



ART REVIEW

Marilyn Arsem contemplates duration in MFA performance



MUSEUM OF FINE ARTS, BOSTON

Museum-goers watching Marilyn Arsem during her performance art show.

By Cate McQuaid

GLOBE CORRESPONDENT NOVEMBER 24, 2015

I always take notes about the art I see, even if it's in a dark theater. But when I stepped into the small gallery in the Linde Family Wing at the Museum of Fine Arts to view “Marilyn

Arsem: 100 Ways to Consider Time,” a 100-day-long performance art work, the artist made eye contact with me, and I suddenly sensed that taking notes might be wrong.

First, it seemed disrespectful and distracting — like scribbling during a church service. Second, I knew it would mediate and interfere with my own experience.

I took notes anyway. It’s my job. Arsem was walking around the gallery, counting. She’d already been there for 3½ hours, and would be there for six, as she is every day.

That sounds tedious, but I got involved right away. I knew the script. I found myself anticipating big, round numbers, and silently urging Arsem forward. I was there when she hit 4,000, and everyone in the room smiled, as if we’d broken the tape ourselves.

My initial confusion says a lot about Arsem’s performance art. She quietly fosters situations that prod viewers into the unknown, where inevitably we don’t know the protocol. She does not entertain; entertainment takes us out of ourselves. Rather, Arsem’s unassuming, intensely present work throws us back on ourselves, into our own persnickety habits of thinking and reacting, in the way that meditation can.

Arsem, winner of the museum’s 2015 Maud Morgan Prize, has been making performance art since she was in high school in the 1960s. In 1975, she founded Mobius, the experimental artists collaborative. She taught for 27 years at the School of the Museum of Fine Arts, where, as Head of the Performance Area, she established the school as an international presence in performance art studies.

She has also performed around the world, making art about war, social justice, and environmental issues. Time, her theme at the MFA, has always been central; she specializes in durational performance art, which can last several hours and thrust artist and audience into a direct experience of time’s movement, crawling or swift.

Then, the art Arsem creates today will be gone tomorrow. It passes like a treasured moment; it passes like life itself. So, even as the artist predictably counts into the thousands, we may sense that this experience is strangely vivid, and worth remembering.

The second time I saw “100 Ways to Consider Time,” I arrived early. When Arsem is not there, audio plays in which she reflects upon her experience of the previous day. She had spent those six hours lying beside a rock, trying to be perfectly still. I thought, oh dear, compared to the highs and lows of the counting, that must have been a real snoozer.

I sat on one of the benches that line two walls of the gallery. Arsem came in and took a seat with her back to me. I reverted to note taking, and anxiously found myself watching people on the other bench. Some distracted themselves on their smartphones, and I felt superior. Then I realized that was probably no different than taking notes.

I moved to a better vantage point. Arsem sat, eyes closed, and on the chair across from her stood a large, theatrically staged rock, with a black backdrop and a spotlight from a lamp. As I watched, I grew quiet. The rock struck me as a source of wisdom. In time, as had happened on my previous visit, I felt soothed and alert. I did not want to leave.

Imagine my mixed feelings, then, when I arrived for my third visit and Arsem, sitting on a table, welcomed me as if she were hosting a party. She had set several rocks in a straight line across the floor because, she explained, they were in a race.

“I’m waiting to see one of them get ahead,” Arsem said.

Arsem chatted up everyone who came in. One fellow left quickly, apparently put off by her metaphorical questions — which rock, she asked us, did we think might win?

This more social performance fleshed out the thinking behind the one I had seen previously. Rocks last a lot longer than humans, but they, too, decay in time. Arsem had already approached the idea viscerally, feeling her way into it with her body and her stillness. Now



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Marilyn Arsem performing in “100 Ways to Consider Time” at the Museum of Fine Arts.

she was approaching it conceptually, but the friendly conversation lacked the immediacy of her more inward performances. I missed it.

Lately, Arsem has sat with a block of ice melting in front of her; she has blindfolded herself and spent six hours facing the wall; she has lain down with stones on her body, and when one fell, she mapped its movement and her own on the floor.

In a wonderful e-book chock full of slide shows, video, and more, which the MFA has made available for free during the run of the show, Arsem refers to her viewers not as an audience, but as witnesses.

Witnesses are different than audience members. To witness is to participate through observation. It's active, not passive. Arsem calls her viewers to that kind of discipline, and she does it with her own magnificent, flawed, heightened, patient attention to this moment, now.

Marilyn Arsem: 100 Ways to Consider Time

At: Museum of Fine Arts, 465 Huntington Ave., through Feb. 19. 617-267-9300,
www.mfa.org

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