



A peace of art

Back in *AUSTRALIA* after 17 years, globetrotting *Serbian-born performance artist* **MARINA ABRAMOVIĆ** loves nothing more than staying perfectly still.

WORDS: SOPHIE TEDMANSON

There is blood dripping on the wall behind Marina Abramović. “It’s graffiti, I’m doing graffiti with pig’s blood right now,” the artist says, smiling, then turns and, in her thick Serbian accent, reads the dripping words sprawled like a scene from a slaughterhouse across the white wall behind her: “Look in the mirror, as it is necessary for your face to disappear in light.’ I have another one, it’s one of my favourites: ‘Fresh morning, you will sprinkle over nightmare, dreams.’”

It is 6am in Sydney, but late afternoon in São Paulo, Brazil, where Abramović – who is speaking over Skype – is preparing her latest work. When I tell her it is indeed a fresh morning, she brightens at the idea she has woken me to face this bizarre scene: “See, that’s the best thing to do!”

I’m not exactly sure what she means – as with a lot of Abramović’s work, her words take a while to absorb – but it doesn’t matter, because being in the presence of this artist is a journey worth taking. Abramović is one of *Time* magazine’s most influential people, a rock star of performance art given renewed cult status in recent years thanks to the 2012 documentary *The Artist is Present*. The film chronicled her preparation for a major retrospective at the Museum of Modern Art in New York – showcasing more than 50 works spanning four decades, and including a new performance by the artist that involved Abramović at a table, silently sitting for 736 hours (over 79 consecutive days), staring at spectators who took turns to sit across from her. The reactions were extraordinary: people stared, people laughed, people cried.

Back on Skype, Abramović is staring and listening to my voice intently. This is Marina being Marina: warm and engaging,



Clockwise from opposite page: Abramović in performance; *Marina Abramović: The Artist is Present* at the Museum of Modern Art; *512 Hours* at the Serpentine Gallery; Abramović blending in at *512 Hours*.

seductive even. The artist is literally mid-preparation for her next work, but she has taken a moment to engage as herself for our interview, conducted as she puts the finishing touches to an exhibition in Brazil. The Brazil show, *Terra Comunal*, was one of a series Abramović is doing this year, including two shows in Australia, which begin this month with *Marina Abramović: Private Archaeology*, a retrospective at the Museum of Old and New Art in Hobart. She will then travel to Sydney for *Marina Abramović: In Residence*, creating a new art experience and holding workshops for her *Marina Abramović Method*, presented by Kaldor Public Art Projects.

Abramović says her Sydney project (her first in Australia since 2013's *13 Rooms*, although the artist was not present) is a follow-on from her *512 Hours* exhibition at London's Serpentine Gallery last year, in which she taught the public to take on the role of performer while she "blended in". Creating experiences that call for more public engagement is Abramović's way of redefining art. "I'm more interested in how the public can have some more experience than just looking at something," she says.

Abramović, who was born in Serbia but has been based in New York for several decades, has lived and breathed art since the early 1970s. Known for exploring the relationship between the artist and viewer, she gained cult status – admired by Lady Gaga, and even featured in *Sex and the City* – for her ability to push her mind and body to physical limits. She has been cut, whipped, and had a gun held to her head in the name of art, and once almost died when she lost consciousness while performing inside a ring of fire.

Her extraordinary ability to sit motionless for lengthy periods of time was

formed, in part, in the Australian outback in 1980, a trip she says had a profound impact on her. Accompanied by her then-partner, artist Uwe Laysiepen, Abramović spent five months with Aboriginal communities, absorbing their nomadic nature and eating witchetty grubs, honey ants and lizards. The trip resulted in the exhibition *Gold Found by the Artists* at the Art Gallery of New South Wales in 1981.

"BY SITTING STILL, YOUR ... AWARENESS CHANGES, YOUR CONSCIOUSNESS CHANGES"

"My relationship with Australia is very strong and emotional," she says. "It really changed my life, being with the people for a very long time and learning patience in the middle of nowhere. Aborigines changed my life because it was amazing to make art with the culture. One that is so different from ours, it's so primitive. I mean, the Aborigines are highly developed human beings. These people have developed their psychic energy to an incredible extent. They are a nomadic culture, and performance is a way of life. They made a big impact on my performance [*Nightsea*] *Crossing*, which was later developed into the *Artist is Present*. It was based on us doing nothing but sitting for long periods of time, because the heat was so enormous in the desert, you could not do anything. And by sitting, your sense of perception changes, your awareness changes, your consciousness changes."

Abramović is also drawn to fashion, another art form: "I think about people

who are original and who say something. In any category, it can be cinema, architecture, fashion. The world is divided into two categories: originals and ones who follow. And I'm always interested in originals. To me, talking about fashion, it's Comme des Garçons, it's Margiela, it's Riccardo Tisci [a close friend]; they're the kinds of people who do things in different and new ways and I really love them."

Abramović is turning 70 next year. She plans to publish her memoirs and throw a huge party at the Guggenheim Museum in New York ("I'm going to pole dance!") and she insists it won't slow her down. "I'm warrior-like," she says when I ask where she gets her energy from. "I wake up at 6.30am and exercise. I've never had a drink in my life, I don't smoke, I have a pretty healthy body. I will perform until I die, but I don't want to die in a performance."

But when she does leave us, there will be another huge party – three, in fact. Abramović has already planned her three funerals, to take place in Belgrade, Amsterdam and New York, and wants people to party in her memory.

"It's important to be happy," she says. "I'm happy ... For so long my work has been misunderstood, but finally by having this [popularity] ... I have things to say and people listen to me. I'm very humble and I want to do things that matter, and I like to change. If I can elevate people with my performance, then I'm very grateful."

And with those beautiful words, she puts her glasses on and turns her attention back to the pig's blood. ■

Marina Abramović: *Private Archaeology*, Museum of Old and New Art, Hobart, June 13–October 5; and Marina Abramović: *In Residence*, Pier 2/3, Walsh Bay, Sydney, June 24–July 5.