

# SEANKELLY

Johnson, Ken. "A Gallery Show, Site Unseen: At Marina Abramovic's 'Generator,' Blindfolds Are Required," *The New York Times*, November 6, 2014.

**The New York Times**

## A Gallery Show, Site Unseen

At Marina Abramovic's 'Generator,' Blindfolds Are Required



Willie Davis for The New York Times

The artist might be present, and then again, she might not. For her last, spectacularly popular outing in New York, "**The Artist Is Present**" (2010), the performance diva Marina Abramovic sat in the Museum of Modern Art's atrium and silently exchanged gazes with other people, one person at a time, for hours and days on end. "**Generator**," a participatory exercise in sensory deprivation at the **Sean Kelly Gallery**, doesn't depend on Ms. Abramovic's charismatic personal presence. She will be at the gallery for much of the exhibition's run, and she will participate in the action sometimes — but not according to any set schedule. In any case, whether she's on site or not won't matter for participants, because their eyes will be covered.

To take part in this activity, you are blindfolded and outfitted with noise-canceling headphones. With your vision and hearing thus blocked, you enter the main gallery, where there may be no one else or as many as 67 others. You can move around, touch other people and stay as long as you like. While this situation is objectively the same for all, how any one participant experiences it will be largely subjective. Here's how it went for me:

After depositing my cellphone and glasses in a locker in the foyer, I'm met by one of Ms. Abramovic's assistants, a young woman dressed in black. She tells me to raise my hand when I'm ready to leave. She ties a blindfold around my head, places the headphones and, taking me by the hand, slowly and gently leads me into the gallery. As we continue walking, it's unclear to me whether she will stop or is waiting for me to stop, so I stop. She lets go of my hand, and I'm on my own. I stand still for a while, not sure what to do. It's quiet but not dead silent. I can hear the muffled sounds of trucks passing outside and people walking around upstairs.

I want to get the most out of this experience, but how? Will I miss something if all I do is stand in one spot? I should move around, but I'm worried about bumping into another person or into a column or a wall. Cautiously, I shuffle forward. Someone bumps into me; I veer away.

I decide to try to get to a wall. I can see a little bit under the blindfold, but I think it would be cheating to look, so I keep my eyes closed. I reach a wall and lean back against it. I stay here for a long time. It's relaxing and meditative, something I'm familiar with through attending meditation workshops before this. I notice how my body feels, which is neither pleasant nor painful.

Eventually, I begin to think about moving again. I imagine the space in front of me as vast, oceanic. To move into it would be like setting out in a boat on an unknown sea. I launch myself.

Someone passes by, grazing my back. Someone else comes near and puts a hand on my arm. The hand stays there. I feel its warmth. Would it be rude to back off? The person touches my hand. I touch back and feel skin. I run my hand up to a bare shoulder. I get the feeling the person wants to interact more, but I fear creepiness, and I turn away.

Should I be more open? It would be interesting, I guess, to explore fully — and to be explored by — another person in such circumstances. I wonder how far others might go in this direction. There are staff members watching without blindfolds, so I guess if someone begins acting inappropriately, he or she will be kicked out. But what would be inappropriate?

Standing now in what I think is somewhere near the center of the room, I begin to feel physically uncomfortable. It's hot; I'm sweating. The blindfold hurts the bridge of my nose. I'm getting a headache. I begin to think about raising my hand. How much time has passed? Have I stayed long enough? Have I given it a chance?

I raise my hand. An assistant comes, leads me back and takes off my blindfold and headphones. It's a relief to be returned to the world of sights and sounds. How long was I in there, I ask. Over an hour, she tells me. It seemed like less time than that. I'm proud of myself for sticking it out that long. I liked the experience, but it didn't change my life, and I have no desire to repeat it.

Drawing back for a more distanced view, I find that a metaphorical aspect comes to the fore: To be blindfolded and artificially deafened in a brightly lit space is analogous to the typically human experience of being embedded in a reality whose depth, breadth and general nature exceeds most people's ability to know and comprehend. To have your blindfold and headphones removed, and the actuality of your situation revealed, is like being spiritually enlightened. You're like the prisoner who escapes Plato's cave and discovers that what he had thought was real was only the shadow of the really real. Ms. Abramovic wants to bring people into the light.

Is "Generator" a good work of art? Is Ms. Abramovic a good artist? It's debatable whether these questions apply any longer. With her establishment of the **Marina Abramovic Institute** and the development of what she calls the **Abramovic Method**, it seems she means to expand her horizons beyond those of the contemporary art world. It appears that her mission is to become an international guru of consciousness-raising, offering techniques and exercises intended to affect and alter consciousness directly, hopefully for the better, not just for people into avant-garde art but also for anyone and everyone.

Maybe she's overreaching. Who knows? It's a work in progress. But whatever you may think of Ms. Abramovic, one thing's for sure: An artwork by her without her electric personal presence is like coffee without caffeine.

Marina Abramovic's "Generator" continues through Dec. 6 at Sean Kelly Gallery, 475 10th Avenue, at 36th Street, Manhattan; 212-239-1181, skny.com.

A version of this review appears in print on November 7, 2014, on page C25 of the New York edition with the headline: A Gallery Show, Site Unseen.







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