

Marina Abramović

23 September 2023 - 1 January 2024

Main Galleries | Burlington House

Royal Academy of Arts, London

There are many reasons why Marina Abramović's major exhibition in the Royal Academy is important and the fact that it is the artist's largest one in the UK to date is certainly amongst the most significant ones. It is also, since its opening in 1768, the first solo exhibition held in the Main Galleries by a female artist. It took 255 years and three waves of feminism for this reputable institution to open the gates of its most representative space to a woman - an icon, a pioneer, an internationally acclaimed performance artist who for over 50 years of her career never once stopped experimenting and challenging her own limits and those of her audience, yet still a woman. Adrian Heathfield argues that her life-long work and especially renowned shows in New York's Guggenheim and MoMA held at the beginning of the twenty-first century, earned her a 'global, cultural popularity experienced by only a handful of (still mostly male) artists' (Royal Academy of Arts (RA), 2023 p.43) and subsequently enabled the Royal Academy show. Another reason of the exhibition's importance lays in the fact that it presents Abramović, a Serbian born in 1946 in former Yugoslavia, not only as a performance artist but as a multidisciplinary one, who utilises photography, video, sculpture, drawing, installation, and other means to explore 'art as a vehicle for emotional and spiritual transformation' (RA, 2023 p.4).



Figure 1. Abramović, M. (2011) *The Spirit in Any Condition Does Not Burn* [C-print] Marina Abramović Archives.

Indeed, it is the spiritual transformation what has become the most important reason and the unspoken theme of the exhibition, and it is well represented in the body of work displayed. Simply titled *Marina Abramović*, with no curatorial statement, the exhibition which the artist significantly planned to call 'Afterlife' (Gleeson, 2023) is being advertised by her 2011's work *The spirit in any condition does not burn* (Fig.1). The show, originally scheduled for 2020 and postponed due to the Covid-19 pandemic, had time to ripe in minds of the artist and the curator, who decided collaboratively to abandon the idea of a chronological retrospective and to take the audiences on a thematical journey built around the key moments of Abramović's career. The artworks are organised following the themes of 'the importance of public participation, pushing the limits of the body, drawing energy from nature, and developing meaning through ritual' (RA, 2023 line7) along with exploring the connections between people and objects, relationships, family, politics. Focusing on themes rather than chronology enabled a dialogue between the artworks which allows the viewers to reflect upon their own opinions, memories, and experiences, to bring in their own stories and subsequently establish their own connection with the artist and her creations.

The exhibition comprises of eleven rooms of diverse sizes, some of them bright and spacious 'white cube,' where a disturbing content is in full light, while others are painted in dark colours and their dimmed lights create an intimate atmosphere. This 'immersive design

... conceived by vPPR Architects' (RA, 2023 p.7) adds to a sense of a journey taking the viewer from cold white opening rooms to a suffocating atmosphere recalling a confined basement where the *Balkan Baroque* is recreated among red walls, overwhelming grey assists the *Relations* - Abramović's artistic collaboration with Ulay, warm substitute of day light marks the end of their artistic and personal relationship, deep green has a calming effect where the *Nude with Skeleton* is being enacted, black walls accompany the *Four Crosses* installation. There are four Abramović's iconic performances: *Imponderabilia*, *Nude with Skeleton*, *Luminosity* and *The House with the Ocean View* reperformed in the Gallery by the young artists trained in the Marina Abramović Method by her Institute, the MAI. As performances happen at various times, they add to a unique experience during each visit and so Abramović's brief appearances at random times do.

The curator, Andrea Tarsia and her assistant, Rebecca Bray created a startlingly impactful exhibition layout. At the entrance, the audience is immediately confronted with the two of Abramović's most globally recognised performances: *The Artist is Present*, which took place over 3 months in 2010, in MoMA, New York and the 1974's *Rhythm 0*, performed during six hours in Studio Morra in Naples. Cathryn Wood defines performance art as 'represented by a singular, experimental and anarchic act' which 'often involves nakedness, vulnerability and risk, invariably putting the artist-performer face-to-face with the audience' (2018 p.34) and this definition perfectly describes what can be seen in the first two rooms of the exhibition. In *The Artist is Present* Abramović spent the total of 736 hours 30 minutes sitting still in front of the changing members of the audience in the gallery's atrium. She served as a mirror for their pain and emotions and proved 'the fundamental human need for connection' (RA, 2023 p.77). This performance was a 'real turning point in Abramović's career' earning her a celebrity status and all the '1,545 people (who) sat with her ... were documented by photographer Marco Anelli' (Burello, 2023 p.9). The effect of his work is displayed on the side walls of the exhibition's first room, faces of the audience members distorted with uncontrollable emotions (Fig.2) opposite to calm, reassuring features of Marina Abramović (Fig.3) captured at different times of the performance. In her memoir *Walk Through Walls* the artist commented: '[T]he sheer quantity of ... unconditional love of

total strangers, was the most incredible feeling I've ever had. ... this performance went beyond performance. This was life' (2017 p.319).



Figures 2, 3. Abramović, M. (2010) *The Artist is Present* [Performance, 3 Months] New York: The Museum of Modern Art.

The following room presents a striking contrast to the positive energy of the first one. A long table with 72 objects representing pain or pleasure, neatly set up in front of a big screen (Fig.4), immediately transfers the viewer to Studio Morra in Naples where in 1974 young Abramović performing *Rhythm 0* (Fig.5) exposed herself as an object and invited her audience to use on her anything from the table, whilst she took full responsibility for the results. On the screen the viewer can see, how initially innocent actions involving a lipstick, or a rose became increasingly violent. The artist got stripped, cut with a knife, pricked with pins, and eventually a loaded gun was held to her neck (RA, 2023 p.77). Remembering that performance, Abramović wrote 'I think the reason I wasn't raped was that the wives were there. ... I realized that the public can kill you' (2017, p.69,70). The outcome of the *Rhythm 0* recalls a terrifying result of the Zimbardo's *Prison Experiment* held at Stanford University in 1972 and stopped after only six days as it became too dangerous for the students who were assigned to be 'the prisoners.' The report of Haney et al. (1972, p.54) mentions the 'observation of the ease with which sadistic behaviour could be elicited in individuals who were not "sadistic types"' - exactly as happened during Abramović's performance.



Figure 4, 5. Abramović, M. (1974) *Rhythm 0* [Performance, 6 hours] Naples: Studio Morra.

At the preliminary stages of her career Abramović exposed her body to the risk of violence, inflicted pain, and injuries upon it just as the other artists who ‘staged themselves in the role of an initiate in a rite of passage’ e.g., Carolee Schneemann, Chris Burden, Petr Štembera or Gina Pane (Wood, 2018 p.42). The exhibition presents the archival photographs of the performances of some of the *Rhythm* cycle which proves the artist’s early interest in spirituality, symbols, and rituals. *Rhythm 10* (Fig.6), where the artist used twenty knives to stab the paper between her fingers frequently injuring herself, allowed her for the first time to experience the energy flow, freedom, a special connection with her audience, and she knew she found her medium (Abramović and Kaplan, 2017). In the highly ritualistic *Rhythm 5* (Fig.7), in 1974, she used her own hair and nails to feed the fire of the five-pointed star and placed herself in the middle of it. This communist symbol, ever-present in her oppressed country and in the whole communist bloc appears again in the *Lips of Thomas*, 1975 (Fig.8), cut with a razor blade on the artist’s stomach. Similarly to Abramović’s *Rhythm 5*, Petr Štembera used his hair, nails, blood, and urine, and drunk it whilst looking at the altar with his own portrait lit by the candles in his 1974’s *Narcissus No.1* (Wood, 2018).



Figure 6. Abramović, M. (1973) *Rhythm 10* [Performance, 1 hour] Rome: Museo d'Arte Contemporanea, Villa Borghese.

Figure 7. Abramović, M. (1974) *Rhythm 5* [Performance, 90 minutes] Belgrade: Student Cultural Centre.

Figure 8. Abramović, M. (1975) *Lips of Thomas (Star on Stomach)* [Black and white photographic print] New York: Sean Kelly Gallery.

The *Balkan Baroque*, which in 1997 won the artist a Golden Lion during the Venice Biennale, occupies the same red room as the *Rhythm 5*, engaging in political dialogue. Dominated by three screens where Abramović, placed between her parents – the Second World War heroes, delivers a horrifying Balkan recipe for creating a Wolf Rat (Fig. 9), it recalls the original performance when she spent four days sitting on a heap of cattle bones and scrubbing them off blood in the attempt of a symbolic purification (Fig.10). The performance created at the time of extremely violent Balkan wars is considered the ‘most complex and multifaceted reflection on her homeland’ (RA, 2023 p.93).



Figures 9, 10. Abramović, M. (1997) *Balkan Baroque* [Performance, 4 days, 6 hours] Venice: XLVII Biennale.

The largest room of the exhibition displays the *Relations* (Fig.11), multiple collaborative projects of Abramović and her partner of 12 years, a German artist, Ulay. Their most renowned work, the 1977's *Imponderabilia*, is being re-performed here, enforcing the audience to confront their own boundaries and decide upon sliding to the next room through a narrow portal created by the naked human pillars, or shying away and choosing the alternative entrance. The next room contains Abramović's personal and artistic tribute to Ulay, pictures from the couple's distant journeys and spiritual experiences they shared which led to their ultimate performance. *The Lovers, The Great Wall Walk* (Fig.12) took place over 90 days in 1988, when they walked along The Great Wall of China from its opposite ends, to meet in the middle for their ritualised farewells.



Figure 11. Abramović, M. and Ulay (1976) *Relation in Space* [Performance, 58 minutes] Giudecca, Venice: XXXVIII Biennale.

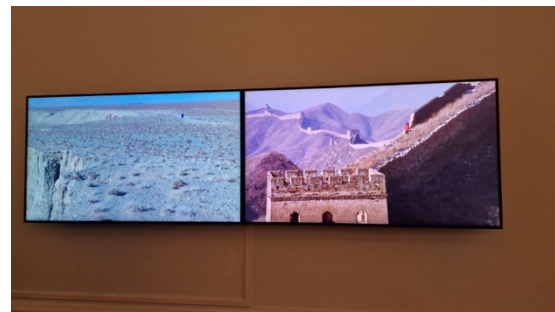


Figure 12. Abramović, M. and Ulay (1988) *The Lovers, The Great Wall Walk* [Performance, 90 days] China: The Great Wall of China.

This journey impacted the future body of Abramović's work inspiring her with reflecting upon the energy and labour, geological activity, and the Earth's energy lines (RA, 2023) what resulted in creation of her *Transitory Objects for Human Use*. From this point the artist began to draw from her studies on Chinese and Tibetan medicine, practice of Buddhist vipassana, and to explore the powers of minerals and crystals. Interaction of her artworks with the viewer results in a healing process and exchange of energy, what recalls Joseph Beuys' curative tools (RA, 2023). Her performances indicate a process of reconnection with environment and its primal elements. Abramović uses rocks, air, the sea, she draws from nature and explores its influence on her. With age, her performances become more peaceful

and calmer, more static yet still challenging as she exposes herself to many hours, even days of immobilisation and fasting e.g., in *The House with the Ocean View*.

The final rooms of the exhibition enhance the impression of deeply rooted spirituality of the artist. Even though she does not consider herself as religious, she drew from the early childhood fascination with St Teresa of Avila and in 2009 recorded a video *The Kitchen – Levitation* (Fig.15) showing herself levitating like the saint, in an old monastery's kitchen. Like Chris Burden, who in his 1974's *Trans-Fixed* crucified himself on the roof of the car (Wood, 2018), Abramović stretched her bleeding body on the cross made of ice blocs in her 1975's *Lips of Thomas*. She returned to this Christian symbol again in 2019, with the *Four Crosses* (Fig.13) consisting of icon-like images of the artist's face either calm or grotesquely distorted. Placed in the four corners of a room they create an impression of a chapel. Leaning towards the centre, where the 1996's *Bed for Dead Spirit* (Fig.14) is placed flatly on the floor, its rose quartz resembling a stone of anointment in Jerusalem's Church of the Holy Sepulchre, they complement each other.



Figure 13. Abramović, M. (2019) *Four Crosses* [Corian, aluminium, iron, oak with LED panels] Marina Abramović Archives.



Figure 14. Abramović, M. (1996) *Bed for Dead Spirit* [Lead, rose quartz] Marina Abramović Archives.

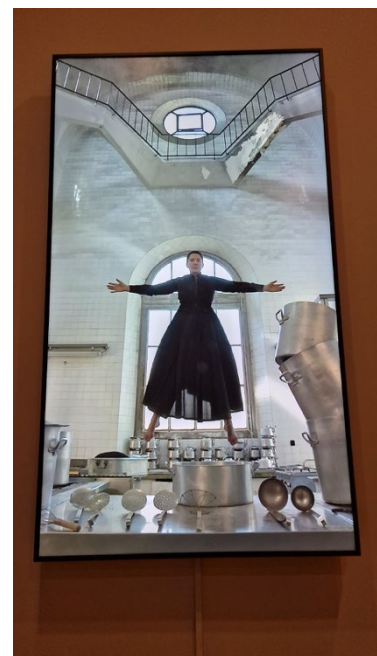


Figure 15. Abramović, M. (2009) *The Kitchen – Levitation* [Video, 11 minutes, 21 seconds] Marina Abramović Archives.

The spiritual journey of the artist is prominent in *Marina Abramović* exhibition. She does not refrain in her works from dealing with death, but through reconnection with nature, meditation, rituals, passing the knowledge to the next generations, teaching her Method and all the processes of purification present in the exhibition, she ensures to be ready to continue her transformation in 'Afterlife.' As Burello argues the artist 'displays the characteristics of a charismatic spiritual leader possibly arising from her mastery of her own transliminal abilities, following a long and serious training in spiritual traditions' (2023, p.18). Through this show, she provides a guidance for her audiences, by sharing with the viewers all stages of her fascinating journey, allowing them to reminiscence and reflect, to confront their own fears and limitations, to walk through the luminous *Portal*, purify and turn to nature- a guidance particularly important regarding current issues of climate change, terrorism, and wars.



Figure 16. Abramović, M. (2002) *Portal* [Selenite, steel, aluminium, LED] London: Lisson Gallery.

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