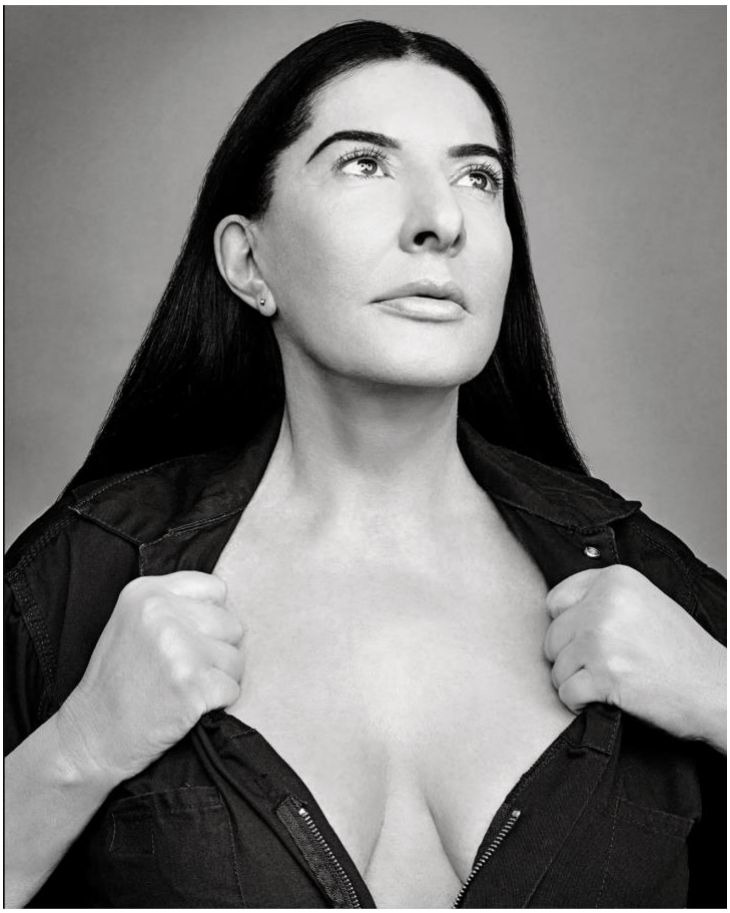
Swanson, Carl. “Marina Abramovic at 70.” *The Cut,* October 17, 2016.

THE CUT

The world’s most famous performance artist has outlasted her lovers and, she hopes, her critics.



Photograph by Ruven Afanador

Marina Abramovic thinks I think too much, and am not very useful besides that. And she is not wrong. Abramovic, when she turns her tractor-beam Slavic-magic gaze on you, sees a lot. Being with her, under the spell of that attention, makes you feel both protected by and protective of her. It’s a bit disorienting. Or, as Jeff Dupre, the producer and co-director of the documentary about her and her 2010 Museum of Modern Art retrospective and marathon-staring spectacular *The Artist Is Present* puts it to me when he hears I am already holed up with her at her charcoal-painted, star-shaped house outside Hudson, New York, it is too late for me. “You’re totally being seduced. You’re being processed. Of course, it’s incredibly fun, you feel like you’re the center of the universe.” I know he’s right, and this is even before we go skinny-dipping in her pool and into the sacred part of her forest to visit her

favorite tree, the most spiritually powerful one on her 26-acre retreat. She isn't yet calling me Carlovich.

Her house, when you face it directly from the front, looks like it's wearing a pointy hat, but there's also a bright-red barn and a couple of prefab buildings hidden behind it that she uses as her archives and a meditation cabin in the woods. If I have any doubt that the place might be just a little bit enchanted, a surprisingly durable double rainbow appears over it on my third afternoon there, shortly before I leave to return to the city.

On the cusp of her 70th birthday in November, Abramovic has invited me up to discuss her new memoir, *Walk Through Walls*, which recounts her story — her controlling apparatchik mother; her parents' romance as Communist partisans in Yugoslavia; her fleeing to Amsterdam and her 12-year, mostly itinerant romance with a fellow performance artist named Ulay; their breakup and her move to New York to make it here, while already in her mid-50s; and her sudden international success a decade later.

She is confident people will connect with the book. After all, her charismatic determination has rarely failed her, and where it has, she doesn't dwell on it — she pushes on. What she does dwell on is people — mostly men — failing her or betraying her or undermining the purity of her intent: trying to take away her power. In person and on the page, she is boundless, boundaryless — and relentless. "I hope this book will be inspirational for anybody who, when people say, 'No, don't do this,' don't listen, you just do it your own way," she tells me.

Part of what is so remarkable about Abramovic is that she became so famous so late in life. Ten years ago, she was a 60-year-old avant-garde grande dame. She'd won the Golden Lion at the Venice Biennale in 1997 for a piece about the Bosnian War (she'd scrubbed bloody cow bones in a basement while singing folk songs), but she was, as the curator of her MoMA retrospective, Klaus Biesenbach — who, years ago, incidentally, had, in her words, a "more than friends" relationship with her — put it, an "artist's artist." She was known by the cognoscenti of 1970s performance art, but also teetering on the edge of becoming a living relic of that time. That might still be true had she not made the decision to sit in the MoMA's atrium for three months during that retrospective, offering up her gaze to visitors who stood in line to sit opposite her, one by one, all day long. It turned into a kind of pop-up Lourdes, a fomo psychic-miracle-working session, remarkable for her endurance as well as the catharsis many of the visitors underwent.

Photographs by Ruven Afanador

The MoMA exhibition made her the most famous performance artist in the world. You could even say she is the world's only famous performance artist. She's also

become something else: a kind of shambolic mother goddess cloaked in a New Age self-help aura, her public image hovering somewhere between those of Joni Mitchell and Oprah, or perhaps Melisandre from *Game of Thrones.* Many who fell hardest for her would have mocked the guru impulse if it had come from someone or somewhere else, but from Abramovic, in the temple of art, the response was almost cultish.

As her fame grew, she began to move outside the confines of the traditional art Establishment, even as she helped make the idea of performance art something that mainstream-famous people sought out (see James Franco, who sat opposite her in the atrium). She did a cameo in a Jay Z performance at Pace Gallery and worked with Lady Gaga, and she was, and remains, all over the fashion press. To some, she began to seem a bit too excited to have the spotlight. As one former museum honcho (who asked not to be named) told me: “She’s everywhere, on every list, at every gala. Well, I guess that is an endurance sport too!”

Walk Through Walls has already come under attack as “racist” for a leaked passage comparing the Aborigines to “dinosaurs” and talking about their “sticklike” legs — the passage was cut in the final version — and how bad they smelled (she and Ulay once spent six months in the Australian outback). And for her candor about her three abortions. “I was and would always be an artist, absolutely. Having a child would just get in the way,” she writes. Adding to the negative attention, Ulay sued her last year for not paying him what he alleged was his full share of the sale of various works they made together — in late September, a Dutch court ruled in his favor, and now she owes him $301,000.

“What you could do for me is collect the worst things that people say about me, on Twitter and so forth, because I want to read them on my birthday,” she tells me. “Because the only way to exorcise them is to confront it. My office is keeping them from me because they fucking make me cry. But I want to read them on my birthday.”

We get to Hudson on Saturday, October 1, coming directly from Newark airport, where she’s arrived in all-black Gaultier, carrying a ted-branded backpack, after two weeks in Europe. We’re driven by her gal Friday, the Brazilian artist Paula Garcia, who works as a curator on her touring exhibitions (and has love and hate tattooed across her knuckles).

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After we pile into the Jeep, Abramovic chatters on with delirious, droll, first-day-of-school delight: “I had this crazy trip,” she says after popping a cough drop; she’s

feeling a bit sick from the voyage. (“I sound like Tom Waits on a bad day.”) “First, I went to Geneva,” where she attended the Scopus Award Gala — an event where, from what I can discern from her scattered account, she spent a great deal of time with philanthropist Lily Safra and her also-quite-rich friends. At the gala, she presented the architect Sir Norman Foster with a golden replica of his brain, as well as what she calls a “brain cozy,” like a nerdy hard hat, bristling with LED tendrils, which he put on. Abramovic has always been interested in various notions of energy waves, and ideas about the brain are, for her, part of this. She also met with “top scientists” working on mapping the brain and artificial intelligence: It was “mind-blowing.” Then, midstream, as happens with Abramovic, her mood swoops: “The future is so gloomy,” she says. “We are going to have machines rule the world.”

And then she’s onto other things: the man she went on some dates with who broke down crying when he told her he’d been sleeping with his mother since he was 15; her love of Nikola Tesla; her meeting with one of the richest men in Stockholm; this new computer-memory chip made out of crystals; how she is preparing for a retrospective that opens in February in Stockholm. Unlike the MoMA show, this one will include her early paintings from her youth. She tells me there will also be a “humanitarian” performance, which might involve refugees, singing, and a reimagining of “the first performance I wanted to do, in 1965,” as an art student in what she always calls “old Yugoslavia.” Gallery visitors were to strip off their clothes so she could wash them, “but it was forbidden.” This time, it will be “the same performance but in a completely different political context.” Oh, and the fact that she is No. 1 on the Artnet “Art World Titans” list this year mystifies her; and yet she’s even more incredulous when I tell her that the list, of 100 powerful and influential people in art, is organized alphabetically, which is why she’s first.

But no matter: The most important part of her journey was a trip to her native Belgrade to be 3-D scanned (yes, naked). Her plan is to create a holographic avatar of herself. “Then I could sit in my countryside and be projected around the world and I don’t need to move.”

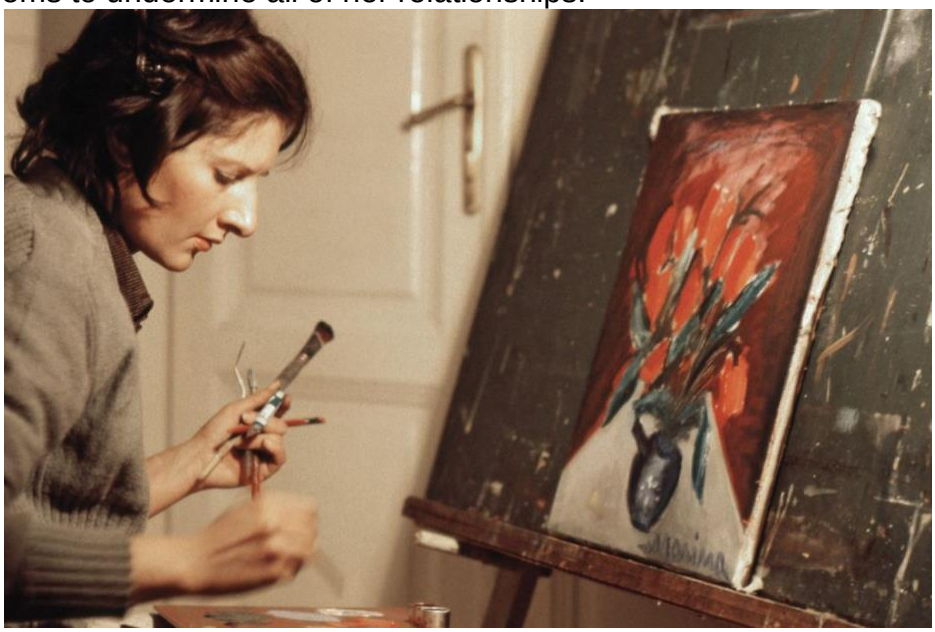
We stop at a gas station and buy string cheese and potato chips, and she falls asleep.

Abramovic’s performances have always been about generating a kind of catharsis for herself, then for the rest of us, pushing people’s buttons, their limits, as she has her own. All to a particular transformative end. “I am one of the few people who don’t have secrets,” she says. “All of my secrets, I made performances out of them, or theater pieces.”

From 1976 until 1988, the buttons she pushed most often were Ulay’s. They made such metaphors-for-being-in-a-relationship pieces as *Rest Energy* (1980), where she holds a bow and he the arrow, tensed and aimed right for her heart as they lean away from each other. They shared a birthday and, at least initially, a hairstyle and traveled around Europe in a Citroën van (which was at the MoMA retrospective) with a dog.

But eventually she just outlasted him. He wanted kids; she felt the need to dedicate her life to art. *The Artist Is Present* was a reference to a work she made with Ulay

called *Nightsea Crossing,* in which they sat opposite each other and stared into one another's eyes day after day, and she never forgave him for eventually breaking the stare and getting up, then expecting her to get up as well. According to her book, it was the beginning of the end for them. Something like this insufficiency of male grit seems to undermine all of her relationships.



Abramovic in Belgrade, 1968.

Abramovic and Jay Z during his performance-music-video shoot for "Picasso Baby."

Photographs courtesy of Marina Abramovic Archives

Their relationship was one of the most powerful narratives in the documentary, which included jumpy old footage of their work together and of his return to New York to be at the opening of the MoMA show. At one point Ulay, smoking and

looking rueful, admits that he was “lazy” compared to Abramovic. The moment when he sat opposite her in the atrium — she reaches across the table and holds his hands, and they both cry; she lets go first — became a viral sensation, viewed millions of times on YouTube.

And their drama continues with the Amsterdam court ruling, which stems from a deal she made with him back in 1999. Abramovic’s work has never been easy to collect, or at least not particularly attractive to very rich collectors. She has created some “transitory objects” — furniturelike props with crystals embedded in them, which she has made in Brazil, for the public to interact with (she asks me not to lean against one in her archive, lest it turn black from absorbing all my bad energy). “My work, marketwise, it’s below any middle-class painter,” she tells me. “And I’m 70, you know. The collectors never understand what actually they have to buy from me. They don’t get me. They don’t really understand.”

Most of her actual wealth comes from having bought a house in Amsterdam for $20,000 (in 1988) and made a deal with the drug dealer living there to give him free rent on one floor in exchange for removing the customers. Selling that house 20 years later, for $4 million, funded her move to New York and her purchase of Star House. “Marina is not a rich artist,” says Sean Kelly, her dealer for a quarter-century. “She has done very well, but she’s not a Richter or Koons or Cattelan.”

In 1994, Kelly hit on the idea of selling limited-edition photographs of her performances. To that end, in 1999 she bought the rights to all her and Ulay’s shared work, thanks to a loan from a collector, but agreed to give him 20 percent of the proceeds. Each of them interpreted the terms differently — she took out Kelly’s commission first; Ulay argued that his take should be off the top — and the court agreed with Ulay. (“There’s nothing worse than a lover’s tiff,” Kelly observes philosophically. “He is the love of her life in many ways.”) The weekend I saw her, she was distracted and defiant, trying to figure out how to pay for it, her eyes flashing with resentment. She mentioned, disdainfully, his “return” to New York as a performance artist in May, at a Red Hook gallery the size of — and she waved her hand around her living room.

It was another obstacle in a life full of obstacles. Some were put in place by society: expectations for female propriety in Communist Yugoslavia (her mother encouraged her in her painting but did everything she could to thwart, for example, her being naked in public) and the high bar of entry for female artists, who had to emulate men to be taken seriously. “I was wearing old trousers and short hair and work boots. This is what I had to look like. It was the only way to survive. No nail polish, no lipstick, or you are a bad artist — you are the bitch who tried to sleep with the collector to sell the art,” she says. She also mentions that she might have had a child with her ex-husband Paolo Canevari (an artist she got together with during her triumphant Venice Biennale in 1997), had she been young enough to. Things change. But “I have never been a feminist.” She was raised by her mother. “I felt that women took their rights, and I took mine. I never felt difference. Or delicate. I was just there like a bull, like a tractor, just go for it, you know?”

To control these people trying to control her, she created systems of obstacles to test herself against. This is part of what makes her “long-durational” work so compelling, and she thinks it can do us all some good.

Performance art in the 1960s and ’70s grew out of a rebellion against the exalted object to be collected (and resold); its ephemerality was a critique of commodity. It wasn’t as accessible as, say, looking for the aesthetically holy in the aura supposedly emanating from a Frank Stella. If its fundamental appeal is that it’s experiential, Abramovic’s popularity seemed to make it possible for her to create an edifice to preserve and honor it. A kind of monument to the transitory. Soon after her sudden success, she got a rather grandiose idea: to hire Rem Koolhaas to convert a broken-down 1929 theater she’d bought in downtown Hudson into the Marina Abramovic Institute, a performance space for various types of long-durational artworks, including hers, as well as an archive and site for various semi-occult, quasi-scientific brain-wave experiments, as well as what might be thought of as a consciousness spa.

MAI as Koolhaas conceived it was expensive to build — over $30 million. And it turned out that the old theater is full of asbestos, which will cost over $700,000 to fix. To pay for her legacy, she started to leverage her celebrity. She invited Lady Gaga up to be filmed doing the “slow-walking exercise” before the cameras. She contracted with Jay Z to appear in his “Picasso Baby” video in return for a donation to MAI. After she participated in the “Picasso Baby” video, her face pressed up against Jay Z’s, she complained to a website that he’d “used” her and not given MAI the donation he’d promised (he had, but her staff hadn’t realized that the money was from him). Some in the art press turned on her. The New York *Times’* Roberta Smith called *The Artist Is Present* “cheesy.” Hyperallergic — a bomb-throwing art website very critical of her — called her, among many other things, an “aloof elitist.” Abramovic began to seem like a symptom of something larger that had gone wrong.

“You criticize me for being a celebrity,” she says. “It’s not my fault. You make me a celebrity and then you criticize me for it. This all happened out of nowhere.” Kelly explains that Abramovic doesn’t always understand how people see her: He likens her to a “little girl” whom some people feel instinctively protective of and others, well, have less generous reactions to. “It’s all driven by a desperate need to be loved,” says Kelly. “The whole ball of wax.” Because of this she has found “superhuman” strength, of the type most of us might tap into only in an emergency or accident. “She’s a warrior … She doesn’t go home at night and flip a switch and watch the Kardashians. Her life is seamless. And part of that imperative is that she has always exposed herself not just physically, by taking her clothes off, but psychologically.”

The memoir is the latest manifestation of that. It’s also likely to renew the debate about how the art world should see her. “There’s going to be huge reaction to this book, I’m sure,” Abramovic says. “The book is not meant for the art public. It’s meant for the general public. You don’t have to know anything about performance art; it’s accessible.” It was excerpted in *Vogue,* but the real reason many people have already heard of it is that controversial Aborigine passage. She finds the

reaction — Hyperallergic's coverage of the controversy deployed the hashtag #TheRacistIsPresent in its headline — "incredibly politically correct. I don't know if you should write about it because they told me not to talk about it at all. But that hurts me so much. You have no idea. If you read in the context of it, it really changed my life, it was such an important experience," being with the Aborigines. "And they just took it out of context."

Abramovic, 1960.

Photographs courtesy of Marina Abramovic Archives

The book was written — spilled out, really — with James Kaplan, also the author of a two-volume biography of Frank Sinatra and another volume with Jerry Lewis. When she was introduced to him, Abramovic tells me, "I thought, *I cannot be in better company. Jerry Lewis, Frank Sinatra, and me. I love it.*" Kaplan deftly preserves the vigorous, grousing poeticism and won't-let-it-go intimacy of her nonstop self-narration. The memoir is really close to what it's like to spend a weekend with her: Abramovic is funny, generous, and vituperative, a raconteur and comedian and the sometimes sad-sack hero of the epic tale of her mad life. In the end, these stories tend to involve triumphing over various people who get in her way. "You know, when I think backward at my life, when I think back to the early '70s, the amount of bad criticism, the amount of shitty statements about art were overwhelming, and if I listened to them I would never be able to make my work." Don't get her started on Roberta Smith's line. "She used the word *cheesy.* That really stung in my heart. You can say anything about my work, but you fucking can't

say it's cheesy. It really got me. And then this racism thing: Everything you can say about me, that I like fashion and I'm a phony … but you can't say these two things."

Or at least she doesn't see it. The book will be launched with an event at the New York Public Library where she will be interviewed by Deborah Harry. They are not friends. One thing about Abramovic is that famous people want to meet her. Susan Sontag saw her in a 2001 performance at the Sean Kelly Gallery called *The House With the Ocean View* (where she lived — ate, slept, peed, but mostly just stood and looked back at people in the dim room — in public for 12 days, fasting, on three platforms cantilevered off the wall) and asked to be introduced. Lady Gaga, the same.

Kelly wasn't sure Abramovic even knew who Harry was when they were introduced. She says now, "One fact I know from her life I want to ask her about, to see if it's true: that she was in love with a member of her band. And he got sick, and she took four years out of her life and her career to be next to his bed. And then the guy got better and left her. Which is something I am very familiar with. Sacrifice for love. It's like if you help someone who is an alcoholic get out of it, he will leave you," since you knew him in that addled and needy state and he cannot stand that. Ulay, according to her memoir, at one point had an overfondness for drinking and drugs.

One afternoon, we walk down the sloping, manicured rear lawn toward Kinderhook Creek, at the back of her property. Once in the wooded riverbank, we pass over a dry streambed, which, she tells me, a visiting Brazilian shaman said demarcates the most intensively spiritual part of her property, dating back to the Native Americans who lived around here. Whether it is technically some sort of vortex, it's certainly very pretty, especially in early October, as the early-falling leaves rustle under our feet.

She has built a meditation cabin with a view of rushing water over rocks; inside, I see a quartz the size of a toddler, positioned upright on a small wooden scaffolding, and a low green wooden stool. She seats me on a deck chair and tells me to close my eyes and listen to the burble, while she sweeps the fallen leaves around me, directing me to quiet my mind.

For decades now, Abramovic, whose work requires nearly superhuman endurance, has been developing and refining what she calls the Abramovic Method, which is based in part on certain Buddhist traditions — she's spent a lot of time in India and knows the Dalai Lama — to encourage being "present," as the mindfulness peddlers like to put it, and which she has taught her students as a way to encourage creativity and — for lack of a better description — psychic openness. It is also, I suspect, the method for Marina Abramovic to live with being Marina Abramovic, directing all her need into something more generous.

Inside, Abramovic's house is spare, with crystals, some quite large, settled here and there on the floor alongside piles of books (*The Secret of Mind Power and How to Use It*; *Dictionary of All Scriptures and Myths*; *Meteorites: A Photographic Study of Surface Features*; *Hans Christian Andersen's Complete Fairy Tales*) and magazines (*Vanity Fair, Vogue*). On her mantel in the living room there's an Ettore Sottsass "Shiva" vase, shaped like a penis; we face it as we talk, splayed out in

Olivier Mourgue folded-man-shaped chaises longues straight out of *2001: A Space Odyssey.*

After dining on lentils, we return to the future lounges and discuss a *Times* story about how pandas in zoos are being shown panda porn to put them in the mood, and how her mother had commissioned one of the "leading socialist-realist" sculptors to make the bronze bust of her at 9 that looks at me as I sleep in her guest room (her friend the singer Anohni, formerly of Antony and the Johnsons, who occasionally stays with her up there, told her that she needed to talk to it, that sad little girl). *The Best of Chet Baker Sings* plays on the iPod. On the living-room table, there is a Rebecca Horn artwork, *Thermometre d'Amour,* in a hinged leather case, like a 19th-century medical instrument. She places its bulbous reservoir in my palm; the liquid goes a bit over halfway up the stem, which is my capacity for love. Abramovic says that's better than many people. I didn't ask, but I suspect hers spurted out the top.

Abramovic's love life has been, to her mind, frustrating. The furniture in the house was mostly chosen by Canevari, another less-motivated-to-work-than-she-was man. Like Ulay, he ended up with a younger woman. She tells me that when the Ulay decision came down, Canevari called her and made bird sounds in her ear, which is something they did to signal their affection for one another. She says she broke out in hives and told him to go fuck himself. Maybe he meant it to say he was thinking about her in her time of need, but she took it as an insult. How dare he prey on her weakness?

As she once told the *Guardian* about her dating problems: "You're too much for everybody. It's too much. The woman always has to play this role of being fragile and dependent. And if you're not, they're fascinated by you, but only for a little while. And then they want to change you and crush you. And then they leave." In the kitchen there's a kitschy Rosie the Riveter–style magnet that declares: "I can only please one person per day. Today I choose me."

MAI's Hudson home is currently on hold, so her legacy project — to preserve and further the ends of performance art and her method for getting in the proper head space to make it — has turned into a traveling circus. She and her collaborators are taking it to other cities — São Paulo, Athens — putting on the Abramovic Show. After an open casting call for local artists, they pick the best ones, then train them in her method and wait for the crowds to come. She shows me videos of the MAI takeover of the Benaki Museum in Greece: A man cuts his way through a series of walls with a key; a woman sits and counts for days on end. In another show, the public lean their heads, hearts, and sexes against the crystals embedded in her "transitory objects." If the frenzy wasn't quite *The Artist Is Present,* it was, clearly, a phenomenon.

And this gratifies her. She knows she's not going to live forever. Back at the house one afternoon, we move from the space lounges to one of her red sofas, so she can show me a PDF of a project she wants to do: perform seven great deaths from opera. It is inspired by her obsession with Maria Callas. There are photos of her and Callas in here in which they look eerily alike.

She never stops working, spinning out ideas, narrating in impressionistic loops. Her delightful slurring cantankerousness goes on and on, as she flings herself against the implacable world around her, slowly, through force of will and body, inching it in the direction she wants. Actually, she and Ulay did that as a performance once, in 1977. In *Expansion in Space,* they flung their naked bodies against monoliths weighing double what they did, trying to move them. Ulay, of course, gave up before she did.

“Always when bad things happen, I get through it,” she says. “It is like how my father taught me how to swim.” He threw her off the boat and started rowing away. She panicked, figured it out, and then caught up with him. “In the end, I am alone.”