

THE CONVERSATION

Excavating Marina Abramović's Private Archaeology – review

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The work, while personal, forms a lasting sense of introspection for the spectator as well. Image courtesy of Dark Mofo

Among the many acts and events at this year's Dark Mofo festival, currently showing in Tasmania, is the exhibition *Private Archaeology* by Serbian, New York-based performance artist, Marina Abramović.

Listed as one of Time Magazine's most influential people of 2014, Abramović is a pioneer of performance art, primarily when it comes to audience participation. *Private Archaeology* is Abramović's first show in Australia for 17 years.

Strangely, as a collection of Abramović's works from 1975 to the present, it isn't a retrospective. It should be viewed instead for what it is: a collection by MONA's senior curators, Nicole Durling and Olivier Varenne, that demonstrates the warrior seeker spirit of Abramović, developed over the last 40 years.



Marina Abramović: Private Archaeology, Dark Mofo 2015.

Images courtesy of Dark Mofo

Abramović is neither feminist nor political artist, believing the pain associated with endurance can be the door to self-knowledge. Walking with Abramović through the many doorways Durling and Varenne have scattered throughout nine galleries in the basement of MONA – art collector David Walsh's Museum of Old and New Art in Hobart, Tasmania – is anything but painful.

It provides the opportunity to partake in a personal excavation of Abramović's life, which not only reveals much about the artist – it forms a lasting sense of introspection for the spectator as well.



Marina Abramović: Private Archaeology, Dark Mofo 2015.

Images courtesy of Dark Mofo

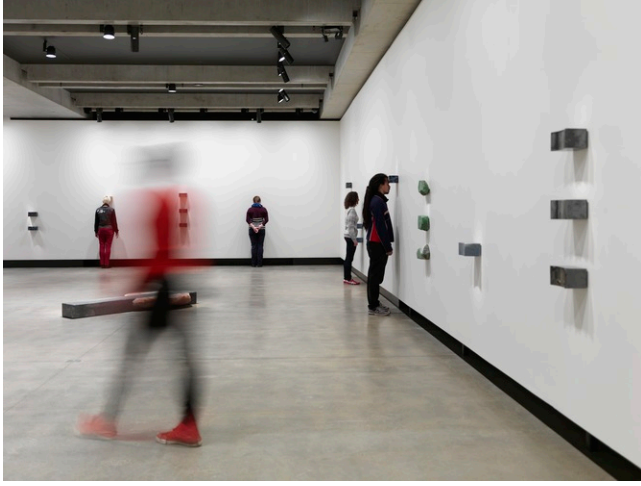
For those who travel to see the exhibition – and people will (and should) flock from all over the country to see it – there will be a polarisation over the validity of some of this work.

Abramović is a superstar, whether she pretends to like it or not, and spending a considerable amount of time in the exhibition engaging with the iconic image of the artist is not nearly as interesting as engaging with works where the artist is less present.

Literal images of Abramović are pleasantly absent from **The Chamber of Silence** (2015), Gallery Six; **At The Waterfall** (2003), Gallery Seven; **Transitory Objects** (1989-2015), Gallery Eight; and **Counting The Rice** (2015), Gallery Nine. For me this allowed the work to stand on its own.

At The Waterfall is a sound and video avalanche of 108 separate male and female Buddhist monks captured over five years as Abramović travelled alone throughout India.

On first glance it would seem quiet, peaceful and contemplative; but it is a confronting and brutal affront to the senses – especially after the experience of **The Chamber of Silence** in Gallery Six, where viewers sit in deck chairs wearing noise cancelling headphones, looking out through a large window into the peace and tranquillity of the MONA grounds; a random bunny even trotted through the landscape on my viewings as if released on cue by a stagehand from the wings.



Black Dragon, Marina Abramović: Private Archaeology, Dark Mofo, 2015. Image courtesy of Dark Mofo

Transitory Objects is a collection of objects central to experiencing the Abramović method, an obscure mode of performance-led self discovery, developed over the last 30 years as part of her solo work.

In Transitory Objects the audience engages with meditative practices as part of the viewing experience. For my viewing this was enlivened by the presence of student performers from the Theatre program at the Tasmanian College of the Arts (of which I'm the current head of department) who demonstrated the various modes of participation with these objects of transition.

The objects are in fact many smaller works including: *White/Red Dragon* (1989/90), *Inner Sky* (1991 and 2015), and *Chair for Human Use with Chair for Spirit Use* (2012).

Each Object is made from a variety of precious minerals, metals and timber. All have emerged in response to Abramović's experiences climbing and walking the Great Wall in China, where the materials used are those encountered along the way.

In this work Abramović presents "tools for a method". These transitory objects ask the viewer to physically touch, rest and sit on or against them, thereby literally becoming tools for meditative transformation.

In Gallery Nine we enter the MAI, the Marina Abramović Institute, which "encourages participation and challenges modes of seeing the world". On a 25-metre-long table – with all personal valuables secured in lockers, wearing monogrammed white lab coats and ear muffs – Abramović's training regime for a better humanity commences through the simplest task of counting grain in silence.

Counting the Rice asks the visitor to separate, count and record piles of rice and lentils in a search for stillness and peace. This work heralds a new focus for Abramović, where "rules of participation" are now central to the viewing experience.



Red Dragon, Marina Abramović: Private Archaeology, Dark Mofo, 2015. Image courtesy of Dark Mofo

Artist and work are inseparable, and for Abramović, who doesn't use a studio and makes through the act of living, her life literally is the work.

While I both understand and find this approach strangely attractive and admirable, it feels as if we've arrived at a point where Abramović's art and life now need to separate.

I gained a truer sense of how the artist interacts with the world when able to read her work sans icon and brand.

I think Abramović would appreciate that.

Marina Abramović, Private Archaeology, curated by Nicole Durling and Olivier Varenne, is presented as part of Dark MOFO at MONA Tasmania, until October 5. Details [here](#).



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