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## Tucked in by Marina Abramovich

Naima Morelli reports on the 512 Hours performance at the Serpentine Gallery, London



When being tucked in for the last time as a kid – I must have been five years old or thereabouts – I couldn't have imagined the next person to pop me under the bed sheets fondly would be one of the most famous performers in contemporary art: Marina Abramovich.

Let's back up a little bit. Since the 1970s, the Serbian-born artist has continually redefined the concept of art through extreme and experimental performances.

Abramovich's recent work has shifted from concentrating on her own physical and mental limits to audience involvement. Her 2010 show at the Museum of Modern Art, *The Artist is Present* entailed members of the public sitting in front of her and staring into her the eyes.

It was a crucial moment for contemporary art. *The Artist is Present* was so minimal that it was impossible to think what would be next.

And yet this year, Abramovich has dreamt up another work for London's Serpentine Gallery. This time, the performance had an aura of mystery about it. People called it the "performance based on nothing". The mystery was fostered by its early participants. Just like mythological characters returning from Hades, everyone had a different story to tell and no two stories were alike. There was no way around it: I had to go and see for myself.

Against all odds, there was no line to get into the Serpentine Gallery. I was asked to put my bag and all electronic devices in a locker to prevent technological disturbances. They stamped '512 Hours Performance' on my wrist and they ushered me in. Since I was expecting nothing what loomed before my eyes was striking.

The whole room was filled with people lying on cots with their eyes closed. They were covered by green sheets and wearing headphones. Lying against the wall, other people were watching them.

At one point a girl rose from a cot and took off her headphones. I didn't even have time to see her walk away, before someone started massaging my shoulder. I turned my head in surprise and it was Abramovich herself. She guided me to the empty cot in complete silence, with her arm around my shoulder. While she was tucking me in, she whispered something along the lines of: "Relax, forget about the world, let your mind flow."

I thought, okay, that's not what I would usually do in a room full of strangers watching me, but I'll give it a shot. I put on the noise-blocking headphones and I stretched out on the cot with my hands behind my neck. Now this was multitasking: I could attend a performance and catch up on sleep at the same time. I guess my position might have looked like I was sunbathing, because an assistant came over to me and softly ordered me to relax my shoulders.

*They formed a sort of human installation straight out of an Orwell novel*

In the other two rooms people were walking slowly or standing still with their eyes shut. The majority of them were super-fashionable, with crop tops and long skirts. Intrigued by the outfits, for a moment I forgot the whole sense of the performance. I was supposed to be looking inside myself to reach some sort of luminous state of being. So I did just that. I closed my eyes.

I was almost there, when someone bumped into me. He gestured an apology and carried on walking backwards, finding his way with a mirror. This seemed interesting, so I sidled up to one of the assistants and I politely asked whether I could have a mirror in order to do the walking-backwards-thing.

The assistant shook his head and put a finger to his lips. It was then I understood you couldn't ask the assistants to let you do stuff. That's why all those people were leaning up against the wall. They were waiting to be picked.

Talking to people outside the Serpentine, I found out that the types of task used in the performance were constantly changing. I decided to come back the next day. I popped my bag in the locker, got a stamp on the wrist and walked into the room. This time round, the scene looked even more impressive. People were sitting neatly at school desks, scribbling on a piece of paper and counting lentils. They formed a sort of human installation straight out of an Orwell novel.

A bearded guy set himself apart from the group by writing "Love is power" with his lentils. He rose from his chair, looked proudly at his work and

waited for an assistant to praise him. The assistant came and wiped out the lentils. Bearded guy left the room on the verge of tears.

Since there was a spot free, I tried to make eye contact with Abra in order to be picked. It worked out pretty well. "Do you want to try this?" she murmured in my ear, accompanying me to the desk. I was given a piece of paper and a small heap of white rice mixed with dark lentils. What I had to do, Abramovich explained, was to divide the lentils from the rice and to count them, taking notes on the paper. It sounded like a bit of an ordeal. At the same time I figured it would be more interesting simply to execute the task, rather than indulging in one's own anarchism, in the style of the "Love is power" guy. Not surprisingly, counting lentils got me in the zone.

On the third day I invited a friend. "Trust me, it's fun! You can lie in a cot, you can count lentils..." She was understandably sceptical, but she came along anyway.

Today there was nothing special in the first room, just people standing still on pedestals and walking backwards with mirrors. One thing you should know about my friend is that, even though I am constantly trying to drag her to contemporary art exhibitions, she firmly refuses to call anything but paintings, 'art'. In fact, when Abramovich started to massage her shoulder and whisper in her ear, she snapped: "Get your hands off me!"

"Relax and empty your mind?"

"What the hell's wrong with you?"

My friend ran appalled into the second room, but there was no way she could escape the others, standing with their eyes closed: "What the hell is that? Has everybody lost their mind? Let's get out of here!"

"But we've only been in here for five minutes."

I protested as she hurried out of the Serpentine. "You know, you should seriously stop bringing me to these things. Now, do you want to go see some paintings or what?"

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