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Boston

- January 21, 2016 Written by [Liz Glass](#)

[Marilyn Arsem: 100 Ways to Consider Time at MFA Boston](#)

I visited the [Museum of Fine Arts in Boston](#) on the 68th day of [Marilyn Arsem](#)'s 100-day-long performance exhibition, *100 Ways to Consider Time*. The premise behind Arsem's exhibition (which exists, it seems, as one piece or work) is that the artist will be on-site, situated in a gallery inside the museum, for each of the 100 days of the show. As the museum is open seven days a week, that means that Arsem will be there seven days a week as well. The gallery that she occupies is a small square inside of the contemporary wing, with works from the museum's contemporary collection—objects and paintings by artists like Kehinde Wiley, Sheila Hicks, Andy Warhol, El Anatsui, and Josiah McElheny—paving the way to Arsem's doorway. The interior of Arsem's modest space is sparse. She is sitting at a small, squarish table more or less in the open center of the room. There are two chairs, and Arsem sits on one. A patient, speckled rock sits atop a folded black felt blanket on the other. One other piece of furniture—a modern-looking lamp—graces the minimalist room.



Marilyn Arsem: 100 Ways to Consider Time; performance still, Museum of Fine Arts Boston. Courtesy of the Artist and the Museum of Fine Arts Boston.

On the day of my visit, Arsem was reading aloud to a dozen or so visitors—who shuffled and circulated as new onlookers joined and veteran audience members left—from Adrian Bardon’s *A Brief History of the Philosophy of Time*. The book is something of a summary of ideas about time and its measurement, from Heraclitus to Einstein. During the period that I shared Arsem’s space, she progressed from the discovery of the speed of light to Einstein’s theory of relativity. The book, perched upon her small table, was joined by a matte black metal water bottle, a black notebook, and black glasses case. Arsem herself was dressed from head to toe in black as well, reading haltingly about our “inertial frames” and the “relativity of simultaneity.”



Marilyn Arsem: 100 Ways to Consider Time; performance still, Museum of Fine Arts Boston. Courtesy of the Artist and the Museum of Fine Arts Boston.

As far as performances go, I would say that Arsem's particular brand, as exhibited in *100 Ways*, is relatively without affect. She has been making performance-based works since 1975, and she approaches her task her with a rather straightforward gait. She read the words on the page, pausing as one would naturally to rethink a phrase (in fairness, it's not the easiest of subject matter). Like a schoolteacher reading a picture book, she would sometimes hold the book up and turn it to the benches in front of and rather behind her, where her spectators sat, showing diagrammatic illustrations or the cover of the book so that the newly entered would know what they were hearing. She chatted with her watchers, made eye contact, paused for water or a cough drop, and complained about the noisy "din" of the surrounding galleries that challenged her vocal chords.

My sense of *100 Ways to Consider Time* is limited to the one day that I witnessed, but I imagine the others were conducted somewhat similarly. Searching the hashtag #marilynarsem on Twitter and Instagram turns up an ad-hoc archive of some of the artist's other days. Arsem answered her own implied question—how do you consider time?—by writing sequential numbers on an oversized roll of paper so that it gathered, ruffled and chaotic, on the floor of the gallery. On other days, she contemplated time by lying yoga-like on the ground, or sitting in her chair overturned on the gallery floor. Some days, her audience members read to her, reciting passages from a book about clocks while the artist attempted to build one on her small wooden table. She dripped water, methodically, patiently, over one of her rocks for six hours in one day, calling up the ages-long process of erosion and the superhuman patience of the earth's time. Each day, for six hours, Arsem invented a new way to question and consider time.



Marilyn Arsem: 100 Ways to Consider Time; performance still, Museum of Fine Arts Boston. Courtesy of the Artist and the Museum of Fine Arts Boston.

I must admit that I am not sure what to think of it. I could quote from a history of durational art practices as an attempt to contextualize Arsem's performance, digging up any number of Marina Abramović works, including her sustained, staring presence at MoMA's *The Artist Is Present* (2010); or by pointing to the meditative *Naked*, performed by dancers Eiko and Koma at the Walker Art Center in 2008. Or I could reach further back, to the advent of performance art, and to the wildly challenging practices of artists like Tehching Hsieh, whose most famous works lasted an entire year (like *Art/Life One Year Performance 1983–1984*, in which he tied himself with a rope to artist Linda Montano); or Chris Burden, whose twenty-two-day *Bed Piece* (1972) also involved the artist's presence in a gallery, where he slept, ate, and lived, without interacting with visitors, for over three weeks. Perhaps this is the history to which Arsem belongs, and to which she is quite intentionally making an appeal through this project.



Marilyn Arsem: 100 Ways to Consider Time; performance still, Museum of Fine Arts Boston. Courtesy of the Artist and the Museum of Fine Arts Boston.

But there is also something quite different about Arsem's approach: a very non-performative quality to her performance. One of the hallmarks of the aforementioned artists is their separateness, but Arsem does not aim to detach herself from her audience. There is no forced application of stoicism or aloofness here, just an individual enacting a strange—and perhaps rather futile—public ritual of passing the day. It is an unusual openness, a kind of generosity that she puts forth, and it becomes one that her audience is drawn to mirror; we watch her, and wait with her, as she counts down the hours.

Marilyn Arsem: 100 Ways to Consider Time is on view at the Museum of Fine Arts Boston through February 19, 2016.