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Morris, Kadish. "Marina Abramović: 'I don't want to have my life in control'." *The Guardian*, February 12, 2022.



The performance artist is known for putting herself in challenging situations. Now, she says, it's your turn, with a set of instruction cards aiming to 'reboot your life'

Go into a park, find a tree you like, hold the tree and complain to the tree. This was Marina Abramović's technique for staying focused during the pandemic. In 2020, she and a group of volunteers tried out this tree-hugging exercise during a [five-hour programme](#) on Sky Arts that sought to educate watchers on the history of performance art. Though at times it felt like watching a mockumentary, it was a transformative experience for the participants, according to Abramović. "It was amazing how people got emotional. How much they kept inside, and how talking to the tree [was] a kind of release."

It's 11am in New York, where Abramović is based, and she has just finished a morning yoga session. She stretches out her arms, showing me her black fitness top before turning the web camera round to reveal a snowy landscape. "I like to do physical exercise. Walk in the snow. I don't want to have my life in control. I hate [the] studio. I never go to the studio," says the 75-year-old artist. "I like to put myself in very uncommon situations."

Internationally known for her performance art pieces that experiment with time, metaphysics and the human body, Abramović is teaching her fans the art of endurance, concentration, self-control and willpower through a new series of instructions intended to "reboot your life". The [Marina Abramović Method](#) is a set of 30 cards, each featuring a different DIY task. Some instructions are overtly unconventional, such as "Walk backwards with a mirror", which she advises you to do outdoors. Others are secretly tricky, like "Open and close a door", which seems simple until you read the small print telling you to do this continuously for

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one to three hours. Many are tethered to Abramović's previous works. One card reads "Count each grain of rice and lentil", which takes inspiration from her 2014 work *Counting the Rice* in which participants laboriously tallied up a pile of grains, one by one.

Abramović, who was born in Belgrade in 1946, has been teaching the art of endurance since the 1980s and exploring it in her own artworks for far longer. She passes on her wisdom via her *Cleaning the House* five-day workshops, in which she takes a group of students to places that are too hot, or too cold, and never comfortable. "Nobody would eat anything apart from water and herbal tea. Without any talking and doing very hard physical and mental exercises, they will then make a work of art out of this."

Still, for all the stoicism, the Marina Abramović Method is not to be taken too seriously. There is an element of fun that she is leaning into thanks to the Dalai Lama, whom she first met in the early 80s. "I always remember what [he] said to me. You have to always start with playfulness. With a joke. Make people laugh to open their heart, and then you tell them terrible truths after, because they're ready," she says. "These cards are playful, but at the same time, if you really do [them] properly, you actually get a very deep experience. You enter two different states of consciousness. It's all about how much we invest in time."

Why has she decided to distil her art-making practice for the general public now? There have been many pioneering figures – such as Carolee Schneemann, Ana Mendieta and Chris Burden – at the helm of performance art, but Abramović is undoubtably the face of the form. Her endurance art, despite its intensity, often veers into trendy themes such as mindfulness, and this has ensured her work's absorption into pop culture. (Shia LaBeouf and [Jay-Z](#) both did their own versions) Such success hasn't come without criticism: her work has been [called kitsch](#), and "celebrity art at its most empty". Are these cards just an exercise in self-branding; an artist making merchandise in order to capitalise on their fame?

"I don't think I will be rich by selling these cards," she laughs. "I am such an interesting example of the art market. I have so many viewers and such a very large young audience, and still, my prices are much below the middle-career artists who make paintings," she claims. Her only goal, she adds, is to engage people, especially young people.



Marina Abramović: The Artist Is Present exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art in New York in 2010. Photograph: Andrew H Walker/Getty Images

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These methods for getting the most out of work and life aren't your typical self-help tips, but they are in line with an artist whose oeuvre consists of pushing herself to the limit. One of her earliest works was her six-hour performance at Galleria Studio Morra in Naples, where Abramović allowed the public to interact with her body in any way they chose, using a range of [72 objects](#) (scissors, bread, a gun) that were laid out on a table.

"I was a painter before, but the first time [I performed] in front of an audience, I felt the electricity that I never felt in my studio. At my age right now, I am not able to do any more of that kind of long durational performance. I did *The Artist Is Present* [in which she sat at a table for eight hours a day, allowing visitors to sit silently opposite her] when I was 65. This was hell on earth to do! Now I'm 75, I'm thinking about how I can express those thoughts [in] different mediums. I just made the opera," she says, referring to [7 Deaths of Maria Callas](#), a piece about the tragic myths surrounding the Greek-American soprano.

Age aside, works such as *The Artist Is Present*, and [512 Hours](#), where she and gallery visitors walked around in silence, require audience participation and close contact, and that seems inconceivable in these times. The pandemic has irrevocably changed the boundaries that artists can push. "Contact with the public is absolutely essential. Because if a performer doesn't have the public, the performance is nonexistent."



Marina Abramović. Photograph: Camila Falquez/The Guardian

Abramović doesn't hate technology – her 2018 work *Rising* uses VR technology to explore rising sea levels, and she collaborated with tech company WeTransfer in 2021 to create an immersive digital experience titled *Traces* – but she thinks our approach to it is all wrong. "Everything became Zoom. I absolutely don't like working with Zoom. First, the sound is bad. Images are terrible. I always think,

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just have patience and wait, because this isn't going to last for ever. We are talking about two years. It's nothing."

Abramović's first UK retrospective, delayed by the pandemic, is due to be held at the Royal Academy in 2023. Spanning her 50-year career, the show will recreate her live performance pieces, adapted to reflect a change in her physicality, and feature new works. "They decided to postpone it for three years. This is kind of big," she says. "I'm 75. Time goes. I really need to do this show earlier rather than later. But at the same time, I understood that it would be a disaster if I had it in 2020, because I depend on the public."

It isn't long before she brings up NFTs (non-fungible tokens: those much-discussed artworks that are also a unique unit of digital data stored on blockchains). "I don't like to be some old-fashioned artist who criticises everything new," she says. "I love everything that is new. I'm curious. But with this medium, I didn't see any good ideas. I didn't see great content. I only see everybody talking about how much money you can make. I never made art for money," she says. "I've been asked every day to do some. They say: 'Your work is perfect for NFTs. Why are you not doing something?' Somebody requested if I could sell my soul as an NFT."



Marina Abramović's 7 Deaths of Maria Callas at the Greek National Opera in Athens in 2021. Photograph: Aris Messinis/AFP/Getty Images

Abramović may not be ready to sell her soul, but she has other ways of exploring immortality. She has created the world's first mixed-reality performance artwork, titled *The Life*, which uses 36 video cameras to create a simulation of her body. "This is the closest to immortality that I can get. This piece doesn't have as much value now because I'm alive, but the moment I'm not there ... I can appear in your living room, I can walk in your garden. That is something that is mind-blowing."

Abramović is clearly intent on injecting herself into the future, but how will the future feel about her? Considering how people long dead are now being held accountable for their past behaviour, what about those comments she made in

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her 1979 diary about Indigenous Australians? In remarks initially republished in her 2016 memoir [Walk Through Walls](#) (but later taken out), she had said that they looked “terrible”, “like dinosaurs” and are really “strange and different”. As the passage became [shared and criticised](#), Abramović released a statement saying that she had “the greatest respect for Aborigine people” and that her earlier description “does not represent the understanding and appreciation of Aborigines that I subsequently acquired through immersion in their world and carry in my heart today”.

Abramović has spent time with Indigenous people in Australia and the Siberian desert, and has taken part in retreats with Tibetan monks. Her tree-hugging exercise was inspired by time spent with Amazonian tribes, where they would, according to her, dance with the sequoia tree. “This dance with the tree was so incredibly moving and emotional, so I said: ‘Wow, why don’t I create exercise that really works for me?’”

Given that her performance artworks and career have long drawn on the sacred practices picked up on her visits to Indigenous communities, I inquire about the methods she has undertaken to battle racism personally in recent years, with more attention on Black lives and indigenous people.



Seeing red: Marina Abramović. Photograph: Camila Falquez/The Guardian

Instead, Abramović responds by taking issue with how her words were reported in the first place. “People take out the quote and they don’t actually see the context,” she says. “I said that Aboriginal [people are] the oldest race on the planet. They are *like* dinosaurs. Next to that sentence. I also say they have to be treated like living treasures. They only saw my quote about dinosaurs.” She appears to have forgotten her own words – there’s a semantic difference between “they look like dinosaurs” and “they are like dinosaurs” – though either way, likening people to animals feels like textbook dehumanisation.

“This is so sad,” says Abramović, before somewhat arbitrarily bringing up her longstanding collaborations with transgender people (“much longer than [people

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have been] talking about”), as well as her work about the Yugoslav wars, and mentioning the Dalai Lama once more. “The only way to stop violence is to learn to forgive and we are not able to forgive as human beings. We are repeating this over and over. This is not new. This is a centuries[-old] story.”

Abramović believes the online criticism directed at her is due to the press manipulating people and that sexism, ultimately, is at fault: “The press is so much tougher on women than on men.” She told me earlier in the conversation that she has never used Instagram and doesn’t go online except for emails and meetings. “There’s so many people who think that what I’m doing is not art at all. If I read this, I will never even leave home.”

She might not read everything, but she reads some things. She asks me who will write the headline for this interview after being outraged with the Times for an article it published last year. “The title, to me, was incredibly vulgar. I was so angry. It was ‘Marina Abramović, young lover, dirty jokes, and magic crystals’. They will not do this to male artists,” she says. “They used a photograph of me for the interview that I did not approve. I don’t know where they found it. Why don’t you put in pictures of the work?!”

One of The Method’s instruction cards reads “Notice a moment of anger, then stop it”. It advises you to hold your breath until you reach your physical limit and repeat as needed, until the anger subsides. It comes to mind as Abramović discusses her treatment by the media.

“I need to go, my dear,” she says abruptly. She does appear calmer for having said her piece. “It was lovely talking to you.”

[The Marina Abramović Method: Instruction Cards to Reboot Your Life](#) is published by Laurence King (£16.99) on 17 February.