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The New York Times

Performance Art Preserved, in the Flesh



With the opening on Sunday of "Marina Abramovic: The Artist Is Present," a long-building energy wave of performance art hits the Museum of Modern Art full force. The show is a four-decade survey of work by one of the field's most visible and magnetic figures. And its combination of stressed-out flesh in documentary films and live bodies, some nude, in the galleries, makes pretty radical fare for this institution.



If the exhibition is uneven — part true grit, part diva hokum — it is rarely uninteresting. And it comes with a mission: to demonstrate that it is possible to preserve performance art, an ephemeral medium, through live re-creations in a museum setting. Ms. Abramovic is confident that this can be done, and to prove it has inserted restaged pieces from her own past into an otherwise standard documentary show. Whether her faith is justified is the question. Based on the evidence here, I'd say no.

Ms. Abramovic was born in Belgrade, Yugoslavia, in 1946. Her parents were heroes of the Yugoslav revolution under Tito and lived well

as a result. She inherited their instinct for personal valor, but under the emotional rigors of family life also developed a rebellious streak.



Although she initially studied painting in an art school, in the late 1960s she began experimenting with performance and soon came up with work as startling for its physical heedlessness as for its intensity of concentration. For a 1973 piece called “Rhythm 10,” she turned on a tape recorder, splayed out her hand on the gallery floor, then quickly and repeatedly stabbed at the spaces between her fingers with one of ten knives, changing knives each time she cut herself. After she’d gone through all the knives, she replayed the tape and repeated the performance, blow by blow as recorded, on the bloody floor.



For “Rhythm 0” a year later she placed 72 objects — including a candle, a rose, a scalpel, some pins and a gun — on a table and invited audience members to apply them to her body in whatever way they wanted as she stood, unresisting, for six hours. Most of the responses were benign, but some were not. Fights broke out between people who wanted either to assault or to protect her. She may have had fears about the direction the ordeal might take, but the important thing for her was that the audience was part of the performance. She fed off its energy, a dynamic she still depends on and solicits.



Naturally, her art existed in an international context; as early as the mid-1960s Yoko Ono had let people snip away bits of her clothing, though Ms. Abramovic didn't know about that. By the 1970s feminism was certainly part of the larger picture. She has repeatedly disavowed any interest in it, and by its lights her art remains problematic. Are her early performances extreme expressions of female agency, or of object passivity?

These questions grew more complicated beginning in 1976, when she met the German artist Frank Uwe Laysiepen, who called himself Ulay. They became lovers and collaborators for a dozen years, most of those spent on the road. Their initial performances, recorded on video, were in the aggressive mode of her solo work: they banged their bodies together for hours on end, screaming at each other until their voices gave out.

For a thriller of a piece called "Rest Energy" they faced each other and together held a large bow and arrow. Ms. Abramovic grasped the bow while Mr. Laysiepen pulled the string taut, aiming the arrow at her heart.

At the same time the artists were evolving performances based on stillness, silence and endurance. For the 1977 "Imponderabilia" they stood naked and unmoving inside the frame of a museum doorway, forcing people going from gallery to gallery to squeeze between them. In the same year they sat back to back, their long hair braided together, for 17 straight hours. Both pieces, and several others, have been recreated for the MoMA show, using performers trained by Ms. Abramovic.



Through the late 1970s the couple moved back and forth across Europe in a van, living to perform and performing, for the most part, according to a code that dictated "no rehearsal, no predicted end, no repetition." As it happened, their single most demanding work, the meditative "Nightsea Crossing," involved both preparation and repetition. Conceived to be performed 90 times, it consisted of them sitting at either end of a plain wooden table staring into each other's eyes for hours, until physical discomfort or exhaustion forced them to stop.

In the 1980s their travels became more exotic. They spent nearly a year living with Aborigines in the Australian desert and visited Tibetan Buddhist monasteries in India. The stage for their final performance, in 1988, was the Great Wall of China. Starting from opposite ends of the wall, they walked toward each other for three months. Originally the meeting was to have been the occasion for their marriage; in the event it marked their break-up.

In any case, by this point their collaborations were suffering, growing ever more calculated and heavy with cultural-tourist baggage: snakes, crystals, flutes and so on. Performances had started to smack of religious ritual and Orientalist theater, elements of which remain active in Ms. Abramovic's performances since she resumed her solo career.

For one she perched nude on a bicycle seat high on a gallery wall, bathed in light, in a pose vaguely reminiscent of a crucifixion. In another she lay under a skeleton to make it appear to breathe. In the much-noticed "House With An Ocean View" (2002) she lived in Sean Kelly Gallery in Chelsea for 12 days, confined to three containerlike rooms — together they suggested a triptych altarpiece — elevated above

the floor, with the front wall open, allowing visitors to watch her ritualistically nap, shower, dress, drink water and urinate, then do the same all over again.



The piece drew rapt devotees, was taped from start to finish and was painstakingly transcribed into print by the writer James Westcott, who was for a while her assistant (and recently produced, with her cooperation, a clear-eyed, nonhagiographic biography called “When Marina Abramovic Dies”).

Ms. Abramovic’s most dramatic work of the past several years was her wrenchingly operatic contribution to the 1997 Venice Biennale, called “Balkan Baroque,” for which she spent four days sitting in a sweltering basement on a pile of bloody cow bones, cleaning the bones while singing childhood folksongs and weeping.

The piece, widely considered to be her response to the war then in progress in her former homeland, is reconstructed at MoMA with some of its original props, but makes a strange effect: it feels light, even farcical, like the fake ethnological films of Balkan folk-culture she cooked up a decade later. Of course no accurate approximation of the Venice piece, with its blood and its stink, could find its way into a museum, though it’s hard to imagine a greater distance between an ephemeral work and an institutional re-creation.



It may be that the crucial missing ingredient in this piece is the live presence of Ms. Abramovic. It counts for a lot. When she recreated a series of early solo performances by artists she admired — Vito Acconci, Joseph Beuys, Bruce Nauman, Gina Pane, and Valie Export — at the Guggenheim Museum in 2005, her personal magnetism carried the day. If the performances were impersonations rather than accurate revivals, dramatized rather than conserved history, they still made an impact.



Theoretically it should be easier to preserve performances that never depended on such personal magnetism to begin with. Allan Kaprow's "Eighteen Happenings in Six Parts," dated 1959, would seem like a natural for revival. The original was a series of simple, closely choreographed actions executed by amateur performers, and Kaprow wasn't among them. Yet a reconstruction of the work presented at Performa 07, though exhaustively researched and rehearsed, was a dud.

Maybe it couldn't have been otherwise. The work and the sense of energizing newness it once radiated were, as Kaprow knew, the product of a particular time and culture. The recreated performances in MoMA's show are similarly products of a milieu that once made them transgressive, poetic or simply gave them heat, but is now gone. And, through no fault of the performers, the pieces feel like leftover things: flat, dutiful; artifacts.

It is possible that Ms. Abramovic can make a case for resurrecting art that yearns to vanish. And she is going to try: she recently established the Marina Abramovic Institute for Preservation of Performance Art in an old church in Hudson, N.Y., near where she has a home. It is scheduled to open in 2012.

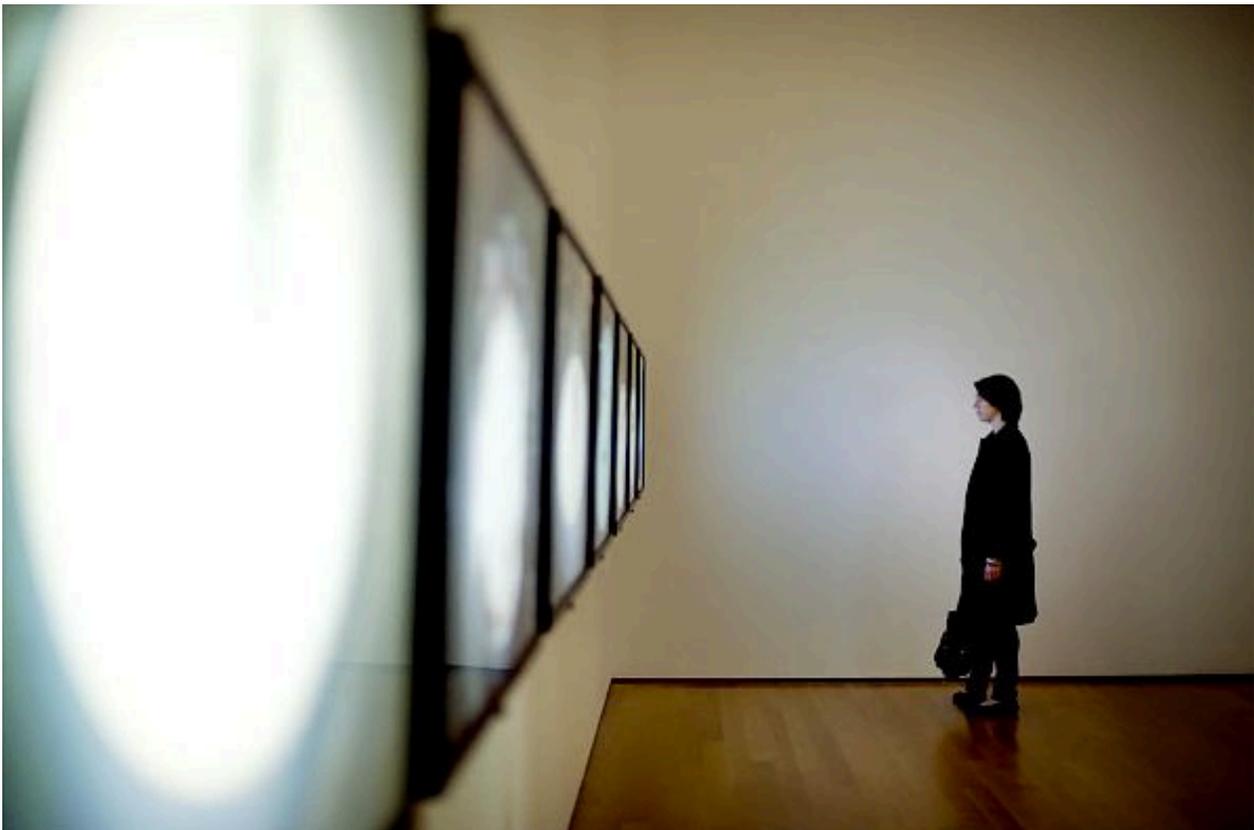


And there is the MoMA show — organized by Klaus Biesenbach, director of the P.S. 1 Contemporary Art Center and chief curator at large for MoMA — to which she has contributed a new performance piece, called "The Artist Is Present," made from an old one. Essentially, it's a solo version of "Nightsea Crossing," with Ms. Abramovic sitting silent at a table in the museum's atrium, facing an empty chair. She's scheduled to sit there all day, every day, during museum hours, for the run of her show. The museum estimates that, if she can stick to the plan, she will sit for 716 hours and 30 minutes, earning her a record for endurance in the performance art sweepstakes.

In a sense the whole business is another act of self-enshrinement in the art world's ego Olympics, and that's not interesting. Divas are a dime a dozen, and I don't trust charisma anyway. More interesting, because it ties in with her impulse to conserve a possibly unconservable art form, is the way "The Artist Is Present" attempts to control time, hers and ours.

I have no idea what her experience of sitting in that atrium for all those hours will be; there has to be some serious agony involved, which is where she hooks up with her implacably daredevil younger self. But my guess is that her presence will have a demonstrable effect on visitors to the museum; that it will slow them down, get them out of drive-by looking mode.

And every now and then someone will slip into that chair across from her — that's what it's there for — and spend some time exchanging stares, or energy, or going blank, or thinking, maybe for the first time, about that hard, high-flown, funny word "endure."



"Marina Abramovic: The Artist Is Present" opens Sunday at the Museum of Modern Art (212-708-9400; moma.org) and remains on view through May 31.

Photo credit:

- "Marina Abramovic: The Artist Is Present": A visitor at MoMA walks between Jacqueline Lounsbury, left, and Layard Thompson, both naked in a doorway.
- Holland Cotter writes: "With the opening on Sunday of 'Marina Abramovic: The Artist is Present,' a long-building energy wave of performance art hits the Museum of Modern Art full force." The museum is remounting the 1977 work "Imponderabilia," in which a man and a woman stand naked and unmoving inside the frame of a doorway, forcing people to squeeze between them. Credit: Joshua Bright for The New York Times
- Marina Abramovic, left, performs "The Artist is Present" opposite a museum visitor at the Museum of Modern Art. Joshua Bright for The New York Times

- "The museum estimates that, if she can stick to the plan, she will sit for 713 hours, earning her a record for endurance in the performance art sweepstakes." Credit: Joshua Bright for The New York Times
- In 1976, Ms. Abramovic met the German artist Frank Uwe Laysiepen, who called himself Ulay. They became lovers and collaborators for a dozen years. "For a thriller of a piece called 'Rest Energy,' they faced each other and together held a large a bow and arrow. Ms. Abramovic grasped the bow while Mr. Laysiepen pulled the string taut, aiming the arrow at her heart." Credit: Marina Abramovic and Sean Kelly Gallery/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York
- Ms. Abramovic and Ulay in the 1977 piece "Relation in Time." Credit: Marina Abramovic and Sean Kelly Gallery/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York
- The piece is being re-enacted at the Museum of Modern Art with Gary Lai, left, and Rachel Brennecke. Credit: Joshua Bright for The New York Times
- Elana Katz and Alexander Lyle perform "Point of Contact," in which two people keep eye contact while barely touching the tips of their fingers. Credit: Joshua Bright for The New York Times
- John Bonafede in "Nude with Skeleton." Credit: Joshua Bright for The New York Times
- Brittany Bailey in "Luminosity," an event in which Ms. Abramovic hung naked on a wall in a gallery, as if floating or crucified, for two hours at a time in 1997. Credit: Joshua Bright for The New York Times
- "Marina Abramovic: The Artist Is Present" opens on Sunday at the Museum of Modern Art, 11 West 53rd St., and remains on view through May 31. Credit: Joshua Bright for The New York Times