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Shock of the new: Royal Academy artist to be charged with 1m volts



Marina Abramovic is known for her "extreme" performances
CHRISTINE POUJOLAT/AFP/GETTY IMAGES

Marina Abramovic revels in shocking her audiences. There was the time the performance artist stabbed a knife repeatedly between her splayed fingers until she cut herself ten times.

Or the time when an audience member invited by the artist to pick up a loaded gun did so and placed it against her neck with her finger on the trigger. Another audience member had to stop that. And then there has been the loss of consciousness by walking into a fire.

So, what for her next piece of art? Being charged with a million volts of electricity and snuffing out a candle.

Plans have been revealed for the artist's seminal Royal Academy show, when she will become the first woman to take over the main galleries in its 250-year history.

Abramovic, who was born in Serbia, is working with Factum Arte, a studio founded by Adam Lowe, on dozens of artworks, including the electrical charging one which, Mr Lowe acknowledges, could be disastrous if it goes wrong.

"We are not reckless or cavalier with the technology," he said. "Her performances are highly extreme. Many of the things she has done are far more dangerous."

A goat farmer from Dorset called Dwight Perry — described by Mr Lowe as one of the "most brilliant engineers I have come across" — has been charged, as it were, with making the artist's ideas possible.

Mr Lowe said they would be using the techniques of Kirlian photography, a process developed in the 19th century that uses high voltage to create contact print photographs. The specifics of the artwork will be worked out over the next two years for the 2020 Royal Academy show, he said, adding that "Marina is the performer, we are the set-builders".

SEAN KELLY

He said that Mr Perry, whose milking machine first caught Mr Lowe's eye, had been "charged with building the full-body Kirlian photographic system". He said they were "building a system to try and visualise the electronic exchanges that happen".

And then, if the charging of Abramovic, 71, with a million volts is successful, she will try to extinguish a flame.

"If you are charged up properly, the stream of electricity coming from your fingers will put out a candle a metre away from you," he said. "Electricity is something that people really don't understand. If you look on the internet though, you will see people becoming highly charged and as long as they are insulated, you can fly bits of lightning out of your fingers."

The technique of putting out flames with electricity is a fledgling one. It is thought to be possible because a flame is effectively a chemical reaction that produces charged particles. An electric field can then repel the charged particles, dislodging the flame from the fuel source.

The Oxford-born Mr Lowe, 59, who employs more than 50 people at Factum Arte fabricating artworks for artists around the world, is working on dozens of pieces for Abramovic.

Some, such as the idea for a glass fountain of Abramovic that would have had her own blood spouting out of every orifice, may not come to fruition.

Mr Lowe likens his studio to a "Renaissance workshop". He says that it illustrates how artists have always been the ones leading technology, citing the French artist Louis Daguerre and his invention of a photographic process. "We want to show what's possible, use technology when applicable and really extend the tools that can be used to make art," Mr Lowe said.

"Obviously Marina is a major event. She will be the first ever woman to show in the main galleries at the Royal Academy in 250 years, which is quite a shocking statement."

The real shock may still be to come, however.