

Responding to Site

The Performance Work
of Marilyn Arsem



Figure 31: Marilyn Arsem, *With the Others*, Durational performance in the Egyptian Gallery as part of Odd Spaces, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, MA, USA, May 2013. Photograph by Shane Godfrey.

With the Others

SANDRINE SCHAEFER

Installed strategically in its Egyptian wing, Marilyn Arsem is sited in the only room in The Museum of Fine Arts Boston that contains bodies on display (Figure 3.1). Like the mummies protected behind glass, Arsem is motionless. Lying underneath a museum bench, Arsem's body is anointed with fragrant jasmine oil and shrouded in black fabric. Her body is only seen by those looking for it, but the aroma heated on her skin fills the room and the spaces leading to it. The smell of jasmine is inescapable, fugitive, as it travels through the halls of the museum. Through this act of connecting her own living body to the corpses in the room, Arsem intentionally places her own body on display yet removes sight as the primary sense with which her body can be consumed. This is especially radical within the context of an encyclopedic art museum where vision and the illusion of permanence is unabashedly favored. The smell is a reward for the curious. It is an invitation to come close. It is an invitation to break any assumed etiquette witnesses may be assigning to this encounter learned from other experiences with performance. Coupled with Arsem's stillness, this reward for the curious creates a condition that calls the performing body into question. Who is actually on display here? Is it Arsem, the mummies, the viewers, or all of us?

Arsem identified seven hours as the necessary requirement for this piece titled, *With the Others*¹ to be fully realized. Here, it is important to address the confusion between the terms *durational* and *endurance* when referring to performance artworks that unfold over extended durations.

While there is often overlap between durational and endurance works, neglecting differentiation between the two risks undermining a work's intention and the nuances in its execution. In endurance work, what is endured is a specific task and what is privileged is the impact of this task on the body. In this tendency, duration is defined as the time that it takes to produce a desired effect/affect on/inside the body. In this tendency time is temporarily removed from the body, transferred to the task of the action, and then returned back to the body. Endurance works often conclude when the performer has reached exhaustion or the task has reached completion. When this occurs, it is apparent that the work's treatment of time is reliant on the boundaries of the body, rendering the body heroic. In durational work however, the material of the body is not privileged over the material of time. What is endured is not the impact of a task on the body, but time itself. Durational work strips the notion of time from its anthropocentrism and asks what constitutes a performing body. One consequence of confusing endurance work with durational work is an assumption that a piece consists only of the same action or set of actions performed repeatedly. This is often due to endurance works' reliance on the accumulation of the impact of a task. This assumption can result in a reductive reading of durational work that instead relies on moving through multiple temporalities.

While Arsem uses endurance as a strategy in *With the Others*, understanding the work as durational is critical. Otherwise the scales of time that the work investigates risk

becoming lost. In *With the Others*, non-linear time is actively dismantled. Simultaneous unfolding multiplicities of past, present, and speculative future are made explicit through Arsem's choice to actively connect her body to a specified history preserved within the museum (Figure 3.2). Arsem's treatment of her body also crosses other borders of time. With flesh crossing into Ancient Egypt, Arsem never abandons her present time. Her body fuses with a contemporary piece of furniture (the museum bench) allowing her body to simultaneously exist in at least two easily identifiable time periods for the seven-hour duration of the performance. Arsem's body not only wears the present and Ancient Egypt on its surface, but also evokes countless histories including (but not limited to), VALIE EXPORT's *Body Configurations* (1972–76), ACT UP's "Die Ins" and "Die Ins" enacted across the United States by the Black Lives Matter movement in recent years. These conjured histories are only a few that manifest through Arsem's audience's subjective perception.

Another notable consequence unique to endurance work is the sensationalism of the imagined duress on the artist's body. While this imagined duress can produce empathetic transference between the artist and viewer that allows direct access into a piece, it can also distract a viewer's reading of the work. Arsem creates another performance condition that is aware of this potential and further positions this piece as durational. The artist renders her body invisible, fully covering herself in fabric as she hides in the shadows cast by the museum bench. The choice to cover anything that distinguishes her body (specifically the choice to conceal her face) takes away the viewer's ability to recognize Arsem's personhood. This removal of identifying features transforms her body into a stand in for someone or something else. This choice coupled with the presence of the visceral reaction induced by the smell of jasmine forces the audience to confront their own corporeal thresholds. Although the aroma never fully vanishes over the piece's seven-hours, it loses intensity. This sensorial shift

throughout the piece mimics processes of decay and operates at a human scale. This results in an encounter where witnesses are asked to contemplate their own mortality alongside Arsem and the mummies. Arsem's execution of *With the Others* moves beyond obvious tendencies for audience interaction and transfers the inquiry of the work into the bodies of those witnessing. This inquiry is corporeally felt long after the performance has concluded, a residue that simultaneously pulls the present toward the past and the future.



Figure 3.2: Marilyn Arsem, *With the Others*, Durational performance in the Egyptian Gallery as part of *Odd Spaces*, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, MA, USA, May 2013. Photograph by Shane Godfrey.

ENDNOTES

1. *With the Others* was part of *Odd Spaces*, organized by Liz Munsell for the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston on Wednesday, May 15, 2013 from 11 a.m. to 8:30 p.m. Participating artists included Marilyn Arsem, David Levine, John C. Gonzalez, Sandrine Schaefer, and Philip Fryer. MFA/ Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, *Odd Spaces*, May 15, 2013, accessed July 5, 2019, <https://www.mfa.org/programs/special-event/odd-spaces>.

The Lightness and Darkness of Becoming-Marilyn

PAUL COUILLARD

*And so night and day are in mutual embrace:
they appear to be opposites, even enemies,
but the truth they serve is one...*
Rumi¹

In considering Marilyn Arsem's participatory performances, I am struck by a particular phenomenon. Experiencing the work as a participant, I have sometimes found myself engaged with what I will call becoming-Marilyn. What I seek to capture with this curious phrase is a possibility of movement inflected with a rare and thoughtful expansiveness that allows participants to come up against themselves and transform in unexpected ways.

In their book *A Thousand Plateaus*, becoming- is one of a cluster of concepts Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari put forth in opposition to sedimented Eurocentric notions of rationalism, linearity, and hierarchy. Rather than insisting on an incontrovertible being that can never be satisfactorily proven, "becoming-" suggests an ever-dynamic moving-toward, an open field of play and discovery. More urgently, however, the term is set against the taken-for-granted subjectivity of an enclosed human ego—the I of René Descartes' cogito as much as the psychoanalytical ego of Sigmund Freud. The concept of becoming- is a tool of assemblage that allows Deleuze and Guattari to explore "a mode of individuation very different from that of a person,

subject, thing, or substance."² Think of those astonishing moments of wonder—surely you have had them—where you have found yourself opening onto the world in a way that no longer corresponds to the usual scale of your human self and senses, a giving-over to experience that takes you beyond your sense of self: becoming-this-moment, becoming-wind, becoming-the-scent-of-lilac. What was previously certain or simply unquestioned is suddenly made strange, and you absorb and integrate an otherness; things are no longer as they were because you are no longer who you were. These are moments of becoming-.

Becoming- suggests an experience of transformation, and a dynamic space of flux. Transformation is frequently cited as a fundamental agency of art, and in particular of time-based, performative practices. Think, for example, of Antonin Artaud's equation of theater with alchemy,³ or Jerzy Grotowski's hyperbolic descriptions of the secular holiness of an actor who "does not exhibit his body, but annihilates it, burns it, frees it from every resistance to any psychic impulse."⁴ Arsem herself acknowledges transformation as a fundamental aim of performance, writing, "Performance is driven by curiosity, and the quest is discovery, transformation and knowledge."⁵ As a description, becoming- is distinct from other common depictions of transformative potential, such as ecstasy or channeling. An ecstatic transformation is viewed as a kind of transcendent experience

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