



Marina Abramovic: The Artist is Present Discussion Guide

Directors: Matthew Akers

Year: 2012

Time: 104 min

You might know this director from:

We Are Legion: The Story of the Hacktivists (2012)

David Blaine: Real or Magic (2013)

Elaine Stritch at Liberty (2002)

FILM SUMMARY

Highly acclaimed, award-winning, and often controversial film, *MARINA ABRAMOVIC: THE ARTIST IS PRESENT* perfectly reflects its subject: the Montenegrin self-proclaimed Grandmother of Performance Art, Marina Abramovic. The film captures the preparations for what is possibly the biggest moment in Marina's career: a retrospective at New York City's Museum of Modern Art (MoMA). Throughout the preparations, Marina is revealed as more than an artist: she is surprisingly light-hearted and self-deprecating, easily given over to laughter and wry humour.

German artist Ulay, who was Marina's lover and collaborator for 12 years, is omnipresent in the film. Once the most well known performance artists in the world, they pushed boundaries and challenged audiences through their exploration of the ego, the male-female dynamic, and pain. Their meeting at the MoMA retrospective is fraught with emotion, capturing their continuing connection and the separate paths they ultimately took.

Marina's unusual childhood, dominated by a perfectionist mother, has obviously driven much of her work, particularly the earlier pieces, which feature self-inflicted pain and brushes with death. The disconnection from her parents, along with their discipline and perfectionism, informs Marina's work. In fact, it is perhaps through her work and art that Marina finally finds a kind of peace and acceptance eluding her for a long time.

FILM THEMES

What is art? This is an age-old question, and the film invites us to confront and question our views on boundaries and acceptance, love and relationships, pain and endurance, and what exactly constitutes art.

WHAT IS ACCEPTABLE

For more than three decades, performance artist Marina Abramovic has been testing the boundaries between performer and audience and the limits of her own body, even risking her own life. She's interested in finding out what is 'acceptable.' For instance, she once decided to breastfeed Givenchy artistic director, Riccardo Tisci. The Madonna-esque photograph was one of many that explored the theme of religion. The reactions of her audience have been varied, whether they think her performances are distasteful, provocative or beautiful. Perhaps this is the role that art should take: to elicit a response inviting people to question themselves and the world they live in.

LOVE AND RELATIONSHIPS

Marina's personal and professional collaboration with German artist, Ulay, has been central to her life and work. Even 25 years after their separation, their names remain linked. Marina has said that an artist should never fall in love with another artist, yet the relationship she shared with Ulay contributed a great deal to her professional growth. They undertook a deep, unconventional exploration of male-female dynamics, and the pieces they created together continue to evoke powerful reactions, even as they are now performed and interpreted by other performance artists.

PAIN AND ENDURANCE

Marina is known for pushing herself both mentally and physically to the far edges of pain and endurance, cheating death more than once. She says that she tests the limits of herself in order to transform herself. In 'The Artist is Present,' she invited audience members to join her in this transformation. The result was fascinating. Emotions spilled from their faces after sitting with her for just minutes. Marina often took their emotions inward and mirrored them. Few were able to endure these deeply-moving connections for more than a few minutes.

WHAT IS ART?

Marina says she was considered insane for forty years due to the nature of her work, and then one day her work became acceptable. Performance art has always hovered on the fringe, often seen as exhibitionism, attention-seeking, or simply not art at all. Art is subjective, of course, and what one person finds thrilling or beautiful or challenging, another might find just silly. That Marina has dedicated herself to performance art, even through long stretches of poverty and mainstream rejection, is almost a performance piece in itself. Art is an exploration that none have explored like Marina.

“When you perform it is a knife and your blood, when you act it is a fake knife and ketchup.”

Marina Abramovic

“The hardest thing to do is something which is close to nothing.”

Marina Abramovic

FURTHER DISCUSSIONS:

1. Ulay and Marina seem to retain a strong bond. Is there a broken relationship in your life that continues to impact you, either professionally or personally?
2. Why do you think that Marina has gone on to much greater acclaim than Ulay, even though they were instrumental to each other's growth as artists?
3. Early in her career, Marina explored pain and self-harm to the point of risking her life. What do you think drove her to such extremes?
4. Endurance was integral to the performance, 'The Artist is Present,' and at times it appeared that Marina was risking her health to continue, yet she refused to stop. What drives people to continue things that are inherently dangerous? Have you ever pursued something despite its risks? What were you looking for?
5. What evoked such primal emotional responses in people who spent time 'in the chair' with Marina? Do you think it was a healthy process?
6. When Ulay takes part in Marina's piece at MoMA, they are both noticeably moved, with deep emotion dancing across their faces. What was this emotion? Do you think Ulay's place in the chair provided a moment of closure?
7. Since parting with Ulay, Marina has embraced the finer things in life and, according to Ulay, has become more willing to "play to the audience." Do you think Marina sold out in some way to cement her position as the Grandmother of Performance Art?
8. Have you ever admired an artist to the point of worship? If so, what triggered that kind of devotion?
9. How important do you think Marina's strong team of mentors and advisors have been to her success?
10. Who gets to decide what art is? Can you describe what art is, or isn't, in your own words?

NOTES:

FILM FACTS:

- In 1979, following an appearance at the 3rd Sydney Biennale, Marina and Ulay trekked to central Australia and requested a meeting with the indigenous people of Western Australia's Little Sandy Desert. They stayed for the best part of a year, living near Lake Disappointment. Marina says that her experiences in the desert transformed her, both personally and professionally, inspiring her and Ulay to create the piece, "Nightsea Crossing."
- Marina has never had children, saying that she never had the desire and feels she could not have pursued her art fully had she had been a mother. The closest she ever came to the experience of mothering was when she helped raise a baby kangaroo during her year in the Australian Outback.
- Prior to meeting Marina and agreeing to make the film, *THE ARTIST IS PRESENT*, director Matthew Akers had no interest in performance art and was even highly sceptical of it as a valid art form. Marina gave him full creative control and put her trust in him fully, even giving him keys to her home and allowing him to film her at any time, without boundaries.
- Actor James Franco makes a brief appearance in *THE ARTIST IS PRESENT*. He has interviewed Marina several times and she is now making a film about his life with full creative control.
- Marina says that the process of art is more important than the result, and so she prepares and trains rigorously for performances. Once the performance is underway, she lets go of all control, considering anything that goes 'wrong' to be a part of the piece.
- When Marina and Ulay ended their relationship, they could only agree on two things: their parting must be monumental, and it must be given over to art. The result was "The Lovers: Ulay started walking at one end of the Great Wall of China, Marina at the other." They walked towards each other for months, finally meeting in the middle of the Great Wall of China to say good-bye.
- Because Marina's work involves blood, and because she doesn't seem to age, her fans and foes alike have often wondered (half-jokingly) if she is a vampire. Marina once set the record straight by admitting that she is, in fact, not a vampire.
- Marina purchased the space for the Marina Abramovic Institute as a birthday present to herself.
- Marina says that while performing *THE ARTIST IS PRESENT* she was taken aback by the amount of pain she felt in her audience, and by how much pain so many people carry inside of themselves, in general.

WAYS TO INFLUENCE

1. Share this film. Give others the chance to be inspired by this amazing artist.
2. Consider donating to the [Marina Abramovic Institute](#) that works for the preservation and expansion of performance art.
3. Mentor an artist. You could do this personally or pool together resources from your doc film club to help mentor an artist you believe in, financially or in other ways.
4. Take the time to seek out artists who are working in your local community. Attend their shows and take friends or family along. The discussions that follow are sure to be enlivening.
5. Explore your own inner artist by taking an art class or joining your local theatre group.

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