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Marina Abramovic wonders whether she's even creating art



Marina Abramovic's Sydney show will involve eye gazing between audience members and a lot of staring at nothing, writes Matthew Drummond.



Marina Abramovic's reputation and influence have only grown since, five years ago, 800,000 turned up to watch her sitting in a chair at New York's Museum of Modern Art. Rice will star in the art she has prepared for Sydneysiders. **Christopher Pearce**

by **Matthew Drummond**

In the early stages of the career of Marina Abramovic – a performance artist who has cut herself, asphyxiated herself and sometimes simply sat on stage and doing absolutely nothing – she was often asked whether she was really creating "art".

Now, aged 68 and feted as one of the world's most influential artists, she asks herself the same question.

"I don't know what this is; I don't know if it's even art anymore," she tells *AFR Weekend* the day after jetting into Australia, where she's about to open a major retrospective at the Museum of Old and New Art in Hobart before staging an exhibition with Kaldor Public Art Projects in Sydney.

The topic under immediate discussion is her most recent major show – *512 Hours* – held last year at London's Serpentine Galleries. Visitors were given noise-cancelling

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headphones, told to close their eyes and instructed to walk as slowly as possible around an empty room. They were sat at little desks and asked to count grains of rice.



At the 2010 New York exhibition, titled *The Artist is Present*, viewers lined up to sit opposite Abramovic. The experience was designed to let people have a moment of deep communication, revelation. AP

It's the sort of art that invites eyebrow-raising mockery and Abramovic herself seems in on the joke.

"It was insane," she says with a chuckle as she recounts taking Londoners by the hand, guiding them towards a white wall and leaving them there to simply stare at it. But then she reveals how the real joke is on the art establishment.

"London is the country of Damien Hirst, everything covered in diamonds and sparkly," she says, referring to the British artist's most famous sculpture, *For the Love of God*, a diamond-encrusted skull. "And I made a show with no money, with just IKEA chairs – which, by the way, are not comfortable."

The comment about the IKEA chairs underlines the thing that stands out most when you meet Marina Abramovic, born in Belgrade in 1946 to war-hero parents, who grew up in Tito's Yugoslavia and who scratched – sometimes in her own blood – a career out from the edges of art's avant garde. She's immensely warm, self-deprecating and unexpectedly funny.

LOVE AND FEAR

These are not the traits you'd expect from a person who, in 1997, won the Golden Lion for Best Artist at the Venice Biennale for spending six hours a day scrubbing the blood off a pile of cow bones (the wars that disintegrated Yugoslavia had ended, the war in Kosovo was about to begin). Perhaps it should not be surprising that a woman who has made her career in performance art has mastered the art of charming strangers.

"People fall in love with the image of me," she says, coming close to breaching her own

rule, conveyed by a PR agent before the interview, not to ask questions about her private life or, cryptically, celebrity.

"At the same time in real life they become afraid of me 'cause I'm sometimes too much. People like to project things that you're not. I always like to show the things I'm ashamed of. I'm not perfect. I don't meditate all the time. I eat too much chocolate. I love bad movies or shitty cheap things. All this is human."

What she does admit to having, and what sets her apart from most, is supernatural stamina and physical control. "I am blessed, or cursed, with this crazy willpower," she says. "I will do it even if I die. If I say I will sit on this chair for 20 hours, I will sit on this chair for 20 hours."

Her two most celebrated works were made 36 years apart, a testament to the longevity of her career. In 1974 she created *Rhythm 0*: for six hours she stood motionless while inviting the audience to take any of a series of objects placed on a table – including a feather, grapes, a whip, a gun and a single bullet – and do what they liked to her. Shy at first, the audience loosened up and then turned aggressive, the gun loaded, pointed at her head and the trigger almost pulled.

In 2010 came *The Artist Is Present*. Over three months, for seven hours a day, six days a week, she sat motionless inside New York's Museum of Metropolitan Art, staring directly into the eyes of anyone who wanted to sit down opposite her.

More than 800,000 turned up. A documentary shows crowds building over the three months, to the point where people began sleeping on the pavement outside and literally running to her when the museum doors opened. It also recounts her increasing physical exhaustion.

"I had a huge amount of pain, being in one place all that time," she says of the experience which, more than any other work, propelled her to mega-stardom. "It was so painful my ribs were going into my organs. There were no arms on that chair, which was a big mistake but I was too proud to change later."

ANCIENT PRACTICES

Understanding what makes a chair comfortable is one outcome of Abramovic's work. Understanding the limits of the body and the mind is another. Her performances make audiences think about the reality of time, of what it feels like to make oneself vulnerable, of entrusting oneself to strangers.

"She has been a great seeker of what is at the core of the human experience," says Heather Rose, an Australian novelist, who adds that Abramovic's works cross over between Western art and the tribal rituals and the spirituality of indigenous people.

Abramovic herself says the months she spent living with Australian Aborigines in the early 1980s were critical to the development of her work. "She's bringing to art," Rose says, "some of those ancient practices that are formally lived in the space of theology and religion: to become content within yourself, to be at one with the inexplicable

aspects of human experience."

Rose travelled to New York to see *The Artist Is Present* and sat with Abramovic four times. She found the experience, sitting in absolute stillness staring into Abramovic's eyes, transportative. "It's so unusual for any of us to experience eye contact for any period of time," Rose says. "We have an inner fear of deep communication. It's revealing and it reveals us."

Having spent a career probing the relationship between a performer and her audience, Abramovic's works have recently taken a 90-degree turn. Instead of gazing into the eyes of one audience member at a time, she now gets them to gaze into each other's eyes.

This seems like a sensible efficiency measure and a way to extract herself from the physically draining nature of her work (and who can blame her? She is, after all, approaching 70.) But for Abramovic the real ambition is to make people experience what she has spent a lifetime practising.

"If you look at the two of my performances: with *Rhythm 0* in that piece I provoke the lowest of every human being; I gave them the tools and they used them," she says, referring to the moment when she was almost shot in the head. "But in *The Artist Is Present*, I provoke the highest of themselves. Every human being can kill; we can all be the absolute beast but we can be incredibly good.

"And I think it's important as an artist how we can find the key to that goodness. 'Cause to me it's important to lift the human spirit, not to put it down. The question is how we can change, and the only way to change it is changing consciousness."

Which brings the topic back to the Sydney show. There will be eye gazing between audience members. There will be staring at nothing. And there will be little tables where people can count rice. Counting grains of rice is what she calls a "right now solution".

"It's a ridiculous thing to count the rice, but yes – count the rice, there is a solution there. If you can't make it in rice, you can't make it in life." Another chuckle.

"You start counting and you're amused. Then you get angry. Then you think she's f***ing mad. Then you get frustrated. Then you get depressed 'cause you can't finish it. But you have to measure what is your ability, what's realistic about yourself, and then you have to go for it. And do it.

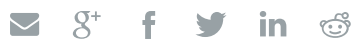
"You go into a regular breathing pattern. You really go into the present here and now. It doesn't matter, anything. And then you're there," she says with a snap of her fingers.

"But you have to get there yourself. I can't do it for you."

Matthew Drummond is the editor of AFR Weekend.

MONA's Private Archaeology runs from June 13 to October 5.

**Kaldor Public Art Projects presents Marina Abramovic: In Residence at Pier 2/3
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