

KATE WERBLE GALLERY

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MAKING ART ONSTAGE NEAR ART ON THE WALLS

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Emilio Martinez Lopez on the lower level of the Whitney.

Choreographers are enamored of museums and art galleries, and while such envy can seem regressive, their outlook is certainly understandable. It's about wealth and sustainability, two obvious qualities dance will probably never achieve. Money is always in short supply, and there's no such thing as sustainability in dance; that elusiveness is what makes it so fascinating.

The battle between live art and its more profitable, stationary counterpart is the subject of a new work by Moving Theater. In "Impermanent Collection," performed at the [Whitney Museum of American Art](#) on Friday, the group's co-artistic directors, Brennan Gerard and Ryan Kelly, question the influence of a permanent collection on live art. Set in the museum's lower-level gift shop space, the production features five dancers who respond to a chosen piece of art from the museum's collection, as well as video portraits by the filmmaker Brock Labrenz and music, ranging from [Steve Reich](#) to Karlheinz Stockhausen, by the marvelous ICE, or International Contemporary Ensemble.

Each performer approaches the artwork differently. Natalie Thomas takes an overly literal approach to [Edward Hopper's](#) "Woman in the Sun," while Emilio Martinez Lopez, who chooses Ben Shahn's "Passion of Sacco and Vanzetti," offers introspective commentary to reveal the story behind the art.

In the opening solo Marion Ramirez discusses Lucas Samaras's "Small Chair 5" — a sculpture made of plaster and colored yarn — telling the crowd that in 10 minutes everyone will congregate at the elevator to see the actual artwork. (It was so difficult to find a decent seat that I saw an elegant man glance at his companion and shake his head, as if to say, "No way"; as it turns out, Ms. Ramirez's announcement is a hoax.)

In reference to "Small Chair 5," she confesses, "I know it sounds strange: it was barking at me." She ends up twisted and covered in strands of yarn herself (imagine Silly String), becoming, in a sense, the object itself, all the while yapping like a dog.

But the production is weakest in terms of its choreography. While some allowance must be made for the impossibly small stage, no such excuse can be applied to the larger outdoor courtyard, visible through the space's large windows. Here the movement, an assortment of dancers running and pressing their bodies against glass, is wholly generic.

The sightlines were terrible, and the chaotic performance seemed like a dress rehearsal. Yet despite this production's flaws, it is no coincidence that after the show many in the crowd were compelled to visit the actual artworks on the Whitney's exhibition floors. In this study, strangely enough, the echo of impermanence is what lasts.

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