

Sydney Morning Herald (Australia)

June 27, 2015 Saturday
First Edition

SECTION: SPECTRUM; Culture; Pg. 16

LENGTH: 1663 words

HEADLINE: Strangers in a strange land;
VISUAL ART

BYLINE: John McDonald

BODY:

The world's most famous performance artist celebrates the unfashionable power of slowness and silence.

MARINA ABRAMOVIC: PRIVATE ARCHAEOLOGY

MUSEUM OF OLD AND NEW ART, HOBART, UNTIL OCTOBER 5

MARINA ABRAMOVIC: IN RESIDENCE

KALDOR PUBLIC ART PROJECT 30, PIER 2/3, WALSH BAY, UNTIL JULY 5

"Life is too fast," says Marina Abramovic, "so art has to be slow." Perhaps fast art is no more nutritious than fast food? You'll notice the difference when visiting Marina Abramovic: In Residence, the latest Kaldor Public Art Project at Pier 2/3. Upon entering, watches and bags are deposited in a locker. After a series of breathing exercises, the visitor is equipped with a set of noise-cancelling headphones and ushered into a cavernous space devoted to six separate "exercises".

Stand still for a moment and you're approached by a black-clad facilitator who will take you gently by the hand and lead you to an exercise called Platform.

It's not hard to do: stand on a wooden platform with your eyes closed. There you may remain, statue-like, for five minutes or five hours, according to your predilections. Next up is Looking at Colour, which entails sitting on a chair, staring at a square of red, blue or yellow paper pinned to the wall. In Mutual Gaze you sit in a plywood booth and stare at a facilitator, who stares back at you. By then you may be feeling a little tired and be ready for Beds. A facilitator will lead you to a camp bed, put a blanket over you, and tuck you in.

Slow Walk allows you to make your way back towards the entrance at the rate of about one millimetre a minute, but you may wish to finish with Counting Rice. The title is a literal description of the exercise, and like every part of this event you can take as much time as you like.

Put these activities together and you arrive at the Abramovic Method - a miscellany of borrowings from different cultures and religions. It's not intended to be "spiritual", as Abramovic feels that word provokes too many negative reactions, but there's nothing to prevent the visitor from using such terminology. If anyone had a vision of the Blessed Virgin or the Buddha, that would be a distinct bonus.

Abramovic calls the experience "a brain spa". Every piece requires audience participation in order to be fully realised, although part of the interest is the spectacle of dozens of people engaging silently in these exercises.

For an artist known for feats of endurance and self-mortification, who calls herself a warrior ("it's so much more heroic"), Abramovic is lenient with her audience. She has said that her own performances were always based on things she found challenging or frightening, but visitors to Pier 2/3 will be asked to endure a lower level of psychic discomfort. There is no pain involved apart from twinges of acute self-consciousness.

Each piece is ridiculously simple but surprisingly hard to perform. To enter the space is to accept a degree of intimacy with a stranger that many people find disturbing. A visitor has to be prepared for an unknown person to come up and take them by the hand, let alone tuck them into bed. The most challenging part may be Mutual Gaze, which obliges the visitor to stare deeply into the eyes

of a facilitator who will sit as long as required.

Intimacy is an issue but duration is probably the biggest conundrum Abramovic sets her audience. How long should I spend standing on this platform? When can I open my eyes? How long do I spend lying on this bed when I'm not even sleepy? How slow is a slow walk? How big a pile of rice should I be counting?

Everyday life makes us purposeful in our movements. We are goal-directed at work, and even in our pastimes. We habitually think of life in terms of tasks to be accomplished.

All this has to be abandoned when we take part in this series of apparently meaningless rituals with no fixed time limits. One may get a sense of achievement from having successfully counted grains of rice, but nobody is going to applaud or give out medals. The only thing gained is the time to think and reflect. Each exercise represents an interval in which it's possible to learn something about ourselves.

You learn whether you are the kind of person who is capable of slowing down and spending time with these tasks. For someone like me, thinking always of deadlines, it's almost impossible to switch off and surrender to the experience. Yet it's not hard to imagine some visitors spending all day at Pier 2/3 and coming back for more. Many will see this event as a miraculous respite from the stresses of life.

If visitors stay for hours it means they have successfully immersed themselves in the Abramovic Method, although it may also mean long queues of frustrated people waiting at the door.

While lying on a camp bed or standing on a platform, spare a thought for the 12 young Australian performance artists who are living upstairs at Pier 2/3 for 12 days, sleeping in plywood cells, learning the arcane skills of the trade from mistress Abramovic. It may sound like an extended slumber party, but one suspects it will be more like boot camp.

There's a chasm that separates Abramovic from her new acolytes. At last week's press conference the artist was her usual charming self, but the disciples could barely put together a coherent sentence when handed the microphone. To whip this lot into shape in 12 days she will need to be both matriarch and sergeant major - roles she has been rehearsing for 45 years.

Abramovic has stated many times that a performance must aim to be transformative. "It can change your life," she tells her charges and the media.

She entertains the highest ambitions for her work and wants everyone to share these ideals. She is not making art for a small subculture of aesthetes, but for the broadest possible audience. Her methods may not be revolutionary but she hopes everyone will get something from the project, be it only a realisation of the unfashionable power of slowness and silence.

JOHNMCDONALD.NET.AU

MARINA DOES MONA

According to the artist, Private Archaeology "is not a retrospective in any sense". The show at David Walsh's Museum of Old and New Art in Hobart is, apparently, a personal selection of Marina Abramovic's work made by the curators, Olivier Varennes and Nicole Durling. The subject of the show believes artists are the very worst interpreters of their own careers.

The exhibition presents a strangely demure overview, omitting many of the more extreme performances. There are a few confronting moments, such as a photograph of the artist serenely holding her finger in a candle flame. There is also a room of blood-curdling primal screams, both by Abramovic and her former partner, Ulay; and by members of the public invited to "have a go", as Joe Hockey might say (with similar results).

The spine-tingler among the older work is a photograph of the performance, Rest Energy (1980), in which Ulay leans back on the string of a loaded bow, while Marina pulls the bow in the other direction, an arrow pointed at her heart. This black-and-white image has that dangerous edge which was such a feature of Abramovic's youthful performances, whether she was self-flagellating, self-lacerating or putting her body through some torment. Even the act of brushing her hair, in Art Must Be Beautiful, Artist Must Be Beautiful (1975), takes on a violent dimension as she tears at her scalp with a metal brush and comb.

The defining feature of Abramovic's performance art has been the sheer duration of so many pieces. In her landmark exhibition at New York's Museum of Modern Art in 2010, The Artist Is Present, Abramovic sat motionless in a chair for the entire three-month duration of the show.

Members of the public lined up to sit in a chair facing the artist at the other side of a table. She didn't know if the idea would work, but the chair was never empty, with some people coming back again and again. Sitting still may not sound difficult but after three or four hours the pain becomes excruciating. "You have to generate this insane power," she says. "Whatever happens to me I'm not going to change position. I'm not going to change position. The pain becomes so bad you think: 'If I don't change at once I'm going to faint'. In that moment you say to yourself: 'So what? Just faint'. Suddenly the pain disappears, like it never existed."

This may sound similar to the trances of mystics and yogis, but there is a twist to Abramovic's endurance feats. She claims she can only do it in public, feeding off the energy of an audience. In her private life she is disarmingly normal. She doesn't go in for long meditation sessions or rigorous diets. The only times she observes strict discipline is during a performance, or in training for a performance.

After 45 years of uncompromising performances, Abramovic is changing the way she works, and this is reflected in the evolution of the MONA survey. Spectators cease to be mere voyeurs; now they are expected to participate. In *The Chamber of Silence* (2015) we are asked to don noise-cancelling headphones, sit in a deckchair and gaze out of the window.

Abramovic's key concepts are simplicity and self-awareness - to be employed as weapons in the fight against the continuing degradation of human life and the planet.

Private Archaeology concludes with *Counting the Rice* (2015), which is also part of the Kaldor Project in Sydney. The idea is for participants to sit in silence, counting grains of rice and lentils for as long as they like. It's supposed to be transformative, albeit without the ordeal of having to pass through the door of pain, or even boredom. As one arrives at a system for keeping count, it becomes clear there are many ways to perform a simple task. We also learn something about ourselves, the way we devise methods and solve problems.

The biggest obstacle lies in overcoming the feeling that there are much better, more urgent things one should be doing. For many of us today this is not just a feeling, it's the human condition.

GRAPHIC: THREE PHOTOS: Clockwise from main: audience members are tucked up under blankets in Marina Abramovic's *Beds*; silence reigns at Marina Abramovic: *In Residence*; one millimetre a minute in *Slow Walk*. **PHOTOS:** DALLAS KILPONEN

LOAD-DATE: June 26, 2015