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Abramovic Recalls Her Recent Present, Looks to a Future Upstate

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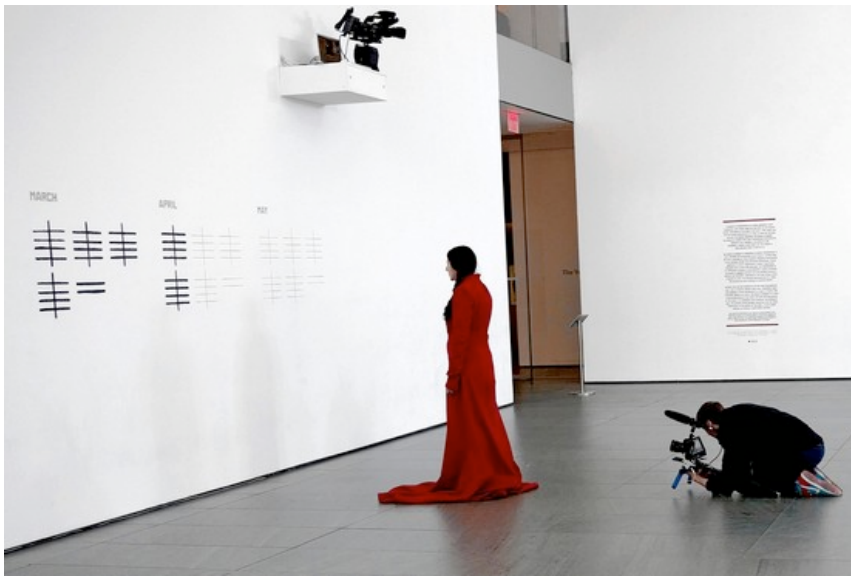
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By [ANDY BATTAGLIA](#)



David Smoler/ HBO Documentary Films & Music Box Films

Marina Abramovic at the Museum of Modern Art in 2010 with filmmaker Matthew Akers.

Pioneering performance artist Marina Abramovic has devoted the past four decades to work that is pitched between extremes of loud and quiet, cooperation and confrontation. For one early piece in the 1970s, she rode a van around a square in Paris for 16 hours, yelling through a megaphone all the while. For another in 1988, she and her husband, the artist Ulay, walked separately from opposite ends of the Great Wall of China, then broke up when they finally met in the middle. In others she has made use of knives and guns, tacitly inviting spectators to threaten her with them.

Then there was the project that serves as the subject (and the title) for a new documentary, Matthew Akers's "Marina Abramovic: The Artist is Present," which opens at Film Forum Wednesday, before a broadcast run on HBO in July. The film surveys Ms. Abramovic's entire career with a special focus on her 2010 retrospective at MoMA, which included re-enactments of past works as well as a new project for which the now 65-year-old artist sat for three months in silent vigil with museumgoers who waited in long lines and even camped out to sit wordlessly, one by one, across from her. Many broke down in

tears.

In a context less taxing than that one, the Belgrade-born artist sat down recently to talk about the film as well as her recent announcement of the Marina Abramovic Institute for the Preservation of Performance Art, a sizable new home for long-durational art, which she plans to open upstate in Hudson, N.Y., in 2014.



HBO Documentary Films & Music Box Films

The performance artist and her then-husband, Ulay, perform 'Rest Energy' in 1980.

Your silent-sitting piece at MoMA seemed to be a grueling exercise. Looking back two years later, what do you take from it?

It's so emotional still that I can't even watch it. Every time I see the faces of people sitting, all these emotions come up. It's still fresh. We screened [the film] recently at MoMA, but before we showed it to a big audience I wanted to show it to the guards. There were 65 guards, and some would sit with me in their free time. Mr. Tunji, the chief guard, would come on his free day just to make sure everything was OK. He got completely emotionally involved in the piece. So many things could have gone wrong when you have that amount of public: 20,000 people were there one day, passing by.

The film offers an extremely up-close view of the entire process. Was it regrettable at any point to have granted so much access?

At 6 o'clock in the morning, the whole crew was in my place waiting with the camera for me to wake up. I wanted to kill them with my own hands. On Fridays, I would have a massage, because my body was in pain. I put my head in the hole in the massage table and the guy is on the floor, looking at my face dropping sweat on the lens. They were hard-core.

Why was it important to you to withstand it with so much else going on?

I really wanted to have the larger public understand what it means to make performance art. The only way is to give up your privacy and make an objective point of view. The filmmaker didn't believe that performance art could be transformative in the first place, and I was very happy with his skepticism. He started a complete disbeliever and turned into a big believer.

In the movie, one woman takes her clothes off to sit with you naked but is whisked away by museum guards. Did you have contact with her afterward?

No, I see so many people on the streets who came and sat with me, but I never crossed paths with her. Everything is forbidden here—it's so difficult to have a spontaneous reaction, not easy at all. To me it was very disturbing the reaction of the press about the [retrospective work re-enacted on the] sixth floor, especially one with two artists nude in the doorway and you have to cross between them. Everybody talked about nudity, erection, half-erection, pinching on the a—. It was a very vulgar reaction, and nobody saw the poetical part: that artists are the door to the museum. If there are no artists, there would not be museums.

What compelled you to develop the Marina Abramovic Institute for the Preservation of Performance Art in Hudson?

Performance art has gone through many changes and an enormous amount of misunderstanding. Every idiotic, sh— little gesture people call performance art is not. Lady Gaga is not a performance artist. Lady Gaga's meat dress—at least three artists

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made a meat dress before her, and nobody mentions it. I also want to educate the public on how to look at performance art. The public is educated on how to look at Rembrandt or Vermeer, how they built an image and how to read the symbols. But nobody has done that with performance.

What kind of projects do you imagine finding a home there?

One of my big dreams is to ask David Lynch to make a 365-hour movie. I also want to create a platform to work with scientists and with new technology. I had lunch a few months ago with Kim Stanley Robinson, a science-fiction writer who gave me a new book he wrote called "2312." I'm one of the characters in the book. He said, "I saw you at MoMA, and you are great for creating galactic troubles." So I am now doing performances on an asteroid near Mercury, just so you know.

Your focus is to be on "long-durational" work. Why?

The transformative energy of long-durational work is immense, for the performer doing it and the public watching it. Durational art can change your patterns of thinking and bring you more into the here and now. It's a pure experience. When you come to the institute, you have to sign a contract with me that you will stay for a minimum six hours and give me your word of honor. If you break your word of honor, that's your problem, not mine. Then, if you give me your time, I will give you an experience. It has to be a fair exchange.

A version of this article appeared June 8, 2012, on page A22 in the U.S. edition of The Wall Street Journal, with the headline: An Artist Recalls Her Recent Present.

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Parents Protest High-Stakes Exams Outside Testing Company Offices

Parents who oppose the proliferation of standardized testing in schools held a raucous protest Thursday outside the midtown offices of Pearson PLC, which makes tests for New York State. The protest, which drew more than 300 parents and children, was specifically aimed at a series of tests children are taking this week and next that don't count but are used to try out future test questions.



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