

You had to be there

Silent Dinner Party, Paddington, September 2016.

Rilka Oakley

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What really matters in art is the enhanced experience of being in the world...¹

The experience of art is a very personal thing. Every individual brings their own expectations, thoughts, personal history and understanding to an encounter with an artwork. As Anthony Bond says above, art is about enhancing our experience of the world. Honi Ryan's *Silent Dinners* certainly create an enhanced experience of ourselves in the world. They offer a new experience of social engagement and open a space to see what might happen if we remove verbal communication, amplifying our other senses.

The *Silent Dinners* are a cross between a participatory performance piece and a meditation on social interaction. They marry the instructional with the durational. Ryan describes them as social sculptures, distancing herself from the theoretical realms of relational aesthetics.² In opposition to placing everyday activities in the gallery context, Ryan specifies that the dinner parties take place in their natural environment – somewhere intimate (a home, a restaurant or other informal space) – creating the sense of connectedness that would occur at a normal dinner party. Ryan defines aesthetics as “the provocation of feeling” and as the antinomy of anaesthetic (the absence of feeling)³ – thus allowing for anything and everything to be included into the realm of art/aesthetics without needing the gallery context to legitimise it.

Time is essential for the dinner parties to exist, they are clocked against the temporality of seconds, minutes, hours. There is a tendency in our society to rush: through the day; through the gallery; through the food; through the routines of life. The requirement to stay at the *Silent Dinner* for two hours – to commit to participating for a specific length of time *in silence* – creates an experience over time – *in time* – it is not a momentary fleeting thing. As is the nature of durational art there is progress – through the meal, through the becoming

¹ Anthony Bond *the idea of art: Building a contemporary international art collection*, Sydney, NewSouth Publishing, 2015, p. 17

² Conversation between the author and Honi Ryan, January 2017

³ Honi Ryan *Gestures of Intent: a year of nomadic social practice*, Masters of Fine Art in Creative Practice, Project Report/Research Paper, Transart Institute, 2015, p. 11. Here Ryan discusses aesthetic/anaesthetic. Anaesthetic being the numbing of feeling.

accustomed process, through the evening, through the alcohol, through attempts at communication without words.

As an unaccompanied participant at a *Silent Dinner* I easily slipped into the role of observer. I was aware of this happening and found it easier than attempting silent conversation with people who I had no previous connection to. With no need for casual conversation I was quite comfortable when normally I may have felt awkward. However, these things are anything but static. The antics of the other participants were humorous, annoying and sometimes hard to tolerate. I was frustrated by the young man next to me taking out his iPhone to photograph the experience. But I didn't feel like taking it on as my cause to stop him. However, the woman on my other side did. She took his phone. Mimed for him to stop, gave it back. Took it the next time he dragged it out. This continued as a kind of stand-off. Neither backing down. The girlfriend of the iPhone guy pleaded with him to stop – he was embarrassing her. He would stop for a while and then temptation rose again and out came the phone.

Being a bit of a purist it annoyed me that my experience was being tainted by the less committed participants near me. This was something to get over quickly. I have learnt from my own meditation practice to be a witness; to allow feelings, thoughts and sensations to pass through me without (overly) reacting to them. This previously acquired skill enabled my comfortable attendance at the dinner. The most delightful part of the evening for me was an uninhibited silent dance with the other party goers, accompanied by a silent DJ. The other memorable thing was the sound of dinnerware tinkling and ringing as people ate without conversation but were unable to use their cutlery silently. It was an unfamiliar musical accompaniment to the meal.

The *Silent Dinners* are driven by our own inner workings and deeply personal, often complex, issues around meals, social gatherings, normal niceties and ways of communicating. Our experience also depends on our tolerance of others, our ability to allow things to wash over us, following the ebb and flow of ideas without the need to voice them. Ryan is putting a microscope on our habitual behaviours around social interaction, food and sharing space with others. In terms of a personal experience there is nothing quite like being pushed gently into something uncomfortable. In terms of an art experience the more challenging the better.

In this situation it really is the viewer who brings the work of art to life – without their personal history, their language and communication skills, their expectations – without their ingrained social behaviours the dinner party would be something else, someone else's story. Ryan describes this as working with "the intangible space between people ... the process of relating."⁴ In this sense her creative medium is what occurs between people during a social sculpture.

⁴ Honi Ryan *Gestures of Intent: a year of nomadic social practice*, Masters of Fine Art in Creative Practice, Project Report/Research Paper, Transart Institute, 2015, p. 25

It is impossible for me to write about Ryan's *Silent Dinners* without mentioning one of the foremothers of durational performance art Marina Abramović. I first encountered Abramović through early documentation of her performances from the 1970s. I was lucky enough to be in Venice in 1997 when she was the artist for the Italian Pavilion where she sat scrubbing a mound of meaty bones clean; as time passed the stench from the Pavilion repelled people – venturing in to look was not for the faint-hearted. Her practice often involves pushing her body to its limits. In 2015, just after I had worked with Ryan on *Strange Embrace*,⁵ I attended Abramović's Kaldor Public Art Projects participatory work *Marina Abramović: In Residence* at Pier 2/3, Sydney. She had only recently decided that for the viewer to get the full experience of her work (and what she was getting from her performances), they had to join in totally and not just as observers with a minor role. In describing this transition Abramović describes herself as a conductor:

*It used to be very simple: the public was sitting in the audience and I was performing in front of them... 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.*⁶

I spent several hours lying in a bed having been tucked in by an attendant, looking a stranger in the eye, and walking as slowly as I could cope with down the length of the room, mindful of my relative speed compared to the more committed participants. As I walk I am conscious that, as Abramović and Ryan both assert, time-based performance is about the present, the now. In Abramović's words; "if you are not present right here, right now when this thing happens, you miss it."⁷ However, my mind turns to Ryan's mindfulness work included in *Strange Embrace* and my immediate thought is "Honi is better". Honi Ryan has a depth of connection and understanding giving her social sculptures a profundity that Abramović only holds onto through her celebrity.

The interesting thing is that Abramović has only recently involved the participation of the audience to this level. As she says above, in the past they were observer while she was performer. Ryan resolved this dichotomy long before Abramović made the shift and it's obvious in the authenticity of her work. Ryan uses time to allow things to be revealed, for the process to unfold, but also in a broader sense the passage of time has seasoned her and her work.

Honi Ryan is skilled at introducing people to silence and mindfulness techniques through familiar social activities. She guides the participants with her instructions (suggestions) and she also models what she expects. When people start clapping to acknowledge some silly

⁵ *Strange Embrace* 2015 curated by Rilka Oakley at Blue Mountains Cultural Centre, Katoomba NSW, including Cath Barcan, Anne Graham, Astra Howard, Daniel Kojta and Honi Ryan looking at encounters with strangers.

⁶ Marina Abramović in <http://kaldorartprojects.org.au/projects/marina-abramovic>, accessed January 2017

⁷ Marina Abramović in <http://mai.art/as-one-content/2016/4/6/history-of-long-durational-work>, accessed January 2017

antics Ryan waves her fingers to show what she expects instead of clapping. This quickly catches on and those who had been the loudest clappers became the keenest finger wavers.

The instructional element of Ryan's work signals artists such as John Cage, Richard Long and even Yoko Ono, but in my mind the most thought-provoking is Mike Parr. Instructions can serve as a guide, an idea to develop, the script to follow or simply a reminder. Parr's instructional pieces stand out through his continued ability to create authentic action. They are like extreme to-do lists or poems that erupt from his subconscious. He finds writing them down allays the desire temporarily, but eventually they rise to the surface and demand attention. Although Parr's performances are often sensational, he does not contrive sensation, rather he draws on what he describes as "irrepressible urges"⁸ that need to be acted out. His performative success lies in his ability to turn these potentially destructive urges into meaningful action.

Like Parr, Ryan creates authenticity. Her instructions are an invitation – an invitation into silence and mindfulness. Her guidelines serve to help the participant get full value out of the moment. If they can't follow the guidelines there are no penalties, no recriminations and no one is forced to stay – Ryan's invitation is to share an experience. During a dinner party she patiently encourages others back to silence over and over again. While some have stood in silent protest of anyone breaking the rules, Ryan gently guides them.

For centuries meditators have known that time spent in contemplation, silence and observation allows things to shift, breakthroughs to come and awareness to be increased. In terms of a durational social sculpture the breakthrough may seem small, but for the individual who has never sat in silence or who struggled for the entire two hours yet survived, the achievement is great. In this sense Ryan's contribution moves beyond creating an artwork, it is about creating mindfulness. In her words:

When art occupies elements of everyday, and becomes a lived practice, it acknowledges that there is so much potential in every step that we take, and that adding awareness to those steps can lead to building a more conscious society. Indeed, when art is a social practice, it may not create art, but build society instead.⁹

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⁸ Conversation between the author and Mike Parr, November 2016

⁹ Honi Ryan *Gestures of Intent: a year of nomadic social practice*, Masters of Fine Art in Creative Practice, Project Report/Research Paper, Transart Institute, 2015, p. 21