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Marina Abramović: 'The planet is dying. We have to be warriors'

In an exclusive interview in Tasmania, the performance artist explains why she stays out of the studio, resists nostalgia ... and how she ate three raw onions

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Let's start with a quick quiz: what do Marina Abramović (Serbian performance artist) and Tony Abbott (Australian prime minister) have in common?

Answer: they've both been filmed eating a raw onion. A whole one. In fact, Abramović ate three. "The first time, the light on video wasn't so good. The second, sound was lousy. Third, I couldn't speak or talk, my throat was burning."

The Onion is one of 13 self-portraits at the beating heart of Private Archaeology, a new exhibition of Abramović's work at Mona, the Museum of Old and New Art in Tasmania. Filmed between 1975 and 2002, these extreme video close-ups show the artist furiously brushing her hair, gnawing her cuticles, meditating, being strangled by a boa constrictor, and lying: under a pile of crystals, in shallow water, or upside down.

"Good art is never made in studio," Abramović says. "Good art I make in life."

The show is not a retrospective. Both Mona and Abramović are quite clear about that. Instead, it mixes recordings of her live performances - some solo, others made with the one-time love of her life, Ulay - with installations and interactive exercises from her Method, a series of mindfulness exercises developed at the Marina Abramović Institute in New York. There are also four cabinets filled with photos and notes from the artist's personal archive in Amsterdam (the archaeology of the show title).

It's Saturday morning of the opening weekend at Mona. The atmosphere around the site is almost nuptial. Glasses are being polished and four pigs are roasting on a spit in the car park. Yesterday's press view, today's launch and tonight's public party (Mona owner David Walsh always invites the whole island) feel a bit like the rehearsal dinner, service and reception of a wedding.

"Is the day!" announces the bride, sweeping into the backroom of the museum, clad head to toe in black (Dries Van Noten), her hair and make-up professionally done. Is she nervous? Always. "If I'm not nervous, I'm nervous. You never know how people are going to receive the work."

I'm nervous too, I say, to finally meet Abramović. It's a rare performance artist who has such celebrity status, whose fans will camp out all night to be first in line for her exhibitions, as if she were a new Apple product or Wimbledon.

In 2010, I caught her Moma blockbuster, *The Artist is Present*, on the last day of a New York visit, but couldn't queue up to sit opposite her because I was late for my flight. I missed her 2014 Serpentine show, *512 Hours*, too, thanks to another plane, this time taking me to a new job in Australia. (I don't mention how I first came across her work: in *Sex and the City*, when Carrie and the Russian visit her installation, *The House with the Ocean View*, at 2am on their first date). To be sharing a sofa with Abramović now, here in Tasmania, close enough that I can see the cracks in her shimmer eyeshadow, well, life is strange, I guess.

"When I think about my life, the early works, you know, always you learn as a young artist to have a style you can follow, a certain line," Abramović says. "But I didn't do that. I had this enormous urge to make different works. And some of them, I didn't see any kind of connection. I didn't know where I'm going. But now, looking 45 years back, everything had perfect sense. It's like a straight line."

At the same time, she makes sure to resist nostalgia. "I change so many houses and places where I live; I change them like I change socks. I don't have this absolute, kind of, how you say, attachment. My brother, if he just has to go to holiday to sleep in different bed, for him it is a disaster. I can sleep under this table or in a five-star hotel, I don't care.

"The idea of being in the right place in the right time is most important."

Right now, that place is Australia, three decades on from her first visit for the 1979 Sydney Biennale. It was after that trip that Abramović negotiated - through land rights activist Philip Toyne, who died last week - a seven-month stay with the Pitjantjatjara and Pintupi people of the Western Desert. The experience was transformative, she says, something I hear her repeat many times to many people over the course of the weekend.

"It was a big base of my performance art - the idea of here and now - because their Dreamtime and songlines are not something that's happening in the past or the future. It's always happening. It's always now. And that's the same as time-based art; it's immaterial. Only what matters is the present."

She learned the same lesson in different ways, she says, from the monks of Tibet and the shamans of Brazil.

But it's this kind of logic (or lack of it) that tends to drive Mona's David Walsh bonkers. When the pair share a stage on Sunday for a spirited public Q&A - Abramović in black jeans and biker boots this time, wearing her wry Slavic wit on her sleeve - he acknowledges as much: "Your sparkling magical thinking and my unpolished reductionist reality, these aren't world views that coincide."

Abramović: "I believe in everything by the way."

Walsh: "And I don't believe in anything."

Abramović: "And this is our main connection here."

Walsh goes on to tell the Woody Allen joke from the end of Annie Hall about the guy whose brother thinks he's a chook: "I would turn him in but I need the eggs."

Perhaps we all do. Abramović's approach and profile has transformed in recent years from the avant garde artist who cut, starved and endangered herself at will to some sort of spiritual godmother (a label she rejects) for celebrities such as Lady Gaga and Jay Z and for the public who queue in their thousands for her shows.

Australians are getting the Method twice over in 2015. Mona visitors are invited to don lab coats and count rice in a one-room recreation of the Marina Abramović Institute. Then in Sydney, the artist will be resident for 12 days at Pier 2/3, mentoring young Australian performance artists and leading the public in five exercises taken from the Serpentine show.

"I really like that my work pass the border from being for 'art public' and go to every life," she says of the project, organised by arts philanthropist John Kaldor. "If someone comes - housewife, politician, farmer, teacher or the child - they can actually experience this work and take something home ... but please dress warm because it is long time. The jackets with a feather, please."

What would happen, I wonder, if all of Canberra came - if we prescribed the Method to Abbott, Brandis, Shorten, Bishop, the lot? Marina reaches for her handbag (Givenchy) and gets out an iPad. "Come and sit next to me," she says, tapping the sofa and then her screen. "I show you image that really touch me."

Up pops a photo of a family - mother, father and son, eyes closed, hands held - taken during 512 Hours in London. "Just people, British people, and they are touching each other! And I have hundreds of these pictures. I had on this platform Bangladeshi housewife, people from Palestine, kids coming from school - and everybody get into that state." Even Guardian writer Zoe Williams, who wrote movingly of her conversion from cynic to crying wreck at the Serpentine last year.

Was Abramović surprised by their reactions? "I'm entering the kind of places in my work where I don't even have a name for it, this art," she says.

At the Mona press launch, she goes further, arguing that the role of the artist is more crucial than it has even been. “We live in difficult times, probably the worst time. Even his holiness, the Dalai Lama, says he doesn’t want to reincarnate. Though, by the way, he says he would come back a woman - give us lots of hope.”

A smile, then serious again. “The complete planet is dying. There is hunger, wars everywhere. There is crime, cruelty, violence ... so we can’t just be having good days, like Cézanne, Monet, Picasso, sitting in the countryside having the best wine, the best food, the best women. We really have to be warriors. Go where the problems are and give awareness to people. Work.”

The iPad comes out three more times on the sofa. Here is a computer visualisation of research she is conducting with scientists to measure brain activity during non-verbal communication; here is Igor Levit, the Russian concert pianist with whom she is teaming up to show people how to enjoy listening to classical music; here is the script for her next magnum opus.

Seven Deaths will see seven big name film-makers (Roman Polanski rumoured to be among them) direct Abramović in the role of Maria Callas, dying the seven most famous deaths in opera. She lists them off: “Knifing in Carmen, jumping in Tosca, strangulation in Otello, burning in Norma, suffocation in Aida, harakiri in Butterfly, consumption in La Traviata.”

She has always been fixated on death - “When I was 16, I was crying like crazy every day that I was going to die” - but now, at 68, she says she is focused on making the most of what time she has left. Seven Deaths is part of this - Callas and Abramović share a strong physical resemblance but the links go deeper. “I had difficult mother, difficult childhood like she had. She is Sagittarius like I am. I almost died from broken heart because of love. And she really did.”

What Onassis was to Callas, Ulay is to Abramović. The two artists lived and worked together for 12 years, including those months in the outback, but eventually split - in spectacular fashion - walking from opposite ends of the Great Wall of China for three months to meet and part in the middle. The next time they saw each other was across the table at Moma during *The Artist is Present*.

Multiple videos of that encounter have recently gone re-viral on YouTube, which begs the question: do the millions of people watching them connect more with art or reality? Ulay and Abramović share the screen in several powerful pieces in the Mona show, too.

“Everyone has his own love story,” Marina answers, with an imperceptible twinge. “That moment, that guy sitting in front of me, my whole life went through my head. Never mind this is life, never mind this is performance. This is pure human emotion. And that’s why everyone reacting. It’s performance that break into life.”

If there’s an ambiguity here, Abramović is happy to sit with it. At Sunday’s Q&A, she says: “There are three Marinas in me. The one Marina is very heroic. I just go for it. I don’t care how much pain inside. Then we have second Marina - very different, very spiritual, very

emotional. Too emotional. Can cry all the time. Is kind of pain in arse. And then there is third one who really like bullshit. Who like fashion, who like eating chocolate. Who like to be lazy and doing nothing and try to avoid any hardship, any confrontation. All these are real.”

Like the onions, I think. Even if only one makes the final cut, they all counted. I’ve certainly met three Marinas in as many days at Mona.

An audience member asks if Abramović will add her voice to the campaign against the closure of Aboriginal communities - perhaps return to the desert and make a new work. “Art can’t change the world,” she responds, gentle but forceful at the same time. “It can only bring the consciousness and ask the questions. Like: why are politicians always oversexed, corrupt and do terrible things, yet we are the ones who are voting them?” The idea is left hanging.

“It’s not possible for one single artist to do all this - it’s a group work.”

● Marina Abramović: Private Archaeology is at the Museum of Old and New Art, Hobart, until 5 October. Marina Abramović: In Residence is at Pier 2/3, Sydney, from 24 June to 5 July

Nancy Groves travelled to Hobart courtesy of Mona and Tourism Tasmania

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