

# DIRECTIONS

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2001b  
HMSG

## Marina Abramović: *The Hero*

November 15, 2001–February 18, 2002



Still from *The Hero*, 2001, color video on DVD with sound, 17 minutes. Collection of the artist.

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Marina Abramović, three years old, with her father in Belgrade, 1949.

**M**ARINA ABRAMOVIĆ, BORN in Belgrade in 1946, has been based in Amsterdam since the 1980s. Although she is often identified by the performances she conceived and enacted with her former partner Ulay (F. Uwe Laysiepen) between 1975 and 1988, Abramović had already created a radical body of work by the time they met. This work, seen in Belgrade, Zagreb, Edinburgh, and cities throughout western Europe, included installations involving sound and performances in which the artist used her own body as material, subjecting herself to physical danger and testing thresholds of pain.

In her performance pieces with Ulay, the artists characteristically moved toward or away from each other's bodies, or remained motionless, for long periods of time. These projects addressed issues of personal endurance

and social interaction and made great physical and psychological demands on both the performers and the audiences. They also played themselves out in tableaux that, like much site-specific sculpture of the period, engaged the space in which they were enacted, creating compositions of great restraint, power, and formal beauty. In *Nightsea Crossing*, for example, Marina Abramović and Ulay sat facing each other across a table without moving for seven hours a day. One of their most ambitious projects, it was recreated in more than twenty different locations throughout Europe and elsewhere between 1981 and 1986, lasting one to sixteen days each time. It was also one of the most visually striking of their pieces, as the artists varied their brightly colored clothing each time it was performed.

Unlike many artists who created works based on their own bodies but gave up live presentations in the late 1970s, Abramović's performance work has continued to evolve, especially since her break with Ulay in 1989, and she has created some of her strongest work in the past ten years. Although she has also produced objects and multipart installations, the power of Abramović's work remains, without a doubt, in its performance aspect, with the artist at its iconic center.

*The Hero* focuses on the performance element of Abramović's work. Filmed in Spain, the video was completed and edited in Amsterdam this past summer. Like *Nightsea Crossing*, *The Hero* is a study in stillness and endurance. With a calm landscape as a backdrop, the artist sits on a white horse (a potent symbol of war, heroism, purity, strength, bravery, and steadfastness) while her hair and the white banner (signifying surrender) that she holds are blown dramatically by the wind. The piece is dedicated to

Abramović's father who died earlier this year. Its title alludes to his status as a celebrated Yugoslavian war hero, a resistance fighter who fought in Tito's partisan army against the German occupation forces during World War II. Contrary to the attitude of acceptance central to both Eastern spiritual practices and her own work, Abramović says of her father, "he could never surrender."<sup>1</sup> The image alludes, as well, to the romantic tale of the meeting of her parents during the war: first, her father found her mother among a group of sick and wounded partisans and took her to a hospital on his white horse; later, Abramović's mother saved the father's life when she found him lying unconscious among other heavily wounded soldiers. The song heard in *The Hero* is "Hej Sloveni," the Yugoslavian national anthem from the time of Tito, beautifully sung by a Yugoslavian woman named Marica Gojović, a former student of Abramović.

The figure of the artist in *The Hero*, seen in profile astride a large white horse, evokes many associations: a Medieval knight in shining armor; Renaissance equestrian monuments and drawings for them; or the romanticized vision of the disappearing American Indian, seen in silhouette atop a cliff high above a desert landscape. With its ambiguous message, *The Hero* strikes a particular resonance in Washington, D.C., a city so identified with equestrian statues, war monuments, and memorials.

Referring to the artist's heritage and to Yugoslavian history, *The Hero* also seems to function as a sequel or bookend to *Balkan Baroque*, 1997, a project for which Abramović won the Golden Lion award at the 47th Venice Biennale that year. *Balkan Baroque* included a performance in which

the artist sang folk songs from her childhood as she cleaned the bones of slaughtered animals. The installation, which smelled potently of carnage even after the bones were removed, also included three copper sinks filled with water and a triptych of videos projected onto three separate screens. On the center screen the artist, dressed in a white lab coat, delivered a dispassionate recitation of the exceptionally cruel method of extermination employed in the Balkans whereby rats are made to kill each other. The text is a version of one used in an earlier performance, *Delusional*, 1994, about which the artist has said:

The events in Yugoslavia reach a very deep emotional level for me . . . . I went there, I interviewed my father and my mother, and a man who had been a ratcatcher for twenty-five years, and these three things were the basis of the piece . . . . *Delusional* is not to do with the killing, but with what it does to me. . . . It's not just that people are killing each other every day, but it's the way they are killing each other. I went to Yugoslavia and I heard a story, I was ashamed to even tell it in this piece. . . .<sup>2</sup>

At the end of the videotape in *Balkan Baroque* the artist removes her lab coat, revealing a slinky black dress underneath. Whipping out a red scarf from her bodice, Abramović begins a traditional Tsjaradas dance. Although Abramović has described the idea, "Balkan baroque," as a metaphor "not for the historical moment but for the baroqueness of our mind,"<sup>3</sup> it is, nevertheless, a dramatic and powerful allegory for the tragic fractional wars in post-Communist Yugoslavia in which people ferociously turned on each other, like rats trapped in terrible conditions. On the screens flanking

the image of the artist are those of her mother and her father, who fought for Yugoslavia's unification.

Later that year Abramović created a five-part, site-specific installation entitled *Spirit House*. Although it has since been shown elsewhere in various formats, the work was conceived for and first exhibited in a former slaughterhouse in Portugal, where each of the five videos related to the former use of the particular space in which it was projected. *Insomnia*, a color video originally projected in the area where the animals were kept the nights prior to their deaths, shows the artist dancing to Arabian tango music, recalling her performance in *Balkan Baroque*. The project concludes with *Luminosity*, the record of a performance in which the artist sits balanced on the seat of a bicycle, slowly raising and lowering her arms as the light becomes increasingly brilliant and her body seems to dissolve into it. The beautiful and indeed luminous vision evokes the spiritual transcendence of the body and a stillness that is also echoed by the artist's pose in *The Hero*.

*The Hero* was first conceived as a two-part piece in which the artist faced a mirror image of herself seated on a black horse; the second image was later edited out in order to focus on the "hero" aspect of the work. The original concept for *The Hero* harks back to an early work, a 1971 double-screen film piece shot in Super-8, in which two swans swim endlessly towards each other against different landscape backgrounds. It also reflects the structure of many of Abramović's projects with Ulay, including their last, in which they walked towards each other from opposite ends of the Great Wall of China, meeting for the final time in the middle.

*The Hero* reveals Abramović's use of recurring spatial iconography and



The artist's parents as partisans, Yugoslavia, 1943.

specific images (a white horse was also central to a 1978 performance with Ulay, *Kaiserschmitt*, at the Spanish Riding School in Vienna), and the consistent power of her formal aesthetic. It is also one of the artist's most personal and autobiographical pieces. Elegiac in mood, it emphasizes the aspect of concentration and stillness that runs like a thread through much of her work. Among the most compelling moments in the video are those in which the artist, suffering from fatigue, loses her grip on the heavy banner she holds, lowers the staff and quickly raises it again. By remaining essentially motionless, the artist demands attentiveness to her slightest movement. As Chrissie Iles wrote about an earlier piece by Abramović, "Everything became so still that the movement of the edge of a skirt in the wind took on a new beauty and significance."<sup>4</sup>

Phyllis Rosenzweig  
Curator of Works on Paper

#### NOTES

1. Conversation with the artist, April 20, 2001.
2. *Transcript*, no. 3 (1997): 11, 13.
3. *The Bridge/El Puente* (Valencia: Consortium of Museums of the Generalitat Valenciana, Spain, in collaboration with Kunstmuseum Bern, 1998): 56.
4. *Marina Abramović: objects performance video sound* (Oxford, England: Museum of Modern Art, 1995): 30.

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Still from *The Hero*, 2001, color video on DVD with sound, 17 minutes. Collection of the artist.



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## BIOGRAPHY

Born Belgrade, November 30, 1946. Attended Academy of Fine Arts, Belgrade, 1965–70; Academy of Fine Arts, Zagreb, 1970–72. Created sound installations and performances in Zagreb and Belgrade, 1962–72; performed *Rhythm 10* at Edinburgh Festival, Scotland, 1973. Met Ulay in Amsterdam in 1975; together created works seen worldwide over next 13 years, including participation in Venice Biennale, 1976; *Documenta*, Kassel, 1977, 1982; and Sydney Biennale, 1979, 1982. With Ulay, designed *Great Wall Project* in 1983; realized in 1988. Participated in numerous international group exhibitions since 1988. Solo exhibition sites include Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam (1989); Centre Georges Pompidou, Paris (1990); Museum of Modern Art, Oxford, England (1995); Kunstmuseum Bern (1998); The Fabric Workshop and Museum, Philadelphia (1998); and Sean Kelly Gallery, New York (1995, 1997). Recently completed major projects in Japan, Ireland, and Spain. Lives in Amsterdam.

Extensive chronologies and bibliographies are found in many of the publications listed below.

## SELECTED PUBLICATIONS

- 1974 *Marina Abramović* (Zagreb: Galerija suvremene umjetnosti). Exhibition catalog.
- 1975 *Marina Abramović ritam 10, 5, 2, 4, 0* (Belgrade: Salon muzeja savremene umjetnosti). Exhibition catalog.
- 1978 *Marina Abramović/Ulay, Ulay/Marina Abramović: Relation/Works, 3 Performances* (Innsbruck: Österreichischer Kunstverein). Exhibition catalog.
- 1985 *Ulay & Marina Abramović "Modus Vivendi: Works 1980–1985"* (Eindhoven: Stedelijk Van Abbemuseum). Exhibition catalog. Essay by Thomas McEvelley.
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- 1992 *Biography* (Ostfildern: Cantz). Essay by Thomas Wulffen.
- 1993 *Marina Abramović* (Stuttgart: Edition Cantz). Published in conjunction with exhibition at Neue Nationalgalerie Berlin. Essays by Bojana Pejić and Doris von Drathen.
- 1995 *Marina Abramović: objects performance video sound* (Oxford, England: Museum of Modern Art). Exhibition catalog. Essays by David Elliott, RoseLee Goldberg, Chrissie Iles, and Thomas McEvelley.
- 1996 *Marina Abramović: Boat Emptying Stream Entering (Part I and Part II)* (Denton: University of North Texas Art Gallery). Exhibition catalog. Essay by Jan Avgikos.
- 1997 *Ulay/Abramović: Performances 1976–1988* (Eindhoven: Stedelijk Van Abbemuseum). Exhibition catalog. Essay by Chrissie Iles. Catalogue raisonné of performances.
- 1997 "Marina Abramović objects performance video sound," interview by Kevin Henderson and Alan Woods, *Transcript*, no. 3: 6–26.
- 1998 *The Bridge/El Puente* (Valencia: Consortium of Museums of the Generalitat Valenciana, Spain, in collaboration with Kunstmuseum Bern). Exhibition catalog.
- 1998 *Marina Abramović: Artist Body, Performances 1969–1997* (Milan: Charta). Published in conjunction with exhibition *Marina Abramović. Artist Body—Public Body*, Kunstmuseum Bern. Introduction by Toni Stooss. Essays by Velimir Abramović, Jan Avgikos, Chrissie Iles, Thomas McEvelley, Hans Ulrich Obrist, Bojana Pejić, and Thomas Wulffen.
- 2001 *Marina Abramović: Public Body* (Milan: Charta). Essays by Marina Abramović and Germano Celant.

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