

# SEANKELLY

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# Queen of Pain

After four decades of performances, some of them nearly getting her killed, the artist Marina Abramović is about to do her biggest show yet—at MoMA

BY LEON NEYFAKH

Sitting at a long, glass-covered table in her sunny 17th-story office in midtown Manhattan on Monday, the performance artist Marina Abramović said she was so stressed out by all the things she has to do in the two weeks before the March 14 opening of her career retrospective at the Museum of Modern Art that she had sprouted a small pimple on the tip of her nose.

"I'm really ready," Ms. Abramović said. "I just want it to start."

Dressed all in black except for a pair of bright red glasses, the 63-year-old gestured toward her stomach to indicate that if the gestation went on for much longer, she might just burst.

The retrospective is a wide-ranging and elaborate one, totaling some 50 works, and will feature continuous live performances of five classic pieces from Ms. Abramović's oeuvre that are being brought back to life, for the first time since she debuted them years ago, by a team of interpreters. The show will also include a new, original piece by the self-described grandmother of performance art that will require her to stop talking, reading and writing for as long as the show is up.

She said Monday that she'd been back in New York for only three weeks, after spending a month in India, where she underwent a professionally administered process of "total purification" in order to prepare her mind and body for the performance ahead. Since her return, she had arranged for her assistant to take over her cell phone and her email account for the duration of the three-month-long show, and stocked her Soho apartment with enough toilet paper to last her the whole run.

Ms. Abramović, who was born in Belgrade and has been living in New York for nine years, expects her new piece for the MoMA show to be one of the most physically and mentally punishing pieces she has ever undertaken.

"I'm nervous," Ms. Abramović said, in her distinctive Eastern European accent. "I'm nervous anytime I do a performance—I never get used to it.

It's a normal state, but this is a big task. It's one of the biggest of my life."

Considering her track record over the past 40 years, which has established her as a fearless, eager daredevil with no qualms about incurring wounds or risking her life, this is saying quite a lot. In 1973, she performed a piece that involved stabbing herself repeatedly in the hands with knives. The following year she self-induced seizures at a museum in Zagreb by taking a pill meant for people suffering from catatonia, and then put herself in a stupor by taking one designed to pacify schizophrenics. A few months later, she did a piece in Milan where she knelt directly in front of a high-power industrial fan until she lost consciousness. And a few months after that, she installed her-

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self in a Naples gallery along with 72 objects—among them an ax, a hammer, a lamb bone and a loaded gun—and allowed audience members to do whatever they felt like to her over the course of six hours. By 2 a.m., when the piece ended, her clothes had been removed; water had been poured on her head; and the gun had been held to her throat.

For all this, when you're sitting across from her, the band-aid Ms. Abramović has applied to conceal the nose pimple seems to be the closest thing she has to a visible scar. More to the point, the upcoming piece responsible for that pimple looks, on its face, to be quite tame in comparison to some of her past work. Titled *The Artist Is Present*, it involves no sharp objects, no blood and no threat of asphyxiation. Instead, it will test Ms. Abramović in a different way, putting her in a wooden chair at the center of MoMA's Marron Atrium, where she will sit for hours on end, motionless-



ly and silently staring across a small table into the eyes of whoever is sitting on the other side; the only rule for museum-goers is that they must remain silent.

She will do this every day for three months starting on March 14, for as long as the museum is open—seven hours a day Sunday through Thursday, 10 hours a day every Friday. At the end of each day, Ms. Abramović will go home to Soho, where she will eat and exercise vigorously in order to compensate for all the sitting. She will remain in her self-imposed seclusion until her exhibition closes at 5:30 p.m. on May 31st.

**"Y**ou know, it's amazing: 10 years ago you could not imagine two major museums having performance events, ever," Ms. Abramović said, referring to the fact that her retrospective will coincide with the Guggenheim Museum's exhibition of Tino Sehgal. "It is only these last ten years that people stopped asking me, 'Why is this art?'"

For most of her career, Ms. Abramović said, she didn't even want to tell people what she did for a living because an honest answer so reliably inspired skepticism. If someone sitting next to her on an airplane, for instance, ever asked her what she did for a living, she would say she was a nurse.

For Ms. Abramović, then, the MoMA show is not just an occasion

to celebrate her life's work, but an affirmation of her longtime mission to bring performance art out from the margins of the art world and into the mainstream. Its origins can be traced back to the early 1990s, when Ms. Abramović and the exhibition's curator, Klaus Biesenbach—the founding curator of MoMA's performance-art department and the director of its P.S.1 Contemporary Art Center—met in Berlin and, according to a forthcoming biography of the artist written by former assistant James Westcott, enjoyed a brief affair that turned into a close and lasting friendship.

The show was conceived as an experiment, Ms. Abramović said, and will mark the first time any of her pieces have been re-performed live in a museum setting. It is also an argument, she said: a reflection of her controversial but firmly held belief that artists who create performance pieces must allow and facilitate their re-performance if they do not want their work to disappear and fade from history.

"Otherwise, it just dies," she said. "Many of my colleagues never give permission to re-perform their work because they think it will be changed, and will not be their own work. But I really have a different opinion. Even if it's changed ... still it's better that it is re-performed in that changed form than not performed at all and become just kind of dead material in books and bad video recordings. I re-

ally believe that we have to give this kind of new life to performance."

Coming from Ms. Abramović, this argument has weight.

"It's an important voice," said RoseLee Goldberg, the founding director of Performa and the author of a history of performance art. "It's coming from an artist who has been so profoundly important for the last 30 years."

As Mr. Westcott explained, "Marina has always seen her art as a kind of public service. She recognizes the tenuous status of performance art and, after pioneering the medium, now wants to institutionalize it. Many would resist that impulse since it goes against the improvised and rebellious origin of the medium, but for Marina, the greater imperative is to both preserve and progress performance art. It's through institutions and museums that a wide audience will be able to experience performance art."

Ms. Abramović, for her part, remains anxious.

"I don't know if it's going to succeed until the end, when we see how this infrastructure works—if it is really possible, physically and mentally, to have this kind of concentration for three months," she said. "This is why I refuse to have a dinner party or anything now, because, you know, most of the time when you open the show you are free, but for me, the work just starts."

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