



Marina Abramovic performing "Nude with Skeleton," 2005-2005

REPEAT PERFORMANCE

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ARTIST MARINA ABRAMOVIC EXPLORES THE LEGACY OF PERFORMANCE ART

Text Suzanne Weinstock

After more than four decades as a pioneer in the world of performance art, Yugoslavian-born Marina Abramovic is breaking new ground yet again, this time in the emerging subcategory of re-performance. Now, for the first time, Abramovic is training others to re-perform her work as a way to both preserve performance and to move it into the mainstream. Opening at the Museum of Modern Art on March 14, "Marina Abramovic: The Artist is Present" is an extensive retrospective that covers 50 of Abramovic's most famous pieces, performed by both the artist herself and a hand-picked group of approximately 35 dancers and performance artists. "Re-performance is becoming a new genre in itself," said RoseLee Goldberg, director of Performa, a non-profit arts organization supporting live performances. "It already has its own history and practitioners."

But that wasn't always the case. In the 1970s, when performance art was first emerging, Abramovic and many others felt that it should not involve rehearsal, re-performance or documentation—the only way to experience a work was to be there, in that time and place. According to Dr. Mary Richards, head of drama at Brunel University in the U.K., this prevented the pieces from being commodified, and represented a sort of resistance to the capitalism of the time. "Re-performances are intrinsically a departure from the impulse of original performance," says Richards. "[They] require consideration of what the performer wants to transmit to a contemporary audience."

While many performers did occasionally photograph their work, only fragments of documentation from that period remain. Abramovic, however, is at an obvious advantage. "So many things have changed," she remarked, "[and] I am one of the few people left from that generation that still performs. So I felt that I somehow have the purpose or function to make history straight."



Abramovic and Ulay performing "Relation in Time" at Studio G7 in Bologna, Italy, October 1997

Abramovic began exploring preservation in 1992, with her "Biography" series of autobiographical theater pieces. These, however, were staged narratives of her life as opposed to re-performances. Then came "Seven Easy Pieces" at the Guggenheim in 2005, for which she re-enacted five pieces originally performed by others (with their cooperation) alongside two of her own. The work was a failed experiment in terms of Abramovic's goals at the time—she had originally planned the piece as a lecture about giving credit to artists whose work was being re-performed or adapted, yet "people started re-performing but without asking permission from anybody [after that]," Abramovic recalls, "which is not what this was all about. I think I somehow opened the door of Pandora's box."

Credit aside, Abramovic said she's come around to believing that performance art only makes sense performed live. Indeed, performance artists dedicate their lives to work that is, by its nature, ephemeral, and many are now thinking about what will happen when they can no longer perform. "In a lot of ways the fact that you're doing someone else's work is supporting the possibility that performance can exist in the future as performance, and not documentation or pictures. [It] can actually be performed again like a painting that can go somewhere else," said performance artist Maria Jose Arjona, one of the retrospective's re-performers.

Abramovic's forthcoming retrospective is exploring precisely that: Each individual piece is static, and therefore easy to replicate day to day, for even months at a time. Abramovic is even experimenting with the possibility of installing performance art as a traditional museum exhibit, claiming that one of her greatest purposes in life is to establish the performance art of herself and others as a mainstream school of art. "For me this retrospective is not just my success," Abramovic said. "It's much larger than that. It's a historical tryout how the performance can become mainstream art."

Abramovic's unprecedented three-month-long MoMA exhibition is, therefore, an ambitious trial run for what could be a performance art revolution: a new model for bringing a sidelined area of the art world to a mass audience.

Nude with Skeleton. Courtesy the artist and Sean Kelly Gallery/Artists Rights Society

Relation in Time. Courtesy the artist and Sean Kelly Gallery/Artists Rights Society



Brittany Bailey, dancer (New York City)

"I don't think too much about Marina in the work because I'm doing a piece that she created. So much of who she is and what she wanted is [already] there—I'm performing. It is a 're-performance,' but it's all about what I bring to [it]."

Brittany Bailey discovered Marina Abramovic in her dance studio—on a poster advertising for "re-performers" at MoMA. "It was a little over my head," said Bailey, who began dancing at age two and currently trains at New York's Merce Cunningham studio. "I perform—[it's] my passion and my career—and I was interested in what they mean by 'performance art.' [So] I knew I connected to something in [the poster] very directly, I just didn't have words [to describe it]. It was intuition."

As it turns out, Bailey was right to trust her gut. At their first meeting, she told Abramovic about her experience with Butoh, a Japanese style of dance focused on emptying oneself of personal emotions in order to be filled with the ideas and concepts of performance. For Abramovic, it was precisely what she was looking for in her re-performers. For Bailey, despite a lack of experience in performance art, it made her immediately comfortable with the work.

"There's no task involved except to be present, and I couldn't ask for a better thing to be expected of me," said Bailey. "It's almost [like] being given an opportunity to go on a big adventure, and no one can bother me. [It may] sound selfish, but the performance aspect makes it a [group] journey. And to be asked to take someone with you as well is just awesome."

Brittany Bailey will be performing "Luminosity."

Photography Dese'Rae Lynn Stage. Brittany Bailey performing "Wake the Animals" in Brooklyn, November 2009



Layard Thompson, performance artist (New York City, and Liberty, TN)

"I consider myself to be somewhat like clay, or a puppet that is really subsuming my agency into the larger agency of Marina's work and its intentions. That said, all of these re-performers are not Marina."

"The work that I do, to a certain extent, is diametrically opposed to Marina's work or at least to the work we'll be re-performing," says Layard Thompson, a trained dancer whose primary work involves creating often-provocative situations in which his movements can be improvised. One example: at the 2009 Movement Research Fall Festival, Thompson went onstage, naked from the waist down and wearing only a white undershirt, and began thrusting his face into a Victoria's Secret bag while stuttering theatrically. He's also used to long durational work, including on performance that involved 24 hours of nonstop movement while wearing a blindfold and earplugs. In other words, stillness is a relatively foreign experience.

Thompson now lives in Liberty, Tennessee, where he is establishing an artist's community. He was a late addition to Abramović's work, having been recommended after other performers dropped out. He's looking forward to the lucky break. "I'm excited to step into a very new terrain which is sustaining these very meditative states," said Thompson. "There's still movement, there's still a sense of muscular release, there's still breath, there's still alignment work, still keeping the chi [is still] flowing—[there are still] all these things that I have a lot of experience with. But I've never so tightly constrained them."

Layard Thompson will be performing "Relation in Time," "Point of Contact," "Imponderabilia," and "Nude with Skeleton."

Photography Julieta Cervantes. Layard Thompson performing "The Warrior" at Performance Mix Festival in NYC, March 2008



Maria Jose Arjona, performance artist (Miami)

"How am I going to have the same strength [as Marina]? The same energy level that she has? The expectations are very high [because the audience has already] seen her there. So you have to forget she was there, but [simultaneously] have the same level of energy that she works with all the time."

Growing up in Columbia, Maria Jose Arjone saw very little performance art. It wasn't until an injury cut short her dance career and instead led her to art school—and to grainy, black-and-white photocopies of Marina Abramovic's work—that she became interested in the medium. Arjone soon began creating her own performance art pieces.

Arjona lives in Miami, where she focuses on long durational performance art. Her fervent admiration for Abramovic, however, hasn't changed. "I need to talk to you," she told the artist, after approaching Abramovic at a book signing in Miami five years ago. "Nobody asked about the work itself. Everybody wanted to know about her life, but to me, that wasn't relevant," Arjona explained. "[She must have] thought I was very serious."

Still, the two became friends and remain in touch. Following a 2009 residency at the Watermill Center in New York, Arjona met with Abramovic to share what she had learned. Although Abramovic was only auditioning New York-based artists, Arjona was subsequently cast as a re-performer.

Maria Jose Arjona will be performing "Point of Contact."

Photography Ted Hartshorn. Maria Jose Arjona performing an untitled piece at Gallery Diet in Miami, March 2008