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## In the Museum for 100 Days, a Performance Artist Pushes Us to Reflect on Time

- by [Heather Kapplow](#) on February 12, 2016
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‘Marilyn Arsem: 100 Ways to Consider Time’ at the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, Day 28  
BOSTON — There are so many layers to [Marilyn Arsem’s piece](#) at the Museum of Fine Arts (MFA) that it’s a bit hard to know where to start. So I’ll start with articulating the most straightforward layers: There are 100 days’ worth of actions and sub-actions occurring within it. There are sounds, processing or responding to previous days’ experiences, installed when the artist isn’t present. There is an [evolving catalogue](#) available to the public now in one form, later in others. There is a feedback loop. (Actually, there are multiple feedback loops.) There is [social media](#), and there is [traditional media](#). There is an audience that doesn’t always know what to do. There is an audience that knows exactly what to do.

There is [Arsem](#), and she is present in much the same way that — as almost every person I heard whispering outside the entryway to someone else in explanation put it — [Marina Abramović was at MoMA](#) in 2010. There is Arsem, and she is present in completely different — and perhaps more complicated — ways than Abramović was.

There is Arsem, and sometimes she is almost not present.

And then there is time.



'Marilyn Arsem: 100 Ways to Consider Time' at the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, Day 16

Let's go back to the beginning.

During each of my four visits to the piece, I overheard at least one person whisper, "what is she *doing*?" to someone else. My editor here asked me the same question when assigning the story: "I'm just curious what the piece will BE ..."

The answer is complex. It varies — from day to day and from moment to moment.

The general answer is that she is drawing the focus of our attention to time. Which leads to the immediate follow-up question of: why?

Well, as a performance artist, time is a significant portion of her medium, so there's that.

It's also something she has focused on before and elsewhere. And a subject that Arsem has a particular interest in right now, and for the foreseeable future, as evidenced by a quote from her website in which she

discusses a 2014 performance in Venice: “Certain recent experiences have led me to reconsider how I think of time and how I will move through it for the rest of my life.”

But the point of the piece does not seem to be to talk about any specific set of experiences as much as it is to explore whether there is a way to get beyond any specific set of experiences via time.

To determine where time is binding and where it is boundless.

To ferret out the secrets of its simultaneous mundanity and transcendency.

And to enlist the audience’s assistance in these labors, perhaps — in this age when time (in Western culture at least) has been highly distorted from what it is in other parts of the world, or what it was here even a generation ago, by new interfaces — for our own good as much as for her purposes.

It’s a line of inquiry not at all disconnected from the other ones Arsem has spent many years opening up.

As the free (for the duration of the exhibition), downloadable, multimedia-rich catalogue for the show will tell you, Arsem’s experimentation has focused explicitly on ephemerality for decades. The MFA’s 2015 Maud Morgan Prize, which inaugurated *100 Ways to Consider Time*, constitutes formal recognition of exactly how much time Arsem has already expended exploring time in very respectful and considered ways — including teaching about it (for nearly 30 years) at Boston’s School of the Museum of Fine Arts, building local communities around experimentation with it, and pushing the boundaries of art practices that rely on it (about 40 years).

But what you really want to know is what her daily performances at the MFA actually look like. And what it feels like to be there, in the room while the performance is occurring. What you want to know is what *100 Ways to Consider Time* is like in real time.

I’m not going to tell you that. I’ll describe what I saw, and I’ll share a sample of my handwritten notes among the images here so you’ll get an impressionistic sense of what I felt when I was there. But you won’t really know what Arsem is doing unless you get to the MFA (where [you may have to cross a picket line](#)) to witness the piece yourself.

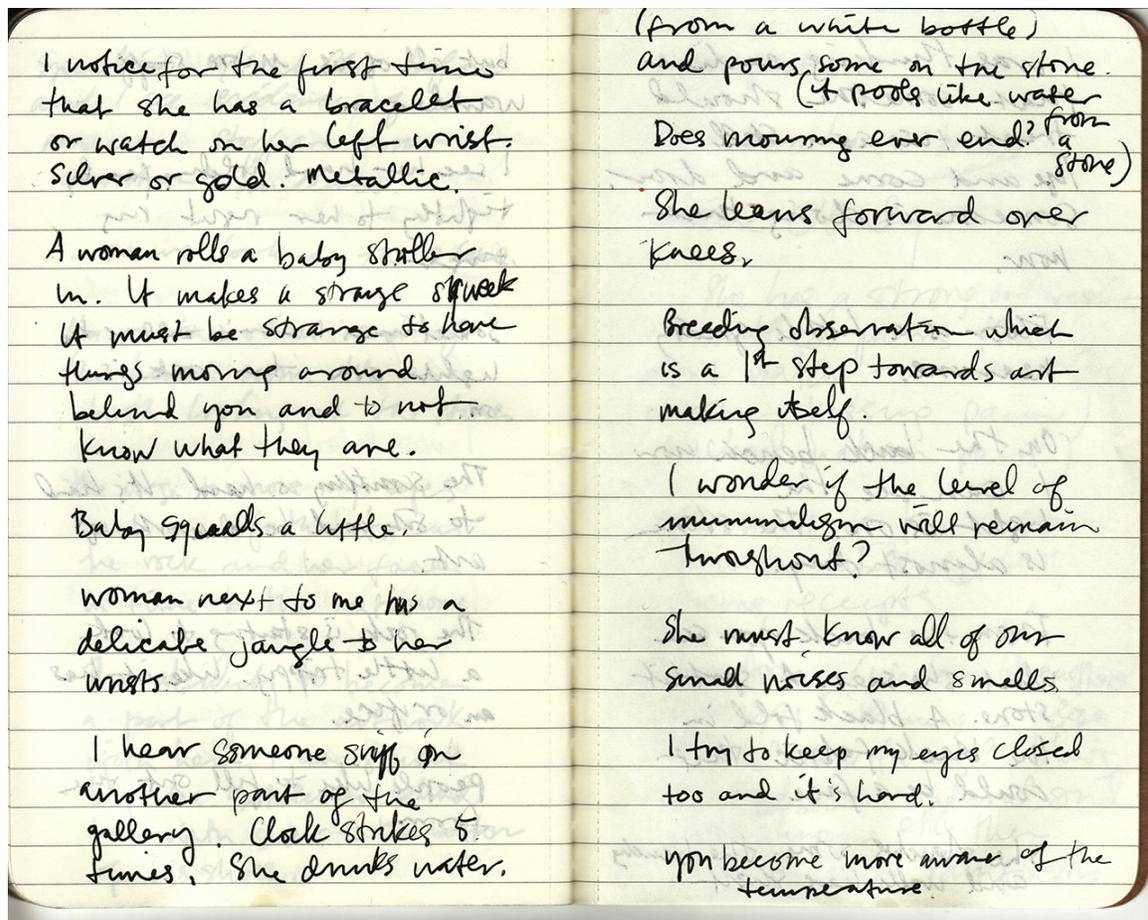
Just before the exhibit opened, I asked Arsem by email what she would be doing each day during her 100 six-hour days in the gallery. She answered that she did not know what specific action she would be undertaking and instead described a process she would be using:

I am planning in advance 1% of the performance, i.e. I am thinking about what I might do on the first day. I have several ideas, but won’t really decide until the night before or possibly the morning of the performance. ... I am intending that each action will come out of what I have done the previous day, and that the work will take me somewhere new in my understanding and thinking about time. ... Each day will grow out of what I discover the day before.

On the days that I visited, for about two hours each time, she did what looked like very little: On day 5, she sat on a chair and looked at a rock sitting across from her on another chair. The next time I came, day 33, she sat on a chair and held a rock in her lap. The third time I visited, day 43, she sat on the floor and the rock sat on the chair, and she looked at it, and then for a while she lay on the floor with the rock to her ear. The last time I went, day 51 (so just over halfway through the project), she sat at a table with another empty chair also at the table. There was a rock on the table.



'Marilyn Arsem: 100 Ways to Consider Time' at the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, Day 43 (photo by the author for Hyperallergic)



Page from the author's notes while visiting Marilyn Arsem's '100 Ways to Consider Time' (click to enlarge)

'Marilyn Arsem: 100 Ways to Consider Time' at the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, Day 43 (photo by the author for Hyperallergic)

It sounds like not much was happening, but a lot was happening. Or rather, small happenings became large ones, so everything that always happens was still happening, but amplified. So much was happening that I took copious notes — finished one notebook, half-filled another — all the while straining to keep track of the pre-recorded (I assume) metronome-like sound that surfaced in the space when everything else was quiet, and counting the clock bongs that announced (I assume) the hours.

Did other people there at the same times as me have the same experience of what was happening? I don't know. I kept overhearing people saying that they didn't know what to do, and then watched them all somehow do the same things. They knew to be very quiet. They knew to take pictures with their phones. They knew to ask each other (in whispers), "what is she doing?" even as they were watching her do it. They knew to sit on the benches lining two of the room's four walls. They knew to close their eyes. They knew to write and draw on the handouts meant for capturing our collective perspective on time (for inclusion in the final, print version of the catalogue.)

On other days, as evidenced by museum photographs, social media, and a comprehensive-through-day-50 list of actions that Arsem sent out in a New Year's greeting email, many other types of action have been happening. She's been doing all manner of performances, using an eclectic collection of simple props, and engaging directly with the audience in very different ways than she did during my visits. I just happen to have tuned into the quiet-rock channel of what's gone on so far.



'Marilyn Arsem: 100 Ways to Consider Time' at the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, Day 11

The work's co-curator, and the MFA's assistant curator of contemporary art and special initiatives, Liz Munsell, puts it this way:

One thing I've realized is that the piece is not about experiencing it as whole. Only Marilyn will have done that in the end (and she may have slept through some of it!). It's about allowing yourself a severe **BREAK** in your normal rhythm as a conscious(ness) raising experience. If you give yourself the gift of time, to truly stay with the piece for more than 5 or 10 minutes, you might be overwhelmed by panic of "wasting time" at first. As you ease into it, you realize that our conception of time is a cultural construction that we are all subject to, but to some degree, most of us can exercise some sort of choice, if we're lucky. That choice has to do with investing your full attention, your full presence, into the person or topic or space that you're in, or being constantly tugged and pulled at by the other geographies and options and experiences that are at our fingertips every second. There's a choice between a virtual time and space and a physical and tangible one that Marilyn's work asks us to consider, even just for a few moments.

My own experiences of *100 Ways to Consider Time* reminded me most of two perception-altering moments I've had in the past: one while I was in a state of profound physical pain and one when a friend dragged me to a "walking meditation" class at a Chinese Buddhist meditation center. In each of those cases, my understanding of time was rocked to its foundation. Here it was more like getting a whiff of that sensation — but being able to generate a whiff of something that intense is no small feat.

Which leads me to conclude that the answer to the question of what Marilyn Arsem is doing in *100 Ways to Consider Time* is twofold. First, she is spelunking — discovering things about time that most of us won't learn ourselves because the frameworks of our lives don't allow us to.

The other answer is a set of questions: What are *you* doing? With *your* time? Right now? This second?

[Marilyn Arsem: 100 Ways to Consider Time](#) continues at the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston (465 Huntington Avenue) through February 19.

[Marilyn Arsem Museum of Fine Arts Boston performance art](#)