

Interview by Bev Sage and Huw Spanner

Pillow talk

For 40 years, **Marina Abramović** has been a pioneer of performance as an art form, pushing her own body and mind to often astonishing extremes. *Third Way* settled down with her at the Chiltern Firehouse in London.



Everyone who has met you reports that you are funny and relaxed and unassuming – which is very much not how your work is perceived. Is there some enigma there?

You know, my work is so hardcore, I put so much into it and it's really serious, and so when I come to real life I have to go a different way completely: I want to have fun, I want to have ice cream or chocolate. And I love to laugh – for me, it cures everything. Plus, I love people.

People who have only seen my work cannot believe how I am in private life, and people who have only seen me in private life cannot believe the kind of work I'm doing. So, it's a contradiction. And that contradiction is one of the things I am exposing in my work, because all of us have it and if you really show your vulnerability, and expose things you are ashamed of especially, you create a different communication based on trust.

You get what you get from me. I don't hide anything. There is no dark side, because I tell it all.

When you came to London in the summer to do *512 Hours at the Serpentine Gallery*, you admitted that you were quite apprehensive, because you perceived the British as cynical and sarcastic people. How did it turn out?

I changed my opinion 180 degrees. It's incredible. The first few weeks were not easy, because there is a lot of self-consciousness here, a lot of shyness, and when you offer your hand to somebody you don't know, they immediately withdraw. But after a while something opened people up – maybe because they had heard that the gallery is empty and actually the public is the subject. And in the end I felt that what I'd done at the Serpent-

ine was like I had turned a key in this immense machine and it had started working by itself – and it worked in such a profound way, because the reaction was unbelievable. People came back and came back and stayed for hours and hours and hours. For the last few weeks, you didn't even see me – I was doing everything like everybody else: I was completely inside the whole process.

I think that this kind of work 10 years ago was not possible at all, but the acceptance just showed that actually the British need this kind of thing I offered.² You know, we've become consumer junkies, art is a commodity, and just to show people that you are there with nothing and you can do something with that and get a really profound experience is important. And then British people are actually incredibly gentle and wonderful.

I remember that you told the *Observer* of a writer who came to the Serpentine once a week and for three hours walked backwards in slow motion and then went home to work. For him, you said, it was 'a brain spa'.

One person wrote me something very beautiful. She said: 'You gave us so little but in the end I came out with so much.' And that 'so much' is what you put into it.

The last day was for me so emotional, because it was raining like hell and the people who were inside didn't want to leave, so that we couldn't let in new people. I went outside and I said to people: 'I'm so sorry, maybe you will not get in.' And they said to me: 'We don't care! We are here, the waiting is part of the experience and we just want to be part of it.' And it was so emotional! I mean, you British are so emotional! You're just hiding it.

You were also surprised by the way people responded to your (slightly less minimalist) performance *The Artist is Present* in 2010, is that right?

When I first proposed the performance, the curator [of MoMA] said to me: 'You understand that this is New York? Nobody has time! The chair will be mostly empty in front of you, so what are you going to do for three months?' I said: 'I don't care, I will sit anyway.'

The chair was never empty and that was a real surprise. People slept outside on the street, just to be first in the queue. And 850,000 people came to it – it was absolutely the record for a living artist, nobody expected that – and they took time, and time, and time.

Seventy-eight people came to see it more than 24 times and they formed a club and every month they have dinner together. They come from different social backgrounds, religions, whatever, and some of them have been in the museum very rarely; but that experience kind of brought them together. I created some kind of new community.

Another thing that was for me very touching was that the [security men] who guarded the museum every day would come on their free day in civilian clothes and wait in the line to sit with me, because they wanted the experience. That's something that does not [normally] happen.

How did the whole thing affect you? It must have been so gruelling, though conceptually so simple.

Before *The Artist is Present*, I trained for a year – it was like going on the space programme! First of all, I knew

I would be motionless for long periods of time, which is extremely difficult because it is unnatural for the body. I had swollen legs, I had terrible back pain, you name it. And, second thing, I trained not to have lunch, and to drink only by night so that I don't need to pee [in the day]. I had a hole made [in the chair I sat on,] thinking that I'm going to pee; but I never used it, because actually my mind control is amazing. You know, this kind of work, and long-duration work in general, needs very much determination and willpower to do it.

I think I all my life trained for this kind of work. I spent a year with Aborigines in central Australia, I went to deserts, I have for more than 25 years worked with Tibetans in different retreats, all to understand how the mind works and to learn to control it. My early research was really into the physical limits of the body, and now it is into the mental. I think I am much stronger now. People say, 'She's become soft!' but, I tell you, running into a wall for an hour³ is *much* less difficult than sitting motionless for three months. You see, it's not enough to sit on the chair physically; you have to be in the present with your mind at the same time, so that your entire concentration covers the person who is sitting in front of you.

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Photographs Andrew Firth

And when that happens, it's incredible how much subconscious information goes through the brain. You know so much about a person, without one word spoken, just by looking at them. It's really true what they say, that the eyes are the door of the soul.

When I watched the independent documentary *Marina Abramović: The Artist is Present* [2012], I was taken aback when you asked your staff at the end of one day's sitting: 'Who was that Asian man? Did anyone get his phone number?'

Yes, sure, he was so fucking good-looking! Are you surprised that I was curious? You're so spiritual!

I had assumed you had been sitting there serene, in a kind of transcendent state!

But this is exactly the contradiction I am talking about. This is why people can respond to me, because everyone is the same. You would have had that kind of thought if you had seen somebody gorgeous, and I am the same. You see, in the film I'm real. I'm not pretending.

OK. You have always gone to such extremes –

Yeah, but look at my background! How could I do less than that? I mean, it was the only way.

Can we talk about your childhood? Your father was a war hero, the commander of the First Proletarian Brigade in the Partisan Army, and your mother had been a major in the Partisans, and both were committed Communists, whereas your grandmother was very devout –

And we had a patriarch in the family – a saint.⁵ It was a mess!

Is it facile to trace many of the themes and motifs of your work back to those conflicting influences in your past?

I always say: the more shitty the childhood, the better the artist, because there are more things to work out. And I had a pretty hard childhood!

My father and mother came from totally different backgrounds. My mother was from a very rich family and had studied in Switzerland; my father was one of 17 children, incredibly poor, and had been in prison before the war for his politics. So, he was pure Communist, my mother was pure bourgeois, and they clashed so much. Everything was about willpower. The entire thing with

my father was that your private life is not important. What is important is the cause, for which you have to sacrifice everything.

With my mother, it was incredible discipline and order. When she was pregnant with me, she dreamt that she was giving birth to a huge snake. She was at a Party meeting when her waters broke, but she didn't want to leave the meeting until it was finished, because she was presiding, and so she was taken to the hospital in emergency. And then I was taken straight to [her mother] and I spent my first six years with her.

Which are the most formative years...

I saw my mother and father just as these strange guys who came to bring me presents – and I never wanted any of their presents. I didn't like dolls, I played only with shadows – I was strange from the beginning.

My grandmother spent most of the time in church, from morning till evening. She was deeply religious, and she deeply hated Communism. With her, it was all about silence and ritual. Her mysticism really is very strong in my work. I would never be what I am if I didn't have this mixture.

I remember going with her to church as a child and seeing always people putting their finger into this water to cross themselves; and maybe I was a little bored one day, so I got a chair and I drank all the water from the font. My idea was that if I drink it I will become holy and I can levitate – but instead I got terrible diarrhoea.

When eventually I was taken to my parents' house, it was a terrible shock for me, because from that quietness I went to the complete opposite. That afternoon, my mother came back from the hospital with my baby brother and their attention was given entirely to him, because he immediately started having epileptic fits. I was kind of abandoned.

It was a very cruel childhood – I was often beaten. I was trained to be a soldier, you know? I vividly remember my mother coming to my room in the middle of the night and waking me if I was sleeping untidily. So, now I sleep straight. My mother never kissed me in my life, ever. When I was 35, I asked her: 'Why did you never kiss me?' She was so surprised and she said: 'Of course, not to spoil you!' She damaged my entire life with that little touch of not kissing me!

I stayed at home until I was 29. I could only do per-

formances before 10 in the evening, because I had to be home by then. So, all this burning myself, cutting my stomach, whatever, I had to do before 10! I was like a black sheep, I was constantly trying to rebel. Both my mother and father were [censured] by Party meetings for my upbringing: How could I do this kind of stuff? It was for the mental hospital, not for art! So, that really made me strong.

I remember I collected a lot of brown shoe polish and I smeared it all over my room – the windows, the doors, everywhere. The smell was excruciating! It was like the Baader-Meinhof [Gang], who put shit on their bodies to make them untouchable. My mother opened the door and said 'Ugh!' and never entered any more.

Was your grandmother's religion so mystical that you yourself got no clear idea or sense of God, or...?

You know, I... I never really went into this God story. For me, it was all about energy. I could see things in the dark, I could speak to spirits and I had these incredibly intense dreams, like a parallel reality. They were so vivid, I even dreamt a dream in a dream, and the dream had a meaning and a sense of the future. Unbelievable!

I had such strong clairvoyant experiences, especially when I went to live with the Aborigines in Central Australia [in 1980/1]. I wrote down the things I saw – in pure daylight – and then I checked them with the newspaper. I predicted an earthquake in Italy [in November 1980] 48 hours before it happened, the shooting of the Pope [in May 1981] 12 hours before it happened, and so much more. It's almost frightening to say it, but I had this ability.

And it's not hocus pocus. I don't understand what it is but there is something to it, because when I do performance I get into a state that is different from the state of reality and I become like a receiver and [transmitter] of some other type of energy which is not my own. And

When I do performance, I get into a state that is different from the state of reality and I become like a receiver and transmitter of some other energy that is not my own. It happens every time and it affects me and it affects others.

this happens every time and it affects me and it affects other people. After I did *The Artist is Present*, American and Russian scientists were interested in studying my brain and they told me that it has a [capacity to transmit] energy that is very intense, more than normal.

You know, I was completely changed after *The Artist is Present*, and now after *512 Hours* I desperately need rest, because I don't even know what really happened in it. Something happened there that is not about art any more but about a much larger scale. This I'm sure about.

Would people who knew you as a little girl have been surprised to know what you would become?

You know, when I was six, seven, I was drawing everywhere, on the walls, the sheets... And my mother really supported this activity, because she was the director of the Museum of the Revolution and Art in Belgrade. I would go with her all the time, so I was exposed to art and I was always thinking of El Greco, things like that. So, I have to give her that.

When did you first think of yourself as an artist?

I had my first show at 12 years – I was very jealous of Mozart because he started at seven! The first things I was painting were my dreams, because for me that was easy. I have had an artistic career ever since.

And did you attract an audience even then?

It was an official show, and people bought my paintings. I remember signing them as big as Picasso: *Marina!* My mother actually bought some of them back, because she was very proud of them. (She hated everything else! I sent her my books – I have made 46 books, really big ones, like 300, 400 pages – and when she died I looked at them and I could not believe it. All of them were like 35, 45 pages. Every photo [in which] I was naked, she just tore it out – she couldn't show it to the neighbours! I have them now; they are like a special edition.

How did you feel about being naked in public?

I am incredibly self-conscious in private, because, you know, am I too fat, or I have too big a stomach or my knees are not good. But when I am in the public I don't care, because I don't present myself, I present purely the female body, whatever it is: young, not young, I don't care. In private, I'm all issues, like everybody else!

When did your body become the focus of your art?

It's a long story, very gradual. When I was 18, I started painting truck accidents. I would put little toy trucks on the highway so the big ones [would] smash them, but they never did; so I went to the studio and painted the opposite: the little trucks of children smashing big socialistic trucks, [to show that] innocence can win.

And then I started painting clouds – I was always looking into the sky. One day, I was lying on the grass and there came maybe 12 supersonic fighter planes and they create this incredible drawing in the sky, and I have a revelation. I say: 'This is incredible! Why should I do something two-dimensional when I can use everything? I can use fire, I can use water, I can use the sky. I can use my body.' I went first to the military headquarters to ask for 12 planes. They called my father: 'Do you know how much it would cost for her to make drawings in the sky with our planes? Is she out of her mind?'

I gradually started involving the body – and as soon as I started using my body it changed everything. You know, for an artist the most important [thing] is to find the right tool. Painting is a tool, sculpture is a tool, video is a tool, and performance is another tool, because I could actually do something with that energy.

I made *Freeing the Body* [1976] – I just dance to the rhythm of the music until after six hours I fall down. In *Freeing the Voice* [1976], I scream until I don't have any voice. And *Freeing the Memory* [1976]⁶ – this is wonderful, this you should see! – is a video [in which] I just look into the camera and say all the words [I can think of till my mind goes blank]. If I did it now, it would be another vocabulary completely; but then it went from 'Stalin' to 'patchouli' – it's crazy, because I was really dealing with my state of mind at that time. So, a whole series of freeing, freeing, freeing myself from everything.

The word 'art' is so elastic and people use it in so many different ways. What is the definition of 'art' you are using when you say your work is art? A lot of your early performances sound like exorcism or exhibitionism – Never exhibitionism! That's a word that the public put on me, but then that means that every ritual in ancient and indigenous cultures is exhibitionism; and it is not. There is a purpose, to open the mind in a certain way.

If some kid says to me, 'I would like to be an artist,' I tell him right away: 'You're not one.' Because you can't like to be an artist – you are one or you're not. Being an artist is like breathing. If you don't breathe, you fucking die. If you wake up in the morning and you have this urge to create, you are pretty certainly an artist, because, like breathing, it's a necessity.

That makes you an artist; it doesn't make you a great artist. For a great artist, the rules are all different. [It takes] a lot of sacrifice, a burning desire, being obsessed, being *diseased* by that creativity that can actually burn you inside. So, that's my definition.

And are you doing what you do for your own benefit or for the benefit of other people? Or both?

I've always been impressed by artists who say, 'I don't care about the public, I'm just doing this for myself,' but for me it has to serve a purpose: it has to communicate a message to people. When you see a good performance, it changes your life. Unfortunately, there are many shit performances that just annoy you, and that is the problem.

For me, the purpose of doing anything is to lift the

human spirit. It's so easy to put the human spirit down – you can do it in three seconds – and I'm so fed up with art that shows how shitty reality is, because we already know how shitty it is. I want to know what I can do to change it. Even if it is the smallest contribution, it's still a contribution. And if everybody had this kind of idea, the world would be a different place.

But (to go back to your early work) *Lips of Thomas* [1975] doesn't lift the human spirit, does it? It shows how shitty the world is, surely?

I see it totally differently. It's very autobiographical – you have Communism and Orthodoxy perfectly combined but with a twist. You have the cross, the star, the whipping – especially the whipping: I whip myself to the point where I don't feel pain any more. So, you can take all these elements and transcend them in your spirit. It's very much like, I don't know, rituals in the Amazon: they're unbelievably painful – they cut their bodies, they do these terrible things – and why do they do this? Because in this way you actually conquer the pain, you go through it into another reality – and to conquer pain is to get free of pain. So, this whole piece is about getting free of pain – this is how I see it.

So, it's almost shamanistic...

Not *almost*. Shamanism is something that interests me enormously. I have just finished this movie on shamanism: I spent four years going to see places of power and people who have certain power and they taught me how to move the wind, how to make the rain. It's all possible! Kids, you have no idea. You should never use the telephone, because telepathy works – and it's cheaper!

Recently, you have started to think about your legacy, and you are setting up a Marina Abramović Institute...

The Institute is very important to me: first, to entrust all my experience, all my knowledge, unconditionally to young artists, but also to be a kind of platform for science, technology, art and spirituality all together to create this new reality, I can call it.

For me, Bauhaus was such an important movement and Surrealism was another; but then what happened? All the artists became kind of victims of art as a commodity: they got higher prices on the market but they lost the community. We have started [recreating] this community which was so evident in the Seventies but we lost it. You have no idea how much correspondence I have had with people after *512 Hours*.

To raise money [for the Institute], recently I gave a hug to anybody who gave me one dollar. I hugged people for 30 seconds – really, it was incredibly emotional!

You have talked very positively about the public reaction to your more recent work, but what did you learn about human nature from works such as *Rhythm 0* [1974]?

Rhythm 0 is a very interesting work because until then everybody was talking about how performance is not a form of art, it is all bullshit, you know, it's exhibitionism – the artist just wants to be naked. And there I was, completely dressed, beside 72 objects that could hurt me or give me pleasure and the public were completely free to do whatever they wanted. And what happened? It provoked a wild reaction. They only didn't rape me because they had come with their wives! I was just an object – it was amazing! I knew [then] that the public could kill me.

1 See bit.ly/1otZHg2. For a total of 512 hours from June 11 to August 25, she presided over and engaged in an exercise in mindfulness, using only a few props in an otherwise empty gallery.

2 But see, for example, bit.ly/1wN49Gh and bit.ly/1wN42dZ.

3 For a total of 736 hours and 30 minutes from March 14 to May 31, she sat silent and all but motionless in the atrium of the Museum of Modern Art and returned the gaze of more than 1,500 people who took their turn to sit opposite her 'for a duration of their choosing'. (For a portrait of each sitter, see bit.ly/111OcCx.)

4 As in *Expanding in Space*, with Ulay (1977) – see bit.ly/1umQGs0.

5 Her great-uncle, Varnava Rosić, was head of the Serbian Orthodox Church from 1930 until his death in 1937.

6 See bit.ly/1ss5wWU for an extract.

7 In this performance, naked, she ate a kilo of honey, drank a litre of red wine, cut a five-pointed star on her stomach with a razor blade, whipped herself and lay down on a cross of ice, bleeding freely.

8 In this performance, she sat in silence for six hours by a table on which lay 72 objects, ranging from a feather to a gun. A sign told the audience that they were allowed to use any of these to do anything they liked to her.

9 Lady Gaga's visit to *The Artist is Present* was reported on Twitter. She did not have time to sit, but subsequently became a friend and student of Abramović and worked with her.

Forty years later, I do *512 Hours* and I know that now I understand human nature and I know how I can get the best out of anybody. I understand the energy. I know how British people can change, from being sarcastic or self-conscious or whatever into being incredibly generous, gentle and loving. I have the key to this. It took me a long time to get it.

You have become, by your own admission, a brand – Yeah.

You're a superstar, an icon, an institution – a commodity, even.

Unfortunately, not an expensive one or I would build the Institute faster!

Isn't this a long way from your original concept of 'true reality'? Haven't you actually been swallowed up by some of the very things you were fighting against?

I don't think so. I'm pretty much myself, you know. And this success came so slow. If it had come when I was very young, it would probably have destroyed me; but not now. I mean, in two years I am 70, come on! I have seen everything: I have seen how people fall, how they get an overdose and how they are killed – and it's not happening to me.

This whole [celebrity] is a side-effect of success, but I'm not attached to it. Every day I am thinking of death and of how much time I really have left to accomplish what I want to. I want to leave good ideas behind me, because only good ideas have a long life – not material goods, which I'm not attached to. And I show this with how I live my life. I do a lot of work. If you spent just one week with me, you would die!

It seems to me that the things your work has always promoted – honesty, commitment, mindfulness, presence – our culture is overwhelmingly opposed to... That's why I have to make more work!

Do you ever feel that you're on the losing side?

I don't know. I only know that right now people listen to me more than ever before. It has taken me 40 years to get to this position where people take my work seriously – in the Seventies nobody even thought it was art. If I give a lecture and I get 3,500 people in the audience, that is something! And most of those people are super-young. I mean, I just had a 24-page letter from this kid who told me that [*512 Hours*] had changed his life. He is 11 years old! It's just mind-blowing.

And also Lady Gaga has brought me all these young kids.⁹ She has 42 million [followers] on Twitter; now I have millions interested in my institute, and slow-motion walking, who would [otherwise only] be interested in drugs. That's a good thing!

It has taken me 40 years to put performance into the mainstream. If I really can in any way encourage mindfulness in the young generation, that's a huge, huge plus. Something has to be done to lift the human spirit, and I think I am achieving something. □

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BIOGRAPHY

Marina Abramović was born in 1946 in Belgrade, where she trained as a painter at the Academy of Fine Arts from 1965 to '70. She then studied at the Academy of Fine Arts in Zagreb until 1972.

She began performing in 1973. Her early works include *Rhythm 10* (1973), *Rhythm 5*, *Rhythm 2* and *Rhythm 0* (all 1974) and *Lips of Thomas* (1975).

In 1976, she moved to Amsterdam, where she met the West German performance artist Frank Uwe Laysiepen (aka Ulay), who became both her lover and her collaborator for 12 years. Their most notable work together includes *Breathing In/Breathing Out* (1976), *Relation in Time* and *Imponderabilia* (both 1977), *Communist Body*, *Fascist Body* (1979), *Rest Energy* (1980) and *Nightsea Crossing* (1981–87). In *The Lovers: The Great Wall Walk* (1988), a 90-day ritual originally intended to culminate in their marriage, she and Ulay walked towards each other from opposite ends of the Great Wall of China and, when they met, embraced and then parted.

She has had major solo shows in many art galleries across Europe and the US, including Eindhoven (1985), Paris (1990), Berlin (1993) and Oxford (1995). In 1997, she won the Golden Lion for the best artist at the Venice Biennale, for *Balkan Baroque*.

In 2001, she moved to New York, where the following year she performed *The House with the Ocean View* in the Sean Kelly Gallery.

In 2005, she presented 'Seven Easy Pieces' at the Guggenheim Museum in New York, recreating five works by other performance artists from the 1960s and '70s as well as her own *Lips of Thomas* and a new work, *Entering the Other Side*.

She performed *The Artist is Present* in 2010 as part of a major retrospective with the same title at the Museum of Modern Art in New York.

With Robert Wilson, she created the 'quasi-opera' *The Life and Death of Marina Abramović*, which she first performed (with Willem Dafoe and Antony) at the 2011 Manchester International Festival.

In 2014, she performed *512 Hours* at the Serpentine Gallery in London.

She has been married twice, but has no children.

This interview was conducted on September 23, 2014.