

Introduction

This essay explores the extraordinary artist that is Marina Abramovic. Her lived experience and how it has shaped her and led to the prolific portfolio of performance artwork attributed to her. How, from a strict and cosetted upbringing by ex military parents in soviet Yugoslavia, becomes the world renowned artist. How in the spring of 2010 the Museum of Modern Art in New York held a Maria Abramovic retrospective covering four decades of performance art works it attracted 175,000 visitors of which 85,000 sat oposite her. The hottest ticket in town a must see, for fellow art aficionadoes, celebrities and the gallery going public.

To briefly trace her early introductions to artists and the world of international art. Her art school days of paint and experimental works of sound installations. Failures and triumphs, all maticulously recorded in dairies and memories The Biography in 1993.

Marina Abramovic



Marina Abramovic is a contemporary, world renowned pioneering performance artist.

Being and time are central to her work. Phenomenological experience plays a significant role. She is cited by many contemporaries as an inspiration in their own work.

Born on 30th November 1946 in Belgrade, Yugoslavia, to parents father Voijin and mother Danica, both military heroes of World War 2. Her father was a general in Josip Broz Tito's army, so after the war both held prominent positions in the Communist government. It was a strict controlled and regimented childhood. Her mother gave her a list of things she should aim to achieve every day, like learn ten new French words, what she should eat, what books she should read, etc

"That time of my life was based on a frame of discipline." "I was always about instructions from the beginning to the end."

(Phaidon pg10 2008)

"Few artists have as directly or as candidly, based so much of their art on the history of their lives."

(Phaidon pg34 2008)

She tried traditional methods of making art.

Abramović studied painting at the Academy of Fine Arts in Belgrade (1965-1970), and at Radionica Krsta Hegedusic, Academy of Fine Arts in Zagreb (1970-1972)

At this time there were many student demonstrations across Europe where the young people were asking for change. Young Yugoslavs were asking Tito for more freedoms, political and cultural. A few unimportant demands were granted one of which was The Student Cultural Centre in Belgrade. Marina took a studio here and enjoyed this flourishing artistic

environment. She explored and experimented, realized that she was moving away from traditional art forms to the more conceptual like Freeing the Horizon. She created sound pieces like The Tree 1971 (recorded bird song) and The Airport 1972.

She soon realised that she could use other materials to make art and her body as the object.

“I feel I’m quite happy to be an object and I think that’s the goal in a way.” Interview Magazine (2024)

Her performances explore pain, empathy, endurance of body and will.

She is methodical and expresses the importance of preparation before any performance. Especially when using the body. Having total controlling for the duration of each performance.

The first art piece where she used her body in the artwork was *Rhythm 10* 1973. She used 10 knives to quickly stab the spaces between her fingers. Performed first at a festival in Edinburgh. Duration 1 hour.

In 1974 she performed *Rhythm 5* at The Student Cultural Center, Belgrade. It was a piece a personal reflection on Communism. She passed out inside a burning Communist star through lack of oxygen.

Duration 1 ½ hours



In 1974 she performed a seminal piece of performance art, titled Rhythym 0 at Studio Morra, Naples. Duration 6 hours.

On a card she had printed the instructions;

"I am the object," and, "During this period I take full responsibility,"

She silently, waited compliant and immobile, inviting the spectators to use any of 72 objects (some for pain some for pleasure) on her body in any way they desired, completely giving up control to the public. to see how the audience would react. She said, "I never wanted to die. I'm not interested in dying."

"What I learned was that ... if you leave it up to the audience, they can kill you ... I felt really violated: they cut up my clothes, stuck rose thorns in my stomach, one person aimed the gun at my head,

After this performance she said she "realized the subject of my work should be the *limits* of the body. I would use performance to push my mental and physical limits beyond consciousness."

Marina Abramovic talks about escaping from Yugoslavia in 1976 She was 29 years old. Her mother reported her missing, kidnapped.

She went to Amsterdam and met fellow performance artist Ulay (Uwe Layseipen). He showed her the meaning of freedom and what you could do with it. Thus started they collaboration in art and in life.

Collaboration: Marina and Ulay



Marina was performing *Lips of Thomas* 1975 Galerie Krinzinger, Innsbruck, where Ulay first encountered Marina.

Part of the performance involved her cutting a five point star into her belly. Ulay saw that she needed care, so after the performance ended he nursed her wounds. Ulay says that this was the moment when something passed between them. After meeting in Prague, they found there was love between them. They impressed each other with their commitment to art and decided to live and work together as complete equals. The overarching concept was to merge together to become one. The actions titled *Relation Works* of (1976-80) they attempted to re-create itself as a third identity, seductively just out of reach. Marina and Ulay investigated telepathy between each other because of their strong emotional connection. *Talking About Similarity* November 30 1976 Duration 45 min., Amsterdam. Biezenbach 2010 pg 96

“When you are focused on the here and now, people get the impression that you are absent.” (Green 2001)

They explored and extended themes of displacement, ascetic, the nomadic, to explore the extremes of self through self absorption, transcendental mediation, Identity was sacrificed in order to make the mental journey of understanding identity formation, gender, masochism, trauma, and being the observed.

The early 1980s they explored empty places, like the deserts of Sahra, Central Australia, Gobi, etc. Marina said they discovered the here and now, the meaning presence, the value of solitude and silence.

Form these experiences and revelations, a Nightsea Crossing was conceived.

The Great Wall Walk 1987 signaled the end of they collaboration and relationship.

Performance Art

” Performance is always a state of mind” Talk About Art (2022)

Best definition of performance.

noun .

the act of performing: or doing something successfully, using knowledge as distinguished from merely processing it.

vocabulary.com

Performance art, is art, because that is the environment and on the ground on which it is being asked to be judged. It is about ideas, not the production of physical objects. Using the human body as the central focus and media for the art work. Artworks that are created through actions performed by the artist or other participants, which may be live or recorded, spontaneous or scripted. It is a distinct and

particular sphere of art. Performance art is the choice for rebellion against the establishment. Often intended to shock the public. To provoke and cause some reaction amongst critics.

It has emerged, erupted and raged, when institutions in the art world have misdirected and misinformed the public, and have exerted restrictive conservative values upon the freedoms of artists.

While the terms 'performance' and 'performance art' only became widely used in the 1970s, the history of performance in the visual arts is often traced back to futurist productions and dada cabarets of the 1910s.

Throughout the twentieth century performance was often seen as a non-traditional way of making art. Live-ness, physical movement and impermanence offered artists alternatives to the static permanence of painting and sculpture.

In the post-war period performance became aligned with conceptual art, because of its often ephemeral nature.

Now an accepted part of the visual art world, the term has since been used to describe film, video, photographic and installation-based artworks through which the actions of artists, performers or the audience are recorded and displayed.

"Conceptual art is the area of modern art about which we tend to be at our most sceptical.

You know the sort of thing: a large group of people gathered to scream as loud as they can (Paola Pivi's *1000*, performed at the

Tate Modern in 2009), or a dark room full of talcum powder lit by a single candle in which we are invited to pad about(an installation by Brazilian artist Cildo Metreles called *Volatile*) Such works are often entertaining, even thought provoking , but are they art?”
(Gompertz 2016 pg.313)

In the contemporary art environment, performance has been understood as a way of engaging directly with social reality, the specifics of space and the politics of identity. In 2016, theorist Jonah Westerman remarked ‘performance is not (and never was) a medium, not something that an artwork can be but rather a set of questions and concerns about how art relates to people and the wider social world’ (Kaprow 2018)

The origins of performance art are from the 1910s while the conceptual art of movements such as Dada and Futurism in the 1910s and 20s were crucial. When you want to talk about changes to the way we think about art, Marcel Duchamp’s Fountain 1917 has to be mentioned. Exhibited at the Grand Central Palace on Lexington Avenue, New York. it created quite a stir. Subversive, provocative and controversial, Dada changed the art world forever. Concept art and the art of ideas was born. It no longer needed to be conventional painting or sculpture using traditionally accepted materials and media. Within this movement, the idea or concept became more important and could be expressed in any way or in any form, with any object, found, bought, salvaged or constructed, the artist wished to choose. This included the artist's own body or the bodies of others.

Art movements like Abstract Expressionism added to the mix. Here are some important performance artworks that must be included:

In 1958 Yves Klein; produced his *Anthropometry* series called, his Blue period. Using the human body as a paint brush, he placed and dragged women covered in wet paint onto large canvases on the floor.

Following the decline of Modernism and Abstract Expressionism in the 1960s there followed interest within political and anti-war activism, the feminist art movements and in performance art across world.

Yoko Ono's; *Cut Piece* from 1964. *Shoot* by Chris Burden 1971. *Seedbed*, Vito Acconci 1972. In 1973 Marina Abramovic performed *Rhythm 10*. Joseph Beuys Coyote; *I Like America and America Likes Me* 1974. Carolee Schneemann; *Interior Stroll* performed in 1975. For one year in 1983-84 Linda Montano and Tehching Hsieh remained tied together by a length of rope, in the endurance artwork, titled *Art/Life, One Year Performance*.

Performance art is the gorilla arm of fine art, with a habit of popping up unexpectedly, making its strange presence felt, and then disappearing".
(Gompertz W. pg314)

Although excluded from conventional museums and galleries since the 1960s, performance art and actions have been encouraged and welcomed.

Biesenbach (2010) notes that for Marina Abramovic performance art is too broad a term which does not describe her kind of work. It can include any piece or action, performed live or recorded in front of an audience.. It could be just about

anything. For her, performance is the tool which she chooses to bring her to the moment. It is not just about emotions. Performance is a mental and physical construction that she steps into, in front of an audience. The time and place is important but the energy from the audience is critical. The larger the audience the more energy there is for her to use. She explains that for her, performance art is the most difficult art form. Being present in a performance, she explains, is so difficult. It's about being present 100%, in mind and body, in the here and now. If you lose presence your performance is gone and you will lose your audience. She talks about the importance of time. Time, consciousness, and existence. Time is limited and she feels that in our modern world everything is becoming shorter and shorter. She would like the duration of her performances to be longer and longer. She wants the moment when the performance becomes life itself. Timeless. "I don't want an audience to spend time with me looking at my work; I want them to be with me and forget about time."

(Biesenbach 2010 Pg 211)

Nightsea Crossing

Sometimes what appears to be the simplest things are the hardest. To sit motionless on a chair in silence for a time.

"Nightsea Crossing" is the title given to a performance art, first performed by Marina Abramovic and Ulay (Uwe Laysiepen) in 1981.

It refers to the soul's spiritual journey, a process of purification.

Eliminating dramatic movements from their performance art so that mental transformation becomes central. The importance of, absence rather than presence.

“The *Nightsea Crossing* title was a really important title. It is not about crossing the sea by night, but about a subconscious crossing”.(Blazwick 2011, Art Monthly issue 349)

The Performance is sitting motionless at either end of a table facing each other, profiles turned to the audience.

The duration of the performance is usually 7 hours. The audience never witnesses the beginning or the end of the performance. The performance has been anything from one day to sixteen days. The performance can take place both inside and outside. the performers remain silent, eat no food, they only drink water.

The original concept for nightsea Crossing came from a dream Ulay had on a flight they were on in February 1985 to Ushimado, Japan.

He pictured them in a carved out hole in the ground, seated at an earthen table. The thoughts had possibly originated from conversations with the Dalia Lama, when the concept of emptiness of form was discussed.

Performed for the first time at the First International Biennial Exhibition in 1985, Ushimado, Japan.



(Beisenbach 2010 pg14)

Nightsea Crossing /Conjunction (1983)

Marina Abramovic and Ulay developed this concept more from being in the Australian Desert. In the extreme temperatures experienced, they soon realized it was easiest just to sit in a trance-like state, in silence.

Initially, as westerners and outsiders they were excluded from much of the first nation Aboriginal culture. There was much secrecy, concealment and unwillingness to share beliefs based on sacred powers within Aboriginal art. Presence and being there in the Here and Now, became the overwhelming sensation. Very much part of the Aboriginal experience and culture. However they forged powerful and rewarding relationships with some Central Australian Aborigines.

“The two artists were attempting to cultivate an indifference toward the travails associated with disappearance, pain and even life itself during their desert journey. This difference, in turn, was connected with denial of physical death: The two artists spoke about reincarnation and saw the body as a “boat” housing the spirit. (Green 2001) pg169

“Australia changed my life dramatically”

(Green 2001) pg166

For Marina Abramovic and Ulay, the concept grew from being in the Australian Desert, and time spent with Aborigines. The extreme temperatures that they experienced, meant that the easiest thing to do was to just sit in a trance like state in that silent environment. Presence and being there in the here and now, became the overwhelming sensation. Very much part of the Aboriginal experience and culture.

Watuma Tarruru Tjungarrayi. Elder of the Central Australian people, participated in Nightsea Crossing/ Conjunction in 1983



(Beisenbach 2010 pg145)

The Artist Is Present (2012)



In 2012, The Museum Of Modern Art (MoMA) in New York USA. chose to put on a retrospective of Marina Abramovic. The exhibition was called 'The Artist Is Present'. Each gallery space had a reperformed seminal piece of work reflecting her artistic journey.

Based on Nightsea Crossing a new piece, The Artist is Present, was chosen for The Donald B. and Catherine C. Atrium at The Museum of Modern Art.

This piece was chosen because it would be possible for the visitors to participate without training, but still experience being

present with the artist. Marina Abramovic explains the importance of being truly present.

Marina Abramovic is able to slow us, the observers down. So that we can be truly present.

This time the public were invited to participate in the performance. There were many unexpected emotional and physical reactions by the participants. They were instructed to sit in silence across from the artist for a length of time of their own choosing, taking part in the artwork.

Ulay said that, to sit for hours in complete silence, without moving, without drinking and fasting, is extremely difficult and painful.

Marina explained that you can control the pain and therefore endure it.

Marina Abramovic explains the importance of being truly present.

Marina Abramovic is able to slow us, the observers down. So that we can be truly present.

“Being present, over long stretches of time, until presence rises and falls, from material to immaterial, from form to formless, from time to timeless.”

Focused control on staying motionless causes physical pain, which takes an act of endurance, the duration of which increases it and multiplies. The emotional energy required is a huge burden and becomes drained.

“This was about limit, even for me”

There is no performance without the artist being present and there is equally no performance without an audience.

Conclusion

Performance art should be taken seriously and has every right to appear on the same bill as generally accepted art work. It expresses the contemporary artworld and is a powerful addition to any artist who wishes to use it. In many cases it is and will prove to be the perfect vehicle of expression. Art needs to be as broad and as diverse as possible, nothing should be excluded. The limits can only be those set by society. It is art when it is performed in a gallery setting and displayed as a work of art to be judged by the museums and galleries world. I believe I have proven the case that the work of Marina Abramovic is of international art standard. Her performance art pieces and seminal works travel close to the soul of what it is to be human in the contemporary world.
