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Marina Abramović in the 2019 documentary Body of Truth. Photograph: Indi Film

The world’s most famous performance artist has spent almost 50 years facing down ridicule, death threats and conspiracy theories. Will the pandemic finally defeat her?

Every morning, Marina Abramović gets out of bed and puts on a pair of slippers. One reads “fuck” and the other “negativity”. “That is how to start the morning with a smile on your face,” she says. Then she will make breakfast to tango music. Sometimes, she will retreat to a hut in the woods by her house in upstate New York, for six days with no food, to contemplate a giant crystal she keeps there and “connect with the memory of the planet”.

This delicious glimpse into the life of the world’s most famous performance artist comes from a new documentary for BBC One’s Imagine series. “I think it’s important to demystify the idea of this glamorous life. It’s just down to earth,” she tells me, completely seriously, of the film – even though her house, built in the shape of a star, is filled with amazing furniture and art, and the grounds are vast enough to hold an aircraft hangar-sized shed containing her archive. It’s all fabulous – as is Abramović, who is funny, warm and yet somehow otherworldly (she goes in for shamanism, crystals, clairvoyants and star signs). I concede

there are down-to-earth elements – when we speak via Zoom, for example, she is drinking a mug of Yorkshire Gold tea, discovered through a Welsh friend.

I'm quite taken with her woodland hut, overlooking a river, which has no electricity or a bathroom – only a giant crystal, a chair and a bed. How often does she go there?

Portrait With Skull With Eyes Closed. Photograph: Courtesy Marina Abramović Archives/DACS 2020/BBC

"Very often. And then I got Lyme disease and I didn't go for a while." She smiles. "But I overcame the fear of ticks." Overcoming is an Abramović theme. From her earliest work, she has explored physical and emotional endurance, confronting fear and exposing vulnerability. In her piece Rhythm 10 (1973), she stabbed a knife at speed between the spaces of her spread-out fingers; the following year, for Rhythm 0, she lay in a gallery in Naples alongside a table of 72 objects including chains, whips, a pistol and a mousetrap, and allowed visitors to do whatever they wanted with her (she still has scars from it). There was the time she lay in the centre of a burning five-pointed star (1974; she ended up losing consciousness) and the two weeks she spent living, on show, in three elevated boxes in a New York gallery in 2002.

In 1997, she won the Golden Lion prize for best artist at the Venice Biennale – she had sat on top of 2.5 tonnes of cow bones, scrubbing the blood and gristle from them, for a piece called Balkan Baroque, her response to the war in the region. For The Artist Is Present, her show at MoMA in New York in 2010 – the one that sent her mainstream – Abramović sat motionless in a chair for eight hours a day for three months while people queued for hours to sit opposite her, usually resulting in a silent and deeply emotional connection (it broke records, attracting 850,000 visitors).

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She has been ridiculed – performance artists being an easy target – from her early work in Belgrade, dismissed as an exhibitionist and masochist, but not these days (now, inevitably, some like to accuse her of selling out). Ambramović is an art world superstar, with large exhibitions and collaborations with celebrities (Lady Gaga once attended a private workshop with Abramović, in which the singer didn't eat or speak for four days and found her way out of a wood, blindfolded and naked), bringing her fame and wealth. "I didn't make art for that," she says. "I make art because I believe in art."

Abramović's profile has also brought her to the attention of a strange group of online conspiracy theorists who are convinced she is a cannibalistic satanist, or – because she is a member of the "liberal elite" – part of a global paedophile ring. It started when an email Abramović had sent to her friend Tony Podesta, brother of John Podesta, who was running Hillary Clinton's presidential campaign, was leaked. She was inviting him, John and a number of others, who had donated money to her institute, to a "Spirit Cooking" dinner – a joke, based on her work in which she scrawled "love spells" on the wall of a gallery in pig's blood. On the night, they did not – as the work suggested – consume "fresh breast milk with fresh sperm milk" or (to my knowledge – I didn't ask) "morning urine". She laughs wearily when I bring it up. "This is something I have been deeply bothered by," she says. "I'm an artist, I'm not a satanist. They Googled me, and I am perfection to fit a conspiracy theory." The five-pointed stars in her work, either burning or cut into her flesh (not a pentagram, but symbols from her communist childhood), the blood, the death, the dramatic clothes and long dark hair – you can see why people got overexcited.

She can laugh at the bonkers nature of it, but also says it is "absolutely disturbing. I had to change my email. I had people saying they were going to come to get me, they were going to kill me, it's unbelievable. One said: 'I will reveal your deepest secrets in two hours.' I started laughing because I don't have any secrets. I hope they will leave me alone. It's horrible because it gives a shadow to the meaning of my work."

Strange times indeed. Abramović moved to the US in the early 2000s, but she doesn't know how long she will stay. "Things are changing. I'm just waiting to see what's going to happen in this election. It's pretty ugly right now, it's not fun at all."

In March this year, Frank Uwe Laysiepen, known as Ulay, her collaborator and lover in the 70s and 80s, died. How has his death affected her? She takes a sip of tea. "Well, with Ulay it's complicated," she says. "We had this huge love story, then we separated on the Great Wall of China, then he made his Chinese translator pregnant." She and Ulay met in Amsterdam in 1975, and worked together for 12 years – much of it spent travelling around in an old Citroën police van, creating challenging and influential performance works including one where, leaning back and perfectly balanced, he holds an arrow aimed at her heart while she holds the bow.

When they conceived their piece The Lovers, the original plan was to each start at opposite ends of China's Great Wall and get married in the middle, but, by the time they got permission from the Chinese authorities in 1988 – eight years later – they had separated. After that, she says, "I didn't see him for seven years, then we started talking again. Then he offered me the chance to buy the rights over the work, then we had fights over this. Then we had a huge law case in which I lost everything." A slight exaggeration – a Dutch court ordered her to pay Ulay €250,000, but by this time, as a solo artist, she was hugely successful. Bruised and angry, she went to India, as she does each year, to a meditation retreat. "I was really down. I arrived, and Ulay and his wife were there already. They are there for one month, and I am there for one month. What to do? To leave? What the fuck?" she laughs.

A month of daily 5am meditation practice will sort out a lot. "It's really easy to say you can forgive someone, but to really forgive with your whole heart is the hardest thing in the world. But truly, I forgave him in the deepest way. We had made some incredible, important work. When it was wonderful, it was wonderful; when it was hell, it was hell." She smiles. "And then we became friends." A couple of years ago Ulay came to Abramović's house so they could record their memories. They last talked late last year, and she says he thanked her for their work. "I was touched. A few months later he passed away." It was a peaceful conclusion to their relationship, she says.

Marina Abramović and her former partner Ulay in Stockholm in 2017. Photograph: Sten Rosenlund/Rex/Shutterstock

The past few months have been a healing time. She has, she says rather guiltily, found lockdown "wonderful". The Lyme disease she contracted three years ago meant she had "low energy, so I had to rest and I could not because my schedule is madness. And then the moment this whole thing stops, I could only concentrate on a few things. I've never been so relaxed, so happy, so focused. I think human beings are afraid to have free time, we're always looking to fill up our agenda till the end."

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Even so, she has been busy. This month, Christie's in London is auctioning The Life, an "augmented reality" piece made with her partner, Todd Eckert, a film producer. With an edition of three, Abramović will appear in virtual reality form to a headset-wearing collector. She wonders aloud whether the pandemic will put the brakes on art as a commodity: "We don't have any more space, it's too much, it's too expensive, the economy is falling down, everything is falling down." This won't be the fate of performance art, though. "Performance will survive because performance always survived, because it's an immaterial form of art."

Abramović has also been working on The Seven Deaths of Maria Callas, her multimedia opera based on her heroine, which opened in Munich last month, in which Abramović directs and stars in seven opera death scenes. There were masked and socially distanced rehearsals, and regular tests. And Sky Arts has just commissioned her to make four or five hours of performance art for television.

Then there is a show at the Royal Academy of Arts in London, which was supposed to open last month but has been postponed until next year. Her work relies on human contact – will the coronavirus put a stop to that? Abramović is optimistic this is a mere pause, and anyway, she says, "I really hate compromise. I don't think that performance should adapt to coronavirus. Performance is about the relationship with the audience – this is our electricity. If you take this out, it's not the same. We have to wait." She is planning a performance work for her Royal Academy show, "not just three hours or three days". The show, she points out, will be on for two and a half months. "I have to really train well. Thanks to Covid, I'm eating and sleeping well." She laughs. "I have plenty of time."

It will be the first time a woman has been given a solo show across the academy's main galleries in its 252-year history. "It's very interesting," she says, a mischievous look darting across her face, "you have a queen but you don't have a woman showing at the Royal Academy." She jokes that all the windows need to be opened to clear the building of testosterone, but admits it's something of a pressure. "As the first woman, I have to deliver something which is even better than a man."

She has named the show After Life, "because I'm finished with dying". After The Life and Death of Marina Abramović, an experimental musical theatre piece, and the Maria Callas opera, she says she's had enough of death. She still thinks about dying "literally every single day, but in a way thinking about death is not to get depressed, it's to enjoy life more".

In her 2016 memoir, Walk Through Walls, Abramović wrote vividly of her childhood in Belgrade. Her parents were war heroes and were rewarded with top government jobs and a huge apartment in Tito's Yugoslavia. Hers was a privileged upbringing, but lacking in love – her mother, especially, was cold and physically abusive, but as the director of the city's Museum of Art and Revolution, she revered art and, as a child, Abramović was given her own studio. Even in her late 20s, by then married (briefly) to another member of her radical art group, but

still living at home, Abramović had to be back each night by 10pm. Her life became about freedom – from domesticity (the nomadic lifestyle; the decision not to have children), from expectations, from everything. It's not about pleasing herself, she clarifies. "I don't do things I only like, I do things that are difficult. I am curious. Freedom is the most important thing for me. To be free of any structure that I can't break."

She looks at "women who are stuck with husbands they don't love – they are not breaking structures, they are trapped. I really like not to be like that." A short while later she says: "Wait!" and disappears before coming back with a fridge magnet with a (paraphrased) quote from, of all people, the neoliberal heroine of the US right, Ayn Rand. "I'm going to read," she says and stylish, black-framed glasses go on. "'The question is not who is going to let me, it's who is going to stop me.' I love this."

Abramović (left) during the Marina Abramović: The Artist Is Present exhibition MoMA in New York in 2010. Photograph: Andrew H Walker/Getty

It seems astonishing to Abramović that she will turn 74 next month. "You see the change in energy; you have to deal with that and you have to deal with it with lots of humour. You have to make every day a happy day. That is absolutely a rule. I've said to myself unhappiness and depression is a luxury that I could not permit myself."

She seems to have done her best work after the age of 40. Does she agree? "I think I made some strong work in my 20s and 30s, but the time for performance art was not right. Performance was not considered mainstream art at all. I think

the persistence is important.” After 50 years of work, she says, “you become really mature. Like old wine.” She laughs.

In the 70s, she and Ulay wrote a great manifesto for life and art. Her own Artist’s Life manifesto stresses the importance of silence and solitude and offers other useful advice not limited to artists (“an artist should not kill other human beings” – take that, conspiracy theorists). Does she still live by it? “I do pretty much,” she says. “You’re not supposed to fall in love with another artist, and I’ve actually fallen in love with someone who is not an artist, which is a huge difference because I made that mistake two times already. Actually, no, three times. Oh, my God, let’s not count.” She laughs. “You know, I break the rules.”

Marina Abramović: The Ugly Duckling is on BBC One on Sunday 11 October at 10.30pm