



Dance

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A Feminine Dance Work, Made 'in a Very Brutal Way'



Alexandra Bachzetsis at the Museum of Modern Art, where "Massacre: Variations on a Theme" is showing.
BENJAMIN NORMAN FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES

By SIOBHAN BURKE

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"I can't believe it's happening," the choreographer [Alexandra Bachzetsis](#) said on a recent afternoon, gazing up at the vast white walls of the Marron Atrium, one of the busiest spaces at the Museum of Modern Art.

For the first time, Ms. Bachzetsis was seeing parts of her new work, "[Massacre: Variations on a Theme](#)," on the scale she had envisioned. Two video projections, each taking up the width of nearly a whole wall, showed subtly violent scenes: A woman thrashed on the floor of a cardboard-padded room; another woman straddled a mirror, her bare legs inscribed with what looked like the stitching of skintight jeans; a grand piano played itself, producing an ominous looping refrain.

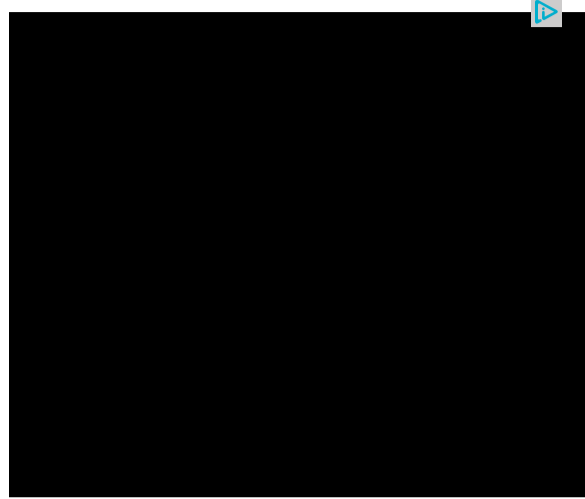
"Massacre," on view through Jan. 31, is a video installation by day and, on select nights after museum hours, a live performance. Each component stands on its own — you don't have to see the installation to appreciate the performance, and vice versa — though they deal with similar themes, what Ms. Bachzetsis calls "excessive rituals" and "personal and collective nightmares."

Born in Zurich and now living in Athens, Ms. Bachzetsis, 42, danced with the Zurich Opera, the German choreographer Sasha Waltz and the Belgian troupe Les Ballets C de la B early in her career. Her own work, which often explores "the limitation of the feminine or the power of it," as she puts it, has toured extensively in Europe, at theaters and gallery spaces, but "Massacre" is only her second New York show. (The first was [at the Swiss Institute](#) in 2015.)

Created for the atrium at the invitation of Stuart Comer, chief curator in the Modern's department of media and performance art, "Massacre" grew out of her interest in "The Rite of Spring," the Vaslav Nijinsky's 1913 ballet to Stravinsky's pounding score. Though Ms. Bachzetsis never intended to create yet another adaptation of "Rite," "Massacre" possesses

something of that ballet's ruthlessness, in its furiously repetitive movement and its macabre original score by Tobias Koch.

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For the video (created with Glen Fogel) and the live performance (featuring three female dancers and two pianists), Ms. Bachzetsis researched ecstatic dance and movement — “the idea of sacrificing yourself or dancing yourself to death,” she said. These ranged from [Northern Soul](#), the craze born in 1970s northern England in response to American soul music, to the convulsive phenomenon known as tarantism, most common among women in southern Italy in the 16th and 17th centuries.

Ideas of phantom limbs, second skins and body distortions — the female body, in particular — also populate the work, taking cues from Dada and Surrealist imagery. “This is maybe the most feminine piece I’ve made, in a very brutal way,” Ms. Bachzetsis said. “I feel violence is so much part of what surrounds us and what we carry in the body.”

Over coffee near the museum, she discussed choreographing across disciplinary borders and near geographic ones ravaged by war. These are edited excerpts from the conversation.



A rehearsal for "Massacre," which is both an installation and a live performance.
ALEXANDRA BACHZETSIS

What's challenging about making work for the MoMA atrium?

It's huge. And it has a huge audience; it's crazy the amount of people that stream in and out every day. The sound [of people talking] is very dominant. And it's visible from many levels. But it's also magical. It has an amazing energy, almost ceremonial.

Do you think of yourself as working primarily in one discipline?

I'm more interested in finding the right language for something. I never wanted to situate myself here or there. It's more important to think "What does this idea need? What's the strongest way to develop it?" rather than "No matter what, make choreography" or "No matter what, make a film."

So you have to be well versed in many approaches.

Maybe. It's also a matter of looking for the right collaborations or partners or institutions. It's completely different to work with a theater on a commission versus a museum. It's interesting to have this dialogue with a context. Often I formulate a work both for the theater and visual-art context. "Massacre," for example, could tour as an exhibition or only as a stage piece.

Did "The Rite of Spring" interest you because of the female sacrifice — the Chosen One dancing herself to death?

Yes. I was always very fascinated and kind of terrified with that story, and I love the music, in particular the four-handed version for piano, which was created for the ballet studio, so

that the dancers could rehearse. It really carries both that fear and ambition to get lost or lose yourself.

One striking image in “Massacre” is the use of mirrors to bisect the body and reflect it back on itself. You mentioned that this is a reference to mirror therapy for phantom limbs. Where does this interest come from?

I find this fascinating, thinking about what if the body isn't there? Or what if what you think is your body is somewhere else? It became interesting to me in Athens, in both a symbolic and very direct way, from witnessing the amazing amount of refugees and people in the streets who have been completely displaced. When you live close to this direct impact of the problems of war, you're confronted with something very profound that's missing all the time. What do you do?

In a way, it feels completely ridiculous and redundant to make work that communicates about an idea of loss or displacement, because it's on such a meta level of relating to the thing. Should you abandon your family and go and work in a camp? What should you do?

Do you think your work can do something?

I don't feel that I'm an activist performance artist. I think work is always political. Or the body is political — what you achieve through your body and through other bodies. But I don't think it offers any straightforward solution. You can only hope that it makes some people think for themselves.

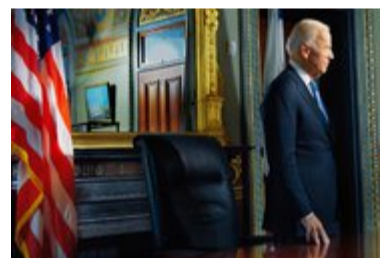
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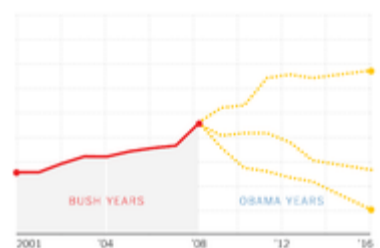


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