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Extreme performance artist Marina Abramovic show opens in Germany

Radical and controversial artist Marina Abramovic is a cult figure in the art world. The retrospective "The Cleaner," on show at Bonn's Bundeskunsthalle museum, showcases works from all periods of her career.



Videos flashing the artist's face greet visitors at the entrance to the exhibition "The Cleaner," on show at Bonn's Bundeskunsthalle museum from April 20 to August 12. They feature excerpts from Abramovic's famous 2010 performance at the MoMa in New York, "The Artist is Present." For 90 days — seven hours a day, six days a week — she sat on a chair and did nothing but stare back at the people who would take the seat opposite and look at her.

Another video shows Marina Abramovic eating a large raw onion without pulling a face.

Photos of the 1973 performance "Rhythm 10" show her hacking away with rhythmic knife jabs between the splayed fingers of her hand. The stabbing sound the knife makes echoes from a loudspeaker. It's scary to watch.



"Rhythm 10": Abramovic darted a sharp knife between her fingers

Abramovic is known for using her art to test her own mental and physical limits. Much of what the 72-year-old artist born in 1946 in Belgrade has acted out is undoubtedly radical, but sensual, too. This can be felt as Marina Abramovic speaks with a soft voice at the press conference on Thursday ahead of the exhibition opening; she peers at her hands, folded demurely in her lap as if in meditation, and largely ignores shallow questions.

"Her works are so significant that it was high time for a major retrospective," says Bundeskunsthalle museum director Rein Wolfs. The retrospective, initially shown in Stockholm, features works from the past 50 years, including early paintings from her years as an art student in Belgrade and Zagreb. Works from her 12-year partnership and artistic cooperation with German artist Ulay alias Frank Uwe Laysiepen are also on show, along with more contemporary pieces.

Films, photography, paintings, drawings, sculptures, installations: Abramovic is a veritable multimedia artist. Her early performances in particular are well-documented and impressive.

Re-performances involving visitors

A highlight of the Abramovic retrospective's program, the Bonn museum will be showing re-performances of her most spectacular works.



A re-performance of "Imponderabilia": You can't enter the museum without physical contact

Two naked people flank the entrance to a room at the Bonn museum. In the 1977 work "Imponderabilia" performed at the Galleria Comunale d'Arte Moderna in the Italian city of Bologna, Abramovic and Ulay also stood at the entrance to the museum — naked. Visitors had to squeeze past to get in. The public was part of the performance.

That was also the case in her 2002 public living performance, "The house with the Ocean View." There was no privacy; visitors could watch her every single action over three days.

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Crossing boundaries

Abramovic's works often focuses on remembrance, pain, loss, endurance and trust. She incorporates her own experience, tearing away the barriers between art and spectators by giving the audience a definitive role in her performances, relentlessly and provocatively.

In a gallery in the Italian city of Naples in 1974, for a work called "Rhythm 0," she set up a table with 72 objects visitors were asked to use, from razor blades to knives and a gun. She sat motionless as some people cut open her shirt. The Bonn exhibition shows excerpts from that performance, startling images that send a shiver down your spine.

At the retrospective, the artist said she sees some of her works as if for the first time. Catharsis, cleansing — recurring topics that take on more than a physical meaning give her work transcendence and complexity.

The reaction it provokes is perhaps a fitting approach to the artist's work: Sometimes her art is disturbing, at times it is amusing. It is always touching and astute — and highly personal. The artist is present, definitely.



MARINA ABRAMOVIC: A LIFELONG PERFORMANCE

1973: Pain, but no pain

Her first performance involved playing the Russian game with 10 knives and two tape recorders. It was an eye-opener for her: "I felt as though my body had no limits, as though pain couldn't affect me anymore, as though nothing mattered anymore - an exhilarating experience." Marina Abramovic wrote in her autobiography, "At that moment, I knew that I had found the medium that was right for me."



MARINA ABRAMOVIC: A LIFELONG PERFORMANCE

1974: Growing up in a communist system

Marina Abramovic, born to two partisans, grew up in Belgrade. She was privileged in that she was given an art education, but she also felt lonely and was often beaten by her mother. The oppression of Tito's regime in former communist Yugoslavia often features in her hazardous works. During this performance in Belgrade, she was rescued from flames by people in the audience.



MARINA ABRAMOVIC: A LIFELONG PERFORMANCE

1975: Artistic development

In her early works, injuries inflicted by herself or others, nudity and unconsciousness were means of expression she frequently used. This was the artist's way of protesting against decorative esthetics that had marked her youth: "I was convinced that art ought to be disturbing, that it should pose questions while being trendsetting."



MARINA ABRAMOVIC: A LIFELONG PERFORMANCE

1976: An art relation

An encounter with German artist Ulay (Frank Uwe Laysiepen) heralded a new era in Abramovic's work. They fell in love at first sight and worked as a creative team from then on. Their cooperation started off with a noteworthy performance at the Venice Biennale with both artists colliding against each other with their naked bodies — for 58 minutes.

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MARINA ABRAMOVIC: A LIFELONG PERFORMANCE

1978: Creative fusion

The two artists lived and worked together for 12 years. It can be assumed that they spent half of that time on an artistic flight of fancy. Totally free, they lived in a small Citroen bus for four years, traveling to various locations where they were invited to give performances.



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MARINA ABRAMOVIC: A LIFELONG PERFORMANCE

1980: Falling out of love

Even their separation in 1988 was sealed with a performance. In a piece called "The Great Wall Walk," they walked towards each other along the Great Wall of China, starting at opposite ends and meeting in the middle. The work was originally planned as a romantic manifesto, but they ended up doing the three-month walk to end their relationship. They separated, both as a couple, and as a team.



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MARINA ABRAMOVIC: A LIFELONG PERFORMANCE

1997: Down to the bones

Rather than slowing down Marina Abramovic's output, the separation actually inspired her. In 1997, she was invited to present her work in the international section of the Venice Biennale. She was awarded a Golden Lion for her performance "Balkan Baroque," dealing with the Balkan Wars, in which she spent seven hours a day washing a mountain of bloody cow bones, over four days.



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MARINA ABRAMOVIC: A LIFELONG PERFORMANCE

1997: Cleaning the mirror

Her bone action was reminiscent of an earlier series of video performances called "Cleaning the Mirror," which is re-performed at her current exhibition in Stockholm. Reperformances are an opportunity to preserve some of her performance artworks. Since the 1990s, she has also been transmitting her "Abramovic Method" to young performance artists.



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MARINA ABRAMOVIC: A LIFELONG PERFORMANCE

2002: Career in New York

Abramovic moved to New York in 2000, where she developed theater pieces, performances and encounters with other artists. It took the American public quite some time to accept her art. In "House with The Ocean View," the artist spent 12 days in three open rooms. Her vision for this piece was to transform the energy field between herself and the viewers.



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MARINA ABRAMOVIC: A LIFELONG PERFORMANCE

2010: Three months of presence

The exhibition in the Museum of Modern Art was not only a comprehensive retrospective featuring re-performances of her best known works. She herself was present for three months so that the visitors could meet her personally — a huge success. The surrounding media hype helped her reach not only an elite interested in modern art, but a very broad public as well.

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