

Wally, Maxine. "The Rebirth of Marina Abramović." *W Magazine*, March 15, 2022.

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The Rebirth of Marina Abramović

The artist contemplates what it means to be happy.



Marina Abramović wears the colors of the Ukrainian flag inside her exhibition at Sean Kelly Gallery, titled "Performative." Photos by Susan Meiselas

For nearly 50 years, Marina Abramović has made art out of pain, suffering, and heartbreak. Take, for example, the very first piece of performance art the Serbian-born artist created, titled "Rhythm 10": it was a play on an Eastern European drinking game in which one participant places their hand, outstretched, on a surface, and stabs a sharp knife in the spaces between their fingers. Each time the player misses and nicks themselves, they have to take a drink. In 1973, a live audience watched as Abramović spread her hand onto a piece of white paper and played the game, her blood acting as paint, while she tape recorded her own guttural groans of pain. Fifteen years later, she and her ex-lover and artistic collaborator, Frank Uwe Laysiepen, whom she called Ulay, ended their 12-year relationship in the piece "The Lovers," by walking towards each other for days across the Great Wall of China, then breaking up once they came face to face. And the idea for "The Artist Is Present," the 2010 MoMA work that Abramović is arguably best known for, was born immediately after she suffered one of the most painful heartbreaks of her life: divorce from her ex-husband Paolo Canevari, following yet another 12-year relationship.

"It's all very Slavic," Abramović, who just celebrated her 75th birthday in November, says while sitting across from me at the dining room table inside her New York City apartment, snacking on a small bowl of cookies. "I was always thinking some terrible

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things must happen to you in order to be in solitude. If you think about Dostoyevsky, Tolstoy—they were always suffering.”



It’s an interesting time to be mulling the painful emotions that have bookended her most famous works since, for the past seven years, Abramović hasn’t put up a single exhibition in New York. Instead, she says, she’s been exploring what it means to be happy. She’s spent her time traveling, attending retreats in Sri Lanka, India; showing all over Europe; healing from a nasty bout of Lyme disease, and working on her current relationship, which has lasted five years so far, and is “stable, actually based on trust,” she says. “I’m completely regular in everything,” Abramović adds. “I go to sleep at 9 o’clock. I wake up at 6:30, I do yoga, I have my tea, I work. And I’m constantly thinking, when is the other shoe going to fall? This can’t be possible. I’ve never had this period, I have to say, ever. I’ve never been more stable than I am now. And honestly, it’s very unnatural ground for me.”

Yet this calm, peaceful mindset also allowed for Abramović to begin exhibiting again. 2023 marks the 60-year anniversary of the beginning of her career, and next year Abramović will put on a major retrospective at The Royal Academy of Arts. (She’s also opening a major solo exhibition [Memory of Being](#) at the Kaunas Picture Gallery in Lithuania, on March 29.) Before that, she has a much smaller, quieter, but equally impactful exhibition running at Sean Kelly Gallery in New York City through April 16, titled “Performative”—an encapsulation of works that have changed and shaped Abramović’s life and outlook on performance art.

The show contains photographs and audio from the aforementioned “Rhythms 10”—a significant work not only because it highlights Abramović’s personal and cultural roots, but also because it was the first piece she made that convinced her performance art was her chosen medium—as well as a video installation of “The Artist is Present,” and a screening of the film “Seven Deaths,” which Abramović made with the actor Willem Dafoe. “Willem is killing me over and over again, forever,” she tells me, by way of explanation on the film’s content. “Can I show you one, to see what it looks like?”

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Abramović scoots out of her chair and shuffles into the next room, looking for her laptop. Her home in Lower Manhattan is filled with light, the entire floor painted a shade of robin's egg blue. ("I did it during quarantine," she says, "To resemble the sea.") There are stacks of books lining the perimeter of her living room which, I note, does not have a television. "I don't watch TV," Abramović tells me, waving her hand.

The artist keeps every piece of press she's ever gotten in her home upstate, nestled inside a "10,000-square-foot- archive," but she's got some clippings here and there in the apartment. A red, leather-bound book contains every article written about "Seven Deaths" in Germany, gifted to her by the Bayerische Staatsoper opera house, which hosted her last year. Much of the ephemera scattered around the house, in fact, were presents for her: small clay statuettes of rabbits playing instruments a friend purchased in Mexico City; a black coat a young Polish designer gave to her that's lined with the image from Abramović and Ulay's 1977 work, "Relation in Time," with the young designer's face superimposed onto Ulay's. She putters around the kitchen, talking in her low, almost baritone voice at a rapid-fire pace, making jokes and laughing to herself until she finds her computer and sits back down at the table.

"Seven Deaths," she explains, is the video version of the traveling opera-slash-performance-art piece that premiered at the Bavarian State Opera, and later showed at the Palais Garnier in Paris, then Munich, in 2021. In this series of short films, Abramović is, indeed, killed by Dafoe—a former neighbor with whom she's quite close—in various manners: jumping from a building, being strangled by enormous snakes, burning at the stake, all set against the operatic stylings of Maria Callas. Burberry artistic director Riccardo Tisci, another good friend of Abramović's, designed the costumes for the series.

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Abramović's love for Callas is well-documented: Abramović first heard the singer when she was 14 years old, when her grandmother turned on their Bakelite radio and Callas's voice came floating through the speakers, prompting Abramović to instantly begin crying. She sees Callas as something of a kindred spirit: they both had difficult relationships with their very strict mothers, they are both Sagittarius, they both created works from places of distress and agony. Callas, who sustained a long-running relationship with Aristotle Onassis and was physically abused by him, eventually died of a heart attack—or, as it was described in the media at that time, “heartbreak.”

“I almost died from love, from a broken heart, too,” Abramović says. “But for me, my work saved me.”

The artist admits there is, however, one thing causing her pain these days: the Russian attacks on Ukraine. It's a personal source of trauma, stemming from her own Eastern European roots; plus, Kyiv is where Abramović completed a recent work, “Crystal Wall of Crying,” at the Babyn Yar Holocaust Memorial Center. “I made the wall, which is the biggest thing I've ever done, 40 meters long, out of black coal, and there are crystals sticking out. The coal is something black, a source of energy, and the crystals are just white and pure,” she explains. Visitors who came to the site at Babyn Yar stood close to the crystals, their heads nearly touching them. At Sean Kelly gallery, she recreated the quartz crystals as an homage to Ukraine, in a section of the exhibition she says is filled with “transient objects.” “I really hurt. It hurts so much because war hurts in general,” she says. “Ukraine can be Syria, anywhere. When you make the work and you make the message for the art, you have to create something that is actually transcendental, that can be used in so many different ways, as the society needs at the time.”

“Crystal Wall of Crying,” Abramović explains, is meant to be a source of healing, a way to praise “your body, your heart, and your stomach against the crystals.” She hopes visitors at “Performative” will feel that sense of healing, that journey across pain of all kinds she experienced throughout her life, until she finally unlocked her own answer to being happy: being present, which means being grateful. When she wakes up each morning to read the headlines about Ukraine, she makes sure to remind herself how grateful she is to be at peace. It's a revolutionary act, she says, to make work from a place of happiness; at least for her, an artist whose entire career has relied upon being tortured.

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“The Artist is Present,” a work that transformed Abramović into a worldwide celebrity, was no different from “Rhythm 10” or “The Lovers” in that it required physical pain and endurance to be brought to completion. Thousands of attendees at MoMA watched Abramović sit in the same spot, without moving, eating, drinking water, or using the bathroom, for 750 hours over the course of three months, while guests took turns sitting in front of her. I ask her whether she considers “The Artist Is Present” the most important project of her life.

“No, I don’t,” she responds. “I still have to make more works, and I always think something revolutionary will come out of me. But I can say this was the most transformative work—this work transformed me into something else. Something happened there. It was that incredible discovery of unconditional love to any single person standing in front of me.” Maria Callas and Marina Abramović may share Zodiac signs in common, but Abramović will be damned if she lets heartbreak kill her.