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THE MONTHLY



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The experience machine

Fiona McGregor on Marina Abramović in Australia

*"An artist should have more and more of less and less."
- An Artist's Life Manifesto, Marina Abramović,
1997/2014*

You enter on condition of silence, leaving your possessions in a locker. A video instructs you to perform exercises that will release the stress from your body. It is the deep, sonorous voice of Marina Abramović, with the body of someone else doing the movements.

A facilitator takes you by the hand. The earmuffs they give you are very efficient. Pier 2/3 at Sydney's Walsh Bay opens: vast, luminescent, sunlight shafting across the ancient hardwood. Your facilitator leads you slowly past sections designed by Harry Seidler & Associates, all plywood and white walls, reminding you this is an exhibition.

In one section, people are seated in front of squares of colour; in another, they are seated in front of one another. At the end of the pier, they are lying in camp beds. A cluster of cameras photograph Abramović kipping, and David Malouf two beds down.

White pillows, grey blankets, black-clad facilitators: all is muted.

Your facilitator leaves you in a booth. Another deposits her charge opposite. You look at each other across the narrow space. There are about 30 booths in rows, gradually filling. You are sure you know your staring partner, but you often think that of people in your home town. Her gaze is strong and friendly. Occasionally you both break into smiles, feeling a bit naughty when that happens. A camera appears around a partition to photograph you. It's very distracting.

Your facilitator leads you to a bed and tucks you in. You grin up at her like a baby, blanket tight beneath your chin, which explains why everyone lies so straight, face to ceiling, like the terminally ill. Soon, you get up and make your way to the section with the squares of colour, sitting before blue till the outlines blur. In the centre of the room, people stand on wooden platforms, motionless, eyes closed. You try that for a while.

In the next section there are rows of desks. Each desk has a lamp, nearly all are occupied. Never has a room of journalists looked so pliant, heads bowed studiously to the task. A facilitator pushes a rice grain to one side, a lentil to the other, counting on her fingers. You count lentils in fives, in the prison tradition of marking off the days.

Marina Abramović: In Residence, Kaldor Public Art Project 30 (24 June - 5 July 2015), is the latest iteration of The Abramović Method, a series of exercises "intended to open and expand the potential creativity of those who participate". A grab bag of Buddhism, shamanism and other ancient traditions, The Method is there for both the audience and the 12 artists-in-residence to perform.

The 12 artists stay on the floor above for the duration of the event. They sleep in a line of white Seidler cells, each with a bed and bedside table, and curtains for doors. None that I ask on this first morning knows what they are expected to do, apart from perform The Method, and give an evening presentation of their own.

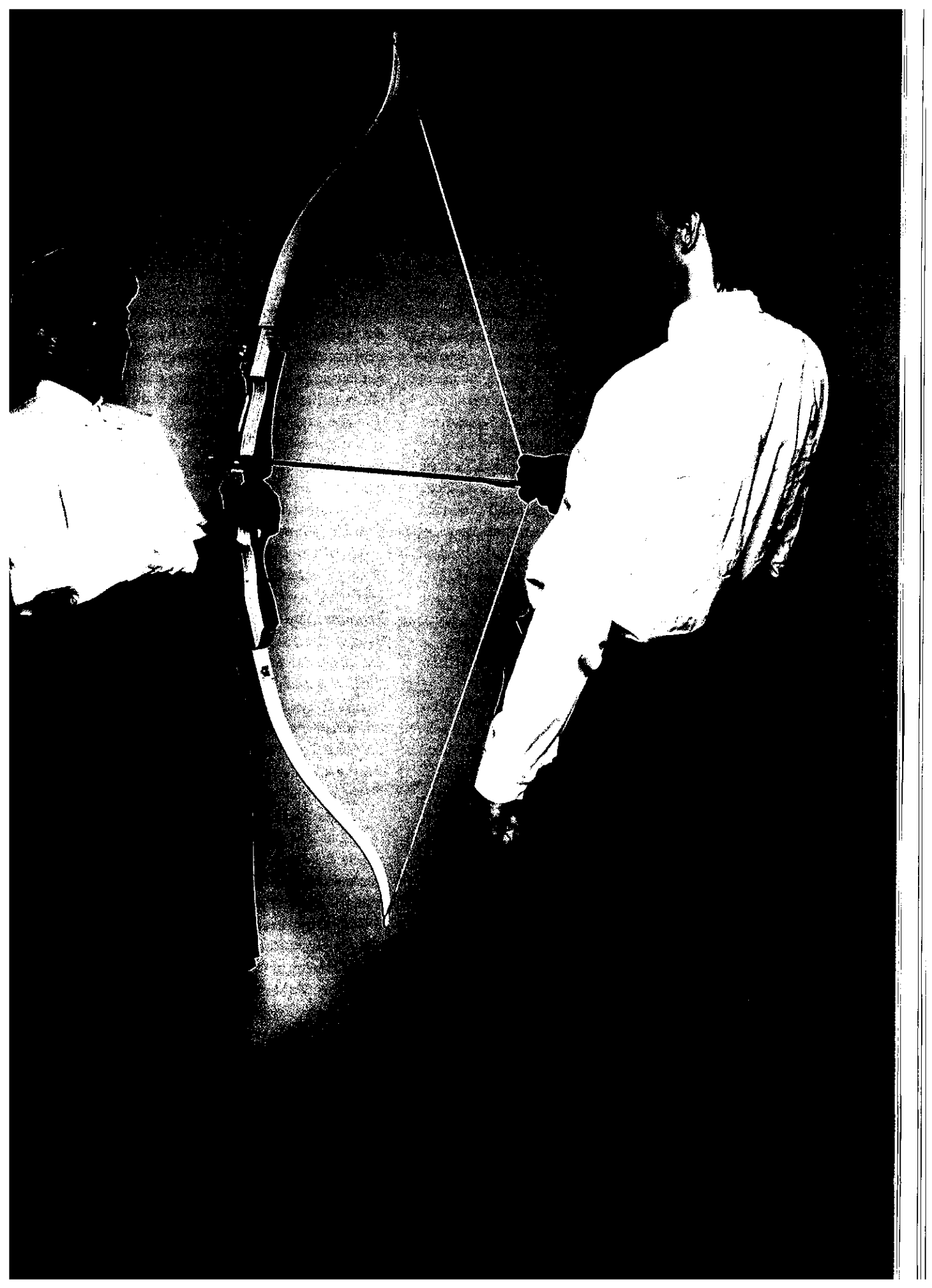
At the press conference, the curators and artists sit either side of Abramović at a long table, in a tableau reminiscent of the Last Supper. On Abramović's right, in the position of John the Baptist, is American choreographer Lynsey Peisinger, who collaborated on *512 Hours*, an iteration of The Method at London's Serpentine Gallery in 2014. On Abramović's left is Sophie O'Brien, Australian curator of *512 Hours* and *In Residence*.

"I truly believe [the] artist is a servant of society," Jesus Abramović says. "And now I want to transmit this knowledge."

Pre-emptively, she adds, "It is dangerous to speak of New Age."

Marina Abramović has been brought to Australia by a partnership between John Kaldor and David Walsh, founder of Hobart's Museum of Old and New Art (MONA). Walsh has long been a fan, with several Abramovićs in his collection. Two weeks before the Kaldor project opened, the launch at MONA of Abramović's *Private Archaeology* (until 5 October 2015) was the centrepiece of the Dark Mofu festival. Curated by MONA's Nicole Durling and Olivier Varenne, this exhibition rides the crest of a wave that performance art has been on for some years. Glutted as we are with stuff, stressed by the speed of contemporary life, the lure of ephemerality and asceticism is strong.

Screams crescendo as you enter *Private Archaeology* down a dark corridor. More MONA than Abramović in its chamber of horrors feel, Gallery One holds 1980's *Rest Energy* and *Point of Contact*. I find these collaborations between Abramović and her then partner, Ulay (Frank Uwe Laysiepen), are still deeply affecting: the symmetry of a couple face to face, enacting simple gestures that time or repetition render tests of



endurance; Ulay aiming the arrow at his lover's heart while she holds the bow.

In Gallery Two, screams surround you. Everything is superbly installed, as befits MONA. In this utopia of inversion, black pool not white cube, life-size projections bring you closer to the mediated ordeal. The screams are distinguishable. There are Abramović's screams in *Freeing the Voice* (1975), for three hours till her voice broke; Ulay's and hers in *AAA-AAA* (1978), for 15 minutes into each other's mouths. Then there are the screams of 270 individuals in the delightful, disturbing *Scream* (2013), made in Oslo for the centenary of Edvard Munch's series *The Scream of Nature* (1893-1910). Abramović had a frame placed before the original location, inviting locals to unleash through it. What emerges is an extraordinary array of pain, bravado, shyness and curiosity.

In the eponymous *Private Archaeology* (1997-2015), four sleek cabinets with sliding drawers form a sort of artist's scrapbook. Mounted on paper, beneath glass, are artefacts, book extracts and photos of sadhus, shamans and medicine men and women. Some are from Central Australia. Ulay and Abramović spent months with the Pitjantjatjara and Pintupi people in the early 1980s, a sojourn she considers life-changing.

Ritual, transcendence and "non-Western" traditions emphasising immateriality were touchstones for much performance art from the 1960s. For Abramović, they remain so. In one drawer there is mention of the Holy Mountain in Athos, north-eastern Greece, and a 40-day fast.

I think of the Eastern mystics who inspired the West during the first centuries of Christianity. Sealed in caves, trapped in cages, mounting pillars, their elaborate mortifications were adopted by monks as far away as Britain. Yet the Westerners were rarely more than provincial imitators, one aspiring German stylite brought down by his bishop before he froze to his pillar.

The stylites on their pillars were considered closer to heaven, many achieving celebrity status. The most famous, St Symeon the Younger, from sixth-century Antioch, was so pious that an entire church was built around him. Instead of facing the altar of God, the congregation faced St Symeon, who preached from on high about damnation. Rich and poor alike flocked to hear him. Even dust from his cloak was considered holy.

The material world with its privations and opulence has always been a burden. People crave escape; they need heroes. Heroes who promise transformation may be the most enduring of all.

Abramović's pedagogical template was *Marina Abramović Presents* at the 2009 Manchester International Festival. Advertisements featuring Abramović holding a mini-me mask saturated the city. The event featured 13 artists

performing in the Whitworth Art Gallery for four-hour blocks each day over a fortnight.

Upon arrival, you surrendered your possessions and underwent The Drill before moving on to the actual performances. From a catwalk, flanked by invigilators, Abramović delivered a series of exercises with all the zeal one might expect of the daughter of a major and a general from Tito's Yugoslavia. The purpose was to teach the audience how to look at durational performance.

The Drill went down like a lead balloon. This, after all, was the country that for 30 years had hosted the world's biggest performance art festival, Glasgow's National Review of Live Art, as well as London's Live Art Development Agency. Most of the audience were more than familiar with performance art.

The Drill was compulsory every day, even for returnees. The emblematic freedom of performance art, the cyclical temporality of its durational chapter, was quashed. It was precious, patronising, even paranoid, to ascribe such ignorance to an audience. The artists were so strictly guarded that the gallery was half empty by week's end.

Michael Jackson had just died, and throughout The Drill Abramović railed against celebrity, a bugbear of hers to this day. Yet all her events since Manchester have been branded with her name and larger-than-life image. In Sydney she looms 3 metres at the entrance, a sort of designer Abramozilla. The poses continue for the media: standing by the harbour, eyes downcast, hands open, a Pietà.

She's not above giving other well-known artists special treatment. At the Whitworth, I saw her take singer Antony Hegarty through by the hand, no Drill required. In 2010, Lou Reed and Björk jumped the queue for *The Artist Is Present* at New York's Museum of Modern Art (MoMA). In Sydney, it was Malouf whom Abramović swept past the induction room.

That The Drill has been honed to a short video in Sydney shows the evolution of The Method, yet the sense of cleansing ritual cum indoctrination remains.

During her Q&A session at MONA, Abramović repudiated the label "grandmother of performance art" and nominated "warrior" instead. Dressed in her signature Manhattan black, she commanded the stage with flair, a polished, if oblique, raconteur, cracking jokes in her Serbian purr. Her communist childhood contained clandestine religiosity, most egregiously a great-uncle who was sanctified. She is now Tibetan Buddhist.

"To me, this idea of heroism is really important. The idea of sacrifice in your private life to a higher cause. I think we are living in worse times than ever. So the role of the artist is more important. We have to go and give awareness to people."

"Marina is neither a feminist nor political artist," reads the first statement on MONA's 13-page "long durational

media backgrounder". Struck by this foregrounding, I asked her why not.

"I don't care if art [is] made by black, white, gay, lesbian. I don't want to be part of these ghettos. I want to be completely judged for myself."

Don't we all, I wanted to reply from the ghetto of 51% of the world's population, subsections notwithstanding. But we were on to the next question, from a Frenchman.

"You are beautiful woman, beautiful artist -"

"Not feminist," Abramović interjected.

"I'm too young for that," the man reassured. "I don't know what this mean."

Abramović's repudiation of feminism may reassure her Sydney host too. The John Kaldor Family Collection at the Art Gallery of NSW contains 194 works by male artists, two by female artists and six by male and female collaborators, eliciting protests when unveiled in 2012.

Gallery Four in *Private Archaeology* contains 13 single-channel portraits, mostly from the 1990s. The oval of monitors overwhelms you with the artist's face. *Waterfall* (2003) offers respite: this massive video installation of 108 Buddhist monks chanting was assembled from recordings made by Abramović. Gallery Eight contains *Transitory Objects*, copper and quartz sculptures also shown at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Sydney in 1998. The patina of decades has enriched these works, well placed in the penultimate gallery. The body is instinctively drawn to them. On the day the media are taken through, the newer *Chair for Human Use with Chair for Spirit Use* (2012) is inhabited by students from Launceston performing with all the conviction of statues at Circular Quay.

I return to the iconic *Art Must Be Beautiful, Artist Must Be Beautiful* (1975), wherein Abramović brushes her hair aggressively till bristles score her scalp. I always found its comment on vanity and aesthetics ambivalent. Now I see she performed it twice in one day after reviewing the footage and finding it unsatisfactory. Already she was bottling "pure presence". Already she was crafting for the afterlife.

Much has been made of the years Abramović lived in a van with Ulay, yet from her 20s she was touring. She first performed at the Venice Biennale in 1976, one year after leaving home. I wonder if she was dissatisfied when she won the Golden Lion there 21 years later. She was 50 years old, had created a rich legacy and deservedly bagged one of the most prestigious art awards in the world, yet she was of humble means compared to millionaires Damien Hirst and Jeff Koons. Like many, she justifiably resented the marginalisation of her medium. Few performance artists have diversified so little. Many fund performance from visual art sales. How then to earn from this immaterial art?

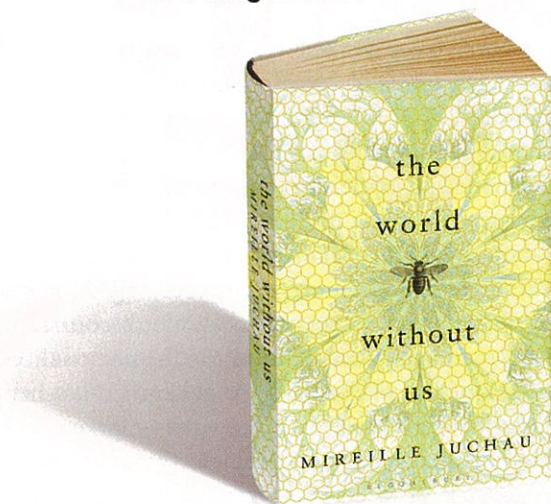
Around this time, in the 1990s, photomedia Abramović works began to enter the art market in earnest via gallerist Sean Kelly. The paradox is that while prioritising immateriality, indeed using it as a sales pitch, Abramović has profited from material versions of her work.

The most reified object of all is Abramović herself, reaching apotheosis in the MoMA retrospective *The Artist Is Present*, where, regal as a monarch, she received the audience for three months. With 850,000 people paying \$25 to experience the artist in person, the pay-off was formidable. Sitting eight hours a day for three months is a feat of unconscionable physical and mental pain, and well might Abramović earn more than some fat-arsed shyster on Wall Street. Nor should it matter that her favourite designer is Givenchy, or how much cosmetic surgery she has had, or that she owns millions of dollars worth of New York real estate, or that she has done ads for sneakers. What jars is the credo of humility and poverty, its didactic repetition.

"This is a lot of fun," she remarked of her *An Artist's Life Manifesto*. "An artist's possessions: one robe for the summer, one robe for the winter."

There is so much rhetoric, platitudinous and contradictory, that it is hard to hold dialogue with the work. In Sydney, the shimmering publicity echoes Abramović's

Sometimes we must confront what has been lost so that we can know the solace of being found.



The World Without Us is a beautifully told story of secrets and survival, family and community, loss and renewal.

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avowal of how incredible it is to participate in a free exhibition that admits all ages and races. Yet large-scale participatory artworks have been around for years, most popularly at the Sydney Festival, most copiously in long-term dedicated institutions like Artspace. And not limited to the over-12s, unlike *In Residence*. The scale is impressive but should come as no surprise given its financial backing. Funding for the event has come from not only Kaldor and other corporates but also federal, state and local governments, even as general arts funding has been slashed by millions. Such is the juggernaut a female artist from the former Eastern Bloc, working a fringe genre, now commands.

As Kaldor Public Art Projects brings attention to how *In Residence* benefits our arts community, it is worth considering the facilitators employed to lead visitors through The Method. Hundreds of applicants were whittled down to 50. Senior and mid-career artists, or instructors in relevant disciplines such as meditation, they are in positions of considerable responsibility, as Abramović herself noted at both the press conference and the keynote. At the latter, the facilitators were not allowed entry to the main theatre, watching in the video room instead. Meanwhile, behind me half the row, probably reserved for sponsors, was empty.

I ask one facilitator how he is faring.

"We're getting \$25 an hour. I think it could be more. I've worked for Kaldor before. I feel like we're the ... lowest."

"What can you do?" another shrugs. "At least it's a quiet environment."

The National Association for the Visual Arts indicated to me an hourly rate of \$53-\$80 would be appropriate, as per chapter 6.9.3 in their 2014 Code of Practice. Yet with an average income of \$25,700 per year, artists are desperate.

In the drip-feed economy of late capitalism, I too have my hand out, earning more for this article than my usual performance-art criticism. It isn't just that juggernauts elicit greater word counts: performance art is almost never written about beyond specialist media. In this critical vacuum, sensational verbs abound - *cut, starved, suffocated, burnt* - reducing performances to stunts. While discourse about the genre remains stagnant, Abramović the personality thrives.

The docility of the media is curious. What magic dust has Marina sprinkled? Is it secondary-market avidity? We are so grateful when people come this far. Curmudgeon-at-large John McDonald moons over Marina in his *Sydney Morning Herald* visual art column, claiming "many will see this event as a miraculous respite". Citing "the unfashionable power of slowness and silence", McDonald reveals himself to be years behind.

The term "pioneer" recurs, obscuring earlier practitioners like Fakir Musafar and Gina Pane, and peers like Jill Orr. Crucial works are foreshortened, authorship collapsed. The

Weekend Australian Review described one Abramović performance as "the artist lying on a bed frame over lit candles". Pane, who originally did this work, isn't mentioned.

A photograph of Pane's *The Conditioning* (1973) is in *Private Archaeology*. The performance was part of a triptych concerned with female autonomy. Abramović's re-enactment for *Seven Easy Pieces* (2005) at the Guggenheim Museum was a homage of sorts, yet stripped of its original context it thins to an image, which, if googled, delivers Abramović's version, not Pane's. Felled by cancer in 1990, Pane cannot reply.

On the third day at Pier 2/3 in Sydney, the artists-in-residence are no clearer on their activities. (They are also on minimum wages, with a clause in their contract that forbids disclosure of the actual amount.)

"Lots of meetings," one says. "But pretty fluffy. It's frustrating."

"Oh yeah," another laughs. "How about that meeting this morning?"

They mime stabbing themselves in the eye. A third wheels over, as another roundtable meeting with Abramović breaks up. "We just got told to shit before sunrise," she laughs. "You know, eliminate the toxins."

The cells the artists inhabit must be open at all times, giving the audience full access. It's Reality Performance Art. For several days, Nicola Gunn defies this, her curtain closed and a sign tacked up: "Naps for your pleasure."

For her presentation, Sarah Rodigari has curator Sophie O'Brien interview her friends while a slideshow of snapshots plays. In this send-up of artist-as-personality, O'Brien's po-face turns farce into reality.

The artists' meetings with Abramović are also accessible to visitors. As I hover among bystanders the following day, Frances Barrett announces, "So, I had this idea where we'd massage the artists to get the ideas out. And we'd call it 'Shit Before Sunrise'."

On the last weekend in Sydney, there is a queue. I enter The Method a final time. It is mesmerising, like moonwalking, a silent disco on Xanax. I watch the facilitators, gentle, priestly, and think about the precariat, the new social class of the 21st century, chronically underemployed. The same era has given us slow food, the consumer creator, reality TV, and *The Mindfulness Colouring Book* as a number one bestseller.

Abramović finished her keynote with *An Artist's Life Manifesto*, dropping pages one by one. As the last fluttered to the floor, she ended hand on heart, to rousing applause.

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