

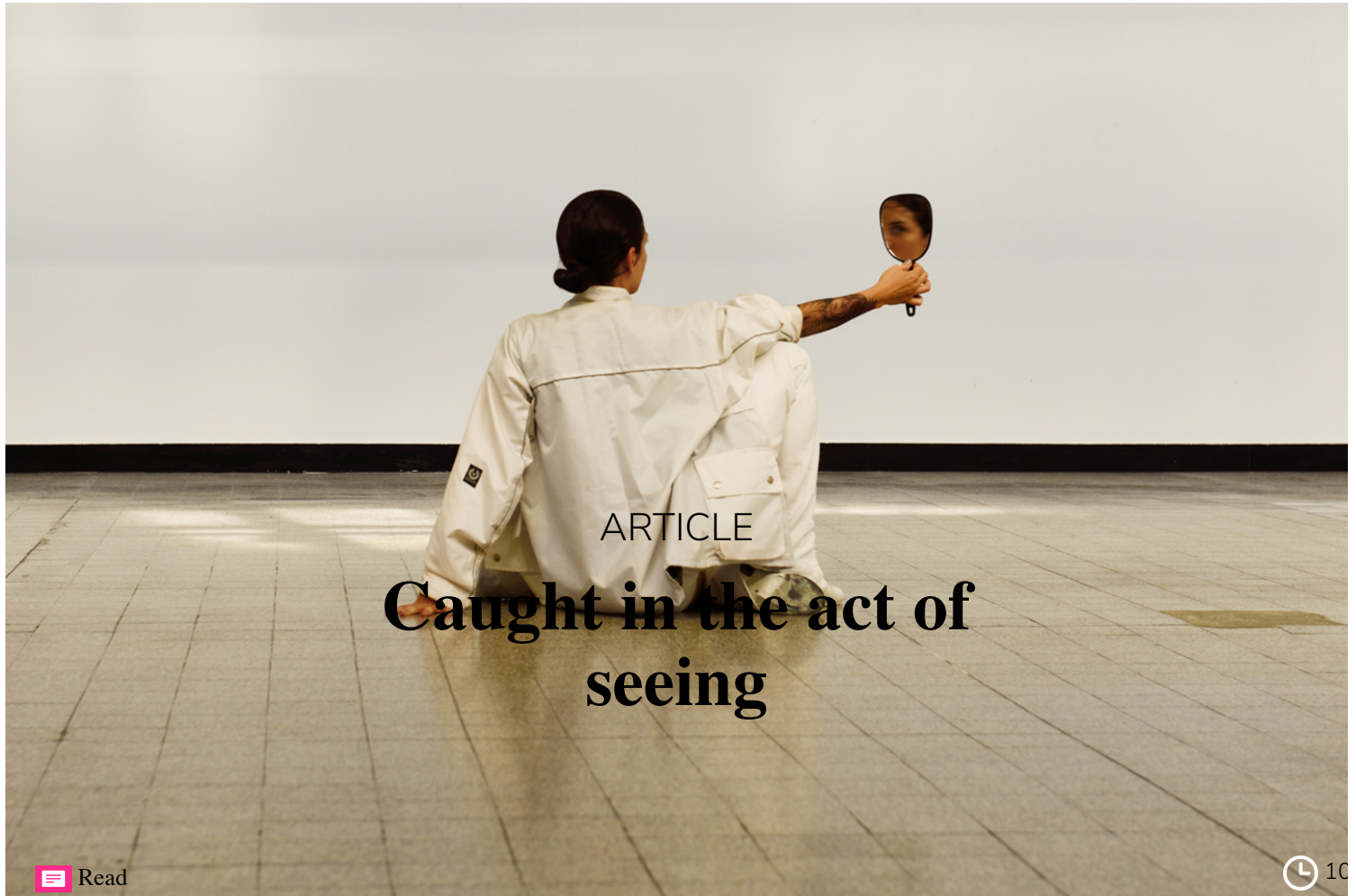
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Lenio Kaklea, A Hand's Turn. Photo: © Arya Dil



[Anastasio Koukoutas \(https://springbackmagazine.com/author/anastasiokoukoutas/\)](https://springbackmagazine.com/author/anastasiokoukoutas/)

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Look, then look again. Anastasio Koukoutas on altering visions
in three contemporary dance pieces from Greece



John Berger, the art critic who renewed our 'ways of seeing' (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0pDE4VX_9Kk), once remarked, 'Like God, the viewer is unseen.' If performing arts and dance evolved around our gaze, and its power to behold and to objectify, what happens when that gaze is questioned? After all, dance broke the proscenium arch long ago, bringing performers and audience closer, questioning our ways of seeing, and suggesting a total sensory immersion or even audience participation in the staged action. As we are introduced to a plurality of visions on stage, we need once again to reconfigure the position of the one who sees. Is that still God-like?

Here's an example: picture – yes, again, image prevails – five dancers with vividly coloured costumes, performing, in slow motion, a sequence of movements on a bright pink carpet. The audience is seated around the periphery. Those familiar with [Maria Hassabi](http://mariahassabi.com/work/staged/) (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0pDE4VX_9Kk)'s work may have already got the picture: the sculptural presence of the bodies, the unfamiliar sense of being physically close to a staged performance yet faintly detached. In *Staged* (<http://mariahassabi.com/work/staged/>), Hassabi and her performers are more than physically engaged with the slow rhythm of the movement: their unnatural pace suggests an altered state of consciousness, inviting us also to alter our perception of the performed movement. We tend to 'see' movement as an infinity of variations in time and space, abrupt changes of rhythm, drastic shifts between areas of focus. However, in Hassabi's work, the notion of time is so expanded and the space so limited – the dancers barely shift on stage, their bodies surrender to gravity, creating a palpable density in the choreographed action – that we ask ourselves: what is there to see?



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What is there to see? Maria Hassabi's *Staged*. © Andreas Simopoulos for Onassis Stegi

Staged is not about the illusion of stillness or a whimsical trick of slow-motion dance. If our gaze is trained to grasp things moving or altering relations in space, it is also trained to frame perceived action in slices of duration. Here, duration is so extended that it not only blurs the traces of movement but challenges the very notion of movement as inner compulsion and externalisation of the self. Failing to distinguish between moving and expressing movement, we are left questioning the central tenet of our perception: what do these bodies generate in time?

If movement is not evidence of the self trying to articulate something in a given duration, what are we invited to see? *Staged* makes evident that seeing is not entirely comprised of (what remains) visible: by prioritising duration over space, our gaze is invited to withdraw and allow us to really 'attend' the show, to immerse in a time continuum. You can explore what's at stake yourself: try make an ordinary movement, which would only take a second to complete, last a couple of minutes. Your attention is heightened, processing the details and nuances of the action, but the bodily sensations caused by this slow-motion task are inscribed in time rather than projected as 'visible marks' in space. Your body is no longer about representing yourself. Movement is liberated from expression.

This separation of cause (the self) and effect (movement) is also approached rigorously in [Lenio Kaklea](http://www.phenomenon.fr/lenio-kaklea.html) (<http://www.phenomenon.fr/lenio-kaklea.html>)'s *A Hand's Turn* (<http://www.abd-contents.com/choreography/ahandsturn.php>), a solo for two spectators at a time. In a room

which balances the sterile environment of a laboratory and the casual privacy of an artist's studio, the choreographer/performer sits behind a desk, facing her audience, ready to start acquainting herself with us through a series of questions: 'Do you remember that scene from the movie?', 'Do you recall this or that?' and so on. What is being examined is not our answers but we, as individuals, who give those answers, who converse daily exchanging data. It is daunting to realise that this data forms cultural patterns that can verify or deny social convention.

Kaklea focuses on two body parts, each with its own distinct value: hands for practicality, and the face as the fortress of one's identity. Hands have also been imbued with moral values historically, the right hand prioritised and the left hand denigrated (<http://www.abd-contents.com/choreography/ahandsturn.php>). Following Kaklea's hands as they turn the pages from two stacks of paper placed on the desk, our gaze is gradually fixed on their mechanical, rhythmic movement while fleetly scanning the contents of each page. These are strictly divided between left and right: phrases like 'I shake hands with the right' and 'Vote with the right' are printed on pages on our right, while 'They say left foot first would bring bad luck' or 'In Goya's painting his head leans on the left' are on pages on our left. Kaklea deliberately over-states this right/left orientation to strengthen the action that follows.

As she stands up and starts dancing we are reminded that the body is also frequently a field of dichotomies. Kaklea accentuates this approach with her sexy clothing and striptease-like movements. She dances with her back to us, and a small hand mirror on a tripod allows us to see sporadically our own reflection. While her body is dancing to our right, our gaze is firmly on the mirror, in the image that looks back from our left. However, when she takes the mirror in her hands the game becomes even more complex: sometimes it's us who look through the mirror and sometimes it's her own image. The paradox is that her body remains detached from her face, making the body an interlocutor in this weird transaction. That her body is offered as feminised and objectified with her/our face visible only from certain angles, reverses the rules of the vanishing point, of the vantage to see without being looked at, or even the 'worst' case scenario: to be looked at without knowing that you are seen.

By dichotomising face and body, the performer is dislocating desire, making this disjunction literal. With her workmanlike impassivity – so ably mastered by professional striptease artists – Kaklea offers her body but also confirms that the human face 'does not know nudity, because it is always naked' (Giorgio Agamben (<https://egs.edu/faculty/giorgio-agamben/>)). Kaklea brings us face to face with an ethical question: by exercising our freedom to choose between her face and her body, we soon realise that our freedom is a guilty one, for it disregards the priority of the face, which in some cases may include our own image. By reversing our desire to behold, the performer obliges us to see mainly what she allows: her gaze towards us.



Kiriakos Hadjioannou's *Erotikon* Photo © Elina Giounanli for Onassis Stegi

Kiriakos Hadjioannou (<http://www.kiriakoshadjioannou.com/>)'s *Erotikon* (<http://www.kiriakoshadjioannou.com/erotikon-higher-states-part-3>) invites us to immerse ourselves in the idea of cruising, to be guided by our senses and not primarily by our gaze. As we enter the space, dimly lit and filled with smoke, a cube centre-stage pulsates in red. Inside it, four performers converse and exchange opinions on dating, fast loving, offering yourself as a sex buddy and the rare, yet real, feeling of *eros* (<http://www.kiriakoshadjioannou.com/erotikon-higher-states-part-3>). The audience surrounds this atypical dark room and peers through the blinds. This reaction has a consequence: as we sneak peeks through the slats we are caught in the act of seeing by other audience members. In meeting that gaze, we recognise ourselves looking, realising we are both exposed as bodies and as gazes. At some point the blinds open, two performers exit and blindfold each other. They move around us, almost touching us, heightening our responsibility to see for those who are blindfolded.

In *Erotikon*, seeing is a game of refractions, either through the blinds or through the gaze of another. The very performative nature of seeing becomes visible. The audience soon realises that there's no vanishing point to which they might escape, and if 'the trap of the visual field is that it promises to show all' – as Peggy Phelan once stated – then this field includes us all. Our points of view are exposed as the performers go in and out of the cube, shaping it with their actions, making it an orifice of desire while inviting us to look closer. An intimate act of entanglement between two male bodies, a dinner for two which ends with the Cartesian

observations of the passions of the soul, a threesome of trembling bodies, all actions taking place within the vanishing walls of the cube –as the cube slowly folds– remind us that we are part of the picture. Once outside the image, our point of view has been placed within it.

These works all propose a resistance against stereotypical ways of looking, of performing the gaze, reminding us at the same time of its cultural value and how it has been shaped in centuries of making art. Reversing this paradigm is not an easy task: more than an aesthetic choice, it also reveals the power of the looker, the 'natural' feeling of just seeing what is there to see. However, the stage is an apparatus through which identities are constructed, verified and performed. To see differently requires not only seeing 'outside the box', but also admitting our privilege of being in the position to see, to value and to understand. But since understanding remains an irresolvable situation between two parts, we ought to admit our (occasional) blindness to what is revealed through seeing. •



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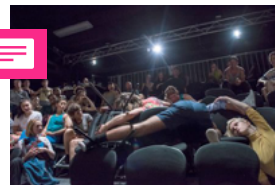


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Anastasio Koukoutas



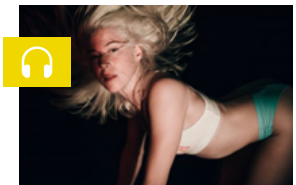
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