PORTRAITS

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THE PERFORMING AUDIENCE

Group Portrait

Alexandra Pirici
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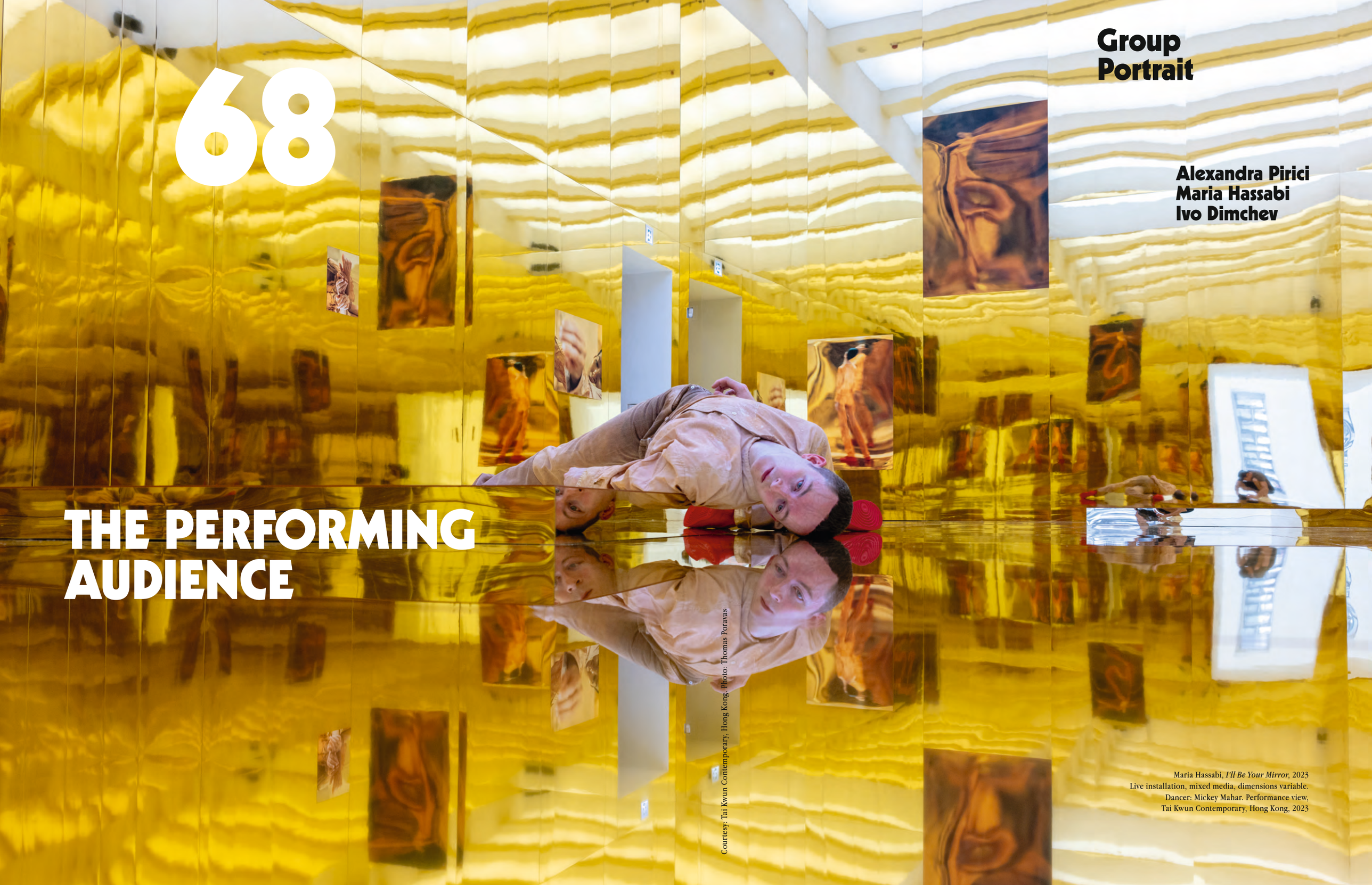
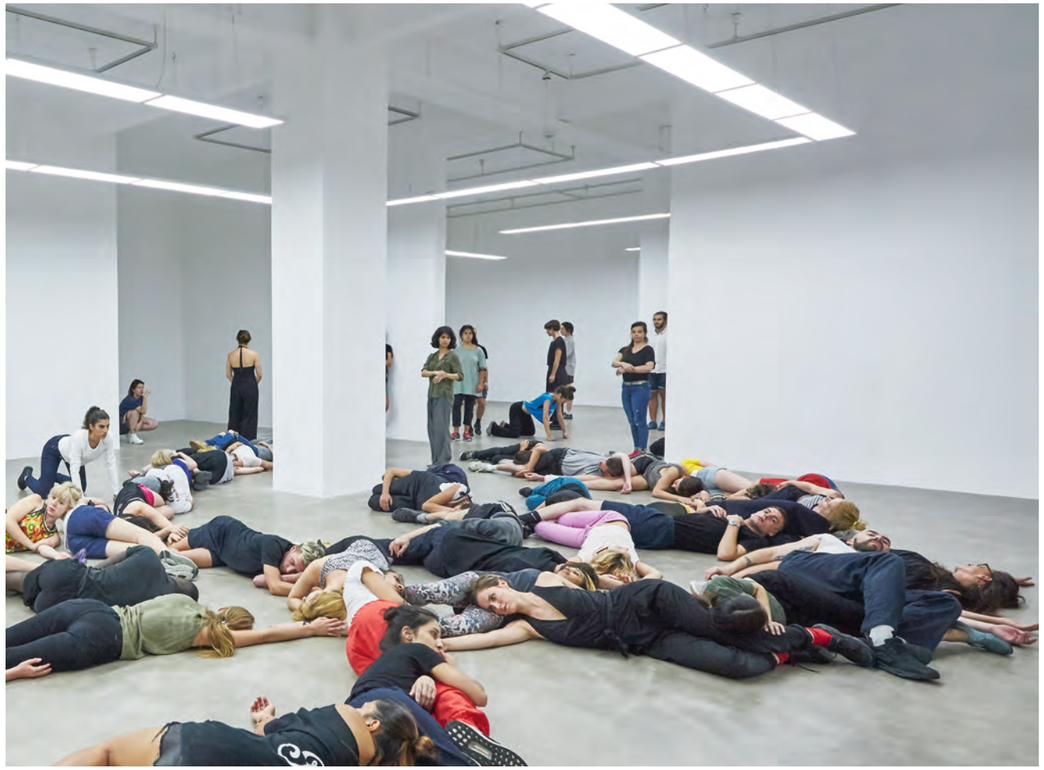


Courtesy: Tai Kwun Contemporary, Hong Kong. Photo: Thomas Poravas

Maria Hassabi, *I'll Be Your Mirror*, 2023
Live installation, mixed media, dimensions variable.
Dancer: Mickey Mahar. Performance view,
Tai Kwun Contemporary, Hong Kong, 2023

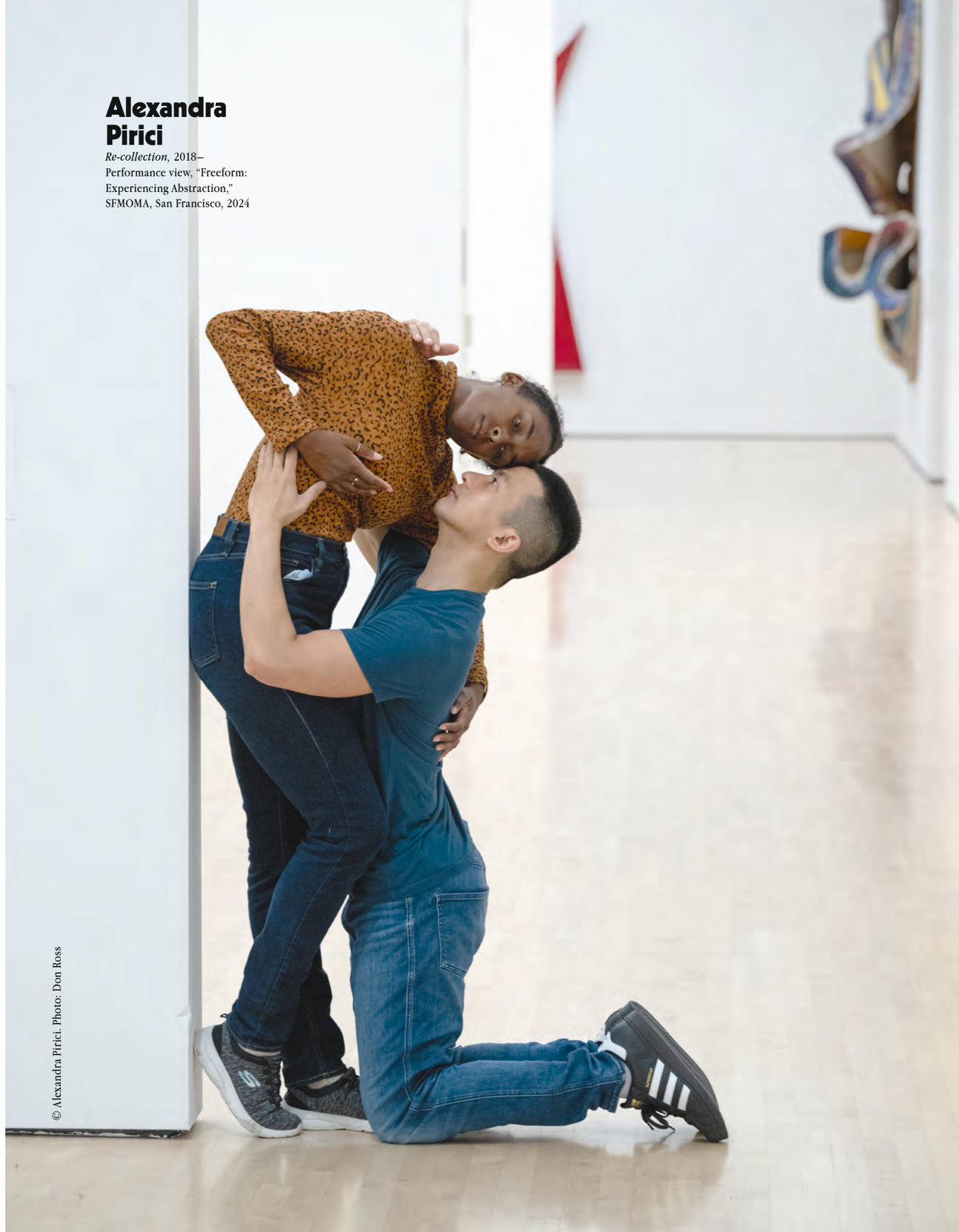
Aggregate, 2017–19, Performance view, Neuer Berliner Kunstverein, 2017



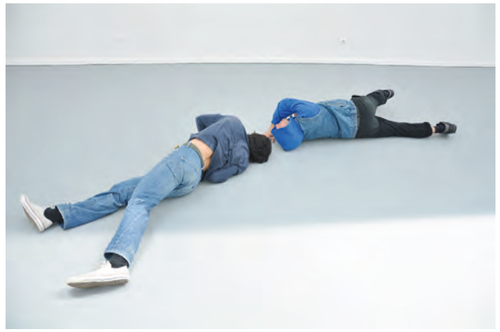
A trained dancer, a choreographer, and a vaudevillian virtuoso walk into a crowded museum – and can't quite tell who's acting and who's spectating. In works that trick the impulse to make images as much as they trigger it, these artists are stripping the dance exhibition down to its essentials: bodies, some movement, absolute co-presence. *By Florian Malzacher*

Alexandra Pirici

Re-collection, 2018–
Performance view, "Freeform: Experiencing Abstraction," SFMOMA, San Francisco, 2024



Enactment of Mona Hatoum, + *AND* -, 51st Venice Biennale, 2005



Enactment of AES + F, *Last Riot*, 52nd Venice Biennale, 2007

Even if moving bodies in a museum no longer surprise, there remains a friction, a productive uneasiness; something does not seem right.

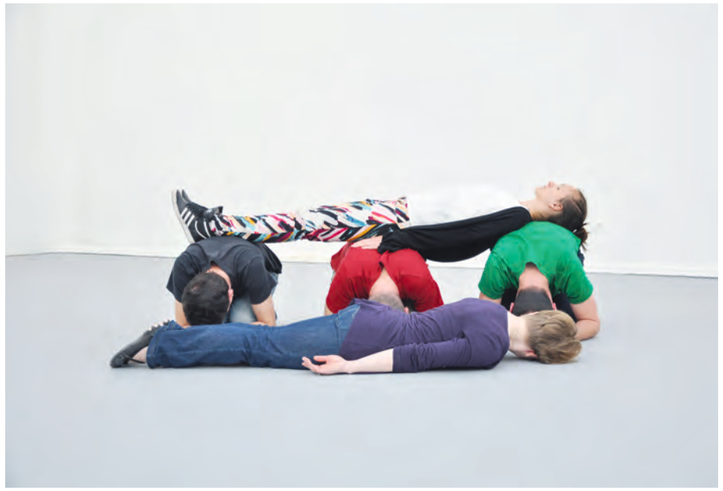
A group of young bodies, constantly moving among paintings, sculptures, hygrometers, guards, and visitors, merge into an image, a group constellation, a combined figure. Together, they present (or represent?) versions, memories, interpretations of sculptures, monuments, paintings, installations, performances, texts, songs, gestures. A few are easily recognizable – this one must be Michelangelo's *David*, that one Malevich's *Black Square* – or is it just a generic geometrical form? Others, we can scarcely narrow down: Here's a faun, perhaps, and over there an eagle, an angel – or a god of love? But who would recognize the references to sculptor Norbert Kricke, to painter Ghada Amer, to images inspired by the Ethiopian-Armenian painter Skunder Boghossian? A song from an old Soviet movie plays while the performers slowly circle themselves, now objects, now animals, now fairies, again humans in a fantastic landscape. Neither a quiz nor a knowledge contest, but a performance of one's own associations, following the associations of the artists.

In her ongoing performative action *Re-collection* (2018–), Romanian choreographer Alexandra Pirici (*1982) digs into the notion of collecting, undermining and reconfiguring the term by transforming works of art and forms of life into embodied memories. It's a strategy she had previously pursued, together with choreographer Manuel Pelmuș, for the Romanian Pavilion at the 55th Venice Biennale (2013): *An Immaterial Retrospective* humorously and pointedly played with art history, translating painting, sculpture, and installation into body images and choreography.

The attention the duo's work immediately received owed not only to its striking concept, but also to the craft of its physical precision. Like the other live interventions that have increasingly populated the spaces – and, even more so, the discourses – of visual arts, *An Immaterial Retrospective* wasn't mainly a piece of classical performance art concerned with the realization of an idea or an action. Rather, it was an exactly constructed, exactly executed choreography that evoked, over many hours and in constantly changing sequences, works that were originally made, not of flesh, but of marble, bronze, oil paint, or metal. With nothing but their bodies – "downsizing and demythologizing," as Pirici describes it – two teams enacted, through all the Pavilion's opening hours and in no particular order, more than one hundred works of art from throughout the Biennale's history, from Auguste Rodin's sculpture *Despair* and Edward Hopper's painting *Hotel Lobby* to Anri Sala's video *Uomo Duomo*. Marcel Duchamp's mustachioed Mona Lisa in *L.H.O.O.Q.* required only a finger and a mouth, while Maurizio Cattelan's *La Nona Ora* (The Ninth Hour) needed two bodies: one for the Pope and one for the meteor. Daniel Buren's *Le Pavillon coupé, découpé, taillé, gravé* (The Pavilion cut, dissected, tailored, engraved) was represented b five performers, who lined up against the walls like the original's stripes, again and again, until the entire pavilion had been covered.

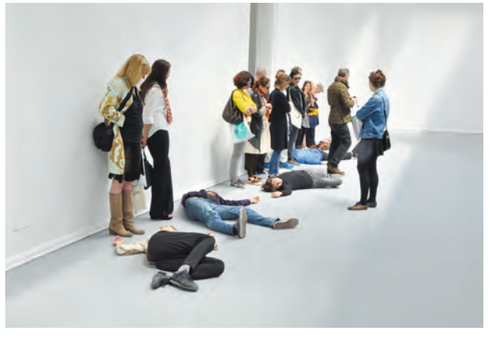
The "new performative turn" (a neologism credited to the 2014 conference "Is the Living Body the Last Thing Left Alive" at Para Site, Hong Kong) is linked to two phenomena: firstly, to the growing desire of art institutions, especially from the 2010s onwards, to fold performative works into

All images: Alexandra Pirici and Manuel Pelmuș, *An Immaterial Retrospective*, 2013. Performance views, 55th Venice Biennale



Enactment of Joseph Beuys, *Tram Stop. A Monument to the Future*, German Pavilion, 37th Venice Biennale, 1976

Enactment of Ernesto Neto, *The Animal*, 49th Venice Biennale, 2001

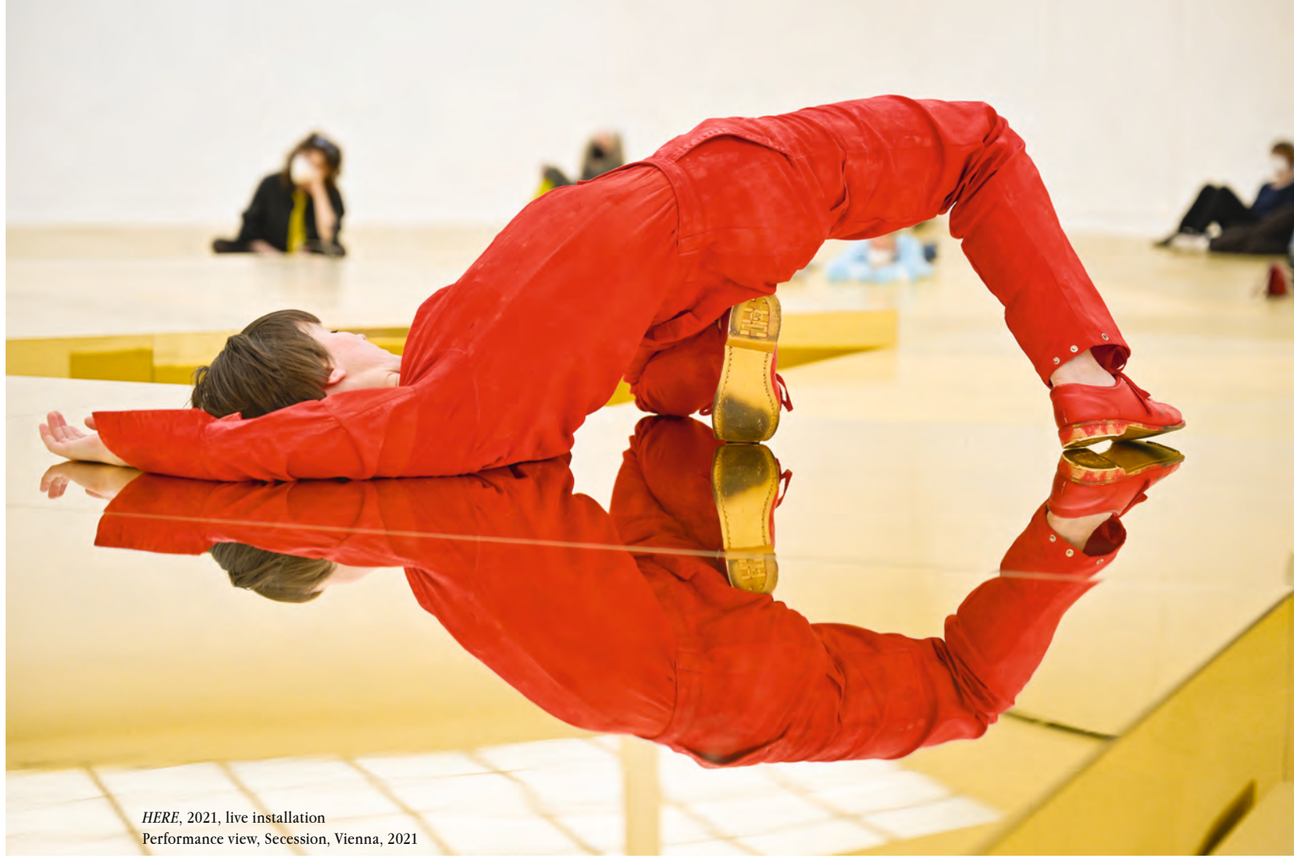


Photos: Eduard Constantin

Enactment of Hans Haacke, *Germania*, German Pavilion, 45th Venice Biennale, 1993

Maria Hassabi
PLASTIC, 2015, live installation
Performance view, MoMA,
New York, 2016

© MoMA, New York. Photo: Jason Schmidt



HERE, 2021, live installation
Performance view, Secession, Vienna, 2021

Courtesy: Tai Kwun Contemporary, Hong Kong. Photo: Thomas Poravas

What stays is presence: of the space, of the performers, of the other visitors, the artworks, the guards, the lighting. The experience is here and now.

Courtesy: the artist and the Breeder, Athens. Photo: Thomas Poravas

their portfolios; secondly, to developments in choreography since the 1990s, usually subsumed under the term "conceptual dance," which counts among its protagonists Jérôme Bel, Xavier Le Roy, Tino Sehgal, Meg Stuart, Eszter Salamon, deufert&plischke, Boris Charmatz, and Mette Ingvartsen. As different as their works are, these artists share a fundamental mistrust of theatrical representations and conventional craftsmanship, while comporting permanent, often ironic senses of self-reflection and distance. In their performances, discourse and language themselves become choreography.

Because of their massive influence, dance theorist André Lepecki favors the phrase "choreographic (or dance) turn" over "performative turn." Even as this technical expertise is evident, though, their work isn't about flaunting the craft. The performers are usually discreet in their virtuosity, well-aware of the fine line between precision and pretentiousness. Choreographic (or dramaturgical, theatrical, and compositional) knowledge is not used to impress, but to recognize the audience in its presence, in its role as spectator and, to borrow from theater director and political activist Augusto Boal, sometime *spect-actor*.

I'll Be Your Mirror, 2023

Much has been written about the differences and encounters between black boxes and white cubes, about repotting artistic work from one to the other. Whereas theater demands engagement, creating temporary communities and proposing – even in its most conventional performances – their shared responsibility for the work, museums traditionally offer more freedom, allowing visitors to choose their own pace, their own time of involvement, their own dramaturgy. Or, ex negativo: Theater enforces collectivization and distrusts too-emancipated spectators, while museums celebrate a proto-neoliberal non-engagement geared only towards one's own pleasure. Both assumptions are as true as they are clichéd; still, theater-makers tend to put a different onus on their audience, on the sharing among people of time and space, than is typical of visual artists.

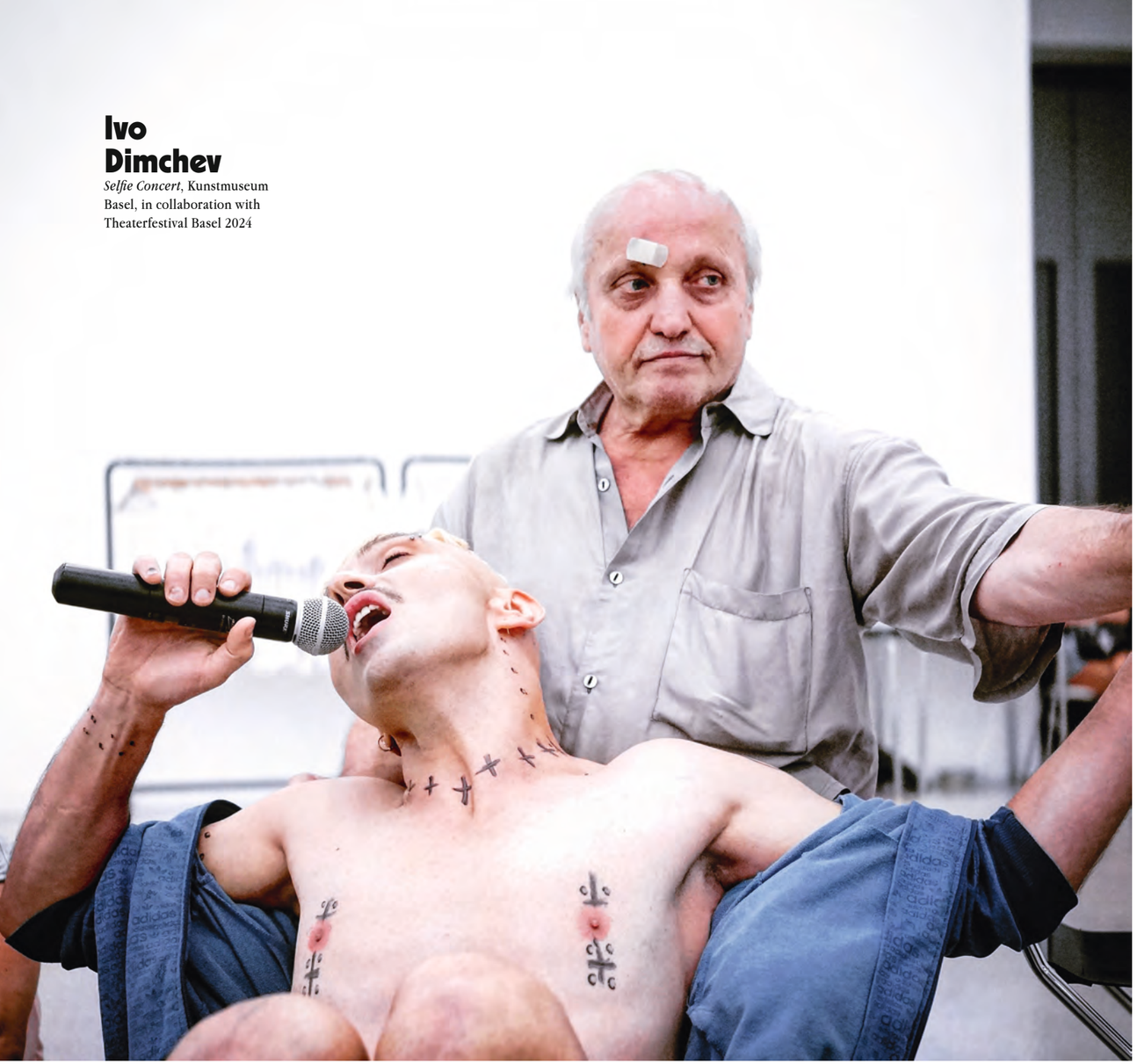
Decrying the inherent violence of audience participation in theater, choreographic-turn pioneer Tino Sehgal (*1976) has been searching for a different kind of visitor involvement in the museum space – one that is not "interaction plus putting someone on display." Paraphrasing museologist Tony Bennett, Sehgal situates museum artworks as merely "props for the performance of the audience," stressing that the museum is no less a place of performance than the theater – what distinguishes the two fora is that, in the former, spectators themselves are also performers. But if the museum might portend a less rigid, less collective social space, it clearly bears the danger of total non-commitment from its audience. Just as people on their way to the supermarket only endure a busker's acrobatic virtuosity until the first hint of boredom, exhibition visitors rarely have the patience for artistic works that do not immediately catch their attention.

Art historian Claire Bishop and others have called the mergers of black boxes and white cubes "gray zones." Besides suggesting a kind of indistinct non-color, the metaphor suffers from rendering all roots unrecognizable (a not unusual phenomenon for the hegemonic attitude of contemporary visual arts). Likewise, it fails to grasp the potential of practices that, paradoxically, are blackbox-y and white-cube-y at once: image puzzles whose resolutions depend on their viewer's focus.

Since the 2013 Biennale, Pirici's choreographies have shifted from concrete objects and texts to new media, swarm intelligences, and algorithms. Yet negotiation with her audience remains a defining feature: In her 2017 solo exhibition "Aggregate" at the Neuer Berliner Kunstverein (n.b.k.) in Berlin, eighty performers depicted tigers, waves, Michelangelo's *David*, hand-signs from Occupy Wall Street,

Ivo Dimchev

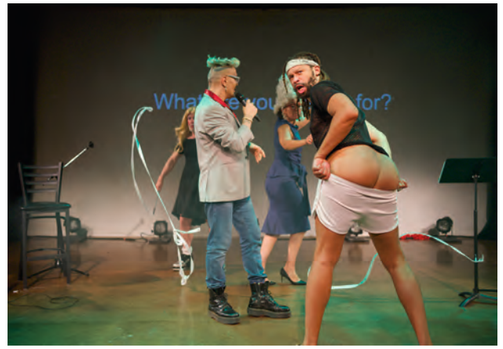
Selfie Concert, Kunstmuseum Basel, in collaboration with Theaterfestival Basel 2024

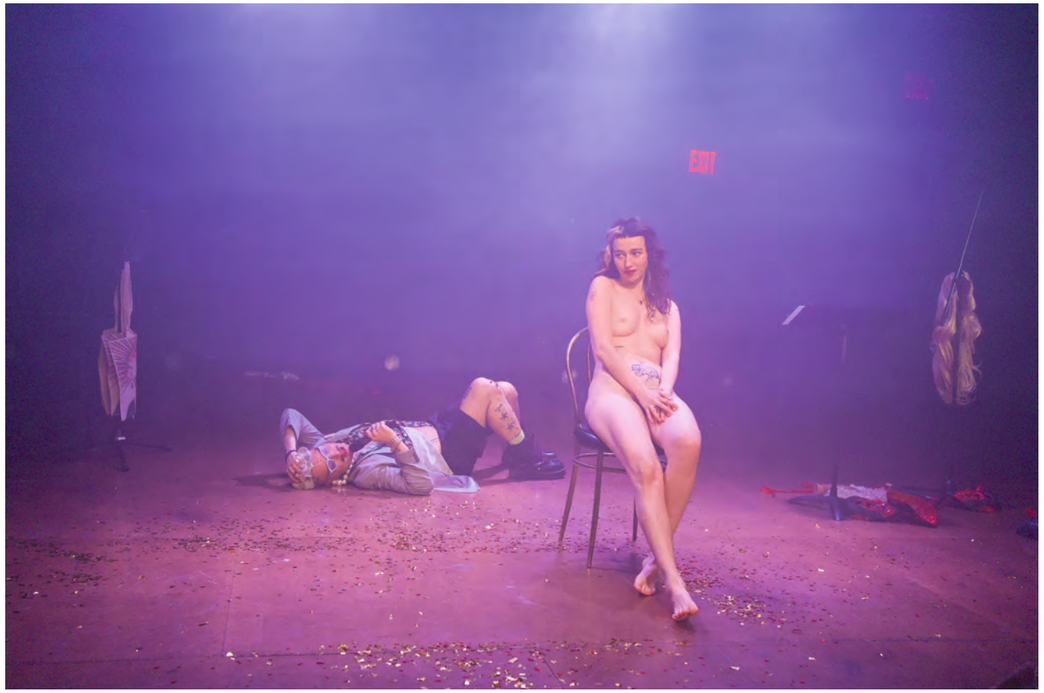


and the *Mona Lisa*, all the while singing songs and reciting poems – images and sounds inspired by the Golden Records that NASA launched into space in 1977, in case any aliens curious about the Earth should encounter Voyager 1. The sheer number of performers at the n.b.k., however, also massively affected the movements of the visitors, who, with little space to themselves, impinged in turn on the performers' freedom each time they changed position. Eliminating the distance between the artwork and the audience, the performance transformed both sides of the experience into a swarm. Pirici's 2024 exhibition at Berlin's Hamburger Bahnhof, "Attune," even more concertedly directed the movements of its visitors, piling up the former train station's metal columns with a huge sand dune – itself a dynamic, self-organizing pattern. Between arched pillars hung chemical gardens, minerals whose colors changed with human presence, messaging that all matter, whether stone or flesh, is made of the same building blocks – the differences are just arrangements of chance.

Photo: Pati Grabowicz

In Hell with Jesus/Top 40, 2023, La MaMa Experimental Theatre Club, New York

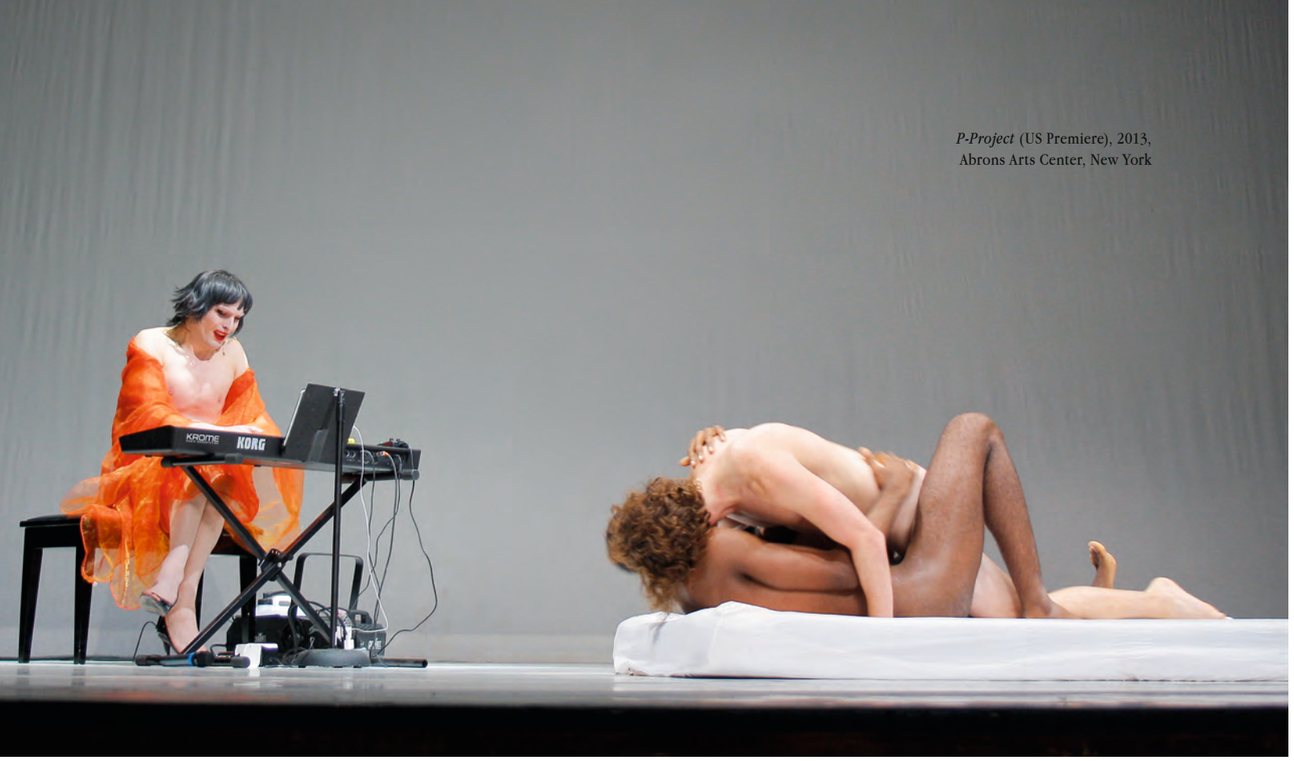




Where Pirici's work always bears an interest in historic and scientific content, the live installations of Cypriot performance artist Maria Hassabi (*1973) are usually rooted in more formal, aesthetic, and architectural concerns, playing with her audiences' expectations and perceptions.

Slowly, very slowly, sometimes barely visibly, a handful of bodies move around a room, changing their positions. One stands in an exhibition space, walking down a hall in slow motion; another glides slowly down a staircase, centimeter by centimeter, as people stream past, some irritated, others deliberately ignoring what is happening, yet others stopping to take photos. A few sit or stand at a safe distance and watch the action for longer periods. Unlike in a public space, no one encountering *PLASTIC* (2016) at MoMA is surprised for long – its status as a work of art quickly becomes clear, even if one might not understand what is happening, nor why. But who is really surprised about anything in a museum of contemporary art?

For those who do not linger, the dancers, with their imperceptible movements, might merely be architectural



P-Project (US Premiere), 2013,
Abrons Arts Center, New York

additions, accentuations of the space, or even obstacles. Whereas those who stay may themselves be drawn into a maelstrom, an alternative temporality within the large exhibition institution's hustle and bustle, and perhaps be emotionally touched by the vulnerability (Lepecki speaks of precariousness) of bodies caught in the current. Even if moving bodies in a museum space no longer surprise, there remains a friction, a productive uneasiness; something does not seem right.

While Pirici's interventions might inspire worry about a collection's safety, in Hassabi's performance, the artifacts seem far more protected than the bodies on the floor. Ours is the responsibility not to jostle them – or, perhaps, to simply perceive them appropriately. Once, performing on a staircase outside the MoMA, they observed a passerby from the nearby St. Patrick's Day parade peeing on a sculpture. The weighty form didn't care, nor could its absent artist; but the dancers, as Hassabi says in an interview, "are alive. And we see everything that is happening. We are not a canvas." The sculptures look back at us and impart an awareness of what it means to stare – or to ignore. Dealing with the artwork becomes a question of respect, not least because the work's creation happens concurrent to its reception. The performers are not locked away behind glass (as in Anne Imhof's *Faust*, 2017), separated in an automobile (as in Agnieszka Polska's *The Talking Car*, 2023), or removed to a distance (as in Tania Bruguera's *Endgame*, 2017). They are neither images nor, as Hans Ulrich Obrist has put it, "sculptures that go home at 6pm"; they are living bodies, living people.

And so are we, the audience. We shift the weight of our bodies, stretch our necks, feel the need to drink something or to go to the toilet. We think of our next appointment, that we're out of laundry detergent. What stays is presence: of the space, of the performers, of the other visitors, the artworks, the guards, the lighting. The experience is here and now.

Hassabi's work almost always deals with her audience's reflections. Last year, at Tai Kwun Contemporary, Hong Kong, her exhibition "I'll Be Your Mirror" took place in a room completely lined with looking glasses. Coated with golden acrylic, they blurred together the multiplied visitors and slow slow-motion dancers – into the image itself. If the performers in "PLASTIC" were part of an existing environment of artworks and people, the visitors in Hong Kong became part of an immersive experience, one that seemed to have no outside, but that also led to ambivalent feelings – gold being the color of gods as much as of Donald Trump, at once divine and trashy. (Hassabi's interest was sparked by her 2021 exhibition "HERE" at the Vienna Secession, where she was greeted daily by Joseph Maria Olbrich's golden cupola and Gustav Klimt's "Beethoven-Fries.")

For Bishop, "smartphones are an integral part of spectatorship" in performances like this, "in part because the dance exhibition emerged (and flourished) at precisely the same moment that our lives became dominated by ubiquitous portable technology." But, as undoubtably Instagrammable as Hassabi's work is, it's also not Instagrammable at all: It's about duration, presence, co-presence, demanding a concentration almost paradoxical for a museum. Only for those who muster that attention does the image become a performance – or remain a snapshot that says little about the whole.

This is true even for an artist who has declared self-promotion and extensive use of social media an integral part of his work: Ivo Dimchev (*1976), a Bulgarian performance polymath who not only posts his own image to excess, but encourages his guests to do the same, even during his shows.

Dimchev's virtuosity is opposite Pirici's and Hassabi's: Lacking absolutely in discretion, it is direct, extroverted, queer, and shrill, his stage persona and private person as inseparable as the performer seems from his audience. In The *P-project* (2012), he sat in drag at a piano, improvising songs on texts written live by audience members and asking volunteers to come on stage and perform for payment – dance, sex, a song, whatever. The concert performance *Sculptures* (2018) went even further, inviting its entire audience onstage. Dimchev's mixture of thirst for visibility and great singer-songwriter talent took him all the way to the British casting show *The X-Factor* (2004–18), where jurist Robbie Williams confessed before a divided audience: "I couldn't take my eyes off you."

In *Selfie Concert* (2018), Dimchev takes Bennett and Sehgal to the extreme. Observing that live sets are often viewed exclusively through the screens of recording phones, Dimchev reversed the performative flow of instant mediatization, only performing as long as at least one audience member stood nearby and filmed him.

And yet, the actual situation is not what ends up on Instagram or TikTok; the medium is not the message. Despite his fascination with image feeds, dating apps, and television fame, Dimchev is an analogue romantic: During Covid lockdowns, he performed no fewer than four hundred concerts in private homes in Bulgaria, Istanbul, New York, and Los Angeles. Being a star and a guest at once, he refused the online song-and-dance numbers that flattened so many his peers. His desire was not to Zoom, but for direct, unmediated encounter – even if they had to be with a three-meter distance and a mask.

Artists of the first performative turn in the 1960s and 70s emphasized over and over again liveness and the presence of their audiences as witnesses. All too often, though, such claims were only half-truths at best: Much of this work was immaterially live only for the brief moment before being congealed into objects. Artists as well as their gallerists have taken much care to ensure that the supposedly ephemeral aspect of such works should not be to their authors' financial and historical disadvantage, and have elevated documentations to the status of artifacts. The photos of the performances by Marina Abramović and Ulay are only the most prominent examples; even the careless-looking film fragments of Chris Burden's *Shoot* (1971) camouflage themselves as proofs of the artist's being shot, when in fact they merely feed off the aura of the real, planned from the beginning as standalone artworks. The performance was necessary, but hardly Burden's main goal.

The protagonists of the choreographic turn have a different focus: They are and stay in the here and now, together with us in one space, one time. The precariousness of the living bodies in the museum space is the precariousness of life – when it's over, it's over. —

In their performances, discourse and language themselves become choreography.

ALEXANDRA PIRICI (*1982, Bucharest) is an artist and trained dancer living in Bucharest. Recent solo exhibitions and performances took place at Hamburger Bahnhof, Berlin; San Francisco Museum of Modern Art (both 2024); Renaissance Society, Chicago (2023); Staatliche Kunsthalle Baden Baden (2021). Recent group shows include the 59th International Art Exhibition of La Biennale di Venezia (2022); 5th Skulptur Projekte, Münster (2017); and 9th Berlin Biennale (2016).

MARIA HASSABI (*1973, Nicosia, Cyprus) is an artist and choreographer living in New York and Athens. Recent solo exhibitions and performances took place at Tai Kwun Contemporary, Hong Kong (2023); LUMA Arles (2022); Secession, Vienna (2021). Her works have also been featured in the group exhibitions and festivals FRONT Triennial, Cleveland; HELLERAU Theater Festival, Dresden (both 2022); Tanz Bozen, Museion, Bolzano; River to River Festival, NY (both 2021).

IVO DIMCHEV (*1976, Sofia) is a theater-maker, choreographer, visual artist, singer-songwriter, and queer activist living in Vienna. He has recently performed at Hebbel am Ufer, Berlin; ImPulsTanz, Vienna; La MaMa Experimental Theatre Club, New York; Kampnagel, Hamburg; Kunstmuseum Basel; and Shedhalle Zürich (all 2024).

FLORIAN MALZACHER is a curator, writer, and dramaturg, as well as the host of the nomadic lecture series "The Art of Assembly." He lives in Berlin.