

The artist is present: Marina Abramovic opens MONA retrospective

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Marina Abramovic wants visitors to her new show to take their time: "Because life is so fast, we have to make art slow." *Photo: Chris Pearce*

Marina Abramovic wants everyone who visits her show at Hobart's Museum of Old and New Art to slow down. Just chill out, and count the rice.

The 68-year-old global performance art superstar (don't call her the "godmother of performance art," she urges, asking that she be described as a warrior) sees the works that encourage public interaction as the most important pieces in her show, called *Private Archaeology*.

One room features a long table with a mound of rice and lentils running its length. The public is encouraged to count the grains of rice, make patterns and become immersed in the present.



Push the pain away: Marina Abramovic describes herself as a "warrior". Photo: Chris Pearce

"Counting rice is a very important negotiation with yourself, it's very important to know what you can and can't do before you start..."

"It's the idea of achievement and failure ... about the process of what your mind is going through.

"You get bored and you get mad and you get angry but you decide to finish," she says of a three-month exercise at a Tibetan retreat that inspired this piece. "Though the process you start to calm yourself, time doesn't matter any more, you're in your present mind. But it takes effort."

Another room features noise-cancelling headphones and low-slung deckchairs facing a window looking out onto a garden, where rabbits hop slowly and birds peck at the grass.

Yet this doesn't quite cancel out the screams coming from another room, featuring three works from throughout the artist's career – installations of Abramovic and participants shouting full throttle. What would at first appear to grate – imagine sitting in the middle of three children's never-ending tantrums – is actually uplifting and somehow invigorating.

Despite being billed as such, Abramovic says the show, curated by MONA's Nicole Durling and Olivier Varenne, is not a retrospective.

"It's not a retrospective, in any kind of sense. It's a choice of different works from different periods of my life," she says.

"Artists are never objective ... For me it was exciting to see their choices and how they put things together."

It does, as the title implies, interrogate her own private "archaeology", with cabinets featuring small works on paper and items she has chosen from MONA founder David Walsh's collection of antiquities.

"Archaeology for me was more kind of a mental state, to collect experience, that's my private archaeology," Abramovic says. "This is something you can't touch, you can't experience. You can't collect them and hang them on the wall."

Abramovic says she tries to make her art as interactive and accessible as possible.

"One of the most important parts of this exhibition is the interactive part, given to the public to have an experience of their own.

"That is the most important thing for the Hobart people, to see how they are going to participate and how they are going to take some of these experiences back home.

"I think my work is not just for the art public ... [If] a housewife, a politician, a farmer, a teacher or [a] child can actually, by experiencing this work take something ... home to continue [to] give some kind of contribution to their life."

Of her most famous works, which involved sitting facing members of the public all day for months at a time in New York's Museum of Modern Art for her seminal show *The Artist is Present*, Abramovic was happy to divulge the secrets to her stamina.

"Sitting on the chair looks so simple. But sit on the chair for one, two, three or four hours. You have the pain if you're motionless of every muscle that is screaming to change position. You have to attain this power, if you reach the level of the pain, this is so high, that you say to yourself, if I don't change I'm going to faint.

"The moment when you're ready to faint [the] entire pain disappears. The body becomes lighter and you really have an out-of-body experience."

"But you really have to go through the door of pain. There is no way out.

"Because life is so fast, we have to make art slow. So fast it doesn't work any more. So the public have to get into the state of mind that they need time, but to perform.

"You get this click in between where the magic happens."

Of her celebrity (perhaps boosted by her association with stars such as Kanye and Jay Z), Abramovic says she never expected to become iconic.

"No, it's a projection on me," she says of her public persona. "You see, Marcel Duchamp always said that the public complete the work. It's no reflection on me. I'm completely normal and pretty simple ...

The Artist Is Present became so prominent because of the public participation, she said.

"I said [to the curator], 'I'll just get them to sit in front of me'. And the curators said, 'What if nobody has the time to sit? So everybody was not expecting what was going to happen, but this chair was never empty. They just keep coming and coming.'"

Private Archaeology is at the Museum of Old and New Art, Hobart, until October 5.

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