

SEANKELLY

Brown, Kate. " 'My Professional Return to Belgrade Is a Big Deal for Me': Marina Abramović Writes a Deeply Personal Letter to Serbia Ahead of Her Retrospective." *Artnet news*. August 6, 2019.

artnet® news



Serbian weekly Nedeljnik's July 26 cover, featuring Marina Abramović's "Letter to Serbia." Courtesy Nedeljnik.

The performance artist Marina Abramović's return to Belgrade is, in her own words, a big deal. Not only is the city her hometown, but it has been more than four decades since she had a solo show there, and that was back when it was the capital of former Yugoslavia. It's the place where she discovered how to make art that could break all the rules, and where she says she now wants to inspire other younger artists to do the same.

SEANKELLY

Perhaps because of the length of time since she left at aged 29, the world-renowned artist published an open letter on July 26 in the Serbian weekly *Nedeljnik* to reintroduce herself to her home city. The personal note, signed “with love, Marina,” starts off with a memory from her youth in Belgrade when she was first becoming an artist.

“I watched [clouds] often while lying on the grass, and one day my observation was suddenly interrupted by planes, which appeared out of nowhere and left a beautiful pattern in the sky,” she writes. “At that moment, I realized that everything could be used to create, and that there was no reason to limit myself to studio painting.”

The artist’s retrospective, which is called “The Cleaner,” has been on an extensive European tour since 2017, but its finale in Belgrade will be extra special. “My professional return to Belgrade is a big deal for me,” Abramović writes. She says that it is the most exciting show since her exhibition at MoMA, “The Artist Is Present” in 2010.

Organized by Stockholm’s Moderna Museet, “The Cleaner” traveled first to the Louisiana Museum of Modern Art in Humlebæk, near Copenhagen in Denmark, where she and her former partner Ulay were reconciled. The exhibition went next to the Bundeskunsthalle, Bonn, and is now on show at CoCA in Toruń, Poland. (In Poland, the exhibition received a mixed reception, with some religious opponents protesting and praying on-site, claiming the artist worships the devil.)

In Belgrade, where the exhibition is due to open in September and run until January 2020, the show will be at its largest. It will also be the most significant to her personally, she says. “I only came back to visit family. I last exhibited here on my own 45 years ago. Now, almost half a century later, I want to show, especially to the new generation, what I’ve been doing all these years.”

Invited by Serbia’s Prime Minister

In 2018, the Prime Minister of the Republic of Serbia, Ana Brnabić, personally invited Abramović to bring the show to Serbia, according to *Still in Belgrade*. The exhibition is being seen as a symbol of the government’s new cultural policy, which is hoping to reach out to youth, and gain Serbia more attention on the international scene.

Abramović has not always spoken highly of the 29 years she spent growing up in what was then Yugoslavia. “I come from a dark place,” she wrote in the opening of her 2016 memoir, *Walk Through Walls*, recalling the communist era under leader Josip Tito. “Perpetual shortages of everything, drabness everywhere. There is something about communism and socialism—it’s a kind of aesthetic

SEANKELLY

based on pure ugliness.” She left in 1975 to move to Amsterdam, the same year she had her last solo show in Belgrade.

The main purpose of the Serbian edition of “The Cleaner” is, according to Abramović, to inspire young people from the art world and beyond. “If I had been paying attention to what was written about me and my performances in the 1970s, I do not believe that I would want to leave the house at all, much less move on,” she says. “Only when you make a mistake [it] means you are doing something new and experimenting.” She stresses the importance of sharing this message with young people who may be facing similar challenges. “In the end, only when you go through a series of failures and create your own path can you accomplish what you envisioned,” she writes.

Marina Abramović’s “The Cleaner” will be on view at the Museum of Contemporary Art, Belgrade, from September 21, 2019 through January 20, 2020.