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Cascone, Sarah. "Visitors Entering the Royal Academy Next Fall Will Have to Squeeze Past Naked Performers as Part of Its Marina Abramović Retrospective." *artnet News*. September 4, 2019.

artnet news



Marina Abramović. Photo by Bastian Geza Aschoff, 2018, ©Kunst- und Ausstellungshalle der Bundesrepublik Deutschland GmbH.

Marina Abramović and her former collaborator Ulay's groundbreaking 1977 performance *Imponderabilia* will be recreated in London next fall as part of Abramović's retrospective at the Royal Academy of Arts.

The museum is now seeking performers to restage the work, which involves standing naked face to face in a doorway while visitors squeeze through the narrow space between them.

It forces "a confrontation between nakedness, and the gender, the sexuality, the desire," Andrea Tarsia, the Royal Academy's head of exhibitions, told the *Times of London*.

Imponderabilia was originally carried out by Abramović and Ulay, her partner from 1975 until 1988, at a performance art festival at the Museum of the Galleria d'Arte Moderna Bologna. The idea was "if there were no artists, there would be no museums. So we are living doors," Abramović told the *Financial Times*.

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Marina Abramović and Ulay, Imponderabilia (1977). Photo courtesy of Marina Abramović/Sean Kelly Gallery, New York

“We decide to rebuild the main entrance of the museum, smaller, and stood there completely naked, so the public who have come to the museum to see the performances have to make a choice to face one or another of us, because the entrance is so narrow they could not go frontally,” Abramović told Glenn Lowry, director of New York’s Museum of Modern Art, on the occasion of the restaging of the work in “The Artist Is Present,” her hit 2010 retrospective at the museum.

Some 300 to 400 people walked through the bodies in the original show, some quickly, others returning for a second passage. Still others opted to walk around the doorway, eschewing such close contact with the nude artists. But within three hours, the police had been called and the performance was shut down (neither Abramović nor Ulay had their passports handy to present to the authorities).

Decades later, the work remained controversial during its run in New York. Much of the press coverage of the exhibition focused on the nude performers reenacting *Imponderabilia*. Art critic Jerry Saltz wrote of having “a close encounter with a penis that grazed my thigh,” while the *New York Post* published an article titled “Squeazy Does It at MoMA,” in which museum visitors spoke of their discomfort with passing between the naked performers. The *Associated Press* reported that some guests had been kicked out of the museum for inappropriately touching the performers.

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Marina Abramović and Ulay, Imponderabilia (1977), reperformed at the Museum of Modern Art at "Marina Abramović: The Artist Is Present" in 2010. Photo by Will Ragozzino, ©Patrick McMullan.

"We have a way to let security know if we're having an emergency, but we're all prepared for discomfort," one performer told the Post at the time. "You just have to suck it up!"

As she did for MoMA, Abramović will hold intensive workshops training the performers to recreate the work in London. The new show will feature more than 50 photographs, videos, installations, and re-staged performances, but will not see Abramović as a constant fixture in the galleries, as she was for "The Artist Is Present."

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“Never say never with Marina, but one thing she won’t be doing, because we won’t let her... she won’t be in the galleries for 80 days,” Royal Academy artistic director Tim Marlow told the Guardian. “Will she be in the galleries doing something? Almost certainly.”

Previous reports offer a hint of what that something could be: In April 2018, it was reported that Abramović was working with art-tech company Factum Arte on a performance for the show that would see the artist charged with one million volts of electricity.

“Marina Abramović: 50 years of pioneering performance art” will be on view at the Royal Academy of Arts, Burlington House, Piccadilly, London, September 26-December 8, 2020.