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Abramovic Retrospective Makes Art Come Alive

By Alli Rath

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Garage hosts a retrospective of Abramovic's MoMA show, a "life-changing experience" according to the artist.

Marina Abramovic, a Yugoslav performance artist, has been a fixture in the art world for more than 30 years. In spring 2010, the Museum of Modern Art in New York featured many of the artist's older works and a new piece, "The Artist is Present," where Abramovic sat unmoving in the museum so that spectators could share her gaze for anywhere from a few minutes to a whole day. For Abramovic, the experience was life changing. "The performance becomes the only reality you know ... the person in front of you, you perceive his energy, his being."

Moscow's Garage Center for Contemporary Culture now has a version of that same New York exhibit. However, in addition to videos, photos and artifacts previously displayed in New York, the Moscow retrospective features live re-enactments of Abramovic's performances.

The pieces are performed daily by 47 Russian artists trained by Abramovic in a grueling five-

day workshop. "I was really surprised by the determination of the Russian performers," Abramovic said at a news conference last week. Many of the performers remarked that working with Abramovic changed their relationship with art.

The performers take center stage in a black box, a dark theater-like room featuring pieces focusing on vulnerability and spirituality, such as "Luminosity," where a nude female model lit by a spotlight sits suspended in the air for hours at a time.

Those who wish to enter the black box must brave two gatekeepers in a piece called "Imponderabilia." One nude male and one nude female face each other in a narrow doorway, forcing the visitor to choose which model to face when awkwardly sidling through. "Imponderabilia" is also featured in another door — the only easily accessible exit to the next part of the exhibit.

The rest of the exhibit displays some of the enormously prolific — and shocking — nature of Abramovic's work from the past 30 years. In a particularly grisly piece, "Rhythm 0," Abramovic placed 72 objects on a table, including vodka, a rose, knives, ropes, whips and a gun. Spectators had eight hours to do anything they desired to the artist, and people soon began to cut her hair and undress her. One man put a bullet in the gun, put the gun in Abramovic's hand and moved it to her head. Another man in the audience promptly punched him. Unfortunately, or maybe not, the piece is only represented in Garage by an account of the events and a recreation of the table.

Any Abramovic exhibit would be remiss if it failed to acknowledge the artist's former lover, Ulay, with whom she worked from 1976 to 1989. Many of the pieces performed by the two are present in video form, including ones in which Ulay and Abramovic yell at each other for hours, breathe in and out of each other's mouths until they almost suffocated and, perhaps most notably, a recounting of their split in 1989, when the two symbolically walked the length of the Great Wall of China in order to meet in the middle and say goodbye.

One of the most notable aspects of the show is its interactive nature. In two rooms, there are platforms where guests can lie and meditate for an indefinite period of time. There are also two giant screens featuring feeds of Abramovic and the people who sat opposite her at MoMA, accompanied by a table and chairs so that guests may recreate the installation.

The artist herself spent three hours a day at Garage last week, sitting with museum patrons in a reimagination of "The Artist is Present." Russian and American scientists set up an experiment entitled "Measuring the Magic of the Mutual Gaze," where scientists recorded the brainwaves of Abramovic and her sitting partner in an effort to understand the ability of the brain to unconsciously perceive the emotions of others. The data will be archived so that other scientists can study the "magic" that happens when two people share eye contact.

Despite the strangeness, nudity, and wildly dangerous acts, there is something magical about performance art. Perhaps the artist says it best: "The performance becomes the only reality you know ... time stops." But if such a time commitment seems a bit ambitious, it may be better to just accept an old joke retold by Abramovic: "How many performance artists does it take to fix a light bulb?" Answer: "I don't know. I was only there 6 hours." Save yourself a few, OK, many, hours and experience the magic in highly condensed form at Garage.

"Marina Abramovic: The Artist is Present" runs at the Garage Center for Contemporary Culture until Dec. 4. 19A Ulitsa Obraztsova. Metro Marina Roshcha. Tel. 645-0520, www.garageccc.com

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