Fascinated, repelled, but not bored

The brutal, dangerous life of a performance artist

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Marina Abramović

WALK THROUGH WALLS
A memoir
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"Balkan Baroque" by Marina Abramović. Performance: 4 days, 6 hours. XLVII Biennale Venice. June 1997

When Marina Abramović dies, she wants three graves. One in Belgrade, one in Amsterdam and another in New York (the three places where she's lived the longest), she tells us in her compelling memoir *Walk Through Walls*. Her body will only be in one of them, though, and no one is to know which. To turn her own death into a kind of performance piece is no surprise from Abramović, whose performance art over the past half-century has been saturated in autobiography. At the Venice Biennale in 1997, for example, she sat in a basement on top of hundreds of bloody cow bones, scrubbing them clean with water and a metal brush for four days, six hours a day. Still images of her mother and father flashed on two screens in the background, while a video showed Abramović in a white laboratory coat and glasses telling a story about starving a rat so much that it turns on its own family; she then did a striptease, pulled a red scarf from between her breasts, and danced a jig. The smell was repulsive, but the audience were transfixed by "Balkan Baroque" and she won the Golden Lion.

With this memoir comes another performance. "I come from a dark place", she tells us, describing her childhood in Communist post-war Yugoslavia. Her parents had a tumultuous, tense marriage: they both slept with loaded guns on their bedside tables. "I used to think my birth destroyed the symmetry", she writes several times. But her family was privileged; her parents were favoured war heroes, high up in the Party, and they lived in a grand apartment. Here Abramović had a bedroom as well as a painting studio, when the majority of families in Belgrade in the 1950s were crammed into single rooms (art was one of the few luxuries encouraged by her mother, who was the director of the Museum of the Revolution). "Later I discovered [the flat] had once belonged to wealthy Jews, and had been seized during the Nazi occupation", she says. A revelation followed immediately in the book by a black-and-white photograph of her young parents smiling in their military uniforms. "Our home was really a horrible place."

Her mother beat her – punishment she was expected to endure "without complaint". "I think that, in a certain way, my mother was training me to be a soldier like her" with "walk through walls determination – Spartan determination", she says. But her father had named her after a Russian soldier he'd been in love with: "My mother resented this old attachment deeply – and, by association, I think she resented me, too". On Marina's fourteenth birthday, her father gave her an ivory-engraved pistol and took her to a strip club. Abramović is unforgiving towards her parents and her younger brother – at one point she tells us, with no sense of remorse, how she almost drowned him in the bath when she was six or seven by letting him fall under the water: "If my grandmother hadn't taken him out, I would've been an only child". Nor does she hold back when talking about her lovers, the most famous being Ulay, the German artist Frank Uwe Laysiepen with whom she collaborated between 1976 and 1988. Ulay met Abramović in Amsterdam, where she was performing "Thomas Lips" at the gallery de Appel, a work she describes – as she does all her art – with vivid and challenging detail: the piece was "both an homage to Lips himself and an autobiographical statement about me". In it, she sits naked at a table with a bottle of red wine, a crystal wine glass, a jar containing 2 kilos of honey, a silver spoon, a straight razor and a whip, and behind her on the wall is a photograph of Lips (a Swiss artist with whom she had had an affair). She slowly eats the honey with the spoon and drinks glass after glass of wine. When both are finished, she breaks the wine glass in her hand, cutting herself, then stands up and draws a satanic pentagram (two points up instead of down) in her own blood around the photo of Lips.

> Then I took the razor and cut the same pentagram, two points up, into my belly, around the navel. This hurt, of course – except that as always, performance transformed my fear into excitement . . . . I kneeled . . . . And began to flagellate my cut belly with the whip. Hard. My blood flew everywhere. The pain was excruciating at first. And then it vanished. The pain was like a wall I had walked through and come out on the other side.

The turning point – when she moved from painting and sculpture to performance – happened at art school in Belgrade in the late 60s: during a group exhibition, she felt tired, lay down on a low table in the gallery, and another student decided to wrap her in transparent packing tape. "Some of the onlookers were fascinated; some, repelled. But nobody was bored." This led to Abramović's *Rhythm* series, the first of which, "Rhythm 10", is based on a drinking game played by Russian and Yugoslavian peasants. Taking ten knives one by one, she stabbed down in the gaps between her fingers as fast as she could. For "Rhythm 2", she swallowed a pill given to catatonic patients that forces them to move; when the effect wore off fifty minutes later, she took another pill used to comatose schizophrenics which lasted for six hours. In "Rhythm 0", instead of doing things to herself, she let the public decide what to do to her – she stood in a gallery with seventy-two objects, such as a hammer, a feather, a bottle of perfume, a lamb bone, a lipstick, a pistol and a bullet. She still has the scar where someone cut her neck and sucked the blood, she tells us; "ultimately I think the reason I wasn't raped was that the wives were there".

Abramović left her Serbian husband and began an intense relationship with Ulay. They performed as a "melded personality": "Ulay-andMarina". The early work showed them as equals, but soon Abramović had the edge: in "Expansion in Space" (1977), for example, they stood back to back and ran into wooden columns – after a while, though, Ulay pulled out. Abramović continued until a man with a broken beer bottle jumped in front of her. In "Nightsea Crossing" (1981–7), Abramović and Ulay sat opposite each other across a table for eight hours a day for sixteen days; they didn't speak, they didn't eat. Even though her earlier self-mutilating work is hard to watch, this pared-down, seemingly meditative piece – the start of many like it – caused her more physical pain. Her diary entries, included here, are all about severe discomfort, exhaustion and light-headedness. Ulay once again could not endure it for as long as Abramović; yet she's anything but sympathetic. The art is more important to her than Ulay. They also came up with the idea to walk the Great Wall of China. Starting from each end, they would meet in the middle and marry. But it didn't turn out that way. By the time the Chinese government let them do it, their relationship had broken down. Instead of marrying, they split for good. "I felt like a failure", she says. Ulay has recently won a lawsuit against her over the share of profits from their joint pieces.

There is something admirable, if sociopathic, in Abramović. Her work, she writes, is about "humanity, simplicity, humbleness, and collectivity. It is very simple. Maybe together we can change consciousness and transform the world. And we can start doing this anywhere". The people who sat in front of her one by one in "The Artist is Present" (2010) – the three-month-long piece in which she sat for six days a week, seven hours a day in a chair in the Museum of Modern Art in New York opposite members of the public – were moved to tears. "The unconditional love of total strangers was the most incredible feeling I've ever had. I don't know if this is art, I said to myself, I don't know what this is, or what art is . . . . But this performance went beyond performance. This was life . . . . I felt, more powerfully than ever, that what I had created had a purpose."