

ALIX KNOWS THE CHAIRS ARE UNCOMFORTABLE BECAUSE SHE HAS TWO AT HOME

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An extract from Andrea Mason's novel, The Cremation Project

Wed 5 Aug

Alix cycles to the Serpentine Gallery.

Alix gets into the red-sheeted bed.

Alix has the choice to enter the exhibition to the left or the right.

Alix knows the chairs are uncomfortable because she has two at home.

Alix puts her bag in a locker, drinks a half-cup of water and approaches the final gateway.

Alix removes her boots.

Alix stands up, circles the room, and enters a room to the left of the main space.

Alix takes off her boots and climbs into the bed.

Alix wants to follow.

Alix watches, closes her eyes, watches, closes her eyes.

An older woman, with short bleached-blond hair, sits down on the edge of the plinth.

And how did they get there?

Another assistant points to a table full of industrial-looking black headphones.

At the door to the exhibition space, they are inducted into the workings of the exhibition.

Blissful.

Both still there.

Breathe.

Breathe.

Contained.

Close eyes.

Close eyes.

Close eyes.

Close eyes.

Eventually, there's movement.

Emergency stop-start breathing.

Everyone has become a symbiotic part of the other: the pushy men, the beautiful girl, the weeping woman, Alix.

Eyes closed.

Finally, she is first in line.

Green?

'Have you been before,' the young man asks.

He covers her with the sheet, and tucks it under her chin.

He pulls back the sheet and she lies down.

He takes her hand and leads her to a green-sheeted bed.

His shoes sit neatly at the edge of the road.

Just one other person turns up whilst she's there.

Looking at the statues in the beds.

Marina circles the space, and takes the hand of one of the black-clad gallery assistants, and leads her through a door, which closes behind them.

Marina has led a young woman to stand and face the wall, at the foot of Alix's bed.

Marina returns with a second lady.

Mostly occupied.

'Next ten,' he says, and ushers them to the gallery entrance.

No one standing.

'No,' she says.

Nothing can go wrong here.

On Lupus Street, an elderly man lies in the recovery position on the edge of the pavement.

One of the men stands forward of her again, to her right now.

One woman, flip flops on the floor in front of her, sits down on the edge of the plinth.
Or the purple one in the far corner?

Others sit on uncomfortable wooden IKEA chairs around the edges of the room facing the plinth.

Outside the Serpentine Gallery there's a queue.

Peep.

Peep.

Peep.

Peep.

People stand, eyes shut, on a low plinth made up of square boxes.

People with eyes closed, except one lady, the yoga lady, who sits on a bed, crouched forward.

'Please put away your bags, phones and watches,' the young man tells them, and opens the door into a locker room, a liminal space, where people sit quietly on soft benches, or dose up on water in see-through disposable cups.

People are transformed once they are inside the exhibition.

People walking around.

Safe.

She enters left.

She feels bullish, determined to be first off the mark as a gallery assistant comes across.

She imagines the drowned man pulling at her ankles.

She is a statue in a bed.

She is building Alix an army of silent swaying warriors.

She is content.

She is the first person in the water.

She lies for a long time.

She must also not speak.

She opens her eyes.

She pushes back the sheet.

She returns instead to the main space, and stands against the wall, as the weeping woman did before her.

She shakes her head.

She sits down and sees that Marina is sitting in the same row, eyes closed.

She stands and walks into another room, the other side of the main space.

She stands with the woman, a spectral presence. She still looks sad.

She watches as the older woman smiles at Marina as she takes her hand and leads her to stand against a wall.

She will swim first.

She wonders how long people stand on the plinths.

Sensory deprivation.

Silence.

Still no one in the pink-sheeted bed.

Suddenly, an urgent need to breathe, as if she has forgotten how.

The central space is busy.

The line dissipates.

The red-sheeted bed is near to the outside wall.

The teenage girl with her does the same.

The unoccupied beds are pink or red-sheeted.

The weeping woman stands up, and leans against the wall opposite Alix.

The woman finds a tissue and brings it up to her eyes.

The woman in the chair diagonally opposite her weeps silently.

The woman puts her feet together in a yoga pose, knees out wide.

The young gallery assistant dressed in black indicates for her to follow him.

There are camp beds covered by coloured sheets: pink, red, yellow, orange.

They stand for forty minutes.

This girl with waist length hair and shorts so short her bum cheeks show drew an intake of breath, earlier, from the men in the queue behind Alix.

This room is also full of beds, with green, blue and purple sheets.

Two male police officers are present, smiling, as well as two older women.

Two men edge ahead of her in the queue.

Watched over.

When she has exhausted her sense of who she is and who she can be in the green-sheeted bed, which felt like a bit of a cheat since she has already spent some considerable time in the red-sheeted bed, she visits the exhibition at the extension gallery which involves her walking across the bridge over the lake where a large HD video installation, with doodlings like hand-drawn tattoos on the computer-generated avatar, a drunk man, a bar stool philosopher, is viewable across two screens from one position and three screens from another position.

When she has exhausted her sense of who he is and who he can be, the words barely audible, a melancholic crooning, a yearning for a lost love is it, she feels sunk.

When she has exhausted her sense of who she is and who he can be, the words barely audible, and what he might be saying, she buys the accompanying book looking for explanation, and stands on the bridge over the lake to read it.

When she has exhausted her sense of who she is and who he can be, the words barely audible, and what he might be saying, she, having bought the accompanying book looking for explanation, and standing on the bridge over the lake to read it, and finding therein none, feels sunk, and she understands that art is experiential, like *Catch 22*; one must reproduce not describe, and she is literal.

When she has exhausted her sense of who she is and who he can be, the words barely audible, and what he might be saying, she, having bought the accompanying book looking for explanation, and standing on the bridge over the lake to read it, that night watches *Marina's Diary*, on her laptop, onto which, every day at midnight Marina posts a blog entry, her reflections on the day: she was thinking of Van Gogh all day, she says, she experienced visions, when we don't move we start seeing molecules of the air; like energy particles that are very real, that's what Van Gogh was painting, she says, a dance of these invisible particles of energy, she says, in her accented English, a guttural 'k' in front of words, and her face and long black hair looming out of the white backdrop, and she wants to be immersed in the work so that she's almost invisible, she says, and today, she says, she felt the particles of the energy in the space, for

which, she says, you need total stillness of your body and mind, and Alix feels privileged to have witnessed such a moment, to have seen Marina immersed in the work, eyes shut as she sat on the uncomfortable chair.

Thurs 7 Aug

A crazy dream.

A man climbs out of a bed covered by a blue sheet.

A maroon-sheeted bed is empty.

A small section of her front tooth severs off.

A transcendent space, like an airport or train station or hospital, where there is a common sense of purpose.

A woman in a blue dress standing against the opposite wall stares at Alix.

Alix doesn't want to get into this bed.

Alix feels cheated, that the assistant, a young woman this time, didn't tuck her in under her chin.

Alix nods.

Alix returns to the room with the beds.

Alix stares back.

Alix walks across the space.

Alix walks around to the other side, and gets in.

An assistant enters with a girl, and tucks her into it.

Another row of chairs faces the walls.

But they lie close together.

~~Carter's 24 and 48-hour coke-fuelled binges: it's for the work, he said.~~

Chairs face the central plinth.

Cycling home, she feels an urgency to see Jean.

Did Carter's coke fuelled work binges feel to him like that; all for the sake of the art?

Everything is at a tilt.

Having had big ideas about cleaning up, putting on laundry, cooking, instead she spends hours googling Marina Abramovic looking at the performances she did with Ulay.

~~He balanced a half-eaten burger on his right thigh.~~

~~He had had a fight with an umbrella, he said at *The Face* Christmas party.~~

~~He'd met her once in Paris with Konrad.~~

~~He tried to give up coke, and, in his final week, alcohol.~~

~~He sat on a chair in the middle of the studio, wearing a blood-splattered T-shirt, and moving a beer can slowly along the shaft of his cock.~~

In front of her, a man's head, with a T of hair.

In the far corner a young woman with long black wavy hair.

In the room to the left, camp beds are covered with purple, maroon, blue, red and green sheets.

In the room to the right, people are walking slowly, individually and in pairs, some holding hands.

It feels important to be here.

~~It's a horse, he said, for Bianca Jagger.~~

'Maybe, yeah,' he says.

~~Mayonnaise dripped down his leg.~~

No meals to cook, no laundry to hang.

~~Not dope though.~~

~~One day, just before their split, she arrived at Carter's studio around 10AM.~~

People are more restless than yesterday.

She awakes feeling hollowed out, and hears a crunch.

She circles the main room.

She decides to go again to the Abramović show.

She drowns.

She enters right.

She hears 'oh' escape her lips.

She's aware she must not take this man.

She's in bed with a man, someone else's boyfriend.

She's somewhere with a lot of people.

She is taken by the hand by the young man from the gallery.

She lifts her head and notes her neighbours.

She sees again the final image she saw at the other show: a flayed body, laid out on the axis of the pubic area: the front cut out around the pubic bone, no genitals, the back retains its anus.

She returns to the main room, and leans against the wall. She sees one assistant lead a woman onto the plinth.

She stands against the wall by the window.

She stands against the wall for a short time in this room.

She walks to the bed and takes off her shoes.

~~She watched as droplets of condensation fell onto his hand.~~

She wonders about the nature of the extremism in Abramovich's work.

Sometime in, a wave of green flashes across her eyes.

The assistants appear less active.

The assistant covers her with the sheet and folds the top edge back mid-way on her chest.

The assistant looks at the girl.

The assistant looks at her.

The assistant pulls back the sheet.

The assistant stays a while holding the woman's hand.

~~The autopsy stated that he had marijuana in his bloodstream when he died, no alcohol, no coke.~~

~~The fingers of his right hand were bandaged.~~

The girl shakes her head.

The girl's friend hovers by the entrance.

~~The horse blocked her entrance into the studio.~~

~~The umbrella, attached to a wooden trestle, constituted a horse's head, along with a saddle made of art blankets with chain for reins.~~

Then he's gone.

There are no shouting drunks, no yapping dogs, no shuffling men hosing their doormats. There are just a few people standing on the plinth.

There is more movement up and down from the chairs.

To her left an assistant, her back to the wall, whispers to another assistant standing beside her.

To her left, an older woman, short, wavy brown hair.

What is it about blue?

When she gets up much later, they are still lying there, eyes closed.

~~Write about it, he said, maintaining a slow ecstatic grin.~~

Fri 8 Aug

A chair becomes free and Alix sits in it.

A few people stand, swaying, eyes closed, on the plinths.

A young girl with long brown hair lies in the bed at her feet.

Again, people are walking, slowly.

Again, whilst standing in the queue, people spill out of their groups and try to edge ahead.

~~Alix and Carter also met young and became a 24/7 item, making art, their studio, for years a 504 Peugeot pick-up truck.~~

Alix closes her eyes and puts her hands on her thighs, as she has seen an assistant tell another woman to do.

Alix expected intense thoughts and feelings to arise during these sessions.

Alix looks into the room on the right.

Alix sees her rise.

Alix sits for a bit longer and gets up to leave.

Alix stands against the wall.

Alix wonders if she enjoys the contact with the young men.

All the chairs are taken, and lots of people stand against the walls, there's a sense of overcrowding.

An assistant whispers in her ear that the exhibition is closed.

And sits back up.

Each time, she lifts her head to look around.

Every now and then she opens her eyes to see if Marina is still there.

Eyes shut.

For a long time, she is.

Having put her bag into a locker, she weighs up which way to enter.

He doesn't seem to understand what she's saying.

He leans forward again, and rests his arms on his thighs, and rubs his hands together.

He looks cross.

He shakes his head, and withdraws.

He strokes her arm with his left hand.

Her eyes closed.

How will it affect what transpires, whether she enters left, as she did the first time, or right, as she did the second time.

In each of the gaps, three rows of three chairs face inwards.

In fact, a kind of emptying has occurred.

In it, Marina reveals herself as a young woman in love with Ulay.

Is that it – women nurture, endure and survive.

It is a lovely thing to see her arms entangled in his.

It looks like a violin.

Marina bends and whispers something to him, and leaves the room.

Marina hugs the young man ahead of Alix, and asks him about the instrument he carries on his back.

Marina is followed by two security guys: short haired clean-shaven men in check shirts and blue slacks, unsmiling, and with crinkled foreheads.

Marina sits next to a young man who leans forward, and rubs his arms.

Marina sits on a chair, in a front row.

Marina stands at the door, and shakes hands with gallery visitors as they exit.

Marina walks across and stands by the window; the spot where she brought people to stand on Alix's first day.

Men do bloody battle, and conquer or die.

~~Once, a live magpie fell down their chimney.~~

Or stand, or crouch against the walls.

People wander past.

Quite a few people stand on the plinths.

She enters right.

She gets in, and sleeps.

She sees that she is directly opposite Marina.

She loved him, Marina said, and felt that it was forever.

She shakes Alix's hand, gives a warm smile.

She stands with her arms entangled around the man's right forearm, like creeping vines. She returns to the main space.

She sees people led to beds and tucked in.

She tries again.

She visits a third time.

She walks across to the other room, in which, happily, she finds camp beds.

She wakes herself intermittently with a snore.

That night Alix watches *The Artist is Present*, a documentary about the making of the work for the recent retrospective at MOMA.

The back of the chair digs into her spine.

The bed here now has a purple sheet, and is empty.

The man continues to sit.

The plinth in the main space has been rearranged into a square platform, with sections placed diagonally at each corner, creating gaps.

The room is busy.

The sheets are purple, maroon, pink, red and green.

~~They travelled in their truck and made art and felt that their world was contained.~~

~~They made a list of all the catastrophes that had befallen them to date.~~

When she has exhausted the memories of all the catastrophes that had befallen them she watches *Frances Ha* and over-identifies with the heroine, a person striving towards an idea of something, but who never arrives, or fits: the scene of Frances using a credit card to go to Paris, just to prove that she can, and spending a jet-lagged weekend in a stranger's apartment is so sharply reminiscent of lonely days Alix spent walking about Paris when she was persuaded by Carter to take Jean to see him, and a weekend in a modernist hotel in Marseille – she saw it in a magazine and thought it looked glamorous and in fact the roof top pool was a paddling pool and was deserted – on her birthday; Carter came for one evening, then went to see a client, he said, in Salzburg, and she stayed three further nights alone with Jean; of course the movie ends hopefully – Frances reframes her expectations, moves to Washington Heights, instead of Manhattan, takes up the admin job offered to her at the dance school where she'd hoped to be offered tenure, and choreographs a show, instead of striving to become a dancer, unlike Alix whose furious struggle will not dissipate.

Sun 10 Aug

A gallery assistant approaches her end of the queue.

A gallery assistant is still talking to a group of young people in the queue behind her.

Again, they are informed that, even though Marina came outside earlier to ask people in the queue not to stay too long, people are however staying a long time, and there's increasingly a chance that people at this point in the queue will not get in.

Alix plans to spend the afternoon there, but when she arrives at the gallery the queue snakes beyond the gallery courtyard and into the park.

Alix pulls her hood up, and holds her bag pressed against her chest inside her coat, to protect the book and notebook inside it.

Alix stands uneasily, colluding in the denial.

And has things to do.

Because they are different, special, and they will be the one to escape death.

But she doubts it.

But why, she thinks.

Each one believing that they will be the one to hold out; others will give up, they will be the special one, the one that gets in.

Everybody stands firm.

For a brief moment Alix is determined to hang on.

I'm soaked.

I'll do it. I'll be the one to leave, she thinks.

In every lake and river.

In her house.

In houses.

It is raining heavily.

It's the final day of the Abramović exhibition at the Serpentine.

Rain seeps into the nape of her neck and through her coat sleeves.

Responsibilities to attend to.

She is alive.

She looks at the panoply of umbrellas.

She really can't afford to stand for two more hours, getting completely soaked, only to be turned away.

She thinks again about the man who drowned.

She walks back through the park, enjoying its emptiness, the sky above a white sheet. She walks across the grass to an exit, somewhat self-conscious.

She was in the queue for two hours.

She wears wellies and a raincoat but does not carry an umbrella, as almost everyone else in the queue seems to.

That will be good for them.

'That would be good for you, wouldn't it,' the assistant laughs.

The lake bubbles high.

The rain rains harder.

There are no badges for standing in this queue, just as there were no badges for remaining as long as she did in a relationship gone bad.

There are dead people everywhere, she thinks.

They will wait for everyone else to surrender, they will get in.

This time several gallery assistants come down the queue at once.

Twenty minutes later, the rain presses down in increasingly huge, torrential droplets, which course along the tarmac.

'We think it will be a three hour wait for you; by which time it will be five fifteen. There's a risk you will not get into the show.'

'We think you might be better off spending your time elsewhere. It is very unlikely that people at this end of the queue will get in,' they say.

'We'll be fine. These other people just need to leave,' one of them says.

Why don't I admit defeat and go home, she thinks?

Will she discover later that those people got in?

Versions of chapters previously published elsewhere include:

AND THEN NOTHING, BODY SPONGE, TEA-BAG 3: AM Magazine, 16 March 2021

DEAD MAN'S STUFF, ESPECIALLY, IS NO GOOD shortlist Manchester Fiction Prize, 2020

THIS IS WHAT SHE IS DOING NOW UEA New Writing, 2019.