

Mapping with Memory Marcia's Odyssey

15 tips for approaching Omnibus: The Long Durational

Tip 1: Make lists

On March 19th. 2010 beneath the clatter, bang, rumble and thud of Glasgow Central Station, a woman in self-exile, was holding a queer court. Entering her strange new world, what began as a casual encounter quickly engulfed me in its shifting sands:

A list of tips for future performance makers; "The 1970's: Things were different then" A rallying cry of "No Future"; Stuart Brisley vomiting through the English National Anthem; "These shoulders we stand on" Getting away from the past and the future; "Where are they now?" Passing things back and forth across time; four bottles of scent (but going without the basics); "Vanity's nice but we've got to get on." A little pink face in a fur ball; and a German analyst called Moyra or Margo; Squirrel Nutkin ("is that a boy's or a girl's name?"), Sunbeam the dolphin's interchangeability with Jesus; Channelling Norma and her sneer; Winnie from Happy Days with or without the stage directions; Simon's students: " My Geeks"; TS Elliot as an anagram by the sea; A depressing Christmas panda; Zipping up, the sports draw and a chemist on the King's road; Empty nests and a book signing; The goat effect; The coffin lining; A monk and a colouring book; Rob La Frenais being booed and dismissed; An Ibis kettle and bedding; Reading a bit of the Waste Lands; 81 slides containing stories: "that must be got rid of"; and the division between those born before and after the first edition of Performance Art magazine

Some fleetingly significant and some going the distance, these particles, woven together emerged as the rich tapestry of live performance *Omnibus*, the first of conceptual artist Marcia Farquhar's epic long durational works.

'Farquhar's work addresses the fixed polarity of audience and performer in a lively and engaging way, imbuing the role of raconteur or storyteller with complex pertinence. 'Kirsten Norrie, Art Monthly (*12 Shooters*)

Tip 2: Ask yourself: What is it?

Was it a retrospect; a summing up of historical parts; a shindig; or a drone in the backbone of the thirtieth anniversary of Nikki Millican's cornerstone of Live Art programming: The 2010 NRLA? For me, it was all these things and more. At times it felt like a social experiment in memory, etiquette; tolerance and rumour. It was at points a solitary fearless act and then an equally exposed one. It was a critical act, then a frivolous one; and at one crucial point it was simply like watching a car crash in slow motion. I don't underestimate the challenge of laying out 70 hours of possible material, setting oneself a time frame and a few parameters before merely allowing things to happen. I am aware of the long durational's context, both historical and contemporary. But it was the density of content, the multifaceted

loops and outcomes and the simplicity and beauty of this work which captivated me: “We came in on a whimper and we will go out with one.”

In the final moments whilst I stood through a crackling, vinyl recording of the Sex Pistols anthem “God Save the Queen” quietly singing along with a crowd of people, some of whom I had come to know and some of whom had just arrived (having been expressly told “There will be no finale”) and who, through ignoring this statement, enabled one, I realized what this odyssey had meant to me.

Tip 3: Make a personal investment

I walked out of the playroom for the final time full of hope, recalling the words of Helen Keller: “The best way out is always through.” I had this feeling of having purged something. Acknowledging that things in this world seem presently askew... and the hope came out of sharing in a small salute to the reality of the landscape that young artists face today, with its opportunities and pitfalls however out of kilter; and of the importance of making small gestures. And my small act of being, present in the here and now of *Omnibus* meant that I could look upon the world with fresh eyes and know that for good or for bad, things might just be ok.

I had come though something, it was substantial and it would stay with me long after the NRLA, beyond March and take me the summer months to unpick and to fathom. Its substance was risk, endurance and spectacle. My role became part witness part accomplice and made me want to write something as idiosyncratic, as mercurial, and as honest - but where would I begin?

Tip 4: Ask for help!

Five months after NRLA I wrote to Marcia to ask if I could interview her, she readily agreed and eight days later I found myself sitting in the garden of her north London home where one of her daughters Kitty was nursing the newest member of the family, little baby Olive. I was understandably nervous but soon began tentatively sharing my questions.

Tip 5: Remember: "Technology can fuck things up"

In my guise as would be journalist I placed all confidence in my trusty new voice recorder, took no notes and gave my subject my full attention - two hours later wearing Marcia’s blue rain Mac circa 1970s after we had battled with the changeable British summer weather and had retired to the galley kitchen - it became apparent I had recorded nothing. In later text messages and in my attempt to deal with this discovery, I focused on the positive - sharing with Marcia that it was a fitting reality, in true measure of her commitment to: “Once only non repeatable performances.” I would only be able to write about that which I could remember. To which she replied:

“You are quite right to see the good in the unrecorded.

The unrepeatable is after all a marvellous aspect of performance and life!”

Tip 6: Don't get too caught up in the Location; location; location

The playroom as a performance space is nothing to shout about but it always holds potential. It's not a clean space, it's a railway arch with a thick stone semi circled ceiling and a black/grey floor. I have witnessed it used for many things but in this work it seemed merely to be a holding structure.

Walking through the main door along the side of a seating bank that took up a third of the room and was littered with groups of people (at ease and very informal) I squeezed past familiar faces and logged myself in the 3rd row. Cutting what was left of the space in two was a large, freestanding screen. Behind it was a mattress, some bags and dimly lit blank space. On my right, ahead of me, was a TV and video unit and on the left were two large tables full of stuff.

I did try imagining, what this would all look like, were this work housed instead, in a crisp white gallery space, where all the objects (70 hours work of possible material) would be given a kind of reverence as 'essential art objects' but this was merely a magical space where anything could happen. The first thing that struck me was the ease in which I was invited into the performance space. This artist said hello when you arrived and seemed almost to mourn you as you left.

Tip 7: Let Art and Life be inextricably linked

Marcia was not alone onstage, two men were with her, Mole and Tim. They were integral, both her friends and her colleagues whom, in this context, she called her "editors". Mole's Rigor and time-keeping was essential and later on it would be Tim who called for silence.

Marcia, her 'editors' and her spectators were distracted. Thoughts lingered outside, in a place where her mum was undergoing surgery. The operation, her mother's choice, was of a serious nature and the fear of it permeated the space, remaining an important reality, keeping the truth of the outside, inside.

During our interview when we talked of this she expressed that her self-exile in The Playroom had felt safe. Her waiting process was shared and became our waiting process wherein her fears were also ours, and in sharing the fear we were also allowed to share in the relief when the news came through that her mum was safely through the operation. I feel unable to put into words what this felt like and how open and sacred sharing in her private / public life became.

Tip 8: Relax into the ebb and flow

I did not watch all and every bit of Marcia's performance of thirty hours and each time I left, although I felt I had missed so much, Marcia was able to summarise the lost minutes or hours between my clocking out. Her seemingly unending riffs, grounded in both the banal and the exquisite continually drew me in and many, like

me, returned: moths to a flame. This ebb and flow was to become a recurring talking point for the artist:

“Who was here when...”?
“Who was it who said...”?
“If you leave now you will miss the punch line...”
“I do hope you’ll come back, we could watch
Norma Desmond later”

One of a number of stories lived in tandem and all of these texts were peppered with repetition and pauses. She grappled with and held onto multiple narratives by the tip of her tongue and located the endless links and loops between them.

Promising much, she delivered more, in her cyclical, sporadic, tightly run ship. She was grace, poise, calm and reason. Talking with a quiet confidence thinly veiled behind impressions of forgetfulness and flight of fancy. What might appear to a newcomer as casual and vague was clearly proficiency and method.

Tip 9: Bear in mind the context

Marcia’s work was not all that was being watched that day. The NRLA, like life, is about choices. Standing in one queue hoping you've picked well to later find yourself wishing you'd been in another queue. Spending time watching durational practitioners in the middle of a densely programmed pick and mix means having the resolve to miss one brilliant part in exchange for another.

2010’s NRLA was, as always, a huge mix of short and long performances and with all these artists sharing works at the same time in spaces next to the Playroom it became impossible to escape the smatterings of rapturous applause erupting at various moments ‘from abroad’ and at one point Marcia shared with us that she felt she might be suffering from a kind of ‘competitive strain injury’, remaining and ruminating for thirty hours to an audience who drift in and out at their leisure is an elongated undertaking but sticking to her remit:

“Farquhar [stayed] with her audience whether, or not, it [stayed] with her.”
Quote from Omnibus blurb

Tip 10: Incorporate all the interruptions - Him Downstairs

Michael Mayhew, engaged in his own epic transformation downstairs for an equal length of time, became a kind of “naughty neighbour.” As the spectators became more like confederates, there was a stream of “gossip” and “reporting back” from the goings on of ‘him downstairs’ There were reports of uncertain or doubtful truth about – ‘the other party’ which Marcia incorporated. She has a perceptive ability to absorb any situation and the savoir-faire to contextualize it. Commenting on work being made as it is made, referring to other junctures, so that nothing is lost

Tip 11: Be true to your roots but don't be fooled by altruism

I expected an artist of Marcia's stature to be well documented; however her early work is not, like many others of her generation. This is due to what she titled 'The Big Con' of 1970's performance happenings, The Death of the writer and Altruism. A great example of this was when a man recalled witnessing a performance by Marcia that she had created on a London underground tube with fireworks, to which she replied:

“Tell me about it. What do you remember? Did you take a photo?”

Having no images of works from this period is not unusual, however sometimes it can be about proof. Works that live only in the moment of the elusive nature of Performance Art is one thing. But if aspects of those works are later claimed by others as their own, the rules change. It changes one's thinking about property, prosperity and ownership. Marcia's more recent drive towards documenting work is grounded in her time studying for her MA at the Slade in the 1990's where she wanted to investigate and develop a kind of 'proof'. (See her book *12 shooters* for a clearer examination.)

Tip 12: But still embrace the live: the unrepeatable!

In *12 shooters* I read a quote about Marcia's work walking a fine line between the prescribed and the unpredictable. This balance is exciting. *Omnibus* was a delight and a lesson in the art of being. As a female artist I was keen to see how she draws on personal material and am in awe of her masterful use of language, but it was her stage presence which was most alluring. The simplicity and casualness of her performance persona radiates plus she is a fascinating person, I particularly enjoyed the contradiction between her open/closed demeanours; her fragile power, her grace under fire: This gentle steeliness.

Tip 13: And fear not the ruptures

The hardest part of watching *Omnibus* was returning late in the evening. I walked into a charged space. Walked straight back out and had to make myself go back. Alcohol had been imbibed and the imaginary 4th wall if there was one, had been broken. And things had “Got a bit silly”. Was I too late to fit into this new environment? I was not sure how the rules had changed or who was spectator and who was now an essential collaborator.

On the periphery, I found myself too awkward, embarrassed, sober, nervous, all kinds of emotions – I was not keen on these new voices, I felt uneasy for the next hours but my fear was a misguided one. In-between these two entrances, whilst discussing my feelings with Mary Brennan, she was quick to assure me that Marcia was still very much in control of what appeared to be a runaway train.

The art of performance akin to hosting any event, can involve the crossing of invisible borders - like the guests of a party that stay too long or get too drunk,

people are very changeable and as an outsider watching these people negotiate their relationship to the artist or host was very uncomfortable. Marcia when we spoke of this aligned my discomfort as being “just as challenging as watching a blade cut skin” and I agreed, watching the artist deal with the new direction of the late night episode of *Omnibus*, the fine line between a flux and mess was very challenging.

I asked her if she had felt at all uneasy with her surroundings and her over-familiar cohort of spectators. It was clear that her editor’s Mole and Tim were openly vocal about what might become problematic and the need to reassert an element of control, but akin to Mary Brennan’s description, Marcia responded:

“If they had stayed all night, still, that would have been just another element of the work. But the knowledge that everyone would be kicked out at three – how far wrong could it go?”

For due to health and safety reasons, the audience was unable to stay with her over night. And departing at 3am there would be no more visitors till the following morning at nine. And during the hours between the last spectator leaving and the next day’s arrivals discussions about this rupture took place and this would become a topic for the final episodes on March the 20th. Recognizing when something is in and out of perceived control is akin to straddling a liminal space. Marcia did this with panache. Her role fluctuated from host to collaborator, performer to spectator within her own work. At points she watched and listened as others took the lead, allowing things to “get a little silly”, having partaken of three glasses of white wine (something she does not do in other performances). She was open to audience participation especially when the spectators overturned Rob La Frenais’s attempt to hold private conversations with her: “No Rob, I haven’t got any beer” after which in a TV chat show moment the audience told him succinctly to “Please leave!” When described as an artist who travels a fine line “between comedy and vulnerability” I would add that she traverses the fine line between control and abandon, safety and risk. Allowing us, the watchers, to feel the call of urgency or temperedness or her behalf, the challenge of having faith that things are actually going according to map of sorts or a web if not exactly a plan.

Tip 14: Think about Labels, language or classifying people

During *Omnibus* while memories laced stories Marcia talked wistfully about what she called “not the normal everyday mishaps of being.” Commenting on “how we watch” and “how we talk about what we watch” and “how we describe people, the shoulders we stand on and offering to be less yet more than the one who climbs on ours”

”People are reduced to one or two lines, there is this whole life of work [trails off]”

I expressed that I felt Marcia to be one of the most 'accessible' female artist in contemporary art, she responded with care and we discussed the difference between the accessibility of Bobbi Baker whose work has at times featured themes of domesticity and mental health verses the mysticism and untouchable aspects of Marina Abramovic, two women, in contemporary art, who are written about very differently.

Marcia talked openly about how 'accessibility' may sometimes leave one open to comment, and to the use of inappropriate male chauvinist adjectives even from women writers, and I came away thinking that women artists are still struggling to deal with the way in which they are written about and how much it matters to be seen in context and not derided for investigating feminine issues or [her] stories.

Tip 15: Take something with you

Marcia Farquhar's generosity as a performer in her art work is as prevalent as a hostess in her daily life. When I interviewed her she was as open with me about her life as she was about her work and she was full of support, encouragement and verve. This wandering quest *Omnibus* denotes her humanity her power and triumph in celebrating and just being, and marking this 'being'. The history of the performance became the narrative of it being performed. Something which I find exciting and pivotal to work that comments of what it means to be human, alive and sometimes a little lost. This leaves me curious about my own journey through art and life. What do I want to be written? Who is my support network? Whose shoulders do I stand on and who will climb on mine?

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