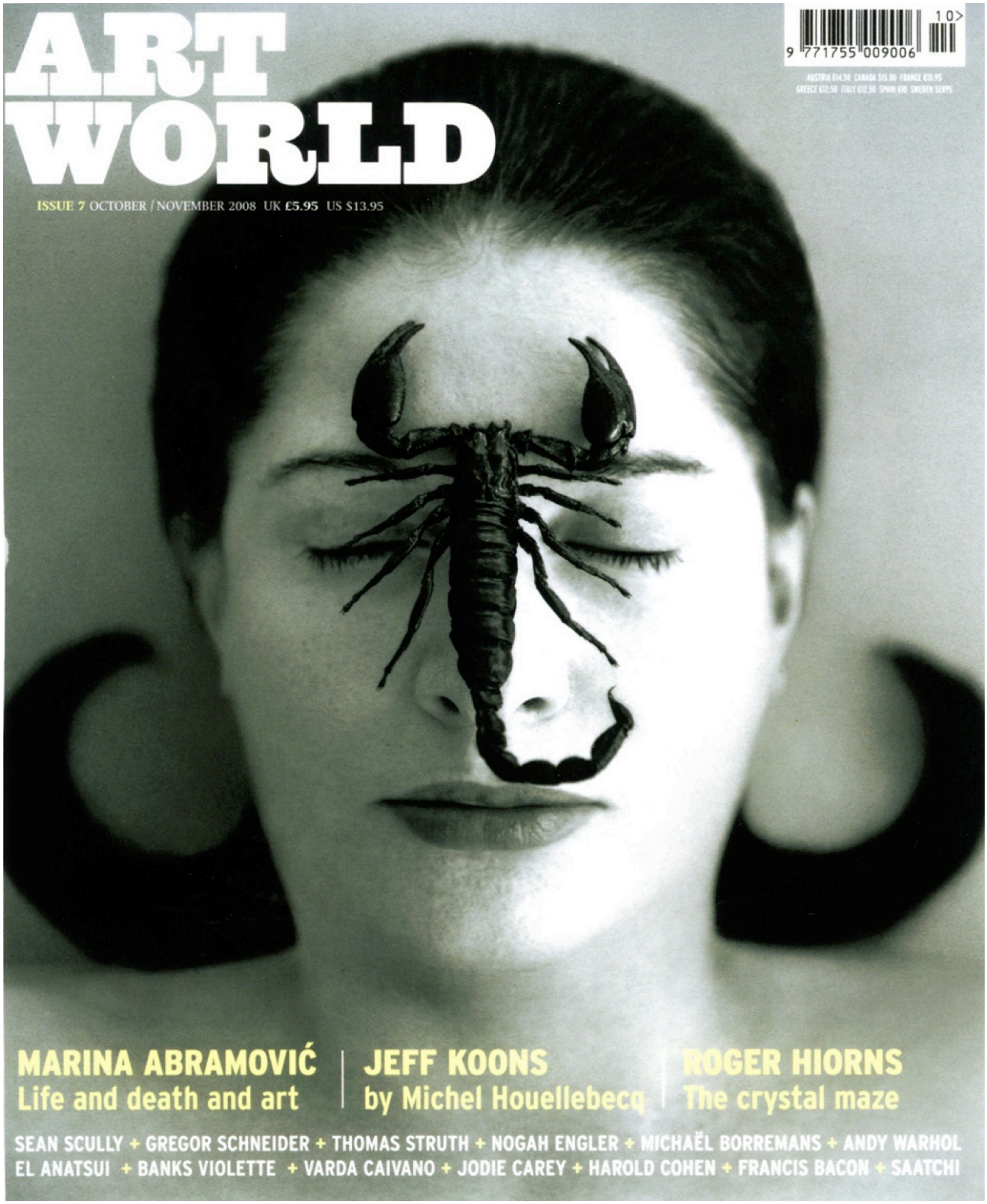
Falconer, Morgan. "The Life and Death of Marina Abramović," *Art World Magazine*, October/November 2008.



Left **Portrait with Maracas** *(2006), chromogenic print, 124 x 134cm*

THE LIFE AND DEATH OF MARINA ABRAMOVIC

Now in her 60s, the controversial performance artist is the subject of a major new book and a slew of retrospectives. But, given that she is very much alive, why is she planning her funeral? And can an ex-Yugoslavian whose high-endurance works have included self-harm and self-starvation really be non-political?

INTERVIEW: *Morgan Falconer*

Marina Abramović is wearing weeds. At least, I think she is. She's certainly dressed sombrely: black pants, black scoop-neck top and black tailored cardigan. And she certainly ought to be: she's heading out to Long Island tomorrow to talk to the theatre director and designer Robert Wilson about the arrangements for her funeral. She's isn't planning on dying just yet, but she wants to stage her funeral as part of a performance, The Life and Death of Marina Abramović, at the Manchester International Festival in July 2011. "It will be another sort of retrospective," she tells me. She'll then set the details down in her will and have them re-enacted when she really does snuff it. "Everybody will die," she says, though looking at her, I wonder if Abramović might actually cheat death. In a career stretching to nearly 40 years, she has publicly fasted, invited the public to slice and shoot her, etched stars on her belly, and lain down on a platform with clusters of candles burning her back. And, as the years pass, Abramović (pronounced ah-BRAHM-o-vich) is only increasing the demands she makes of herself. At the Guggenheim in 2005, just before her 60th birthday (she celebrated that milestone at the same museum with a grand dinner, ritual cocktail drinking and a serenade from Anthony of the Johnsons fame), she re-enacted famous performances of the past in an event entitled, with some irony, Seven Easy Pieces. It included Vito Acconci's masturbatory Seedbed, Joseph Beuys' How to Explain Pictures to a Dead Hare, and the lashing and burning of one of her own famous early performances, Thomas Lips, from 1975. When MOMA celebrates her career with a retrospective in 2010, she'll be there, performing, every hour that it's open.

Marina Abramović in **Seven Easy Pieces** *(2005), re-enacting Beuys'* **How to Explain Pictures to a Dead Hare** *(1965)*

Does she look roughly handled after all this punishment? Not a bit. Abramović, who retains the striking glamour of her youth, is a standing endorsement of performance art as a beauty regimen. She has had a personal trainer in recent times, which no doubt helps, but her vivacity seems to come from the soul: although she does have a studio in New York, our encounter took place in a French-style cafe in SoHo on a Sunday where she had arranged meetings all morning. She'd just flown in from Europe, yet she wasn't the least tired, and leaned across the table to me, talking excitedly and conspiratorially throughout as she revealed her plans.

Health and vitality notwithstanding, Abramović does seem to have an eye on her legacy at present. Not only are there "retrospectives" of all kinds, but in October Phaidon are publishing a new volume on her, as part of its reliable "Contemporary Artists" series. Klaus Biesenbach interviews her, Kristine Stiles surveys her career in depth, and Chrissie Iles writes an appreciation. It spans her life: her early years in Tito's Communist Yugoslavia; her decades in Amsterdam; the 13 years when she worked with German performance artist Ulay (the two parted in 1988); and the period since she moved to New York in 2002.

The book is far-reaching, yet Abramović has her eye on still larger memorials, and to that end she has acquired a former theatre in Hudson, a town in upstate New York. She plans to transform this into a foundation bearing her name, which will be devoted to the teaching of performance art (she currently lives nearby with artist husband Paolo Canevari). Earlier reports suggested that she planned to open it this year, but the opening date has been sliding, and when I ask Abramović about it today, the plans have become more flexible still. "I hope I can open this in at least 2011, 12, 13..." she says.

She needs to secure backers, and one doesn't have to hear much about the project to sense what their anxiety might be. "I'd like to address all the performing arts – theatre, opera and dance – not just 'performance'," she says. "The only difference between this performance centre and any other is that I want to concentrate on long

All images courtesy Marina Abramović. How to Explain Pictures to a Dead Hare: photo Attilio Maranzano

CHRISSIE ILES ON MARINA ABRAMOVIC

"Every day we would get into the sauna and she would tell me what she'd seen"


Chrissie Iles

Chrissie Iles is co-author of the new Phaidon book on Marina Abramović, and is the Anne and Joel Ehrenkranz Curator of Contemporary Art at the Whitney Museum of American Art, New York. She has a long association with Abramović, notably curating a retrospective at the Museum of Modern Art in Oxford in the 1990s. She spoke to Art World about her friend's unique strengths, and the experience of working with her.

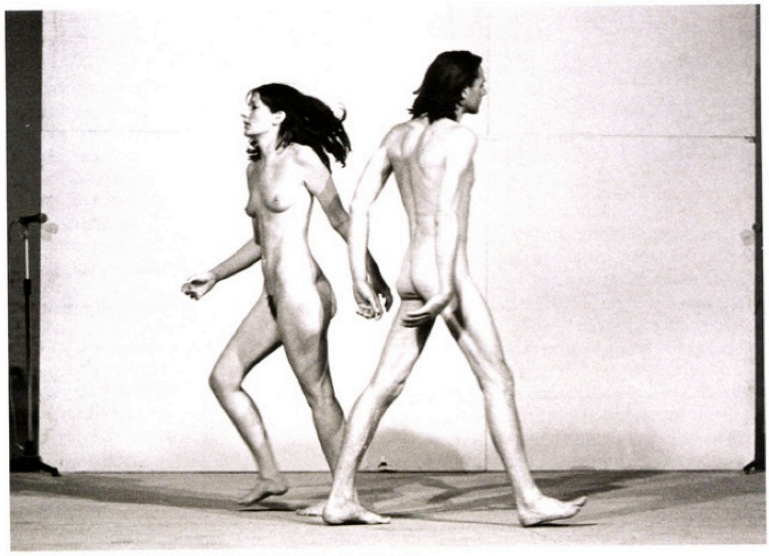
"There's something about Marina's physical presence – naked and clothed – that gives her the confidence to make performances, and her ability to make the durational, demanding works is partly physical and partly psychological. The physical side comes from genetic good luck: she's as strong as an ox, and has this incredible ability to withstand things that most other people would not be able to.

And psychologically, coming from communist Yugoslavia, she was in a unique position. Yugoslavian Communism, under Tito, wasn't as harsh as the Soviet or East German system. There was a slightly more liberal circumstance there, which was coupled with the fact that Marina's parents were very high up within the country's structures of power. Both were Partisans [Communist-led popular movement which drove fascists from Yugoslavia] in the second world war, and instilled in Marina a sense that the socialist body was more important than the individual, and a sense of toughness. That lent her a willingness to endure things for long periods of time. And this was then overlaid when she left Yugoslavia and came to Amsterdam and became exposed to spiritual practices such as Tibetan Buddhism. She drew on the lessons in a very subtle way to explore how far the body could go.

When you work with an artist you tune into their life and go deeply into their thinking, and you enter their world. It's a bit like being a biographer – you become a sounding board for them, an editor, a muse – someone who understands the work on a deep level, and who can develop something that can take shape as an exhibition that informs on the dialogue you have with that artist. And because her work is so much about physical discipline, when Marina works on a big project she gets very focused, she draws everything together in a very concentrated way.

In the case of the Oxford retrospective in 1995, the show was a residency and collaboration involving the Ruskin School of Art and the Pitt Rivers Museum [Abramović worked with items in the Pitt Rivers' ethnographic collection, and the results were three new works, Cleaning the Mirror #1 (pictured left), #2 and #3]. Every day we would get into the sauna and she would tell me what she had seen in the museum on that day and I would ask her questions about it, why that was important and why she'd been drawn to a particular aspect. We know each other very well anyway. We ate together, did everything together, and over six weeks, the three new pieces emerged. She is very good at focusing and structuring things, so there is a clarity of thinking that takes place in your head too. Marina brings you in and shares things: there is an incredible generosity of spirit and energy that she emits when she is in that state."

Left **Cleaning the Mirror no. 1** *(1995), video-installation/performance (performed for video), Oxford University*



Relation in Space *(1976), performance at Biennale di Venezia*

All images courtesy Marina Abramović. *Relation in Space*: photo Jaap de Graaf

"We're always running, running, running, and so many artists are making art to accommodate that fast living. I think we should be doing the opposite. We should be stopping time so that we can experience things at a different level"

durational works, works that are no less than six hours long." While I gulp, she laughs and continues. "I think our lives have become so much shorter. We're always running, running, running, and so many artists are making art to accommodate that fast living. I think we should be doing the opposite. We should be stopping time so that we can experience things at a different level. But I also want to have workshops to teach the public how to see long durational pieces – I want to develop with an architect some chairs which are also beds, so if you fall asleep you can still wake up and the work will still be happening in front of you. John Cage said something very interesting – that we should learn how to go over the boredom threshold. Spending time with things allows you to enter into a different state of consciousness. You enter a space that I call luminosity."

Duration hasn't always been central to Abramović's work, but endurance has been crucial: Thomas Lips lasted barely an hour, but it involved etching a star into her belly, lying on ice, being warmed by heaters, and lashing herself with a whip. One senses a displaced politics of liberation in these gestures, though their particular character is perhaps obscured by our ignorance of the art scene in Yugoslavia in the period. And, as Abramović insists, these sorts of readings are all too easy with hindsight.

So, I ask, was the work political? "I don't think so," she says, "at least, only in that I burnt a five point [Communist] star into me. I was much more interested in experimenting with the body." Experiment is a roomy term to explain the thought behind such a foundational work, but that perhaps reflects Abramović 's unwillingness to be marshalled into the conventional performance art camps of politics or feminism. Her work seems to draw more of its inspiration from Eastern ideas; her notions about performances are ritualistic and almost priestly. "I believe in the hierarchy of art," she said on one occasion. On another: "The public is like a dog – they feel insecurity and doubt." And her notion of the value of duration and endurance blends behaviourism with mysticism: "It's important to push mental and physical limits, and it's also important to control pain," she says to me. "Pain is such an incredible door, but you can go through it. I can't do this in my private life – if I cut myself in the kitchen I cry – but if you stage these kinds of things in front of the public you become like a mirror to them. As if to say, if I can do it, they can do it."

Abramović's ideas can seem a tangled riddle, but then so is her biography. Elements of it sound solid hard left: her father was a General in Tito's army; her mother the director of Belgrade's National Museum of Revolution and Art. But the

"Spending time with things allows you to enter a different state of consciousness … a space that I call luminosity"

picture is more complicated: her father was deeply committed to the party, while her mother was only intellectually so (her family were bourgeois), and her grandfather was an Orthodox [Christian] patriarch who was allegedly murdered by the state and later beatified. James Westcott is currently preparing a biography of Abramović, and we may have to wait until that is published before such riddles are untangled.

What seems incontrovertible is that Abramović's early experience of political extremism laid the foundations for her extremist art; yet that leaves open the question of the validity of her performances today, which take place against the very different backdrop of a wealthy art scene and a media keenly attuned to spectacle. She has pointed out in various interviews that she's the only one of the original generation of 1970s body artists who still makes performance central to her practice. However, that depends on your definition: and when Art World approached 1960s performance pioneer Carolee Schneemann for comment, she disagreed, quoting a long list of female artists that included herself, Laurie Anderson, Joan Jonas, Orlan and Annie Sprinkle, adding: "A critical problem for women who have used their bodies as a transforming material remains the disproportionate cultural response to the body at the expense of their underlying visual structures."

Whatever Abramović's peers may think of her sweeping statements, when she approached a few from that earlier generation to obtain permission to re-enact their work for the Guggenheim's Seven Easy Pieces, Chris Burden was the only one to refuse. Abramović wanted to stage Transfixed (1974), in which Burden was nailed across the bonnet of a VW Beetle, but a message reached her via his assistants saying that he refuses all such requests. "I saw him afterwards," she says, "and I asked him – because I had sent him a few letters to find out the real explanation, but he hadn't answered – and he simply said, 'Why do you need permission? You can do it anytime you want'. I was surprised, because I think it's unfair that artists restage things without permission."

One can only speculate that Burden was concerned about the context that Abramović and the Guggenheim might bring to the work. After all, when Abramović starved herself for twelve days at Sean Kelly Gallery in New York, for The House with the Ocean View (2002), the fuss was immense: Salman Rushdie, Susan Sontag and Björk all showed up, and Abramović even ended up with a cameo on an episode of Sex and the City. To some, it might have seemed a bit much. But for Abramović, what was on show amidst all the gossip and the spectacle was silence and starvation. And maybe that's a little of what a culture like ours needs.

Marina Abramović by Kristine Stiles, Klaus Biesenbach and Chrissie Iles, is published by Phaidon on 31 Oct; www.phaidon.com

MARINA ABRAMOVIC: SIX KEY WORKS

Marina Abramović first came to note for her solo performances in the early 1970s, using her body as a material and also a route to the mind. These pieces tended towards self-sacrificial battles between her active and passive selves and required considerable endurance. From 1976–88 the opposition or balancing of forces was shown through collaborations with her partner, Ulay: these culminated in 1989 with a final performance titled Great Wall Walk, in which the pair walked towards each other for three months from either end of the Great Wall of China, eventually meeting in the middle. Since then Abramović has continued to perform solo, but has more often made object-based work such as Shoes for Departure (1991), in which the viewer is invited to stand in amethyst shoes too heavy to walk in, close their eyes and attempt a mental departure without being able to move. Thus, by lying in wait ready to be activated by viewers, and with the aim of changing their mental states, Abramović's sculptures still work with her original aim of linking body and mind. Below, we revisit just a few of her defining moments.

1 Sound Corridor (1972)

Sound installation (amplified sound of machine guns in corridor), Museum of Contemporary Art, Belgrade

Some of Abramović's earliest work consisted of sound installations such as this one, in which speakers concealed in the entrance corridor of a museum in Belgrade unleashed the deafening sound of gunfire. "I wanted the viewer to be killed by sound so that when they entered the museum it creates a kind of empty space, a silence," recalls Abramović of this eerily prescient work (these being the days when, under General Tito, Yugoslavia appeared peaceful enough to become a popular package holiday destination for northern Europeans). "When I later reconstructed the piece, there really was a war in Yugoslavia."

2 Thomas Lips (1975)

Performance, Krinzinger Gallery, Innsbruck

One of her earliest and most legendary performances, and one she has occasionally re-staged, Abramović derived its ambiguous title from a man she once met who looked like both man and woman. "[Thomas Lips] had a mixture of communism and orthodox religion. All the elements were there – the cross of punishment, the sacrifice, the legend. My family always taught me that you have to sacrifice yourself for others, for the cause. The reason I restaged it at the Guggenheim in 2005 was because it reflects the willpower of my upbringing, and that's so different from life here today."

3 Breathing In, Breathing Out (1977), with Ulay

Performance, Student Cultural Center, Belgrade

"The minimality of the work I did with Ulay was very important at the time – it was truly Minimalist," says Abramović of the period spent with her long-term collaborator. "A lot of the work was related to the architecture of the space, but this piece was different, and it's really my favourite because it's only dealing with air, which is so simple and essential. We wanted to see if we could circulate the same air between our bodies, with filter tips in our noses and microphones in our mouths. After a while you stop breathing oxygen and start breathing carbon dioxide. It was amazing that we could do it for 17 minutes without fainting."

4 Balkan Baroque (1997)

Performance-installation (detail), Venice Biennale, June 1997

This multipart performance and video installation was staged at the Venice Biennale in 1997, where Abramović won the Golden Lion. She cleaned a huge pile of fresh beef bones while singing folksongs from her youth; meanwhile, videoed interviews with her parents were screened behind her. "Already so many artists had reacted to [the Balkan wars], but I couldn't do anything, it was too close to me. I don't like to make political art by just reacting to an event. So I needed to find out how I could take something and make a kind of transcendental image, something that could represent any war at any time."

5 Dozing Consciousness (1997)

Performed for film, Balkan Baroque

Throughout the late 1980s and 1990s Abramović made much sculpture involving rocks and crystals. "I'm very interested in minerals," she comments. "The Aborigines have a story that you can trap the impulse of light or electricity in quartz, and it will never leave – it becomes like a primitive computer. So the medicine men among the Aborigines cut small pieces of quartz and put them in their head." [Aboriginals keep their practices secret, but accounts of medicine men having quartz crystals placed into incisions in their heads and bodies – often by spirits – do exist.] "I think crystals are a kind of simplified computer for the planet – you can access the memory of the planet through them."

6 The House with the Ocean View (2002)

Performance, Sean Kelly Gallery, New York

For this durational performance, Abramović starved herself in Sean Kelly Gallery in New York for 12 days. "It was really interesting for me to come to New York just after 9/11. I found the people open and vulnerable. Americans don't really have a consciousness of death, they're all about being forever young. So I dedicated the piece to the people of New York. The idea was pure experiment: what would happen if I purify myself by not talking and not eating for a certain period of time. Can I project that to create a sort of invisible energy?"

All images courtesy Marina Abramović Balkan Baroque Dozing Consciousness: photos Attilio Maranzano House with Ocean View: photo Stephen P Harris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