

And on the 6th day... I ate berries
How Marina Abramović's method reset my body and mind

From the 23rd of September 2023 to the 1st of January 2024 The Royal Academy hosted the biggest retrospective of Marina Abramović's work in the UK. She is the first female artist in the institution's 255-year history, to have been invited to have a solo show in the main galleries. I was one of a group of 39 people selected to 're' perform some of Marina Abramović's works from the past, we were made up of a mixture of dancers, performers and actors. Before starting our work at the RA, we had a six day residential preparatory workshop - 'The Cleaning the House workshop was developed by Abramović in the 1980s as a way of sharing her performance preparation practices with her students'. Now, having done it, I know that it is something that goes well beyond this brief description.

The Cleaning the House Workshop is intense but after experiencing the days of fasting and silence I felt uncomfortable returning to normality. I actually would like to have continued. I felt a sense of connection, serenity and hope that I don't think I've ever felt before in my life. Of course, I consider myself privileged to have had the chance to reperform some of Marina's historical works, but for me the important part of this experience has no longer been about the reperforming. Because I know that the real experience of this chapter in my life has been the chance to experience this workshop, which is something I don't think I would have done if it was not part of my contractual training to work for the show.

I saw Marina Abramović's work for the first time in early 2000 in Milan and I was really confused. Coming from a very conservative little city in the north of Italy, with a very narrow-minded education, I couldn't understand how something like that could be considered art. Only when I began to use art to process this mad world in which we live, did I start to understand the deep research Marina has been doing for decades about the experience of being human, exploring our individual and collective fears and dark sides.

Before this experience her most recent work, which has become much more spiritual, seemingly focussing on individual and collective healing, was fascinating but impenetrable to me: a sort of enigma without rhyme or reason. How could it be possible that a person who went through what she did in 1974, performing 'Rhythm 0', believe there is the chance to heal the human race? In Rhythm 0, one of her first performances, she dived deeply into the cruel and violent nature of humanity. During this iconic, endurance performance she, at that time in her early 20's, laid a series of objects out on a table, ranging from lipstick and honey to tools and a gun and a bullet, and gave the audience the following instructions: 'There are 72 objects on the table that one can use on me as desired. I am the object. During this period I take full responsibility.'

After a gentle start the performance violently escalated. Half way through her clothes had been cut off, she had been slapped and punched, someone had slashed her neck and drank her blood, others had sexually abused her and the audience had divided into opposing factions... Everything I have read about this pioneering piece of performance art, says that for six hours she stood there completely still and passive enduring every sort of abuse.

After 6 hours of performance she left that gallery alive but broken by the base nature of human beings when given the license. By the end of the performance someone had put the bullet inside the gun and placed it in her hands pointing towards her... she was left naked, in tears, bleeding and with a streak of white in her hair from the stress.

I am not sure where she found the strength and motivation to carry on with her investigation through her work. But what is now clear to me is that she learnt something very important along the way about teaching healing and how to share this knowledge in a very effective way through the workshop.

In the months leading up to the workshop I was mainly excited because finally I had the chance to detoxify myself from my stressful life enslaved by unnecessary tech gadgets. Our reperformer contracts clearly stated 'All phones, laptops, watches, and electronic devices will be collected. During the workshop, participants should refrain from eating, speaking, and reading to bring the body and mind to a quiet, calm state.' Six days without electronic devices and without feeling obliged to show off to the world how cool and fantastic everything is in my life, sounded like paradise to me!!!

Once we arrived, after a brief introduction and frugal dinner, our evil devices were finally placed in a black box with the promise to see them safe at the end and we started the training.

Billy and Rebecca were the beautiful souls who facilitated the workshop. Both of them trained with Marina and have been working at the Marina Abramović institute for years. Every day from dawn till night they were leading our routine with love, trust and understanding. I don't think that for one second they made any of the 38 participants feel inadequate, wrong or not supported. The first part of the morning was an interesting ritual where after a quick 'check in' of energy and space we were dipping naked in a swimming pool. A little bit scary the first day, but, having been blessed with the hottest September ever, at the end it was just a pleasure. Then a shower and a long break to write, stretch, sit under a tree and listen to nature. After that, what I think we all agreed was the best part of our day, listening to Rebecca's calm voice taking us through a session of Feldenkrais (a system of movements designed to promote bodily and mental awareness and wellbeing).

After these daily rituals we went through a series of long durational exercises lasting between 1 and 8 hours. The exercises were different every day, but the intent was always the same, whether we were counting grains of rice, gazing into each others eyes, or walking backwards staring in a mirror. In that week we learned how to slow down, to be fully present in the moment, to connect with the others and with the whole just through our presence and energy without the intermediation of any external agents, we didn't even know what the time was. And a fundamental part of this learning process were the long breaks between one exercise and another, where we could indulge in sunbathing naked, writing, dipping in the pool or going through long routines of stretching. It still makes me giggle to think that if an alien encountered human beings through us in those days they would have a very strange idea of our species: a very slow race that loves to be undressed, resting in, to say the least, very unusual positions...

When the 6 days of workshop finished I decided to avoid to share dinner with the other performers but went to eat blackberries from the bushes in the fields that had been my home. While I was eating the delicious berries, admiring a pink, soothing sunset and enjoying the warm breeze, I felt so connected with every particle surrounding me: the sense of peace and love was so deep that I would have been happy to die in that moment to be able to melt with the whole. I was really part of everything and I finally felt a real sense in what generally feels like a meaningless life, but a sense that is difficult to explain with words. I imagine I was just experiencing the present for the first time in my life...

That night I couldn't sleep and in my waking hours I remembered the extraordinary video and audio installation 'In Pursuit of Venus' By the New Zealand artist Lisa Reihana that I saw a few years before at the exhibition Oceania at the RA.

In it the slow scrolling of the scenes make it impossible to not feel how the simple and quiet life of an indigenous community has been poisoned by the dreams of western colonizers. The slow routine of peaceful people accompanied by the gentle sound of nature, transforms into the bitter feeling of an increasingly quicker life dictated by the speed of a never ending greediness with a brutal soundtrack of violence.

Since I saw it, this work has resonated in my life and so many times I have thought that there is no chance to go back and undo what western society has created. That it is impossible to find a simpler reconnected life, or even more simply, that it is unthinkable to stop this collective madness we have created that is endangering the future of humanity. Every time it echoed in my mind increased the sense of hopelessness.

But that night for the first time I felt that there is some hope, that I have an alternative. That all that I need to be serene is inside myself. That the first step to heal the collective is to heal myself and my well-being depends only on myself.

Marina Abramović's work is really intense, sometimes very difficult to watch and uncomfortable to experience, but isn't the very experience of being human very difficult and intense? And I strongly believe that we need art now more than ever to make us think and give us tools to take control of our lives.

What I learned through this workshop has given me a handbook to survive the worst side of myself and the system I live in and this has been an extraordinary gift.