

Sydney Morning Herald Column > Marina Abramovic: Private Archaeology

Marina Abramovic: Private Archaeology

June 27, 2015



Artist Portrait with a Candle (detail) © Marina Abramović, Courtesy of the Marina Abramović Archives



David Walsh never does anything by halves at his [Museum of Old and New Art \(MONA\)](#). Within a few years he has transformed Hobart into one of the most desirable cultural tourist destinations in Australia – or just off the coast of Australia, if you take the Tasmanian perspective. The [Dark Mofo Festival](#) has drawn thousands of people to the city during the grey days of winter, while MONA is swarming with visitors.

Walsh has been just as ambitious with the artists with whom he has held solo exhibitions over the past few years – Wim Delvoye, Matthew Barney, and now Marina Abramovic, occupy the upper echelons of the contemporary art scene. Each of them is known for thinking big.

When Delvoye was at MONA in 2012 he said he was planning to start his own religion based on information gathered from questionnaires. Despite these careful preparations I'm afraid Marina Abramovic is way ahead. Judging by the reception she got in Hobart at the opening of her exhibition, [Private Archaeology](#), and in a public conversation with David Walsh, Abramovic could start her own religion right away. She has all the necessary credentials. Born in the former Yugoslavia, her father was a general, her mother a major – both “national heroes” under Tito. She also admits to having a religious fanatic for a grandmother; and an uncle who was a bona fide saint, martyred in the 1930s for standing up to the King.

By now we are in the midst of [Marina Abramovic: In Residence](#), the latest Kaldor Public Art Project at Pier 2/3, Walsh Bay, which will continue until 5 July. I'm writing in advance of the opening, so in this column I'll set the scene by discussing the MONA exhibition and some of the ideas that lie at the heart of Abramovic's work.

<http://johnmcdonald.net.au/2015/marina-abramovic-private-archaeology/>





Recent Posts



Gilbert & George
December 4, 2015



Phoenix
December 4, 2015



In the Heart of the Sea
December 4, 2015



@JMDartcritic



Paul Keating has asked some serious questions about the AGNSW's Sydney Modern project. Do declining attendances require a huge new building? [about 1 week ago](#)



Paul Keating: Art gallery plan is about money, not art <https://t.co/oJGulRX49Y> via @smh [about 1 week ago](#)

Tags

aboriginal art abstract art action adventure
Archibald Prize Art Gallery of NSW
Australian art Australian artist Australian
film biography Chinese art comedy
contemporary art crime documentary
fashion french film history Installation Art
International Art landscape Museum of
Contemporary Art Music mystery National Gallery

The first thing to know about *Private Archaeology* is that, according to the artist, “it is not a retrospective in any sense.” It is, apparently, a personal selection made by the curators, Olivier Varennes and Nicole Durling. The subject of the show was happy to stand aside, as she believes artists are the very worst curators of their own work.

The second thing to know is that the exhibition presents a strangely demure overview, omitting many of the more extreme performances. If this seems out-of-character for MONA it at least confirms that Walsh likes to keep his audiences guessing. There are a few confronting moments, such as a photograph of the artist serenely holding her finger in a candle flame. There is also a room of blood-curdling primal screams, both by Abramovic and her former partner, Ulay; and by members of the public invited to “have a go”, as Joe Hockey might say (with similar results).



AAA-AAA (video still) (1978)



Rest Energy (1980)

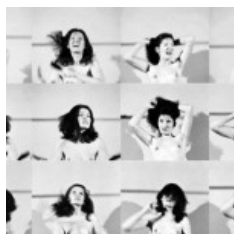


Dozing Consciousness (video still) (1997)

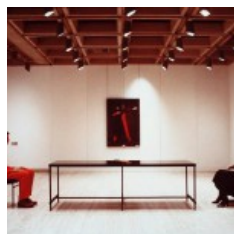
The spine-tingler among the older work is a photograph of the performance, *Rest Energy* (1980), in which Ulay leans back on the string of a loaded bow, while Marina pulls the bow in the other direction, an arrow pointed at her heart.

This black-and-white image has that dangerous edge which was such a feature of Abramovic's youthful performances, whether she was self-flagellating, self-lacerating, or putting her body through some torment. Even the act of brushing her hair, in *Art Must be Beautiful, Artist Must be Beautiful* (1975), takes on a violent dimension as she tears at her scalp with a metal brush and comb.

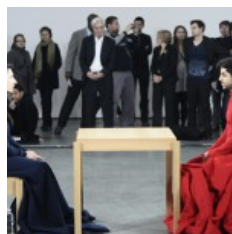
The defining feature of Abramovic's performance art has been the sheer duration of so many pieces. In 1979, after spending the best part of a year living with Aboriginal people in central Australia, she and Ulay performed *Nightsea Crossing* at the Art Gallery of NSW. It required the artists to sit motionless at either end of a table for 16 days, seven hours per day.



Art Must Be Beautiful, Artist Must Be Beautiful, (1975)



Nightsea Crossing, (1981)



'The Artist Is Present', (2010)

In her landmark exhibition at New York's Museum of Modern Art in 2010, *The Artist is Present*, Abramovic sat motionless in a chair for the entire three-month duration of the show. Members of the public lined up to sit in a chair facing the artist at the other side of a table. She didn't know if the idea would work, but the chair was never empty, with some people coming back again and again. The process is well documented in a film by Matthew Akers and Jeff Dupre.

Sitting still may not sound difficult but after three or four hours the pain becomes excruciating, as the muscles demand a change of position. “You have to generate this insane power,” she says. “Whatever happens to me I'm not going to change position. I'm not going to change position. The pain becomes so bad you think: 'If I don't change at once I'm going to faint.' In that moment you say to yourself: 'So what? Just faint.' Suddenly the pain disappears, like it never existed. You become lighter and you feel you are having an out-of-body experience. But you have to go through the door of pain. There is no other way.”

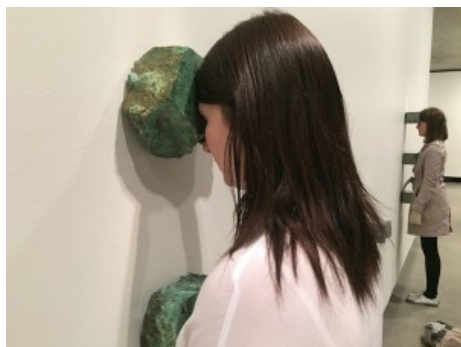
This may sound similar to the trances of mystics and yogis, but there is a twist to Abramovic's endurance feats. She claims she can only do it in public, feeding off the energy of an audience. In her private life she is disarmingly normal. She doesn't go in for long meditation sessions or rigorous diets. The only times she observes strict discipline is during a performance, or in training for a performance.

Anyone who meets Abramovic socially can verify this claim. An extremist when performing, she's

of Australia National Gallery of Victoria painting
photography political art politics Queensland Art
Gallery romance S.H. Ervin Gallery sci-fi
sculpture Sculpture By the Sea thriller Venice
Biennale war

chatty, personable, humorous in private. She's horrified at the prospect of turning 70 next year but looks more glamorous today than she did in 1998, when she held an exhibition at Sydney's Museum of Contemporary Art.

After 45 years of uncompromising performances, Abramovic is changing the way she works, and this is reflected in the evolution of the MONA survey. Spectators cease to be mere voyeurs, now they are expected to participate. In *The Chamber of Silence* (2015) we are asked to don noise-cancelling headphones, sit in a deckchair and gaze out of the window.



Detail view of Marina Abramovic's installation *Transitory Objects* at MONA with performance artist (foreground) and audience (rear) participating in crystal energy transference.

Photo ArtsHub

There is also a return of the *Transitory Objects* shown at the MCA in 1998 – a series of stone and metal platforms that are only activated when in contact with the body. The idea is for participants to channel their energies in relation to these sculptural objects.

If this seems to echo the New Age fascination with crystals, or perhaps Wilhelm Reich's Orgone Accumulators, Abramovic is both unrepentant and non-doctrinaire. She says she believes in everything – which is the opposite of a religious approach. She is also reluctant to use words such as “spiritual”, a term that has been debased by constant, profligate usage in art circles.

Her key concepts are simplicity and self-awareness – to be employed as weapons in the fight against the continuing degradation of human life and the planet.

Nevertheless, there is a cosmic fascination for all the manifestations of “energy” that have distinguished different cultures. A room called *Power Objects*, chosen from the MONA collection in collaboration with David Walsh, contains antiquities from China and ancient Egypt that have a powerful presence. In the same room there is a video of Abramovic in the Pitt Rivers Museum in Oxford, holding her hands over power objects from the collection. She did this for a week, and ended up spending three days in bed recuperating.



Scenes from Marina Abramovic: *In Residence*. Photo: Dallas Kilponen

Private Archaeology concludes with *Counting the Rice* (2015), which is also part of the Kaldor Project. The idea is for participants to sit in silence, counting grains of rice and lentils for as long as they like. It is the kind of exercise found on Buddhist retreats, when one is asked to slow down, leave the ego behind, and concentrate on a simple task. It's supposed to be ‘transformative’, albeit without the ordeal of having to pass through the door of pain, or even boredom. As one arrives at a system for keeping count, it becomes clear there are many ways to perform a simple task. We also learn something about ourselves, the way we devise methods and solve problems.

The biggest obstacle lies in overcoming the feeling that there are much better, more urgent things one should be doing. For many of us today this not just a feeling, it's the human condition.

Marina Abramovic: Private Archaeology
Museum of Old and New Art, Hobart, until 5 October

Published in the Sydney Morning Herald, Saturday 27th June, 2015

Tags: international artist, Marina Abramovic, Museum of Old and New Art, performance art

Related Posts: 13 Rooms: First Impressions, 13 Rooms, Monanism, The Red Queen, Theatre of the World

Sydney Morning
Herald Column

Art Essays
Australian Art
International Art
Aboriginal Art
Chinese Art
General Art Essays

Other Writing
Film Reviews
Book Reviews

Blog

Contact
Books
Diary
Advertise

© 2015 John McDonald. Website by 10 group.