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Marina Abramovic: queen of extreme art

Trailblazing performance artist Marina Abramovic has sat in silence for 700 hours, enacted her own funeral, scrubbed blood from bones, carved a pentagram into her stomach with razor blades and lay on a crucifix of ice. For this summer's 512 Hours at the Serpentine Gallery, she is doing something completely different, she tells Kara Manning



Charismatic: 67-year-old artist Marina Abramovic will take up residence at the Serpentine Gallery for 512 Hours, from June 11 to August 25

It's just past nine on a crisp April morning in New York and Marina Abramovic, possibly the most recognised performance artist in the world, is locked out of her Soho office. Stranded in the hallway and slightly flustered, she apologises and explains that her usually punctual associate is running late. Trusting that he'd arrive before she did, Abramovic blithely left her keys at home in Brooklyn.

This charismatic woman, who captivated more than 750,000 people at New York's Museum of Modern Art in 2010 with *The Artist Is Present*, her galvanising "durational" performance and career retrospective, is uncharacteristically perplexed. She swiftly regroups and cheerfully leads me down the street to a tiny café tucked at the back of a hair salon.

Abramovic's unwavering trust in others and her ready abandonment of safety nets — whether dealing with office keys, an audience, her vast swathe of collaborators, or her own endurance — will be on full display in London this summer during her first durational (continuous) work in the city.

The 67-year-old Belgrade-born artist will take up residence at the Serpentine Gallery for 512 Hours, a 64-day event that stretches from June 11 to August 25. She will hold court for six days a week — taking Mondays off — for eight hours a day. She'll literally open and shut the doors of the gallery herself, starting the day at 10am and ending at 6pm, connecting directly with visitors, but doing, as she enthusiastically puts it, "nothing".

Serpentine director Julia Peyton-Jones began laying the groundwork for a project with Abramovic back in 1997, shortly after the artist won the Golden Lion award at the Venice Biennale.

"Her idea for 512 Hours is so wonderfully simple," says Peyton-Jones, who has collaborated with gallery co-director Hans Ulrich Obrist to shape the show with Abramovic. "It will be just Marina, the audience and a few props in the empty space of the gallery. This simplicity harks back to her earliest solo performances — there is a sense of her coming full circle."



Striking: Cleaning the Floor, 2005, plays with ideas of femininity © Marina Abramovic, courtesy of the Marina Abramovic Archives and Lisson Gallery

Abramovic will be asked to surrender coats, bags, mobile phones, watches, cameras, electronic

equipment and anything potentially dangerous or distracting. There will be no “selfie” opportunities with the artist and no cheeky tweets.

The event won't be entirely unrecorded: the artist will maintain a video diary, taping her impressions at each day's end. Other logistical issues are still in flux: Obrist believes that the sheer number of visitors attending the show could be daunting.

He first saw Abramovic perform in Switzerland when he was a teenager. Their friendship began in the early Nineties when he worked at Hamburg's Deichtorhallen, leading to this present-day project. “Already we have had people wanting to book tickets,” he says, “which I'm afraid they can't, as the exhibition is free, as they always are. Everyone has to queue. It will be part of the experience. As Gilbert and George say, it's art for all.”



Doing “nothing” with Abramovic is a misnomer: 512 Hours will embrace the artist's very active form of idleness, asking the audience to interact with her in what she calls “a pure transfer of energy”.

“From *The Artist Is Present*, it took me four years to get to this kind of radical idea because it takes so much to process what happened,” she says. *The Artist Is Present* placed her in a wooden chair in the MoMA's vast atrium for six days a week over a three-month period — 736 hours and 30 minutes — staring tenderly into the eyes of the 1,545 people who sat across from her, met her gaze, and often wept.

“I was shocked. I never saw so much pain in my entire life than during that time sitting,” says Abramovic, who often found herself in tears too. “It's amazing how in [New York] there is so much alienation, so much loneliness.”

For that work, she says, “we had two chairs and one table. I removed the table, so we had two chairs. Now I'm removing everything. I want to have the public as my living material and I am living material for them. So I don't have a concept, I don't want to have any structure. I want to find out what really happened if nothing is happening. Our base is nothing and from nothing, something is going to happen ... or not! I'm in panic! You know how difficult this is? To me, *The Artist Is Present* looks lightweight.”

Greatest hits: recent highlights in the 45-year-long career of Marina Abramovic include 2005's *Entering the Other Side*, the final act in the week-long *Seven Easy Pieces*, which re-created moments from the history of performance at New York's Guggenheim Museum © Marina Abramovic, Courtesy of the Marina Abramovic Archives and Lisson Gallery

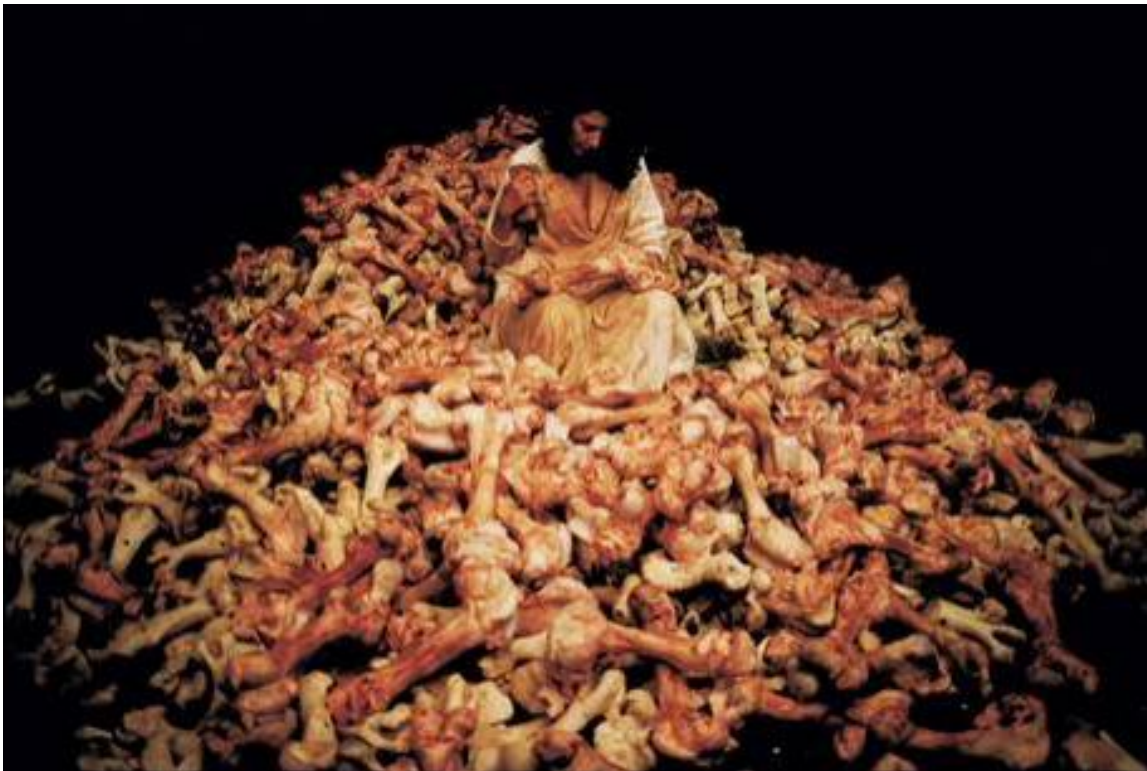
It's funny for her to consider anything she's done over her 40-plus-year career as "lightweight". In the early Seventies, the young artist sought extreme avenues of artistic expression. In 1975's *Thomas Lips*, performed in Innsbruck, Austria, a naked Abramovic downed a bottle of red wine, carved a pentagram into her belly with razor blades, whipped herself and then lay on a block of ice, cut into the shape of a crucifix.

That same year in a Naples gallery, in the now-infamous *Rhythm 0*, she placed 72 items on a table, ranging from the benign — olive oil, feathers, lipstick — to the lethal: an axe, a saw and a loaded pistol. For six hours, she passively allowed the audience, with free access to those items, to do anything they chose, tempting bodily harm and humiliation.

In 1988's *The Lovers*, one of art's most resonant break-up gestures, Abramovic and fellow performance artist Ulay (Frank Uwe Laysiepen), her one-time paramour and collaborator of 13 years, walked the entire length of the Great Wall of China from opposite directions for 90 days, finally meeting in Er Lang Shan in the Shaanxi Province. After bidding each other farewell with a final embrace, Abramovic headed west and Ulay east, completing a brutal trek that, in hindsight, commenced Abramovic's most influential chapter as a solo artist.

Despite awards and mainstream accolades, such as *Time* magazine's recent inclusion of Abramovic as one of the magazine's 100 most influential people of 2014, she has frequently encountered derision from those who don't understand the methodology and emotional impact of her art form. "How much I'm criticised is incredible," she says. "I've been spit on, some think I should be in a mental hospital, that this is not art, this is ridiculous, performance is nothing."

She admits that it has taken years to shake off that negativity and that it's the enthusiasm of younger people, including recent acolyte and student Lady Gaga ("I call her Gagavic"), that has inspired her to establish the Marina Abramovic Institute in Hudson, New York, projected to partially open in 2015 or 2016.



Pile-up: works such as *Balkan Baroque*, 1997, during which Abramovic washed cow bones while singing folk songs from her Yugoslavian childhood have, she says, helped her come to terms with her cultural and spiritual background

The centre will focus on education, teaching “The Abramovic Method” of performance art, branching into scientific research and serving as a global resource to champion, preserve and produce immaterial and durational performance art, theatre, opera, cinema, music and more. “Young kids understand me more than my own generation right now,” says Abramovic, “and the institute is not for my generation. Performance is a tool, like painting or anything else, and I can tell you, just standing in front of me, if you have it or if you don’t. You have to have some kind of charisma and you can’t learn that. But if you have that, you can learn a lot of things to really use it.”

Recently, Abramovic collaborated with director Robert Wilson, actor Willem Dafoe and composer and songwriter Antony Hegarty on *The Life and Death of Marina Abramovic*, a commissioned biographical piece presented by the Manchester International Festival in 2011 and produced last autumn at New York’s Park Avenue Armory, in which Abramovic starred and even staged her own funeral.

Hegarty, who composed songs for the play based on his personal perception of his longtime friend, describes Abramovic as “pure and passionate”. “She cares deeply and gives everything of herself,” he writes via email. “She is a joyful person with a tremendous love of life. Her work is like a love affair with the ecstasies and pathos of life.”

Over a cup of herbal tea, Abramovic lays out a series of small plastic packets, each marked with a time and containing four almonds and an Isagenix “snack” tablet. For the past month — and for the next two — she is following an austere diet for her Serpentine Gallery residency and working with a trainer (“He says: ‘Marina, when you get to 70, I will get you into bikini’”).

Besides the supplements and nutritional shakes, she eats a meal of vegetables with chicken or fish once a day. Once *512 Hours* begins, she’ll have a meal in the morning and the evening, refraining from food during the day, but allowing herself water. Durational performance art is physically demanding and often painful, akin to running a marathon, and Abramovic prepares like an elite athlete. Unlike *The Artist Is Present*, where she refrained from bathroom breaks, *512 Hours* will permit her that small luxury, since she’ll be walking, talking and moving freely about the gallery space.

A deceptive portrait of stillness and serenity, *The Artist Is Present* was physically agonising for Abramovic. “Every single day of this piece, was the question — ‘Can I make it to the end?’ It was incredibly painful. But the reward, what happened with the people, that energy and the reaction was so incredibly important to me.”

It’s that untapped, unpredictable communal force that gives her clarity about her purpose as a performance artist. “I have an incredibly strong idea about why I’m on this planet,” she says with unabashed sincerity. “I have to deliver. I have to lift the spirit of humans and teach people how to transcend pain.”

Hopefully her extensive preparation for *512 Hours*, including another journey to Brazil this month to work with shamans, will lead to a not-too-painful physical experience for her in London. As for visitors, yes, there will be some extreme pain dealing with the long queues that will inevitably snake around the Serpentine Gallery. But as smitten New Yorkers discovered four years ago, camped out in front of MoMA, the chance to connect directly with the queen of performance art, whether in pursuit of a meaningful gaze or “nothing” at all, is worth the wait.

Marina Abramovic: 512 Hours will be at the Serpentine Gallery, W2 (020 7402 6075, serpentinegalleries.org) from June 11 to August 25. Open Tue-Sun 10am-6pm, admission free