

SEAN KELLY

José Arjona, María. "Marina Abramovic in Conversation with María José Arjona," *Arte Al Día*, January 15, 2014.



MARINA ABRAMOVIC IN CONVERSATION WITH MARÍA JOSÉ ARJONA



As an introduction to the work of Marina Abramovic (Belgrade, Yugoslavia, 1946) Sarah Lyall wrote in *The New York Times* dated October 19, 2013: "In the name of art, she has hung naked on a wall and carved into her own stomach with a razor. She has masturbated in a museum; scrubbed at a pile of bloody, maggoty bones in a fetid basement; stood still while strangers put a gun to her head and stabbed her with thorns; and, in her best-known work, sat silently for seven hours a day, six days a week, as a succession of people lined up to bask in her aura at the Museum of Modern Art".

Referring to María José Arjona (Bogotá, Colombia, 1973) Natalia Roldán wrote in *Arcadia* magazine: "The discipline with which Arjona prepared her body has enabled her to remain standing barefoot, for hours, on a huge ice cube full of tacks; to blow soap bubbles against the wall, once and again, without becoming breathless (...); to resist the

pressure of thirty-seven straps tightened around the most sensitive spots in her body while the spectators tried to free her; to abandon herself to the public, without any rules, and endure, with concentration and serenity, everything that this public wished to do to her."

This article is not a customary interview. It does not follow the parameters of a text written by an art critic. Rather, it is a testimony of an informal meeting between Arjona, a disciple and her teacher, Abramovic; an oral history transcription that is almost a non-edited memory of a moment shared by two women from different generations and continents, with a different artistic development, but linked by an absolute passion: performance.

.....

I hadn't seen Marina Abramovic since I re-performed for her retrospective at MoMA in 2010. Many things have happened since then: the premiere of the film *The Life and Death of Marina Abramovic* at The Manchester International Festival, several exhibitions, the fundraising for the Marina Abramovic Institute, millions of articles about her documentary, awards and front covers of different fashion magazines. Marina Abramovic doesn't need much of an introduction, nor another article about her interaction with Ullay, Lady Gaga or Jay-Z. This conversation is about art, performance, and how Abramovic is reshaping the way in which we understand long durational work (and art in general) beyond preconceptions and established definitions. It is about the creator whose vision supersedes the interpretation of what a visual artist – like her – should be and could do. Defining Marina is as tough as defining what performance art is.

MJA: The obvious first question was essential for me to ask: What happened to you during the months after MoMA?

MA: I went to the countryside for ten days. Strictly to rest, swim in the river and do nothing. I was so tired. A month after this short retreat, I went to the south of Italy for a photo shoot, resulting in a series of images and two videos titled *Back to Simplicity*. It was a natural move to make after three months of

human contact. I wanted to come back to real nature, perform simple actions, simple and non-human interaction... but I also wanted to “show” that side of me...

Marina continues the conversation, transitioning with some thoughts about her plans to start performing in 2014 (mostly in Europe). These years during which she has not performed have become crucial to create future work; indicative of the energy required to generate long durational pieces. She goes back to the fundraising and expresses the personal need to finish the Marina Abramovic Institute.

MA: The fundraising was really important for me...and everybody said: You are going to fail, you are doing this in August; everybody is on vacation; nothing is going to happen. I am so happy we succeeded. For me, the *Kickstarter* was a “kind of measure” with the larger audience. Not the jet set or the art jet set. I wanted real people supporting the Institute with small amounts of money.

And everybody knows how well this *Kickstarter* campaign went. Thousands of emails were sent. Every week, we saw advertisements on *Facebook* and messages on *Twitter*: “One hug from Marina if you donate one dollar”. Months later, Marina owes 4,760 hugs. It is important to underline the way in which her presence becomes an extension of the institute. Is not about Marina Abramovic, since the Institute is not a museum intended to “install” her work (she repeated this same phrase several times throughout the conversation). It is about creating, together, a space for human, time-based interaction with spirituality and individual power.

The immediate perception of Abramovic “using” her celebrity status to raise money started to appear in different conversations, and not exclusively on the Internet. Then came the video featuring Lady Gaga and the performance with Jay Z. But there is something beyond the media frenzy and the negative criticism that was not perceived by many members of the art world: Abramovic has seen a bigger picture even before the MoMA experience. Let us remember: When she started her career as a performance artist, she did not receive good reviews from the critics. But she endured. Let us not forget what happened with *Seven Easy Pieces* at the Guggenheim; her legacy –the possibility to re-enact her own work and that of other artists –became established.

MJA: One cannot underestimate how *The Artist Is Present* opened up a larger audience for performance artists and ignited a curiosity that was not there before about long durational work. Last but not least, Abramovic's appearance in fashion magazines at age sixty-seven, redefines our concept of beauty and – why not? – [her appearance] paves the way for us to interpret the role and power of feminine bodies and their intricate relationship with the mass media.

MA: Let's talk about Lady Gaga in order to clarify why her involvement was important for the Institute. Lady Gaga has forty-three million followers on *Facebook*. Young followers from ages four to twenty-five. Forty-three million people who are confused about everything and who follow Gaga as an idol but also as a model. Lady Gaga came to me addressing several issues in her life at twenty-seven –the crisis that a lot of pop stars go through at this specific time. She came to me wanting to learn. Asking me if I could teach her . . . and a few days later, she was attending the workshop; humble, extremely receptive and dead serious about the work we were doing. Before this specific event, Gaga sat with me during the performance at MoMA and her appearance was twitted; thousands of her followers started to come to the exhibition. It changed the structure and preconceived idea of the type of audiences expected by museums. They were young, and I think this is crucial and very positive for art in general. Now these young persons are going to performance art exhibitions; they are actively researching my work, and of course, they have donated to the Institute, which will also become a space open for them. New audiences revitalize institutions and challenge artists. This is the bigger picture, the real intention behind the *Kickstarter*: addressing different and huge audiences in order to shift their focus to art.

I always have an agenda, I do things that don't seem clear at the moment, but in the long run, they come together. We are in the 21st century, we have to cross different borders and we have to understand what this means. It is interesting. . . These issues with fashion and mass media... such amazing platforms! Do you know how many followers Madonna has on *Facebook*? Ninety million! So again, this is power. If you can use what is out there to say something relevant... you should do it! You need to access these channels and use their social power to create interest. I am building this Institute, and if I can reach people to finish it. . . I will. This is going to be a space open to [for] everybody: dancers, musicians,

scientists, artists, actors. . . I am using these platforms not for a personal purpose; I am using them for the Institute.

My relationship with fashion is relevant in order to deliver a message to a different crowd. If you can use fashion, if you can use design or pop culture to say important things... It doesn't matter! We are now interconnected and connectivity generates wider platforms for your work to expand. The use of these platforms doesn't change my work. I am not into vanity; I am not a pop star! It is still the same Abramovic doing performances. I just took a break to raise money for an Institute that will cost nineteen million dollars. I am looking now for donations from big and famous visual artists, like Jasper Jones. One of his paintings will cover part of the amount we are talking about. I want established and economically solid artists to understand these concepts and see if they can be generous enough to donate their work.

MJA: Any romantic idea about performance or art, their boundaries, strategies and/or definitions seem to disappear from your discourse. What I encounter in your conversation is the idea of performance art as an expression always challenging the establishment by placing the artist's body at the center, in order to restate and shift concepts based on identity, gender, distribution of power, politics, economy and spirituality.

MA: Our relation with art is romantic and it is "passé"... It is no longer the same. It is not about performance, it is about art in general... The entire idea of the artist's "touch", so vital for a lot of art critics, has been removed. The conception of what art or an artist should be, and the notion of talent based on craftsmanship, is wrong; it doesn't belong to the present. Art should and must be related to a state of freedom, in the way we perceive it, the way we manifest it. If freedom is not related to art, then we are slaves to the object and its most superficial definition. We would be living in the past. The same applies to performance.

Let us talk about the idea of re-performing... It doesn't matter if the "original" artist is "in" the piece if the context has changed. The majority of performances that could be re-enacted are not strictly tied to historical moments. The artist has to be ready to give his/her ego away, enabling other artists to go through the same experience. The problem is not performance art: it is where the idea of uniqueness and ownership is located.

One thing you have to really claim is your freedom as an artist. You have to be free, to break the borders.... Also, you have to accept your imperfections and be vulnerable enough to show them to the audience... and they can project whatever they want. In the long run, you have to see how the work evolves; where it takes you. An artist can not be judged by one work or one action. An artist is judged by years of work. You can be as eccentric as Salvador Dali was. He was doing really strange things for his time. He outraged the art scene but at the end, he was declared the father of surrealism. He owned his freedom!

You cannot work to please the public or the critics. It would be a repetition. If I were doing today the same type of I did in the '70s, everybody would be very happy! But I would be completely dead! The only thing an artist should do is follow his/her own intuition, and that is all I am doing. I don't compromise the work... I go for it!

At sixty-seven and after thirty-five years of solid work, Abramovic has succeeded in making performance relevant for museums, institutions and galleries. She has unlocked the door for a new generation of performers to re-enact other artists' pieces, but also for them to have their own work re-enacted in the future.

MJA: If there were any doubt regarding the power of your post-MoMA work, it is relevant to mention the retrospective at the Contemporary Art Pavilion-PAC in Milan (2012), curated by Eugenio Viola, and titled *The Abramovic Method* / *Italian Works*...

MA: Eight thousand people participated. I had an amazing connection with them and I know it worked. They wrote several messages describing how this method helped them in their own lives. This is what it is all about... I actually found a system where the artist doesn't have to be there. The public is watching the public, and the artist is actually and finally removed. I created a perpetual mobile, a system that works

without me. Which brings me back to what happened at MOMA: While the performance was happening, the people standing in line were doing exactly the same “performance” while waiting for their turn. The public was being observed by the public, while the piece (*The Artist is Present*) served as a platform to generate this synchronicity.

MJA: There is an element I don’t want to leave out of the conversation, since it is deeply linked to the institution: Technology...

MA: After MoMA we designed a game where you could virtually sit with me and we could look at each other for the amount of time you would remain seated in front of your computer. Every Tuesday, real time. The dynamic is exactly the same as when one goes to a museum: you buy your ticket, you wait in line... I waited in line several days and missed my turn. But the number of visitors and the amount of time they take to experience the piece is amazing!

The game and its conception are based on real time. It is not a fast-pace experience, such as you would expect from virtual games. Through technology, time can, finally, be experienced at the pace at which the performance happens.

We also developed “spiritual games” for the *Kickstarter* campaign, where you count sesame seeds or rice grains. It only works from 6 am to 7 am. When you play this game online, instead of making it easy for you, it absorbs the same amount of concentration and time, the one required if you were doing it here with me. The public has counted three million seeds.

MJA: The association between Joseph Beuys’ concept that “every human being is an artist” and the Abramovic Method came to my mind...

MA: Wait, let’s think about contexts. People have different contexts. A businessman, for example will never become a performer, but he can apply the method to his life. It is the knowledge he acquires about power, concentration, limits, and his understanding of time connected to the importance of being present, which could be beneficial for him and for his job. That is the point: for people to take the best out of the method and enrich their lives.

The method functions as a catalyst for change, but it is not close to Joseph Beuys idea. We are all artistic in nature but the method’s objective is to apply these techniques to everyday life, not to turn people into performers.

MJA: Leaving the method aside and almost running out of time, I feel it is pertinent to ask you about your thoughts on how the institute will interact/collaborate with *PERFORMA*, the Performance Biennial in New York?

MA: The Institute is completely something else. What I am trying to create is a “cultural spa”. It is very different. It is not only about performance art. There are so many other layers to this project. I am focusing on “immaterial forms of visual art,” but I am also very interested in dance, theater, opera, and music. All of these disciplines which could be long durational. There are artists creating extended pieces of music. Long durational was not something I invented! But there is no other place in the world that could house these kinds of projects. The Institute will commission works from several artists every year, and I want to make sure that each proposal, has the right context, space and audience, but also a proper documentation and archival method...

It is refreshing to hear Marina’s story and feel the energy that very much defines the spirit crossing performance art and characterizing really good performance artists: undefinable, challenging, free, immaterial, but always present.