

SEAN KELLY

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Marina Abramovic: What's Art Without Danger?



Marina Abramovic performing her piece "The House With the Ocean View" in 2002. Credit Nicole Bengiveno/The New York Times

WALK THROUGH WALLS

A Memoir

By Marina Abramovic with James Kaplan
Illustrated. 370 pp. Crown Archetype. \$28.

The torrent of publicity generated by Marina Abramovic's 2010 retrospective at the Museum of Modern Art in New York might have led us to believe we knew everything there is to know about the artist and her work: her unenviable childhood among the privileged elite of Communist-era Yugoslavia; her long creative and romantic partnership with the German artist Ulay; her performance pieces featuring painful, punishing feats of endurance, self-mutilation and provocative interactions with the audience. But Abramovic's engrossing new memoir, "Walk Through Walls," makes us realize how partial our knowledge was.

Written with James Kaplan, the memoir takes its title from the ferocious refusal to show weakness or fear that Abramovic appears to have inherited from her parents, both of whom fought with Tito's partisans. Predictably, these Spartan qualities proved more useful for warfare than for family life. The household was an embattled one, and her parents divorced. Her mother regularly beat her and locked her in a closet.

Marina was a bookish, unhappy child who saw ghosts, developed a mysterious bleeding disorder and attempted to break her own nose so that the doctors would reconstruct one that looked more like Brigitte Bardot's. At school in Belgrade she was taught to paint traditional canvases, but inspired by the political climate

of 1968 and by her fellow artists, she began to invent proposals for performance pieces, one of which involved a game of Russian roulette. A turning point came when she pinned up a peanut “just far enough from the wall to cast a tiny shadow. . . . As soon as I saw that little shadow, I realized two-dimensional art truly was a thing of the past for me.”

At the 1972 Edinburgh Festival, she performed “Rhythm 10,” in which she splayed her fingers on a sheet of white paper and stabbed the spaces between them with a series of 10 knives, striking faster and faster, occasionally drawing blood and groaning in pain. “It was as if electricity was running through my body, and the audience and I had become one.” Over the decades, Abramovic continued to raise the level of risk and danger. She lay on blocks of ice; surrounded herself with burning wooden rails until the heat made her lose consciousness; carved a star in her stomach with a razor blade; invited a gallery audience to choose any of several objects (among them needles and a gun) to “use on me as desired.”

In Amsterdam she met Ulay, whom she recognized instantly as her soul mate; they shared the same birthday and finished each other’s sentences. The couple inspired and challenged each other to perform ever riskier work: In one piece, Ulay sewed his lips shut; in another he held a bow and arrow, aimed at Abramovic’s heart. Together they traveled to fascinating, if inhospitable, regions, most notably the Australian Outback, where they spent months among the Aborigines. (This sojourn occasioned an immensely insensitive passage that appeared in the bound galleys of the memoir and received a great deal of negative prepublication publicity; it doesn’t appear in the finished copy.) Abramovic describes many physically challenging journeys, mostly involving pilgrimages to healers, gurus and holy men. We can track the ways in which these meetings influenced the obsessive, maniacal body of work that is difficult not to admire, if only for its sheer wildness and for its creator’s dogged perseverance.

Abramovic and Ulay’s most ambitious project was planned for years and carried out despite financial and political obstacles. They would each start at one end of the Great Wall of China, walk toward each other, and meet in the middle. Though it was originally intended to culminate in the couple’s marriage, the pair were by then so estranged that they used the occasion to mark their formal separation. Along the way, their experiences were quite different. Abramovic’s Chinese translator despised her because he’d been assigned to accompany her as punishment for his obsession with Western break dancing. Ulay got along much better with his Chinese guide. “I would soon learn that he had impregnated his translator. . . . They would marry in Beijing in December.”

Abramovic writes touchingly about romantic heartbreak, about the pain of separation from Ulay and her sense of betrayal when her husband, the Italian artist Paolo Canevari, left her for a self-styled “sexual anthropologist.” A scene in which Abramovic confronts her rival is, in its way, as brutal as one of her bloodier performance pieces. She is also moving on the subject of grief, including here the strong (and forgiving) eulogy she delivered at her mother’s funeral.

Perhaps what’s most unexpected are the flashes of humor. Remarking on a piece in which she complained about her life while eating raw onions, she notes the self-centeredness of her having given “third billing to shame about the war in Yugoslavia” after shame about the size of her nose and her behind. She writes ruefully of failures and impractical schemes; a plan to have 400 rats run around an iron stage in magnetic shoes was abandoned because the Belgian cobbler reported that the rats’ feet “were so many different sizes that the process of fitting them all would be endlessly long and too expensive.” Such moments broaden our sense of the woman who seemed so unremittingly solemn when, during her retrospective, she spent 700 hours gazing at more than 1,500 people who came, one by one, to sit across from her in the MoMA atrium — and stare back.