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Miller, M.H. "The Rest is Silence: Marina Abramovic on her New Show at Sean Kelly," *ARTnews*, October 21, 2014.

ARTNEWS

THE REST IS SILENCE: MARINA ABRAMOVIC ON HER NEW SHOW AT SEAN KELLY

Marina Abramović and I had truly terrible technical difficulties on the phone when we spoke last weekend, which seemed appropriate given the premise of her new project at New York's Sean Kelly Gallery, which opens this Thursday. The audience—up to 68 people at a time will be allowed inside the gallery—must surrender their bags, phones, computers, and any other belongings, and don noise-canceling headphones and blindfolds, a means of creating an atmosphere of, to use Abramović's word, "nothingness."

"Going into a commercial gallery is where people come to see something or hear something," Abramović told me. "But here they are completely alone to process the energy in the space. After you have enough of being in the space, you'll be taken out. And that will be a different experience."



Abramović.

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The piece—called *Generator*—grew out of Abramović's recent performance at London's Serpentine Gallery, called *512 Hours*, in which her audience likewise had to surrender all their technological devices. In that show Marina Abramović was on hand in the gallery for eight hours a day (the show lasted 64 days), positioning the audience and offering them instructions—stand at a wall, breathe, and so forth.

The high degree of audience participation in *512 Hours*, with Abramović acting more as a director than a performer, is an extension of Abramović's now-legendary 2010 show at MoMA, "The Artist Is Present," where museum attendees were integrated into the performance, lining up for hours to sit in a chair across from the artist, who was staring in silence across from them. During *Generator*, she'll be around, but more or less as an audience member herself, deaf and blind and entering the void. "I want this experience like anybody else," she said. "I am part of the problem."

Generator is a marked change of pace for an artist whose corporeal form has been her main subject for nearly four decades. Arguably her most celebrated performance, *Rhythm 0*, from 1974, involved Abramović standing before a table of 72 props that included a rose, olive oil, scissors, a gun, and a bullet, with which the audience could do what they pleased. The piece devolved into a kind of chaos, with the audience splitting into factions of aggressors and protectors, and the artist was left naked—they'd cut off her clothes with the scissors—and wounded—from the rose's thorns—but alive: when one audience member aimed the gun at her head, another took it away.

For all her concern with her physical being, Abramović has gradually been phasing herself out of her recent work. Last year, with the help of her own money and a crowd-sourced funding campaign that achieved some \$660,000, she launched the Marina Abramović Institute, "a platform for immaterial art and long durational works," according to its oddly laconic website. She has been training performers in The Abramović Method, which she describes as something like the heightened awareness of the present produced by the void set up in *Generator*. That she is almost completely shifting the focus from herself to her audience is no accident. She's 67 now.

"You have to face the fact of your own mortality," she told me, "and that you can't live forever. What then? It's very important for me to create a system of performance that can be applied by anyone."

Generator is as much about Abramović passing the torch as it is a reaction to the very culture that made her popular enough to have to consider a posthumous legacy in the first place. She has said on numerous occasions that, with “The Artist Is Present,” she made performance art mainstream, but she also said it took her four years to recover from doing the show. Now, the word “diva” is so casually thrown around in a review of *512 Hours* in *The Guardian* that it’s easy to miss the accusatory subtext. In the last year, Abramović made an appearance on Kim Kardashian’s Instagram, and a video promoting her institute featuring Lady Gaga “practicing” The Abramović Method predictably went viral. (This involved the pop star lying on a wooden floor and shouting a single droning note, standing in the middle of a creek wearing a blindfold and staring up into the sky, and cuddling a giant crystal in the nude.) Willem Dafoe and Antony Hegarty starred in an opera loosely based on Abramović’s life. Jay-Z was one of her institute’s backers. After so much public noise, she now seems to desire some peace and quiet.

“We are visual junkies,” she said. “There is incredible thought pollution. There’s so much to occupy you, but what is your own experience of yourself, alone in a space?” The question raised by all these distractions, she said, is: “Where are we?”