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Marina Abramovic's Paradigm-Shifting Australian Power Play

BY NICHOLAS FORREST | JUNE 29, 2015



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Superstar Serbian performance artist (<http://au.blouinartinfo.com/news/story/1537/marina-abramovic>) (</artists/marina-abramovic-4098>) **Marina Abramovic** (/news/story/1537/marina-abramovic) is on a one-woman mission to reempower and reenergize contemporary art, which she says has lost its power. And she's chosen Australia to launch two unique projects that represent a significant development in her global campaign.

The basis of her plan of is a four-pronged strategy: to promote and facilitate what she calls "immaterial" art, that is art with no object; to encourage the slowing down of art with long-duration performance; to encourage people to experience and value the present, the "here and now"; and to cement and establish her legacy through the Abramovic Method and the (<http://au.blouinartinfo.com/news/story/1537/marina-abramovic>)

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"To change the world is to change the consciousness. To change the consciousness you have to start with yourself. And I have done so much work on myself and now I want to share with others and give to others," she says. "It is important for me to transfer all my knowledge to young artists as well as everybody else. I truly believe that an artist is a servant to society and that this is our duty; and I want to transfer everything I know," she adds.

Over a period of two weeks I had the privilege of interviewing Abramovic, experiencing both her Australian projects, and attending multiple talks and Q&A sessions with the artist. I have to admit to starting out as a serious sceptic when it came to Abramovic's philosophy and approach, but over the two weeks I can honestly say that I was transformed from sceptic to believer, not in everything Marina believes in, which is quite literally everything, but definitely in her methods, motivations, and ambitions. The conversion was by no means quick or easy: it required an open mind, dedication, commitment, and perseverance. But as Abramovic says, "It's all about time. How much you invest is how much you get out." And she's absolutely right. The journey was at times disconcerting, uncomfortable, unfamiliar, and sometimes downright baffling, but at the same time it was empowering, enlightening, energizing, and strangely addictive – so much so that I am left wanting more.

Abramovic's return to Australia after 17 years has been orchestrated by collector and patron John Kaldor AM, founder of the not-for-profit arts organization, Kaldor Public Art Projects, and businessman and art collector David Walsh, founder of Tasmania's Museum of Old and New Art (MONA). MONA is the site of "[Private Archaeology](http://www.mona.net.au/marina-abramovic) (<http://www.mona.net.au/marina-abramovic>)," a major solo exhibition that showcases 40 works spanning her forty-year career, including sound pieces, video works, photographs, sculptures, and interactive "Abramovic Method" works. And in Sydney, at Pier 2/3 in Walsh Bay, Abramovic is presenting a series of exercises from the Abramovic Method as well as a ground-breaking and innovative new residency project that signals a major evolution of her practice, collectively titled "[Marina Abramović: In Residence](http://kaldorartprojects.org.au/projects/marina-abramovic) (<http://kaldorartprojects.org.au/projects/marina-abramovic>)."

Together, these two projects trace the evolution and refinement of Abramovic's practice, from centering her practice on the use of her own body as the primary medium of expression and communication, to initiating projects and experiences that enable the viewer to become a participant and experience performance art for themselves, and in the process craft their own journey. Abramovic says that is was during her 2010 MOMA retrospective, "The Artist is Present," during which she performed the longest-duration solo work of her career, that she realized the great need to focus on audience participation.

"Ten or fifteen years ago people were not interested in doing this," she says. "But now they want their own experience. I picked up that they don't want to look at something, they want to be part of something. I was thinking about how to accommodate this need and to bring the audience an even stronger experience than just being with the artist. And I realized that the artist has to be removed."

Those familiar with Abramovic's career will know that she has a strong connection with Australia. She cites Aboriginal culture as a major influence on her practice, having spent a year in the central Australia desert in the 1980's living with the local Aborigines who she credits with showing her the importance of the "here and now" and teaching her that "the present is the only reality that we can deal with" and that "there is no other reality other than the present." She says that the idea that this culture is nomadic, that this culture is constantly dealing with ceremonies as a way of life, that they are completely connected with nature and the land, and that they focus on the here and now, was mind blowing.

"My theory, which is something that was clear to me, is that full blooded Aboriginal men and women are fully realized human beings who use much more of their brain than we do because of their extra sensory perceptions," she says. "They have so many other abilities that I was witnessing, but that it is not possible for me to explain. And they have the techniques to get there, and they are getting there."

The hype surrounding Abramovic's return to Australia reflects her reputation and her superstar status, both of which definitely precede her. Not only is she a pioneer and icon of performance art as well as one of the most influential artists working today, she's also a visionary, self-styled warrior, and even somewhat of a mystical, mythical figure, thanks to the extreme nature of her practice as well as her apparent refusal to age. (In a 2013 Reddit Q&A, session, in which she encouraged people to ask her anything, she was asked whether the fact that she does not appear to have aged in the last 40 years was because she was a vampire).

Throughout her forty-year career, in a quest for emotional and spiritual transformation, and to change her conscience, Abramovic has explored the limits of the mind and body and probed the boundaries of self-expression and self-restraint, in the process exposing herself to incredible feats of pain and endurance, even risking her life. She's sat in silence for 700 hours, enacted her own funeral, starved herself for twelve days, carved a pentagram into her stomach with a razor blade, and even had a loaded gun pointed at her head. There's nothing quite as extreme as this in her Australian projects, but she's moved on since those days. To those who say "oh, she's not cutting herself, it's such a pity, she must be getting old, remember the good old days of the 70s," she says: "to tell you the truth, it was easy to cut yourself, because you just heal, and that's it. But to sit in one place for three months – try it for at least three hours and see what kind of hell it is."

At one time or another throughout my own two-week (<http://au.blouinartinfo.com/news/story/1537/marina-abramovic>) (/artists/marina-abramovic-4098) [Marina Abramovic](http://au.blouinartinfo.com/news/story/1537/marina-abramovic) (/news/story/1537/marina-abramovic) experience I am screamed at, watch the artist eat an onion, stand on a plinth with my eyes closed while holding the hand of an Abramovic Method “facilitator,” get tucked into a camp bed, sit opposite a complete stranger and stare into their eyes, wear noise cancelling headphones while sitting on beach chairs in a “chamber of silence,” stand under a giant crystal geode to experience “crystal energy transference,” sit in front of a wall and stare at a rectangle of color, participate in a series of breathing exercises, and separate and counted grains of rice and lentils from a large pile, twice, all in the name of artistic enlightenment. But not just any form or artistic enlightenment, Abramovic’s unique and singular vision of artistic enlightenment.

“All of us can kill, all of us can do terrible things. But at the same time if you stimulate the other side, you can have the best of people. I am always interested in how to lift the spirit and how to make the best of it,” Abramovic tells me.

My quest to experience Abramovic’s unique brand of artistic enlightenment begins at the MONA exhibition, “Private Archaeology,” which is a showcase of important works from throughout her career rather than a linear retrospective. It features a rather eclectic and disparate collection of works that presents an exciting, engaging, insightful, and revealing overview of her career that traces her practice from the early years when her body is both subject and medium to her recent shift to focusing on the experience of the audience that is evident in recent works such as the self-explanatory “Chamber of Silence” 2015 and “Counting the Rice” 2015. The title of the exhibition is taken from a work comprising a series of four cabinets with drawers containing various objects and artifacts from Abramovic’s life, including items dedicated to her MONA experience. Abramovic says that her own private archaeology is collecting experiences — what she describes as “the immaterial, the archaeology of the memory.” Highlights of the exhibition include a selection of her seminal collaborations with the German artist Ulay, her creative partner and lover of 12 years, and the “Video Portrait Gallery,” an installation 13 single-channel close-up portraits (produced between 1975 and 2002) of the artist’s face as she engages in a variety of actions and experiences such as eating an onion, repeating the words “art must be beautiful, artist must be beautiful” while aggressively brushing her hair, and letting snakes crawl over her head and neck.

One of the most challenging and perhaps important works in the exhibition is the “Power Objects” room for which Abramovic selected nine objects from David Walsh’s antiquities collection based on their original use in religious ceremonies, and which she feels have a certain energy. Each object is placed on a plinth, within a clear Perspex box, and has a chair in front of it so visitors can sit and contemplate the objects. It was on my third visit to the room that I had one of those “aha” moments. Having originally dismissed the idea of a “Power Objects” room as mere folly due to my disbelief in the ability of objects to have any sort of power or energy, on my third visit I took the plunge and went round the room to “experience” each object. As I moved from object to object I realized that it was the act of looking, the act of removing oneself from the world and taking the time to just sit and ponder, that Abramovic is encouraging and initiating, not some sort of supernatural encounter. It is crucial to recognize that with all her works, belief is in no way a prerequisite for experience.

Abramovic’s Sydney project, “Marina Abramović: In Residence,” is both the culmination of forty years of self-exploration and self-interrogation and the beginning of a new phase in her career. The project comprises a series of participatory Abramovic Method exercises as well as a groundbreaking Residency Program involving 12 Australian performance practitioners who were selected to be mentored by Abramovic for the duration of the project and develop their own performative practice through research, workshops, discussion, and debate. In Sydney, for “Marina Abramović: In Residence,” Abramovic says that she will be like a conductor in the exhibition space, but it will be the public who will take the physical and emotional journey.

“We constantly like to be entertained, to get things from outside. We never take time to get in touch with ourselves... our inner self. My function in this new kind of performance situation is to show you, through the Abramovic Method, what you can do for yourself. I wanted to make this big change because I understood that actually you can’t get any experience by me doing it for you... So I’m completely shifting the paradigm, changing the rules,” Abramovic explains in the introduction to the exhibition.

“Private Archaeology” and “Marina Abramović: In Residence” reveal that the genius of Abramovic’s practice is her ability to engage and activate the subconscious, those peripheral systems and senses, and to do so subtly and surreptitiously while at the same time retaining a strong sense of aesthetics. She doesn’t dictate or demand, instead providing elegant and sophisticated cues and prompts to initiate interaction and engagement. Using time, repetition, endurance, and precision as her tools, Abramovic creates a sense of anticipation and tension that prompts the audience to engage their own imagination and creativity to resolve and complete the experience. And although it

would be irrational to suggest that Abramovic has acquired the same sort of abilities that she says the Australian Aborigines possess, the success of her practice and the effects of her work suggests that she does seem to have some sort of heightened state of awareness and a hyperdeveloped understanding and perception of the human emotion and the human psyche that is difficult to explain.

The participatory element of the project, what Abramovic describes as a series of exercises designed to “heighten participants’ awareness of their physical and mental experience in the present moment,” begins with a directive to remove all possessions from my person — especially time keeping devices such as watches and phones — and place them in a locker to ensure total dedication, commitment, and immersion. The next step is to participate in a series of breathing exercises after which I am deemed ready to begin the experience. Upon entering the space I am handed a pair of noise-cancelling earmuffs and ushered into the space where a facilitator take me by the hand and leads me to a plinth where I am instructed by hand signals to close my eyes. The facilitator remains holding my hand for what seems like a very long time, but eventually lets go, leaving me alone on the plinth, wondering whether I should stay where I am or open my eyes and leave the plinth. After standing alone for a while longer I eventually decide to step off. And a few awkward moments later I am taken by the hand by another facilitator and led to the next exercise, and so the experience continues, through all the different exercises. When I return to my locker and retrieve my possessions I am amazed at how much time has gone by. But more importantly I was left with a revived and renewed appreciation for the significance and importance of time as well as a profoundly altered concept and perception of its role in shaping the experience of art.

At the center of Abramovic’s current practice, and driving her two Australian projects, is a desire to rectify what she perceives as a situation where “art has lost its power.” She remembers that there was something incredibly beautiful and innocent about the needs of making art during the 70s when money was not the main focus — when money didn’t even matter. “It was just about surviving; and making art was more important than anything else,” she says. “And I think that this was an incredibly important period; and I come from this period. And then, right now, if you think that a Francis Bacon work sold for \$142 million and a Picasso for \$179 million, art has become a commodity. Something is being lost. When you look at a painting that costs that sort of money, you see money, you don’t see art anymore... So artists have really lost that power of creation, because everything becomes about celebrity, money, and the commodity. And that purity of art and why we are making art is being lost.” Looking back to the last century, Abramovic recalls telling people that the future of art in the 21st century was art with no object — what she describes as “a transmission of energy between the artist and the public,” adding that she wants to “go back to the real meaning of why we are making art in the first place and what art is about.” When asked to finish the sentence “art has lost the power to...,” Abramovic replies: “art has lost the power to make people understand that art can really transform your life, that art can lift your spirit, that art can have a deeper meaning, that art can predict the future, that art can be disturbing, that art can ask the questions.”

During my interview with Abramovic she proudly says that if she dies tomorrow, she has actually contributed and achieved a few things: First, to put performance into mainstream art and to be accepted into museums, just like photography and video art. Second, to introduce reperformance, and initiate a framework that ensures that artists’ works are reperformed in a way that acknowledges the original creator and ensures their work is treated with the dignity and respect that it deserves. Third, to create a system that gives the public access to performance and to have their own personal experience and own journey. Fourth, to introduce long-duration performance art, about which she says that she believes that the more time is spent in an experience, the deeper the experience will be. And lastly, to create a kind of legacy, the (<http://au.blouinartinfo.com/news/story/1537/marina-abramovic>) (/artists/marina-abramovic-4098) [Marina Abramovic](#) (/news/story/1537/marina-abramovic) Institute, which she says is not a normal foundation to glorify one’s own work or preserve one’s own work, but has a much larger perspective that deals with science, technology, and immaterial, time-based forms of art such as theatre, opera, dance, and film.

There is no doubt that Abramovic has had a profound impact and influence on contemporary art and the medium of performance art. And judging by the success of her Australian projects and her new direction and focus, she isn’t done yet. I just hope that it isn’t another 17 years before she returns to Australia again. But should I need a fix of artistic enlightenment, I have my own little piece of Abramovic in the form of a signed catalogue complete with an outline of Abramovic’s hand with a squiggle emanating from the little finger and the words “spirit exit.”

“Marina Abramović: Private Archaeology” is at MONA Tasmania (see [here](http://www.mona.net.au/marina-abramovic) (<http://www.mona.net.au/marina-abramovic>)) until October 5 and “Marina Abramović: In Residence” is at Pier 2/3, Hickson Road, Walsh Bay, Sydney (see [here](http://kaldorartprojects.org.au/projects/marina-abramovic) (<http://kaldorartprojects.org.au/projects/marina-abramovic>)) until July 5.

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