

SEAN KELLY

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Marina Abramovic, review: 'I hated every second but I can't deny its power'

The performance artist Marina Abramovic is in residence at the Serpentine Gallery. Richard Dorment squirmed at the results.

★★★★☆



Marina Abramovic at the Serpentine: 'she can silence a room just by entering it'

In 2010 the Serbian born performance artist Marina Abramovic staged a breakthrough work that not only transformed the medium of performance art, but brought her a level of international attention usually reserved for movie stars. For 'The Artist is Present' she sat in the foyer of the Museum of Modern Art in New York without moving or speaking all day every day for three months (a total of 736 hours and thirty minutes).

Members of the public were invited to come forward one by one and sit in a straight-backed chair opposite her with a table between them. They could stay for as long as they wished. Though they could speak to her, she did not reply and nor did her facial expression change.

Some smiled, chatted or stared at her in silence, others wept or told her things about their lives they'd told no one else. The piece became a media sensation; New Yorkers queued for hours to participate. In a city that always seems to be on the edge of a nervous breakdown, Abramovic had created a situation that in some respects replicates what happens during the process of psychoanalysis. She took the role of the psychoanalyst – a silent impassive stranger onto whom you could project your everyday hopes and fears,

but also someone who by a process of transference could be idealised, despised, loved or hated in lieu of a parent.

Only a person of her age, experience and impressive appearance could have carried it off. She was absolutely paying attention, not just physically but also in her ability to live in the present moment. When you watch her performance on You Tube you see that her eyes never glaze over. She looks each person in the eyes, alert to the exchange that is happening between them even when both are completely silent. One other thing. In appearance Abramovic looks like a cross between Clytemnestra and an Earth Mother. Her beauty is inseparable from a personality so powerful that she can silence a room just by entering it.

During every moment of her performance, she was in complete control from the moment a member of the audience joined the queue until the moment they left. The queuing was a very important part of what happened because by the time you came into her presence, you were already playing by rules she had established.

The performance Abramovic is now staging at the Serpentine Gallery in London, 512 hours, takes what happened at MoMA a stage further. As before, she will be present in the gallery for the three month duration of the show, only this time she is moving around the space interacting with visitors (160 are allowed in at any one time, and must leave all clobber such as iPad, watch, camera and phone in a locker in the foyer). Though the barriers (of silence, immobility, and the desk that acted as a partition between her and the public) are no longer in place, the artist is still very much in control.



Marina Abramovic's 512 Hours at the Serpentine Gallery, London

When I arrived on the first day of the performance only a few hours after it opened to the public, the queue outside the building already stretched from the front door to the road. Inside the artist and her assistants moved quietly through eerily silent galleries, sometimes going up to a visitor, taking him or her by the hand, and guiding them to a spot elsewhere in the building. They led some to a low wooden plinth in the middle of the rotunda, others were placed so that they faced a blank wall or a window and what

was initially unfathomable to me is that wherever they'd been put they stayed without moving a muscle – not for a few minutes, but for long stretches of time.

I watched as Abramovic walked into a gallery with a wooden folding chair in one hand, set it up, then gently guided a young man to sit in it. As he did, she lightly put her hands on his shoulders in a gesture that conveyed affection or compassion and whispered something in his ear no one else in the gallery could hear. After I left I saw this man in the bookshop and asked him what she had said. At first he didn't want to tell me, but at last said that she'd told him to seize the day, to live in the present, to forget the past.

Until you've seen it, I can't convey in words how strange the experience is. The compliance of the visitors was almost worrying; many stood stock still staring at a wall for whole time I was in the gallery. Some must have been meditating and others almost asleep – but that was certainly not true of them all. Everyone in the gallery seemed blissfully happy but what I was seeing is what I imagine the open ward of a mental hospital in which the inmates have been heavily sedated must be like. The combination of the long wait in the queue and the atmosphere of soporific peace and quiet presided over by the commanding mother figure, had reduced everyone I saw to happy zombies.

Except me. It took me exactly 30 seconds to realise that I live in a parallel universe to all the people around me. Whenever I'm on a train or aeroplane and the captain tells us all to sit back and relax I long to reply that I've spent my entire life trying not to relax and I'm not about to start now. I hated every second I spent in this show. I longed to escape and can't tell you what relief I felt on emerging from it into a world of light and air where people walked and talked normally, where they checked their iPhone, raced for the bus and had deadlines to meet.

Yet even as my mind raced with all these thoughts I was perfectly aware that of all the people who visited that show I was the one who most needed to be there. The important thing about Abramovic's work is not what your reaction to it is, but that you react to it at all.

In that sense, I felt the power of her work as much as anyone else who experienced it – and what's more, it may in the end be of more benefit to this workaholic journalist than to some of the spaced out art students who, when I last saw them, were still standing just where they'd been positioned, motionless as statues.