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MARINA ABRAMOVIĆ ON HUMOR, VULNERABILITY AND FAILURE



Marina Abramović is talking about the role of humor in her life and work. Now, that's not necessarily a topic you might expect to chat about with the *grande dame* of the performance art world. Her work is powerful, austere, often overwhelming ... but funny?

"People know my work and they're afraid to meet me," Abramović acknowledges with a laugh. "Then they get to know me and my work and they think I'm hilarious. Put it all together and somehow it works." She recalls one piece at the Guggenheim in New York in 2005 for which she ate a kilo of honey, drank a liter of red wine, and whipped herself raw (among other things). Not exactly the stuff that comic legends are made of. But, says Abramović: "I was licking the honey and I saw someone opposite writing something frantically in his notebook. And I thought 'What is he writing, we just began?' I turned over the spoon and saw there was the pricetag: \$9.99."

The idea that Abramović is at heart a bit of a goofball provides a sweet insight into a persona that has mesmerized audiences since well before she set up shop in the Museum of Modern Art in 2010 (though that retrospective and her daily performances certainly cemented her standing in the eyes of the general public). Another: her absolute willingness to lay herself open and be vulnerable for all to see. For her, this is not a choice; it's the only way that she knows how to exist. "People like to create the best image of themselves and then hide the shit, but my whole idea is to expose everything. Human beings have to be honest about themselves and others," she says forcefully. "It's okay that we're not perfect. It's okay that we all have problems. It's okay to cry, to show emotions."

Forcing people's hands and encouraging self-recognition is, she says, one reason that her time sitting opposite visitors to MOMA became such a powerfully emotional experience for participants. "People never sit at home and look someone in the eyes," she says. "You do everything to amuse yourself, you are afraid to do nothing, you look at television, text messages, the computer, email. Instead we need to learn to be still, to be present, to be here and now. At MOMA, I was there, I was available for any amount of time, and the relationship was one to one. People had nowhere to escape but into themselves, and that realization brought an enormous amount of emotions."

So does she feel like she's mastered the art of being vulnerable? Abramović shakes her head. "I have to deal with it every day. I never get used to performing," she says. "But then again, I think failure is a very important part of success. If you don't fail, it means you're not risking anything, or you're repeating yourself. And that means you'll lose the curiosity and the life force inside of you."

Nurturing such life force is at the heart of her latest venture, the MAI in Hudson, New York. There, students will learn how to look at the world through distinctly Abramovićian eyes. "One of the things I want to do is set up simple exercises," she says. "Don't not cry. Cry. But cry in front of everybody."

Featured image courtesy Show of Force, photo illustration by Dian Lofton/TED.