

Marina Abramović
 Born: 30 November 1946, Belgrade, Yugoslavia



BORN

1850 '60 '70 '80 '90 '00 '10 '20 '30 '40 '50 '60 '70 '80 '90 '00 2010

Years Worked



"The audience is like a dog. They can feel immediately that you are afraid, that you are insecure, that you're not in the right state of mind - and they just leave..."

SYNOPSIS

Towards the late 1950s, as abstract art began to lose impetus, many artists across the world began to embrace **performance art**. Performance had been a feature of avant-garde art since around 1910, but Marina Abramovic's work is typical of the aims of the new generation in her eagerness to avoid traditional, object-based art materials (such as paint and canvas), and to cut down the distance between the artist and the audience by making her own body the medium. Born under Yugoslavia's repressive Communist dictatorship, and raised by parents closely tied to the regime, Abramovic's dramatic and dangerous performances often seem like cathartic responses to these early experiences of power. She has produced a quantity of sculpture, but she remains best known for performance, and she remains one of only a handful of performance artists of her generation who have continued to

perform late in their career.

KEY IDEAS

- Marina Abramovic's work is typical of the ritualistic strain in 1960s performance art. It often involves putting herself in grave danger and performing lengthy, harmful routines that result in her being cut or burnt, or enduring some privation. She views her art almost as a sacrificial and religious rite, performed by herself for a congregation of viewers. And the physical ordeals she endures form the basis for exploring such themes as trust, endurance, cleansing, exhaustion, and departure.
- We might interpret her work as having displaced art from traditional media such as painting and sculpture, and moved it directly on to her body. Yet far from conceiving it as simply a surface, she has said that she thinks of the body as the "point of departure for any spiritual development."
- Between 1976 and 1988 she collaborated with the German-born artist known as Ulay. The performances the pair created during this time often exploited their duality to investigate ideas such as the division between mind and body, nature and culture, active and passive attitudes, and, of course, between male and female.

ARTIST BIOGRAPHY

Childhood

Marina Abramovic was born in 1946 in Belgrade, Yugoslavia to parents who held prominent positions in the Communist government. Her father, Vojin, was in the Marshal's elite guard and her mother, Danica, was an art historian who oversaw historic monuments. After her father left the family, her mother took strict control of eighteen-year-old Abramovic and her younger brother, Velimir. Her mother was difficult and sometimes violent, yet she supported her daughter's interest in art. While growing up, Abramovic saw numerous Biennales in Venice, exposing her to artists outside of Communist Yugoslavia such as Robert Rauschenberg, Jasper Johns and Louise Nevelson.

Early training



Abramovic studied painting at the Academy of Fine Arts in Belgrade (1965-1970), and at Radionica Krsta Hegeusic, Academy of Fine Arts in Zagreb (1970-1972). It was in the early 1970s that she began creating performative art, initially creating sound installations, but quickly moving towards works that more directly involved the body. During this period she taught at the Academy of Arts, University of Novi Sad (1973-1975).

Mature period

In her early work, Abramovic often placed her body in danger: she took drugs intended to treat catatonia and schizophrenia (*Rhythm 2*, 1974); she invited viewers to threaten her body with a variety of objects including a loaded gun (*Rhythm 0*, 1974); and she cut her stomach with a razor blade, whipped herself, and lay on a block of ice (*Thomas Lips*, 1975). She has suggested that the inspiration for such work came from both her experience of growing up under Tito's Communist dictatorship, and of her relationship with her mother: "All my work in Yugoslavia was very much about rebellion, not against just the family structure but the social structure and the structure of the art system there... My whole energy came from trying to overcome these kinds of limits." Accordingly, these rebellious performances, which took place in small studios, student centers and alternative spaces in Yugoslavia, ended by 10pm, the strict curfew set by her mother.



Abramovic created these pioneering works when performance art was still a new, emerging art form in Europe, and until the mid 1970s she had little knowledge of performances being done outside Yugoslavia - even then, she learned of such work only through word of mouth. But in 1975, while in Amsterdam, Abramovic met the German-born artist Frank Uwe Laysiepen - known as **Ulay** - and the next year she moved out of her parents' home for the first time to live with him. For the next 12 years, Abramovic and Ulay were artistic collaborators and lovers. They traveled across Europe in a van, lived with Australian Aborigines, and in India's Tibetan Buddhist monasteries, and spent time in the Sahara, Thar and Gobi deserts. Their works, which they performed in gallery spaces primarily in Europe, included *Imponderabilia* (1977), in which they stood naked in a narrow doorway, forcing spectators to pass between them; *Breathing In/Breathing Out* (1977), in which they inhaled and exhaled from each other's mouths until they almost suffocated; *Relation in Time* (1977), involving them sitting back to back with their hair tied together; *Light/Dark* (1977), in which they alternately slapped each other's faces; and *Nightsea Crossing* (1981-1987), a performance in which the pair sat silently opposite each other at a wooden table for as long as possible. When Abramovic and Ulay decided to end their artistic collaboration and personal relationship in 1988, they embarked on a piece called *The Lovers*; each started at a different end of the Great Wall of China and walked for three months until they met in the middle and said goodbye. They have had very little contact with each other since that point, both proceeding independently with their artistic work.

Late period



After this separation from Ulay, Abramovic returned to making solo works; she also worked with new collaborators such as Charles Atlas (on *Biography*, 1992); and she worked increasingly with video (such as in *Cleaning the Mirror #1*, 1995). In 1989, she began making a number of sculptural works, *Transitory Objects for Human and Non-Human Use*, which comprise objects meant to incite audience participation and interaction. In addition to her performances during the 1990s, Abramovic taught at the Hochschule der Kunste in Berlin and the Academie des Beaux-Arts in Paris (1990-1991), as well as the Hochschule fur Bildende Kunste in Hamburg (1992). Beginning in 1994 she taught for seven years as a performance art professor at the Hochschule fur Bildende Kunste in Braunschweig, Germany.

She was awarded the Golden Lion for Best Artist at the Venice Biennale for *Balkan Baroque* (1997), and in 2003 she won a New York Dance and Performance Award ("Bessie") for *The House with the Ocean View* (2002), performed at Sean Kelly Gallery in New York. In 2005, she restaged performances by artists such as Vito Acconci and Bruce Nauman, as well as her own *Thomas Lips* (1975) in an exhibition at the Guggenheim Museum called "Seven Easy Pieces", for which she earned a U.S. Art Critics Association Award.

While many artists, including Abramovic, made very little effort in the early 1970s to capture their performances on film or video, feeling that the true performance could never be repeated, she has since argued for the importance of continuing the life of these works through re-

performance. She has said, "the only real way to document a performance art piece is to re-perform the piece itself." To that end, the Museum of Modern Art recently held a retrospective exhibition - its first ever for any performance artist - that included performances of her work and a new piece, *The Artist is Present*, performed by Abramovic herself. For the full duration of the 2010 exhibit, she would sit across from an empty chair in which museum visitors were invited to sit opposite her for as long as they liked.

LEGACY



Abramovic, who has referred to herself as, "the grandmother of performance art," was part of the earliest experiments in performance art, and she is one of the few pioneers of that generation still creating new work. She has been, and continues to be, an essential influence for performance artists making work over the last several decades, especially for works that challenge the limits of the body. Although she does not view her own artwork through the frame of **Feminist Art**, her confrontations with the physical self and the primary role given to the female body have helped shape the direction of that discipline. Her commitment to giving new life to older performance works - both hers and the works of others -- led her to create the Marina Abramovic

Institute for Preservation of Performance Art, set for a 2012 opening, in Hudson, New York. This non-profit organization will support teaching, preserving and funding performance art, ensuring an enduring legacy for her performances and, more broadly, for the ephemeral art form itself. About this Institute, Abramovic has said, "Performance is fleeting. But this, this place, this is for time. This is what I will leave behind."

Original content written by Rachel Gershman

ARTIST QUOTES

"To me the pain and the blood are merely means of artistic expression."

"Through performance, I found the possibility of establishing a dialogue with the audience through an exchange of energy, which tended to transform the energy itself. I could not produce a single work without the presence of the audience, because the audience gave me the energy to be able, through a specific action, to assimilate it and return it, to create a genuine field of energy."

"I started realizing I could use any material I want, fire, water, and the body. The moment when I started using the body, it was such an enormous satisfaction that I had and that I can communicate with the public that I could never do anything else. I could never go back to the seclusion of the studio and be protected by the space there. The only way of expression is to perform."

"When I am performing a piece, anything that happens in that moment is part of the piece."

"We are always in the space in-between... all the spaces where you are not actually at home. You haven't arrived yet.... This is where our mind is the most open. We are alert, we are sensitive, and destiny can happen. We do not have any barriers and we are vulnerable. Vulnerability is important. It means we are completely alive and this is an extremely important space. This is for me the space from which my work generates."

Major Works:



Title: Rhythm 10 (1973)

Materials: 20 knives, tape recorder

Description: Abramovic's first forays into performance focused primarily on sound installations, but she increasingly incorporated her body - often harming it in the process. *In Rhythm 10*, she used a series of 20 knives to quickly stab at the spaces between her outstretched fingers. Every time she pierced her skin, she selected another knife from those carefully laid out in front of her. Halfway through, she began playing a recording of the first half of the hour-long performance, using the rhythmic beat of the knives striking the floor, and her hand, to repeat the same movements, cutting herself at the same time. She has said that this work marked the first time she understood that drawing on the audience's energy drove her performance; this became an important concept informing much of her later work.



Title: Rhythm 5 (1974)

Materials: Wood shavings, gasoline, fire

Description: Viewing both life and performance art as reaching beyond the realm of awareness, Abramovic has created performances in which she sleeps or becomes drugged into unconsciousness to examine this crucial aspect of life. In *Rhythm 5*, she created a star shape with wood shavings covered in gasoline and lit the wood on fire. After cutting her nails and hair and dropping them into the fire, she lay down within the burning star, a symbol both of the occult and of Communism in Yugoslavia. When audience members realized her clothes were on fire and she had lost consciousness due to the lack of oxygen amidst the flames, they pulled her out, ending the performance. After performing *Rhythm 5*, she said she "realized the subject of my work should be the *limits* of the body. I would use performance to push my mental and physical limits beyond consciousness."



Title: Rhythm 0 (1974)

Materials: 72 objects including a feather, pen, book, saw, honey, band-aid, salt, rose, gun, bullet, paint, whip, coat and scissors

Description: With a description reading "I am the object," and, "During this period I take full responsibility," Abramovic invited spectators to use any of 72 objects on her body in any way they desired, completely giving up control. *Rhythm 0* was exemplary of Abramovic's belief that confronting physical pain and exhaustion was important in making a person completely present and aware of his or her self. This work also reflected her interest in performance art as a way to transform both the performer and the audience. She wanted spectators to become collaborators, rather than passive observers. Here, they physically directed the actions, while in other performances, Abramovic involved the audience through a dynamic exchange of energy. In *Rhythm 0*, the audience divided itself into those who sought to harm Abramovic (holding the loaded gun to her head) and those who tried to protect her (wiping away her tears). Ultimately, after she stood motionless for six hours, the protective audience members insisted the performance be stopped, seeing that others were becoming increasingly violent.



Title: Rest Energy (1980)

Materials: Bow and arrow

Description: *Rest Energy* was only four minutes and 10 seconds long, but it was a highly intense piece that revealed the fragility of the line between life and death. Abramovic and Ulay faced each other, aiming an arrow on a tense bow, just inches from her heart. They placed small microphones on their chests to make audible their increasingly rapid heartbeats in response to the growing danger. This work was one of their many performances that depended on a close relationship and trust. Many of their works also often involved elements of extreme duration, a characteristic that Abramovic continued after she and Ulay stopped working together.



Title: Balkan Baroque (1997)

Materials: Projections, cow bones, copper sinks and tub filled with black water, bucket, soap, metal brush, white dress

Description: Reminiscent of *Cleaning the Mirror #1* (1995), in which she sat on a stool for three hours washing a skeleton, Abramovic created *Balkan Baroque* in response to the innumerable deaths that had taken place in the former Yugoslavia. Sitting on top of 1,500 cow bones in a white dress, she spent four days, six hours a day, washing each of these bloody bones, surrounded by projected images of her parents and herself. The accompanying sound included her recorded description of methods used in the Balkans for killing rats and her singing of her native folksongs. The performance progression was made visceral due to the unbearable heat of the basement room and fetid smell. For Abramovic, it was not enough to simply recount the number of people lost in modern-day war. Instead, she aimed to remember the lives, efforts and hopes of individuals killed by carefully touching and cleaning "their" physical bones and blood. Transforming her individual performative experiences into universal ideas was also an important concept for Abramovic throughout all her work. The comparison between the inability to scrub away all the blood and the inability to erase the shame of war is a concept she viewed as having universal reach.



Title: The House with the Ocean View (2002)

Materials: Sink, bed, chair with mineral pillow, table, toilet, shower, pants and shirts in different colors, white towels, metal bucket, metronome, bar of natural soap, bottle of rose water, bottle of pure almond oil, ladder of wood and butcher knives

Description: In *The House with the Ocean View*, Abramovic spent twelve days in the Sean Kelly Gallery without eating, writing or speaking. Contained within three 'rooms' built six feet off the ground, Abramovic slept, drank water, urinated, showered and gazed at the viewers wearing a differently colored outfit each day. She could walk between the three rooms, but the ladders leading to the floor had rungs made of butcher knives. Set to the sound of a metronome, Abramovic ritualized the activities of daily life, focusing on the self and simplicity while eliminating all aspects of narrative and dialogue. She saw this piece as an act of purification - not just for herself, but also for any viewer who entered the space. This piece was a shift from the masochism of her earlier works to

performances that focus more on ideas of presence and shared energy, although there is still the element of danger present in the butcher knife ladder. In addition, it was an extension of the challenging durational works that have long been a significant aspect of Abramovic's career.