

The Silent Dinners

an intercultural dialogue

part 1

Honi Ryan

BARCELONA

LAHORE

SYDNEY

Edited by Herman B. Mendolicchio and Honi Ryan.

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With thanks to all who have contributed to and supported the Silent Dinner project, especially every person who has sat at the silent dinner table over the years. These remnants are for you.

Published by Hedonics Creative, Australia, 2017.

Supported by the Goethe-Institut Barcelona and the Goethe-Institut Pakistan.

Design and Layout
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ISBN: 978-0-9924376-1-9

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INTRODUCTION



PLEASE DO NOT USE WORDS OR YOUR VOICE
PLEASE DON'T READ OR WRITE
TRY TO MAKE AS LITTLE NOISE AS POSSIBLE
DON'T INTERACT WITH TECHNOLOGY
STAY FOR AT LEAST TWO HOURS.

The project

The Silent Dinners are an artistic research project, mounted as a series of participatory performances based around a meal. It is a regular dinner event except the guests are requested:

Please do not use words or your voice
Please don't read or write
Try to make as little noise as possible
Don't interact with technology
and stay for at least two hours.

A nomadic, intercultural, artistic experiment, the Silent Dinners break barriers to human exchange. They open up spaces for discovering new ways of interacting – in real-physical-space and across cultures – in light of the digital turn.

Artist Honi Ryan hosted around forty of these social sculptures between 2007 - 2017, for between two

and two hundred participants at a time. They took place in seventeen cities across ten countries in Europe, Asia, the Middle East, Australia, the US and Latin America.

Ryan's approach to art making and cultural production is that performance can be used as an experimental platform for enacting new ways of living, stepping ideas into life through action. The Silent Dinner project grew out of a desire to create social environments where language barriers were alleviated and social hierarchies shuffled from their norm. Over time, participants repeatedly reported experiencing heightened tolerance for the other, non-judgemental encounters, and conviviality.

Each dinner is unique, the experience filled with a meaning particular to that place, time, society, group, and individual. As a series, the Silent Dinners reflect on society in dual ways. They simulta-

neously reveal the unifying human elements that transcend borders, through the actions that naturally repeat over time and place; whilst celebrating difference by allowing unique cultural elements to emerge through the changes that occur in each place, and through each individual perspective.

To bring people together around food provides a comfortable open space for people to get out of their comfort zone in. The food highlights the uniqueness of each geographical location, with food as one of the most necessary and foremost expressions of culture. The menus are developed with local people, from domestic food enthusiasts to professional chefs and caterers. The dishes come from the traditions of the place, and are prepared with local, seasonal, vegetarian ingredients.

The Silent Dinners are an intimate, embodied, cross-cultural portrait of an epoch; highlighting globalisation, the changing nature of communication, and the essential space between people. The Silent Dinners are a platform for peaceful exchange, and, they are a lot of fun.

The publication

After over 10 years of experience, the Silent Dinner project enters a new stage and faces a new dimension in the form of a publication. All the unsaid during the participatory performances, all the inner thoughts that were burning intensely in the midst of those intercultural encounters, and all the consequential reflections, called for an in-depth analysis and a specific place to emerge collated.

This publication focuses on the changing meaning of the experience of a Silent Dinner across different cultures. Drawing from the history of the project, the publication references the way this meaning

has evolved over the past decade, in regards to the proliferation of communication technology; the value of mindful practice (silence) in society; the changing nature of food philosophy; and how the experience is grounded in the trajectory of art: from the foundations of performance art in everyday life through to socially engaged art practice and beyond.

The texts included in this initial publication, are in response to recent performances – realized in Barcelona, Sydney and Lahore – and they are different in character and style. The diverse approaches of the written contributions – either critical or creative pieces – are twofold. On the one hand they reflect on the specific elements, atmosphere and experience of a particular performance in a precise location and context; on the other hand they reflect on the body of knowledge, concepts and ideas that recur and cross the long-term project.

The diverse written contributions were either commissioned to invited guests or submitted freely by participants of the Silent Dinners.

Through this methodology, different voices – from different disciplines, territories and cultural contexts – offer a wider understanding of the Silent Dinner project, highlighting the variety of experiences, visions and interpretations that happen and emerge around it.

This publication is a kaleidoscope of ideas and reflections about the diverse facets of human communication (or the lack of) and it offers to the readers, and to the overall project, an unusual passage from silence to polyphony.

Herman B. Mendolicchio
and Honi Ryan



PERFORMING

THE

(IM)POSSIBLE

A UTOPIAN SILENT DINNER IN BARCELONA

Honi Ryan: Last year you curated a Silent Dinner into an exhibition in Barcelona under the moniker of *Utopian Tomorrow*. For you, what is it about the performance that should be included in this theme?

Herman Bashiron Mendolicchio: A utopian vision comes from mingling together a robust imagination and a hearty will of change. Dealing with utopias means dealing with challenges, and is also related to the idea of imagining and conceiving what is commonly considered as impossible. I think that most of your art practice responds to a utopian vision, through a utopian approach, with a specific focus on human presence, awareness and communication.

This atmosphere of imagining and conceiving the impossible – if you want – is something that happens commonly in cinema and in several art practices. What is interesting in your work is that you bring this dimension to the social realm, to human life, without having to use special effects.

In specific regards to “The Silent Dinners”, I would say that it’s a project that stimulates a transformation in human communication; it shakes our convictions and our position as human beings living among other human beings; it questions our inner existence and our outer co-existence with the others. We definitely know that all humanity is suffering from huge communication deficits and we are all in a desperate search for better empathy and understanding. How to solve it? The Silent Dinners, through their focus on the diversity of human communicative behaviour, address this utopia.

HR: Utopia also promises peace, and as we are starved for inspiring, living examples of what peace is, the idea allows us to imagine what it might be, for us, here, now. And as you say, utopia can reference

the impossible, or the idea of no-place, and in that make itself unattainable or overly idealistic. So utopia at once evokes peace, while placing it out of reach.

What was meaningful for me to be involved in performances around a Utopian Tomorrow in Barcelona was that we got to enact that state, live it out, play with it, consciously, in person, among people, in our comfortable everyday environments. One of the core ideas in the Silent Dinner project is to provide an experimental platform for peaceful exchange, the lack of verbal or written language alleviating some of the boundaries to it. Through these experiences we can create living embodied memories to carry into our lives and societies.

Having said that, the encounters at the Silent Dinners have not always been entirely peaceful, but they are usually convivial. The Barcelona SD was your first Silent Dinner, you have since attended more, but if you can place yourself back there, how was your personal experience of the event?

HBM: I have lots of good memories related to the Silent Dinner in Barcelona. My personal experience was really deep and intense, not only because I attended the SD for the first time as a diner-participant, but also because I was involved in envisioning and organizing that specific episode as a curator.

As you know better than me, even if you have to follow the same set of guidelines, every SD is a different experience, which relates to the location, cultural environment, atmosphere, human presence, energies, etc.

Each event gives place to different stories and reactions, and that’s also why – I would say – we are now engaging with this deeper reflection through this publication project.



Focusing back on Barcelona, and trying to be concise, I could highlight three specific moments (plus some additional details) that were somehow remarkable:

1) The arrival and attendance on the terrace

When I arrived most people were already there, standing or sitting on the exterior terrace of the house. The scene was epic, an improvised set up at the boundaries of theatre, performance, magic and the world of psychological introspection. We were together and alone, with our bodies and our shadows, waiting for something big to come. It was not only a moment of observation, but there was an inner force growing fast. It reminds me Antonin Artaud when he said: "If our life lacks a constant magic, it is because we choose to observe our acts and lose ourselves in considerations of their imagined form instead of being impelled by their force".¹ In that moment we were starting to be impelled by this magical force.

2) The gaze exchange moment

Looking inside and outside was a constant process during the SD. Suddenly, a natural and collective moment of exchanging deep gazes pervaded the scene and paralysed all other activities. We rarely find the time and the right approach to look into others in this way. That moment was a real treasure.

3) The final joyful explosion

The pleasant and magnetic development of the dinner lead to a final explosion where all participants greeted the opportunity to stay longer and exchange feelings and thoughts, finally in words, with the other diners. The ensuing flow of conversa-

tions were nonetheless unusual, conscious of the previously wordless state of our ritual. I remember a warm and sincere expression of gratitude from everyone towards you and the overall situation.

Beyond these three specific moments, I think that in Barcelona we had a perfect combination of aesthetics, meaningfulness, concentration, communication, inspiration and joy. Talking in metaphor, it was a journey through several phases, and we learned how to silently share our time and space with the other diner-travellers.

The intimate domestic space, the energetic human presence and a balanced, good number of participants were definitely successful ingredients of that SD. One extremely important point, in my opinion, is that most of the diners didn't know each other. This is a significant point: I think that the Silent Dinner is not a dinner between friends, but that we need that kind of mystery in order to make our mind fly: who are these people?

What do they do? What language do they speak?

The unknown plays a very important role in the silent dinners.

We were really touched by the potential of that gathering. Some of the participants cried, showing that we reached beyond any idea of entertaining, and were experiencing the depth of human communication in all its naked, raw material.

I talked too much! How was your experience back there and what are your thoughts in regards to the aforementioned points?

HR: The Barcelona SD was indeed utopian, bringing together many ideal elements with around 25 guests mostly unknown to each other; being hosted in a private domestic space where the home

owner was present and active; and the food being cooked in collaboration with a local food enthusiast with local, seasonal produce. It was also nostalgic for me, reminiscent of the early years of this project when I would mount these events independently in people's homes wherever I was travelling at the time. More recently, it has not always been possible to have all of these elements in place, and it was lovely to be able to experience it in that form again. Having said that, I don't think that these elements are necessary conditions for the profundity of the

experience. The Silent Dinner project by nature shifts and changes in dialogue with the place and time it is being held in. These shifts are an exciting, living part of the work; allowing elements of culture and contemporaneity to emerge and bring meaning to the action.

You touched on two important parts of the evening, the arrival, and the breaking of the silence. Upon arrival, and for about half an hour after that, people are adjusting to their new, shared state with

WE RARELY FIND THE TIME AND THE RIGHT APPROACH TO LOOK INTO OTHERS IN THIS WAY. THAT MOMENT WAS A REAL TREASURE.

anticipation. It is a time to allow yourself to feel awkward, submerged in the unknown, and to have the conviction to work through it without rejecting it on first impulse because it's foreign. It helps us to practice the patience needed to tolerate difference.

It's true that in Barcelona, after the two hours were up the silence was broken at the table and we talked, debriefed, cried, consoled and celebrated each other around the table for hours more. But it does not always happen like this, and it is my strategy to not give the group any guidance in how they are to resolve the silence. It is up to them. It is

a brave move to be the first to talk, and somehow difficult after resolving oneself not to.

To consciously alleviate words is to place them in very high regard, and in this we can understand the multitude of meanings of 'silencing'. Some participants would rather not break the silence, relishing the opportunity hold the uniqueness of the experience, and leave before people begin to talk. However, most participants usually find a way to discuss the event together afterwards. Then, and as it was in Barcelona, there is usually some correction of details that were misunderstood, but



those things are quickly let go of to highlight the ways we *did* find to communicate with each other, with a heightened awareness of the importance of words and language, and a deepened sensitivity to the other ways we perceive information.

Every group develops their own language over the short course of the evening. A set of symbols and gestures form, each departing from one moment of understanding to the next. Language is so innate to humans, and surprisingly quick to create.

HBM: It's interesting to see that even if some actions, gestures, reactions and behaviours, repeat themselves in different contexts and locations, every Silent Dinner stands ultimately as a unique experience. There is a combination of predictable elements (all social patterns and behaviours reveal themselves over dinner: the shy, the extrovert, the analytic, the entertainer, the bored, etc., just as a few examples) that merge with totally unexpected ones. In fact, no one knows exactly how they will behave in total silence and every single person is

exposed to a situation that is mostly unknown to them. It comes from deep concentration on your own. I think this is also one of the strongest points of the project: its capability to become a mirror to the self. This brings us back to the Greek ancient maxim 'Know thyself', which can be understood as the main and basic paradigm of communication. In Barcelona we had this stimulating mixture of elements: on the one hand the subjective and intimate individual focus, and on the other hand the collective and emphatic sharing of the experience with the group. The cosy domestic space, as well as the inclusive and affable welcome that you and the host offered to all guests, created that peaceful and deep atmosphere.

Suddenly, in the course of the Silent Dinner, silence becomes not an obstacle to overcome, but a language and an accomplice with which to coexist.

¹ Antonin Artaud, *The theater and its double*, Grove Press. NY, 1958. Page 8.

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CATALAN

2 bunches / 250g fresh spinach
60g raisons
50g pine nuts
3 cloves of garlic, sliced.
2 tbsp olive oil.

SPINACH

Soak the raisons in hot water for 10 minutes.
Drain and set aside.

Wash the spinach but do not dry it.
Remove the hard stems. Place it in a large pot, covered, on a high heat for 5 minutes.
Let the water that has clung to the leaves steam the spinach to wilt, but do not overcook it. Take the spinach out and push it gently into a sieve to release the excess water. —Roughly chop the spinach and set it aside.

Heat the oil in a pan and add the garlic. Brown for about 4 minutes, then remove and discard the garlic.

Place the pine nuts and raisons in the hot oil, and cook until the nuts are golden and aromatic, about 2-4 minutes.

Add the spinach and stir through to heat.

Serve immediately.

4 SERVES



WE NEVER STOP TALKING

THE BLUR BETWEEN THE REAL AND THE ORCHESTRATED.

TEXT BY SAIRA ANSARI

Saira Ansari is a researcher and a writer with an interest in South Asian contemporary and modern art history.

1. The Careem car is hurtling through the chaotic streets of Lahore. The street lamps seem to have gone out, but the blinking frenzy of oncoming, swerving, honking, motorbikes and rickshaws provide enough light. I think I'm running late but I'm not sure. The dinner invitation said 8 sharp. One hand shifting between the steering wheel and the gear stick, the other one clamped to his ear, the driver is arguing with someone over the phone while he drives. As pedestrians, cars, life, veers out of our way, a uniformed man jumps in front of our car. "Oh no" exclaims the driver, as he hits the breaks and drops his phone. A conversation – that probably has occurred in a thousand different iterations in the career of this Traffic Warden – unfolds. The Warden points out that driving and speaking on the phone is a traffic violation. The driver pleads guilty, feigns distress. He crumples 200 rupees in the Warden's hand. The Warden crumples a traffic ticket in the dust. The actors nod in mutual understanding, perhaps never to meet again. The pandemonium picks up again as the car belts past the Railway Station, a bastion of colonial virulence. Across a traffic signal. A new bridge. What is this cemented monstrosity? A sharp left. I'm back in familiar territory. A gate, a trot, and I make it to my destination. Early.

2. Existing in Lahore requires a ritualised performance in itself. But to walk from that into an orchestrated one is a bit surreal. This city does theatrical stage performances well and I have spent a large part of my life both on stage and in the audience. It was much later, during my time at the National College of Arts, Lahore (first from 2001 to 2004 and then again from 2009 to 2010) when I began to draw a feeble line of understanding between the performing arts and *performance art*. It was new and confusing, and exciting too. In a culture so rich and diverse in thespianism as ours, it was unfortunate that I knew nothing of local performance art. There

was no published documentation around it that I was able to find. I still admit to knowing very little of what happened in the past. Perhaps nothing like it did happen. But as time passed, I began to familiarise myself with the pockets of performance art taking shape around me. The few and far between performances grew in number, and I began to slowly piece together a nuanced vocabulary of my own.

3. Tonight the roles of the performer and observer are not divvied upon entering the staging space. Tonight we are all participants, and our presence makes the event.

The event is in the historical district of the city in the murkily colourful *Heera Mandi* (Diamond Market) neighbourhood, the oldest red light district in Pakistan. Cropping up in the shadows of the Lahore Fort and *Badshahi* Mosque, the area first served as the living quarters for the royal courtesans of the Mughal Emperors. Dinner will be served on the top floor of a nondescript building next to *Andaaz* restaurant. On the other side of *Andaaz* looms *Cocco's Den*: the first restaurant concept in the area that invited the rest of the city into the centuries old sex-worker's neighbourhood for a *kosher* entertainment experience. The multi-storied *haveli*¹, owned by renowned artist Iqbal Hussain, opened its ground floor museum-like lobby and the glittering rooftop to the public, while the rest housed the artist's family. The son of a sex-worker, Hussain grew up in a crumbling *Heera Mandi* and painted the prostitutes and dancing girls around him. People flocked to eat at this restaurant, overpay for food, and peer over the backside of the roof into the scores of windows, rooftops, and street life of a very different world. At the end of the meal, the curious would drive through the backstreets and try to sneak a look into the 'music' shops. I remember the pimps, eating from street vendors, keeping one eye out sharply for potential clients. That was the



90s. Now the area is eerily gentrified – the streets have been cleaned up and the houses illuminated. A government sign welcomes people, and a slew of restaurants line the *new* food street. The green belt in front has been rid of its human lumps of heroine addicts. The backstreets now have paid parking. Prostitution is still active.

4.

Please do not use words or your voice.

Please don't read or write.

Try to make as little noise as possible.

Don't interact with technology.

Stay for at least 2 hours.

We walk out of the elevator and on to the rooftop, and are welcomed to a bird's eye view of the majestic *Badshahi* Mosque, a spectacular specimen of Mughal architecture that flanks the Lahore Fort. It's lit up strategically, aware of the many eyes that watch it. There are a few long tables set up on our rooftop and several people are sitting already, waiting quietly. I head to the last table, to the last chair, and take the seat that faces outwards. It's a strategic choice. I'm expecting to be extremely uncomfortable in my forced silence amongst strangers, and so I want to be facing the least number of people and also want a view to distract myself with. If I must contemplate, I must have a pleasing unobstructed view to be the backdrop. I was invited tonight by the artist in my capacity as a writer, but there was no specific request to observe; I wasn't the audience, but a participant in this act – hence, painfully aware of my own self and my indisposition to hold eye contact for long. Forced silence. Ordered silence. It evokes an inner noise that is cacophonous. Every thought possible chimes in, louder than the last. I'm conscious of being part of an 'art event.' How must I act? Must I

act at all? I'm distracted, disturbed almost, by how much I can't *let go*.

The location bothers me. It is beautiful, but it's a postcard setting for a glibly cleaned up Lahore, The Cultural Capital. I feel a sense of being Other-ed: a self-fetishization, evoked through the eye of an outsider. I choose not to ask if the location is the artist's selection or a recommendation by the hosts. I choose instead to make a more considered judgement at the end of the night.

More people arrive, this time familiar faces. They seek comfort in recognition and silently head towards my table. Within minutes, I'm surrounded by many whom I know from my art school days. Two artists, an eastern classical dancer, students from an art history class that I assisted at, a friend, a critic. Add to that some strangers and a sole white male. Nods of acknowledgment, hello, how do you do, this is strange, haha, nothing more to say, let's look away, the view is amazing, I am so calm and collected, this doesn't bother me, actually it does bother me, what are we doing.

It's a bit chilly. There is some preoccupation with adjusting outerwear.

5. Lahore is not a silent city; no metropolis really is. And the older it gets, the more its buildings and streets creak louder. Punjab, the province, is louder still: the men have big laughs; the women have big thighs. Everything moves, constantly. The fights are big, and love larger. Personal lives spill outside doors and windows, and everyone always talks. Talks, chatters, gossips, lectures, snitches, orates soliloquies. Everyone. Talks. All the time. Silence is not something that comes naturally to our people, and those who practice it are deemed wise and few. *Honi*, I say, when I'm first introduced to her two days before, *you are brave to do this in Lahore*.

How are you going to keep Lahoris silent for an entire evening?

6. It's been 15 minutes. The girl in front of me slips out her phone to check her whatsapp or facebook or whatever social lifeline she needs to slice through the awkwardness. Everyone looks at her, reproaching loudly in their heads. Her neighbour nudges her and pantomimes disapproval, trying to soften it with a smile. She doesn't care, but switches her phone off after one last glance. Someone moves, a chair scrapes, a shawl is draped. A giggle is stifled. My neighbours do an elaborate mime of appreciating each other's rings, clothes, necklaces. Their fingers

touch, graze, linger, share. The lack of words to condense the exchange transpires in an acceptable physicality.

Plastic sealed trays of salad are served and yogurt bowls are placed on the sides. There are not enough serving spoons. People pass around the trays and the one large spoon and begin cutting through the cucumber. Niftily. Calculatedly. Something to keep our confused hands occupied.

Physical. I realise that more and more people around me are beginning to resort to theatrical gesturing. The expressions are exaggerated: eyes are wide open, mouths distorted to express a question or an answer; arms flail, hands mimic words.

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There is a lot of polite smiling and nods and eyebrow dancing. And cucumber forking. Time ticks. Finally an entrée is served. Good, because everyone is hungry and no one knows what tonight's fare is. Silently, obediently, a slew of staff serves a purplish, blood red concoction. It's a shredded beetroot salad with some kind of local crumbly, white cheese. I like beetroot. It tastes a bit like cardboard, but the cheese compliments it and a low, humming sound of appreciation escapes my throat. *Mmmm*. Heads whip to look at the elicitor of the sound, and some laugh: shoulders moving, without sound. I peek over and half way down, a couple is poking at the salad disappointedly. They

are cautious, hesitant, take a bite and push their plates away in distaste.

7. Slowly the awareness spreads past our own bodies. Realisation awakens that the other next to us is just as awkward, if not as uncomfortable. And so we begin to point now to other people, the mosque, the moon, and the rooftops next to us. Everything is inspiring an amplified fascination. The music playing from other rooftop restaurants surrounds us. Our food is taking too long.

After what might seem like a sophisticated timeframe of endurance, patience begins to run thin. My neighbour pokes me, I turn around, a ciga-



rette is offered. A white flag. I nod eagerly and we get up. Our metal chairs drag loudly on the floor. Everyone turns to look at us, their senses heightened, their pupils tracking our steps as we walk towards a staircase and up to a small chunk of elevated landscape that can best be described as a vantage point for jumpers. I take a drag, and let out a huge, smoky sigh. Thanks, I nod to my accomplice. More people join us, all girls. Now, suddenly, I'm conscious again. On a petri dish fit for an enlarged microscope, emancipated girls smoke. Morally sound customers from the next-door restaurant's attached rooftop stare and shake their head in disapproval. I find myself lowering my gaze, rushing to finish my cigarette without belittling my generous accomplice's stick gift, and rush down. All eyes stare. It is the quietest, oddest dinner party I have ever been to.

8. Hunger is not something *Lahoris* deal with well. Food for us, on the other hand, is the sacred glue that binds government deals and marriage vows. The country's current Prime Minister hails from Punjab, and his grand eating habits have often made national news.

The space between the entrée and the main course is excessively long for many around me. The mime now revolves around hunger, death, biting off one's arm, etc. Finally there is a signal that food is served, buffet style. We all get up and queue in a line. I'm very curious about what's on the menu: is it special? Will there be new things to try? Is it traditional *Lahori* cuisine, set to match the location?

Standing at the edge of a very low boundary wall, I see the open kitchen of the restaurant next door. It is close enough for me to jump into. The spread is lavish and with every kind of meat, chicken and fish grilling, frying, simmering. The smells waft up and my stomach growls very loud. I turn around to the

person behind me and point and smile, mistaking this to be our dinner fare. He laughs and mouths the words: no meat. I assume he's vegetarian. My turn finally comes to reach for the silver food trays and... it's all vegetarian. I hear a gasp from the person in front of me who has just also realised this. *Lahoris* are known for their excessive food habits – cooking, eating and feeding. Traditionally, a sign of hospitality is the meat you can put on the table. Its expensiveness is a testament to how much a guest is valued, outmoded as it may sound. It is a carnivorous culture, and the sacrifice of goats and cows is something we all grow up seeing. Several of my friends and colleagues are vegetarians in Pakistan. They never find it easy to eat out – no one really understands how to cater to them. So, quite visibly, I see people distressed around me. The food is good. I pile up my plate high, but the shock off no meat has hit me too. I firmly believe the artist is aware of this conundrum. Whatever her personal choices may be, this is not a decision taken lightly when hosting a dinner in Lahore.

9. I return to the table and look longingly at the *Cooco's* rooftop, a few buildings down. Their lamb chops are notoriously famous for being delicious and overpriced. As my attention turns away from inside my head and my stomach, I begin to focus on the music wafting in from the surrounding eateries. The wind picks up different pockets of songs and flings them towards us. A popular Bollywood song from the 90s is tossed around with an eastern classical *raag*. Turn this way, and you hear the *raag* more, turn the other and you can tap your foot to the beat.

The precise act of eating distracts the best of people. Everyone is engrossed with shovelling food from plate to mouth, but there is a choreographed togetherness in the scores of people doing the same thing. Plying deftly formed pat-

hooray² wrapped bites into their mouths with their hands, one after another. An older, officious looking gentleman has been seated next to me. He is very upset and he plays with his food, but he too eats. The two next to me get up for a second helping. The food breaks a barrier. The ability to get up and move around brings with it the sounds of physicality that help create the most minimal of dins, but one that cuts the silence. It brings a relief. I now see around me lots of wordless but animated conversations taking place. Across from me, the art critic is acting out an elaborate story that has his conversation partner wobbling with silent laughter. I stand up gently, lean against the roof railing, and finally observe. No one notices me anymore. Everyone is engaged. It is like someone pushed the mute button on a television show. We have all become willing participants of this performance. We are the layers, the textures. We are the material and the meaning. The artist watches too.

10. I look across and see Honi walk across to Herman. They hold hands and stare in each other's eyes for several lengthy minutes. People point to them and everyone stops to turn and look. Suddenly a new epicentre of the gathering is formed, and it demands attention in its silent but powerful non-activity. Are they together romantically, someone gestures a question at me. I shrug, I don't know.

It is dramatic, theatrical and apparently un-staged, but it leaves an impression. Their conversation requires no pantomime, just an exchange of imperceptible communication through touch and sight. After an extended period, which seems like forever to me, they nod and disengage. Honi then walks across and repeats this with a random dinner guest, and then with the next, edging slowly towards our side. A moment of panic hits me and I turn sharply away, avoiding any possibility of being picked. I am incredibly uncomfortable with maintaining eye contact in general, and do not wish to

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IT BRINGS A RELIEF.



participate in this seemingly innocuous act. She comes close to me, engages with my neighbour, and then moves on. I didn't realise I was holding my breath for that entire time. Whoosh, it comes out.

11. The evening is almost coming to a close and it gives me time to reflect – upon this experiment that we put ourselves through. Experiences require no validation; yet they instigate a deluge of judgments. For me, the Silent Dinner became more of a sociological study into the dissection of an audience and how we as One Body responded to an

estrangement from our own instincts. Watching a performance is different – it allows us to vicariously live through the desires, sorrows and ambitions of a character. Our colour, ethnicity, social, religious and economic status, for that brief period, unyoked. To be part of a performance as the same laymen, on the other hand, requires us to exhibit our fragilities – in an inexperienced manner that both cripples us and liberates us – for everyone to see. We stumble in the aching awareness of our dumbness; we pretend to know better.

WE HAVE ALL BECOME
WILLING
PARTICIPANTS OF THIS
PERFORMANCE.

WE ARE THE LAYERS,
THE TEXTURES.
WE ARE THE MATERIAL
AND THE MEANING.

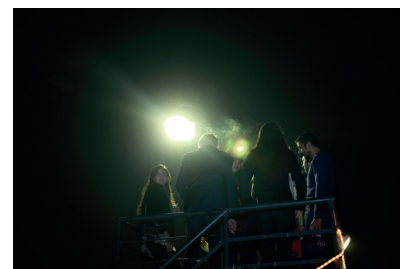
It is quite likely that a different demographic – not of the city, or perhaps even of the country – might have responded differently within this setting. One can only postulate that the enchantment of Lahore would have held sway over the night. What if the dinner had taken place inside a room? A plain room, with no ethnographic details to embellish the condition. By the end of the night, the location seemed like an elaborate set. If the dinner was not silent, this particular group of people perhaps might not have engaged long in a conversation about the old city, the mosque, the fort, and the romance of the Mughal period. Instead, I imagine, the conversation would have focused on how the recent spate of horrifically planned urban development has ripped through the fabric of their city and built a brute bridge that obliterates the views of this historic neighbourhood. The backdrop, then, would serve as a reminder of all that is being rapidly lost to delinquency. The conversation would also have revolved around, with equal vigour, the food served that night and being cheated of a carnivorous feast the Old City always promises, and delivers.

If an extreme consciousness of our own self and our thoughts and anxieties, is what public silence – and also art – is supposed to bring, the night was successful.

12. Is it time yet? Wrists swing to display watch faces. It is time. Why are they not giving out a signal to start talking? There is confusion and gesturing. Someone points to Honi, shows her the watch and mouths if they can speak now. She smiles and motions, your choice. The official silent time is over, but no one wants to be the first to talk. Unpredictably, speaking has become as uncomfortable an act as being silent was just two hours before. Everyone looks to another for clarity. Suddenly, unceremoniously, a whoop of delight from a table at the other end pierces the evening. Someone has just seen the time. That sharp, loud cry of joy draws laughter

from everyone. Another table starts clapping and everyone launches into conversation together. Not hearing, just speaking.

The diners at the rooftop next to us had been just as caught up with our act as we had been. To them, a large party of about 50 or 60 had spent an entire evening in silence. Upon hearing us break our vow of silence, they hoot cheers of appreciation and clap for us. A moment of sound and cacophony connects us strangers.



THE LOST SUPPER

OR THE END

OF A BEGINNING

TEXT BY QUDDUS MIRZA

Quddus Mirza is a visual artist, art critic and independent curator, based in Lahore. He is the Head of Fine Art Department at National College of Arts, and the editor of Art Now Pakistan.

Language, the greatest means of communication, was probably the most important tool to shape *Homo erectus* into human beings. Once a man or woman communicates with others, he or she views them as a mirror in which to see his or her self. Language also provides the opportunity to store human knowledge and convey it across continents, cultures and generations. In a sense the entire world, or universe is contained inside the limited letters of an alphabet, of any language.

Octavio Paz, writing on the relation of the sound of words to things which they signify, imagines the perplexity of our ancestors who must have been surprised to find another sound (word) used for denoting the same object which has a different name/word/sound in their tongue. "Sooner or later all societies discover that there are other groups speaking a language different from their own. To realize that for other men the sounds that designate one thing or another – bread, sky, demons, trees – name other objects or designate nothing at all and are simply noise, must have been an awful experience. How can different sounds produce similar meanings?"¹. Perhaps that confusion created a sense of recognizing and realizing the presence of the *Other*, and generated the profession of translators, who convert text from one language into another tongue.

Imagine the world without translators. We would have been reduced to a small circle, without knowing or interacting with other communities, or accessing the literature written in other languages. Translators not only bring verbal expressions from other nations, they also expand our worldview, and make us global, international and transnational.

But as translators, texts and contents are of varying kinds, languages are also of different types. Along

with written and spoken forms, and signs, humans communicate through images and objects they make. There may be a link between all sorts of language mankind employs in order to converse, but the peculiarity of a system of communication also determines the content in it because certain concepts and ideas are only possible in one or another language.

The limitation of language is experienced in everyday life, but it was strongly realized at '*The Silent Dinner*', that took place on an early December night in Lahore. Organized on the rooftop of a restaurant in the old part of town, the dinner was attended by a number of people including artists, writers, curators, collectors, journalists and educationists etc. Rows of table were filled with these invitees who sat for two hours without uttering a single word. Apart from using language, every other activity related to food happened that evening. Cutlery was placed, starters were served, water was brought, and guests left their seats to pick their favourite dishes from a selection of vegetarian cuisine. Dinner ended with enjoying a range of sweets, but more than that by gazing at the watches to find when the two hours are up and one can start to speak again.

But interestingly as soon as two hours were complete and 'participants in the performance' were 'allowed' to 'talk', some of them felt unease with words, or realized the futility of spoken language. The experience was not dissimilar to getting your wrist bone broken, having a cast on it for three to four month, not moving the hand, and once the bone is healed, cast is removed, fingers are free, you are still unable to turn it or use it. And while in that period of 'invalidity' you have developed a habit of substituting acts connecting to arm, hand and fingers through some other way.



Same was the case during *The Silent Dinner*, because, like me, several other guests (or participants) after feeling the initial frustration – being stopped to speak, read text on their cell phones, or write on their notebooks – were forced to find other means of communications. Shaking hands, embracing, waving arms, or pointing to items in front of them were a few modes to interact with someone sitting next or across the table. The dinner began with a sullen sensation, almost foretelling the boring two hours ahead, but by the end when 120 minutes were almost over, many of those present, were freely communicating with each other and scarcely needed words to do so. One also started thinking about the requirement, role and necessity of spoken words, and if humans had not invented language, we might have some other scheme of discourse amongst us. Probably diagrams, drawings, scratches, marks, lines, shapes etc.

The experience of being there reiterated the relevance of words, and in the same instance exposed a sense of fasting. Eating, and to a sumptuous level can not be by any chance connected to the ritual of fasting, yet *The Silent Dinner* was a blend of fasting and feasting. I, like some other participants, already had my regular meal before leaving for the restaurant, the venue of the performance. Presuming that if the speech was barred, eating might have not been allowed either (as tongue was reduced to only one of its functions: tasting, and not the other function: talking), since we always associate having dinner with others as a social activity to intermingle and discuss many things.

Actually the link between cuisine and conversation is two folded, because in some conservative households kids were instructed not to talk while having their food at the family table. For them it

amounts to bad behaviour, because you shift your attention from food and indulge in trite activities. On the contrary, in some circles (and these are the majority) it is decent to engage in small talk with fellow humans while sitting at a dinner table. Eating in silence is understood to be a person's selfishness, self-centredness and greediness. There are diverse topics at a dinner table but it is usually observed that while eating people only discuss food (if not their plans to join a gym, loose weight or calculate calories and chart out different healthy diets!).

Thus an occasion where eating was about controlling your tongue, but fully devouring your food presented interesting and unexpected outcomes. Many (including me) despite of having their dinner, had another full meal – probably out of their frustration of not using their mouth to make sound, they engaged it to savour what was served. So at *The Silent Dinner*, food became the main course and focus of communication. Pointing towards types of salad, main course, sweetmeat or other stuff became the main act, action and activity. Everyone tried to offer what was in front of him or her to person sitting left, right or opposite. Thus the dinner, even though it was *silent*, was not without communication and interaction. Some even dared discussing slightly complex or higher subjects, for example art, politics, fashion, or the surrounding architecture dominated by the grand mosque built during the reign of Mughal emperor Aurangzeb, next to Lahore Fort.

However all these attempts were proven false and futile, because soon those individuals realized the futility of these efforts. It dawned on us that if we are stopped from using 'verbal vocabulary' we are reduced to basic functions and elementary interactions. No matter how hard we try, we cannot move

beyond the banal. This scenario is reminiscent of the egg and chicken situation: debating whether our concepts have produced our complex language, or our system of language led to a wealth of sophisticated ideas. The absence of spoken words during *The Silent Dinner* signifies the dearth of sublime concept in the wake of verbal interaction.

Certainly the participants were silent for the entire duration of dinner, they were refrained from conversation with each other, but it didn't mean abandoning language; because in place of talking to each other, each individual was in conversation with him or herself. Once the guests were denied the right to speak loudly, speech occupied their brains, and they were in discourse with themselves – through thinking, recollecting, remembering and taking mental notes. In fact the process of thinking is just an act of verbalising, and there is no thought beyond or devoid of human speech – in the form of its internal discourse.

Yet a person questions the need for hosting *The Silent Dinner*, which in actuality did not remain 'silent' in the pure sense of the word. In spite of strict instructions, people did speak, in their heads, through signs, and other means, even though no sound was produced. Not even the beep of a mobile phone was ringing (an unimaginable scenario in contemporary conditions!) yet one could hear and note the sounds of surroundings, fragments of a song, lines of a verbal exchange from a far away house, the announcement of an event and the call for prayers were a few fleeting and floating sound pieces, which were comprehensible and identifiable – and initiated chains of thought in some minds. So if there was no complete and absolute suspension of speech, the whole performance served a greater cause. It provided a unique experience of discontinuing a small section of our

routine existence – for a brief period of two hours – to make us realize how important and indispensable the habit of talking is for the human race.

To some extent it also alluded to a totalitarian society, in which state, market or some other dominant force determines the discourse of a public. What to say and what not to utter. What to write and what to hide. In many communities, the authorities dictate and direct the course and conversation of its population. Often directly, and many times in an implicit manner. The tendency of self-censorship is an example of silencing one's expressions and ideas, which takes place without the direct and obvious command of a higher governing body. Due to a subjugated public's conditioned behaviour, the demand to conceal unacceptable material is met by the writers, artists and general public as an act of 'free choice'. Solely because in the beginning any restriction appears odd, oppressive and illogical, but with the passage of time it becomes part of one's system of thinking, and mode of behaviour. *The Silent Dinner* confirmed, determined and demonstrated this psychological process, where for two hours, men and women abandoned their right to speak and by the culmination of performance they seemed to be not missing much and could have continued for a further extension of the experiment.

Once the human race is stripped of the gift of speech, it can still survive and manage to make itself understood. This was observed to a level in Lahore, and must have been the same during other *Silent Dinners* in different cities. But the Lahore performance was unique because of the political history of this country. The nation has suffered years of dictatorship that always tried to stifle the voices of dissent.

[1]. Paz, Octavio. *Convergences*. Harcourt Brace Jovanovich: New York. 1987 (page 1)



KARHI

Pakor

- 120g chickpea flour
- 1 medium potato, diced small
- 1 a red or brown onion, diced
- 3/4 tsp red chilli powder or cayenne pepper
- 1/4 tsp of baking soda
- 2 small hot green chillies, chopped (optional)
- A handful of fresh coriander, chopped
- 150mL Water
- 3/4 tsp salt

Karhi

- 1 1/2 cups natural yoghurt
- 1 tsp cumin seeds
- 1 tsp mustard seeds
- 1/2 tsp fenugreek seeds
- 1/2 tsp turmeric powder
- 1/2 tsp red chilli powder or cayenne pepper
- 35 g chickpea flour
- 3-4 dried red chillies, chopped
- 1 1/2 tbsp grated ginger
- 2 large tomatoes, diced
- 2 cloves of garlic, finely chopped
- A handful of fresh coriander, roughly chopped
- 2 small hot green chillies, finely chopped (optional)
- Salt to taste
- 3 tbsp oil

PAKORA

Place the chickpea flour in a bowl and mix in the salt, red chilli powder, baking soda, green chillies, and coriander leaves. Then add the water slowly and mix to make a batter. The consistency should be wet but not runny. Add the onion and potato to the mix and stir them through. If the batter is too liquid, you can add more flour or if it is too dry add more water and mix thoroughly.

Pakor

Preheat the oven to 180°C in a fan forced oven. Cover an oven tray in greaseproof paper. Spoon out 1/2 tbsp of the mix into small piles. You should get about 18 pakoras. Bake for 10 minutes, turn the pakoras over and bake for a further 5 minutes. Take them out of the oven and set them aside.

Place the yoghurt in a bowl and add the chickpea flour, turmeric and salt. Whisk together until smooth.

Place 2 tbsp of oil in a pot or deep pan on medium heat and brown the onions slowly, not blackening them. This should take 15 - 20 minutes. Add garlic and tomatoes and simmer for 10 mins.

In a separate smaller skillet heat 1 tbsp oil and add the fenugreek, mustard, cumin, red chillies, ginger and stir. Leave on the heat until the ginger is cooked (3-4 minutes) then transfer to the pan with the tomato and onions. Stir through and simmer for 2 minutes.

Add the yoghurt mix to the pan, stir through and follow with 1.5 cups of water. Mix well. Let the sauce come to a boil. Reduce the heat, add the red chilli powder, green chillies, coriander leaves, salt and stir them through. Add a little more water if it is thickening too

much. Place the pakoras in the sauce and stir them through. Leave to simmer on a low heat for 10 minutes until the pakoras are warmed through. Garnish with fresh coriander and green chillies.

Serve with white basmati rice.



FORGETTING YOUR REGULAR LIFE.

TEXT BY ANNETTE INNIS

Annette Innis is an artist from Newtown, Sydney who works teaching art programs in aged care.

AN IMMERSION INTO THE SILENT DINNER

I was extremely excited but also nervous about the Silent Dinner Party. I didn't tell anyone I knew that I was going because I didn't want anyone I knew to come. No one in the room would have any pre-existing relationship with me, or expectation of me. I was going to be completely anonymous. As a natural extrovert, I'm confident with conversation skills and can fill any awkward silence seamlessly. I love meeting new people, I have lots to talk about, and have sharp skills when it comes to flattery, and listening to others. I wondered whether I would still feel valuable once stripped of my *on-paper* identity, and was treating the experience as a personal challenge.

I wanted to look fabulous, yet weird and very approachable. I knew the crowd would be full of open minded eccentrics who would appreciate an artistically put together outfit so I wore a bright green formal dress, sparkly high-heeled glitter boots and a big fake flower in my hair with matching bright red lipstick.

As I walked up the grand staircase and into the 'quiet' area, the eerie silence was new to me so it felt like I was making a grand entrance. All eyes were on me but no one was talking. I felt like the whole party paused in a stunned silence upon my arrival. Maybe this is how famous people feel when entering a room, I thought. I was greeted by smiles and was very curious about the others who were embarking on the same bizarre experience as I was.

It was a pleasure making other people feel welcome and special too as they entered the room, greeting each other as friends and carefully clinking our champagne glasses in a silent 'cheers'. Honi gave me a welcoming hug, and in that moment I felt like she was a familiar old friend who was glad I had made it! I sat down in an empty part of the

room, and watched as the seats around me filled with a mixed bunch of people of different ages, ethnicities and personal styles. I never usually would be at a dinner party with such a diverse bunch. I didn't even know whether everyone spoke English or not. I warmly greeted the small gang who were to become my Silent Dinner immediate family for the evening.

I felt comforted by the social rituals I could fall back on like waving hello, pointing out the grandeur of the room we were in, giving the thumbs up to people's outfits, and an occasional Mexican wave. Soon I observed that the way to gain value in this group was to be a bit silly. The more I exaggerated my expressions, displayed funny behaviour, and generally acted strange, the more I was liked. We displayed over-the-top annoyance when the waiter with the wine was taking so long to reach us, tapping our imaginary watches in agitation, and pretending to be absolutely starving and impatient about the food arriving. We took turns proving that we didn't take ourselves too seriously, with every silent joke being instantly followed by reassuring friendly grins to show that it was all in good fun.

People wearing vegan-wristbands were served a weird, rubbery looking bread as a starter, and when the lady opposite me looked disgusted, we collectively started piling up a of all the pieces of the dodgy looking bread we could reach onto her plate, encouraging her to eat them. I wondered whether the bread was unappealing on purpose, providing a common enemy for us to unite against. In a similar fashion, the edible flowers from people's entrees were all added to my hairstyle to match the flower in my hair.



I was amazed at how creative we all became with the limited stimulus we had. When conversation was stripped away, our imaginations came to life. Napkins were used as blindfolds, hats, flags, then all tied in knots to create a giant banner, stretching over the entire length of the room.

One man in our group refused his meal with a silent tantrum, so I opened my handbag and generously offered him the collection of fake plastic fruit that I had brought. The fruit was then passed underneath tables, juggled in the air, a fake banana was strategically placed right on the round curve of a bald man's head. Eventually it was being thrown great distances across the hall and caught triumphantly, with some guests being transformed into celebrated cricket legends along with silent eruptions of applause from the crowd.

At one point, whilst balancing a pretend candle on my head, I noticed a guy at another table doing the same thing. We locked eyes, understood that this

was now a competition, and tried to outdo each other by seeing who could move around the most without the candle falling. Eventually, with both of us standing on our respective tables laughing and dancing, he stumbled and lost balance. I triumphantly thanked the crowd and took a sip of my wine with my rude finger subtly pointing his way, the plastic candle still on my head.

We left our tables and formed a silent dance floor, looking up to see a DJ spinning imaginary records. We could tell what genre of music he was playing by his exaggerated acting. Everyone froze still while waiting for him to pick the next record, then danced their hearts out. I felt so free that I spun around in circles, my ball gown skirt creating a green blur around me. The crowd started to clear and suddenly I was face-to-face with the candle-balancing guy. He (pretending to be devastated) reenacted my rude finger moment whilst pretending to cry, so I got on my knees and begged forgiveness. We slow danced together and all was resolved.

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Returning to our seats there was a special sense of camaraderie at my table, and I could tell this was the case all over. At one point a man rose majestically on top of a distant table. His neighbours had transformed him into a living sculpture of the Statue of Liberty with napkins and cutlery balancing on top of him from different angles, clearly a team effort. We went between tuning into our own group intensely, and joining in on the collective entertainment with the wider party. After using up both of my wine tokens, I was sent a paper-aeroplane wine ticket from one of my new friends who had noticed I'd run out. Such generosity! The rest of the evening was far more casual; we played a lot of musical chairs to connect with the people in further-away seats. There was so much love and laughter in the room that I didn't want it to end. Towards the end, a few of us motioned that we were going to grab a drink at the pub across the

road together afterwards, I was determined not to miss the big reveal!

Previously, I had wondered whether I was going to have to try to introduce myself through a charade game of facts and nonverbal introductions, but none of that happened. Instead, I forgot all about my regular life outside of this experience and was completely immersed in the moment, laughing so much at everything that was going on. I felt absolutely refreshed and learned that everyone has a fun side to them. What an incredible experience, I absolutely cannot wait to do it all again.



YOU

HAD

TO BE

THERE

TEXT BY RILKA OAKLEY
Rilka Oakley is a curator
living and working in Katoomba,
NSW, Australia.

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 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



THE SILENT DINNERS ARE A CROSS BETWEEN A PARTICIPATORY PERFORMANCE PIECE AND A MEDITATION ON SOCIAL INTERACTION.

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.

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 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

1 Anthony Bond <i>the idea of art: Building a contemporary international art collection</i> , Sydney, NewSouth Publishing, 2015, p. 17	Blue Mountains Cultural Centre, Katoomba NSW, including Cath Barcan, Anne Graham, Astra Howard, Daniel Kojta and Honi Ryan looking at encounters with strangers.
2 Conversation between the author and Honi Ryan, January 2017	6 Marina Abramovic in http://kaldorartprojects.org.au/projects/marina-abramovic , accessed January 2017
3 Honi Ryan <i>Gestures of Intent: a year of nomadic social practice</i> , 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.	7 Marina Abramovic in http://mai.art/as-one-content/2016/4/6/history-of-long-durational-work , accessed January 2017
4 Honi Ryan <i>Gestures of Intent: a year of nomadic social practice</i> , Masters of Fine Art in Creative Practice, Project Report/Research Paper, Transart Institute, 2015, p. 25	8 Conversation between the author and Mike Parr, November 2016
5 <i>Strange Embrace</i> 2015 curated by Rilka Oakley at	9 Honi Ryan <i>Gestures of Intent: a year of nomadic social practice</i> , Masters of Fine Art in Creative Practice, Project Report/Research Paper, Transart Institute, 2015, p. 21



EATING

TEXT BY BRAVO CHILD

Bravo Child is a game designer; exploring play and chaos through videogames, card decks, immersive theatre and sensory art. Bravo was the co-host at five Silent Dinners in Australia between 2012-2016.

SILENCE

```
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<head>
<meta name="Silent Dinner"
content= "width:evening x 1.0">
<style>
var = variables
var city:["Sydney", "Sydney", "Adelaide"];
var soundLevel =
guidelines.getLevelByListening("myAudio");
event.volume = 0.0;
</style>
</head>

<body>
<h1>Eating Silence</h1>
<blockquote cite="Bravo Child">

<nav>Navigate by instinct.
<button type="talking">Reaction 01</button>
if (hour < 2) {
    greeting = "Shhhh";
}
<button type="custom">Reaction 02</button>
if (authenticity == false) {
    greeting = null [0];
}
<button type="outcome">Reaction 03</button>
var expectation = 0;
</nav>

<div class="creative article">
We set the space to invite stillness.
We calmly place the napkins
and fill the water jugs.
The night begins to turn the objects
fuzzy with dusk.
We hush the labels on bottles
with brown paper.
It feels like a high school recital,
except we're all in the ensemble.
The only audience - ourselves.
We witness the human theatre
of getting to know how to interact
without our usual tools.
How do we know where we stand?
...so we sit.

Somebody. Some body. Body.
Somebody else...
Some else's body.
Studying the mouths.
Embodying paper hats and stacks of glasses.

We are building our unspoken vocabulary.

<p id="body language">
Eye gaze
Or eye gouge?
Sitting on seats like
bicycles without handle bars,
what do we do with our hands?
```

Sitting in clumps of stranded strangers,
the starch white table cloth stretching out
into the unreachable.
Catching attention.
Throwing plastic fruit across the silence.
Hands replacing ears to receive them.
Ripples of interaction shiver across the room.
Finding the warmth without words.
Reassured by the bond that "We're in this to-
gether".

"What am I afraid of?
The dark?
The silence?
The unknown in the minds of the unknown?
My own company?"

The thinking is slowed by alcohol.
The th i m k l i n g a s s a l l o w e d
BUY ALCO HOL
THE STINKING ASS Halo
hAllow hollow ALL LOW

Comment Tag <!--COME HERE, LOOK WE CAN TALK
IN THE HALLWAY, I'M NOT IN THE ROOM ANYMORE,
I'VE BEEN HOLDING UP THIS TOKEN AND I'M BEING
IGNORED!!! YOU CAN'T JUST TAKE PEOPLE'S MONEY
AND THEN NOT SERVE THEM!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!
I'M IN HOSPITALITY!!!!!!!!!!•••-->

<div id="response">
*nods
</div>
<div id="unsaid">
"I am not here to make this easy
and forgettable."

...but I know we are made of mistakes.
Piecing something new together
from the broken habits
which we mistook for parts of ourselves.

The stillness could look like boredom,
but if you listened to silence,
it was an opening
beyond the limitations of words.

Peace and quiet is the dessert.
</div>
</blockquote>

<footer>
I am here to facilitate a coming to terms with
the human beyond the social programming of the
'right' way to interact, so that we may settle
into the trust of learning each other, together.
The calm of vulnerable connection when you both
admit that you don't know the rules... and perhaps
question that there are any?
</footer>
</body>
</html>

BARCELONA

LAHORE

SYDNEY