

Allen, Emma. "The Rapper is Present," *The New Yorker*, July 11, 2013



JULY 11, 2013

THE RAPPER IS PRESENT

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Three years ago, when the performance artist Marina Abramović sat in the atrium of the Museum of Modern Art for seven hundred and fifty hours, many of the people who had waited in long lines to sit across from her melted down in her presence. Abramović remained silent and still, enduring thirst, hunger, and back pain (and speculation as to how, exactly, she was or was not peeing), while visitors, confronted with her placid gaze, variously wept, vomited, stripped naked, and proposed marriage. But the other day, at the Pace Gallery in Chelsea, where Jay-Z was presenting his own take on Abramović's piece—rapping for six hours in front of a rotating cast of art-world V.I.P.s—viewers' primary response was to get up and dance.

Jay-Z (or Shawn Carter, or Hova, as he's alternately known) was continuously performing "Picasso Baby," the second song on his new album, "Magna Carta...

Holy Grail," to a succession of visual artists, museum directors, gallerists, Hollywood folk, and Pablo's granddaughter Diana Widmaier Picasso. These guests took turns on or near a wooden bench positioned across from a low platform on which the rapper stood, except when he was prowling around. A crowd of less famous art-world denizens and cool-looking people (some of whom had been specially cast) loitered along the walls of the gallery, except when they were invited to scurry right up to Jay-Z. Roving steady-cam operators followed the instructions of Mark Romanek, the director of what will become a music video featuring more middle-aged white people than are usually in rap videos.

When Jay-Z, who is forty-three, entered, wearing a short-sleeved white button-down shirt, jeans, a gold chain with a hefty pendant, and a gold watch, everyone cheered. "I just want a Picasso, in my casa / No, my castle / I'm a hasa, no I'm an asshole," he began. The artist George Condo, who had on sunglasses and New Balance sneakers, sat smirking and doing a nerdy-dad dance as Jay-Z rapped at him: "Fuck it, I want a billion / Jeff Koons balloons, I just wanna blow up / Condos in my condos." (In the song, he also name-drops Rothko, Bacon, Basquiat, Warhol, da Vinci, Art Basel, Christie's, the Met, the Louvre, and the Tate Modern.)

Little of Abramović's—or, for that matter, Texas Senator Wendy Davis' s—superhuman stamina was on display, as Jay-Z took numerous breaks and drank liberally from a bottle of Fiji Water. The stunt did recall "A Lot of Sorrow," the National's



six-hour looped performance, organized by the artist Ragnar Kjartansson, of their song “Sorrow” at PS1 earlier this year. And it was also in keeping with the recent trend in rap-art world convergences. Just last month, Kanye West told the *Times* that his latest album, “Yeezus,” was inspired by a Le Corbusier lamp; Jay-Z repeatedly reminded the room, “I’m the modern day Pablo / Picasso, baby.”

Roselee Goldberg, a curator, critic, and champion of performance art who helped produce the event, walked up to the bench and began twirling and waving her arms, then dropped down to one knee. “Both performances, Marina’s and Jay-Z’s, encourage you to look somebody in the eye, which we don’t do enough of, and it’s daring to do that,” she said, when her turn was up. The artist Dustin Yellin busted out some break-dancing moves, spinning around on the ground and attempting a sort of handstand. He hadn’t known what he was getting into when he received the mysterious invitation, which required the signing of a name and likeness release, and a promise not to wear logos. “I thought Jay-Z was going to make some paintings or something,” he said.

Although ‘No Photography’ signs were posted around, cell phones materialized from pockets and purses almost immediately, and Jay-Z hammed it up. “I’m posing for your picture!” he said. “See that? That was *statuesque*.” (“It became apparent in the first three seconds that there was no way to control it,” Romanek said on the phone after the video wrapped. “I think when I edit, I’ll probably cut to a shot of the sign and then show the iPhones being held up.”)

Judd Apatow, the director, took a turn, plopping himself (and a galley of “Dirty Love,” by Andre Dubus III) down on the bench. While Jay-Z did his thing, Apatow pretended to take a phone call. He held up a finger and, faux-irritated, mouthed “one second, *one second*” at the rapper. “I don’t have any skills other than I can be the awkward, awkward guy,” he said later. “We are just polar opposites, a comfortable person versus a totally uncomfortable person.” The actor Adam Driver lingered on the bench, and had to be escorted back to the perimeter by Jay-Z’s security detail, members of which had been outfitted with matching gray suits, so that they resembled suspiciously buff museum guards.

“How was the intimacy level for you?” Apatow inquired.

“It was really intense,” Driver replied.

“Yellow Basquiat in my kitchen corner / Go ahead, lean on that shit, Blue / You own it,” Jay-Z rapped, referring to Blue Ivy, his one-year-old daughter with Beyoncé. Jeanne Greenberg-Rohatyn, a gallerist and art adviser to Jay-Z who helped coordinate the shoot, interpreted the lyrics: “He’s thinking about his relationship to art and to how you want one thing and then you want the next thing and then it comes all the way back around; now he has a family and how he passes on the cultural baggage.”

The gallerist Bill Powers said, “You know what’s weird? Marina’s performance was about, like, quiet moments and getting comfortable with the stillness, but I think there’s too much going on here for you to ever capture that.” He then headed toward the bench with his wife, the fashion designer Cynthia Rowley, and their daughter. When the lyrics got raunchy,

Rowley covered the young girl's ears; she rolled her eyes and stuck out her tongue. Jay-Z took over, covering her ears with his hands while continuing to rap—this she seemed O.K. with.

The Santa Claus-bearded conceptual artist Lawrence Weiner stepped up in high-heeled turquoise cowboy boots and lounged. Afterward, he said, somewhat cryptically, “He has a demeanor and I have a demeanor, and both of us have a cognizance of what it’s all about.” Asked if he has a favorite Jay-Z song, he demurred. “I came. I did. Isn’t that enough of an approval?” The artist Marcel Dzama arrived in costume: a polka-dotted robe with a clown collar and a giant cow mask, which he explained was partly inspired by Picasso, but more by Picabia, and which he’d made for a short film starring Kim Gordon. “I can’t see a thing out of this,” he noted, before blindly shuffling toward the center of the room.

When Abramović appeared, serene, in a voluminous black gown, the room fell silent. “I need energy from everybody. This is a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity,” a member of the production crew barked to the stunned crowd. The artist slunk in, discarding her shoes and her belt along the way, holding her arms out to the side, palms facing forward. What followed was a slow, seductive dance, the artist and the rapper pacing around, staring intently into each other’s eyes, occasionally pressing their foreheads together, the mind-meld complete. “I had no idea what I was going to do,” Abramović said afterward. “I just came here and felt the energy. I love his music, because it’s social issues, it’s political, and really goes to everybody’s heart. It’s so good. It’s like a volcano.”

Photograph by Emma Allen.