

Westcott, James. "By Order of Marina Abramovic..." *ArtReview*, Summer 2009.

Art Review:

BY ORDER OF **MARINA ABRAMOVIC**, VISITORS TO THE WHITWORTH GALLERY DURING THIS SUMMER'S MANCHESTER INTERNATIONAL FESTIVAL (MIF) MUST NOT ONLY TURN THEIR MOBILE PHONES OFF, BUT SURRENDER THEM ENTIRELY.

words JAMES WESTCOTT

NO CALLS, NO TEXTING, NO PHOTOS and no Twittering allowed; there must be no distractions from and no mediations of what visitors are about to witness. They must also sign a contract stating that they will remain in the gallery for four hours. No one may leave.

At this year's MIF, Abramović, one of a tiny number of her (1970s) generation of performance artists still working in the live arena, is curating a group show of 13 long-duration works by her former students and better-known young artists such as Terence Koh and Jordan Wolfson. In addition to the already stated contractual obligations, Abramović believes that a twitchy, demanding contemporary audience will not sacrifice its freedom and precious time – committing four monotonous hours to watching performances in which very little might happen – without some specialist training. In an antechamber to the galleries, she will put visitors through a series of exercises meant to relax the body and hone concentration. This will probably involve a lot of shaking and flailing of limbs to free up the flow of blood, frantic rubbing of the hair to release static electricity from the brain, vocal exercises bordering on primal screaming and calmer activities, such as prolonged eye contact with strangers or wearing ear muffs and blindfolds to block out external stimuli – and thus reactivate the senses.

"Life is too fast", Abramović says. "I will try to take away the worries of life and bring the public to a kind of empty, pure state. I want to make sure they are in the right condition to see the work." Born in 1946 in Belgrade and having grown up in Tito's communist Yugoslavia, Abramović has an only semi-ironic attachment to authoritarian gestures in her art. Her strict regulation and even indoctrination of

the audience in Manchester defies the contemporary orthodoxy of making no demands upon art audiences and allowing them total free interpretive reign. For many it may even be a relief to be told exactly how to behave.

And what will Abramović's bootcamp-trained public see once inside? Obsessive, repetitive actions by the likes of Yingmei Duan, Eunhye Hwang and Amanda Coogan, who all studied with Abramović at the Hochschule für Bildende Künste in Braunschweig, Germany. American artist Jamie Ikenstein embedding her body into specially made pieces of furniture or home decor. Maybe something porcine from Irish artist Kira O'Reilly, who provoked outrage in the UK's moral-majority newspaper the *Daily Mail* recently for 'hugging a dead pig' onstage – and in a public gallery, at the taxpayers' expense! No doubt something highly cerebral, and possibly acted out by other people, from New York-based conceptualist Wolfson.

The big question, though, is whether the public will see signs of a rejuvenation in performance art based on duration and endurance – the kind that Abramović and peers Chris Burden and Vito Acconci pioneered, but which fell out of vogue before most of the performers at the Whitworth were even born. But Abramović has been carrying the torch since the 1970s, constantly finding new ways not just to disturb audiences with extreme physical acts – such as her classic *Thomas Lips* (1975), in which she (while naked, of course) ate a kilo of honey, drank a bottle of red wine, then cut a five-pointed star on her belly, whipped herself and finally lay on a cross made of ice – but also to create situations of almost overwhelming empathy in spaces that she tries to condition with her prolonged presence.



“Life is too fast. I will try to take away the worries of life and bring the public to a kind of empty, pure state”





Abramović lived up on three platforms in a New York gallery for 12 days without eating or speaking, her only sustenance prolonged eye contact with members of the public



At the beginning of the 1980s, Abramović and Ulay (German artist Frank Uwe Laysiepen, her partner in life and performance for 13 years) retreated into the Australian desert to live with Aboriginals, and developed ideas of duration, presence and stillness that gave them reasons to continue performing just as their peers in performance art were turning to material-based practices. Throughout the 1980s Abramović and Ulay embarked on a series of gruelling performances called *Nightsea Crossing*, in which they sat opposite each other for seven hours at a time locked in a static gaze. Between 1981 and 1986 they repeated this traumatic and extremely painful feat (the cramp was almost intolerable) 90 times in 22 venues around the world, confronting audiences with an immovable *tableau vivant*.

When Abramović split with Ulay in 1988, she began trying to find ways to include audiences in the experience of endurance and concentration rather than just confronting them with it. In a little-known performance called *Escape* (1998), in a former prison in Melbourne, members of the public were strapped onto chairs and blindfolded by mock prison guards in an attempt at enforced meditation. In the 2002 performance *House with the Ocean View*, Abramović lived up on three platforms in a New York gallery for 12 days without eating or speaking (the audience also had to remain silent). Her sustenance came in the form of prolonged eye contact with members of the public and the palpable sense of empathy for her in her ordeal. The gallery became a kind of chapel, and people returned every day and sat there for hours at a time – myself included. It was like what they say about fishing: the time spent there didn't eat out of your life; it just added to it.

Abramović's soldier-like perseverance in performance art over the decades has always had two aspects: one looking forward to ever-new possibilities for the medium – her project in Manchester being the latest attempt at this – and one looking back, fighting to enshrine performance in the history of visual art in the twentieth century.

Seven Easy Pieces, performed over seven days in the rotunda of New York's Guggenheim in 2005, was Abramović's effort to find a solution to the problem of preserving and re-presenting the inherently ephemeral and transient medium of performance. She re-performed – for seven hours at a time – classic pieces by her peers, such as Acconci's *Seedbed* (1972), in which he lay under a ramp in a New York gallery, masturbating and miked up so that his muttering was relayed to people walking above him, and Joseph Beuys's *How to Explain Pictures to a Dead Hare* (1965), in which he slathered honey and gold leaf over his head, held a dead hare under his arm and silently 'explained' the pictures in a gallery in Düsseldorf. As her re-performances stretched deep into the night, Abramović again created an audience-community in the space, with a sense of shared and sharpened awareness of the deliciously suspended present moment. But her biggest achievement with *Seven Easy Pieces* was to suggest a new way for institutions both to preserve the history of performance art and to keep it alive, and that was to treat performances like musical scores that can be re-performed by other artists, with sufficient institutional backing, full permission of the original artist or their estate and thorough curatorial guidance. "If you put performance in this historical context", Abramović says, "finally it might be accepted as mainstream art. It's a huge responsibility not to fail."

Abramović is now preparing for a retrospective at the Museum of Modern Art in New York in 2010, in which she will again employ re-performance to breathe life into old work. As well as photographic and video documentation of her work since the 1970s, carefully selected actors and artists will actually perform it right there in the



galleries, all day every day. Meanwhile, for the full three months of the exhibition (though not at night), Abramović herself will inhabit a series of platforms fixed high up on one of the enormous walls of MoMA's towering atrium.

The retrospective, pointedly called *The Artist Is Present*, is curated by Klaus Biesenbach, director of MoMA's new department of media and performance art, which deals with live performance as well as sound and video. Partly as a result of ongoing symposia among artists, historians and curators, in which Abramović is a major presence, the department recently embarked on a series of exhibitions that attempt to give the material history of performance its due. The cage that Taiwanese performance artist Tehching Hsieh lived in – without speaking, reading or, indeed, doing anything at all – for one year, from 30 September 1978 to 29 September 1979, was recently on display at MoMA. Hsieh undertook a series of such *One Year Performances* through the 1980s – including never going indoors for one year, and punching a time clock every hour for one year. Recognising him as the undisputed king of endurance, Abramović is dedicating her exhibition in Manchester to Hsieh.

While Abramović's work to gain institutional acceptance for the slippery genre of performance art has had impressive results, her influence on artists working in the live arena today is still unresolved. Outside of Manchester this summer, there aren't many artists around who seek to emulate her work with long duration, and with the necessary ferocious concentration and immediate physical encounters – the fundamental ingredients of Abramović's classical conception of performance art. It's as if Abramović and her generation achieved everything possible with their bodies, doing it all so you didn't have to. Intensive and legible physical commitment has not been a core feature of art in the live arena at least since the early 1990s, when relational aesthetics, for example, might ask nothing more demanding of artists and their audiences than to sit around and have a meal. More widespread now among performance artists (though the title hardly fits any more) are activities that blend photography, video, music, dance, theatre (or at least character acting) or social encounters into some kind of live situation. The presence of the artists themselves might not matter at all. This is the flourishing mode of live art that we're likely to see more of this November in New York in the third edition of



Performa, the 'visual art performance' biennial (note the hybrid title) directed by the performance art historian RoseLee Goldberg.

Meanwhile Abramović is continuing to focus on an unfashionable and more elemental strain of performance art, one that demands unadulterated and unmediated presence and a commitment to duration. As our lives become ever more crowded with content, with endless options and with ways of micromanaging our time and exploiting it to the full, this might be just the moment that artists and audiences get interested in giving it up completely and seeing what happens. Abramović is setting up a foundation in upstate New York that will be devoted to this work. To see if performance will come full circle and return to its fundaments of time and presence, Abramović will just have to wait. Something she's pretty good at. ■

Marina Abramović Presents... will take place from 3 to 19 July at the Whitworth Art Gallery as part of the Manchester International Festival. Abramović will receive an award at the Florence Biennale, 5–13 December, and will have a retrospective, *The Artist Is Present*, at MoMA, New York, in 2010

WORKS
(IN ORDER OF APPEARANCE)

- Marina Abramović, *Thomas Lips*, 1975, in *Seven Easy Pieces*, Guggenheim, New York, 2005. Photo: Artisio Blanzano. Courtesy Sean Kelly Gallery, New York.
- Melvin Snyders, *Father I'm Ready*, 2006. Limited print on Kodak Endura matt photo paper (A1) edition 60 x 40 cm, edition of 7 © the artist.
- Marina Abramović performing Javed Bejtes' *How to Explain Pictures to a Dead Horse*, 1969, in *Seven Easy Pieces*, Guggenheim, New York, 2005. Photo: Artisio Blanzano. Courtesy Sean Kelly Gallery, New York.
- Janine Jansen, *Archais*, 2008. Mixed media, 3 dimensions variable. Courtesy Gallerie de l'Or, Nouroukh, Beirut.
- Yngwie Duan, *Yngwie in Wonderland*, 2008. Performance, installation from *Aschenbrödel* 1970–2008. Darmstadt. Photo: Ursula Teicher-Marek.
- Nico Vascellari, *Cuckoo (Vestizione)*, 2008. Performance still. Photo: Ale Zuck-Smartest. Courtesy Monika Gallery, Rome.
- Marina Abramović, *The House with the Ocean View*, 2002. Photo: Steven P. Hanks. Courtesy Sean Kelly Gallery, New York.
- Marina Abramović performing *The Conditioning*, first action of Gino Pans' *Self-Portrait(s)*, 1973, in *Seven Easy Pieces*, Guggenheim, New York, 2005. Photo: Artisio Blanzano. Courtesy Sean Kelly Gallery, New York.
- Marina Abramović, *Escape*, 1994. Courtesy Sean Kelly Gallery, New York.