**“Bring and Do Nothing”: the evolution of a participatory paradigm or Abramović’s *512 Hours* (2014) in the context of *Rhythm 0* (1975)**

Following the astounding spectator response Marina Abramović generated for her durational performance *The Artist is Present* (MOMA, March-May 2010), where the pilgrimage to sit with Abramović as part of that work, appeared to elevate her status in the media to something akin to a quasi-religious superstar, Abramović commenced *512 Hours* at the Serpentine Gallery, London; remarkably her first durational performance in this city. For 64 days, 8 hours a day, 6 days a week from June-August 2014, Abramović professed to “bring and do nothing” in this free-to-enter space in the heart of London . This paper will consider to what extent this is a new departure or a reiteration of the announcement she made some 40 years ago in Galleria Studio Morra, Naples “I am an object, you can do anything you want to do with me, I will take responsibility for 6 hours” as *Rhythm 0* (1974) commenced and audience members were allowed to directly engage or as we might view it today ‘participate’ in the making of the artwork, through the 72 objects left at their disposal. I will consider the specifics of place, time and space that marked out this early performance work as both a seminal and a signature piece, before considering how the gallery itself and 512 Hours places/misplaces/displaces the spectator and the artist. Moreover, I will further consider how perhaps the premise of *512 Hours* can be seen to reflect something of the wider shifts in perception and functioning of performance art and the evolution of participatory practice.

In 1975 in Galleria Studio Morra, Naples Marina Abramović is reputed to have made the now notorious announcement detailed above, although as Frazer Ward has noted, accounts of the piece vary and so too does the mythology that has come to surround *Rhythm 0* . What is certain is that the piece was unsettling in its inherent challenge to the ‘community’ of spectators who could, through the objects laid out, apparently act upon the body before them, in seemingly limitless ways.

However, the invitation did of course impose limits; the spectators/”spect-actors” were restricted by a specified time frame of six hours (8pm- 2am), as well as by the artist’s choice of objects. In addition, spectators were limited by the presence and actions of others in the space which Ward has observed; socially constructed limits that were eroded or uncomfortably stretched as the work progressed, leading Abramović to wryly observe:

‘If you leave decisions to the public, you can be killed’ (Abramović, 2002: 30)

Abramović didn’t ask that the audience converse directly with her; they were to act upon her through the medium of any of the objects laid out before them. Thus turning the erstwhile visitors to the gallery, into what Jan Murray would describe as ‘procedural authors’, whereby the ‘rules for the interactors’s involvement‘ and ‘conditions under which things will happen in response to the participant’s actions’ open up a range of ‘narrative possibilities’ (Murray 1999: 152) . Whilst spectators spoke quietly amongst themselves, constructing their response and by extension contributing to the ways in which the ‘narrative’ of the event would be told and retold, the artist’s choice to remain silent, rather than producing a sense of an erasure of self that might be associated with voicelessness, proved fundamentally important to the ways in which spectators chose to ‘narrate’. Silence (and the choice not to verbally protest at any intervention) may be read as submission, even complicity; after all hadn’t she said ‘you can do anything you want with me’? But her selective muteness instead foreground the story procedural ‘authors’ told, through their individual and collective actions on her body; the photographic evidence of the work providing further means whereby subsequent viewers could imaginatively participate to interpret and write the story.

Unlike Yoko Ono’s implicit commentary in *Cut Piece* (1964) where the focus was upon a single tool – the scissors, and her clothed body kneeling before her audience. And where every person who chose to cut had to enter the stage space and be witnessed as doing so by the rest of the assembled crowd. Ono’s quiet submission – can and has been read as a reflection of Ono’s place as a Japanese woman already culturally marked as exotic, first as a woman artist in Japan in the 1960s where the work was first performed, and then within the U.S. framework where the work was subsequently re-enacted. So although neither woman spoke during their performances the absence of language in each case was instrumentalised to speak of different sorts of predicament.

The willing subjugation Ono performed in 1964 took place in the year after the assassination of President John F Kennedy but well before the student protests of 1968. Indeed, it is more than ten years later, that Abramović presents *Rhythm 0* (1975) which by comparison, appears excessively busy ; yes, like *Cut Piece* there are scissors but fully 71 further objects; a smorgasbord of possibilities for every appetite. The table and its objects (recreated for an exhibition in Lisson Gallery, London in 2010) is disturbingly reminiscent of the sort of tray of randomised objects used in memory games played as a child; where all the objects are temporarily revealed for a minute and then dramatically shrouded once more, before everyone scrabbles to write down the name of as many of the objects as they could remember and thus be declared the winner: “spoon, cotton, flowers, matches, rose, candle, water, scarf, mirror”. Health and safety considerations for galleries and other public spaces where audiences of spectators gather means that other items on the original table are no longer welcome and indeed, items on the table; gun, bullet, axe, saw, metal pipe, scalpel, metal spear, and box of razor blades, are likely to be carefully placed at a distance; out of touch. However, this was not a concern for *512 Hours* (2014) to which I will now turn.

In April 2014 Abramović stated in a BBC Radio 4 interview with Will Gompertz in which she discussed her plans for a new exhibition in London; "I called Hans Ulrich and I said 'I don't know how you're going to take this, but this is what I want to do: nothing...there's nothing.' There's no work, just me, and the public is my live material, and that's the most radical, the most pure I can do." This became the premise for *512 Hours*.

I was intrigued – could the promise of nothing offer something radical to audiences? To do nothing is often couched as a negative – indeed as a denial of external factors that are likely to impact on the individual and/or society as a whole ‘don’t just sit there doing nothing’; ‘the cost of doing nothing’ usually related to things like….climate change; the obesity crisis; or any other contemporary demand for action. Could there even be a nothing to explore after John Cage? Yves Klein’s empty gallery in the ‘50s? or more recently New York–based artist Mary Ellen Carroll ongoing project *Nothing* to which Abramović’s new work has been compared and criticised? However, in returning to the Serpentine Gallery website, the statement that described the piece contained an important modifier of Abramović’s original radio statement:

“Creating the simplest of environments in the Gallery spaces, Abramović’s

only materials will be herself, the audience and **a selection of common**

**objects that she will use in a constantly changing sequence of events.**” (bold emphasis mine) http://512hours.tumblr.com/ accessed 14 August 2014

Common objects? Constantly changing sequence of events? Nothing suddenly appears oddly busy. I go to experience the new nothing on offer. In truth, I go to experience Abramović , but that is something to which I will return later.

Serpentine Gallery, Friday 13 June 2014

After obediently deposited all my belongings into locker number 199. I enter a room populated with around twenty earnest looking individuals, all silent, pensive, yogic even; either sitting or standing upright. I scan the room for Abramovic, she’s not here, so I move towards the room to the right and Abramovic comes into view, walking slowly, in her customary black, and accompanying two people by the hand; leading them across the space as if they were blind or in some other capacity compromised. The people she accompanies look awkward as if simply walking has suddenly become something strange and complicated. They walk away and I move to find a space on the floor. I look around at those around me, noticing that there are a number of black garbed assistants ‘operating’ in the room. These assistants periodically take people by the hand and lead them in a slow walk across or through the space before placing their hands on their shoulders or back in a sort of slow motion healing ritual. I’m disturbed by their presence. Their passive but insistent gestures appear intrusive, manipulative even. I am particularly struck by a male figure in what, if we were to consider the various adjoining rooms as analogous to those of a bath house, I would regard as the ‘hot room’ of the exhibition - where there is a low hum and a heavy, pervasive silence. He stands at attention, dressed in D.Ms, long haram pants and a blank expression suggestive of a bouncer, as if to remind the audience to behave with the requisite seriousness of the room’s enterprise; that stunted motion and complete silence is both expected and required. I admire the woman beside me who sleeps in an upright position, arms crossed across her chest, unperturbed. I return to the central space and watch while three more selected individuals are led by the hand out onto a low level central platform. The earnestness with which this is done might be touching, but I feel unmoved and search again for a familiar face. Suddenly, Abramovic appears again from the right, and now she catches my eye. She stretches out her hand towards me. FFS no, I think, but find that I meet her hand with mine and moments later I’m taking a stroll with the artist, we are hand in hand. I scrutinise the floor furiously as I move. I’m the awkward incapable one now.

9 July 2014 512 Serpentine Gallery 10:45

This time I think I know what to expect, but today it’s different. I enter from the left into what has become an even more ‘spiritual’ space with an enlarged platform in the shape of a cross on the floor beneath the circular dome from which bright white light emits. On all four sides of the platform there is a row of four chairs where people are seated facing the central area – most have head phones/ noise excluders on. On the platform there is a cosy group of individuals standing, facing inwards – mostly with eyes shut and remote looks on their faces. It feels a bit church so I move to peer through the doorway to the left which is mostly blocked with onlookers who have hesitated on the threshold. I can’t see much – a long row of desks with seated figures like a school room, all with their backs to those of us at the doorway. I navigate into a position where I can see more; why this reluctance to enter? Perhaps early experiences of classroom etiquette have caused this bottleneck at the entrance? A black dressed figure walks down the row of desks with hands behind her back as if inspecting the work of those at desks. Indeed, the seated people appear busy, concentrated, silent and yes, industrious. They are fully occupied sifting what looks like rice and sunflower seeds or lentils. Some are creating small measured piles of each, while others are making patterns with the separated materials. I see it now - at each desk an individual is presented with a mixed pile and told to separate the two. It’s another exercise, there to focus the mind on the here and now: the present moment. For a fraction of time I think of Dante’s slothful souls in purgatory condemned to pointless occupation, but as quickly I dispel this thought; here there is activity, it’s not frenzied, nor is it viewed as pointless by those who carry it out. Quite the reverse, as soon as a desk becomes vacant, a man rapidly asserts his right to take up the place so he too can sort and count; the energy of absorption and productivity emanates from the space. Not coincidentally this is the same exercise Abramovic gave Lady Gaga in December 2013 when Gaga, apparently too stressed by her demanding lifestyle took part in a four day retreat with Abramovic. A range of exercises were carried out each for a four hour period. Abramovic recalls her time with Gaga;

"One of the most insane exercises was, I gave her one pound of rice and one pound of lentil seeds," …. "You mix them together, and then you divide them and count each one. She did this for four hours. It looks like a stupid thing full of repetition, but it has everything to do with self-control, with concentration, with state of mind. It’s to see if you can focus on one matter for a long period of time. It says everything about you — what is your patience level and so on.” (Abramovic cited by Hoen, 2013)

So today’s participants are being treated to the same ‘insane’ exercise as superstar Gaga. Is this the real source of their enthusiasm for the task? Repeating what Gaga did? But as Abramovic warned - You are being tested, Can you maintain interest? Are you patient? What does the seed sorting reveal about you? I pull away. I haven’t even taken the time to wait for a seat. It’s a poor reflection – but I don’t even engage with my own disengagement. I have no patience, self-control, or concentration. I feel failure but my concentration is way too poor to feel bothered. I turn back and find a vacant chair in the dome space. I slip the head phones on and feel a genuine moment of contentment as the phones muffle the sound of the world around me; a pleasant filter on my experience. It still feels very church. I watch those around me and then I see Abramovic emerge from nowhere right in front of me. This time she’s energised and talkative – chatty even. Gone are the plimsolls and instead she sports high end Adidas trainers[[1]](#endnote-1). I see her whispering in an animated manner to a man who has returned from the low platform plinth where he was placed earlier. She continues for some time, the rest of us maintaining the expected silence… I wonder what she’s saying… I’m amazed she engages with this individual for so long – he nods and smiles but doesn’t seem able to say a word. This doesn’t deter her. Her helpers are still active, moving people about as before but even they seem more amiable than a month ago. Why can’t I speak? Why do I persist in remaining silence?

'Discipline' may be identified neither with an institution nor with an apparatus; it is a type of power, a modality for its exercise, comprising a whole set of instruments, techniques, procedures, levels of application, targets; it is a 'physics' or an 'anatomy' of power, a technology. (Foucault, 1977: 215)

The place has become more tangibly disciplinary. Each space provides reminders or contains remnants of the forces or institutions that have traditionally structured Western existence and developed productive and compliant citizens; the ‘church’ space evoking an atmosphere and indeed behaviours reminiscent of religious or spiritual belief and/or experience; the ‘schoolroom’ where we are educated or acculturated into valuing a particular set of ideas, behaving with restraint and working to a timetable that measures out the day; and finally the ‘exercise’ room where Paul Rabinow and Nikolas Rose’s interpretation of Foucauldian biopower might be usefully evoked

‘Modes of subjectification, through which individuals are brought to

work on themselves, under certain forms of authority, in relation truth

discourses, by means of practices of the self, in the name of their own life

or health, that of their family or some other collectivity, or indeed in the

name of the life or health of the population as a whole.’

 (Rabinow and Rose 2006:197)

so that the slow walk, a form of controlled motion (which can be seen as exertion without the dangers of over-exertion) is encouraged and instrumentalised for the benefit of maintaining a healthy and thus a useful body. In this instance, discourse and classification are not overtly used as mechanisms of control but rather the mutual surveillance of visitors and the space, together with the actions instigated by those employed to ensure particular processes occur, guarantee visibility and compliance. Silence, stillness, slowed motion and sorting are established and normalised.

So even while Abramovic subverts the strangely familiar productive potential of the places she has created in the gallery, there is a residual sense that the spaces still reiterate the underlying disciplinary structures they unconsciously(?) propose to challenge through the original proposition of presenting ‘nothing’ in the gallery as a route to mindfulness.

* I am too busy therefore alternative action in this protected place will teach me to be more in the present. If I become more present, I will become more aware that my busyness takes me away from my presentness.

My third visit is different again – well, the central room is the same and there are still slow walkers, but the seed sorting classroom has gone. Instead, there are camp beds lining the walls of both sides of the room. Each has a brightly coloured sheet and a pillow. One of the black clad assistants I recall from my first visit controls the room and offers me a place in a newly vacated bed. I decline and instead walk to the end of the room to take in the sight of so many supine bodies which to me is less a meditative space and more like an overcrowded ward of patients yet to come out of the anaesthesia.

Indeed, perhaps it is my sense of a collective disconnect that troubles me about this work. Yes, people are very engaged with themselves and enjoy tuning into the meditative vibe of the place, but the overarching sense is one of an over controlling artist imposing a disciplined environment on me for my own good. Abramovic have you become your mother?

 *Rhythm 0* (1975) whether Abramovic was conscious of it or wished to admit it or not, spoke of the objectification of the female body and the just- below- the-surface violence people were capable of unleashing on an ‘unguarded’ female subject who had ‘asked for it’. In her desire to see how far an audience would go she placed herself at the centre but not as the site of pilgrimage but as a site of contestation. The work was and continues to be critiqued and examined for its provocation and for the immense risk Abramovic (and the Gallery) took in situating herself in this way. This work is a long way from the drive that seems to motivate her current activities which Abramovic suggests are about engaging in a pure exchange of energy. Agreed, there is an emphasis on spectator involvement in both works, indeed as discussed earlier, spectators took up the offer of authorship or participation to make the work, but while the type of interaction was largely down to the spectator in *Rhythm 0* in *512 Hours* the spectator has little if any real choice in how they might engage with the spaces. If we didn’t immediately follow what others in the space were doing, then the assistants would soon ‘befriend’ us and ensure we complied. Abramovic herself spent her time working the various rooms with a sort of evangelical zeal. Every time I felt out of place.

*Rhythm 0* (1975) placed the body of the artist at the centre of the piece; electively silent and compliant*.* In an early exercise in participatory practice her offer encouraged gallery visitors to author the piece as they tested and pressed up against the edges of physical and social limits in ways that defied and challenged the structures of power and disciplinary mechanisms that usually restrain and control. The fact that for the most part, the ‘narrative’ developed through the six hours spoke of intrusive, distressing and/or sexual interventions is perhaps of less importance than the willingness of the artist to take this risk in the first place.

*512 Hours* (2014) by contrast, places the reputation, dare I say, the cult of the artist at the centre of the piece. In search of Abramovic, the Gallery became a place of participatory pilgrimage. Icons are visited for their ability to link us with the divine. Pilgrimages are made to holy sites and to gurus: people of established significance or merit, who are worth visiting for the spiritual benefits they might bestow. In contemporary western culture we have celebrities serving a parallel function, with the places where celebrities are or have been, becoming sites for secular pilgrims. So while the question of how we are acted upon – remains the focal point of both *Rhythm 0* and *512 Hours*, in *512 Hours* we do not act upon the artist but we are asked to act upon ourselves in the presence of the ‘master’/ the shamanic Abramovic, who will show us how the actions and activities in the space can increase our mindfulness. In this instance, the Serpentine Gallery became a place of pilgrimage and contemplation and yes, of celebrity where the desire for the real thing; Abramovic the authentic artist, present every-day in the space, drew spectators to this place: a place where we were ironically encouraged to engage in practices that enacted a very particular sort of ‘nothing’ administered and minutely micro-managed by Abramovic and her team of assistants.

**Bibliography**

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1. These shoes may be linked with the making of the recent Adidas advertising campaign for Climachill technology in trainers which took the form of a short black and white film called ‘Work Relation’ (2014) in which Abramovic notionally re-creates a piece developed by Ulay and herself in 1978. The choice of black and white film evokes the photographic stills typical of 1970s performance art, and the establishing shots of sizable piles of stone in neatly separated groups, create a sense of the task ahead as well of Abramovic, who oversees the entire operation from the edge of the performance space. In the film, which Abramovic explains in voiceover, is ‘exploring three different social groups’; two individuals, a couple and a line of individuals working together. Abramovic notes that the first group to ‘give up’ is the one in a ‘relationship’, that is, two people sharing a bucket to transport a brick from one end of the space to the other, Abramovic then states that “the next to give up are the two individuals” who carry buckets on their own. She then goes on to make the observation that “The [human] chain is the most efficient method (message?), the chain has the most endurance, the chain stays for ever”. The reference to team work provides the requisite link with FIFA World Cup, and each of the eleven performers wears Adidas trainers, as well as the white Marina Abramovic Institute (MAI) overalls which prominently display the MAI logo over the left breast pocket. The film is finishes with the text ‘All in or nothing’ which is followed by a footer gliding in from the left to ‘suggest’ Adidas Climachill: a Cooling revolution, complete with a click through link to another video advertising the ‘revolutionary’ science of climachill technology. Finally, a larger Adidas logo appears in the centre of the screen. <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=B2KKfgYGOuU> accessed 30 September 2014 [↑](#endnote-ref-1)