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Strangers in a strange land The world's most famous performance artist celebrates the unfashionable power of slowness and silence, writes JOHN McDONALD.

Marina Abramovic. Photo: Nic Walker Slowness and silence reign at Marina Abramovic: In Residence. Photo: Dallas Kilponen Life is too fast, says Marina Abramovic, "so art has to be slow."

Perhaps fast art is no more nutritious than fast food? You'll notice the difference when visiting Marina Abramovic: In Residence, the latest Kaldor Public Art Project at Pier 2/3. Upon entering, watches and bags are deposited in a locker. After a series of breathing exercises, the visitor is equipped with a set of noise-cancelling headphones and ushered into a cavernous space devoted to six separate "exercises".

Stand still for a moment and you're approached by a black-clad facilitator who will take you gently by the hand and lead you to an exercise called Platform. It's not hard to do: stand on a wooden platform with your eyes closed. There you may remain, statue-like, for five minutes or five hours, according to your predilections.

Next up is Looking at Colour, which entails sitting on a chair, staring at a square of red, blue or yellow paper pinned to the wall. In Mutual Gaze you sit in a plywood booth and stare at a facilitator, who stares back at you. By then you may be feeling a little tired and be ready for Beds. A facilitator will lead you to a camp bed, put a blanket over you, and tuck you in.

Slow Walk allows you to make your way back towards the entrance at the rate of about one millimetre per minute, but you may wish to finish with Counting Rice. The title is a literal description of the exercise, and like every part of this event you can take as much time as you like.

Put these activities together and you arrive at the Abramovic Method - a miscellany of borrowings from different cultures and religions. It's not intended to be "spiritual", as Abramovic feels that word provokes too many negative reactions, but there's nothing to prevent the visitor from using such terminology. If anyone had a vision of Blessed Virgin or the Buddha, that would be a distinct bonus.

Abramovic calls the experience "a brain spa". Every piece requires audience participation, although part of the interest is the spectacle of dozens of people engaging silently in these exercises.

For an artist known for feats of endurance and self-mortification, who calls herself a warrior ("it's so much more heroic"), Abramovic is lenient with her audience. She has said that her own performances were always based on things she found challenging or frightening, but visitors to Pier 2/3 will be asked to endure a lower level of psychic discomfort. There is no pain involved apart from twinges of acute self-consciousness.

Each piece is ridiculously simple but surprisingly hard to perform. To enter the space is to accept a degree of intimacy with a stranger that many people find disturbing. A visitor has to be prepared for an unknown person to come up and take them by the hand, let alone tuck them into bed. The most challenging part may be Mutual Gaze, which obliges the visitor to stare deeply into the eyes of a facilitator.

Intimacy is an issue but duration is probably the biggest conundrum Abramovic sets her audience. How long should I spend standing on this platform? When can I open my eyes?

How long do I spend lying on this bed when I'm not even sleepy? How slow is a slow walk? How big a pile of rice should I be counting?

Everyday life makes us purposeful in our movements. We are goal-directed at work, and even in

our pastimes. We habitually think of life in terms of tasks to be accomplished.

All this has to be abandoned when we take part in this series of apparently meaningless rituals with no fixed time limits. One may get a sense of achievement from having successfully counted grains of rice but nobody is going to applaud or give out medals. The only thing gained is the time to think and reflect. Each exercise represents an interval in which its possible to learn something about ourselves.

You learn whether you are the kind of person who is capable of slowing down and spending time with these tasks. For someone like me, thinking always of deadlines, it's almost impossible to switch off. Yet it's not hard to imagine some visitors spending all day at Pier 2/3 and coming back for more.

If visitors stay for hours it means they have successfully immersed themselves in the Abramovic Method, although it may also mean long queues of frustrated people waiting at the door.

While lying on a camp bed or standing on a platform, spare a thought for the 12 young Australian performance artists who are living upstairs at Pier 2/3 for 12 days, sleeping in plywood cells, learning the arcane skills of the trade from mistress Abramovic.

There's a chasm that separates Abramovic from her new acolytes. At last week's press conference the artist was her usual charming self but the disciples could barely put together a coherent sentence when handed the microphone. To whip this lot into shape in 12 days she will need to be both matriarch and sergeant major - roles she has been rehearsing for 45 years.

Abramovic has stated many times that a performance must aim to be transformative. "It can change your life," she tells her charges and the media.

MARINA ABRAMOVIC: IN RESIDENCE Kaldor Public Art Project 30, Pier 2/3, Walsh Bay, Until July 5.

MARINA ABRAMOVIC: PRIVATE ARCHAEOLOGY Museum Of Old And New Art, Hobart, Until October 5.

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