

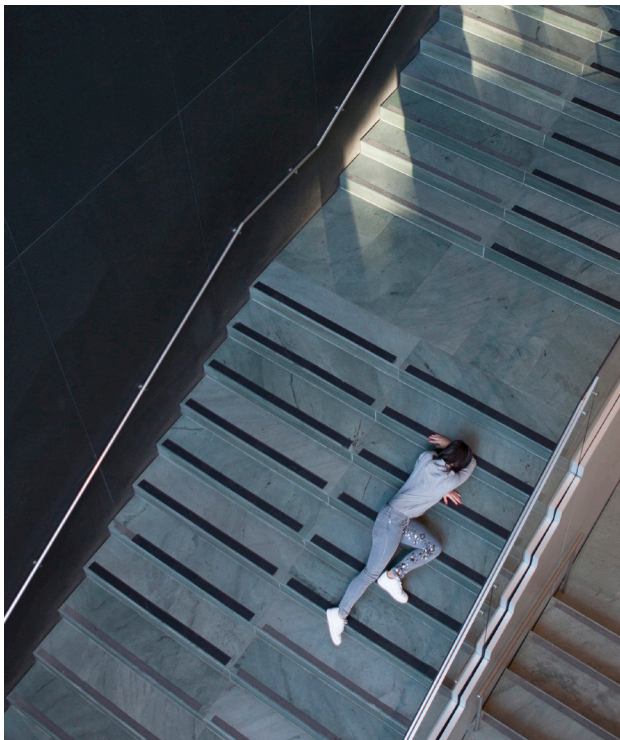
When first taking account of Maria Hassabi's *PLASTIC* (2015), audiences might initially reconsider just what it means to *perform*. For during the past decade, the production and reception of performance has radically shifted, if only by virtue of performance's increasingly prominent role within museums, galleries, and alternative spaces usually reserved for visual art—where it is set among aestheticized objects and images, frequently becoming subject to a subtle pictorialization. Contrary to performance's framing in recent art history as a discipline revolving around ephemeral events and actions executed in the immediate presence of audience members, performance in the contemporary context (and, more specifically, in the white cube) often remains at a quiet remove, even when a performer is ostensibly within arm's reach. In other words, performance is something primarily to be *seen* rather than *encountered*. And this imagistic quality has only been amplified as performances in museums and galleries are often oriented toward other moments in time, either modeled after photographic documentation of performances from the past—obtaining, in effect, the virtual sensibility of a picture rendered in space—or anticipating their

own photographic reproduction and circulation as so many images in turn.<sup>1</sup>

Such shifts in how performance is put forward as a medium have necessitated a shift in even the most basic language for how performance is evaluated in art today: To *perform* within the context of contemporary art is to embrace a contradiction—between object and image, and between singular and circulated event—that is only now being recognized and urgently engaged as such by a new generation of artists and their audiences.

Amid this ambiguous backdrop, Maria Hassabi's practice is remarkably resonant. Known for choreographies whose fantastically slow unfolding heightens such changing relationships between corporeality and pictorialism, Hassabi reflexively places herself at the very interstice of our competing understandings of performance today. In a 2015 artist's statement, she goes so far as to acknowledge explicitly that her work is “centered on the relation of body to image..., draw[ing] its strength from the tension between the human subject and the artistic object,” with her performers (who work close to the ground) assuming “an uncanny sculptural quality....”<sup>2</sup> Accordingly, even when Hassabi is working in an explicitly theatrical setting, she is apt to use titles such as *SHOW*—emphasizing the moment of presentation and display inextricably bound to the beginning of any temporal arc onstage—while nevertheless destabilizing conventional demarcations of performer and viewer, underscoring the physical reality bound within any constructed illusion. Looking at photographic documentation of *SHOW*, for example, one finds Hassabi and her partner, dancer Hristoula Harakas, nearly entwined with one another, surrounded by a tightly packed crowd of audience members who clearly share not only the stage but also the production's demanding physical parameters. Just as the dancers are contorted on the floor, executing only the most minute actions, so the audience must labor to be perfectly still and attentive, effectively mirroring such action in a minor mode, inevitably becoming aware of their own physical positioning. Gravity and pressure points—and even boredom—register palpably, in both musculature and mind. The audience assumes a material presence, both for itself and within the larger scope of Hassabi's work.

The implications of this audience engagement along such visual and corporeal axes are all the more provocative given that Hassabi is among the few choreographers today who regularly shuttles between theater and gallery contexts, even presenting the same works (to say nothing of the same choreographic modes) in these different settings. Such restaging inevitably provides Hassabi's various works with different valences, putting on display not only different



Maria Hassabi. *PLASTIC*. 2015. Rehearsal, The Museum of Modern Art, October 30, 2015. Performer: Hristoula Harakas. Photograph © 2016 The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Photo: Julieta Cervantes

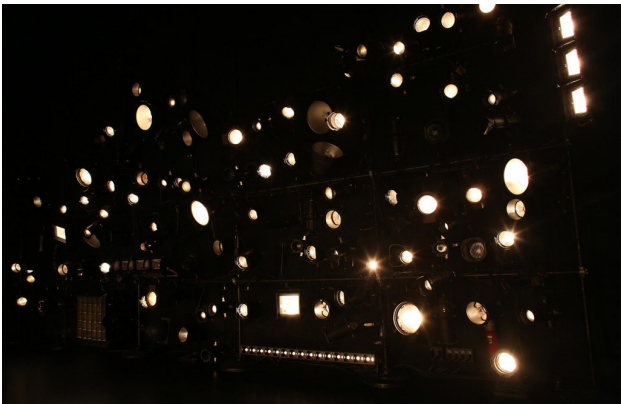
aspects of her practice but also the different effects produced by varying institutional settings and their distinct protocols. To offer the plainest explanation here: audiences in galleries are typically mobile—with viewing hours allowing for sporadic visits to the performance space—whereas those in theaters are often seated for a specific duration, which subsequently creates a kind of parallel, if distinct, experience for performer and viewers. So it is that *SHOW* would (after its premiere at The Kitchen in New York) be presented at Antwerp's Middelheim Museum and Kunsthall Oslo, among other venues, where audiences could easily circumnavigate cool, open gallery spaces, able to contemplate the dancers more in passing and with a kind of intellectual detachment. By contrast, the same work in its theatrical version, while retaining the stuff of images, still harbors one material element that cannot be reproduced: those who experienced *this* work in person will recall the room's gradually increasing temperature, with the work's intense lighting generating enough heat to make the space nearly suffocating. Just as the body was no longer transparent for audiences in this situation, so the physical apparatus of the theater itself (bodily positioning writ large) became apparent not through deconstruction but instead through heightened intensity.

This underscores a crucial transition in choreography—and even suggests an outright inversion of its terms—during the past half century. Consider how Hassabi's choreography evokes, for many critics

of her work, the example of legendary choreographer Steve Paxton, whose proposition of “small dance” during the 1970s revolved around the premise of dancers doing nothing more than standing. The model suggests choreography composed simply of what the structural scaffolding behind physiognomy (skeleton and tissue, here in dialogue with the pull of gravity) allows. And indeed, seen through the prism of such work, Hassabi's choreographic practice may also be said to gravitate to and put forward a set of material possibilities—for example, the body as a structural scaffold. Yet integral to her work is an acknowledgment of how such an analysis, and premise, also demands some expansion of scope to include considerations of the physical stage, which after all corresponds with any bodies set there—and which, more specifically, operates as a mechanism determining the conditions by which any body might be rendered visible. Put another way, the elemental visage of Hassabi's object is necessarily in dialogue with its frame. The body is inseparable from its look, and therefore historical questions of the body necessarily extend to the very rendering of its image. (To borrow a Kantianism, she forces an institutional consideration of what makes a body an object of possible experience.) In this respect, as Hassabi speaks of the lighting for another work, *PREMIERE*, which consisted of an amazing array of can lights installed as a nearly blinding wall on one side of her dance, she remarks,



Maria Hassabi. *SHOW*. 2011. Performed at Le Mouvement: Performing the City, Biel, Switzerland, August 26–31, 2014. Performers: Hristoula Harakas and Maria Hassabi. Courtesy the artist. Photo: Alex Safari Kangangi



Maria Hassabi. *PREMIERE*. 2013. Performed as part of *Performa 13*, The Kitchen, New York, November 6–9, 2013. Courtesy the artist. Photo: Paula Court

It isn't something deep and mysterious that changes the tone of the space and gives it an artificial effect. Instead it is prominent in your vision—it's almost like another performing body in the space. Because I like to insist the word "theater" means seeing-place, the lights are very important as what enables us to see.<sup>3</sup>

In fact, the foregrounding of such institutional conditions for visibility pervade Hassabi's work, whether taking the shape of an array of low-standing fixtures set along the stage's perimeter in *SHOW* (2011) or a group of such lights at center stage (with their power cords winding toward every wall offstage) in the previous year's *Robert & Maria* (2010)—in which the artist and fellow dancer Robert Steijn simply stared into each other's eyes. And yet even here body and architecture operate in parallel; as if to contradict again the primacy of images, the physical mechanism for seeing became apparent as each dancer's tear ducts began welling up.

A question remains, however, as to how far to extend such a grasp of the body, and in this regard it seems noteworthy that—however much Hassabi's exacting physicality elicits profound reactions in its moment of enactment—the conditions of visibility for certain of her works are steeped in cultural source material pulled from a broad history of images that includes art, fashion, sports, music videos, and magazine editorials. For example, *SoloShow* (2009) incorporated movements and poses based on representations of women in spheres from fine art and classical dance to popular media and athletic competition. Such occasions suggest that Hassabi's work navigates a significantly broader institutional ground. For her, choreography in these instances adopts a cyclical mode with respect to mediation, moving from image to body to image again—realizing material from pictures in bodily form, yet intentionally

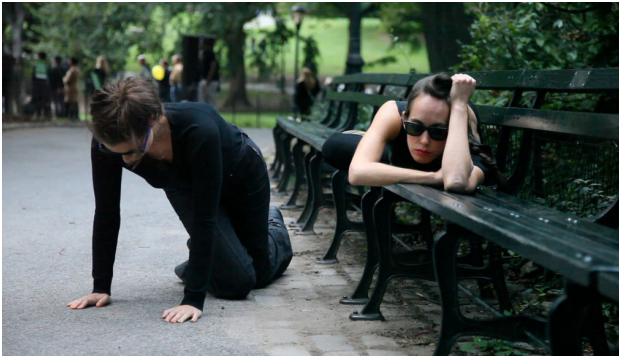
and self-consciously retaining this pictorial quality in space. In this vein, Hassabi's movement—and, as intriguingly, her stated allusion to *sculptural* form in dance—offers a compelling turn on appropriation work by artists in the late 1970s and early 1980s. (Perhaps this should come as no surprise. As was the case for artists from Dara Birnbaum to Cindy Sherman, Hassabi engages questions of representation only while using media as a material—as when, for instance, she clads her dancers in apparel designed by the contemporary fashion mainstay threeASFOUR.)

Consider Hassabi's extended contortions in choreography alongside Robert Longo's *Men in the Cities* (1979)—a series of distended figure studies that began with a single sculptural wall frieze based on a still from Rainer Werner Fassbinder's *The American Soldier*. This original piece, which was later rendered by the artist as a charcoal drawing, features a man whose arched back and tossed-back head denote the moment of his death by shooting. As described by art historian Douglas Crimp, who included the frieze in his legendary 1977 *Pictures* exhibition, Longo's work captured a move in cinema from the long take to the freeze frame. This technical shift allowed the artist to register a kind of "shock" whose temporality determined the work's hybrid nature. As Crimp writes, "Longo suspends the moment between life and death in the ambiguous stasis of a picture. And the odd result is this picture/object has all the elegance of a dance."<sup>4</sup> One may well suggest that the converse is true for Hassabi. As the artist reintroduces extended time—or the "long take"—in her work, her dance assumes all the elegance of a picture/object with complete self-awareness. Intriguingly, Crimp's perspective on Longo's hybrid image/object seems to correspond across the decades with art historian Hal Foster's more recent description of contemporary performance in the gallery setting as something "not quite alive, not quite dead"—with the implication being that Hassabi reanimates, or dramatizes anew, the attending stakes.<sup>5</sup>



Robert Longo. *Untitled (Men in the Cities)*. 1979/2009. Set of three black-and-white photos, 20 × 16" (50.8 × 40.6 cm). Courtesy of the artist and Metro Pictures, New York





Maria Hassabi. Still from *The Ladies*. 2011. Video (color, sound), 10 min. Performers: Rebecca Brooks and Biba Bell. Courtesy the artist

Notably, Longo's work was interpreted by some critics as having captured the stress exerted by contemporary capitalism on human subjectivity—and here again one may consider how Hassabi's work transposes such concerns for another era. Especially telling is how Hassabi's specific attention to temporality—and its material effect—has been remarked on by her own dancers. (When it comes to establishing such ties between material and temporality, Hassabi herself has gone so far as to cite theorist Paul Virilio's adage that form is but a "technical pursuit of time," which is all the more provocative for Hassabi's work given her critical combinations of image and object.<sup>6</sup>) For example, in Hassabi's 2011 video *The Ladies*—a short piece featuring two female dancers executing pared-down movements in public settings such as midtown sidewalks and The Museum of Modern Art's garden—the artist takes Longo's figures offstage, out of the gallery, and back into the city as allegorized through images of its streets and public squares. In the former case, per the account of one of Hassabi's collaborators, Biba Bell, the performance—by virtue of establishing cadences distinctly at odds with those of the urban fabric surrounding them—rendered habitual behaviors newly and immediately visible, suggesting how the architecture (both physical and structural) modeled behaviors.<sup>7</sup> In fact, this dialogue was made all the more palpable by virtue of Hassabi's work having made that real landscape scenographic.

*The Ladies* is incredibly pertinent for considering *PLASTIC*, particularly as it is situated in a museum context. On first consideration, *PLASTIC* summons so many other critical maneuvers of performance within sponsoring institutions in the past: figures occupy and move throughout its public spaces, whether stairwell, hallway, or atrium, and whether those areas are meant for circulation of contemplation. And, in fact, as Hassabi's dancers reside in these areas, audiences are newly cognizant—and forced out of—their paths, caught between the acts of looking and navigating.

In turn, audiences will be apt to become newly cognizant of, and potentially alter, their physical paths and cultural behaviors. A museum visitor will have to step to the side of a body lying down across so many steps, for example. The social dimension of such a tension between object- and subject-hood—or better, of a figure that is at once an aesthetic figure and laborer—will be difficult, if nevertheless incisive, when it comes to the conditions of visibility in society more broadly speaking.

This last aspect of Hassabi's work asks us to consider the recounted experience of another dancer, Harakas, whose execution of Hassabi's slow-moving choreography in *SHOW* has been described as a sequence of connections made and released among dancers, with one encounter giving way to the next.<sup>8</sup> Her words suggest a vastly changed idea of choreographic production (and sequence) and, in fact, bear an uncanny resemblance to philosopher Paolo Virno's model for economic structures after networked communication. Saying the workplace is a "virtuosic" sphere, Virno claims that the character of performance—a mode of communication among individuals where ostensibly nothing is produced but itself—is now germane to daily life.<sup>9</sup> (To wit, Steve Paxton's plain, everyday life as denoted in dance during the 1970s is not our life lived today.<sup>10</sup>) In other words, communication in the contemporary cultural sphere is often valued in its own right; and it is, further, communication for the purpose of generating more communication in turn that is valued most. By such a measure, in Hassabi's work one finds Virno's conceit of the post-Fordist *virtuosic* realized in form. The activity of performance, as he writes on the term and its new relevance for general culture,

*is an activity which finds its own fulfillment (that is, its own purpose) in itself, without objectifying itself into an end product, without settling into a "finished product," or into an object which would survive the performance. Secondly, it is an activity which requires the presence of others, which exists only in the presence of an audience.*<sup>11</sup>

And such form inevitably inflects its surroundings: viewers will pass through constellations of figures whose very stillness is apt to suggest those anonymous figures set within architectural renderings of proposed museum spaces just in order to give a sense of scale—such that the artifice of the viewing experience itself becomes apparent through this sense of such a space having been rendered. Her "long take" in real space renders the behavior of audiences within the museum's frame a kind of image/object in itself.<sup>12</sup>

This same stillness—which gives rise to a dance with the elegance of an image/object, to turn Crimp's words again—marks a decided shift from artistic projects engaging museums in previous decades. Indeed, whereas such previous critical endeavors were



Maria Hassabi. *INTERMISSION*. 2013. Performed in Phanos Kyriacou's *Eleven hosts, twenty-one guests, nine ghosts* (2013) and Gabriel Lester's *Cousin* (2013), Cypriot and Lithuanian Pavilion, 55th Venice Biennale, May 28–June 4, 2013. Courtesy the artist. Photo: Robertas Narkus

often termed *interventions*—as they grappled with the structures of a given institution in order to reveal how they administrate meaning and, by extension, power—Hassabi's work presents an alternative model of *intermission*. A title for a similar performance work Hassabi executed for the Lithuania/Cyprus pavilion as part of the 2013 Venice Biennale, *INTERMISSION*, is especially telling in this respect. Set in a gymnasium near the city's Arsenale hall, the exhibition consisted of sculptural installations from numerous artists, in the midst of which Hassabi's dancers performed—eluding at first glance any neat categorization of performer, spectator, or pedestrian, but coming into focus as choreographed figures as time passed and, more specifically, as their stillness established a parenthetical contrast in space with the tempo of visitors to the surrounding biennial. Indeed, Hassabi's alternate temporality does not orient viewers to any chronological moment before or after the performance. Instead, the shift takes place within the specific context.

Hassabi's critical mode, which looks more to structures of visibility than to those of signification, is most enigmatic and potentially provocative in her foray into *PLASTIC*'s occupation of MoMA's atrium: painting some of the museum walls gray—implicitly asking

audiences to consider changed circumstances for performance by creating a space that is neither black box nor white cube—Hassabi also installs furniture from the museum's public spaces in the atrium. This displacement also calls attention to an altered landscape for viewership when it comes to performance in the museum, which increasingly employs experience-based artwork in order to attract an ever-larger public for whom performance, as Virno would have it, is the language of our day. Even the vicariousness of lived experience in hybrid settings, in which, say, work and leisure are never entirely distinct—or where leisure and its particular mode of attention and distraction are even the stuff of industry—are uniquely implicated.<sup>13</sup> Here, the museum system itself seems on display as an aesthetic object. Indeed, in a sense, Hassabi here literalizes the contradiction of performance as an image and object—with a gray lounge set within a white cube, and the dancer a stand-in for the audience member, both beholding architecture and enacting a choreography. In this respect, *PLASTIC* then underlines how not only the artwork but also the audience is produced by institutional frames and the protocols of space—and Hassabi prompts audiences to picture themselves within the dance at hand.

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- 1 If one wished to bookend such a development during the past 10 years, a revolutionary beginning would be offered by Marina Abramović's *Seven Easy Pieces* at the Guggenheim Museum in 2006 and, subsequently, the artist's survey at The Museum of Modern Art, for which she transposed historical works for the contemporary setting. Regarding the former project, see Johanna Burton, "Repeat Performance," *Artforum* (January 2006), 55–56, in which the author describes how the artist's reenactments were "sophisticated holograms, both present and past, fact and fiction." The latter work was notable for rendering work from previous decades more explicitly pictorial, with the exhibition placing performers, whether standing or set within dioramas, "in the same gallery but not in the same social space as audiences"—as I wrote at the time—marking a turn among institutional presentations of performance-based and participatory artwork. See my "Postscript: The Museum Revisited," *Artforum* (Summer 2010), 330. Visual artists have more recently frequently taken up such changed terms for performance-based work. For example, Elad Lassry's *Presence*, in 2012 at The Kitchen, sought to present a work reflexively as a picture, inverting his stated desire—regarding his more widely known photographs—to make pictures into sculptural objects. As a matter of anecdote, it seems noteworthy that Lassry's efforts in this regard were modeled after the example of Charles Atlas, whose videos of choreographers do not merely document work but effectively transpose their form for another medium. Such an interstitial quality seems especially worth revisiting when contemplating our current moment.
- 2 Maria Hassabi, "Artist Statement," unpublished (New York, 2015), p. 3.
- 3 Lauren Bakst, "Scott Lyall and Maria Hassabi," *Bomb* (February 11, 2014). See <http://bombmagazine.org/article/1000022/scott-lyall-and-maria-hassabi>. Accessed on February 16, 2016.
- 4 Douglas Crimp, *Pictures*, exh. cat. (New York: Artists Space, 1977), p. 26.
- 5 Hal Foster, "In Praise of Actuality," *Bad New Days* (New York: Verso, 2015), p. 127.
- 6 It is noteworthy that another prominent choreographer of our day, Ralph Lemon, who is similarly grappling with the museum context, has pointed to the same quote from the philosopher. See James Hannaham, "Ralph Lemon," *Bomb*, <http://bombmagazine.org/article/6615/ralph-lemon>. Accessed February 10, 2016.
- 7 Biba Bell, "Slow Work: Dance's temporal effort in the visual sphere," *Performance Research* (Vol. 19, issue 3), pp. 129–134.
- 8 Writing on the structure of this work as laid out by Hassabi in conversation, author Jenn Joy suggests that such discrete sequences of connections extend from performers to audience as well. See Jenn Joy, "Dear N1," *Danse: An Anthology*, Noémie Solomon, ed. (Lyon: Les presses du réel, 2013), pp. 225–27.
- 9 Paolo Virno, "Day Two: Labor, Action, Intellect," *A Grammar of the Multitude* (New York: Semiotext(e), 2004), pp. 47–72. Although Virno's proposition is by now very familiar, its potential correspondence with real artistic compositional technique is perhaps becoming legible only in more recent years.
- 10 At the same time, one should note that performance is actively in dialogue with its cultural moment. If Hassabi's work renders visible a specific kind of social and institutional sphere in her work, the same could be said of, say, Vito Acconci's *Proximity Piece* (1970), as his performance implicates audiences' intuitive and acculturated understanding of personal space.
- 11 Virno, 52 (emphasis in the original).
- 12 At the risk of taking this premise a bridge too far, one may speculate that the "fictive" element in performance—and the scenographic context—also correlates with a rising sense of inauthenticity within the discipline. If authenticity was once partly measured by a particular, reflexive resistance to commercial forces and commodification, then what happens to the figures and models of resistance—the very parlance of performance in previous decades—when they become a basis for economic exchange in their own right?
- 13 Significantly, for an earlier presentation of the work at the UCLA Hammer Museum, Hassabi painted the typically white gallery walls a theatrical black, adorned one wall with stage lighting, carpeted the gallery floor and, at the center of the room, placed a large seat cushion occasionally used for repose by a single dancer.