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Evening Standard. **Artist Marina Abramović on marriage, masochism and why she's moving to London**

After five decades beguiling art lovers with cutting-edge happenings, Marina Abramović opens up to Patricia Nicol about marriage, masochism and why she's moving to London



If anyone can get me tea, this same English tea, I will be happy,' announces Marina Abramović in her treacly Balkan basso.

She sits poised and immaculate, wearing a [Burberry Riccardo Tisci](#) silk monogrammed blouse and tailored black trousers. A mug of murky builders' brew is placed in her hand and her response is rapturous. 'Oh my god how you manifest this?!' she declares, lifting the tea to her vermillion lips. 'It's fantastic!' Who knew the world's best-known performance artist could be so easily impressed by a humble British beverage?

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It is 3pm on a Sunday and Abramović, 72 next month, has been on the go since her hotel gym workout at 6.30am. Tomorrow, she will fly directly from her 'really old friend' [Tisci's debut show](#) as chief creative officer of Burberry to a headlining retrospective of her own work in Florence. 'I am gypsy nomad, you know,' she sighs, although since 2001 she has struck out on her wanderings from a base in New York. Next year, however, the Belgrade-born icon will settle in London to prepare for her major 2020 Royal Academy exhibition. When she lived in Notting Hill Gate in 1971, she washed dishes and got sacked as a postal worker for discarding official-looking letters. Now, the woman who once labelled herself 'the grandmother of performance art'



(though she wishes she hadn't and would now prefer 'warrior, soldier, anything but grandmother...') will be the first woman in the institution's 250-year history to have a solo show across all of the RA's main galleries. She is excited but also apprehensive because 'you English, you're very critical and try to make fun of everything'. As an aside, she also thinks we drink far too much.

She doesn't yet know where she will be based in London, though she likes Spitalfields, home to fellow artists Gilbert & George. Several New York friends decamped to Europe after Trump's election. 'There is a very strange vibration and energy in New York right now. It's interesting, since Trump is President, my work is more in Europe and Asia. I really love London right now. It's so vibrant, with so many foreigners passing through and such a diverse art scene.'

I have been in Abramović's charismatic presence before, not that she could be expected to remember. In the summer of 2014, I was one of 129,916 visitors to her show 512 Hours at the Serpentine Gallery. Six days a week for six weeks, she became the de facto chatelaine of the Serpentine, opening its doors each morning and seeing the last visitor off the premises. Participants were bidden to leave their phones in lockers and enter the meditative sanctum of the gallery's white space. Some were given noise-eliminating headphones. In the gallery, Abramović and her assistants waited, sometimes putting a guiding hand on a visitor's shoulder and turning them to face the wall, perhaps with their eyes closed. Others were given tasks, such as separating lentils from rice grains. Many critics hated it, decrying the 'mass obedience', but the show was a hit with the public, some of whom wept, or became regular returnees.

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The forerunner of the public's leading role in that piece was Abramović's 2010 blockbuster, *The Artist is Present*, at New York's Museum of Modern Art. The most popular show in MoMA's history, it attracted 850,000 visitors, but it was the atrium's live staring contest that became the hottest exhibit. More than 1,000 participants — among them Björk, a teary Jemima Kirke, Lou Reed, Sharon Stone, James Franco and Rufus Wainwright — queued to sit at a simple wooden table opposite Abramović, and lock eyes with her. Footage of Abramović herself moved to tears, after her former long-term romantic and artistic partner Ulay pulled up a chair on opening night, went viral. The work inspired the video for Jay-Z's 'Picasso Baby'.



That piece reflected a hunger among audiences for immersive, experiential culture, an area Abramović continues to explore. 'That's absolutely [of the] moment right now,' she says. 'The public is sick and tired of just looking at something and wants to be a part of it. And I want to be able to give them that role; for me, the public is increasingly the work of art and I am the conductor.'

A week after our meeting the tables were somewhat turned when Abramović was attacked at her show in Florence by a man who hit her over the head with a painting he had apparently made of her. 'These dangers arrive quickly, just like death,' she said afterwards. Fortunately, she was unhurt.

Injury, however, has played a key role in Abramović's career. She was still living in the former Yugoslavia when she started to attract international attention for a series of edgy solo performances exploring the boundaries of pain, passivity and sadism. In *Rhythm 0* (1974) she assembled 72 objects, from a feather to a gun with a single bullet, and offered the audience the chance to use them and her as they chose. She still bears scars from when things got dangerous. The same year's *Rhythm 5*, in which she set alight the five points of a communist star then leapt to its centre, could have killed her. She passed out due to lack of oxygen, flames licking around her, before anyone realised the performance had moved way beyond the conceptual.

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Is she troubled now by the masochism of those early works? 'I never saw it that way. I was inspired by the shamanic rituals of ancient cultures that go through physical pain to achieve another state of mind. I wanted to free myself from the fear of pain. To me, those pieces were a tool in order to change myself. Now, I don't need to do that work any more. In fact, I don't need to perform any more.' Addressing the increasingly spiritual bent of her work, she adds: 'Now, I need to teach the public and a younger generation of performance artists what I've learnt.'



Abramović, who dedicated her 2016 memoir *Walk Through Walls* 'to friends and enemies', says she comes from a 'dark place'. She means aesthetically — post-war communist Belgrade 'was a very ugly place' — but also emotionally. Her parents' Second World War romance sounds like something from a Hemingway novel. As young communist partisans, he saved her life, then she saved his. Abramović's finicky, severe, hygiene-obsessed mother, a senior party figure, brought her daughter 'up to be a soldier'.

'She drilled me,' recalls the artist, laughing. 'When I sleep now in the hotel, cleaners don't think I've been there. I am so disciplined about everything. After my mother died, I found her diary. If I had read just one page when she was alive, our relationship would have been totally different. She was an incredibly hurt, lonely woman and very, very emotional, but she masked that with an iron face. I think she didn't want me to suffer like her, so she made me soldier. But I did suffer, from not having love from her.' Even when Abramović was in her late 20s, married and working, she had to abide by her mother's 10pm curfew. She also lived separately from her artist husband, Neša Paripović, because her mother disapproved of him.

In 1976, aged 29, she left her mother, marriage and Belgrade for Amsterdam — and Ulay. They lived and worked together for more than a decade, until the final grand artistic gesture of *The Lovers* (1988). Starting at opposite ends of the Great Wall of China, they each walked 2,500km before meeting, then formally separating. 'I was [over] 40. I felt fat, ugly and unwanted,' she says.

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'The unwanted [feeling] was very important.' In 2016 Ulay won a court case awarding him backdated royalties and enhanced recognition to their joint archive. But it was without him, as a solo artist in her 50s and 60s, that Abramović became a superstar. 'I'm not attached to success,' she insists. 'It came so slow.'



Abramović is famous enough to have Cate Blanchett portraying a version of her in a Netflix spoof documentary next year. And you don't have to look hard to find crazy stuff on the internet about her. There are frequent, scandalously untethered claims from Americans on social media that 'Spirit Cooking' — a recurring Abramović series invoking mystical incantations poetically — marks her out as a high priestess to Satan.



At the opposite cultural extreme, there are long-standing fans who complain that she has embraced the mainstream and become a brand. They question whether the Marina Abramović Institute, founded in 2013, and its ritualistic, shamanic-inspired Abramović Method — originally for training up a next generation of performance artists, but increasingly being taught at retreats — is about creating a legacy, or monetising her process.

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Abramović, who primarily draws inspiration from power in nature — from waterfalls, volcanoes — says ‘technology alienates; humans have become very lonely and have lost their spiritual centre’. She believes the skills she has honed through her feats of endurance can help others refocus.

In 2014, towards the end of the Serpentine show, she told a journalist she was lonely. A second marriage to sculptor Paolo Canevari had ended in divorce in 2009. Is she still lonely now? ‘No, not lonely at all, just the opposite,’ she beams. This is largely due to her relationship with Todd Eckert, an American businessman 21 years her junior. They met at a friend’s party two years ago and ‘he totally fell in love with me’. As we speak, he has just arrived at her hotel from New York, and she is itching to get back to him. ‘It used to always be the man with the younger woman. But now I think the woman has different power.’



But it is clearly not just love and daily exercise that has given Abramović this confident glow. Nor is it surgery — she’s keen on lasers and creams, but not a ‘face-altering lift’. It is a breezy positivism, too. ‘When I turned 70 I said to myself, depression and unhappiness are emotions you can’t permit yourself; you have to have fun. And from that moment, I really enjoy everything. Like today, this fashion shoot, I enjoyed more than any of the kids working here. I never want to go back to when I was young. I suffered so much: wrong man, wrong relationship, wrong everything.’

But she revels in the company of younger people. Lady Gaga and James Franco [‘He is genius,’ she cackles] are among the celebrity ‘kids’ Abramović loves. ‘I only have younger friends — my generation sucks,’ she jokes, though minutes later she speaks with warmth of fellow female luminaries and Greenwich Village senior scenesters, Laurie Anderson, Cindy Sherman and Patti Smith.

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She is the first to admit she can be difficult. 'You know, it's very hard to be with me. I'm always travelling somewhere else. Work is very important to me and I really don't compromise much. I didn't compromise to have family and children. This is what I am really — you have to love me as I am.'



But then she has had to fight hard to be who she is. 'You know, when I was a kid in 1965 and I went to Belgrade's Academy of Fine Arts, a professor came and said to me, "If you don't have balls, you can't be an artist." And I said, "S***, I don't have balls; I am a woman. But now I am thinking, women have balls in so many ways.'

Following last week's incident in Florence, Abramović said she would be interested in meeting her attacker to understand why. You see, balls.