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MARINA ABRAMOVIC

FOR MORE THAN THREE DECADES, PERFORMANCE ARTIST **MARINA ABRAMOVIC** HAS BEEN TESTING THE BOUNDARIES BETWEEN PERFORMER AND AUDIENCE AND THE LIMITS OF HER OWN BODY, OCCASIONALLY RISKING HER LIFE IN THE PROCESS. ON THE EVE OF A RETROSPECTIVE AT MoMA, SHE READIES HERSELF FOR WHAT MAY BE HER MOST CHALLENGING PERFORMANCE YET.

BY JULIE L. BELCOVE





The human form, disrobed and displayed in all its glory, is arguably the most enduring motif in the history of Western art. Museums dedicated to art both ancient and modern are filled with nudes rendered every which way: painted, chiseled, molded, sketched and photographed. They're just usually not living and breathing. But come March 14, New York's Museum of Modern Art will host daily performances of five seminal works by Marina Abramović, three of which feature performers in the altogether. In *Imponderabilia* (1977), two players stand opposite each other, au naturel, in a narrow doorway. Visitors must brush past them to enter the exhibition—an early, if awkward, example of interactive art.

“This is America!” the Yugoslavian-born Abramović trills jovially in her heavily accented English, on a rainy fall day in New York, as she considers the potentially embarrassing encounter in what will be the first live exhibition of nudes in the museum's history. “Is going to be riots! I have so many meetings with the security of MoMA and how we're going to deal with things.”

In all fairness, yes, Americans have a more delicate relationship with nakedness than Europeans, but Abramović acknowledges that when she and her former collaborator and lover, Ulay, performed the piece at a museum in Bologna, Italy, the police showed up six hours into it, asked to see their passports (which they obviously didn't have on them) and promptly shut down the performance. This time around, regulations mandate that MoMA provide a second route into the exhibition—one with a wider opening to allow for wheelchairs—a measure Abramović finds understandable but disappointing. “I hate that alternative because in the original piece there was no alternative—you go here,” she says, seated in

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This page: *Portrait With Potatoes*, 2008, chromogenic print. **Opposite:** Installation view of *The House With the Ocean View*, performed at the Sean Kelly Gallery, New York, November 15–26, 2002, chromogenic print.

her midtown office as she points to a photograph of Ulay and herself, face-to-face in the passageway, while a man turned slightly sideways tries to negotiate the cramped space. Even so, Abramović has come up with one small tweak: Though the original conceit paired a man and a woman, she now plans to mix up the couples taking turns performing *Imponderabilia* so that some are same-sex.

At 64, Abramović is the doyenne of performance art, a true believer who has literally risked her life more than once in fealty to her work. Decades after her peers segued exclusively into other—typically more lucrative—art forms, she is still constructing new performances, though she does dabble in other mediums. For the MoMA retrospective, the 36 hired players will rotate every two and a half hours to allow for breaks, while Abramović herself will

perform a new work nonstop during museum hours for the duration of the exhibition. That's seven and a half hours a day, five days a week; 10 hours on Friday. For three months. "The idea is that we are there before the museum opens, and we are there when the museum closes," she says. "The attitude is the same as toward a painting—the performance is always there. It's never been done that way for three months, ever, in history." Her new performance, *The Artist Is Present*, is technically a solo performance, but it will depend on a multitude of other "players": Museumgoers will be allowed to take turns sitting with Abramović in the atrium, though she will remain silent (and fully clothed). The concept, she says, is a play on the wording of gallery announcements from a bygone era. "You know in the old days you have this invitation for a painting exhibition, [and it says] 'The artist will be present at the opening.'"

For Abramović, the performance is inseparable from the audience. "So many artists say they're not aware of audience. For me is unbelievable," she says, shaking her long mane of thick, glossy, dark hair that, along with an unusual radiance, helps make her look a good 15 years younger. "I remember Martha Graham said, 'Wherever a dancer dance is holy ground.' I say, 'Wherever audience stand is the holy ground.' I always want my audience to be touched on the deepest level possible."

Perhaps more than any other performance artist, Abramović has made her audiences not merely bystanders or even participants but, as Paul Schimmel, chief curator of the Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles, observes, "actually complicitous." Her harrowing *Rhythm 0* (1974) was a groundbreaking example. Abramović stood passive for six hours as audience members in Naples, Italy, took turns doing whatever they wanted to her. She had laid out 72 objects, including a gun and a bullet, on a table for their use. She still bears a scar on her chest from a knife's blade—and she shows it off like a battle wound. One man sucked her blood; one pointed the gun at her, though another took it away. "This is the thing," she says, "you see how the public doesn't have limits." Abramović wanted to re-create the work at the Guggenheim Museum in 2005 as part of her "Seven Easy Pieces" show, which reimagined some of her peers' classic works, but the museum refused out of fear for her safety. "Everybody's afraid of the people here," she says.

Her willingness to put her life in jeopardy could logically raise questions about her sanity. Schimmel, however, insists Abramović is not crazy, just brilliant at psychologically manipulating her audience. "Okay, you read about *Rhythm 0*, and it seems very scary, and it gets more and more dark and violent, but then the other half of it is her generosity of spirit," he says. "[Her] joy and fearlessness created a group that ultimately protected her." He does concede that Abramović probably would not have stopped the performance under any circumstances—even if she had been gang-raped. "I think it really comes from a profound commitment to [her] art," Schimmel says.

In person, Abramović seems perfectly stable. In her own defense, she notes, "I never would do anything painful to myself at home, because I hate it." Still, it's little wonder that, when airplane seatmates inquire what she





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ALL ARTWORK © MARINA ABRAMOVIĆ. COURTESY OF THE ARTIST AND SEAN KELLY GALLERY, NEW YORK.

This page: *Crystals for Non-Human Use*, 1996, wood and laser quartz crystals, an example of Abramović's sculpture.
Opposite: *Cleaning the Floor*, 2004, chromogenic print.

does for a living, she tells them she's a nurse from New Zealand studying the country's health problems. "How can I possibly explain?" she asks with a girlish giggle.

Abramović was born in Belgrade, in what is now Serbia, the year after World War II ended. Both of her parents were war heroes and went on to hold high-ranking government posts. Her mother, Danica, joined the Communist party after the king had Abramović's grandfather, the Patriarch of the Serbian Orthodox Church, assassinated. Danica later helped save a truckload of wounded soldiers while under enemy fire. After the war she long served as the head of the Museum of Revolution and Art, filled with propagandist images, and Abramović's father, Vojo, rose to be a general in Tito's army. As a result of their elite status, Abramović and her brother, now a philosopher, were raised, ironically, bourgeois. "I had a piano teacher; I had a French teacher; I had an English teacher; we have a maid," she says. Abramović credits her mother for her extreme precision and organization: "If my bed is too much mess, she wake me up. She liked order." She also dressed her daughter as a devil for a costume party when Abramović was not much more than a toddler. All the other little girls, as evidenced in a photo, went as princesses or fairies. "I was always the black sheep," she says.

From her earliest consciousness, Abramović says, she was an artist. First she painted her dreams, then truck accidents and surreal compositions of bodies and clouds. "I was often looking into the sky, and my revelation—when I stopped painting—was the day I saw 12 military planes crossing the sky and making lines," she recalls. "I was so fascinated by the idea that from nowhere came these planes, made these lines. You see the drawings, and the drawings disappear and become blue sky. It was so amazing that I went to military base and asked if they would give me 12 planes to make drawing. And they called my father and said, 'She's crazy.'"

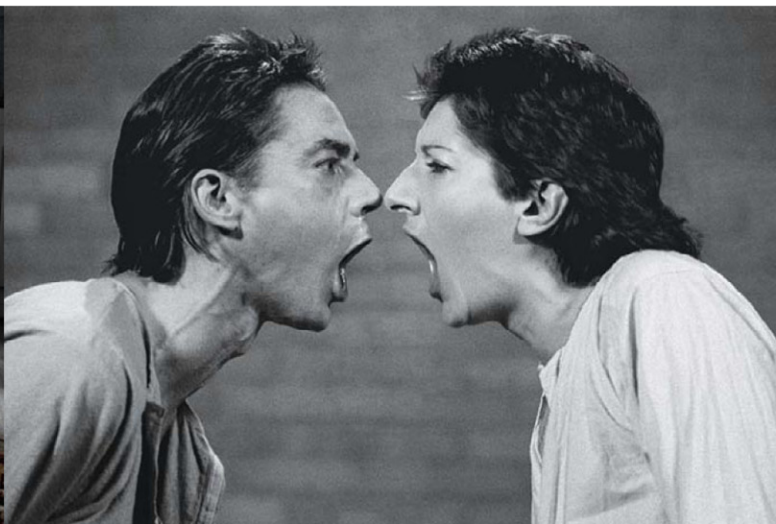
But Abramović realized her choice of medium was limitless. She first gravitated toward sound. One work, *Airport* (1972), she installed in the student cultural center. "We never could go anywhere, not because of political reasons, but because people had no money," Abramović says. "So I had speakers with the sound of a

very cold voice, my voice, saying, 'All the passengers on the airline Jat [the Yugoslav airline], please go immediately to gate 345 [though the Belgrade airport had only three gates] because the plane is leaving immediately to Tokyo, Bangkok, Honolulu and Hong Kong.' Everybody there become this imaginary passenger to somewhere." Other sound projects, which she describes as "more crazy," didn't get past the conceptual stage: Authorities rejected her bid to rig a bridge with speakers broadcasting the sound of a bridge collapsing. Gradually her ideas evolved to encompass her own body. Her first actual performance, *Rhythm 10* (1973), in which she played her hand on the floor and rapidly plunged the point of a sharp knife into the spaces between her fingers, relied heavily on the ominous thwack of the dagger. Each time she missed, stabbing her hand instead of the floor, she started over with a new knife. She used 20 in all.

Although the Yugoslav authorities didn't exactly get what she was up to—and at times gave her mother a hard time about it—Abramović made a name for herself in Western Europe, which was more open to the avant-garde. At a 1975 performance in Amsterdam, she met Uwe Laysiepen, a German performance artist who uses the moniker Ulay. He recalls being captivated as she carved a star into her belly. "After the performance I cared for her wounds," Ulay writes in an e-mail. "That was the beginning.... We became lovers, which was the absolute base for anything else [that] happened afterwards." After Abramović ran off with Ulay, she says with a slight laugh, "my mother went to the police. They said, 'How old is she?'" When told Abramović was 29, the police responded that it was about time.

The couple could not earn much money with their art, so they lived in their van for five years, traveling around Europe and making performances for small fees. (The van, which they drove in a circle in a performance at the 1977 Paris Biennale—until all the oil leaked out, leaving slick black tire tracks—will also be in the MoMA show.) Abramović and Ulay washed in gas station sinks and spent a year with Aborigines in the Australian outback. Together they made a series of works that explored love, trust and the boundaries of human relationships. For *Relation in Time* (1977), which will be performed at MoMA, they sat

This page, from left: *The Kitchen IV—Homage to Saint Therese*, 2009, pigment print; AAA-AAA, Marina Abramović and Ulay, originally performed in Liège, Belgium, 1978, gelatin silver print. **Opposite, from top:** *Entering the Other Side*, performed as part of "Seven Easy Pieces" at the Guggenheim Museum, New York, 2005, chromogenic print; *Portrait With Scorpion (Open Eyes)*, 2005, gelatin silver print.





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back-to-back, their hair tied together. The first 16 hours, there was no audience other than the gallery staff. When the artists were near collapse from exhaustion, the audience was allowed in to watch for the final hour. In another work, the couple exhaled into each other's mouth until almost passing out from carbon dioxide poisoning. In 1988, knowing their relationship was over, they spent three months walking the Great Wall of China, beginning at opposite ends and meeting in the middle, where they said goodbye. "It was so painful for me, this separation," Abramović says. Ulay notes of their 12 years together, "It was almost a perfect union."

In Schimmel's eyes, Abramović was the driving force in the partnership, "and yet it's clear," he says, "what they accomplished together they never could have accomplished apart." Writes Ulay, "There was no hers or mine."

After their breakup, Abramović returned to a solo practice. The strife in her homeland dominated her work in the Nineties, represented by motifs of skeletons and bloody animal carcasses. *Balkan Baroque*, an epic installation, earned her the prestigious Golden Lion at the 1997 Venice Biennale. In 2001 Abramović moved to New York at age 55. Her boyfriend at the time, artist Paolo Canevari (later her husband, now her ex), lived in Rome. She was based in Amsterdam. He suggested New York as neutral ground. "I was very afraid," Abramović admits. "Because it's a strange place—if you're not here, you don't exist. Even if I was already known artist in Europe, here I have to start from zero." The city, though, proved to be a boon for her: "I remember Susan Sontag saying to me, 'Once you've lived in New York, you can't live anywhere else.' And I totally understand that. Everywhere you go looks like slow motion."

Her first solo show after arriving was a blockbuster. In *The House With the Ocean View* (2002), Abramović lived in an installation of three open "rooms" perched on the wall at the Sean Kelly Gallery. For 12 days she drank only water, ate nothing, spoke not a word and remained in full view of the public. Her goal, she says, was to ritualize the most banal acts of daily life, from showering to using the toilet, and to achieve nothing short of a transformation for both herself and her audience. It was, she says, the most intense performance of her life. "I understood the power of gaze," she explains, and of nonverbal communication.



"Many times tears burst in my eyes, and [visitors] would come and cry. I had people come in the morning, then go to work, then come back. It was on such an intimate level."

So intimate that when the gallery's jerry-rigged plumbing leaked into a back room storing other artists' works, a staffer held up a sign out of the audience's view imploring Abramović not to flush. "I burst into laughter," she recalls. "I could not stop. And the public was thinking, She's gone mad."

When I offer that urinating in public is the stuff of most people's bad dreams, Abramović responds that performing enables her to "step into a different state of mind. If you ask me now to pee in front of you, I could not do it. Because is the personal self. But you depersonalize yourself." Marina the woman, she claims, is quite modest, but as an artist, "when you use the body as the object or subject of your work, that body becomes not your body anymore. It's the body itself, so it is old, it is wrinkled, is fat, is skinny—is not important anymore."

P.S. 1 Contemporary Art Center's new director, Klaus Biesenbach, who curated the MoMA show, says that what makes Abramović's nudity so potent is the fact that she is not a "female model modeling for a male artist. She is just herself, and that changes the perspective of object and subject, of power and direction."

To Abramović, all the fuss about nudity is misplaced. "For me, showing nipples of Janet Jackson on television in the middle of the Iraq War and writing about [the controversy] is misleading about the real issues," she says. "This is something wrong. So it's really how society puts things."

The House With the Ocean View crossed over into the mainstream consciousness when *Sex and the City* made it a plot device in one episode. Abramović, who'd never heard of the TV show, was amused by its parody of a crazy artist and adds, "I like to see how my art becomes part of mass culture." She is determined to educate audiences about performance and to preserve important works by other artists, from Joan Jonas to Bruce Nauman. To that end, she has acquired an old theater in Hudson, New York, which she is converting into the Marina Abramović Institute. There she plans to highlight works that are at least six hours long. But for one of her peers, whose work she reimagined in "Seven Easy Pieces," preservation may not suit the spirit of performance art. Vito Acconci, who gave up performance in part because he did not want to repeat himself, says the genre should remain distinct from theater. "For me that difference is that it should be something on the spot," he says. Acconci also thinks performing ad nauseam regrettably turns artists into stars. "I think Marina likes being a personality cult," he says.

Then again, Abramović's art practice differs from many big-name artists' in significant ways. For one thing, she has a small office rather than a studio with professional assistants churning out work. "I always wanted to have the planet as a studio," she says, noting that she has traveled to every corner of the world. Traditional studios, on the other hand, contribute to the problem of what she calls "art pollution." "In this city we have 136,000 artists working, and I think going to the studio every day is a really bad habit—it's like being an employee," she says. "You have to live life, and from life comes ideas." Abramović does not rehearse her works; she is not "acting." (The downside to lack of rehearsals, she notes, is that sometimes she doesn't realize until well into a performance that a piece is "big bull----.") She does, however, prepare meticulously. Now, in advance of the MoMA

exhibition, she is waking at 5:45 a.m. four times a week in her SoHo loft to work out with a trainer. "People always say to me, 'You [used to] do these physical performances where you run into walls, you cut yourself, and now is, like, less physical,'" she says. "I say they don't know what they're talking about—the long durational works are a million times harder." Though she admits to being nervous about her upcoming piece, she insists, "I'm not interested in doing anything I'm not afraid of."

After selecting the 36 players for MoMA—many dancers, some performance artists, no actors—she took them to her house upstate, and they all slept in the barn, rose at 6 a.m., washed in the ice-cold river without soap and "trained" for three days. No food, no talking. "That's really to exercise your perception, willpower, determination," she explains. The works Abramović chose for MoMA are not violent; she says she would never put others in danger, only herself. Some are meditative, like *Nude With Skeleton* (2002–05): A skeleton lies atop a player, whose breathing appears to give it life. "It's really about facing your own mortality," she says.

Abramović has already begun facing hers, creating a theatrical work with Robert Wilson aptly named *The Life and Death of Marina Abramović*. The piece, set to premiere at the Manchester International Festival in 2011, details the artist's real-life plans for her burial, which she had a lawyer draw up after she attended Sontag's funeral. "It didn't express her spirit," she says of her friend. "I decided it's very important to control your own funeral."

"I really love to rehearse my own funeral," Abramović enthuses. "I want to have three bodies—two fake and one real—and three coffins, and they're going to be buried in three different places I lived the longest: Belgrade, Amsterdam and New York." Only she (and, clearly, one or two others) will know which is which. "Then I want to have this celebration of life, because I always feel the most important thing is you live well, you have to die well and die consciously." For 30 or 40 years before their deaths, Abramović says, her grandmother and great-grandmother, who passed away at 98 and 103, respectively, had their burial clothes chosen; as fashions changed, so did their selections. "The point is that when you're ready for death, you can wait a long time because you're not pushing it away. The culture in America is completely wrong because death is removed from your life. It's all another year of being ever young. Mortality is so important to be part of everyday life, because then you cut the bull----."

Abramović says she has attained such wisdom since embracing Tibetan Buddhism 30 years ago. While visiting Bodhi Gaya, India, with Ulay, she encountered a monk who smiled at her, then flicked her forehead. A short time later, she began to cry uncontrollably and couldn't stop for hours. She ended up staying in Bodhi Gaya for three months and studying the religion, which has informed her work ever since. She recounts how the Dalai Lama's representatives invited her to choreograph a dance for a dozen monks who were to appear in a festival in Germany. She spent two weeks in intense rehearsals with the monks in India before leaving for Germany. When the monks arrived shortly before the festival, she didn't recognize a single one. "I say, 'Who are these people?'" she recalls. The lama in charge replied, "These are the new monks." "I said, 'Where are my monks?'" He said, "Oh, they didn't have passports." Then he looked at me and said, "Let it go."

Now when she's performing, she says, she tries "to be like a river; you just have to let it go." And when it's all over, Abramović says, "how it was taken, not taken, does society not understand, does society think is genius, or will be forgotten—who cares?" ●

Abramović wearing a gown from the University of Plymouth, from which she received an Honorary Doctorate of the Arts in 2009, and the Austrian Commander's Cross she received in 2008



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