

## MARINA'S DUE

### Marina Abramović: The Artist is Present

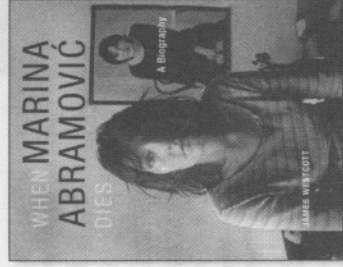
Edited by Klaus Biesenbach  
Museum of Modern Art, 2010  
224 pp. (345 illustrations)/\$50.00 (hb)

### When Marina Abramović Dies: A Biography

By James Westcott  
The MIT Press, 2010  
326 pp. (100 illustrations)/\$27.95 (hb)

### Art, Love, Friendship: Marina Abramović and Ulay, Together and Apart

By Thomas McEvilley  
McPherson & Company, 2010  
304 pp. (65 illustrations)/\$27.00 (hb)



important than the product. . . . I see performance as a tool with only one purpose—to elevate the spirit of the audience.”<sup>33</sup> Indeed, my spirit is elevated as Abramović weaves a masterful tale, never overanalyzing or overexplaining her purpose. The guide overcomes the challenges inherent in reproducing video and performance work in book format. How appropriate that Abramović performs for her audience, a generous gift in exchange for our undivided attention. She is present, and demands nothing less from her audience.

Organized chronologically, the text includes Abramović's early conceptual and rhythm-based works (1968–75), followed by her collaborative works with long-time partner Ulay (1976–88), and concluding with her recent work (1995–2010). Each piece features photographic reproductions and a detailed written description. Essays by Klaus Biesenbach, Jovana Stokic, Arthur C. Danto, Nancy Spector, and Chrissie Iles provide a comprehensive overview and interpretive insight into Abramović's life and work.

Also organized chronologically in three parts—“Yugoslavia” (1946–75), “Ulay” (1975–88) and “Solo in Public” (1988)—Westcott's biography contextualizes each major event in Abramović's life, entwining Yugoslavia's conflicted history with the artist's difficult childhood. As evidenced in chapters such as “Menstruation, Masturbation, and Migraines,” and “Abstinence and Affairs,” Westcott does not shy away from taboo subjects. The author (with the artist's permission) reveals intimate details about Abramović's life, including an abortion, breast augmentation, and the deep pain surrounding her split with Ulay. It is a testament to Westcott that these graphic revelations avoid illicit connotations; rather they demystify and humanize both the artist and her work.

Simultaneous with performance artist Marina Abramović's retrospective at the Museum of Modern Art in New York are four publications chronicling her life and work.<sup>1</sup> While the books share common biographical and artistic information, each has its own unique focus. Predictably, MoMA's monograph focuses on Abramović's life work. However, upon opening the book, I discovered a hidden gem—a CD of Abramović's voice. It is powerful and commanding:

Dear Reader,

- Before starting to read this book, you need a little preparation. Find a comfortable seat at a table in your living room or kitchen. Drink glass of pure water. Relax. Breathe slow and close your eyes for a few moments until I count to seven. 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7. Open your eyes and let the energy flow. Now we are ready to start.<sup>2</sup>

Thus begins the audio guide accompanying the text. For the next ninety minutes, Abramović navigates the listener/reader on a journey spanning over forty years. Her performances come alive as she eloquently describes the impetus, process, and behind-the-scenes anecdotes surrounding her work: “In performance, process is more

Westcott's preface opens with a stipulation from Abramović's last will and testament:

In case of my death I would like to have this following memorial ceremony:

Three coffins.

The first coffin with my real body.

The second coffin with an imitation of my body.

The third coffin with an imitation of my body.

...

The ceremony should be a celebration of life and death combined. After the ceremony there will be a feast with a large cake made out of marzipan in the shape and looks of my body.

I want the cake to be distributed between the present people.

(xiii)

Abramović carefully orchestrates even her final performance down to the most meticulous detail. Westcott's text reveals the background behind the artist's prolific career, exposing her unquenchable work ethic, which promises to continue beyond the grave.

I read McEvilley's book last; thus some of the material found in

the other texts was familiar. However, what distinguishes *Art, Love, Friendship* from the other texts is the relationship of the author to Abramović and Ulay, resulting in an unusual combination of both intimacy and criticality regarding their work. McEvilley includes essays written over his twenty-seven-year friendship with the collaborative duo. The book opens with an essay entitled "The Romance: A Paradox," written for the Kunsthalle exhibition "Simultaneity of Other" (1987) in Bern, Switzerland. McEvilley poetically reflects on the identification of self: "The self is created by its apprehension of an other. . . . There cannot be self without other; there cannot be other without self. They exist only and always in a secret embrace. They are a mutually dependent, eternally linked pair" (31). The essay serves as a lens with which to examine Ulay and Abramović complicated symbiotic relationship, both personal and professional.

One of the book's highlights is the section on the Great Wall project. Spanning almost one hundred pages, McEvilley discloses his separate adventures with Ulay and Abramović during their three-month-long *Great Wall of China Walk*. Starting at opposite ends of the Wall, the artists walked toward each other. McEvilley spent the second month in China—two weeks with Ulay at the western end of the Wall in the Gobi Desert in Lanzhou, the capital of Gansu Province, followed by two weeks with Abramović on the eastern end of the Wall in the Tangshan mountains. The artists' meeting and embrace in the middle of the Wall signified the end of their professional and personal thirteen-year relationship. McEvilley's travelogue provides a detailed account of his experiences, as well as historic and cultural background about China. Recounting thwarted expectations, frustrations, and humorous mishaps, the essay imparts an alternative perspective to Abramović account of the project in Westcott's biography.

Part Two of *Art, Love, Friendship* features Ulay's work after the split with Abramović, something obviously missing from the other texts. The book closes with a current essay, "Marina's New Life, Or

The New Age Of Performance Art" (2010). While it pays tribute to Abramović's lasting legacy, the essay proffers little in the way of forecasting the future of performance art.

Each of these texts illuminates different aspects of Abramović's all-encompassing relationship to art and life. Read together, the multiple perspectives cohere into a complete narrative and reveal interesting insights. Abramović's work is often mischaracterized, linking her to early feminist performance artists who used the body as a tool for rebellion against the male gaze. Abramović resisted this categorization, instead aligning her early work with Viennese Actionist artists who rebelled against the atrocities of war. As her work evolved, the radical performances shifted focus. Pain and endurance were less about pushing the body to its limits than about transcending pain to reach a higher state of consciousness. Rooted in Tantric, Vedic, and Aboriginal rituals, Abramović's extreme performances articulate a deep commitment to a metaphysical and spiritual practice. As quoted in Westcott, she states, "I am not a masochist. To me the pain and the blood are merely a means of artistic expression" (96).

As the self-proclaimed grandmother of performance art, Marina Abramović's time is now. Tribute is due. These books ensure that her work is preserved and archived, providing a valuable resource for art historians and subsequent generations of artists and aficionados.

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*NOTES 1. The fourth text (not reviewed here) is Marina Abramović and the Future of Performance Art, edited by Paula Orvell (New York: Phaidon Publishers, 2010). 2. Audio guide CD accompanying MoMA book. 3. Ibid.*

[Ed. note: see Afterimage 38, no. 1 (July/August 2010) for a review by Alisia G. Chase of the exhibition "The Artist is Present" by Marina Abramović.]

## afterimage

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