

Managing Yourself

Life's Work: An Interview with Marina Abramović

by Alison Beard

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Marina Abramović has for decades pushed the boundaries of performance art—hurling herself against walls, cutting herself with razor blades, sitting motionless for 750 hours. Though she started with fringe shows, she eventually worked her way up to premier venues, such as the Venice Biennale and New York's Museum of Modern Art. Her memoir, *Walk Through Walls*, is out now.

HBR: Tell me how your creative process works.

Abramović: I've never really had a studio. A studio makes you lazy and comfortable, and you repeat yourself. I don't go on holidays. I go on research trips to places that don't have Coca-Cola or electricity, away from civilization. I'm interested in nature and people from different cultures who push their bodies and their minds in a way we don't understand. I expose myself to life, and from that, ideas come as a surprise. I totally dismiss the ones that are pleasant and easy. I'm only interested in the ones that really disturb me and that I get obsessed about. They're what bring me to new territory. When I say, "Oh my God, shall I do that?" I know I have to. I love what John Cage said: "Every time I'm accepted by my audience, I move to the place where I'm not."

Why did you choose such a difficult, poorly understood medium?

In the beginning, I was a painter, but the moment I stood in front of the public and expressed my ideas using my body as the object and subject of the work, immediately it was clear that this is my best medium. I struggled with acceptance; my early career was hell. But it took me all these years to create a foundation so that performance would become accepted in the same way as photography and video. You have to believe that you're right, even if everybody believes you are wrong.

As a young artist, you faced a lot of rejection. How did you handle it?

I didn't take no for an answer. I've always been like that. If I think in my gut that I'm right, I do it. You have to have this kind of conviction. Otherwise, I would have given up many years ago. After the 1970s, all the performance artists started doing paintings and sculptures or architecture; performing was far too hard. I'm so happy I didn't give up.

You've talked about the importance of not just making work but ensuring that it's seen in the right place by the right people at the right time. How did you develop those marketing skills?

Early on, I had to perform wherever I had the possibility. My audience was anything from 10 to 40 people. Then I started getting invited to the festivals, finding curators interested in presenting new forms of art, and going to important exhibitions. So many artists don't have that kind of stamina. They need collectors to buy the work or galleries to take care of them. I didn't have a gallery for at least 30 years. I had to do everything myself. But now I really do only projects that interest me. I get lots of invitations, and from these I choose the thing that will really bring my work to a new level.

How did you develop that stamina?

Both my parents were war heroes in Serbia, and my entire childhood I was taught that I had to sacrifice my private life and everything else for the cause. Why are you here on this planet? What is your function? What is your responsibility? That's how I was brought up, and that's what I've been doing.

You set such ambitious goals for yourself, artistically and physically. How do you get yourself to a point where you can achieve them?

You have to train the entire body: training physically, thinking about nutrition, not taking drugs, not ever drinking. And I learn from Tibetan monks, Aborigines in Central Australia, shamans in Brazil. To be able to sit on the chair in *The Artist Is Present*, I trained my body for an entire year. I didn't have lunch, so my body wasn't producing acids to make me sick. I drank water only by night so I wouldn't have to pee.

You talk in the book about times when you've hit your limit in a performance, yet you kept going. How do you do that?

Everybody can. The mind is a huge enemy because, every time you try to do something out of your comfort zone, it will make you not do it. But we all have this extra energy in our body. We might use it when we're in extreme situations, trapped or in a plane crash or a fire, and we're able to run out. But we don't need to wait for this drama.

Critics recently lambasted you for describing Aborigines in a racist way in early drafts of your memoir. What's your response?

The controversy is profoundly upsetting. Despite what is being said, I know what is in my heart. My words—diary excerpts from 1979—were poorly chosen, but they came from a place of wonder, respect, and love. The year that [my partner] Ulay and I spent living with Pitjantjatjara and Pintupi people in the Little Sandy Desert transformed me.

Ulay was both an artistic and a romantic partner. How have you balanced the personal and professional over the course of your career?

I tried to have the marriage life, but it didn't really work. I always felt guilty that I worked and traveled too much. Now I'm getting to 70, and I've never felt better. I don't need to tell anybody if I'm coming home or not. I can do whatever the hell I want. I didn't want children because I didn't want them to suffer. I had a dog, which suffered enough. I don't even want a goldfish or a turtle. I have a desert plant in my house that needs a glass of water maybe once a year, which I can deliver. If you're in a relationship, your energy is divided. If you have children, it's even more divided. When I'm alone, there's nothing else, so then I put in not just 100% but 20% more than 100%, and that 20% really makes it.

How have you handled going from starving artist to famous?

People who love you start to hate you when you become that rock star. Everybody is scrutinizing. They want you to be poor, to suffer, and to struggle. I could not pay my electricity bill until I was 50, and now I can. I think this is something I should not be criticized for. That is the negative part. What's more important is the platform—on CNN, TED, Bloomberg—to talk about performance art. I've always been working with artists, always been teaching. The memoir is coming out so that the general public can understand my life. It's the same with the film *The Artist Is Present*. I was taped with a microphone for one year, and the crew could come anytime.

What lessons do you try to pass on to artists at the start of their careers?

We investigate first what is their motivation, then which is the right work, how to develop the idea, how to start and finish the performance, how to prepare and condition, how to breathe. I also teach them how not to be exploited by galleries. In one of my first shows, all my photographs sold, but I never got a penny. I don't want that to happen to young artists. I also go to their home and studio. I make them write down every single thing they have, and they are completely alarmed by how much shit they collect. Then we clean the whole place and have a fresh start.

In the book, you describe an interesting classroom exercise.

Yes, it's very simple. For a few months, they sit for two hours a day at a table with 1,000 pieces of blank white paper and write down their ideas. All the good ones they put on one side of the table; all the bad ones go in the trash can. But in the end, I only look in the trash. It turns out to be a treasure of everything they're afraid of and really should do.

When people criticize or make fun of your work, how do you react?

I'm only angry at myself if I know that I didn't give my 120%. But if I give everything, you can criticize, you can ridicule, you can do anything, and it doesn't touch me. If I was not strong enough to push my idea completely through, then I know I failed, and that's worse than anybody else telling me.

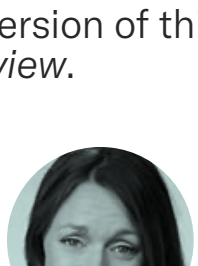
When you do fail, how do you learn from the experience?

I was talking to some painter friends of mine. They make one painting, and the more they work on it, the worse it becomes. Then they take the next canvas, and in two minutes they made a masterpiece. The more you fail, the more you understand what caused the failure, and you can make the next piece great. You're not consistent because you're taking risks, exploring different territories.

You've said there are three Marinas: the warrior, the spiritual one, and the bullshit one who doesn't believe in herself. How do you keep that third Marina at bay?

I don't. I just expose all of them. It's very important to be vulnerable and to show the things you're afraid and ashamed of to everybody—not just to people you love but also to the public. That way, we have a connection. We create trust. My work is emotional, and I never hide anything. But it took me a long time to get to that point.

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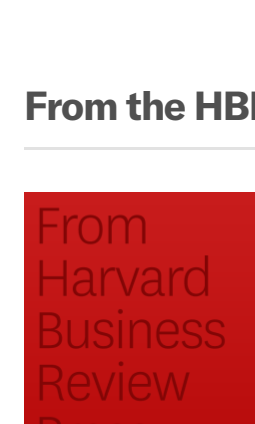


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