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Dickson, Andrew. "Marina Abramovic Comes Home, and Comes Clean." *The New York Times*. September 25, 2019.

The New York Times



Marina Abramovic at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Belgrade, Serbia, where a major retrospective of her work has just opened. Credit Marko Risovic for The New York Times

BELGRADE, Serbia — It was looking doubtful whether Marina Abramovic would manage to eat lunch. She had barely taken her seat in the restaurant before being interrupted by an emotional admirer who dashed over for a selfie. Moments after presenting the main dish, the waiter came back seeking an autograph. Then a message arrived that a fan had delivered 44 bottles of brandy to her assistant's apartment — one for each year since Ms. Abramovic last staged an exhibition in Belgrade, the city of her birth.

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Ms. Abramovic looked triumphant. “And I don’t even drink!” she said.

The artist’s return to Belgrade after nearly a half-century has been an event. Across the city, there are billboards advertising the retrospective of Ms. Abramovic’s work that opened at the Museum of Contemporary Art, showing the artist astride a white stallion (a still from her 2001 video work “The Hero”). On Saturday, the day the show opened, her face was on the front page of nearly every national newspaper in Serbia. When you turned on the TV news, there she was again, being picked over by pundits with a zest that locals generally reserve for soccer and stories about political corruption.



An installation used for the performance “Balkan Baroque” is part of the exhibition in Belgrade. Credit Marina Abramovic; via Sean Kelly Gallery/(ARS), New York; Marko Risovic for The New York Times

Though she conceded that the fuss made eating in public a challenge, Ms. Abramovic seemed to be relishing it. “Being in Belgrade again, all the emotions rush at you,” she said. “I’m trying not to be emotional, but I am not succeeding very well.”

The exhibition, titled “The Cleaner,” is a homecoming in a number of ways. The largest survey show of Ms. Abramovic’s work yet mounted, it features more than 120 pieces dating from the mid-1960s. Having opened in 2017 at Stockholm’s Moderna Museet, it has made a stately progress through Denmark, Norway, Germany, Italy and Poland before arriving in Serbia, its final stop.

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En route, it has given rise to both respectful reviews and just enough scandal to keep things lively. In March, Roman Catholic protesters in Poland picketed the exhibition, disgusted by what they regarded as satanic imagery (a charge Ms. Abramovic has wearily denied). More than half a million people have seen it so far.

In Belgrade, the show feels like a reminder of an era when Ms. Abramovic generated headlines with the vital ferocity of her art, rather than, say, puzzling feuds with Jay-Z. Visitors enter to the rat-a-tat-tat of machine gun fire, a looped 1971 sound piece. Once inside, the building echoes with her guttural moans and cries, issuing from ghostly black-and-white films of early performance pieces.



The retrospective also includes a recording of Ms. Abramovic's 1976 performance piece "Freeing the Voice." Credit Marina Abramovic; via Sean Kelly Gallery/(ARS), New York; Marko Risovic for The New York Times

The museum's entire permanent collection has been put into storage to make space for the exhibition, and a team of local "reperformers" has been hired to bring the artist's past selves back to life.

On opening night, a young woman perched on a chair near the foyer, yelling "Art must be beautiful, artist must be beautiful," in tribute to Ms. Abramovic's 1975 piece of that title. Upstairs, two performers — one male, the other female — sat rigidly back to back, their long hair braided together, in a re-enactment of the 17-hour 1977 work she made with her longtime collaborator and partner Ulay, "Relation in Time."

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Perhaps fortunately, no attempt has been made to restage the artist's most notorious performance from her Belgrade years, "Rhythm 5," a work from 1974 in which she first tried to push her own bodily endurance to breaking point. For this piece, the artist lay inside a burning wooden star, and, so local legend has it, almost asphyxiated herself.



Marina Abramovic performing "Rhythm 5" in 1974. Credit Marina Abramovic; via Sean Kelly Gallery/(ARS), New York; Nebojsa Cankovi

"A friend of ours had to pull her out," recalled Jerko Denegri, a Serbian critic who attended many of Ms Abramovic's early performances. "Not many people understood what she or other artists at that time were doing with this type of art."

Ms. Abramovic explained that she had decided to call the show "The Cleaner" for a variety of reasons. Partly it underscored the obsessive cleansing rituals that often surface in her work; it was also a way of tying up loose ends. "I really love the idea of cleaning the past, cleaning the memory," she said. "It's a physical and mental metaphor, but also a spiritual one."

Born in Belgrade in 1946, Ms. Abramovic spent her first 29 years in the city, which was then the capital of Yugoslavia. Though she has described her childhood as "desolate," growing up in the shadow of parents who were decorated war heroes and high up in the country's communist government, Ms. Abramovic found art a way to rebel. After studying painting in Zagreb, she joined the punky, provocative group of artists who congregated at Belgrade's Student Art Center.

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One of her first conceptual pieces — sadly unrealized — involved sending up a fleet of jets from the Yugoslavian Air Force to fly in formations of her own devising. (“They called my father — he was a general at the time — and said, ‘She is completely crazy, do you know how much it will cost?’” she recalled.)

Later, another artist, Era Milivojevic, decided to wrap Ms. Abramovic in packing tape while she was lying on a table in a gallery, something that seems to have given her the inspiration to move away from the sound art and sculpture she had been making and use her body instead.



“Being in Belgrade again, all the emotions rush at you,” Ms. Abramovic said. Credit Marina Abramovic; via Sean Kelly Gallery/(ARS), New York; Marko Risovic for The New York Times

According to Mr. Denegri, the critic, these early efforts with wildly experimental performance art in Eastern Europe sowed the seeds for what Ms. Abramovic would go on to do. “The scene in Yugoslavia was so dynamic and international,” he said. “Her upbringing, her education here, sets the track for her entire life.”

Yet Ms. Abramovic always had an eye on broader horizons, and, in 1975, she decamped to Amsterdam. In the years since, her career has taken her to Australia, Brazil, China Japan and a panoply of other countries — as well as to New York, the site of her greatest artistic coup, “The Artist is Present” and her current base. (Sometimes.) She has returned to the Balkans for only fleeting visits, she said, adding, “For a long time, I wasn’t welcome.”

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For Serbia, coaxing Ms. Abramovic back — something that took the intervention of the country's prime minister — is a way of signaling a fresh start. The Museum of Contemporary Art, where the exhibition is being held, was closed for renovation for over a decade, an embarrassment for a country that prides itself on its cultural past. But since the museum reopened in 2017, there is a sense that Belgrade is rediscovering its artistic mojo, aided by an expanding gallery scene and the October Salon biennial, which last year hosted work by Yoko Ono, Cindy Sherman, Olafur Eliasson and Anselm Kiefer.



"Rhythm 10," a work by Ms. Abramovic involving 10 knives from 1973. Credit Marina Abramovic; via Sean Kelly Gallery/(ARS), New York

"Marina's show will change everything," Slobodan Nakarada, the museum's acting director, said.

His goal is to attract 150,000 visitors in the next four months — more than the museum had in the whole of 2018. He said he hoped that many would be young Serbians, who have had little opportunity to see work by the country's most famous living artist. "It took us 44 years to get her back home," Mr. Nakarada said. "We have to make the most of it."

Ms. Abramovic said she had mixed feelings about returning: While she regarded the show as a "homecoming," she also felt as nomadic as ever. And although the

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exhibition is a career retrospective, she insisted that it was not a valediction. “I will die working,” she said, several times.



An installation of the work "Count on Us." Credit Marina Abramovic; via Sean Kelly Gallery/(ARS), New York; Marko Risovic for The New York Times

Next month, she is to fly to Los Angeles to begin rehearsals for “Seven Deaths,” a long-deferred opera inspired by the career of Maria Callas that is scheduled to premiere in Munich in April. In September 2020, another major exhibition will follow at the Royal Academy of Arts in London.

Plans for a permanent institute devoted to performance art have been abandoned. A plan to convert a former theater in the Hudson Valley collapsed two years ago, and supporters learned that more than \$1 million in donations had already been spent and would not be refunded. (As The New York Post put it, “The artist is present, but the cash is gone.”)

But Ms. Abramovic said she was optimistic that a home might be found for her archive, perhaps in Athens. “This I really would like to find a home,” she said. After that, she said, she needed a break, perhaps in India or at a Tibetan monastery. “I really need to have distance from my own public in order to create,” she said. “The public consumes.”

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A still from "The Hero," from 2001, a work dedicated to Ms. Abramovic's father, who was a soldier for Yugoslavia in World War II. Credit Marina Abramovic; via Sean Kelly Gallery/(ARS), New York

Yet at a packed, crack-of-dawn news conference on the day of the opening, Ms. Abramovic seemed as indefatigable as ever. She coolly handled Serbian-language questions from reporters on topics as varied as Balkan folk songs, her views on feminism and her self-care routines (this last from the Serbian edition of Hello!, the celebrity gossip magazine).

When asked if she felt her own celebrity ever came into conflict with her artistic goals — a topic that could have touched a nerve — Ms. Abramovic seemed unperturbed. Pausing only to flash an ironic smile, she switched to English and fired back with a line from Woody Allen: "Today, I'm a star; tomorrow, I'm a black hole."

The Cleaner

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Through Jan. 20 at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Belgrade, Serbia;
msub.org.rs