

ART



Andrew Purcell

The present tense

Provocative artist Marina Abramovic is returning to Australia, the place that changed her 'perception of the world'.

Before we get started, Marina Abramovic reaches for the hourglass, turns it over with a flourish and asks how long this is going to take. We're sitting in two of eight mid-century modern dining chairs with high green backs, either side of a long table in her apartment. The decoration is minimalist, and the only art on the walls is a self-portrait in which she's burning her finger with a candle, radiating enough energy to crack plaster. I wonder if she gets the hourglass out specially for interviews.

"First, you can't use the word performance," she says, taking issue with my opening question, about her upcoming residency at Kaldor Public Art Projects in Sydney. "It's really not a performance. What I am doing there, I am presenting my method." An hour in conversation with her may not match the apparently life-changing experience of staring into her eyes in a packed art gallery, but it is intense, all the same.

At 68, Abramovic is one of the world's most famous living artists, thanks in large part to her retrospective at the Museum of Modern Art in New York in 2010, and an accompanying documentary, both called *The Artist Is Present*. For seven hours a day, six days a week, for almost three months, she sat in a chair in the museum's atrium, gazing at whoever was facing her. People waited hours and many broke down in tears the moment she looked at them.

"I tried to give them the energy of unconditional love," she says. "Physically and mentally, I did it with every atom of my being." Lou Reed, Bjork and Isabella Rossellini had a go. Seventy-eight people sat more than 20 times. MOMA's chief curator, Klaus Biesenbach, was last in line. When he stood up, eight minutes before the work was due to end, Abramovic was briefly furious. Then the relief washed over her.

"You create the space and time in which performance is going to happen. You physically enter. And whatever happens in that frame is the part of the piece that you can't control," she says. "If earthquake come, if electricity stop, if somebody scream or have epileptic attack. If people vomit. Everything is a part of it. The only thing is to give yourself completely."

Art impresario John Kaldor has been working to bring Abramovic to Australia since catching her at the Serpentine Gallery in London last year. The piece she devised there, *512 Hours*, was a further step towards what she describes as "immaterial art", in that she

interacted with people as they performed mindfulness exercises such as walking around the space blindfolded, counting grains of rice and drinking water as slowly as possible, but wasn't the singular focus she was at MOMA.

"I was there eight hours a day but then the last few weeks, I didn't need to deal with the public, because it was getting completely independent. I was just one of them. It was the most incredible moment," she says, fetching a tablet to show me images of people lost in contemplation. "It's very important, this transition that I'm trying to do. America is all about celebrity. Here you have to be present."

This is easier said than done. Abramovic's extraordinary charisma is a huge part of her appeal. Kaldor insisted that she appear in person. The residency will take place on two floors of Pier 2/3 in Walsh Bay: 12 performance artists will live upstairs and start each day with a two-hour workshop led by Abramovic, after which she will descend to the main space, to join anyone willing to leave their phone at the door and put on noise-cancelling headphones.

Abramovic first came to Australia in 1979 with her then partner, German artist Uwe Laysiepen - Ulay for short. At the Sydney Biennial, they performed a work called *Brink*: Ulay walked back and forth along the top of a wall and Abramovic kept pace with his shadow until the sun set.

The following year they returned to spend six months in the Great Victorian Desert with the Pitjantjatjara tribe. Abramovic describes this as a pivotal experience, although they didn't create any art. Ulay took Polaroids of their hosts, but the Indigenous people tossed them on the floor, according to them no more value than any other possession.

"I don't think people understand how much Australia changed my perception of the world. It was a huge shift in my consciousness when I was there," Abramovic says. "The Aboriginal culture is completely immaterial. They don't have possessions: even if they kill a kangaroo and can't find another for three weeks, they will eat that day and what is left they will leave in the desert and move." She was particularly struck by the way Aboriginal myths, songlines across land and sky, are always sung in the present tense. "Everything is happening now. They will not tell you that it happened in the past or it will happen in the future: it is happening now and it is always happening. . . The influence on my work is huge. The whole idea of stillness and immateriality came out of this experience."



“The audience put the nails of the rose in me, cut my neck and drink my blood. So there are two sides of this story.”

(Clockwise from above) *Dozing Consciousness* (video still, cropped image), 1997, courtesy of the artist and MONA, Hobart; Marina Abramovic. MAIN PHOTO: NIC WALKER

The first manifestation of this was a work called *Nightsea Crossing* that Abramovic and Ulay performed on 16 consecutive days at the Art Gallery of NSW. They sat opposite each other for eight hours, completely still, separated by a table with a live python on it. On the 11th day Ulay quit early, in agony. Contrary to a doctor's advice, they resumed the performance the next morning.

In the early phase of her career, Abramovic was known in art circles for her fearlessness and her determination to provoke an audience reaction. One of her first proposals was for a public game of Russian roulette. "This performance has two possible endings," she wrote. The gallery turned her down.

For a work called *Rhythm Five*, at the Student Cultural Centre in Belgrade, where she first experimented with performance art - "Please write that I am ex-Yugoslav. What is now, I hate it," she says - she filled a star-shaped frame with wood chips and petrol, set it alight and lay down inside. The piece was interrupted when two friends noticed that flames were licking her leg, realised she must be unconscious and dragged her out.

A performance called *Thomas Lips* began with her drinking a bottle of red wine and breaking the glass in her hand. She then cut a pentagram into her abdomen with a razor blade, whipped her naked body for a while and lay down on a bed of ice blocks. This time, fellow artist Valie Export couldn't bear to watch, and pulled her off the ice. Did this annoy her? "It was the end of the piece," she shrugs. "I was young and mad. I was always investigating the limits of the public."

The most direct exploration of how far an audience would go was *Rhythm Zero*. For six hours, she invited patrons of the Galleria Studio Mora in Naples to do whatever they wanted to her, using props including a fork, an axe, a feather, chains, needles, a hammer, a rose, a gun, a bullet, a pen, a lipstick and a mirror. People took off all her clothes, manipulated her into poses, wrote messages on her body in lipstick, poured water over her head and gave her a necklace of thorns.

"The audience labels us masochists, but then *Rhythm Zero*, I done exactly to investigate that public attitude. And what happened? That same public cut the dress, put the nails of the rose in me, cut my neck and drink my blood. So there are two sides of this story."

The early 1970s was the golden age of body art. In Los Angeles, Chris Burden was being shot, starved, electrocuted and crucified on the

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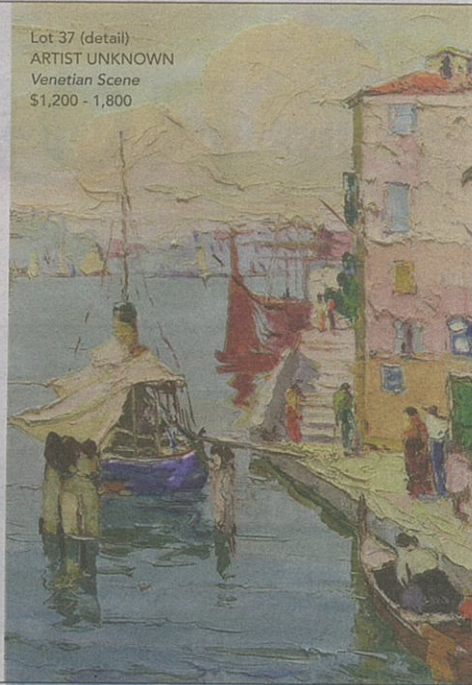
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HOME

bonnet of a Volkswagen Beetle, Vito Aconcci was masturbating under a ramp in a New York gallery and in Vienna, the Actionists were making art of blood, shit and slaughter. But as the decade wore on, many of Abramovic's peers quit, because it was so hard to make a living - there was nothing to sell.

"For 20 years, performance was never paid. You would pay more for plumber to come to your house, fix your bathroom," she says. She and Ulay lived in a black Citroen van with ART IS EASY written on the windscreen. They worked odd jobs and were paid for their physically and mentally demanding performances in cash.

Lately, Abramovic has been thinking about how to make serious money out of performance art, both for herself and the coming generation of artists. She has a country house in upstate New York, and her flat in the West Village, one of the most exclusive corners of Manhattan, must be worth at least \$5 million. People sometimes accuse her of being a sell-out, for dressing in Givenchy couture and carrying a fancy handbag.

"Why they don't ask the same question Jeff Koons? Why not Damien Hirst, that has Picassos in their living rooms?" she asks, with a touch of anger in her voice. "I'm 70 next year and I spent years and years not having money. I was 50 when I won Golden Lion [at the Venice Biennale] and people started taking me seriously.

"To come from that van to MOMA, that's a long trip. So I think people should see more the courage, see the whole transition, than put me in the van and say I should stay there the rest of my life. Why? I worked my ass off."

When she gets back from Australia, she will start work on a memoir. She's using a ghostwriter, because it's too much work, but also so that friends who will "tell the shit" can be honest about her flaws and misadventures. She already has her funeral planned, full of dirty jokes and raucous singing. There will be three coffins, dispatched in three different directions after the service, so that nobody knows where her body will end up.

She's working with the Park Avenue Armory, in New York, on a performance of J.S. Bach's *Goldberg Variations*, scheduled for December. Virtuoso Igor Levit will play the piano. Abramovic's main contribution appears to be ensuring that the audience arrives half an hour early and is obliged to sit in a state of sensory deprivation until the music begins.

Her days of stripping bare, cutting herself and running into walls are over. Soon, if she has her way, she won't even be at the gallery at all. "My relation with the public is constantly changing," she says. "You remove this, you remove that, and now I am removing myself."

Marina Abramovic: In Residence, presented by Kaldor Public Art Projects, is at Pier 2/3 Walsh Bay, Sydney, from June 24 until July 5. *Marina Abramovic: Private Archeology* is at MONA, Hobart, until October 5.



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