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Marina Abramovic: The Artist Is Once Again Present

Posted by *Judith Thurman*



In August of 2009, I began reporting a Profile of Marina Abramovic that ran in *The New Yorker* seven months later. The filmmaker Matthew Akers began shooting his documentary about Abramovic, "The Artist Is Present" (which had its New York premiere last Wednesday at Film Forum, and takes its title from her 2010 retrospective at the Museum of Modern Art), the same week. We met on the lawn of our subject's star-shaped country house in the Hudson Valley. Abramovic was hosting an intensive workshop on her twenty-five sylvan acres for the "reperformers"—most of them young artists, yogis, dancers, or actors—whom she had recruited for the show. It was a gruelling course in the ascetics of performance art: total silence for five days (all cellphones had been confiscated); almost total fasting; early-morning calisthenics; a group swim au naturel in the icy mountain kill that runs through the property; exercises in slow motion, concentration, New Age hygiene, self-discipline—and self-surrender.

The rule of silence didn't apply to Akers and me, or at least not inside the house, so in our off-duty moments we traded notes in a collegial fashion. (Here I will confess that I was stealing almonds from the pantry—I didn't want to eat around the fasters, including Abramovic, but I was starving.) After the workshop ended, we kept in touch by e-mail, and met at Marina-related functions, like her sixty-third birthday party, that November. Akers, however, was in for a much longer haul than I was. My seven months on the story was a sprint compared to his marathon of almost three years. Abramovic gave him the keys to her loft on Grand Street, and he sometimes used them to slip in, early in the morning, to film her while she was still asleep in her red silk pajamas. ("Red," she says on camera, is a "healing" color.) He travelled with her to France and Germany, to her native Belgrade, and to her parents' native Montenegro. They went to India together, on an Ayurvedic spa retreat; he was with her in Florence when she received an award. One of the few key places in her life that they didn't revisit was China. (In one of her most famous works, Abramovic and her former partner in life and art, Ulay—the German performance artist Frank Uwe Laysiepen—set out from opposite ends of the wall, and walked toward each other for three months, meeting in the middle, where they ended their relationship.) But Akers's interviews with Ulay provide some of the documentary's fiercest, most tender, and revealing moments.

Once her performance at MOMA began, on March 14, 2010, Akers recorded every minute of it, either on stationery cameras or in person (he acted as his own director of photography). The performance consisted of the artist being present on a wooden chair, in MOMA's atrium, in a long-sleeved gown with a pooling train, for seven hours a day, six days a week, from the opening until the closing on May 31st—a historic ordeal. Throughout the performance, she was perfectly

silent and virtually immobile (her features registered vicissitudes of emotion, and on the first night, when Ulay took a brief turn in the facing chair, she stretched out her hands to him.) Thereafter, members of the public were invited to sit opposite her—at first, on the other side of a table, and then, when the table was removed, with nothing but space between them. Many of the sitters whom Akers chose to include in the film (including the actor James Franco, who went unrecognized) seem to be having a transcendent experience. Their eyes grow bright; tears well and fall; they bow their heads or touch their hearts—and Abramovic occasionally touches hers.

The unsung heroes of the piece, and the film, were the museum's security guards. The atrium is an open space, overlooked by balconies on every floor, and any sort of protest or outrage might have occurred. Some prankster did release a flurry of leaflets; an aspiring performance artist stripped off her dress; a weird-looking giant in a black overcoat opened it, pulled out a mirror, and held it to his forehead. But by and large, the mood was festive and the vibe reverent.

Among the seven hundred thousand people who came to this unique performance, some had camped outside the museum all night for a front place in the sitters' line. (Until the last day, there were no time limits on occupancy of the chair opposite the artist; one ardent fan spent an entire day "exchanging energy" with Abramovic, as she had described her shamanic goal for the encounters, then returned twenty more times. He later had the number "21" tattooed on his arm.)

Akers's film is an epic in its own right. He logged some fourteen hundred hours of footage, then edited them to a hundred and five minutes (which will air on HBO on July 2nd)—a shooting ratio of a thousand to one. His previous credits include the impressive ten-part PBS series "Carrier," for which he spent six months at sea, living with the crew of an aircraft carrier. This feat had impressed Abramovic, who felt that Akers had demonstrated the "hard-core" devotion to his craft necessary to understand hers.

The artist was present at the screening, and he looked a bit less boyish (he is now thirty-six), a bit svelter, and a lot better dressed—in a stylish jacket—than I remembered him. I knew how hard he had struggled for dispassion against the undertow of Abramovic's neediness and grandiosity, but also of her earthiness and charisma. With a subject like Marina, it is hard to resist the gift—or the illusion—of complicity. (But as a journalist one struggles with the same thing. Read Janet Malcolm on that potentially treacherous exchange of energy.)

As Klaus Biesenbach puts it in the film, "Marina seduces everyone." (Biesenbach, MOMA's curator at large, conceived the show and has enjoyed an intimate association of long-standing with Abramovic.) And both versions of "The Artist is Present" were symbiotic collaborations; i.e., mutual seductions. But if Akers celebrates Abramovic (and celebrates her celebrity) a bit too uncritically, he also captures her vital contradictions. The film conveys that what she does, as an artist and a woman, is to break down boundaries even as she resists being broken (by her terrifying mother; by her self-inflicted pain; by love and its loss; by her struggle for legitimacy; and finally, at sixty-five, by age). And the film raises, even as it dramatizes, a conundrum inherent in all forms of art: Where are the boundaries between performance and authenticity?