

## "PERFORMANCE AS EMBODIED THINKING": INTERVIEW WITH MARILYN ARSEM

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**Abstract:** Marilyn Arsem, performance artist and former professor at the *School of the Museum of Fine Arts*, Boston (SMFA), talks about her experiences and learnings in more than forty years of practicing and teaching performance, both institutionally and in workshops throughout the world. By following her thoughts, it is possible to understand a little more about Arsem's creational and creative processes which, in our understanding, depart more from a genuine impetus of investigating and experimenting with reality and in the present moment's tessitura (weaving) than from creating performances whose developments and objectives are somehow already conceived.

**Keywords:** Performance; Art; Aesthetic Thinking; Creative Process; Experiment.

## "PERFORMANCE AS EMBODIED THINKING": ENTREVISTA COM MARILYN ARSEM

**Resumo:** Marilyn Arsem, artista da performance e ex-professora da *School of the Museum of Fine Arts*, Boston (SMFA), fala sobre as suas experiências e aprendizados nos seus mais de quarenta anos de contato com a prática e o ensino da performance, seja institucionalmente, seja em workshops mundo afora. Ao acompanharmos as suas reflexões, é possível compreender um pouco mais acerca do próprio processo criativo e criador de Arsem, os quais, em nosso entendimento, partem muito mais de um ímpeto genuíno de investigação e experimento com o real e na tessitura do momento presente do que em criar performances cujos desenvolvimentos e objetivos finais já estejam, de certo modo, pré-concebidos.

**Palavras-chave:** Performance; Arte; Estética; Processo Criativo; Experimento.

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**Izis Tomass - Firstly, I want to thank you once again for agreeing to concede us this interview, it's truly an honor! I would like you to introduce yourself, telling us a little bit about your life's trajectory as you see it. Was there a crucial moment in your life that led you to your artistic and investigative practice?<sup>2</sup>**

**Marilyn Arsem:** The trajectory to where I am now in my practice began when I was a child, and it has been a steady path. I grew up in a small town outside of Buffalo, New York, USA. Even as a child I wanted to be an artist, and this was encouraged by both my parents. I drew and painted, and with my siblings wrote and performed plays for our family and neighbors. I also studied music and took dance lessons. But I would say that I encountered my technical limits in these media before I was able to express myself to my satisfaction.

In high school in the 1960s I began to create Happenings with my friends, because we were reading newspaper accounts of them in New York City. We were also seeing productions of experimental theater in Buffalo, as well as doing our own productions. Increasingly I became interested in creating performances that were visually-based. My only real option for training in performance at that time was to study theater. The term 'performance art' was not yet in use.

Within two years after graduating from college, I had rented a studio and invited a group of artists working in different media to join me in creating original performances. We were writers, performers, dancers, visual artists and musicians, and we worked collaboratively to create new work that we performed on the street and in galleries and bookstores throughout the Boston area. I was particularly interested in creating performances in which the audience had an active role. It was at this point that I became involved with the newly emerging performance art community of Boston. And shortly I recognized that the work that I was making could more appropriately be called performance art.

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<sup>2</sup>The interview took place online in July 2021.

## 2 - How do you think or perceive the notion of "body" in your practice? What is a performative body? What is a witnessing body? How are they constructed? How do they interact?

**Marilyn Arsem:** All we have, really, is our bodies. There is no escape. It is through our bodies that we perceive and engage with the world. But how we do that is learned from our families and our community. So yes, we are constructed by our culture. And our minds are part of our bodies; there is no separation. We think with and through our bodies as we experience the world.

[But I am not sure where this gets us in this conversation...]

People often assume that art is an object and something that is separate and independent of bodies. But it was a body that made it. Even visual art, such as painting or sculpture, could be considered the end result or documentation of a bodily process, so all artmaking could be considered a performative act. Initially you make the work for yourself, to satisfy something that you need to express. But then you want someone else to see it. What is it that you want to share, and why? What are you offering to others? What do you want from them in return? This exchange with the viewer is the completion of the work, and from it comes the most comprehensive understanding of it. Meaning is generated by, and between, the maker and the viewers of the work.

For ten years I taught a required four-week seminar to all incoming graduate students at the School of the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, which I called *The Body in Art: Presence and Ephemerality*. The focus of the seminar was on the theory and history of performance art, but because the students were artists working in all different media, I introduced each week's reading assignments by asking them to answer a series of questions related to their own practice. So as they discussed the academic essays and videos of performance art in each class, they also discussed their own practices relating to questions of dematerialization, corporeality, presence, and ephemerality.

The following are some of the questions that I asked them:

- What are the performative aspects of your own process?
- How does the work reveal them?
- What is the impact of your work on your body, and on your psyche?
  
- Who is your audience and how do you construct their experience?
- How do others interpret your work?
- How does that impact your understanding of it?
  
- How do you document your work?
- How does the documentation change your memory of your work, or the way that you think about your work?
- What remains of your work? How long will it last?
- What disappears from your work? When does it disappear?

I often ask students to identify the point at which they invite a viewer to see their work. I ask them to think about what aspects of their process they choose to keep private and what parts they decide to make public. The underlying question is about what they believe constitutes the work of art. The preparations for a performance, as well as cleaning up after it, might logically be included as part of the public event. When does the action really begin? When does the action actually end? What are the implications of hiding or revealing the preparations or the after-effects?

**Izis Tomass - How do you think or perceive the movement (fluxes, mechanisms, chains, threads) in your artistic practice?**

**Marilyn Arsem:** Nothing is static, everything is always changing and in transition. We are aware of some processes more than others, generally because the timeframe of change is shorter than our own.

Think about the pace that you maintain in your daily life. What systems around you operate more quickly and which operate more slowly? How do you adjust to those other timeframes?

When audience members say, after seeing a performance, "It was so slow!" I often ask them, "Slow compared to what?"

One of the aspects of durational work that I appreciate most is that it allows me to take the time to pay attention to processes that are even slower and more extended than my own. It is an opportunity to use as much time as I need to see and experience, and to contemplate and think about everything that is around me. There is no rush. I can take as much time as I need to make each decision in its own time and when it is needed.

**Izis Tomass - How does the otherness subject figure in your thoughts on art theory and praxis?**

**Marilyn Arsem:** Two immediate thoughts come to mind:  
Some days I wake up as if a stranger to myself.

and

We are all different degrees of 'other' to each other.

When I am making a performance, the first question that I ask myself is, "What do I want to learn?" But the next question is, "What do I want the audience to experience?" From the start I assume that the performance is a shared event between myself and the viewers. I consider the context in which I am performing the work and what expectations the viewers might have. I think about creating entry points in the work for an audience. I often try to find ways to make actions, materials or references less specific so that the connection to my own biography is less direct, and less reductive. Making the actions more open-ended allows viewers to more easily associate the actions with their own lives. I sometimes design a way for the viewer to engage in a process of discovery that is parallel to my own, or to even help me directly.

What I learn in doing a performance is not necessarily what the viewer learns while watching it. I recognize that when people see art they think about their own lives. They are hardly concerned about what the artwork means to the artists making it or even why they are doing it. They are much more interested in what it means to themselves and how it makes them think about their own existence.

Viewers bring their own agendas to the artwork. They view it through the lens of their ways of seeing and being in the world. I have no control over that, nor is even

really possible to anticipate the viewers' perspectives. In the end, I can only offer my own questions, and hope that they can find some value in witnessing or assisting me in my inquiry.

**Izis Tomass – How do you perceive the concept of site? What would be its historical weight and its mutable weight in the multiple dimensions that can cohabit in a place? Does the site dilate? Could the historical aspect of it, within itself, be also mutable? What is a site to you?**

**Marilyn Arsem:** Sites have their own personalities. Like anything, much of their history is hidden, or only partially revealed. How do you discover the past? How do you decipher its impact on the present? We are continually analyzing what has come before and imagining what the future might bring, but it is always through the lens of our own time and experiences. It is only in this place and at this moment that we can make a response to that which is in front of us.

When I travel to a location I read about its history and culture in advance. I always want to know how the United States has historically and is currently engaged with the country. Once I arrive I talk to people in the community. I am curious about what is in the air, what people are concerned about, and what they think is important to tell a white, and older, American woman. I know that I can't escape their assumptions about who I am and the country from where I come.

I engage in research that is as broad as possible, both before and during my initial encounter with a place. Nevertheless, what we can learn of the history of a place is always ever fragmented and partial. I attend to what is attracting me and capturing my interest. On what or where or who my attention focuses is a hint about what is on my mind, even before I am fully conscious of it.

How I choose a site is a mysterious process. As I look at possible locations with the organizers of an event, I pay attention to what I am paying attention to. It is a key to what I want to do as a performance. Something about a site's presence speaks to me, makes me feel as if I can be in conversation with it in some way and engage with it through some action or activity. It inspires feelings, ideas, questions, movement, materials, images. The process is intuitive, and it helps me identify what are often my underlying or still unconscious concerns.

Then the task is to choose an action and materials to create a performance in response to the site. Finally, I consider what a site might want of me in return. What might the place need or want? Here is where the idea of having a low impact on a site comes into play. How might I leave the place in better condition than I found it? What can I offer in return for the opportunity to be there?

I think about my performances as a kind of conversation between myself and the location. I try to remind myself that I am not there to deliver answers, but rather that the questions and the inquiry is what is important. That inquiry is related to a concern or question in my own life that has been triggered by the site. But the value of this new context is that it provides a different perspective from which to consider the question. I consider performance as embodied thinking, as a way to learn new things about the world and myself in it. Ideally the performance provides an experience for the audience that allows them to also learn something new.

**Izis Tomass –After reading your texts and the articles produced after your works, we could assume that, for you, the outcome of a performance is supposed to be totally new or unexpected. Still thinking about the site subject, how do you see the emergence of the “new” inside the historical materiality of space? How do these two elements interact with one another?**

**Marilyn Arsem:** I am sorry that you understood from my texts that the outcome is supposed to be totally new or unexpected. I didn't mean it in quite that way. To say it more clearly, some artists make works intending to produce a very specific end result. In those cases, actions and materials are selected to be able to achieve a predetermined conclusion. In those works the question is, "What can I do and use in order to make 'x' happen?" That is a very different process than one where the question is, "What happens if I do this?"

I am more interested in art where the process of doing or making is the work itself. The end result is less significant than the activity required to arrive there. Discoveries are made by the viewers in witnessing the artist's decisions in the process of making the work, and in the resulting transformations of the artist's body and the materials being used, as the action unfolds over time.

As an audience, I am not particularly interested in watching the perfectly executed action that has been rehearsed until there is little possibility of a mistake. This only succeeds when absolutely everything is controlled and there are no unexpected intrusions. But life is not really like that. I am much more interested in watching individual artists make decisions and solve, in the immediate moment, whatever unexpected complications arise as they proceed with the actions that they have chosen for their performance.

**Izis Tomass - Could we say that in both cases ("What can I do and use in order to make 'x' happen?" and "What happens if I do this?") there's still something unexpected in the Performance (not necessarily the outcome, but sometimes the process itself)? And I'm still curious about how do you see the emergence of the unexpected (when there's one) in relation to the historicity of the site. Does it add something new to its history, does it change somehow its historicity, or does the unexpected enter into a relation with the historicity of the site in a deeper sense?**

**Marilyn Arsem:** The history of the site isn't only in the past. It continues into the present, so my performance also becomes part of the history of the site. And really, I can only respond to a site out of my current understanding, which is always ever fragmented, incomplete, and entirely influenced by my own context.

That is one of the reasons that I consider my site performances as a conversation between me - where I am now and where I have come from - and the place. I am asking questions and listening for answers through the actions that I create, in order to learn more. But I can only approach it from where I have come from and where I am now. Inevitably I will have made assumptions based on what I have already learned, but hopefully I am open enough to engage with anything new that emerges. That is where learning happens. And ideally the viewers are, in some way, part of that process of discovery and learning.



**Izis Tomass - How do you work and perceive the notion of time and duration in your artistic and investigative practice? What are the different possibilities of duration that can emerge from a performance? Does the performance continue to exist in the artist's and witnesses' durations after it's over? How would this kind of durational existence be?**

**Marilyn Arsem:** Time is only one of the elements that I consider when I am designing a performance. The other questions are how will I inhabit the space, what materials will I use, what actions will I do, in addition to how will all of these occupy time. The underlying question is what do I want to learn, and how can each element serve that inquiry?

Materials have a life of their own, and with that their own timeframes. Extended time can provide the opportunity to really examine a process, letting it unfold at its own pace and reach an organic conclusion, rather than trying to force the process into some pre-determined amount of time.

Nevertheless, most contexts in which I make work - festivals or galleries, have already an established amount of time when they are open or have invited an audience to attend. Choosing actions that fit comfortably within those timeframes is often the real challenge.

**Izis Tomass - This question "Does the performance continue to exist in the artist's and witnesses' durations after it's over?" is actually based in one of your statements in "THIS is Performance art": "Performance art is experience – shared time and space and actions between people. The record of performance art resides in the bodies of the artist and the witnesses." I find this statement fascinating and I would like to hear more from you about this issue, if possible.**

**Marilyn Arsem:** The performances reside in memory, and memory resides in your body. Consider how a smell or even a particular physical movement can trigger a memory. The memory returns to you in response to something that happens to you in the present. Usually, it is only a fragment of the experience that rises to the surface - an image, a feeling, a gesture, a word. We are constantly reconfiguring the memories of our experiences into new understandings of their significance to our lives. We don't make meaning only once from events in our lives. Our perspectives on our lives continue to change as we incorporate new experiences and new information, and that in turn transforms our memories of the past.

**Izis Tomass – Now, a curiosity: What were the most sensitive impressions you had in “100 Ways to Consider Time”? On the 57th day, “Unscheduled Time”, was there an answer that intrigued you the most?**

**Marilyn Arsem:** What most surprised me about *Day 57: Unscheduled Time*, in *100 Ways to Consider Time*, was actually the number of people who said that they often had unscheduled time in their lives. I had not expected that. But maybe that was because my own time, at that point anyway, had always been so carefully scheduled. In our conversations, we distinguished between leisure time and unscheduled time, since very often leisure time is scheduled with activities just as fully as our work time.

Different experiences trigger my memories of particular actions or events from *100 Ways to Consider Time*. Yesterday, because of a question in a workshop on listening in which I was a student, I thought of the day that I spent the six hours blindfolded, sitting in a chair facing the wall, just listening. The gallery's walls did not extend to the ceiling, so it was possible to hear the activity not just within my space, but also within the larger gallery in which it was situated. There were a multitude of sounds both near and far, of audio artworks, air vents, my clock ticking, people talking, their footsteps, and alarms going off when viewers came too close to artworks. In fact, it was a cacophony of sound the entire six hours.

The rocks that I used in the performance line my staircase at home. I look at them every day and often think about how they occupy time with me. I wonder how long they were in this form before I picked them up from the beach. And I think about how they will continue as they appear now, long after I am dead. I don't imagine that they will be included in my archive, though by rights they could be considered my collaborators. I wonder where they will reside when I am gone. But the memory that persists most is how the constant of 6 hours a day underscored my experience of the elasticity of time. What I was doing, how I engaged the viewers, everything that I was feeling, profoundly impacted my experience and understanding of time. Some days felt interminable, and some days flew by as if in no time.

**Izis Tomass - Is there a durational limit to your practice? How do you see and deal with the notion of all kinds of limit in your practice?**

**Marilyn Arsem:** If I started a work now, the longest duration it could be would be less than thirty years. How much less? That is a question I can't answer. The durational limits in my practice come to the forefront as I get older. The body has its own needs, and my body clearly has limits.

But there are so many other factors that impact the duration of a work. Venues, events and physical spaces always have conditions that you need to consider in making the work. This is one of the reasons that I always think of my work as site responsive, even in a white cube gallery in a museum. And this is why I try to wait until I have seen the space and had a discussion with the sponsors of the event before I design a work. The nature of the event, other works that are being shown at the same time, the size and location of a space, how viewers move through it, all affect what I choose to do. Every context has constraints. But the challenge of designing a performance specific to those circumstances is what continues to intrigue me.

**Izis Tomass – Regarding the contemplative element in your works, it reminded me of contemplation in the philosophy field, and more specifically, in Neoplatonist philosophy, where contemplation can be understood as a kind of unit engine through which everything would exist and function. What is the place of perception and contemplation in your practice? And as a witness?**

**Marilyn Arsem:** I don't actively think about the notion of contemplation when I perform. What I do think about is being wholly invested in the moment, and maintaining a state of being as fully present as possible. I try to pay attention to everything - every visual element - from the largest to the smallest, every smell, every taste, every sound both near me and to the furthest distance that I can hear, every vibration, every movement, the temperature of the air, every physical sensation both external and internal, my emotions, my thoughts, everything.

If an audience is willing to spend time with the performance, they generally begin to replicate the same degree of attentiveness. Their concentration increases and they relax and slow down, which results in increasing degrees of awareness.

**Izis Tomass - I'm still curious about how do you perceive and/or contemplate other performances as a witness. What do you feel? What is the kind of performance (or what were the performances) that affects/affected you the most in a contemplative sense?**

**Marilyn Arsem:** The performance that I continually return to is a performance that I saw, or more accurately, in which I was a participant, in 1984. This work had a profound impact on my own. It was called *On the Emerald Necklace*, an all-day performance by Ron Wallace, an artist here in Boston. He performed it for a single audience participant. It was a 15 mile walk of the entire Emerald Necklace, a park system that encircles Boston. This system of connected parks was designed by Frederick Law Olmsted, who considered it a work of art.

Before Ron did the performance, he spent over a year researching Olmsted's creation of the parks. He studied Olmsted's notes and plans and work orders, read all the minutes of the Franklin Park board meetings, spent time with park maintenance staff, and repeatedly walked the entire circuit with maps and plans in hand locating not just the design features that were built, but even finding particular plantings made by Olmsted nearly 100 years earlier. He learned the identification of the trees, shrubs, plants and animals of the park, and their annual cycles and habitats. He studied the movement of water throughout the park system in its paths above and below ground. He also traced the changes that had been made in the park system after its initial design and creation.

His thorough research gave the work its depth and its value. His knowledge of the parks allowed him to answer, seemingly effortlessly, any questions that I had. While there were aspects of the Emerald Necklace that he wanted to highlight, he also shaped the conversation around my own curiosity. I understood that this undivided attention would not have been possible with even one other audience member.

Different topics emerged and developed as the day progressed, sparked by the environment and the art work through which we were walking. The conversation included not just my own questions, but his own as well, with observations by both of us, so that it was a true sharing of knowledge. In retrospect, I recognize that he

maintained the focus on the art work within which we were walking throughout the entire eight hours, never letting the conversation collapse into the mundane.

This experience helped confirm for me that a performance can be the direct experience of learning, about looking and discovering more about the world around us, and that it was possible to also do that with an audience. Perhaps most importantly, I learned from him that time is an essential component. It is critical to have enough time, to take all the time that is needed, to both develop and perform the work.

**Izis Tomass – What is your perception of non-human existences and what are the different possibilities of movement of their existences when a performance takes place?**

**Marilyn Arsem:** Materials have a life of their own. Their lives unfold in timeframes that can be either considerably shorter or infinitely longer than our own. We tend to only notice them when they intersect with us and are either useful or interfere with our own existence. It is a sad commentary on how little we notice about the universe surrounding us.

**Izis Tomass – How do you deal with your own intentions while in process of creating and executing a performance?**

**Marilyn Arsem:** Before I start to make a performance, I ask myself a series of questions: What do I want to do? This is distinct from what I think I should do, or what I think others expect me to do. What can I do that I haven't done before? What would challenge me now? What is on my mind right now? Along with those questions I also remind myself that it is fine to simply ask questions. I don't have to provide answers. And most importantly, it is not the end of the world if I fail. What is the point of doing something that I already know? Taking a risk and choosing to try something new is how we grow.

At this point in my life as an artist I am very willing to follow my instincts. I often can't explain why I am attracted to a particular image or action or material. I trust that I will find a way to build it into a performance. I am willing to assemble the

elements slowly, piece by piece. I take my time considering each choice of an addition, debating whether it adds to the work and if it is actually necessary. I spend more time stripping away ideas and elements, in order to distill the performance.

Other imperatives guide me: Adapt to the constraints of the situation. Do not alter what is there. Add as little as possible. Use local materials that are plentiful and easily available. Tread lightly. Do no harm. Leave no marks.

I don't rehearse a performance. I might make some tests to see how materials behave, or to learn how to use a tool, but I don't practice the whole event. If I had already done it, what would be the point of doing it again?

I don't fully understand a work until after I have performed it. I have often made performances that bring to the surface what I have been unconsciously thinking or desiring. I understand that performance, any artmaking really, can be a way of articulating concerns that aren't easily identified through conscious thinking or language. So, reflecting on the performances is an important part of my process as well. What I understand about the work immediately afterwards, versus a week or a month later, or even a year later, changes and deepens. In retrospect, aspects of the work emerge that didn't seem significant at the time. It is this analysis of the work, primarily through writing, of its content as well as my choices for its execution, and the public responses, that lets me more fully understand my own intentions and process, suggesting new directions or possibilities for future work.

**Izis Tomass - What would you say are your primal references? What does feed the course of your creations and investigations? Would you indicate to us any of your references?**

**Marilyn Arsem:** I read history, politics, science, and cultural theory. I read commentary about political situations in the world, social justice issues, the climate crisis, and the latest scientific discoveries.

Specific topics that I am particularly interested in are:

- Time, including historical, scientific and cultural understandings of it.
- Processes of accumulation and decay, in all their manifestations.
- Issues relating to power dynamics and how people perceive and exert their power. While this has often been a theme in the work, it has also been examined directly through different kinds of performance structures, and in particular ones in which the audience has a role in the creation of the event.
- Aging and death, which is also related to time, but more specific to ourselves and how we experience the end of our own time on this planet.
- Issues related to water on this planet, including the depletion of potable water, the polluting of oceans and its effect on sea life, and the impact of melting polar icecaps and glaciers.

I have made hundreds of performances, experimenting with different structures and content. But more importantly, I have seen thousands of performances by other artists in the past 45+ years, between running an art space, being a member of an artist group, attending international festivals and teaching performance art throughout those years. Witnessing other artists work and seeing how they approach the issues that concern them, and the choices that they make in creating performances, is illuminating. I always learn something from seeing other artists' work.

**Izis Tomass** - In Brazilian theater and television there was a great and provocative actor, Antônio Abujamra, who used to interview artists, and this final question is based on the way he used to end his interviews. Is there a question that I didn't ask and you would have wanted me to? What would it be? And what would the answer be?

**Marilyn Arsem:** What constitutes failure in your art practice?

Ha, and now I have to answer it!

Okay.

Failure is being afraid of failure, and so avoiding trying something unknown because of the fear of not succeeding.

And what then is success?

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