

"The Insatiable Talent That Is Marina Abramovic"
by Toni Lester (July 1, 2017)

Provocateur, radical chic, pioneering grand dame of performance art, Maria Abramovic was celebrated in a retrospective at MOMA in Stockholm this past Spring.¹ Room after room of standing room only crowds overflowed with everything from a pile of dirty, bloody animal bones being incessantly scrubbed cleaned by one of her assistants,² to the spectacle of a naked woman, head covered in a hood that harkened to military torture, dancing as if in a trance for hours. The instructions for the piece asked the dancer to dance until she dropped from complete exhaustion, as a clothed male drummer drummed hypnotic, repetitive rhythms some have accused Abramovic of appropriating from Aboriginal culture on one of her many treks to meet shamans and healers in far off lands. Well, at least far off to westerners. To indigenous people, these same lands are after all - home.

In her early work, Abramovic engaged in what could be viewed as masochistic performance pieces where she made herself vulnerable to violence. On display at the retrospective were early films she and her then lover and co-creator, Ulay, developed in this vein. In one the two slap each other over and over again;³ in another he stands holding a completely taut bow and arrow targeted directly at her heart, while she holds the tip of the arrow in her hand as a monitor tracks and amplifies the sound of their hearts beating.⁴ On her reasons for staging these kinds of happenings, she has said: "Art is a matter of life and death. This may be melodramatic, but it is also true."⁵

These days, Abramovic seems to have mellowed. Along with the Stockholm MOMA installations described above, she brought videos of the urban pilgrims who came to worship at her feet, or should I say - table, as she sat for a mind boggling 736 hours in an almost completely static, silent vigil, called "The Artist is Present" at New York MOMA in 2010.⁶ People - some crying, some in quiet contemplation, some in awe, stared into her eyes and she into theirs as if she were a guru. Clearly she was tapping into a deep, long held need by the public to have someone be a witness to their lives, their sorrows and their longings. Even Ulay showed up for a sit down. After the shock of seeing him for the first time in years during which a lengthy and contentious battle took place over ownership rights to their joint work, she became overcome with tears - of forgiveness?⁷ Or maybe it was simply the exhaustion she endured because she had to be so sedentary for such a long period of time.

Here, as in much of her work, Abramovic was in her element - embodied, the center of her own artistic gravity. Indeed, this sense of embodiment is a core part of her overall philosophy. In one of the museum rooms in Stockholm visitors could open a series of draws in a large oak bureau. One draw revealed the following statement written by her in black marker on a large white sheet of paper bordered in red: "The effect on me from my first performance with my own body was almost a state of shock. I had such a tremendously strong experience that I knew almost immediately it was the only way I could really deal with the public."

One of the most intriguing installations in the museum was a long table covered in what seemed like an infinite amount of black and white rice mixed together. Visitors were invited to separate the rice by color into two separate piles. This appears to be inspired by techniques associated with Buddhism and other contemplative traditions designed to quiet the mind.⁸ So yes, the question of appropriation definitely lingers over a great deal of Abramovic's work. What would be good is if she listed the specific influences more overtly in her exhibition curatorial notes and perhaps even included some of her many nonwestern mentors and influences in a joint exhibit or co-authored book.⁹ This would go a long way towards demonstrating what must surely be her gratitude for all that she has culled from those experiences.

Still, without a doubt, Abramovic has an incredible, insatiable talent. Always searching for the new (or at the least ingeniously recasting the old), she continues to challenge us to reshape our preconceived notions about what art is and the role that the body and performance plays in its conception.

¹ www.modernamuseet.se/stockholm/en/exhibitions/marina-abramovic.

² The piece is called "Balkan Baroque". For this exhibit a younger artist "reperformed" the work Abramovic originated years ago. Id.

³ This piece is called "Light-Dark". See <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=t-j0Ey2O4HU>.

⁴ This piece is called "The Other - Rest Energy." See www.youtube.com/watch?v=5IJte841c4A.

⁵ Actually this was originally said by artist Bruce Nauman, who Abramovic in turn quoted in a 2005 show she comprised largely of reenactments of the work of pioneering performance artists presented at the Guggenheim. Randy Kennedy, "Self-Mutilation is the Sincerest Form of Flattery," at www.nytimes.com/2005/11/06/arts/design/selfmutilation-is-the-sincerest-form-of-flattery.html.

⁶ Apparently she did go home at night to sleep and relieve herself! See www.moma.org/calendar/exhibitions/964?locale=en.

⁷ Here is a video of their reunion: www.youtube.com/watch?v=OS0Tg0IjCp4.

⁸ Anne Marsh, "Marina Abramović: Mindful Immateriality," www.academia.edu/21521497/Marina_Abramovi%C4%87_Mindful_Immateriality

⁹ Abramovic has participated in a short documentary, called "The Space In Between - Maria Abramovic and Brazil," where she is shown visiting a variety of spiritual teachers and healers - including "Son of John" - to immerse herself in their culture. www.latimes.com/entertainment/movies/la-et-mn-capsule-marina-abramovic-brazil-review-20170615-story.html.