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MARCHESA
Red carpet queens

FRANÇOIS-HENRI PINAULT
Cleaning up luxe

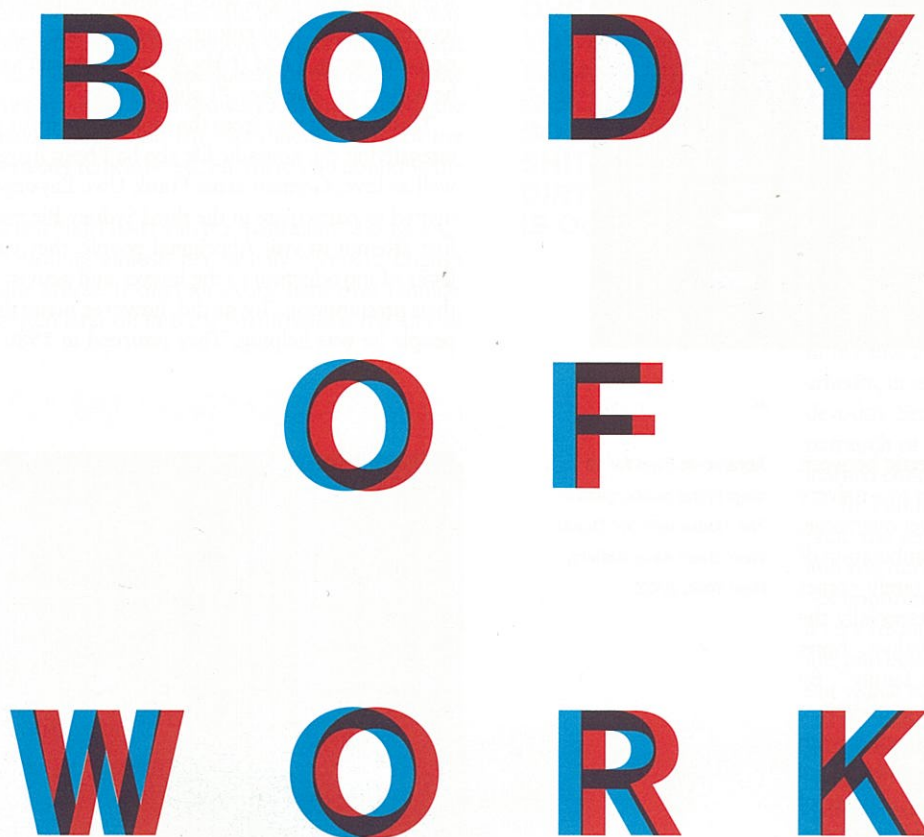
MARINA ABRAMOVIC
Cutting edge



FROM THE PILBARA TO PARIS

THE GLOBAL DESIGNS OF KYM ELLERY





Marina Abramovic has parlayed her compelling form of performance art into a superstardom that some see as a sellout, others as due recognition of her brilliance. She talks to **Miriam Cosic** about love, art, funerals and plastic surgery ahead of her return to a country that helped shape her practice.

Pain has always been at the heart of Marina Abramovic's art. Physical pain. Emotional pain. Burning. Cutting. Muscle-straining immobility. Total exhaustion. She has passed out from asphyxiation in a ring of fire, cut into her stomach with a razor blade, held still in balance with her lover, his finger on a taut bow string, the arrow aimed directly at her heart.

She was an edgy outlier in the 1970s, the heyday of performance art, when she hung out with equally grungy artists in shared houses in Amsterdam. Today, when most of her peers have long quit the field, she has negotiated her outlier sensibility into mainstream celebrity. She has learned to monetise the ephemerality of performance art. She wears designer clothes and hangs with a trans-Atlantic art crowd. Robert Wilson directed her, with Willem Dafoe and Antony Hegarty, in a "visual poem" based on her life in 2011. She has appeared in an ad for Riccardo Tisci's Givenchy and in the video *Cut the World* by Antony and the Johnsons, to the chagrin of harder-core artists who think she's sold out.

The derring-do of youth has certainly gone; the woman is, after all, pushing 70. But the brushes with danger, the guns and the knives, have only given way to a different category of distress: almost superhuman bouts of endurance that meditate on time as well as mortality and still the limits of the human body. In 2002, the Sean Kelly Gallery in New York presented *The House with the Ocean View*. Three elevated rooms – sitting room, bedroom, bathroom – opened on one side like a doll's house to public view. Abramovic lived in it for 12 days, not eating or speaking, without privacy. She showered, went to the toilet, brushed her hair and drank water, but mostly she sat and looked out at the audience. And many came to watch her. Symbolically, three ladders reaching from each room to the floor had upturned knife-blades in place of rungs, making escape seem impossible.

The event that sealed her celebrity, however, was *The Artist Is Present*, her performance piece at the Museum of Modern Art in New York in 2010. For that, she sat immobile and silent

for seven hours a day on a wooden chair, while people queued up to sit directly across from her and look. Most gazed into her eyes. Some cried. Many came away visibly shaken. The show broke all records: in 20 weeks more than 850,000 people came to commune with her or watch the spectacle. *The New York Times* wrote repeatedly about it as an unfolding news story. It was a feat of stoicism and transcendence.

Those who have watched Abramovic closely, such as her former assistant, James Westcott, who wrote a fascinating biography called *When Marina Abramovic Dies*, see no sellout but a consistency in her 40-year career.

"I used to be a bit upset by her celebrity moves, but now I think it's not an aberration from her trajectory; it's a continuation of it," he says. "She's always wanted to reach as wide an audience as possible." Of the shift in the style of her performances, he says: "You can't go on self-harming like that your whole life. It would get a bit one-note after a while, and would lose its impact. And it would show no maturing."



Westcott defines Abramovic's work as a "dialectic between vulnerability and control" and several people refer to a naivety that all her experience and sophistication have never overcome. Her New York gallerist, Sean Kelly, talks of the combination of "strength and extraordinary vulnerability, that rarely comes together in a single person". He says criticism, especially the idea that she has compromised her artistic values, hurts Abramovic, not that she shows it outside "the family". By family he means her closest circle of friends and confidantes, because she has no immediate relatives remaining apart from her brother Velimir, a philosopher who lives in Belgrade, where they grew up. Kelly continues: "Strong people are capable of making themselves super-vulnerable and that touches people. And that is allied to a remarkably charismatic quality."

Abramovic's charisma seems to result from her many contradictions. Westcott says that she is both incredibly generous to others and self-obsessed, a diva. "She's distracted by herself constantly," he says. "She's constantly nervous and stressed. Life is one rolling catastrophe. It exhausts her, and she complains that it exhausts her."

"But at the same time she's more generous than 99 per cent of people. She's committed to nurturing other people. She doesn't have any of the Zen of her work in her everyday life. But even that you could say is generous in the end because she's living her life as a kind of public service. She sees it that way. She has sacrificed her entire life to this public existence."

It's morning in Abramovic's minimalist Soho apartment, which is more like a busy public space than a home. A make-up artist is putting finishing touches to her face. The photographers are setting up lights and backdrops. A team of videographers is conferring and sizing up the room. An assistant is walking around with a running sheet. Abramovic is smaller than I'd expected – her works on video suggest a towering presence – and seems engulfed, at the mercy of everyone else. Eventually, however, after she and I have been sitting opposite each other for a while, continuing with desultory chat while others fuss, she asserts herself. "Can we start, kids?" she says, raising her voice a little, and a hush falls.

We begin talking about her upcoming return to Australia, and segue from there into performance art, then art in general. I have questions that I'm saving for the end in case she gets annoyed and throws me out. Like the one about plastic surgery, given that she looks at least 20 years younger than she is. I need not have worried. "I will never say 'is off the record'," Abramovic says right at the start. "I just show everything. I'm not perfect, so I can talk about things I'm

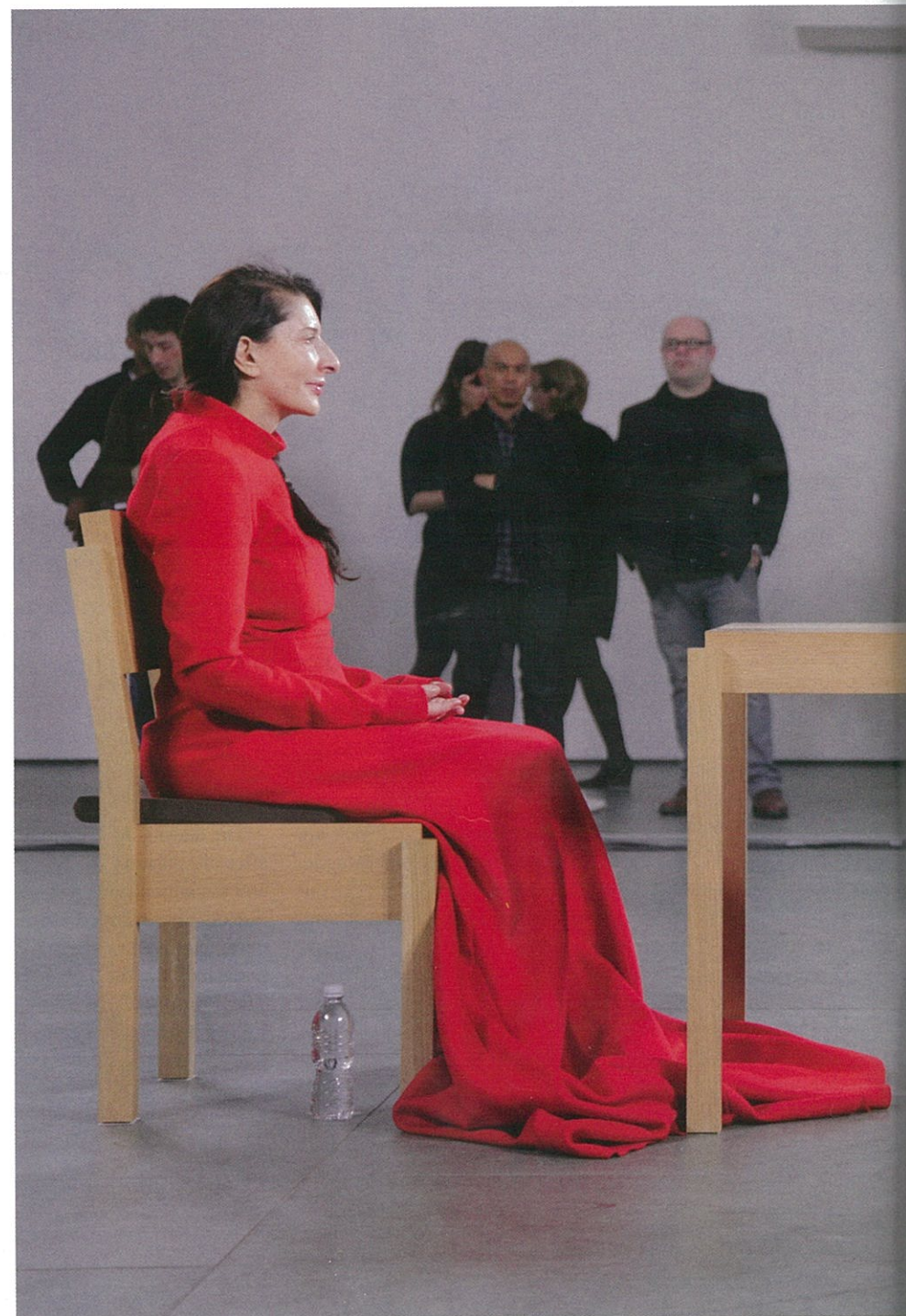
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Abramovic lived for 12 days in the public gaze in *The House with the Ocean View*. Sean Kelly Gallery, New York, 2002.

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In *Marina Abramovic: The Artist Is Present*, Abramovic sat silently opposite members of the public for seven hours a day. Pictured is Ulay, her former partner, making a surprise visit. Museum of Modern Art, New York, 2010.

ashamed of. [The public] can relate to you in a more honest way than if you pretend there is only one image of yourself and then they discover some dirty shit. All my dirty shit is out."

Abramovic has a tendency to drop four-letter words, like an adolescent asserting her independence and looking to shock, though the ugliness of the words is muted to cute by her accent. It seems of a piece with that naivety people remark on. She is also very funny, deploying a Yugoslav irony recognisable from the former nation's cinema and very similar to Australia's dry sense of humour. She particularly likes dirty jokes and intends to have them told at her funeral, which she has already choreographed in detail. She wants services held simultaneously in the three places she has spent most time: Belgrade, Amsterdam and New York. She doesn't want anyone to know which coffin contains the body. She has banned black and wants people to wear bright, vital colours. She says she has asked Antony Hegarty to sing Frank Sinatra's signature song, *I Did It My Way*. "He hasn't agreed, but I think he'll be so sad when I die that he will do it," she says. "I plan on that."

This is a long way from the months she spent with Aboriginal people in the Australian desert, intensifying the nomadic life she had been living in Europe. She and her collaborator in art as well as love, German artist Frank Uwe Laysiepen – who goes by the single name Ulay – were invited to participate in the third Sydney Biennale, titled *European Dialogue*, in 1979. In their first attempt to visit Aboriginal people, they turned up unannounced in Alice Springs with a letter of introduction to the lawyer and activist Phillip Toyne. He sent them away, irritated by their presumption. Toyne did, however, invite them to think of something they could do for the people he was helping. They returned in 1980 on an Australia Council grant and stayed for



almost a year, six months of it in the desert, where they used their skills to help collate and design a book on land rights. It was the beginning of a life-long engagement with the spirituality of indigenous peoples, an experience Abramovic has credited as the most important of her life. It was her first encounter with a nomadic culture, of people who don't cling to possessions, who take what they need from the land and move on.

She and Ulay hooked up with Pitjantjatjara and Pintupi people and travelled with them: Abramovic with the women, Ulay with the men. "One thing that fascinated us about the Aborigines was the ceremonious way of life," she says now. "It's not like they are making a Christmas-time ceremony, or Easter, or three times a year. It's all the time." A torrent of memories ensues. She talks of kangaroo kills and death ceremonies and telepathy. Of the way early explorers, who were men, documented indigenous men's traditions and, of necessity, left indigenous women's lives as blank as though they didn't exist. She speaks of the heat. Of the flies that tormented them until eventually, many days away from showers and flush-toilets, the flies suddenly accepted them as part of the environment and left them alone. Some of her recollections seem naive, or rose-tinted, or imperfectly remembered, but there's no doubting the enthusiasm and gratitude triggered.

"The idea of living in the present is the biggest teaching I had from the Australian Aborigines," she says. Abramovic's voice is deep, sensual, thrilling almost, her heavily accented English marked by typically Slavic misuse of the definite article. It casts an exotic light over familiar aspects of Australian life. "This is what I integrated later on into my performance: the idea of here and now."

"THE PUBLIC CAN RELATE TO YOU IN A MORE HONEST WAY THAN IF YOU PRETEND THERE'S ONLY ONE IMAGE OF YOURSELF THEN THEY DISCOVER SOME DIRTY SHIT. ALL MY DIRTY SHIT IS OUT."

Asked why she didn't stay forever, Abramovic replies that she is, above all, an artist. "This is my role, why I'm on this planet in the first place. You don't need art in nature. Nature is perfect without us. We need art in disturbed societies."

Leaving is a trope in Abramovic's personal history. She was born in Belgrade in November 1946, at the dawn of communist Yugoslavia. Her parents, both Montenegrins, had been partisans, war heroes, and were ranking members of the Communist Party. Until she was 10, Abramovic believed her birthday was on October 29, Republic Day, a more worthy anniversary in her parents' eyes.

Her father, who was in the military, came from a poor family. Her mother, who managed historic monuments and public art, was from the wealthy pre-war bourgeoisie. Despite their fealty to Marxism, the family lived in a large apartment full of expensive furniture. Abramovic was a sickly child and her parents worked long hours, so she lived with her maternal grandmother until she was six, when the nuclear family reunited – sort of – after her brother was born.

A formative tension between equal and opposite forces arose in her life. Her parents were dialectical materialists and strict atheists, in service to the common good. Her grandmother was devoutly Serbian Orthodox and her great-uncle had been a patriarch of the Serbian Orthodox Church. Her grandmother loathed communism and had baby Marina secretly baptised.

"In communism, there's always five-year plan, 10-year plan, the sense of discipline and working for a certain cause and you have to deliver," Abramovic says. "Your private life is not important: it's what you're going to bring to others. I have a very strong sense of that. Then this ritualisation of everyday life, and being really tuned to the world which we call invisible, but which is present."

Her father was also often invisible, absent on security business or private pleasures, while her mother was a more constant, exacting disciplinary presence. She showed her daughter no affection, in fact often beat her, but facilitated her education with an extracurricular program of language and arts studies. Her father left for good when Abramovic was 15, moving in with the woman he'd been having an affair with for years. Astonishingly, Abramovic observed a curfew her mother imposed until she was 29, when she went to live in Amsterdam.



► The audience became part of the performance in *Marina Abramovic: 512 Hours*. The Serpentine Galleries, London, 2014.



► In *Balkan Baroque*, Abramovic scrubbed at blood on a pile of cow bones for six hours a day. It won the 1997 Venice Biennale Golden Lion for best artist.



By then she was performing her most provocative art works during the day, and scuttling home every night by 10pm. Also by then, even more improbably, she was married to her first husband, Neša Paripovi, a fellow alumni of the Belgrade Academy of Fine Arts.

Abramovic was hanging out with the avant-garde in Belgrade and increasingly across Europe. A turning point came when she was invited to an event in Amsterdam and Ulay was detailed to pick her up from the airport. They discovered they had the same birthday, and the same superstitious tick of tearing out the day in their diaries. They became inseparable for the next 12 years. He was the love of her life, though she went on to have other lovers and another husband.

They lived peripatetically in a black Citroën van with their dog. Her most memorable art, the works that define her and were recreated in MoMA's 2010 retrospective, were collaborations with him. In a 2010 documentary of her life, Ulay says ruefully that Abramovic took another path in the end, away from what they had stood for and towards wealth and fame.

That wasn't what split them though. For years the couple had worked on the logistics and permissions to walk the Great Wall of China, starting at either end and walking for weeks to meet in the middle. In 1988, the project came to fruition: it was to be an affirmation of their love as well as their grandest art action to date. Then Abramovic discovered Ulay had been having an affair with their translator, who was pregnant with his child. They walked the wall anyway, but their meeting in the middle was their farewell.

This is where the question about plastic surgery comes in. When I ask if that's what accounts for her amazingly youthful looks, she says no, it's in the genes. What she does admit to, willingly, is breast augmentation. "I had breast implants when I was 40, after Ulay and I separated ... I was at [the] lowest point in my life; I thought I had lost everything."

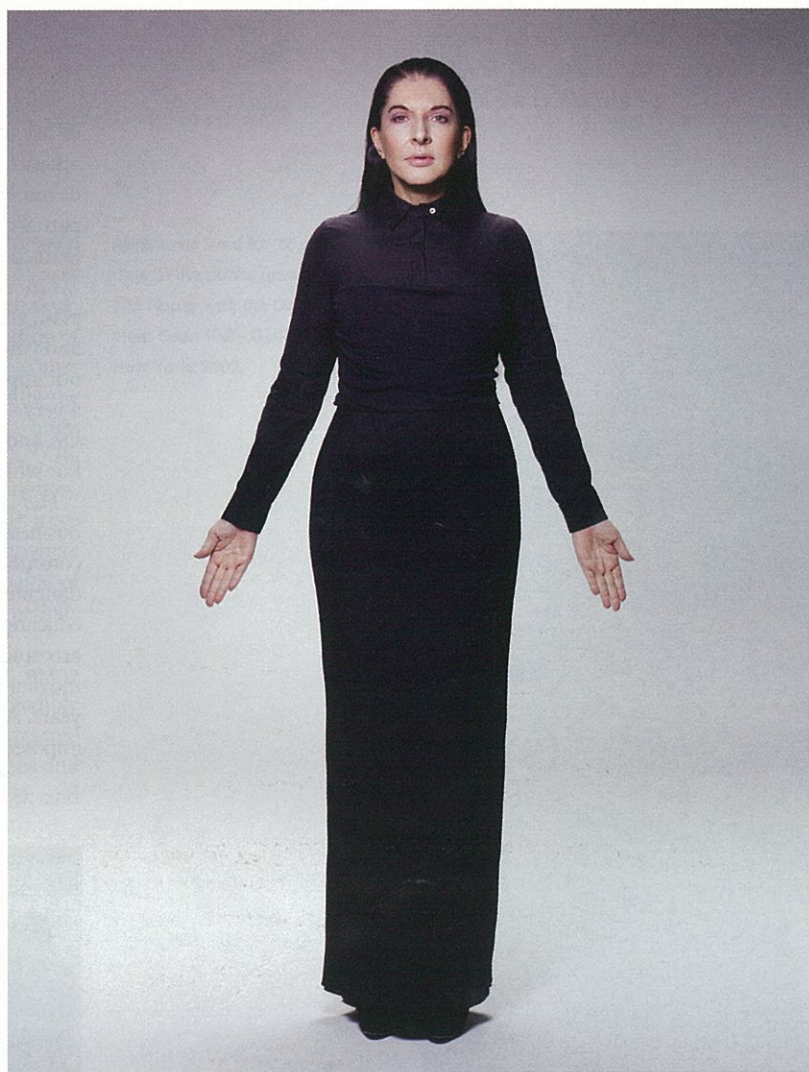
At the same time she discovered fashion. "I didn't have clothes, I didn't have money. The first time I sold a work, I went to Paris and bought [Yohji] Yamamoto – jacket and trousers, beautiful, just black and white – and I'll never forget how I felt. I never thought myself to be beautiful or attractive, and my self-esteem was very low when the man I loved left me for somebody else. I felt fat, ugly and unwanted. And then things really changed. Now I make fashion magazine covers. At 68, can you believe it?"

Ulay took his turn sitting in front of Abramovic at MoMA in 2010. A brief, moving clip of this silent reunion has had more than 9.7 million hits on YouTube.

Abramovic's first high-powered international acclaim came in 1997 at the Venice Biennale. Her work is rarely political, with visceral exceptions such as the five-pointed star of Yugoslav communism that she carved into her stomach in 1975. Sean Kelly, for one, advised against her accepting an invitation to represent Montenegro in Venice, which might have been seen to endorse the Milošević regime. (Montenegro and Serbia were still in federation at that time.) The Yugoslav wars of disintegration were still roiling, with accusations of genocide levelled at all sides – but particularly the Serbs, her people.

In *Balkan Baroque*, she scrubbed and scrubbed at a mound of cow bones for six hours a day, trying to clean the blood from them. It won her the biennale's Golden Lion prize for best artist, and also some notoriety when her invitation to show in the Montenegrin pavilion was withdrawn at the last minute, her work deemed too expensive, too ugly. It left Venice officials scrambling to find space for her in the main hall. She has said, with some satisfaction, that she had the last word when the Montenegrin culture minister was sacked.

In the same year she met Paolo Canevari, an Italian sculptor and video artist 17 years her junior, with whom she would have another 12-year relationship,



I USED TO BE UPSET BY HER CELEBRITY MOVES. BUT NOW I THINK IT'S NOT AN ABERRATION FROM HER TRAJECTORY, IT IS A CONTINUATION OF IT.

Biographer James Westcott

the last two as a married couple. In 2001, they moved to New York and her fame surged. In 2007, Abramovic bought a weekender in upstate New York. When she and Canevari split, she made plans to turn it into the Marina Abramovic Institute, a sure sign that she herself was becoming something of an institution. The artists who recreated her earlier works for the MoMA retrospective trained there, and alumni include Lady Gaga. In 2012 Abramovic launched a Kickstarter campaign which collected more than \$US600,000 to upgrade the institute to a formal school.

Come June, Abramovic will be back in Australia for the first time in 17 years for two different shows. *Private Archaeology* at the Museum of Old and New Art in Hobart will give an overview of her practice in two clear stages; videos of her early work, some of it with Ulay, then a jump to the 1980s and '90s when she was just beginning to withdraw from the performance space. In addition there will be a couple of works which involve public interaction. In

Sydney, Kaldor Public Art Projects will host a durational performance, involving the public as participants, in the presence of the artist.

The videos at MONA and the re-stagings by young actors at MoMA, highlight questions raised by Abramovic's more serious critics: what about the transience, the ephemerality, which was the very point of performance art in its earliest, most provocative days? "That early manifesto that she and Ulay wrote was very much about the aliveness of the performance piece," says Julie Rrap, an Australian artist who uses performative techniques for photographic and video work. "The radical thing was that it was done there and then for that audience and it wasn't to be done again. But it wasn't too long after that that they began to create some documentation, and that turned into those quite large glossy Cibachrome prints. I suppose, like any artist, they were producing some kind of commodity that they could sell related to the work."

Rrap argues that the whole genre has shifted. "Performance art has a documented history that now forms part of the syllabus in art academies around the world, so that young artists working with this history are working within a known space. The notion of the 'live radical act' can't help but carry traces of the past. Perhaps this is why re-enactment has become part of the repertoire of performance art today."

Abramovic responds smoothly to this line of criticism: "In the '70s I agreed completely. I never repeated a performance, never rehearsed a performance, and right in the beginning we didn't even document. But then things change and you have to go with the times."

She realised others were starting to copy her work. "If you find out that your

performance is being copied by MTV, by television, by fashion, by advertising, by films, by everybody without any credit, you get fed up. And you say, 'Fine, now I'm going to teach artists to repeat the performance like a score and I want the credit.' At least have dignity to acknowledge where the material comes from, who is the original artist and pay the rights. Like you pay for a book."

If anything demonstrates the shift from radical girl living hand-to-mouth with her lover in a van to the protected celebrity of international stardom it's this insistence on legal and economic protocol. From barefoot princess to reigning queen. But look into those curiously unguarded eyes, in a video or a metre away in person, and it's almost startling to realise the girl is still there. Still challenging and reassuring in the same moment, still flouting and seeking approval in her own, complex way. ■

Miriam Cosic flew to New York courtesy of MONA, which presents *Private Archaeology* in Hobart, June 13–October 5. Kaldor Public Art Projects presents *Marina Abramovic: In Residence* in Sydney, June 24–July 5. Next year, the Museum of Contemporary Art Australia will stage an Abramovic retrospective in Sydney.