

WINTERING OVER

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Located in the Hidden Gardens at Tramway, viewers of *Wintering Over* entered a glasshouse from one end at the other a low pile of black earth emitting an odour of fresh soil had been placed, two shovels leant against the wall and a pair of gardening gloves hung over a metal strut. Speakers inside the entrance to the glasshouse transmitted live sound from the artist. The contours of the mound varied over the duration of the performance according to the artist's position beneath the soil. The sound and visual elements acted in opposition to each other, viewers were drawn to the mound of soil but to identify the words spoken softly by the artist at sporadic intervals had to retreat to the other end of the glasshouse to listen closely to the speakers.

The particular quality of the soil, light and rich in texture with vegetable matter clearly visible, gave the piece a different quality during the daylight hours. The presence of a live human body enveloped in earth did not seem as incongruous or sinister as expected. A thin layer of soil over the contours of the body moved barely perceptibly up and down with the artist's breathing. Viewers of the piece often noticed this after a few minutes of being in the glasshouse and this discovery was met with a range of responses: relief, voyeuristic excitement or fear and discomfort. After a short time viewing the piece the spectator also became acutely aware of the industrial sounds of the glasshouse fan, building work in a nearby street and the sounds of the city. One of the most interesting aspects of this piece was this continuous tension between nature and the manmade.

The duration of the performance passing from day through the twilight hours to night operated like a condensed cycle of seasons. After night fell small yellow toned spotlights trained on the soil created an atmosphere reminiscent of forced horticulture where plants are brought on in specially constructed manmade conditions. The tubing apparatus to allow Marilyn to breathe was clearly visible and brought to mind images of babies in incubators or patients in hospital beds nearing the end of their lives reliant on oxygen tubes and respirators.

As the artist spent long periods without moving or speaking this allowed the viewer an opportunity to contemplate the issues the work raised for her/him. A number of visitors spent a considerable amount of time in the space, sitting on the glasshouse floor watching the soil almost in vigil.

Wintering Over prompted questions for me about how we resist the *process* of living, for example by identifying a very limited section of our life experience as the best part of our lives. In terms of plant life this is equivalent to trying to remain a seedling, a vulnerable stage in the life cycle where many fail or are lost. In human terms this results in a huge pressure being placed on the young generation to enjoy to the full the 'best part of their life'. The fatalism or disillusionment that many young people seem to experience can perhaps be linked to this, with nothing to look forward to in later life one can understand an attitude which places little value on life and the future.

Towards the end of the performance Marilyn began to list what she feared about death primarily the loss of others, by naming the people who populate her life. For me this highlighted how our lives are defined by relationships with others. These networks of relationships connected by one person are fluid, after the death of a loved one families often reconfigure into different groups as in nature a clearing is rapidly repopulated by other plants.

I feel one of the most poignant aspects of the work was an atmosphere of loneliness, which intensified as darkness fell and towards the end of the performance, prompting an impulse to reach down through the soil to touch the artist to reassure her that she wasn't alone. Acting as an invigilator it also highlighted how I rely on reading people's physical language in everyday life, speech felt like a coarse or blunt form of communication to monitor Marilyn's physical and mental wellbeing during the performance.

This quiet piece worked as an anchor, bringing the viewer firmly back to the fundamentals, contemplating the cyclical relationship between life and death, our interaction with the earth and relationship to nature and each other.