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DystopiAbramović: *Marina Abramović: In Residence: Sydney 2015*

By Quinn Eades and Anna Poletti

ABSTRACT

“DystopiAbramović” responds to a performance initiated by Marina Abramović using bodies of the public in silent performance. We trace the haunting of that performance by forms of collective embodiment that characterize Australia’s political reality: carceral immigration policies, the Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse, Australia as a refuge for Jews fleeing Europe, and late capitalism.

It begins in the Blue Mountains, where I am on a two-week writing-residency. Frost, currawongs, hopelessly long days, a neck mangled from sitting wrongly and sleeping in a small, odd bed. A friend is going to see *Marina Abramović: In Residence* and I drive down to meet her, with vague ideas about what I will do when I get there, but drawn mostly by Abramović’s reputation, by what she might do.

On the drive further down
the mountain we talk about counting
grains of rice and I say
“You might have to pull me out of
there—I like repetition,
repetitive activity, too much—I might
get stuck.”

Marina greets us when we arrive at the wharf: she is wearing black, her face starkly white; she is pasted above us, flattened against the wall; she is image|paper|advertisement|cult. She oversees us as we line up, respectfully, to get in. She is severe, and we sense already the need to obey. There is excitement in the line. What if she’s in there, now? The chance of an encounter makes us goofy in the Sydney afternoon, the harbor blinging, the bridge arcing, Luna Park shouting from over the water. In the line, while we wait, I sense a social experiment and get anxious about what I might be willing to do: I have never been good at rebellion.

Queuing to enter the performance space

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We get to the front of the line, and we are allowed up the stairs and into the space. There are people dressed in black, with utilitarian puffy vests (I am told later these are for warmth, that the space can't hold heat, but they seem military to me) who smile and usher us through.

In the line, we agree
that we will separate,
that we don't know what's coming,
that we will meet at the end, at the
bottom
of the stairs.

*Submitting to timelessness (removing watches,
turning off mobile phones)*

Before we are allowed in we are told to turn off our phones (putting them on silent isn't enough) and take off our watches. We do.

Placing our belongings in lockers

yoga
retreat
mountain
cave
prison
cell
box
car
camp
entry

These three experiences are highly managed: calm, friendly gallery attendants speak to me in quiet tones at each step of the way.

We are directed to lockers, where we put our timepieces and dead phones, our bags, our knowledge of what comes next. We pocket our keys and walk toward the entry proper. We are handed noise-canceling headphones and told that there is absolutely no speaking once we are inside the exhibition.

We put the headphones on.

Noise is canceled, but not completely (trains, the thud of feet, the sound of thirty people saying aaaaaaah from somewhere nearby).

We separate.

I am interested in the order of things and notice the desire to "do" the exhibition properly; to start at the beginning, to move sequentially, to be present, to immerse, not just to succeed but to excel.

"Doing basic exercises"

The fourth friendly person to speak to me before I enter the performance advises me that these exercises are intended to help me "prepare" for what will come. He suggests I do only three or four, given it is nearing five o'clock and the exhibition closes in two hours. I step into the anteroom. On twin televisions runs a video of an anonymous young woman demonstrating basic warm-up exercises I am familiar with from my theater-making youth. The instructions for the exercises are delivered by Abramović in an affectless monologue.

I notice the orderliness of the space, and the way I know, without being told, where to start. I begin by joining a group of twenty or so bodies, moving in unison, facing all the same way, following directions on a screen. I can't tell if the woman on the screen, dressed in black, is Abramović or a simulacrum. I fall in line. I perform. We perform. We are one body made of many bodies, banging our chests with

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interlaced fingers and cupped hands, breathing through first one nostril and then the other, shaking our heads, our hands, our legs, saying “aaaaaaaah.” I cycle dutifully through all the exercises, and then peel away.

The rice and lentils are in piles on tabletops, mixed together, black and white. All the chairs behind the rows of tables face forward, and most of them contain humans with headphones, bowed over their piles. For a moment the world folds, and I am not in an exhibition but on a factory floor. The people in their vests are overseers, and the workers perform repetition (constructing machine parts or iPhones or sewing on buttons or ...), for a tiny wage. I sit. The world unfolds. We are a room full of humans with enough leisure time to attend an exhibition where we give up our control over time and submit to repetition, because we want to.

There is a little sign that says SORT AND COUNT, and I do. I am entranced by grains of rice and the little black pebbles that are lentils. I am quickly lost in the pile and submit to the directive, but not without rebellion. I refuse to count. I look at the paper and know it is for tallying, feel the urge to write a poem instead. But the grains and pebbles call me, and it is with them I stay. I can't tell you how long I was there for. People finished, and their work was carefully destroyed. I sorted, knowing that my pile would be unsorted as soon as my back was turned. The space filled with a gentle sadism. Everything that is done will be undone.

Sort. Count.
The way grains stick and fling,
lentils skitter shoot
on tabletop.
The sound of my own ears.
Sort. Count.

I can't bear to look back at my half-sorted pile when I leave. I know what happens behind me. I move slowly to the next space, where I find chairs in front of colored squares of paper. Red. Yellow. Blue. Red is free, so I sit. Time is elastic and brutal. The red is blood-sunset-gerbera-gash-hole-edge and it stains my eyes.

Wearing identical, poor-quality ear-muffs

I leave the exercise anteroom and collect black industrial earmuffs from the pile. I enter the warehouse and see the first exercise, which is in full swing.

Standing still, with eyes closed on podiums, or watching others standing still with eyes closed on podiums

Cubicles in which we sit and look at strangers

Camp-beds in rows, with rough blankets in which we sleep

Walking very slowly from one end of the room to the other

Sitting on a chair and staring at a colored piece of paper

The series of exercises undertaken by the public that make up the performance work *Marina Abramović: In Residence* creates an uncanny scene that feels deeply political. Through the use of surprisingly few props and instructions, Abramović curates the circumstances for the enactment of the rapid establishment and seemingly simple maintenance of the status quo. In a largely unreconstructed industrial warehouse on a dock in Sydney, a dystopian publicness is produced and performed in which the audience plays both the subject and the object. Your performance is my experience; my experience is your performance. We navigate the space, observing and undertaking the series of individualized tasks Abramović has planned for us. The intended effect is that of “being in the moment.” Yet what is produced alongside the collective pursuit of an individual experience of mindfulness is a complex and uncanny collapsing of time and worlds. While some performer-audience

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I move, slowly, because fast walking seems forbidden in this place. I am approached by a vested person who leads me to a low wooden platform in the middle of the space with the colors and the chairs. She indicates with two fingers that stroke her eyelids and then her cheeks that I should close my eyes. I am good. I do. When they are closed, she stands next to me for three hundred years, two minutes, an hour, with one hand on my chest and another between my shoulder-blades. I am frightened I will tip over. There is a sense that it is only us. I see sunlight through my closed lids. She leaves.

Abandonment platform.

The place where I stand, swaying lightly, waiting for return.

She doesn't come back, and I lose interest in not-looking, not-hearing, not-being-touched. I am pushed from the platform by curiosity. What comes next?

What comes next are cubicles. Another vested person, who smiles into me, then leads me to sit opposite an unknown human. She is not-me. I smile when I sit, but she remains quiet. We look into each other. Discomfort moves quickly in, then through, then out. I glean comfort from the corners of her eyes, the way they come to a perfect, lipped point. I look. She looks. I wonder if Abramović is watching, and what it is that I am meant to learn. I move into competition. I want to win, to watch her walk

members zone out with their eyes closed in beds and on platforms, others (me) experience a temporal disturbance. Some pockets of the warehouse resonate with a near-future dystopia, where the public—in their role as performers—restage the submissiveness and mindless acquiescence that define the contemporary Australian body politic. Led by the facilitators, participants stand still on low daises and sit staring at colored pieces of paper. Seemingly of their own free will, they walk slowly from one end of the room to the other. Have I wandered onto the set of a staging of *1984*?

Adjacent to this dystopian world that is formed by the silent convergence of bodies, historical calamities shimmer briefly into view. The rows of camp-beds at the back of the warehouse evoke the long sad history of the institutional housing of people—the innumerable camps that hold refugees, prisoners, survivors of natural disasters, and ethnic minorities who await their fate—flicker into sight. There is nothing in the supporting material surrounding the residency to suggest that this connection is intentional. Yet the chill in the unheated art-space is momentarily suggestive of winter in the Semlin Judenlager, the camp established by the Third Reich in a suburb of Abramović's home city of Belgrade. This temporal ghosting lasts a few seconds. The Jews and Romani lying in the beds are replaced by the unsettled sleeping bodies of the Iranians and Tamils who are housed in the camps, running right now, on islands off Australia's north coast. The incongruous cold air of the room makes their presence a blur, a smudge, but they—people kept so distant, whose identities are assiduously kept secret lest we on the mainland become aware of their humanity—are here, briefly. Then gone again, pushed aside by the near-future dystopia as an instructor gently takes my hand, leads me to an empty bed, and tucks me in.

I appear to be free-associating *man's inhumanity to man*.

I lie flat in my bed under my institutional blanket. Reading the book that accompanies the performance later, I am told by Talia Linz that "With the exception of the odd airport floor, most of us probably haven't slept in public since the days of kindergarten nap time." But the temporal flickering has already alerted me to how public sleeping is an everyday occurrence for millions of people and that it is likely a marker of a considerable loss of autonomy. I lie in the bed, trying to feel

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away. I wait. She smiles at a friend walking past and I think that I've done it. I hold my own hand. She does not shift. I feel time from light and know it is getting late and that I need to meet my friend, and anxiety settles into my chest. She wins. I leave.

I leave and another vested person finds me and leads me around a white partition, where I see three rows of twenty beds. Army-green, grey-furred blankets, thin white pillows. World folding again. Orphanage? Battle? 1984? Where am I? How do I locate myself? Time is lost (apart from the moving sun, which I catch through a break in the beams) and I am about to be put to bed, to sleep. The vested person pulls back the blanket and I get in, boots and all. She tucks greyiness around me and I close my eyes. She puts a hand on my forehead. And I, always susceptible to kindness from strangers, leak tears. She leaves.

Can't stay
in bed
in the day,
while sun waits.
Feet fidget, blunted
under blanket
I won't keep still I
won't be put down
as if sleep here
would be a tiny death.
Blanket undone. Boots on the floor.
I nearly run.

The way out is past people slow-walking to the exit. I can't. I walk with respect for the silence, for what I guess is an experience approaching the sacred for some, to the exit, to my watch, to my phone, to water and jacket and home.

The way out is never the way out. I am time-folding, heart-holding, carrying the weight of a wharf-building full of bodies in perpetual motion. This is not what I had imagined. I fell for Marina the first time I saw a picture of her seated naked next to a table full of implements, the word END written on her

grateful for the comfort and the meager warmth offered by the single blanket. I look at the ceiling. It appears to be Romanian. For the span of a breath I am one of Ceaușescu's children. And then I am myself. Lying in the bed, I hear the testimony given to the Royal Commission into the Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse of how the boys of Knox Grammar feared a man in a balaclava who came to their dormitory at night.

I will not close my eyes.

"Separate and count"

Acquiesce to meaninglessness. Of the seven exercises that make up the work, "separate and count" is particularly effective in making visible the collective's preparedness to do as it is told and to apply one's labor (and time) to a task with no apparent meaning. The exercise is staged on long rows of trestle-tables, with individual seats facing individual large piles of white rice and brown lentils. The rows of tables face in a single direction. Each pile of rice and lentils is lit by a lamp. When I enter the performance around 4:30 pm on a Friday, every seat is full, and people—of many ages and ethnicities—sit silently working on their piles. They are separating and counting the grains of rice and lentils. Provided with a pencil and a blank piece of paper, they work silently and diligently.

Some people meticulously organize little piles—shaping them in triangles or squares. Some work more haphazardly. When someone leaves their place, a facilitator trained by Abramović—the only people without earmuffs and dressed in black—serenely walks to the vacated place on the table. They reset the exercise with slow purposeful movements, remixing the white rice and brown lentils and collecting the paper that may hold the tally produced by the labor of the previous sitter. Once the exercise is reset, they look up with a slight smile and invite the next person to take their place at the table. There is an informal queue forming for "separate and count."

It is only when I take my place at the table and attempt the task that the full force of its pointlessness strikes me. As someone who has held their fair share of jobs—both menial and professional—I am surprised that so many people seem willing to sit at a table undertaking a pointless task on a Friday afternoon. Just outside, hundreds of thousands of people are fleeing their workplace, warmed by the meager flame of promise the weekend offers the fully employed. Still others—the tireless makers of

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forehead in lipstick. I moved from that photo to a description of her living on a pile of rotting bones for days. Had she intended this? Army-beds grey blankets colored squares grains of rice grains of rice grains of rice? The coercion of bodies. All that capitulation?

All that capitulation.

dumplings, the taxi-drivers, the bartenders and dishwashers—are just clocking on for their shifts in the drudgery and repetition of the service industries.

I half-heartedly begin the task and am quickly cognizant of the time it will take to complete it.

Taking up my pencil, I begin to write on the paper provided and reflect on the experience. A small group of earmuffed onlookers are intrigued by my writing and form a small audience at a respectable distance from my chair, which sits at the end of a long row. Mimicking the serene smiles of the facilitators, they look on benignly as I scribble in my lopsided left-handed scrawl. Why are people—no doubt employed in jobs that consist in no small part of the pointless tasks and repetitive gestures of bureaucracy and data-management (the pointless gestures of manufacturing long since delegated to machines) so willing to undertake more pointless work in the name of Art? Why are still others prepared to don earmuffs to watch them?

Numerous questions stemming from these two primary ones appear on the page, peppered with expletives.

My heartbeat bangs in my ears. I am suddenly on the set of *Invasion of the Body Snatchers*. I fold the piece of paper and shove it in my pocket. I walk as fast as I can away from the table and out of the performance space.

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Disclosure Statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.