



A Clinical Eye on Abramović

A doctor dissects the MoMA blockbuster

BY DR. ELAINE SCHATTNER

Twice I visited Marina Abramović, the artist on display at the Museum of Modern Art. At 64, she is a curious specimen.

She's been sitting six days each week, with few exceptions, for two months, in a re-creation of her piece *Night-Sea-Crossing*. Each session demands preparation; she ingests no fluids after 8 p.m. in the evenings prior. The following morning, she appears on a square stage in the MoMA atrium, lit by four sets of double spotlights, that recalls an old-style operating theater. She stays unmoving. Her dark, braided hair falls, Kahl-osesque, behind broad, square shoulders. She blinks, somehow breathing within the tight bod-ice wrapped around her chest like a brace.

Ms. Abramović sticks with me for some time. Like some patients I remember, years later, for the rarity of the condition. Born in post-war Belgrade, Ms. Abramovic emerged in the performance art scene in Eastern Europe after the demonstrations of 1968. Her trick is to present her body as an object, constantly seeking the emotional and physical limits of her human self.

"I use my body for an experiment," she told viewers of her 1974 piece, *Rhythm 2*, before taking pills onstage at the Gallery of Contemporary Art in Zagreb. The first tablet, prescribed for catatonia, threw her body into convulsions. Then, she took a remedy that left her asleep for hours. In *Rhythm 5*, she set a fire in the shape of a five-point Communist star round her prone figure. The blaze consumed her hair and she lost consciousness before onlookers pulled her away from her art.

I shuddered as I walked by the table with the 72 items featured in her 1974 piece, *Rhythm 0*. For this, the artist provided knives, a saw, rope, cotton swabs, a rose with thorns, a syringe, forceps, rubbing alcohol and other materials to her audience. She invited them to apply these to her as she remained passive, vulnerable, willing.

I'm reminded of the OR, after scrubbing, sterile, the instruments labeled and ready, just in case you need them. "Scalpel, please, number 7." We do our work quietly, concentrating, deliberative. This is different. The doctors on

their rounds use their instruments to fix, to repair, maybe to heal. But in one aspect it may be the same: Sometimes they don't stop or look or even take a glance. They might not listen or care or notice the pain. The person is a case, an object, a thing, no more.

In *Imponderabilia*, two unclothed models—one male, one female—flank the entryway to a gallery. A doctor, I should be comfortable in this naked passage. Still, I'm not sure which way to turn, not wanting to stare or probe or cause pain. Hesitant, I turn slightly toward the woman so as not to confront the man's nakedness. It's their job, I know, but still they are human, as am I, gliding through, touching barely.

Once through the door, a procedure of sorts, I look back and watch as other visitors pour through. Some giggle. Some stand and watch. I am relieved there are no instruments here, no potential for damage—except through disrespect, indignity or unwanted touch. After a few minutes, two fresh young new figures appear. They carefully remove doctors' white coats from hooks on the wall and deliver them to the bodies by the door. And then, slipping out of their own, they trade places.

I think back on my years in medical school and as an intern at the hospital, when I, then young as they are now, first examined others' bodies outside of the bedroom. I never really thought about it much back then. It was just part of what I did.

In the hospital there's a reason for each procedure. After signing a consent, the patient gets anesthesia, is rendered unconscious, unhearing and not even knowing what's being done. The patient wakes up, better, a scar or two but most often improved for the experience.

I wonder why Ms. Abramović, a healthy creature, would put herself through casualties, over and over. Each wound, small, takes its toll. The body is not an object, I am certain now. More than ever before. I learned this at the museum.

Dr. Schattner is an medical oncologist and also Clinical Associate Professor of Medicine at Weill Cornell Medical College in New York. "Marina Abramović: The Artist Is Present" closes May 31.



Arshile Gorky, *Still Life with Table and Pitcher*, black crayon on paper, c. 1931, inscribed to Hans Burkhardt. Estimate \$4,000 to \$6,000.

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