



Marina Abramovic: A Study in Resilience

BY DAN RULE 25th June 2015

On the eve of legendary performance artist Marina Abramovic's major exhibition at the Museum of Old and New Art, we offer an appraisal of a 40-year career wrought by pushing the body and the mind to the limits of experience.

It's easy enough to track down performance artist Marina Abramovic's earliest works, but it's near impossible to expunge them from memory. The grainy, monochrome photographs and 16-millimetre films that serve as a remaining link to the Serbian-born artist's performances from the early and mid-1970s reveal a body in crisis, a mind pushed to the brink and a society rupturing at the seams.

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In her seminal 1974 work *Rhythm 0*, Abramović remained completely passive in the gallery while audience members were invited to do what they wished with her body, using any of the 72 objects laid on a table. In the six hours that ensued, a quiet, nervous, diffident gathering morphed into something far more brutal. Abramović had rose thorns driven into her stomach, her limbs were bound, her clothes were cut and torn from her body, and for a brief period, a loaded gun was pointed at her head. Far from just an act of masochism, the then 27-year-old had engineered a situation that exposed the alarming proximity of social decorum to moral disorder.

There are any number of works from the era – done on her own or with her lover and creative partner of the time, Ulay (West German performance artist Uwe Laysiepen) – in which Abramović skirted the thresholds of sanity, life and limb for her art. Screaming until her voice had disappeared; whipping her own naked, bleeding body until she felt no pain; crucifying herself on a cross made of ice; ingesting body and mind-disabling drugs: it all fed into a wider practice that has irrevocably altered the face of contemporary art.



"Marina Abramović is incredibly brave," says Nicole Durling, who alongside Olivier Varenne is senior curator at David Walsh's Museum of Old and New Art (MONA) in Hobart. The museum will host *Private Archaeology*, the first major Marina Abramović survey in Australia, from June 13 to October 5. It is presented in conjunction with a major performance for Sydney's Kaldor Public Art Projects, *Marina Abramovic: In Residence*, from June 24 to July 5.

"It is a resilience of mind and body that characterised Marina's work, and to have that commitment to step into the unknown," continues Durling. "You don't know what's going to happen when you're sitting there in the gallery for hours at a time; you do not know how you're going to respond, what the conditions are going to be, what people are going to do to you."

Durling is referring to *The Artist is Present*, Abramović's major 2010 exhibition at MOMA, New York, which smashed all attendance records at the institution and introduced Abramović – long considered something of an outsider – to a whole new generation of artists, viewers and curators. The show's title work and centrepiece was a 736-hour-and-30-minute interactive work, in which Abramovic sat motionless at a table in the MOMA atrium. Visitors were invited to take turns sitting opposite, sharing a silent experience with the artist. Both artist and several of her unofficial collaborators recounted an incredibly powerful, empathetic experience, and one of remarkable endurance.

Private Archaeology, which has been in the works since well before MONA opened its doors in 2011, is considered a further articulation of this resilience. The exhibition traces Abramović's performances from the mid-1970s until the first major turning point in her career in 1988, when she and Ulay finally separated – symbolised by a final performance in which they each walked 2500 kilometres from opposite ends of the Great Wall of China until they met in the middle to say goodbye. It then shifts to her later works, which have been characterised by their experiential qualities for the audience. *Private Archaeology* may be varied but its central tenets remain remarkably consistent. Among the bloodied acts, durational performances and loaded sculptural environments, the work continues the idea of amplifying and crystallising the sensory experiences and emotional states of everyday life.



Durling points to the more recent Marina Abramović Method interactive works that the artist developed as part of the program of the Marina Abramović Institute (MAI) in Hudson, New York. “When you think about Marina’s work, it’s really just based around these ritualised actions of the everyday,” says Durling. “Sitting, lying, standing, breathing – these are the base-level things that we do as human beings. And this is what our body does. Her work, through all its iterations, is about being hyper-aware of your body and hyper-aware of your mind.”

One work that will feature in *Private Archaeology* is *Counting the Rice*. Participants must sit quietly in a room for upwards of an hour counting out individual grains of rice, gaining a more pointed consciousness of their powers of concentration, endurance and self-control in the process.

It’s this kind of inclusiveness that Durling wanted to emphasise. While the formidable artist’s oeuvre is riddled with the extremes of pain and perseverance, it is equally remarkable for its generosity and vulnerability. The piece from which the exhibition takes its name, for example, assumes the form of a cabinet punctuated by a series of drawers, “almost like a filing system” for objects, pictures and texts that are poignant to the artist.



“Visitors are encouraged to spend time opening the drawers and sifting through this material,” explains Durling. “Through these different assemblages or collages of materials, the work describes the inspirations for Marina’s work and gives an incredible insight. It is a process of inviting visitors to gain an understanding of the artist’s work in a way they wouldn’t usually.”

And like her early performances, *Private Archaeology*’s effects and parameters are surprising. “There’s incredible strength and incredible presence to Marina, which we’re all familiar with,” says Durling. “But there is a very human vulnerability about her. She is a very magnetic individual, and you see her suffering in her work.”

Private Archaeology shows at MONA, Hobart, from June 13 to October 5.

Broadsheet is a media partner of *Maria Abramović In Residence* presented in Sydney by Kaldor Public Art Projects.

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