“My relationship to the public is changing”

Marina Abramović: In Residence
Sarah Balkin and Sandra D’Urso

Marina Abramović: In Residence (2015) was a two-week durational performance, 24 June–5 July, in a historic shipping shed on Pier 2/3 near Sydney’s famous Circular Quay. With her collaborator, performer and choreographer Lynsey Peisinger, Abramović trained a team of “facilitators” in the Abramović Method, which in this instance consisted of six exercises: Slow Walk, Counting Rice, Looking at Color, Platform, Beds, and Mutual Gaze (Kaldor 2015:9).1

In Sydney, the exercises, which were performed in different zones of the shed, encouraged

1. Peisinger previously collaborated with Abramović in 512 Hours (2014), a durational exhibition staged at the Serpentine Gallery in London. Many of the exercises that made up 512 Hours were repeated in In Residence (2015). Peisinger played a key role in both exhibitions, including the training of potential facilitators in and the development of the Abramović Method for each.

Sarah Balkin is Lecturer in English and Theatre Studies at the University of Melbourne, where she teaches courses on theatre and performance, modernism, and literature. She has published essays and reviews in Modern Drama, Genre, Theatre Journal, Public Books, and The Conversation, and is Assistant Editor of Theatre Research International. She is currently at work on a monograph, Occult Materials: Character on the Modern Stage. sarah.balkin@unimelb.edu.au

Sandra D’Urso is a researcher at the Australian Centre, University of Melbourne. Her work has appeared in journals such as Theatre Research International and Performance Research. sandra.durso@unimelb.edu.au
slowness, embodied experience, intimacy with strangers, and experiencing time differently. 

*In Residence* called on members of the public to become part of the artwork, with the facilitators as guides who modeled the exercises and maintained the pace and tone. In the Beds exercise, facilitators walked hand-in-hand with participants across the shed and tucked them into beds: acts of public intimacy and care. In other exercises, facilitators and participants sorted and counted piles of rice and lentils on rows of IKEA desks, stared at squares of color on white walls, stood on raised platforms, and gazed into each other’s eyes in the manner of *The Artist is Present* (2010), the Abramović piece that has received the most media coverage. The resulting interactions and experiences ranged from tender to disciplinary, and from absorbing to ridiculous. As a facilitator, Sandra D’Urso took part in the training period and performed as a facilitator for the duration of the exhibition. The training ran from 15–17 June, from 10:00 a.m.–6:00 p.m. On 22 June, facilitators opened *In Residence*, from 12:00 p.m.–7:30 p.m. This opening was reserved for investors, members of the art industry, the mayor, and local politicians. On 23 June, there was a media launch and a second opening for the general public. Then, from 24 June to 5 July facilitators performed daily from 11:15 a.m.–7:30 p.m. Sarah Balkin attended *In Residence* as a participant on 27 June for two and a half hours.

*In Residence* posited Abramović’s famous “presence” as a teachable method: a set of exercises that locate her artistic legacy in other people’s bodies. Abramović was often absent from the performance space, with the facilitators and, by extension, the public participants standing in for her as we performed the exercises. The project summary for *In Residence* frames Abramović’s absence as a late-career response to her own celebrity in the wake of *The Artist is Present*: “I have made a career as a performance artist for 40 years now and my relationship to the public is changing […] In Sydney, for *Marina Abramović: In Residence*, I will be like a conductor in the exhibition space, but it will be the public who will take the physical and emotional journey” (Abramović 2015b). In the context of a late-career performance practice dominated by retrospectives—such as the concurrent (13 June–5 October 2015) *Private Archaeology* exhibition at Tasmania’s Museum of Old and New Art—*In Residence* positioned facilitators and participants as living museum pieces: embodied representations of Abramović herself.

We have written our account of *In Residence* from two perspectives, drawing upon overlapping secondary literature, and in conversation with each other. Claire Bishop notes that because of the extended “on-site time commitment” (2012:loc. no. 159–60) involved in engaging with durational participatory work, accounts of it frequently fall to curators “who are often the only ones to witness its full unfolding” (162–63). But, Bishop adds, “The more one becomes involved, the harder it is to be objective” (166). By writing from two different levels of imbrication—D’Urso was present for the full two weeks, as well as for the audition and three-day training period, and Balkin visited for a few hours—we aim not for objectivity, but for insights based on behind-the-scenes knowledge, corporeal experience, and a combination of openness to and critical analysis of the project.

The Work of Facilitating

**In Residence from the Perspective of a Facilitator**

**D’URSO:** In July 2015 I auditioned for the role of “facilitator” in the 30th Kaldor Public Art Project’s *Marina Abramović: In Residence*. The initial interviews for facilitators were held over

---

2. Other people would doubtless describe their experiences differently. See for instance a description of doing some of the Abramović Method exercises by the Australian artist Christian Thompson, one of the 12 artists “in residence” in Sydney, in the *Guardian* (in Tan 2015).
a weekend in June 2015. In a group interview we talked to Peisinger about what drew us to the project. Many applicants were artists looking to challenge their relationship to art and the world. Others were yoga teachers, gallery owners, curators, butoh dancers, or artists living in Sydney. Other potential facilitators arrived from across Australia and one artist—who had just exhibited work in the Venice Biennale—had come all the way from the Ukraine.

During the second phase of the interview process we performed exercises associated with the Abramović Method, such as the Slow Walk (a mode of Buddhist walking meditation) and gazing at a square of color on the wall for extended periods. We wrote our names slowly for an hour, keeping our pencils on the paper. Finally, we separated and counted lentils as a way of practicing “presence” through durational performance. Performing the exercises for the first time was mentally difficult, physically painful, and sometimes emotionally charged, making sense of Abramović’s observation that, in hindsight, her “self-harming” works of the 1970s were “easy” (Abramovic 2015c).

During three days of training at the Sydney iteration of the Marina Abramović Institute (MAI), the facilitators worked at transforming ordinary tasks by performing them slowly. In the training period and during the performance, I felt the slowness emptied the prescribed actions of utility. On some days I sat for hours at the rice and lentil counting activity, dragging one grain of rice away from the pile, marking it down as a 1 on the paper, and then dragging another away. Many participants noted the Method’s calming effect or ability to induce “mindfulness” or “community.” In Residence’s catalogue likewise invokes “the contemporary renaissance of mindfulness meditation” (Kaldor 2015:23) in its account of the Counting Rice exercise.

3. Abramović expressed this in an address to the press on 23 July 2015 following a closed showing of In Residence.
4. These discussions occurred in the debrief room set up just outside the main exhibition space.
But it was increasingly apparent to me that these were expedient terms for a techne Abramović had developed over time. Rather than generating a feeling of the body as a stable or venerated object, *In Residence* destabilized it through prolonged aestheticized gestures that were also radically ordinary and often domestic.

During and after *In Residence* I struggled to make sense of the varied types of labor — waged, physical, intimate, affective, and aesthetic — it entailed. As a facilitator I signed a contractual agreement to sell my labor. The activities of my body and the bodies of others became the artwork. At times, this produced a kind of cognitive dissonance as I attempted to correlate what I was doing each day — often while I was doing it — with my understanding of the classical Marxist interpretation of the alienated worker. In one instance, I could feel an elderly participant’s weight pushing into my side as we walked together across the shed. With each step she desperately squeezed my hand to steady her uneven gait. I could feel the expansion of her chest against my side as she breathed. She stopped to say, “your hands are cold,” and bundled them up inside her own hands, gnarled with age, to breathe a warm tide of breath over them. There was something akin to love in this gesture difficult to reconcile with the idea of a corporate transaction. Contrary to Marx’s theory of alienation, *In Residence* instantiated both the process of labor as well as the bodies of laborers into the guts of the artwork — often producing what felt like genuine moments of involved, self-authored, artistic process. The artwork was also a free entry event, suggesting a break with capitalist imperatives.

This incorporation of the body of the artist into the work is not unusual in performance art. On the contrary, performance historiographers take for granted that the artist’s medium is the body and/or other bodies. Many, if not all the facilitators were artists in their own right, and as such expressed feelings of ownership over their work at the shed. So, if this performance was a classic example of alienated labor, then it displayed a kind of paradox; while our activity was delegated from “above,” as it were, our bodies were inseparable and indistinct from the artwork itself. Thus the classical distinctions between “work” and “labor,” “artist” and “laborer,” were dissolved, or became irrelevant. Performing *In Residence* recalled for me Hannah Arendt’s grappling with ancient figures for and categories of human action: the *animal laborans*, whose toil follows the rhythms of the seasons and is ineluctably mired in the body, and *homo faber*, whose activity creates masterful “works” in contradistinction to labor ([1958] 1998:134–35). *In Residence*’s status as an “artwork” seems to imply the mastery and singularity accorded to *homo faber*, who works “upon” materials (as opposed to the animal laborators, who “mixes with” materials) ([1958] 1998:136). *In Residence* installs Abramović as the privileged figure of the activity of the work and posits the singularity of her authorship. On the other hand, her vision for *In Residence* was that she would blend or “mix with” the instrumental bodies of facilitators.

Although Abramović described *In Residence* as showing participants “what you can do for yourself” (2015b), at least some public participants understood themselves to be working for Abramović. Some participants reported that the rice and lentils sorting activity recalled the spectral figures of a labor camp. When one of the facilitators raised this dark reading in discussion, Abramović rejected it by simply saying, “No, this is not like slave labor.” Participants were of course not engaged in slave labor; they were there voluntarily. But the comparison suggests some participants’ discomfort with the ways they saw their bodies being used. In 2016, Indigenous Australians expressed their anger and disappointment over comments Abramović made in a leaked early draft of her forthcoming memoir, in which she noted Aboriginals “look like dinosaurs” (Harmon 2016). Indigenous activist and commentator Nayuka Gorrie tweeted about her disappointment in Marina’s comments: “Can’t believe I counted lentils at mona for this racist b*%h” (Nayuka Gorrie 2016). In this instance the participant’s discomfort hinged on

5. In a debrief between Abramović and the facilitators.
a shift in her understanding of Abramović’s politics; that is, her labor had taken on a meaning she rejected when she perceived Abramović’s own shift as a signifier.

Other In Residence participants felt disciplined by some of the exercises. For example, a participant visiting from Brazil spoke to me about a memory from childhood, where a strict cook employed by her mother forced her and her little brother to sort lentils as a punishment. She shifted her noise canceling headphones and whispered this story to me as she looked on, shaking her head. I watched again with a fresh perspective as the public, in compliance, sorted and counted the rice and lentils. The ideas of punishment, endurance, kitchens, lentils, and feminized labor began to intermingle and inform my interpretation of the actions performed. In Residence evoked the secret spaces of domestic labor and acts of endurance within the private sphere, just as it aestheticized the outward activity of performing the mundane tasks. The labor economy implied in the sorting of food, holding hands, smiling, careful touching, arranging blankets, and tucking strangers into bed was familiar to me, and yet the activities were excised from the private sphere of home—the “real” residence in which this labor normally takes place—producing a feeling of disjuncture.

While this kind of artwork is conventionally understood as durational—how long can you walk, gaze into someone’s eyes, or count lentils?—the cessation of activity seemed equally significant. When on breaks I felt the specificity of the techne enter into ordinary gestures such as opening the fridge, unwrapping food, going into the bathroom. Even though the Method began to creep into everyday movements, the distinction between worker and the activity of the artwork was also carefully maintained by the venue’s policies and procedures. At the conclusion of each eight-hour shift facilitators were required to sign off with resident security, who kept track of who entered and exited the space for “safety reasons.” We performed in eight-hour shifts, taking turns for two half-hour breaks throughout the day. During the breaks facilitators could rest or eat lunch in a dedicated room in the shed, which adjoined the performance space. From there I could tune into the subdued soundscape emitted by the artwork, listen to the hushed conversations between facilitators on break, at rest or eating; however, the artwork itself kept moving, breathing, and working, giving the impression of having a life of its own.

If indeed it had life of its own, In Residence resembled a Leviathan of sorts: a compound life that relied on and transcended the individual actors who performed it. Hobbes’s Leviathan imagines the sovereign as a “great artificial man” ([1651] 2010:1), a princedly sort of avatar representing a chorus of well-ordered citizens. This 17th-century imagining of the sovereign posits that his power and authority derive, firstly, from his organic and material body, but, secondly and more importantly, from a virtual, eternalizing presence. Hobbes describes the authoritative presence of a sovereign in terms of its “Artificial Soul, as giving life and motion to the whole body” (1). Abramović reperforms something akin to the Hobbesian sovereign or Leviathan in her later works. She assumes the elevated position of the “artificial” and the spectral quality assigned to the sovereign as Leviathan. Like the sovereign, she distributes her authoritative presence among the bodies of the facilitators, in much the same way as Hobbes imagines “Magistrates, and other Officers of Judicature” as “artificial Joynts” (1). Even when physically absent, the sovereign maintains a “presence” through these officers of the state.

The Hobbesian figure for sovereignty and civic life had found its way into a contemporary formula for “living” in a contained, security-bound participatory artwork. Thinking about sovereignty also accounts for the way Abramović’s “presence” and charisma operate in her most recent works. It isn’t her material presence alone that draws thousands of participants to the artwork, while facilitators and security guards administrate its flows and affects. Like the sovereign, her presence is divided and distributed, reflecting the medieval formula of the king’s

---

6. This was expressed to us in an address by the security staff to the entire crew of In Residence, including the cohort of artists living on-site, above the exhibition space.
two bodies (Kantorowicz 1957): one of these bodies is organic, finite, and fallible; and the other more perfect and perpetual, as is Hobbes’s sovereign. One moment she was physically there in the installation, leading and driving our prescribed activities; the next, she was absent. Yet her distributed presence carried the body of the artwork forward. Hobbes famously theorizes the sovereign’s presence in his construct of the body politic as the mythical beast, Leviathan:

For by Art is created that great Leviathan called a Commonwealth, or State, (in Latine Civitas) which is but an Artificiall Man; though of greater stature and strength than the Naturall, for whose protection and defence it was intended; and in which, the Soveraignty is an Artificiall Soul, as giving life and motion to the whole body. ([1651] 2010:1)

_In Residence_ represents an attempt by the artist to grapple with and to manifest a charismatic, sovereign-like relationship to the public, one that she claims is changing. Rethinking _In Residence_ against Hobbes’s image of the Leviathan and Commonwealth suggests its reliance on formulations of publicity and “artificial” life that are older than recent critiques of her celebrity can account for. _In Residence_ reproduced the political grammar of Hobbesian “artificial life” and “commonwealth” and reconceived it as “participation.” Different people came together to act in concert, and in doing so believed— or rejected— the idea that they transcended the particularity of their bodies and identities to form one synchronous community. Critiques arguing that artworks such as _In Residence_ are borne out of a specifically postmillennial neoliberal context do not capture the arcane formula of an artistic rationale that seeks to constitute a singular, civic-like body— comprised of a multitude of living bodies— which then performs its own processes of governance from within.

_In Residence_ asked participants to perform, but it also subjected them to regulation by facilitators and security staff. If someone was hurt we were to check on them; if someone behaved strangely, took unauthorized photos, or in some other way hijacked the mood, we were to ask them to leave. While Abramović was far more accepting of interruption and dissensus, Peisinger felt that protecting the work was an absolute imperative at the wharf. On one occasion, somebody caused a disturbance and facilitators asked her to leave. When she resisted, she was ushered from the exhibition by security. Just prior, she had been shouting and handing out leaflets containing messages about the perils of conforming to rules in art. She warned of fascism and compliance. I overheard her say to security staff, “But I thought Marina would like this, isn’t this what she’s all about?” Other messages read: “Take the blue pill,” and “Take the red pill.” I found some of the messages in a bin later that night as I collected my belongings after a shift. After the woman was ushered away, another ecstatic person ran through the space. Breathless and flushed from exertion, he grabbed my arms and asked, “Are there rules about running, are there? Are there? I just ran and it felt GREAT.” When the public displayed such “irregularities” in behavior, they were generally quelled or otherwise discouraged by facilitators. Peisinger encouraged facilitators to maintain the delicate ecology of the work, though there were no hard and fast rules as to how this should be done. As a result, I became keenly aware of a tension between disruption and coercion in the exhibition.

Bojana Kunst notes that “immaterial” participatory art shifts the onus on artistic process (2015). In so doing, argues Kunst, the labor of art demands that human subjectivity and sociability become aestheticized, shown, or performed in a way that accords with the safety expectations of the institution. Accordingly, the logics of institutions are inevitably wrapped up in procedures of risk management, security, and safety consciousness. This argument is echoed in museum studies (Bishop 2012) and performance studies critiques (Kunst 2015), which scrutinize the relation of participatory art and neoliberal imperatives. According to this critique, the artwork absorbs the entrepreneurial rationale so that it is impossible to separate artistic claims
from economic ones. If we apply Foucault’s thinking on the art of neoliberalism, we might extend this argument to say that “immaterial” performance in institutional space generates and excites the possibility of risk by overstating the procedures of occupational health and safety, multiplying “opportunities for disputes” (Foucault [1979] 2010:149–50). For Foucault, the proliferation of enterprises and the excitation and friction between enterprising institutions characterizes one of the key tendencies of neoliberal society. This is one way of interpreting In Residence’s intersecting layers of institutions and the “surfaces of friction between each of these enterprises” (149), even if not taken to their logical conclusion. For instance, the project’s enterprising bodies included Kaldor Public Art Projects, Marina Abramović Institute, key corporate sponsors such as the Commonwealth Bank of Australia, and the company that provided security personnel. The bodies of the artists, workers, and the public provided further “surfaces of friction.” The protection of the artwork through the use of security guards, safety signs, and release forms became normalized through their positioning as part of the mise-en-scène of the exhibition, creating a surreptitious and valuable sensation of risk and marketable friction.

The security guards looking after In Residence shared the space with public participants and facilitators. They moved around slowly, carefully, in a way that allowed them to pass as facilitators of the artwork. They wore black and stayed within a certain distance of Abramović when she was performing with us—not so close as to disturb the illusion of an unmediated encounter with the celebrity, but not so far as to be ineffective in case of danger. Peisinger shared an anecdote about Abramović’s alarming encounter with a fan in Brazil, during an M.A.I. exhibition there. She described how she had observed a fan following Abramović closely, moving whenever she moved. The behavior of the fan caught Peisinger’s attention because it appeared strange to her. After several hours, the fan persisted with ghosting Abramović’s every movement through the space. Finally, while Abramović was seated, the fan produced a small pair of scissors from his braided hair. He then proceeded to cut his braid and laid it at Abramović’s feet as though an elaborate ritual of adoration. Peisinger described this incident to alert us to possible and potentially threatening scenarios. In light of anecdotes like this one, the idea of insecurity began to insinuate itself in my thoughts and feelings—not quite anxiety, but the idea that this kind of artistic experiment might excite or invite danger. As it turned out, In Residence didn’t result in any dangerous encounters. However, the knowledge that security guards were present but not easily identifiable seemed to serve a two-fold function. The obvious one was to attend to the artwork by assessing and intervening when danger or risk presented itself. The second unspoken function seemed to be to generate the idea of risk, which had the effect of aestheticizing a danger that hadn’t yet transpired.

The work of facilitating included assessing what kinds of events, gestures, or people might constitute danger to the artwork. The processes of risk assessment, including the interpretation of behavior of participants, could not be separated from the artwork. It engendered a singular “presence” identified with Abramović’s persona, which was distributed across multiple bodies. This distribution across 50 facilitators and thousands of participants provided almost countless points of friction, each representing possible risk scenarios. There seemed to be an aggregation of security-driven processes with aesthetic ones, such that it was difficult to discern whether decisions to “protect the work” defined an aesthetic process or a policy-driven one. Securitization and its triggers became collapsed into the artwork such that In Residence resembled a social or civic body that learns to regulate itself from the inside in order to resecure the seamlessness of that body, indicative of the “Joyns” and “Nerves” of Hobbes’s Leviathan: “The Wealth and Riches of all the particular members, are the Strength; Salus Populi [the peoples safety] its Businesse; Counsellors, by whom all things needfull for it to know, are suggested unto it [...] Equity and Lawes, an artificiall Reason and Will; Concord, Health; Sedition, Sickness; and Civill war, Death” ([1651] 2010:1).

The facilitators and security guards curated the human gestures that were permitted or possible during In Residence by deciding on a case-by-case basis what was acceptable participation in
Any parts that showed disorder or irregularity—“Sedition” or “Sicknesse”—were to be removed from the civic body. An unspoken practice developed at the Mutual Gaze section of the exhibition, where participants performing “irregular” gestures, such as giggling, too much blinking, or moving about too quickly, were ushered away to what facilitators came to call a “less demanding” activity. One woman was ushered out of the exhibition by a facilitator because she insisted on wearing a newspaper under her headphones to shield her head. Some facilitators led participants away from certain exercises if they were too unsettled to “properly” engage in a specific activity. This usually happened in the Mutual Gaze exercise. At one point, a security guard approached me to share his opinion that a particular public participant was “ruining it for everyone else” by laughing and “carrying on” and to ask if I thought he should be ejected. This moment was a curious inversion of the facilitator and security divide, in which the security guard felt compelled to offer an opinion based on aesthetics. As a facilitator, I felt I was being drawn into a security question; I was asked to take a view of the artwork as though it were a civic body, a client in need of protection. I shook my head and offered the opinion that ejecting the person would be unnecessary. This example nonetheless shows how the logic of aesthetic encounter within In Residence overlapped with issues of safety and security, making the political metaphor of a well-functioning civic body all the more relevant to a form of artwork reliant on the coordinated “physical and emotional journey”—the “Health” and “Concord”—of unrelated humans.

Disruptions seemed to arise as resistance to the delineated and repetitive nature of the tasks; that is, the slow-walk, the counting, and the gazing. Some participants confided in me, “I don’t want to follow the rules.” I questioned whether human communication, free will, and intimacy were really possible in the performance of these repetitions; alternatively, was it possible to activate a genuine, collective enactment of “presence”? Bishop and Kunst both see disruption of the status quo and the creation of shared realities as criteria for good participatory art and institutions. Bishop argues that good participatory art can differentiate itself from “festival art” by producing “disruptive events that testify to a shared reality between viewers and performers, and which defy not only agreed ways of thinking about pleasure, labor and ethics, but also the intellectual frameworks we have inherited to understand these ideas today.”
Kunst’s proposition is that we need a new sort of institution “where vulnerability is not exposed to be protected, but where in vulnerability we are actually not alone” (2015:12–13). Such an institution would “deeply disturb the smooth operations of social logistics today and intervene with their material strength, because they would also be able to be changed and influenced by what they create, organize and put into practice” (13). By Bishop and Kunst’s logic, the participants who disrupted In Residence suggest that good—if “good” means democratizing—participatory art must not only be disruptive in the sense of intervening in people’s habituated ways of being and living; it must also tolerate disruption of its own aims and tone. The artwork would need to accept the vulnerability of reliance on participant labor.

While In Residence was participatory, it was not about democracy, as implied by its tiered structure of participation. But within that tiered structure, facilitators and participants were given a great deal of room to make choices. From the perspective of a facilitator, In Residence suggested that the divisions of labor separating critic, curator, and artist were not entirely fixed in the context of performance. They were sometimes openly discussed, debated, or written as private thoughts in notebooks. Sometimes, critiques were offered in whispers during the work. For example, discussions took place in which facilitators defended a choice to move during an exercise or not to move at all. Some liked to give spoken instructions to the public while others withheld speech. Some preferred to stand at the entrance of the exhibition space and promptly take a participant’s hand, while others avoided physical contact with the public or kept it to a minimum. These kinds of decisions were negotiations between a personal artistic rationale and the set parameters of the artwork. Facilitators also debated and discussed each other’s choices, asking, “why did you move that person away from the rice and lentils counting?” or “why is everyone congregating at the entrance? The entrance should be clear!” At other times, facilitators would offer authoritative narratives about the meaning and function of the artwork, assuming a kind of curatorial voice, particularly in frank discussions that took place in the “debrief room”; this room was positioned just outside the main exhibition area where members of the public were invited to write, record, or discuss their experiences with facilitators. I liked to ask participants if they categorized their experiences inside the exhibition as art. Many agreed, “Yes, it is art,” whereas others felt that there were “too many rules.” Collaboration by facilitators was encouraged by both Peisinger and Abramović, who would sometimes note their astonishment at the seeming independence of the exhibition, the way it seemed to flow and carry on as an entity held together by something other than the singular artist’s intention or by a uniform curatorial rationale. It is difficult to judge whether these small maneuvers, choices, and dialogues added to or expanded the institutional and fixed parameters of In Residence, but they do suggest a structure of participation and labor that extends and sometimes complicates current critique of Abramović’s role in the field.

I Was Probably Failing at Presence

In Residence as a Participant

BALKIN: I arrived at Pier 2/3 on a Saturday around 12:30 p.m. I had stayed on in Sydney for an extra day following a conference and had a flight to catch at 5. I was asked to leave my belongings in a locker, including my phone and watch, because, a Kaldor staff member in the entry area explained, I was “about to enter time and space.” As I began to put my coat in the locker, another staff member suggested that I might want to keep it on, since the performance space would be cold. The scripted line and the care for my bodily comfort, delivered by Kaldor staff in the intermediate space between In Residence and the outside world, typified how the project configured institutional performance and blurred distinctions among types of labor. I have structured my account of the project in order of my journey through the space.

During my visit Abramović was “present” only in the warm-up video. The warm-ups involved various kinds of breathing, shaking out my limbs, and massaging energy and warmth into my face. This mediated instruction in presence positioned the artist as a “method,” a
term Abramović has adopted to describe this retrospective and self-proclaimed legacy-driven stage of her performance practice (MAI 2015). By positioning Abramović’s presence as a transmissible method, the video ironized the idea that presence is unmediated even as the exercises stressed its corporeality. The warm-up video thus extended Amelia Jones’s claim that the conventional notion of presence as “a state that entails the unmediated co-extensivity in time and place of what I perceive and myself” is unhelpful for understanding Abramović’s recent performance practice (2011:18). But the video was only the most conventionally mediated transmitter of presence. In addition to coaching us to wake up our bodies and senses, the video primed us to accept a series of stand-ins for Abramović—the facilitators—as instructors in presence. In Residence not only suggested that “experience is mediated, representational” (42); it also positioned humans as media.

Before entering the main performance space I was given noise-canceling headphones, which I found restful. In addition to muffling sound, the headphones distinguished the participants from the facilitators, who did not wear them. My first facilitator, a blonde woman who seemed a bit younger than me, took my hand. I smiled at her, wondering if she would smile back—was she allowed to? She did. We walked slowly through the space, holding hands. This responsiveness differentiated In Residence from The Artist is Present, which Jones describes as “a simulation of relational exchange with others (not just the artist, but the other spectators, the guards, the ‘managers’ of the event). For [Jones] this felt like an inadvertent parody of the structure of authentic expression and reception of ‘true’ emotional resonance that modernist art discourse […] so long claimed” (2011:18). In Residence assigned greatly expanded roles to the participants and facilitators, with both groups taking the “physical and emotional journey” Abramović associates with her performance practice. The facilitators also functioned as managers, caregivers, and gentle disciplinarians. The expanded roles of people other than Abramović, in relation to her absence from the space, invoked and inverted the authenticity Jones associates with modernist art discourse in light of Abramović’s celebrity. The shift from warm-up video to hand-holding facilitator might be understood as a shift from the simulation of relational exchange to authentic relational exchange—as invoking and then circumventing the problem of Abramović’s celebrity presence. But I actually think positioning the facilitators as stand-ins for Abramović in the wake of the warm-up video shows the limits of authenticity as a way of thinking about relational exchange and expression. Some parts of In Residence, including the warm-up video, struck me as parodies of liveness, presence, and authenticity, even as they performed their intended functions. On the other hand, facilitators—another key element of the production—responded sensitively to my facial and bodily expressions of feeling. In other words, In Residence left room for varied, uneven, and sometimes humorous modes of emotional engagement with its human and nonhuman media.

My initial experience in the main performance space was one of public intimacy. My facilitator and I headed for the Beds at the end of the pier. It was not clear to me who was leading: was she guiding me there because I was supposed to go there first, or was my facilitator walking straight ahead because I was? We arrived at a bed and my facilitator tucked me in carefully. I thought of my grandmother, the only other person who has tucked me into bed as an adult, and the pleasure it gave her. I stayed a while, mostly resting with my eyes closed, but sometimes

8. Although Abramović was absent when I visited, she did sometimes move through the performance space, surrounded by security. Abramović’s presence as a celebrity with her slow-motion entourage in tow would have significantly altered my experience. I am interested in the possibility of Abramović positioning herself (and her attendant security) as a disturbing element in an otherwise tranquil space, but, based on D’Urso’s experience of feeling indistinguishable from Abramović’s security, as well as my own occasional disciplinary interactions with the facilitators, it seems more likely that Abramović’s presence in the space made a difference of degree rather than of kind.
watching people around me get up and move to my left, where they began very slow walks across the pier. I felt happy. When I got up, I saw D’Urso and another facilitator watching over the beds. I waved to her, wondering if she was allowed to wave back. She did, and mouthed “Hi, Sarah” — I imagine she said it out loud. As I moved toward the slow walkers, D’Urso remade my bed. Although public intimacy is one of the hallmarks of celebrity (Roach 2007; Marshall [1997] 2014), and although In Residence responded to Abramovic’s celebrity in a variety of ways, the bed exercise suggested a different sort of public intimacy grounded in vulnerability and care.

In Residence’s aesthetic ecology was sustained in part by the slow pace of all movement at the site. I found the slow walkers beautiful — they looked like a film in slow motion. At first I was pleased by the idea that only a collective, unspoken agreement and the facilitators’ modeling kept the pace consistent, but then I discovered the pace was gently enforced. I walked too quickly and a facilitator — a dark-haired man about my age, who was already walking hand-in-hand with an older woman — took my hand to slow me down. He looked at his own feet to show me how to walk. For a short time the three of us walked together. When the facilitator let go of my hand he went on walking with the older woman. The correction had been gentle, but I became anxious about walking wrong. There was a lot of shed to cover. I saw one walker move confidently out of the space and into another area. If I tried the same thing, the dark-haired facilitator might take my hand again. I slowed my pace even further to let the facilitator and the woman get ahead of me, after which I planned to make a slow-motion break for it. Inching along, I felt how difficult it was to keep my pace evenly slow. I noticed my balance was bad on my right side. This period of increased corporeal awareness brought on by doing the exercise properly in order to escape it was the height of my experience of In Residence. I was present because and in spite of myself and others, and the movement was its own sort of discipline. When I felt there was enough space between me and the dark-haired facilitator I veered — slowly, but with purpose — out of the walking area.

A different facilitator, a dark-haired woman in perhaps her 40s, took my hand. This facilitator made eye contact more than the others; she emanated care and what I perceived as a near-evangelical presence. She guided me to seats that faced each other in little pinewood cubicles, where participants gazed into each other’s eyes in the manner of The Artist is Present. In this area Abramovic most strongly referenced and circumvented her own celebrity presence. By restaging the work that marked her shift to celebrity performance artist (Marcus 2015), the gazing participants represented both Abramovic and themselves. With its clear allusion to The Artist is Present, the gaze exercise showed how In Residence departed from (and in some ways inverted) a recent trend in participatory art that Bishop calls “delegated performance.” In delegated performance, Bishop argues, artists rely on amateur performers “who metonymically signify an irrefutable socio-political issue (homelessness, race, immigration, disability, etc.)”; in so doing, “the artist outsources authenticity and relies on his performers to supply this more viv-

Figure 4. Facilitators usher people into beds. Marina Abramović: In Residence. Kaldor Public Art Project, Sydney, Australia, 2015. (Photo by Sandy Edwards)
idly, without the disruptive filter of celebrity” (Bishop 2012: loc. no. 4669–72). In Residence’s facilitators and participants did not signify an obvious sociopolitical issue in the demographic sense Bishop discusses. The facilitators’ two days’ training in the Abramović Method positioned them somewhere between experts and amateurs. (Indeed, D’Urso reports that Abramović and Peisinger raised the possibility that facilitators might be called in to facilitate future MAI projects, cutting down on the need to retrain facilitators for each project.) And rather than eliminating the filter of celebrity, the Mutual Gaze exercise expanded it to include the participants. Although her changing relationship to the public seems to have spurred Abramovic to absent herself from performance spaces, ostensibly removing the filter of celebrity, the Mutual Gaze exercise troubled easy oppositions between celebrity and authenticity by positioning participants as celebrity re-enactors. This makes sense in the work of an artist for whom presence, a concept bound up with celebrity as well as temporal embodied experience, is the state being performed.

The gaze was also the only exercise during my visit that was centrally organized around interaction between participants—perhaps because it was also where we most obviously stood (or sat) in for Abramovic. The facilitators guided participants to sit across from one another and then withdrew. The first woman to sit across from me refused to do the exercise as prescribed; after briefly making eye contact and smiling crookedly, she looked everywhere except at me. I wondered whether she intended to buck the system, or if she was uncomfortable. I decided to look at her, even if she would not look at me. Would she look back? No. She left. Having had only moderate success at slow walking I wanted to do better at gazing, so I waited for another partner. Soon a facilitator guided a young man to the seat across from me. He was a good partner. He seemed a little sad. Reverting back to a habit I developed in childhood in case telepaths existed, I thought very clearly at him: Are you sad? I waited. Nothing. I wondered how he thought I felt. I feel OK. I didn’t like the slow walking, but the beds are good. I hope your life will be good. Although we did not achieve telepathy, the exercise showed that the affective power of gazing into a stranger’s eyes is undiminished—if changed—by reenactment.

But In Residence tipped over into the ridiculous when I was made to reenact part of my own journey through the space. When I left the gazing area my ultra-present facilitator appeared again, took my hand, and led me back to the beds. No, I gestured, I already did that. No one had said I wasn’t allowed to talk, but I felt I couldn’t. The facilitator gestured again toward the bed, emanating presence. I shrugged, OK, and got into bed again—the same one. She tucked me in. Maybe it was a punishment for not completing the Slow Walk, I thought, and I would have to do it all again and I would miss my flight. I felt I was probably failing at presence. Relaxing, I noticed dust motes floating at about the same pace as the slow walkers. I got up and moved deliberately away from the beds and the walkers. I noticed that a woman who had just left the gazing area was crying. My ultra-present facilitator was caring for her, touching her gently on the arm and saying something neither of us could hear.

The next stations, which were in a shared area, involved sitting in a chair staring at a colored square on a white wall and then standing on a raised wooden platform with my eyes closed. The colored squares invoked a historical avantgarde aesthetic evocative of Kazimir Malevich and Piet Mondrian. Staring at a blue square on a white wall, I felt like a parody of the historical avantgarde’s institutionalization in modern art galleries. There was a humor to the squares, which were a perfect modern art cliché. In this area I also enacted the move from visual to performance art. When I got up from my chair, a facilitator led me to a platform, held my hand for a moment, and left me to stand on my own. In moving from Looking at Color to Platform I shifted from looking at art to being it, though as a participant I was of course “being” art the whole time. My being was bound up with the being of others, with nonhuman objects, and with histories of art and reception. Although in comparison with the beds, slow walking, and gazing, the squares and platforms left me cold, in retrospect I find myself increasingly interested in
In this section of *In Residence*, which mapped awareness of the false binary of passivity and activity onto the history of visual and performance art.

A growing number of scholars are rejecting binaries having to do with activity and passivity and the ways participatory art supposedly activates the spectator. Influential in this discussion is Jacques Rancière’s *The Emancipated Spectator*, which traces the alignment of spectatorship with passivity to modernist understandings of audiences, specifically referencing Bertolt Brecht’s practice of distancing audiences from the staged action and Antonin Artaud’s practice of collapsing that distance ([2009] 2011:4). “Faced with the [contemporary] hyper-theatre that wants to transform representation into presence and passivity into activity,” Rancière “proposes instead to revoke the privilege of vitality and communitarian power accorded the theatrical stage, so as to restore it to an equal footing with the telling of a story, the reading of a book, or the gaze focused on an image” (22). The emergence of performance art out of the early-20th-century avantgarde’s attempts to collapse art and life makes Rancière’s proposition about the theatrical stage in some respects belated. But his rejection of representation/presence and passivity/activity binaries has influenced current thinking about contemporary performance art, which “does not necessarily privilege the live moment or the artist’s own body, but instead engages in numerous strategies of mediation that include delegation and repetition” (Bishop 2012:loc. no. 4512–43). My short, slow journey from gazing at a colored square to standing on an energy platform suggests a kind of embodied teaching and learning of these concepts.10

Current skepticism about participatory art’s capacity to activate spectators is also rooted in its relationship to neoliberal economic structures and institutions. Drawing on Isabel Lorey’s analysis of the isolating, individualizing effects of the normalization of precarity under neoliberalism (2015), Kunst argues that contemporary participatory art reinforces “socialised isolation” even as it claims to “awaken the body and the subjectivity from its isolation and disclose art as a place of sociality” (Kunst 2015:8). MAI certainly has a history of perpetuating the precarious labor conditions that dominate the art world; the art blogger Jillian Steinhauer called the

---

9. See for example Bishop (2012); Foster (2015). See also Bertie Ferdman’s review essay in *PAJ*, “Participation and its Discontents” (2014). This troubling of the active/passive binary has also begun to make its way into debates about active and passive learning as educators question the modes of ‘active learning’ advocated by the neoliberal university (see Blenkinsop et al. 2016).

10. It would have been possible to visit the energy platforms before the colored squares, in which case a participant would not enact the same historical trajectory, but I do not think this element of chance in the encounter negates my point (or the museal avantgarde aesthetic of the area). Tála Linz’s account of the exercises in *In Residence*’s catalogue also explicitly links Looking at Color to the historical avantgarde and Platform to live performance (in Kaldor 2015:30, 35).
organization out for advertising four unpaid positions in 2014 (Steinhauer 2014). In contrast, *In Residence’s* facilitators were paid an hourly rate that was above Australian minimum wage for their work, although the payment came from Kaldor rather than MAI. As paid contract work, *In Residence* was neither economically exploitative nor invested in ameliorating conditions of precarity. At the level of its economic and labor practices, MAI might best be characterized as unremarkable—“participatory” in the nontraditional sense of participating in, rather than resisting, dominant contemporary institutional and economic frameworks.

Hal Foster cites the Museum of Modern Art’s 2010 Abramović retrospective as an example of how the reenactment of live art in museums introduces a “zombie time into these institutions” (2015:127), speculating that “the prevalence of the zombie trope in culture at large has to do with our neoliberal status as ‘human capital’” (178). Foster extends the idea that participatory art reinforces institutional status quos to the relations among work and viewer:

> [M]ore than the viewer, it is the museum that the museum seeks to activate. However, this only confirms the negative image that some of its detractors have long had of it: that aesthetic contemplation is boring and that historical understanding is elitist; that the museum is a mausoleum. Just as the viewer must be deemed passive in order to be activated, so a work of art and art museum alike must be deemed lifeless so that they can be reanimated. (135)

An essay excerpted from Foster’s book, “In Praise of Dead Art,” is accompanied in *The Art Newspaper* by an image from *The Artist is Present*. The image is exemplary of the extent to which Abramović has become synonymous with the sort of participatory art Foster argues against. At the level of cultural production, perhaps MAI will become (or already is) the Oprah’s Book Club of performance art, scorned by an art world in which liminality confers cultural capital, but afforded a high degree of recognition and influence.

Abramović’s art is both participatory and dead, or something close to it. Abramović’s works of the 1970s were grounded in “radical passivity” (Clemens 2015:145), and her own descriptions of her late work frame it as a development of that early practice: famously, movie posters for the 2012 documentary *Marina Abramovic: The Artist is Present* were printed with the quotation, “The hardest thing is to do something which is close to nothing” (Akers 2012). The *In Residence* warm-up video’s instruction in presence (bodily activation) prepared participants for a series of near nonactivities. We were activated for laborious receptivity. Perhaps people should also do warm-up exercises before viewing traditionally “dead” art, since aesthetic contemplation is also an embodied, sensory activity. Regardless, it seems clear that a durational performance practice grounded in doing something that is close to nothing—and teaching that “nothing” to others—already frames passivity and activity as well as participation and spectatorship in non-dualistic ways. Moreover, to the extent that Abramović is performing the institutionalization of her own legacy, the museum is a mausoleum, albeit an active one; thus, Clemens describes her late work as “museal auto-embalming glorifications” (2015:145).

It would be easy to assert that since *The Artist is Present* Abramović has become a parody of herself. But I think that her intelligence about the history of art and modern celebrity make a compelling case for a strain of camp historical consciousness in the “embodied documentation” (Cesare and Joy 2006:170) of her late work. At her keynote lecture in Sydney, Abramović explained to the facilitators that her grandmother spent years ironing and re-ironing her funereal garments in preparation for death. This anecdote sheds camp-gothic light on *In Residence’s*

11. See also Miranda (2014), which includes a response from MAI.

12. The Australian minimum wage was $16.87/hour AUD in June 2015, increasing to $17.29/hour AUD on 1 July 2015 (Fair Work Commission 2015).
repetitive domestic tasks, such as tucking participants into beds and remaking them. Moreover, in her “Artist Manifesto,” which Abramović performed at the same public lecture, she claims, “AN ARTIST SHOULD GIVE INSTRUCTIONS BEFORE / THE FUNERAL SO THAT EVERYTHING IS DONE THE WAY HE WANTS IT / THE FUNERAL IS THE ARTIST’S LAST ART PIECE BEFORE LEAVING” (in Clemens et al. 2015:17). During the Q&A period in Sydney, an audience member asked what instructions Abramović would give for her own funeral. Abramović expressed her wish that at the event of her death there be three Abramovićs that are buried simultaneously: one body in Belgrade, one in New York, and one in Berlin. She added, “no one knows where the real one is” (Abramović 2015a). This death scenario is a joke about celebrity presence that also extends the substitutional logic of In Residence and suggests the humor of Abramović’s late performance practice. In her institutional incarnation Abramović is the living dead. This is not to dismiss her, but to assert her relevance for a contemporary moment when we are increasingly attuned to the ways our bodies, thoughts, and feelings tangle with economies, institutions, and media. “Presence,” in this context, is mediated, corporeal, and perhaps historicized.

At the final station I sorted and counted rice and lentils. Many participants made designs, which the facilitators reformed into mixed piles as participants left their seats. Facilitators also provided participants with sheets of paper and pencils, which we could use to keep count if we wished. When I sat down, the facilitators had not yet cleared away the paper belonging to the previous participant, who had written, “too many 😊.” When I read the good-natured defeat in the previous participant’s note, I felt empowered to sort and count only for as long as I found it pleasurable. The Australian artist Christian Thompson—one of the 12 who were mentored by Abramović in Sydney—reported that Abramović was unimpressed by the six hours he spent sorting the rice and lentils: her deflationary response was “Yeah? Oh, good” (in Tan 2015). The video that accompanies the Guardian’s feature on Thompson shows Abramović demonstrating the Method, including an exercise in which she sits next to a pile of rice that she claims would take “at least sixteen hours to count” (Tan 2015). The implication is that Thompson’s six hours are comparatively small potatoes. But the video’s editing is at odds with the durational aspects of the exercise. The video shows Abramović slowly counting out the first 10 grains and then cuts to grain 6,735, ending a few seconds later at grain 6,737, with most of the pile still uncounted. In Residence’s distribution of labor across human and nonhuman media performed some of the same functions as the video’s camera cuts. Perhaps, then, the humor and intelligence of Abramović’s distributed performance are better captured by cessation than duration: the “almost nothing” of the artist leaving, slowly.

Death and the Institution
Beyond Neoliberalism

Abramović “is at the forefront of an industrial-strength institutionalization of performance histories” (Jones 2011:19). Starting with The Artist is Present, Abramović has gone beyond exhibitions in “the most conservative modernist institutions within the art academy [...] the Guggenheim and MoMA’ (33) to create “institutional assemblages” (Clemens 2015:141) that foreground museums and other organizational infrastructure as part of the art. As a result, Abramović’s late performance practice sits uncomfortably with the supposedly democratizing

13. In her response, Abramović seemed unimpressed, but not insulting; she has continued to mentor Thompson, who in turn defended her during the public outcry over her comments about Indigenous Australians in August 2016 (see NITV 2016).

imperatives of participatory art, which have often been understood to resist a neoliberal world order (see Bishop 2012: loc. no. 275–85). Our two separate experiences of the event show that although neoliberalism is unquestionably at work in *In Residence* and its corporate and labor economics, neoliberalism alone is inadequate in accounting for *In Residence* as art. Our engagement with neoliberal institutions is so pervasive that in order for the concept of neoliberalism to be useful, it cannot be a dismissal or a totalizing concept.

Currently MAI is a mobile project that collaborates with partner venues and organizations. In addition to *In Residence*, MAI projects have included *512 Hours* (2014) at the Serpentine Gallery in London as well as numerous talks and lectures at museums and art festivals. Abramović selected the site of MAI’s future permanent home, a 33,000-square-foot building in Hudson, New York, that is currently being redesigned and renovated, partly for its proximity to other institutions: “Hudson is a central hub between existing arts organizations and schools, including Dia:Beacon, Mass MoCA, Storm King Arts Center, Olana Arts, Bard College, Cornell University, Williams College, and Harvard University” (MAI Hudson 2015). The implication is that MAI Hudson will partner with some or all of these places as well as foster international collaborations and exchanges (Orrell 2010:53). In conceiving of her legacy as an institution, Abramović deliberately engages with art economies characterized by, on the one hand, large-scale partner organizations and, on the other, crowdfunding: a Kickstarter campaign raised $661,452 for MAI in 2013 (MAI Hudson 2015).

The Kaldor Public Art Project, which collaborated with Abramović on *In Residence*, does not have the global institutional weight of the Guggenheim or MoMA; however, in an Australian context it is a heavy hitter committed to “[t]ransforming the cultural landscape of Australia” (Kaldor 2016) by sponsoring art projects of international importance. *In Residence*’s catalogue contains 11 pages of organizations described variously as supporters, donors, patrons, partners, benefactors, and collaborators (Kaldor 2015:95–105). Kaldor also differs from the Guggenheim and MoMA in its mission. Kaldor is a Sydney-based arts organization “dedicated to taking art outside museum walls and transforming public spaces with innovative contemporary projects” (Kaldor 2016). Kaldor is thus not concerned with performance documentation or preservation to the same degree as the Guggenheim or MoMA. But the idea of “taking art outside museum walls” still participates in the logic of activation and deadness Foster attributes to the institutionalization of live art, only rather than seeking to activate the museum, the Kaldor mission leaves it for dead. This is not to condemn Kaldor, but rather to show how *In Residence* as a public art project outside of museum walls still partook of the logic of the neoliberal institutional assemblage, particularly in its shift work, security presence, and links to an array of corporate, governmental, and educational organizations. And *In Residence*’s invocations of Abramović’s prior work, most notably in the Mutual Gaze exercise, meant that the “zombie time” of institutionalized reenactment was alive and well in the shipping shed.

But, like globalization, neoliberal critique potentially homogenizes its object(s). Abramović’s own varied performances of deadness—for example, MAI’s intended status as her legacy, her plan for her own funeral, and the substitutional logic of *In Residence*—give us a clue for how to open up this critique to account more fully for *In Residence*. As a facilitator, D’Urso experienced *In Residence* not only as shift work, but also as a Hobbesian body politic that gave the impression of a self-regulating life beyond its constituent parts. As a participant, Balkin was struck by Abramović’s simultaneous absence from the space and presence in the bodies of facilitators and participants who stood in for her. These insights together suggest the usefulness of situating *In Residence* in a longer history of institutional performance. *In Residence*’s undead qualities are an effect of the neoliberal institution, but they can also be understood in terms of Hobbes’s early modern political imaginary predicated on sovereignty. To call the performance a body politic is to show how talking about art in a neoliberal institutional framework already collapses a political imaginary into the structure of an artwork—i.e., “participation” is part of a political grammar that enters into aesthetics. What a 17th-century political imaginary can better account for
is the body of the sovereign, who is both a person and the charismatic embodiment of a community that does not operate on democratic principles. When In Residence located Abramović’s legacy in other people’s bodies, she performed the role of the dead sovereign. The expedient terminology of MAI and the Abramović Method incompletely describe what she is doing. In Residence suggests scholars looking to understand Abramović’s late performance practice will be better served by looking to her intended death scenario, a high camp performance of the king’s three bodies.

References


