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Want to see the exhibition? You'll have to strip off first

Forget painting, participatory art is the latest craze. **Cristina Ruiz** takes a deep breath and drops her drawers to report

I am standing naked in a darkened room. Another woman is just outside waiting to disrobe. In front of me a film showing a nude middle-aged woman astride a horse flickers on a giant screen. She sits there solemnly, occasionally speaking to an artist painting her portrait, before glancing at me accusatorially.

Although this may sound like an esoteric initiation ritual, it is in fact an artwork by the American Jennifer Rubell. She asked visitors to her recent exhibition at the Stephen Friedman Gallery in London to take off their clothes before watching her film in a private room so that "artist and viewer [could act] equally as subjects within the work".

This shared nudity is far from ennobling; rather than reflecting on the deeper meaning of communing with Rubell across time and space, I wonder how long I have to stand here, alone and naked in the dark, before I can justifiably claim to have completed this art experience? When did contemporary art become so annoyingly interactive?

Exhibitions that demand our direct participation are the trend du jour in our museums and galleries. In recent times we have been asked to eat, dance, play and exercise our way to artistic enlightenment. There have been giant slides at the Hayward Gallery courtesy of Carsten Höller; dialogues with strangers at Tate Modern as part of a performance by Tino Sehgal; and a durational piece by

the veteran performance artist Marina Abramovic at the Serpentine Gallery, in which the interplay of visitors filled the empty gallery spaces. Antony Gormley even made participatory art public in 2009, by inviting people to stand on the fourth plinth in Trafalgar Square as part of his *One & Other* commission (most of the 2,400 of them used their allotted hour to raise awareness of their chosen charity).

Now the Israeli artist Einat Amir is asking us to take part in what can best be described as a celebration of embarrassment at her new show, *Enough About You*, at the Triad gallery in central London. Members of the public, selected at random, will be ushered in pairs into glass-fronted booths where a recorded voice will ask them increasingly personal questions. Others will watch them navigate the social discomfort of forced intimacy with strangers. "Awkwardness is my favourite sensation," explains Amir. "It creates hyper awareness; you might be blushing but you're very aware of other people in the room. It gives you a sense of the world."

Few other forms of culture can elicit emotions like this, says Amir. "There is so much high-quality entertainment today that you can consume at home or in an Imax cinema, but those experiences are



Above: Olafur Eliasson's *The weather project* at Tate Modern in 2003. Below: Yoko Ono's *Cut Piece* from 1964

incredibly safe." As the quality of our popular culture has increased and social media has made us all hyper-connected, museums and artists have responded by creating theatrical environments that cannot be replicated on a screen.

"All cultural institutions are doing their best to find new ways to get people physically involved with art," says Amir. At the Zabludowicz Collection in north London, the artist Jon Rafman is inviting visitors to enter a real but artificial maze populated by virtual sculptural busts using Oculus Rift technology.

Although Rafman's piece is state-of-the-art (the Oculus Rift, one of the first consumer-targeted virtual reality headsets, won't be released to the

public until next year), audience participation in art is nothing new: its history stretches back to the 1960s and 1970s when artists such as Abramovic and Yoko Ono often involved the audience in their work. In one terrifying performance in 1964, Ono sat on a stage as members of the public armed with scissors proceeded to cut her clothes off piece by piece until she was left completely naked.

Back then, though, participatory art took place on the cultural fringes. Today it's gone mainstream. When Tate Modern unveils its new extension by the Swiss architecture firm Herzog & De Meuron next summer, there will be ample space for these new forms of art. They will not replace the paintings on the wall but they



JENNIFER RUBELL/STEPHEN FRIEDMAN GALLERY; ALY SONG/CORBIS; CHRIS HARRIS FOR THE TIMES



Left: Jennifer Rubell's *Posing*. Above: *Rain Room* by Random International. Below: Einat Amir's *Enough About You*



will be a crucial component of the newly expanded museum, says the departing director Chris Dercon.

"We are striving to activate people through art," he explains. "Visitors tell us they want encounters with art, artists, ideas and each other. It is this conversation around art — whether a painting or a performance — which turns it into a cultural good. In a busy, digital world we crave quiet, contemplative experiences of 'slow' looking, but as the music industry has shown, the more digital the world becomes, [the more] the appetite for physical meetings and live events grows. We have to meet both these demands and we are excited to be doing so."

It's no surprise that Tate Modern is positioning itself at the forefront of

this new social art movement. After all, this is the gallery that commissioned the most celebrated participatory artwork of our time.

In 2003, the Scandinavian artist Olafur Eliasson transformed the Turbine Hall into a magical misty landscape presided over by a giant sun that filled the space with pale orange light. *The weather project* included a mirrored ceiling that reflected the audience's reactions to this strange new world back to them. And they

“ In London people queued for hours to experience *Rain Room*”

loved it: 2.2 million visitors flocked to see the installation, proving that if the circumstances are right we are keen to get involved.

The same public enthusiasm greeted the debut of another installation that harnessed the elements in the name of art. *Rain Room*, first seen at the Barbican's Curve Gallery in 2012, asked us to walk through a downpour. Motion sensors in the ceiling prevented us from getting wet, giving us a feeling of "empowerment" says Hannes Koch of the design studio Random International, who created the piece.

"We consume so much stuff all the time on social media, on television, on emails," says Koch. "It's a multi-channel bombardment of the senses. Stepping into a work like *Rain*

Room removes the pressure of all this communication. It gets through to people and that's what they need at the moment."

This need appears to be universal: in London people queued for hours to experience *Rain Room*. The same thing happened when the installation moved to the Museum of Modern Art in New York in 2013. Now a new, larger version of the installation is receiving about 1,500 visitors a day at the Yuz Museum in Shanghai. The Los Angeles County Museum of Art, which will display an edition of the work from November, is likely to attract similar crowds.

However, these art experiences are only as good as the artists creating them. At their best they intimate the sublime. At worst they're just mystifying.

Back at the Jennifer Rubell exhibition, the next person to experience the enforced nudity after me, Claudine Thomas, a mother from south London, strips down to her underpants before watching the film of the artist getting her portrait painted on horseback.

She is not impressed. "I have no idea what that was supposed to mean. All I could think about was the poor horse standing there for hours and breathing in toxic fumes from the paint."

Not, perhaps, what the artist intended, but when you ask the public to complete your work by physically engaging with it, the results can be unexpected.

***Enough About You* is at Triad, WCI (07882 031137), from Oct 9-18. *Sucky Drama* by Jon Rafman is at the Zabudowicz Collection, NI (020 7428 8940), from Oct 8 to Dec 20**