

# Miranda July's quietly amazing show breaks the fourth wall of the web

Building on her app, which allows messages sent on the web to be delivered by real people, this show had a democratic spirit while recognising the artist as leader

**Glen Helfand in San Francisco**

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Miranda July showcased a new performance artwork twice in San Francisco this week. But you didn't hear that from me. The show, titled *New Society*, is sheathed in stipulations, a gentle request to avoid spoilers. The printed program contains a single request for those attending to protect future viewers by creating "a quiet absence of information about the show online". At least until after she finishes touring the piece this fall. "These days," to quote the program, "it is a rare sensation to sit down in a theatre with no idea of what will happen."

Of course, followers of the artist, performer, film-maker, writer, app developer and handbag designer will come to this event, which was co-presented by the San Francisco international film festival and the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, with some sense of what they'll be getting themselves into. July's work, as demonstrated in her best-known works - the 2005 film *Me and You and Everyone We Know*, and recent novel, *The First Bad Man* - creates tweaked microcosms that stem from the alienating effects of digital culture. Her performance persona is a quirky, nerdy outsider with a deceptively soft, tentative voice. She inhabits a sense of contemporary discomfort, often to devastatingly incisive effect.

The request to not disclose details of *New Society* is an artistic gesture of trust. It shares something with the impulse of the artist Tino Seghal, who forbids photographs of his performative installations, or Kate Bush, who made similar requests for her recent comeback concerts - only you don't get the sense that July will litigate if something does leak. Her demeanour may be deceptive, but there's something warmly seductive about how she takes her audience into the fold and makes us feel comfortable before throwing in something that may tip that balance.

So what can be said about the show without spilling the beans? A lot, it turns out. It is, after all, part of July's oeuvre. Her work is consistently about relationships, and challenging our sense of togetherness and loneliness. There are clues in the title, and its suggestion of the show's hermetically sealed nature - we were instructed to use the bathroom before entering, perhaps a ruse, suggesting that once you were in, you couldn't come out. What seems safe to say is that the show is very much a group experience, and like all her work, aims to give us a reframed outlook on contemporary life. The streets feel different when you

exit the theatre.

The show shares themes with her recent previous project, the social media app Somebody, which just released an upgraded edition. You send a message digitally, but it is delivered to your recipient by an actual person, found through the kind of GPS technology used by apps from Uber to Tinder. Somebody might be more of a conceptual project - it's hard to know how many messages are delivered in the flesh - but the whole premise breaks down the fourth wall of the internet, the shiny screen that protects us from actual human interaction. The app's implications are demonstrated well in a short film, viewable online. In it, July enacts a terrific balance of wit, psychological sensitivity, and social satire. I showed it in every contemporary art course I taught last fall, and it generated lively conversations in each.

New Society also breaks down walls as it shares some of the democratic outsourcing impulses of her collaborative project, Learning to Love You More, in which assignments for artworks were posted online and anyone could post their resulting works.

There's a democratic element to her work, while at the same time recognises her own artistic persona as a leader figure, the catalyst for interaction. She is the center of this universe, and yet she is also a self-deprecating, gawky character. Her tones are hushed, tentative, with neurotic intonation. There are plenty of people who find her character abrasive, though her work's solid construction points to the very conscious command she has over her artistic personality. She appears to be softening into her skin in the new show, which has its confrontations, though it's surprisingly amiable and uplifting, even with its dark notes.

Is it a spoiler to say that New Society is quietly amazing? It's a risk worth taking.

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