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# MARINA ABRAMOVIĆ

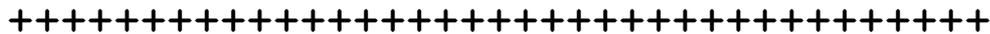
## Private Archaeology



### LONG-DURATIONAL MEDIA BACKGROUND

**Marina Abramović**  
**PRIVATE ARCHAEOLOGY**  
**June 13 through October 5, 2015**

**Curated by Nicole Durling and Olivier Varenne**



Marina Abramović says:

She is neither a feminist nor a political artist.

That beyond boredom is pure presence.

Danger is important to bring you to the here and now.

Pain can be a door to self-knowledge.

Shame reveals your vulnerability.

Marina Abramović says she learns about herself through her performance works, not through everyday living. So this exhibition may be a time of personal reflection: a chance to re-examine the works that have shaped and informed who she is today. She returns to Australia during a crucial personal juncture; a time when her body is no longer the focus of her work. Her creativity now focuses on the lives of others and she is asking us to use her art to learn about ourselves.

It was in the Australian desert in 1980–81 that Abramović discovered the possibility of living in the moment or what is today called “mindfulness”. Ironically, she states, it was at the moment when she questioned her decision to return to urban life that she realised her future path: “...I am an artist and that is my function. Whatever I experience here I have to translate and bring it out of here.”

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Curators Nicole Durling and Olivier Varenne are inviting visitors to explore some of the primary moments in Abramović's life. The path is not chronological but revelatory.

Abramović's determined revelations have impacted us. No other artist of our time has succeeded in using her artwork to expose our weaknesses and strengths. She has bored, frightened, angered, shamed, seduced, repulsed, nauseated, comforted and baffled us, while also exposing our brutality and humanity. With this exhibition she has challenged Mona's position as a self-declared secular temple guided by David Walsh's commitment to the scientific method.

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The exhibition installed across Mona's ground floor galleries selectively examines Abramović's work as a performance artist beginning in the early seventies as an art student in Belgrade, through to her works with the German artist Ulay (Frank Uwe Laysiepen) her creative collaborator and lover for 12 years (1976 to 1988), her return to solo performance, and her decision to place the audience at the centre of her works – while at the same time repositioning herself from the margins of the art world to its centre.

The opening image, *Artist Portrait with a Candle*, 2013, may cause viewers to flinch to attention as they recall the searing pain of skin on a hot pan or a burning match. Unlike Marcel Proust's *In Search of Lost Time*, Abramović is not asking us to recall a poignant memory but the sharp, and precious, sting of everyday living.

*Artist Portrait with a Candle* belongs to a series of works *Places of Power*, most recently exhibited in Brazil. Since 1989 Abramović has studied Brazilian shamanism and she believes in the importance of our engagement with nature, and the healing power of crystals and gems on the human body and mind.

**Sound work in The Mona Void:** *Artist Manifesto*, 1997/2014. Read by Marina Abramović. "This is a lot of fun," she has stated, and something few artists do today.

The **first gallery** introduces the works of Abramović and Ulay. When they performed *Breathing In, Breathing Out*, in 1977, they had been working together for a year. The O device text explains: "... We

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are kneeling face-to-face, pressing our mouths together. Our noses are blocked with filter tips. Ulay: I am breathing in oxygen. I am breathing out carbon dioxide. Marina: I am breathing in carbon dioxide. I am breathing out carbon dioxide...’...”. A contact mic, attached to Abramović’s throat transmitted the sound of their breathing. The performance lasted 19 minutes (video duration: 00:10:49).

They were exploring their relationship: unity and separation. In an earlier work, *Relation in Space* (performed in July 1976 at the 38th Venice Biennale), still considered one of the unsurpassed actions in the history of performance art, they were naked, pacing backward and forward toward one another – initially they passed, barely touching, but with each return their pace increased and eventually they were crashing and bouncing against one another.

Their collaboration enabled Abramović to continue the journey she started in the early 1970s: to understand the use of the body as a medium of visual communication. With Ulay, the journey took on another facet, it became the uniting of male and female energy and visual communication. Their expressed goal was to produce a “hermaphroditic state of being”.<sup>1</sup>

They also wrote their first manifesto:

Art vital

no fixed living place

permanent movement

direct contact

local relation

self-selection

passing limitations

taking risks

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<sup>1</sup> From *The Biography* performed in 1993 and referenced by Klaus Biesenbach in “Klaus Biesenbach in conversation with Marina Abramovic”. Kristine Stiles, Klaus Biesenbach, Chrissie Iles, eds, *Marina Abramović: Survey*, Phaidon Press Limited, London and New York, 2008, p. 34.

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mobile energy

no rehearsal

no predicted end

no repetition

extended vulnerability

exposure to chance

primary reactions<sup>2</sup>

Both considered their early works as explorations of their human energy or life force, exemplified through physical actions, and each performance piece pushed them to their physical limitations. Over time their approach changed as they decided that human energy could be transformed into a sensitivity for “inner and outer dialogues”.<sup>3</sup> Such sensitivity was something they understood and engaged with more fully after spending time with the Pitjantjatjara and Pintupi Aboriginal people of the Western Desert.

The later pieces, *Rest Energy*, 1980, and *Point of Contact*, 1980, are two of four actions, *Nature of Mind* and *Timeless Point of View*, performed under the encompassing title *That Self* in August 1980, just prior to returning to Australia.<sup>4</sup> According to art historian, Kristine Stiles, Abramović and Ulay trained in hypnosis to explore the link between material and psychic knowledge and energy, and that this was “an exploration that would shape and characterize their art and lives together for the next eight years”.<sup>5</sup>

*Rest Energy* lasted 4 minutes and 10 seconds, but we see it as an never-ending, timeless act. In the original performance there was, obviously, a beginning and an end, but Abramović says she didn’t want the public to see the beginning and the end because ‘the entire universe is looping, and I like to simulate this looping in performance’.<sup>6</sup> It is the sound of their pounding hearts and heavy, anxious breaths coupled with

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<sup>2</sup> Kristine Stiles, “Cloud with its Shadow”, from Kristine Stiles, Klaus Biesenbach, Chrissie Iles, eds, *Marina Abramović: Survey*, Phaidon Press Limited, London and New York, 2008, p. 77

<sup>3</sup> Stiles., p. 81.

<sup>4</sup> Their first visit was to attend the Third Biennale of Sydney in April 1979, where they represented the Netherlands with *Performance 21: The Brink*.

<sup>5</sup> Stiles, p. 79.

<sup>6</sup> Biesenbach, ‘Klaus Biesenbach in conversation with Marina Abramovic’, p. 14.

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occasional **involuntary** cries that place you in their present moment. In the  $\bigcirc$  device Abramović and Ulay write: “Together we hold a taut bow and a poised arrow. The weight of our bodies puts tension in the bow.” Marina: “The arrow is pointed at my heart. Small microphones are attached to both our hearts recording the increasing number of heartbeats.”

*Point of Contact* has an other-worldly tension: two people dressed conventionally in business attire facing one another with their index fingertips millimetres apart. The image has a somewhat “enlightened” glow.

The **second gallery** inflects a different tension: the never-ending scream contrasted with the last breath.

*Freeing the Voice*, 1975, was performed at the Student Cultural Center in Belgrade, and the original lasted a painful three hours as her vigorous and continuing screams increase with determined intensity, and anxiety, driven by the difficulty of execution, but she never ceases. It’s hard to hear.

The second work in this gallery, *AAA-AAA* was created in 1978 with Ulay. It is self-explanatory and as the  $\bigcirc$  device text states: “...We slowly build up the tension, our faces coming closer together until we are screaming into each other’s open mouths.”. The performance lasted for 15 minutes and interestingly it was filmed for a television performance in Leige, Belgium and then filmed again a little later in March in Amsterdam. It is painful to see Ulay starting to cough and struggling to keep pace, while Abramović never waivers and in the last 50 seconds she alone continues screaming.

*The Scream*, a more recent work, performed in Oslo, Norway, on October 24, 2013, to coincide with the 100th celebration of Edvard Munch’s famous four works entitled *The Scream of Nature* (1893–1910), most familiarly known as *The Scream*. Abramović collaborated with 270 locals to perform this homage at the location where Munch created the works.

In **gallery three** sit the eponymous *Private Archeology*, 1997–2015. Visitors are invited to open each of the cabinet drawers to explore excerpts from books, artefacts, photographs, and portraits of people and places. There are 59 unique collages, with objects notated as to their significance. Each cabinet grouping offers a theme: **Places of Power** (her exploration of vital sources of energy in nature and cultures); **Food** (tracing rituals which incorporate food, and how the absence of food changes our perception of the

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world); **Preparation to Enter the Other Side** (including works by artists in the 1970s who were experimenting with performance art; and examining how different cultures and artists condition their body and mind); and **Entering the Other Side and Death**.<sup>7</sup>

In the same gallery is *Cleaning the Mirror I*, projected on five monitors. The performance was created in 1995 at The Museum of Modern Art, Oxford University. The O device states: “I sit with a skeleton on my lap, next to me is a bucket filled with soapy water. With my right hand I vigorously brush different parts of the skeleton. Duration: three hours.” Over the the three hours her white garments, face and arms become splattered with a frothing inky-black liquid. The ritual is based on ancient Slavic traditions of purification where the bones of deceased family members were exhumed and washed.<sup>8</sup>

She once quoted the Romanian philosopher and historian of religion, Mircea Eliade (1907–1986) who wrote on the importance of religious humanity manifest through symbols, myths and ritual “To be human is to be initiated”, later adding her own mutation: “[b]ut to be a creative human is to be self-initiated”.<sup>9</sup>

The next work, *Freeing the Memory*, 1975, returns us to the formative years before Ulay and anticipate these later works of mental cleansing and release. The O device text states: “I sit on a chair with my head tilted backwards. Without stopping, I continuously speak the words that come to mind. When words no long come to mind the performance ends.” She continued for 90 minutes.

### *Confession*, 2010

The incongruous situation in which the artist relates painful memories of her childhood to a donkey. Confessions are often more important for the confessor than the confessant.

<sup>7</sup> ‘When I was a child in Yugoslavia – I don’t remember how old I was but I must have been very young, perhaps five years old – I found the cover of a book in my room. There were no pages, just the cover, which was a very glossy dark blue glowing with stars. I was completely fascinated. I held this cover in my hand and I think I slept that night with it. In the morning it was gone. I asked my parents, but nobody had even heard about it. In Yugoslavia during the fifties, such a book wouldn’t have existed. Nothing was glossy, nothing was shiny-looking, so it was a complete mystery to me. I remember that picture of the sky, just the cover – it haunted me for years and years. When I was very young I started cutting images from newspapers and books and collecting objects. There are times when you just see something and it makes a deep impression on you. Sometimes your subconscious fixes itself on a certain image, on a certain face in a photograph, which becomes part of your memory. You don’t really have any rational explanation. For instance, I never found a rational explanation about what happened to that cover, which actually disappeared. Maybe it didn’t exist and it all came from me. But now my star book has become my *Private Archaeology*.’ Marina Abramović, *Public Body: Installations and Objects 1965–2001*, Edizioni Charta, Milan, 2001, p. 402.

<sup>8</sup> Stiles, pp. 37, 38

<sup>9</sup> Stiles, p.37.

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**Gallery Four** contains the *Video Portrait Gallery*, 1997–

Thirteen single-channel portraits, each monitor features close-up portraits of the artist's face. The O device quotes Abramović: “this installation is a way of reflecting on and regrouping my old works. First realised in 1997 for the Kunstmuseum Bern as a collection of 12 videos, *Video Portrait Gallery* was turned into a 16-channel installation in 2003. However, the gallery is a work in progress, as every new video that includes my head will be added to it in the future.”

The viewer is within the life of Marina Abramović: a life of continuous reflection and re-enactment where she uses her work to understand herself.

The current *Mona* iteration includes:

*Art Must Be Beautiful, Artist Must Be Beautiful*, 1975

Performed twice in the same day after Abramović reviewed the footage and saw that it was not as she intended.

*Dragon Head No. 1*, 1990

*Dragon Head No. 2*, 1990

*Dragon Head No. 4*, 1990

The ophidiophobists nightmare. The series grew out of a piece Abramović performed when working with the New York video artist Charles Atlas in the late eighties as she was adapting to her life as a solo performer. The idea for a series continued when curator Chrissie Iles invited her to perform at the Museum of Modern Art Oxford in May of 1990. Four large pythons and a huge boa constrictor were placed over her head, and despite trying to be calm when one snake slipped from her head and encircled her neck she began, understandably, to panic. She said later that she realised the more frightened she became the tighter snake became, so she knew that to survive she needed to relax. She relaxed.

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The works were performed in several galleries in the U.S. and Europe during the nineties.

*Cleaning the Mirror II*, 1995

*In Between*, 1996

Meditation with Marina Abramović.

*The Onion*, 1996

A tearful lament we can all relate to. The eating of the onion makes the self-torture complete.

*Image of Happiness*, 1996

Upside down with only her head and shoulders visible she describes what she considers images of a happy domestic life: “A fresh white ironed shirt, a glass of milk ....”

*Lost Souls*, 1997

This work was originally part of *Spirit House*, 1997. It’s minimal and the lighting is poignant. “The hardest thing is to do something that is close to nothing because it is demanding all of you.”<sup>10</sup>

*Dozing Consciousness*, 1997

The gentle tinkle of human breath. The work’s simple visual premise plays with her understanding of how quartz crystals and the human body interact.

*Red Period*, 1998

Self-explanatory - seduction?

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<sup>10</sup> Abramovic in the introduction to *The Artist is Present*, a film about the making of the 2012 exhibition at MoMA. <https://vimeo.com/42699063> [accessed May 23, 3015]

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*Blue Period*, 1998

A sense of angst, and possible nail biting.

*Stromboli*, 2002

Performed on the Italian island off the Sicilian coast with the only permanently active volcano extant in Europe.

**Gallery Five (Mona Tunnel):**

*Golden Mask*, 2010

The artist as icon. Imperfect.

In caves occupied by our Paleolithic ancestors (30,000 years BCE) there are paintings of masked dancers, and throughout time masks have been used in all cultures to create fear, magic, intrigue, anonymity, and to honour the dead. Gold has been used in many civilisations and religions to express immortality and reverence.

*10,000 Stars*, 2015

Sound installation, 10-hour loop.<sup>11</sup>

**Gallery Six:** *The Chamber of Silence*, 2015

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<sup>11</sup> Talking about this piece, Abramović states: “As a child I was fascinated by the night sky. I spent many hours looking at it, especially when there was no moon in the countryside and the city lights were not interfering with the vision of the stars. When I travel, I always look out for observatories in order to have a better and closer view of the stars. I look at the Milky Way, dying stars that don’t even exist, but keep on shining, black holes, comets, and so on. My main question is not so much about the universe per se, but more about what is behind it. In 1969 I made a drawing comprising of dots, which the public was invited to connect in any way they wanted. Every single person would create their own journey in the universe, whose traces were described through the lines with which people were completing my drawing. Looking back at this early work, I still have the same unanswered question: What is behind all of this? Is there a higher purpose behind the order and the proportions that regulate the universe? And how do human beings locate themselves within this order? Upon reflection, I would like to propose an installation where the audience can make a mental journey in the universe.”

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Site-specific and interactive installation based on exercises from the **Abramović Method**

○ device text: “We are immersed in patterns of consumption, surrounded by visual information and sound pollution. This creates enormous stress on human beings. Our concentration is scattered and limited. And as a result we feel restless. If we don’t go back to simplicity, if we don’t take serious steps toward simplifying our lives, our world will be replaced by science fiction, which is becoming more and more a reality.” —Marina Abramović

### **Gallery Seven:** *Waterfall*, 2003

A “waterfall” of sound as 108 male and female Buddhist monks intone their individual chant. Over five years Abramović travelled throughout India as a solitary traveller seeking out and recording with a low-quality camera each individual monk.

### **Gallery Eight: Transitory Objects**

In the late eighties and into the nineties having separated from Ulay, Abramović sought new ways to work as a sole performer once more. It was at this time, she states, after walking the Great Wall of China – where they ended their relationship – she realised that during the walk she had been performing for the first time with no audience physically present, and this would be her new direction: she would offer objects and meditative practices that the audience could incorporate into their own lives. They would not be sculptures, but “transitory objects” that triggered physical or mental experiences for the public through direct interaction. In an interview with Hans Ulrich Obrist, in 2010, responding to Obrist’s question on the role of museums in the future, she said, “the more we stop believing in things, the more people come to the museums to find some kind of art spirituality”<sup>12</sup>.

*Red Dragon*, 1989, . oxidised copper and rose quartz

*Green Dragon*, 1989, oxidised copper and rose quartz

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<sup>12</sup> Hans Ulrich Obrist, *The Conversation Series: Marina Abramovic*, Verlag der Buchhandlung Walter Koenig, Köln, 2010, p. 19.

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*White Dragon*, 1989, oxidised copper, black obsidian

*Black Dragon*, 1994, blue quartz, green quartz, hematite, obsidian, rose quartz, smoked quartz, snowflake obsidian, chrysococolla

*Inner Sky*, 1991, iron, amethyst geode

*Inner Sky*, 2015, iron, amethyst geode

*Chair for Human Use with Chair for Spirit Use*, 2012, wood and quartz stones

*Bed for Human Use*, 2012, copper, black quartz, crystal quartz

*Bed for Dead Spirits*, 1996, lead, rose quartz

**Gallery Nine:** *Counting the Rice*, 2015

An exercise from the Abramović Method

Abramović stresses the importance of regaining our disappearing ability to concentrate: “You have to decide what you are going to do and stick with it. Learn about yourself in the process. The reward is going through what you said you would do. The ceremonies of the Aborigines have been the same for thousands of years. It’s about the power of repetition.”<sup>13</sup>

### **Mona Library**

*Power Objects*, 2015

This site-specific installation was commissioned by Mona curators.

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<sup>13</sup> During a discussion about *512 Hours* held last August at the Serpentine Gallery, London. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lx3thHV4nc> [accessed May 28, 2015]

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Abramović has selected pieces from David Walsh's antiquities collection. She chose objects based on their original use in religious ceremonies. The work offers the public an opportunity for a personal encounter with these powerful objects. Sit and ponder.

*Cleaning the Mirror III*, 1995

Performance for video, recorded at the Pitt Rivers Museum, Oxford.

The objects feature in the video are from the permanent collection at Pitt Rivers Museum in Oxford. For the many ancient cultures they represent each object is believed to hold the spirit of good or evil. Abramović engages with the power of each piece.

### **Objects chosen from the Mona Collection:**

*Seated baboon*

Egypt, Late Period, 26th Dynasty, 664–525 BCE

*Bowl*

China, Ming Dynasty, 1368–1644

*Eyes and brows, inlay fragments*

Egypt, New Kingdom, c. 1550–1069 BCE

*Mortuary pectoral*

Egypt, New Kingdom, 18th–19th Dynasty, c. 1550–1186 BCE

*Votive figure of the Oxyrhynchus fish*

Egypt, probably Late Period, c. 600–300 BCE

*Altar in the form of a bird-headed deity*

Golan Heights, Syria, Chalcolithic, 4000–3000 BCE

*Figure of a ram*

Egypt, Ptolemaic to Roman Period, 100 BCE–CE 100

*Canopic jar with the head of Duamutef, Son of Horus*

Egypt, 6th to 18th Dynasty, 2300–1300 BCE

*Geode carved in the shape of a peach*

China, c. 1800–1850

### **The final image in the exhibition is:**

*The Spirit*, 2015

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*Places of Power*  
2015

Abramović cups her hands around a small figurine from Brazil taking in its ancient power. With this image the exhibition returns to the opening work – *Artist Portrait with Candle* – continuing the story of *Places of Power* and Abramović’s continuing journey of exploration.

### LIBRARY READING ROOM

A resource room offering a selection of documentaries, interviews and programs about or starring Marina Abramović. Indulge.

### The Abramović Method and the Marina Abramović Institute (MAI)

MAI (Marina Abramovic Institute) explores, supports, and presents performance. MAI encourages collaboration between the arts, science, and the humanities. MAI will serve as the legacy of Marina Abramovic. Currently, MAI partners with venues and artists presenting workshops and collaborative projects. When complete, MAI Hudson will be home to the Institute, providing a space for performance, multidisciplinary collaborations, and educational programming.

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### Exhibition Catalogue

Mona will produce a 160-page hardback exhibition catalogue, **Marina Abramović: Private Archaeology**, featuring images of the artworks installed at Mona. Foreword by David Walsh; along with essays by Justin Clemens, senior lecturer, University of Melbourne; and Mona writer, Elizabeth Pearce. Pre-orders available from 13 June. Catalogues available in spring 2015.

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**Cinemona** will run a series of films including: *The Artist is Present* (2012) a documentary of Abramović’s preparation for her major retrospective at the Museum of Modern Art, New York; *Life and Death of Marina Abramović* (2012) an experimental opera starring Abramović, Antony Hegarty and Willem Dafoe; *The Abramović Method practiced by Lady Gaga* (2013).

Ends

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