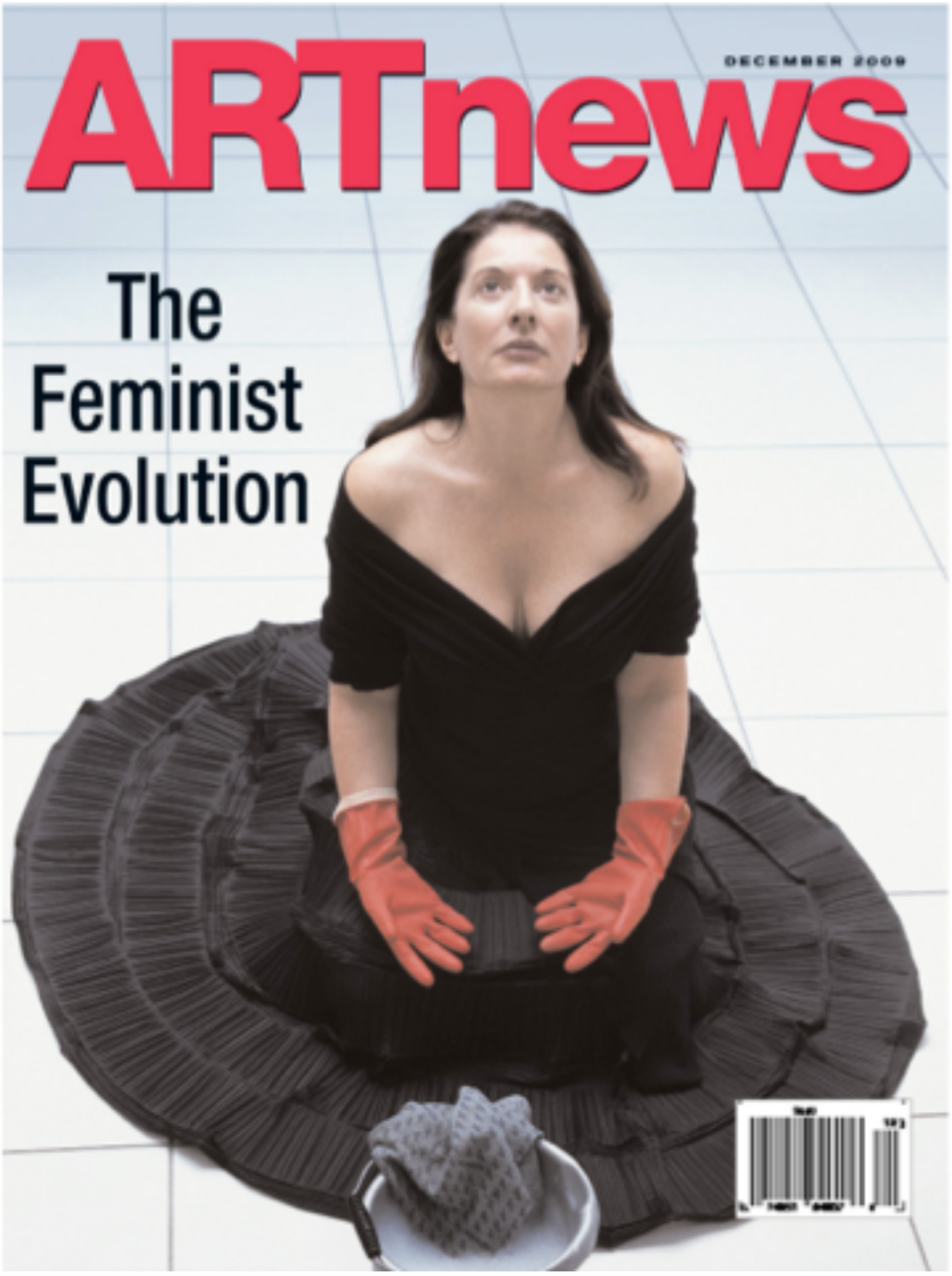
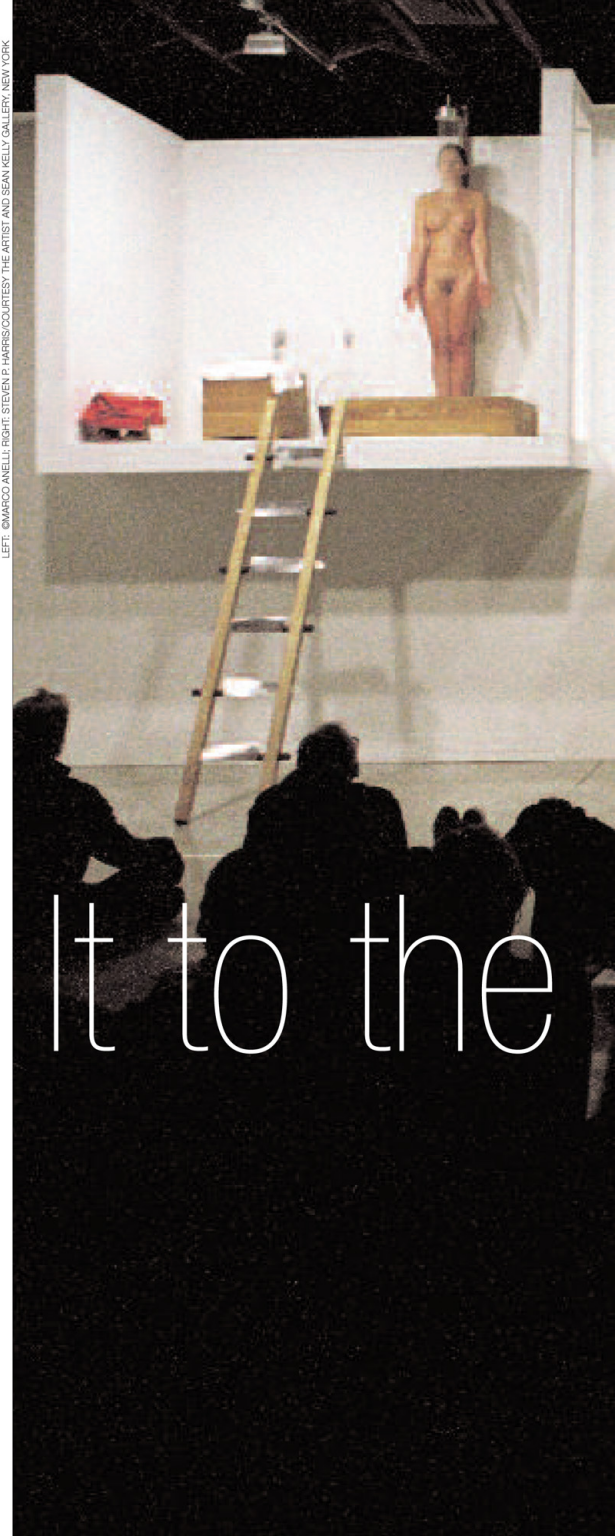
Yablonsky, Linda. “Taking it to the Limits,” *ARTnews*, December 2009.



Marina Abramović's performances, feats of endurance involving self-denial and even self-mutilation, are so influential that MoMA has asked 35 artists to re-create them for an upcoming retrospective—and so provocative that it is building a separate entrance for the show

Taking It to the



LEFT: ©MARCO ANELLI; RIGHT: STEVEN P. HARRIS/COURTESY THE ARTIST AND SEAN KELLY GALLERY, NEW YORK

BY LINDA YABLONSKY

WHEN it comes to inflicting pain on herself, Marina Abramović stops at nothing. In 30-odd years as a performance artist, she has cut a five-pointed star into her belly with a razor blade, brushed her hair until her scalp was raw, slapped herself silly, screamed herself hoarse, had the air sucked out of her until she fainted, lay naked on a block of ice, and submitted to an audience willing to pull out her hair and shoot her. For a 2002 work

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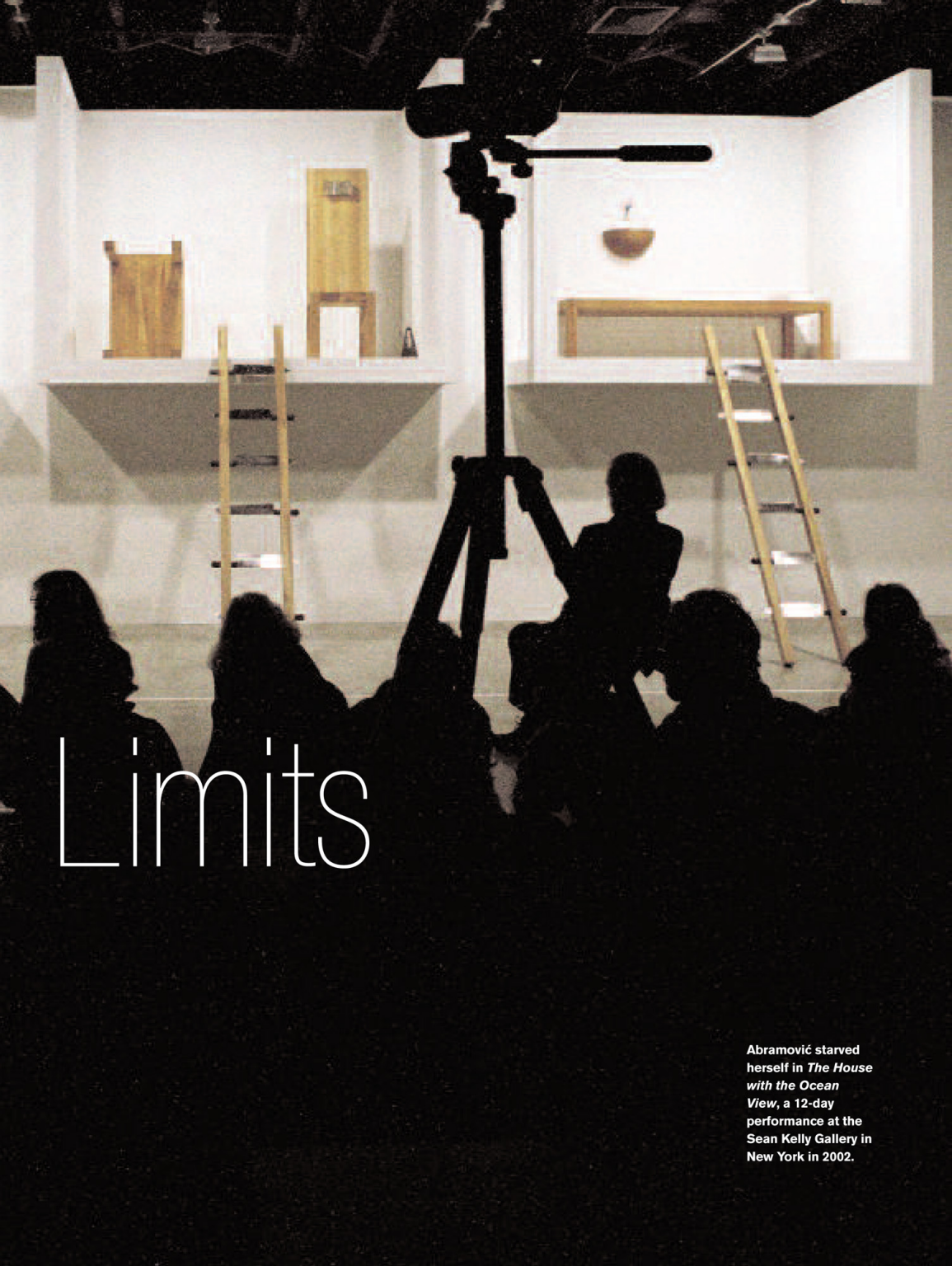

Limits

Abramović starved herself in *The House with the Ocean View*, a 12-day performance at the Sean Kelly Gallery in New York in 2002.

Abramović and Ulay first performed *Imponderabilia* in 1977 at the Galleria Comunale d'Arte Moderna, Bologna. It will be re-created at MoMA.

called *The House with the Ocean View*, performed over 12 days at the Sean Kelly Gallery in New York, she starved herself in public.

Pain is not the point of Abramović's art. Getting past it is. By driving herself to the limit, she seeks a spiritual transformation exquisite enough to communicate itself to an audience. Nonetheless, when we meet for an interview near her country house in upstate New York, I experience a different sort of pain, one with a comic edge, as I watch the fearless, 64-year-old Serbian beauty attempt to back her car out of a parking space.

Here she is, inching a used Range Rover forward and back, unable to get out of the lot because turning the wheel makes her nervous.

"I've been driving for two weeks," she explains, when we stop for gas on the way to her house in Malden Bridge. She doesn't know how to use the pump or even how to align the car next to it. This is the first time she's tried. The experience brings what every encounter with Abramović holds in store: laughter and tears, a rush of adrenaline, and a period of intense concentration followed by unmitigated triumph.

By her own estimation, Abramović is now the world's leading performance artist. She is certainly one of the few—Joan Jonas is another—who has been practicing this little-understood mode of expression continuously since its first big wave, in the '70s. Her career, which has taken her to nearly every part of the world and untold regions of the mind and spirit, is soon to get its biggest boost, when the Museum of Modern Art in New York stages her first full-scale retrospective, "Marina Abramović: The Artist Is Present."

Take the title literally. The show, opening March 14, will include not only videos and re-creations of Abramović's early works but also a new piece that she will perform daily, in total silence, throughout the exhibition's two-and-a-half-month run. She will be on display all day every day when the museum is open—and sometimes when it isn't.

Time—the here and now of it—is a central component of Abramović's work. To understand a piece fully, audiences must be as willing as she is to commit a significant part of their day to it. "The one thing we don't have anymore is time," she says, her voice inflected by the Serbian accent she hasn't lost in her nearly ten years in New York. "As life gets shorter, art has to get longer. We can't do anything about the past, and we don't have the future. We only have the present."

ABRAMOVIC'S own schedule is pressing. She works constantly, developing performances that take almost superhuman preparation, making videos and photographs for gallery shows, holding workshops for those who aspire to take up her mantle, and devoting herself to what she sees as her legacy: the Marina Abramović Institute in Hudson, New York, a performance and study center she hopes to open in 2012 and dedicate to long-duration performance art. ("I want to have a chair you can eat and sleep in," she says, "so you are always inside the piece. But I haven't yet figured out how to put a toilet in it.")

The institute will also contain her archives. They go back

to her debut at the Edinburgh Festival in 1973, where she performed *Rhythm 10*, stabbing the spaces between her fingers at a frantic pace. When she missed, and cut herself, she picked up a new knife, bloodying ten knives in the process and recording the sounds she made on audiotape. Playing back the tape, she tried to repeat the action exactly as before, with the same mistakes, and ten more knives. "The idea," she says, "was to put time past and present together."

"The moment I first stood in front of the public," says Abramović, who had been making sound works, "I understood that was the only thing I want to do in life. It was still connected with sound, and I was not aware it was a 'performance.'"

In Edinburgh she met Joseph Beuys, as well as Viennese Actionists Hermann Nitsch and Günter Brus, whose performances, using animal carcasses, blood, and entrails, lasted many hours. "Beuys helped me get invitations to perform in Europe because he liked me and thought me crazy," she recalls, also recounting her one experience with Nitsch. He put her on a cross and covered her with 30 pounds of sheep's eyes. "I stopped it after 12 hours because I'd had enough," she says. She didn't collaborate with anyone again until 1976, when she met Ulay (Uwe Laysiepen), a German-born performance artist, and fell in love. The couple moved to Amsterdam, where they created a number of works for museums and other art spaces all over Europe.

In one of their first collaborations, *Rest Energy* (1980), the two faced each other, both leaning back to hold a bow taut, its arrow pointed directly at Abramović's heart. Microphones attached to their bodies recorded their intensifying heartbeats over four alarming minutes. For another early collaboration, they screamed into each other's mouths for 15 minutes. For *Relation in Space* (1976), they ran naked across a gallery space until they touched and then collided, repeating the action after a short interval, each time with more force. "We were blue for months," she confides.

For Abramović, the most important of these collaborations was *Nightsea Crossing*, a site-specific performance that she and Ulay adapted to different museums in different countries 15 times between 1981 and 1987. Dressed in bright two-tone clothes, a new combination each time, they seated themselves at opposite ends of a table and stared at each other continuously throughout the hours that the building was open to visitors.

***Carrying the Skeleton*, 2008, limited-edition framed C-print.**

THOUGH Abramović began painting as a child in Belgrade, where she was born, and attended the city's Academy of Fine Arts, working in two dimensions didn't hold her interest long. Her parents, both war heroes who became prominent in the Yugoslav Communist Party, were not enchanted with her turn to performance, particularly after their daughter decided to try "drawing on the clouds"—skywriting. "I went to a military base and asked for six supersonic planes," she says,

Abramović cut a pentagram into her abdomen in *Lips of Thomas*, repeated at the Guggenheim Museum in 2005, 30 years after its first performance, in Austria.

"and they called my father to get me out of there." The attempt may have been frustrated, but she never painted again.

Her mother, whom she describes as an unemotional woman, had served in the army medical corps but also studied art history. She later became director of Belgrade's Museum of Art and Revolution and took the 12-year-old Abramović to the Venice Biennale (where in 1997 she would win a Golden Lion). Both parents were criticized in Communist Party meetings for their daughter's activities, which had a decidedly anti-Communist bent. Most dismaying was *Lips of Thomas*, the 1975 piece she first performed at Galerie Krinzinger in Innsbruck, Austria, wearing her father's army hat while cutting a pentagram shape into her abdomen, whipping herself, and lying naked on a block of ice.

The symbolism was lost on no one. "It was the Communist star," Abramović says. "That star was everywhere—on my birth certificate, on the walls—and I was fed up with it." She was also motivated by her fear of the sight of blood. At six, she spent a year in the hospital being treated for hemophilia, which never recurred. That experience led to the use of her own body as sculptural material, she says. "It's important to do things I'm afraid of in performance."

For Abramović's retrospective at MoMA, five of her early works, both solo and collaborative, will be re-created live by 35 artists trained by her and rotating every two and a half hours. Meanwhile, Abramović herself will be on view in the museum's atrium. Seated at a table opposite an empty chair, she will face volunteers willing to sit down and lock eyes with her for as long as they can, seeking what Abramović calls "a charismatic state of mind."

In each of her performances, Abramović visibly enters a kind of trance that allows her to endure physical pain and to concentrate on the task at hand. "You find a way to get over that moment when you panic," she says, adding that much of her working energy comes from contact with her audience. "The public has always gone to museums as voyeurs, not liking to be observed," she notes. "But it's not enough for them to view a work. They have to be transformed."

During *The House with the Ocean View*, she says, "I didn't have verbal communication. It was only with the eyes. I became so sensitive that—it sounds almost religious—I had this amazing opening of the heart that hurt me. This is why I believe time is so necessary: the public needs time to get the point. When I spend 12 days in a gallery, its energy is changed. Artists have to serve as oxygen to society, and that is what I do."

In 1988 she spent three months walking half the length of the Great Wall of China, and in 2005 she performed a different seven-hour piece each night for a week at the Guggenheim Museum in New York. Only weeks before our meeting, she had an audience of hundreds at the Manchester International Festival in England suiting up in lab coats and agreeing to a four-hour, cell phone–less lockdown.

Several works included in the MoMA retrospective require the performers to be nude—a first for the museum. "In performance, to be without clothes is a very important reduction," says Klaus Biesenbach, head of MoMA's department of media and performance art and curator of the show. For example, *Imponderabilia*, from 1977, calls for a nude man and woman to stand at opposite sides of a narrow doorway through which visitors to the exhibition must pass sideways, facing one performer or the other.

The museum is providing the underage or faint of heart with an unobstructed separate entrance. Even so, this seems a risky proposition for an institution that attracts a wide swath of humanity with differing attitudes toward public nudity. Doesn't that worry Biesenbach? "The part that makes me nervous is the whole retrospective," he says. "Otherwise it wouldn't be interesting. But you can't do anything significant if you're not willing to experiment."

For Biesenbach, who has put Abramović in previous shows he organized in London for the Institute of Contemporary Arts and in New York at P.S.1 Contemporary Art Center, performance art is the most consistent indicator of sweeping social change. "When an artistic movement is really pushing the envelope," he says, "it happens in performance art. And Marina is one of the most influential artists working today."

She is certainly one of the most intriguing to other artists. Don DeLillo wrote her into his novel *Mao II*, and Bruce Chatwin wrote about her in *The Songlines*. She also made it into an episode of *Sex and the City*, restaging her *Ocean View* performance at the Sean Kelly Gallery.

KELLY, who has represented Abramović since 1995, created a viable market for her work beyond its catch-as-catch-can live events. With him, Abramović produced editioned packages of her pre-Ulay performances that include an image from each, along with a text panel and other related material. "If you present information in a very specific way and it gets institutional support, you've effectively created a market," he says. (Today, prices for an edition of seven photographs range from about $96,000 to $185,000; one of the most sought-after recent images shows Abramović carrying a human skeleton on her back. Her videos come in editions of five and sell for about $148,000 to $258,000.)

***Cleaning the Floor*, 2004, limited-edition framed C-print.**

Though she has taught performance work to others—from 1994 to 2001 she was professor of performance art at the Braunschweig University of Art in Germany—and holds workshop training sessions for collaborating artists, Abramović says that to be a performance artist, "you've either got it or you don't. You have to have a certain energy, a presence. It does not come from you but through you. It is something you transmit. This is an ability you can't learn."

Her own lengthy preparations follow the exercises in concentration she gives to others. They include walking blindfolded in the woods at night while "seeing" with her body, as well as denying herself food and conversation for several days—or a month—while performing strenuous physical workouts. "I call it cleaning house," she says.

Abramović relaxes by taking long baths with kosher salt and baking soda. While she lies in the water, eyes closed, she listens to records of shaman drums. She is an avid reader of books about anthropology and Tantric Buddhism and loves "bad movies strictly with happy end."

Abramović and Ulay separated in 1988. Recently she wiped another slate clean, divorcing artist Paolo Canevari, with whom she had spent the last 12 years, and throwing herself into her work even more deeply. "I feel I'm in my third act," she says, "and I want it to go nicely."

Partly to that end, she has created *The Life and Death of Marina Abramović*, a three-part performance slated for the Manchester International Festival in 2011 and then moving to Madrid and New York. Essentially it is a staging of her funeral the way she'd like to see it. Each part has a different director, to whom she gives the material of her life to shape.

"My mother never kissed me or told me she loved me, because she didn't want to spoil me, and now I have to do so much to deserve attention," she says. "You have to get past private suffering and translate it to something universal, and then you detach from it.

"You come from your own story, and in the end it becomes everyone else's. That is why it's such a good thing to do." ■