase between the fourth- and fifth-floor galleries—and installed dancers in each. To call them dancers, however, seems almost unbecoming. What is demanded of their bodies, though no less onerous than dance, verges on being its opposite. The performers move across the given spaces with a nearly imperceptible speed. Sustained attention yields the truth: yes, they are moving. Their costumes, designed by the collective threeASFOUR, suggest an apocalyptic glamour: gray button down shirts, white tennis shoes, and gray jeans appliquéd with a cluster of rhinestones. Project curator Thomas J. Lax notes in a short text that accompanies the exhibition that the clothing reflects Hassabi’s influences, which include, amongst other things, “junkies in the middle of the street” and “luxurious figures at rest.” Seventeen dancers perform in *PLASTIC*, though due to its temporally elongated choreography—a loop lasting several hours—seeing them all may not be possible for most of the museum’s patrons. Moving downstairs from my overhead perch for a closer view, I joined the little boy and a smattering of other museumgoers in the atrium. Painstakingly, the dancer rolled her inverted body across the sofa, and eventually off of it. The muscular discipline required to hold such a disagreeable position underscored every modest movement with raw emotion. Her traversal of the furniture suggested a human entropic collapse, a surrender to despair.



Maria Hassabi. *PLASTIC*. 2015. Installation view, The Museum of Modern Art, February 21–March 20, 2016. Pictured: Maria Hassabi. Photo: Thomas Poravas. © Maria Hassabi

Across the atrium, another dancer was slumped in a heap on the floor. Bit by bit, she raised her torso, eventually coming into a sphinx-like position, the process transforming her body into a sculpture. Attentive guards were stationed near every performing artist, but that did not stop one person from thrusting an iPhone close to the dancer’s face and snapping a picture before hurrying away. The moment was brief yet tinged with danger as the brazen flouting of the dancer’s personal space was a reminder that it was a living, breathing body we were appraising, and not an inanimate object. The peril seemed even greater for Hassabi, who performed that morning, lying on the Garden Lobby staircase, the most bustling and congested of the three locations. The fact was not lost on the guard stationed there, who moved people along shouting orders to step around her like a traffic cop. His vigilance was understandable but also dismaying, more proof—like passing by an army servicemember packing a machine gun at Penn Station or Grand Central—of the policed atmosphere and wary, autocratic scrutiny we live under and largely regard as the new normal.

The smaller space of the stairs between the upper galleries framed the performance that unfolded so that it looked almost like a tableau. It also contained and amplified the sound design—an untitled piece composed specifically for *PLASTIC* by Morton Norbye Halvorsen, which included song fragments by Marina Rosenfeld—in a way that the other two locations were unable to by virtue of their open airiness. On the second floor of the museum, the sound was lost in the din of the cavernous and crowded arena, but the dissonant tones reverberating in the more claustrophobic stairwell heightened the drama of the (in)action that unfolded there. A lone dancer lay across the steps near the landing, her head tilted back and pressed against one step so that her eyes gazed upward. The abject position seemed uncomfortable, possibly painful. It was in that moment, from my vantage point at the crest of the stairs, that I locked eyes with her. We held each other’s gaze, unbroken even by the watchful eye of the guard on duty and the patrons who picked their way gingerly up and down the stairs around her. My instinct was to aid her, to untangle the contorted body and cradle it, and my eyes welled with tears. So did hers. Nearby, a father punctuated the stillness by explaining to his young daughter: “So these people lay around here making art all day.” The nonchalant callousness of the remark made me twitch as I registered that compassion is not necessarily a universal reaction.



Maria Hassabi. *PLASTIC*. 2015. Installation views, The Museum of Modern Art, February 21–March 20, 2016. Pictured at left: Tara Lorenzen, Michael Holland, Mickey Mahar; pictured at right: Maria Hassabi. Photo: Thomas Poravas. © Maria Hassabi

The potency of *PLASTIC* emanates from the dramatic tensions created between viewer and performer, and extends to the dichotomies that one must negotiate on a daily basis just to get through life: trash and glamour, empathy and heartlessness, hope and despair. Eventually, the performer with whom I’d locked eyes raised her body from the staircase and languorously moved to a standing position. Here, erect and silent, she regained her power. We blinked; our eyes shifted, and the spell was broken.