

February 2016

The Fenway News

A DIRTY JOB, BUT SOMEONE HAS TO DO IT: ARTIST ARSEM INSTALLS HERSELF DAILY IN NEAR-EMPTY MFA GALLERY TO ‘CONSIDER TIME’

6

I FENWAY NEWS | FEBRUARY 2016
BY JOHN ENGSTROM

P

erformance art may well be the most mysterious art form of all because it engages

one of the most mysterious phenomena that exist—the unmediated human presence. Marilyn Arsem’s ongoing, solo installation “100 Ways to Consider Time” now at the MFA, in which the Maud Morgan Prize-winning artist is physically on-site every day (in Gallery 261), doing something different on each of those days, revels and glories in this kind of mystery. Like nothing else you might encounter at the MFA, it makes a museum visit something potentially empowering and intimate, enlightening and fun. With any luck, you come away from the show thinking about time and duration in a different way.

To explain her process, Arsem has written, “I am committed to a practice (of art) where I cannot avoid knowing the impact of my actions, and where an exchange between people is of primary value. It is a practice that remains anchored in the here and now, keeping me grounded in the limits of my body and the reality of time...” She will continue the ambitious project, which includes an e-book on her performance work published by the MFA, and the artist’s own summary of the voluminous visitor input, through February 19. The days and hours of her presence in the gallery are Monday, Tuesday, Saturday and Sunday 10:30am to 4:30pm; Wednesday, Thursday, Friday 3:30 to 9:30pm.

Art that foregrounds the physical presence of the artist is perhaps a newer concept of art-making than the ancient perception of the artist as a creator of illusions, a self-effacing presenter-interpreter of reality whose “work” might carry his (or her) personal signature, but which doesn’t require the artist to participate personally—to intervene—with the art-viewing experience. Nowadays the public personality of the artist is widely taken as a given when we think about the art; it’s impossible to separate, say, our awareness of Andy Warhol’s art creations from the media-savvy persona of Warhol himself and the cohorts of his “Factory.” If we are more conservative, we might think of “classical” artists in a privatistic way; we all love Rembrandt’s self-portraits—a life-long project of his—but how many people do you know who think Rembrandt’s self-portraits would be improved if they started talking to us?

In any case, during the 1970s and 80s, mainstream America started to pay more attention to the eccentric creatives, usually New York-based, who identified as “performance

artists,” and accordingly the genre got more commercial. Probably the most famous performance artist of this ilk in our current time—the artist as flashy celebrity—is Marina Abramovic, who uses temporal duration and personal interaction in her much-publicized, often controversial public experiments.

Marilyn Arsem, whose work also explores duration and interaction (but with a very different aim and effect than Abramovic), is a cofounder and current member of Mobius, the experimental art collaborative that has been giving envelope-pushing performances and exhibitions in these parts for many decades and luckily for us, is still up and running. (Formerly housed in a palatial gallery on Congress Street, Mobius now occupies more modest quarters in Central Square, Cambridge.) In an era when radical artists everywhere are losing spaces to the encroaching culture of capitalist real estate, Arsem, like the group she helped found, has stayed the course and made a mark. Her performances are known all over the world, in settings of infinite variety. She is also a respected performance instructor, having taught for decades at the School of the MFA before winning the museum’s Morgan Prize in 2015, the first performance artist to be so honored.

Mobius performances and events could always be counted on to be process-oriented, intellectual, exploratory and playful, qualities that are very evident in “100 Ways to Consider Time.” I covered many Mobius events in the 1980s and 90s when I was an arts critic second-stringer for The Boston Globe. I got to be on a friendly basis with Arsem and some of her fellow “Moboids,” who were patient with the fact that, coming from a theater background, I was often guilty of stereotyping Mobius performances as plays instead of the genre-busting anomalies that they often were. An annual highlight of the Mobius seasons, directed by Arsem, was “Persephone and Hades,” a richly interactive presentation that drew on ancient Greek myths of the underworld and gender relations.

For each of the hundred days she is at the museum, Arsem, wearing the same outfit of black turtleneck dress, shawl and shoes, offers a set-up of the same objects or props—a simple wooden table, two chairs, a floor lamp, a large rock—and a different activity, with a varied approach to visitation. From multiple visits I noticed an alternation between a kind of abstract, self-contained solo performance mode and a sociable, interactive variant in which the audience is invited to join in the activity. On Day 61, Arsem slowly perambulated the gallery with her eyes cast down, concentrating intensely, interacting with no one, and evoking for this viewer the massively slowed-down spectacles of avant-garde theater director Robert Wilson. It was an austere, powerful traversal, although I’m not sure if Arsem thinks of herself as or wants to be called an actress.

On Day 64, Arsem switched to a register that was sociable and inclusive. Visitors got “homework” to do: we were asked to write down memories of significant smells that are now part of our personal history and memory. (As writing classes teach us, this is actually a terrific way to jump-start the creative process.) Arsem then would tape the writings on the gallery wall, creating a collective portrait of olfactory memory that resonates with the exhibit theme of time passing.

But on Day 66, Arsem was back to “self-contained” expression. Visitors saw the artist seated at the table, composing a three-color mosaic of hundreds of black, off-white and beige (or “pink”) beans. Working slowly and carefully, she arranged the beans into a pointillistic composition that resembled a landscape. Using these three-dimensional materials she created irregularly shaped fields of flat color, juxtaposing them with each other and with areas of mixed colors. She didn’t talk, make eye contact, or invite collaboration, although the open-ended format didn’t rule them out. The atmosphere was so hushed that you could hear a pin drop, as we witnessed the artist-scientist as a closed system. At one point she gave a half-smile, got up, reversed position and continued to work from the opposite end of the table.

Arsem’s intense, intensive process inspired visitors to movement and action. Seeing an artist so engaged made you want to do or make something. People strolled in—single people, couples, families, a school group—and contemplated Arsem in brief or at length. Some would stand like statues as they watched, or move around the gallery with a choreography that was unique to them. The sense of others bringing their “stories” into Arsem’s energy field was strong.

A young woman came in, ascertained that “nothing was happening” (!) and left quickly. A middle-aged man got up and took Arsem’s picture, then sat down on one of the benches that jut from the gallery walls. Another stood quietly off to the side and examined the large rock that Arsem had placed on the other chair. A student to my left doodled an abstract image in ink on the visitor card. Another youth sat on the floor and surrounded himself with artifacts of the museum visit—note cards, tickets, a map folded origami-style—in an arrangement understandable only to him. The man with the camera went over and picked up a stray bean on the floor and handed it to Arsem, who smiled silently before going back to her meticulous arrangement and solitude. Performance art thus became an essay in group dynamics and sociology.

I didn’t attempt to make contact with Arsem on that occasion because her presentation was so concentrated, meditative and Zen-like that one felt as if to venture in on the artist’s space might be disruptive. Arsem is a performer who can weave a spell that you’re reluctant to break. But on Day 67 she was back to her jovial, interactive mode. She said: “I’m building a clock today, and people are reading (from a book on longitude) to pass the time, so come on in and listen!” A few days later, the clock was all put together and ticking away, providing a counterpoint to Arsem’s activity du jour: sorting the same beans she had used to make the mosaic and placing them in a dozen cereal bowls that were arranged on the table in a “clock” shape. Periodically, she announced how many hours, minutes and seconds had passed, and invited the audience to take part in her fastidious labor.

Arsem’s approach to performance is democratizing: it doesn’t presume to put the artist on a higher plane than that of the spectators, who are enabled to make their own contributions to the project. If America gave more recognition to its cultural workers, Marilyn Arsem would be a national treasure. But we’re lucky in having her among us through February 19.

John Engstrom lives in the West Fens.