

Student Academic Conference

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## Marina Abramović: Conveying Pain through Performance

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The body as a medium is not a common tool that the average artist would choose to utilize. Artist Marina Abramović, also known as the ‘Grandmother of Performance Art,’ is an artist who has been using her body for performance for over four decades. Today, I will be exploring the effect of Abramović’s intense physical performance history, going beyond what a viewer would interpret on the surface. Then unveiling that by being a woman, she injects a deeper meaning in her work.

It’s often crucial to know an artist’s backstory because like Abramović, her biography is the fuel of her work. Born in Yugoslavia, now Serbia, her parents were politically active as they both fought as partisans in World War II. Later, they would be employed by Josip Broz Tito in the communist government. Up until her late twenties, Abramović was held to a strict home life and a messy family. Her mother was very hard on her and kept her to a strict curfew while growing up. It wasn’t until the mid- to-late ‘70s that her career took off and some of her most well-known pieces were performed.

The first piece I’d like to unpack is titled *Balkan Baroque*. Originally performed in 1997, *Balkan Baroque* is a piece that is meant to epitomize

the shame of the Bosnian war. Abramović recalls that it was difficult to gather the will to perform a piece like this. During an interview with the Museum of Modern Art, she explains her hesitation “I could not do anything. It was too close to me.” Over a span of four days, Abramović sits in a white gown washing thousands of blood-stained cow bones with nothing but soapy water and a metal brush. Performing this piece in Venice, it was especially hot. The smell becomes gut wrenching and worms begin to writhe from the inner marrow, still, Abramović continues to wash. In between her cries she sings songs of her childhood, Serbian folk songs. Like the soiled bones, blood cannot be washed out. Abramović contributes to this performance in two ways. The first being her own childhood. Growing up around war and with parents that fought *in* the war is a part of who she is. This hits home. She is familiar with the consequence that war brings, which can be seen in her expression as she wails for the dead. The second important factor is the domesticity of washing. Traditionally, when one thinks of “washing,” women doing the dishes, or cleaning the laundry comes to mind. By zooming in on that mundane task that Abramović performs, it’s rather simple and unsurprising. If a man were to do it, it wouldn’t have the same effect. The expectation of women’s responsibilities is at play here, and that’s to clean up the mess. When we see *what* she’s

washing, we get that disturbing realization that although she's executing a stereotypical womanly chore, she's scrubbing bloodied bones. When the blood refuses to come clean, the audience experiences deep humiliation. The thousands of cow bones representing the thousands of dead men, women, and children from the selfish grasp of violence. Both parties feeling the intense failure and guilt of the result of war.

The two pieces I'd like to highlight next are some of Abramović's most well-known works. The Rhythm series. With a total of five separate performances over the course of a year, Abramović explores the limit of both her body and mind with these performances. I'll be talking about *Rhythm 2* and *Rhythm 0*. Starting with *Rhythm 2*, Abramović was inspired by her previous piece, *Rhythm 5*, where she lay within a burning star and loses consciousness due to lack of oxygen. An audience member pulls her out after realizing her state of unconsciousness. Abramović was frustrated by this and her body's limits. This time around, she wanted to organize a *planned* unconscious performance where the audience wouldn't have to save her. In *Rhythm 2*, Abramović sits in a chair with a table in front of her. On the table, lay various medications. During phase 1, she ingests a pill meant for people who suffer with catatonia, a neuropsychiatric syndrome where a person is unable to fully grasp the world around them, causing

them to be hyper unaware of their surroundings. Most people who suffer from this cannot control their body movements. As the medication kicks in she seizes and shakes, unable to fend off the effects of the pill. After the effects of the first pill wear off, she takes another pill meant for people who experience severe depression and schizophrenia. This causes her to be completely removed from herself and become very still, struggling to keep track of the passing of time. The two medications she takes result in two very different reactions, which was the goal of this piece. Abramović wanted to display the loss of one's body, and then one's mind. *Rhythm 2* was performed in 1974, but now more than ever do I think this piece holds a greater message to women. The struggle that we face to obtain this control of our bodies and mentalities seems impossible at times. We're given these metaphorical pills that control what we can and cannot do with our bodies. Many onlookers nowadays stand by and watch our grip slowly slip, just like viewers of *Rhythm 2* are forced to watch Abramović lose the rule of her own being. Speaking of onlookers and women's bodies, this leads me into *Rhythm 0*. I first found Abramović through this piece and I was astounded by not only the message behind this performance, but the sheer will one must possess to pull off a stunt like this. *Rhythm 0* was conducted in the same year of *Rhythm 2*. Abramović stands idly by for six hours in front of a

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table which holds 72 different objects. Perfume, honey, roses, books, knives, alcohol, an ax, and a gun with a single bullet in its chamber were just *some* of the props she had available. For those six hours Abramović lets the audience do whatever they please as she takes full responsibility for any and all their acts. On the gallery wall she displays a label which states “I am the object.” It started light, people moving her around, putting her into poses, writing lipstick on her face, before you knew it her clothes were being cut off her body. She was groped, licked, one man tries to rape her, another cuts her neck to drink her blood. Once the viewers realize the shield of consequence is broken, things turn barbaric. The audience splits into two, half protecting her and half wanting to continue the experiment. It was only until someone takes the gun and positions Abramović to point it at her chest that the performance ends. She begins walking towards the crowd, both blood and tears running down her face. No longer zombified, the audience flees from her in fear of the repercussions. Leave it up to society to treat a woman however they choose, and the results are villainous. It took no time for the crowd to use and abuse their authority they had over Abramović knowing they wouldn't be punished. One could argue that the weapons were there and meant to be used eventually, but by being a woman performer, this piece caused audience members to immediately pursue

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their sexual desires and dehumanizing deeds that wouldn't be relayed onto a man. *Rhythm 0* was the last piece of Abramović's rhythm series. Since then, it has not been recreated and hopefully never will be. Its message will live on and be an important subject when discussing, with no consequences, how society would treat a woman.

The next piece I'd like to spotlight today is a piece titled *Imponderabilia* by Marina Abramović and Ulay. This piece was one of many performed by the couple, who were in a relationship for 12 years. Sharing their love for art, they performed many pieces together during their relationship. I can only talk about so many works today, but out of their fourteen shared works I recommend looking into their final piece "The Lovers" if you get the chance. *Imponderabilia*, was performed in 1977 at the entrance of the Galleria Comunale d'Arte Moderna in Bologna, Italy. Both Abramović and Ulay stand naked, facing each other in the doorway forcing visitors to make a split-second decision as to which person they'd face upon entering. Nearby on a wall read "Imponderable. Such imponderable human factors as one's aesthetic sensitivity/the overriding importance of imponderables in determining human conduct." While doing my research I found an interview where both artists are being questioned about this piece. In doing so, I began to read the comments and found rather distasteful reactions to

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their performance. There were some that genuinely reflected upon the performance and had an overall positive takeaway, but most typed how badly they wished to brush through the door against Abramović, it's noticeable after watching this performance that attendees would face Abramović more often than Ulay. The point of this piece was to make that decision, then ask yourself why. If it were two people of the same sex the decision wouldn't matter, there would be no alternative. Having both a male and female be part of this experiment was key to challenging that perspective and proving that facing the woman was less threatening, and in some cases, more perverted. Years later, not much has changed. People are publicly admitting their sexual focus and they weren't even at the performance! This proves the deeper message of this piece and how "Imponderables" meaning double standard or stereotypes, are deeply rooted without us realizing it.

The final piece I will be analyzing is one of Abramović's most recent works. In 2010, she performed live at the Museum of Modern Art with *The Artist Is Present*. For nearly three months straight, eight hours a day, Abramović sits at a wooden chair allowing strangers to file in and out, locking eyes with her in silence for however long they choose. The Museum of Modern Art explains that "The work was inspired by her belief that stretching the length



of a performance beyond expectations serves to alter our perception of time and foster a deeper engagement in the experience.” Thousands of people stood in line waiting to share this moment with Abramović, many replying in tears. The question is, why? Once again, hypothetically comparing what the reactions of the audience would be if Abramović were a man, we can presume it’s likely that participants found motherly comfort within Abramović’s gaze, therefore feeling safe to let their emotions fall freely. If not motherly comfort, then a general feeling of support since women are traditionally more emotionally connected and vulnerable with others than men. Traditionally from a male’s perspective, crying is viewed as a weakness. If Abramović were the opposite sex, not many contenders would respond the way that they did. Feeling that silent unintentional consolation, forces one’s inner feeling, that they may not have been aware of, to flow.

Abramović claims that her work is not from a feminist standpoint, it’s hard to ignore that having the mind and body of a woman impacts her work with feminist undertones. Her incredible portfolio demonstrates this through vigorous performance and dedication. If her pieces were to be recreated by anyone else, it would be to no avail. Her fearless vulnerability and clever notion of performance art could never be recreated, and her work has

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continuously carried tremendous societal messages that have both changed and influenced the art world for the better.