

Marina Abramović and performance art



▲ Marina Abramović, *The Artist Is Present*, 2012.



▲ Marina Abramović, at the retrospective entitled *Marina Abramović. The Cleaner* held at Palazzo Strozzi (Florence), 2018-2019.

Part 1

Marina Abramović: life and works

1 Read the text below. Then do the activities that follow.

reading

Marina Abramović (born November 30, 1946, Belgrade, Yugoslavia [now in Serbia]), Yugoslav-born performance artist known for works that dramatically tested the endurance and limitations of her own body and mind.

Abramović was raised in Yugoslavia by parents who fought as Partisans in World War II and were later employed in the communist government of Josip Broz Tito. In 1965 she enrolled at the Academy of Fine Arts in Belgrade to study painting. Eventually, however, she became interested in the possibilities of performance art, specifically the ability to use her body as a site of artistic and spiritual exploration. After completing postgraduate studies at the Academy of Fine Arts in Zagreb, Croatia, in 1972, Abramović conceived a



▲
Marina Abramović,
Balkan Baroque,
 1997. Copper, water and one hundred cow femurs.
 Performance at the Venice Biennale.

Glossary

perilousness:
 dangerousness.

byname:
 nickname.

brooding:
 looking thoughtful and sad.

series of visceral performance pieces that engaged her body as both subject and medium. In *Rhythm 10* (1973), for instance, she methodically stabbed the spaces between her fingers with a knife, at times drawing blood. In *Rhythm 0* (1974) she stood immobile in a room for six hours along with 72 objects, ranging from a rose to a loaded gun, that the audience was invited to use on her however they wished. These pieces provoked controversy not only for their **perilousness** but also for Abramović's occasional nudity, which would become a regular element of her work thereafter.

In 1975 Abramović moved to Amsterdam, and a year later she began collaborating with Frank Uwe Laysiepen (**byname** Ulay), a like-minded German artist. Much of their work together was concerned with gender identity, most notoriously *Imponderabilia* (1977), in which they stood naked while facing each other in a museum's narrow entrance, forcing visitors to squeeze between them and, in so doing, to choose which of the two to face. [...] When they decided to end their relationship in 1988, they symbolically marked the dissolution with a piece in which they walked from either end of the Great Wall of China and met in the middle to say goodbye.

Abramović's profile was raised in 1997, when she won the Golden Lion for best artist at the Venice Biennale. Her exhibit, the **brooding** *Balkan Baroque*, used both video and live performance to interrogate her cultural and familial identity. She also captured public attention for *The House with the Ocean View* (2002), a gallery installation in which she lived ascetically for 12 days in three exposed cubes mounted onto a wall. [...]

In 2010 the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) in New York City held a wide-ranging retrospective of Abramović's work, *The Artist Is Present*. For the exhibition, Abramović debuted the eponymous performance piece, in which she sat quietly as museum patrons took turns sitting opposite and looking at her as she gazed back. The chance to participate in the work helped attract long lines of visitors. The retrospective also featured a company of performers reenacting Abramović's earlier work. Although the reperformances were often criticized for eradicating the energy and unpredictability of the original presentations, they and the new performance piece brought Abramović further recognition – as did the 2012 HBO documentary *The Artist Is Present*. A chronicle of the retrospective, it also documented Abramović's test of physical endurance as she sat motionless for seven hours each day during the three-month-long exhibition run.

shortened from www.britannica.com/biography/Marina-Abramovic

a. Fill in the following table about Abramović's works (not all information is given).

	Title	When	Where	What
1.
2.
3.
4.
5.
6.
7.

b. What do you think these performances have in common?

- 1. The artist is always naked.
- 2. They all involve the artist's body.
- 3. They can't be repeated.
- 4. They cost a lot.
- 5. They all need the public's participation.

reading



LINK
The Museum of
Modern art

Marina
Abramović,
Rhythm 10,
1994.

c. Sort the performances by their characteristics.

1.	Expensive performances	.....
2.	Unique performances	.....
3.	Interactive performances	..........

2 Read the description below of a performance written by Marina Abramović herself. Then do the activities that follow.

Preparation

I lay a sheet of white paper on the floor. I lay twenty knives of different shapes and sizes on the floor. I place two cassette recorders with microphones on the floor.

Performance

I switch on the first cassette recorder. I take the knife and plunge it, as fast as I can, into the flesh between the outstretched fingers of my left hand. After each cut, I change to a different knife. Once all the knives (all the rhythms) have been used, I rewind the tape. I listen to the recording of the first performance. I concentrate. I repeat the first part of the performance. I pick up the knives in the same sequence, adhere to the same rhythm and cut myself in the same places. In this performance, the mistakes of the past and those of the present are synchronous. I rewind the same tape and listen to the dual rhythm of the knives. I leave.

www.moma.org/explore/inside_out/2010/03/24/listening-to-marina-abramovic-rhythm-10/

a. Which of the above listed ones does she refer to?

.....
.....
.....
.....

b. Where do you think the title of this performance comes from?

.....
.....
.....
.....



c. Choose one of the performances listed in exercise 1 and prepare a short presentation for the class about it. If possible, find a video that shows the performance and comment on it.

group work

3 Read the following excerpt from an interview with Marina Abramović. Then do the activities that follow.

The themes that you took on are deeply personal, often private subjects that have long been taboo and often silenced. Were these issues drawn from specific experiences or observations in your life? If so, could we discuss how one or two of them began as experiences or observations and were transformed into performance?

(A) I think the most important thing for an artist is to ask themselves, “Am I really an artist?” If they are, then which medium is the best medium to serve themselves and society? In this way, I am so lucky that I fell into performance at an early age.

(B) One thing that fascinated me about performance at that time and still now, is the immateriality. It’s so immaterial, and in the beginning, when you’re a young artist you make so much material because you are scared you are not enough. Constantly you have to make more and more through youthful insecurity. Once you really get to the stage of being comfortable, you start to understand that you can create your own field and create a direct communication with the audience. Once you find that, you find the entrance point to another world.

(C) It’s all about consciousness, state of mind and transformation. There’s always an element of transformation that I found in performance which lasts longer than the short term. It can go on for long periods of time and it’s these works – where duration is part of it – where I feel like the connection is really made with the audience. If you do something for an hour or two hours, yes it’s a performance, but create something that lasts, two months, three months... then it becomes life.

www.dazeddigital.com/art-photography/article/39128/1/how-to-live-according-to-artist-marina-abramovic-sean-kelly-early-works-new-york

a. Which paragraph does each of the following statements refer to?

1. It is better to have long performances than short ones.
2. Every artist should find their own way of expressing themselves.
3. Marina started performing when she was young.

b. Find the words in the text that mean the following.

1. Worried
2. Young
3. At ease
4. Continue
5. Link

TOWARDS INVALLSI

listening

4 On the website of Marina Abramović Institute, in the About MAI page, you can watch a video of Marina talking about her early years. Find the following information.

a. At what age did Marina hold her first exhibition?

.....

b. Which were the first subjects painted by Marina?

.....

c. What in the sky captured Marina's imagination?

1. Clouds
2. Supersonic jet-planes passing by
3. The shade of blue

d. What does an artist need to do art, according to Marina?

.....

e. Which is Marina's artistic medium?

reading

5 Read the following text about Marina Abramović's performance *The Artist Is Present*.

In 2010 at MoMA, Abramović engaged in an extended performance called *The Artist Is Present*. The work was inspired by her belief that stretching the length of a performance beyond expectations serves to alter our perception of time and foster a deeper engagement in the experience. Seated silently at a wooden table across from an empty chair, she waited as people took turns sitting in the chair and locking eyes with her. Over the course of nearly three months, for eight hours a day, she met the gaze of 1,000 strangers, many of whom were moved to tears.

"Nobody could imagine... that anybody would take time to sit and just engage in mutual gaze with me," Abramović explained. In fact, the chair was always occupied, and there were continuous lines of people waiting to sit in it. "It was [a] complete surprise... this enormous need of humans to actually have contact."

One visitor described sitting with Marina Abramović as "a transforming experience—it's luminous, it's uplifting, it has many layers, but it always comes back to being present, breathing, maintaining eye contact. It's an amazing journey to be able to experience and participate in the piece. I was so taken with it, in fact, that I returned to sit with the artist 21 times!"

www.moma.org/learn/moma_learning/marina-abramovic-marina-abramovic-the-artist-is-present-2010

writing

6 Imagine you took part in *The Artist Is Present*: what do you think your feelings would be? Write 200 words in your exercise book describing the experience for an art magazine.

Part 2

The art of performance

7 Read the following dialogue about different forms of artistic expression. Match each picture to its description in order to find out what a performance is.

matching

TEACHER: Today we are talking about different forms of art.

STUDENT: What is art, exactly? It sounds difficult to give a single definition of such a vast field of human activity.

TEACHER: You are right. Art is in fact defined as the expression or application of human creative skill and imagination. This means that almost anything could be art.

STUDENT: Even an empty canvas, or a torn one?

TEACHER: Yes. Contemporary art often throws aside the tradition of the past in a spirit of experimentation. Lucio Fontana, for instance, the founder of Spatialism, used to do exactly what you mentioned: his artworks consist of holes or slashes on the surface of monochrome paintings.

STUDENT: How can you compare this to a masterpiece of the Renaissance like the *School of Athens* by Raphael?

TEACHER: I suppose the main point they have in common could be that both are an expression of their times. Our times are complex and diverse, so their expression is complex and diverse as well. This is one of the reasons why nowadays the idea of art is so broad. Is a movie art? Yes, it can be, in fact movies and theatre are called “performing arts”. Is a person standing still for hours art? Yes, as long as they want to express something “artistic” through their performance.

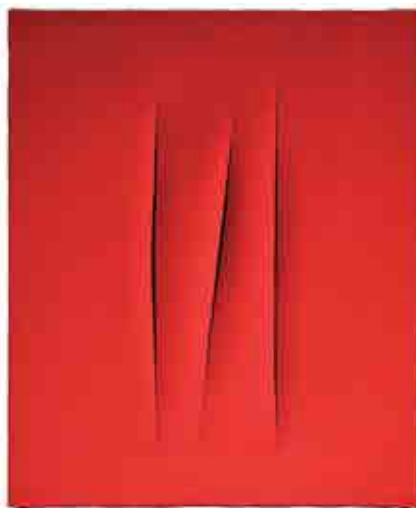
a. Renaissance painting

b. Spatialist art

c. Performance

d. Performing art

1.



2.



3.



4.



reading

Glossary

take root:
become
established.

▼
Yves Klein,
*Anthropometries
of the Blue Epoch,*
9th March 1960.
Images from the
performance at
the Gallery of
International
Contemporary
Art, Paris.

8 Read the following text that draws a short history of the art of performance. Then do the activity that follows.

In the twentieth century every consolidated tradition in the history of art lapsed: artistic techniques, classical references, subjects and, of course, the established relationship between the observer and the artefact.

The same artistic object could no longer be classified according to the old types. Therefore new forms of expression such as performance and installation flourished alongside painting, sculpture and architecture (the “fine arts” of the past). These works require much more from the observer than mere contemplation.

Pioneers of this new form of interaction with art were those crazy **Futurists**. Their noisy evenings regularly ended with a spectacular throwing of objects on stage and fights in the stalls. The audience thought they were watching four idiots perform and instead it was part of the work of art!

Marcel Duchamp, a leading figure in the Dada movement, argued that both the artist and the viewer are necessary for the completion of a work of art. He claimed that the creation of art begins with the artist—often working in isolation in the studio— but the artwork is not completed until it is placed out in the world and seen by others. “*All in all, the creative act is not performed by the artist alone; the spectator brings the work into contact with the outside world by deciphering and interpreting its inner qualities and thus adds his contribution to the creative act*”, he once wrote.

Some artists used performance to emphasize the body’s role in artistic production. These performative approaches to making art were largely based on philosophical interpretations of Abstract Expressionism, which held the gestural markings of action painters as visible evidence of the artist’s own existence. Like **Jackson Pollock** dancing around a canvas on the floor of his studio, some artists began to see the artist’s creative act as equally important as the resulting artwork, if not more so. In this light, Pollock’s distinctive drips, spills, and splatters can be seen as mere remnants, a visible trace left over from the moment of creation. However, the idea that people can shape the artistic project didn’t **take root** immediately. We have to wait for **Piero Manzoni** to invent some very simple yet ingenious techniques: the *Consumazione dell’arte, dinamica del pubblico, divorare l’arte* (in which the participants ate the hard-boiled eggs previously stamped with the artist’s thumbprint) and the *Base Magica* (a pedestal to make art out of anyone who climbs on it).

Then, in 1961, **Yves Klein** presented three nude models covered in his trademark blue paint, who rolled around on sheets of white paper. He was also famous for his “jumps into the void”. Later, in the Sixties, there are also the mirrors of **Michelangelo Pistoletto**. Simple reflecting surfaces with life-size human figures applied on them. They could be paintings – and in fact they are called *Mirrored Paintings* – if it weren’t for the fact that as soon as you move close to them you become part of them.

In this way moving, freeing oneself, discovering, looking at one another become new forms of interaction with the artwork. Observing a work of art thus becomes an experience, not just passive viewing. All the more so if the artistic act consists in traversing the narrow space between two nude bodies, like in the *Imponderabilia* experiment by **Marina Abramović and Ulay** in 1977. Marina and her partner stood naked, facing one another, in the narrow doorway to the Galleria Comunale di Arte Moderna in Bologna, forcing visitors to pass sideways between them. The embarrassment caused by the situation led the visitors to look beyond but the inevitable physical contact set in motion contrasting and personal feelings in each visitor.

However, that was nothing compared to what Abramović had done two years earlier in Naples, with the performance *Rhythm 0*. Her body was available to the public for six hours. Feathers, razor blades, shoes, ropes and even a gun were among the 72 objects that visitors could use on her.



Participants let themselves be carried away by instinct, by the desire to discover how far they would go. She stood motionless, in silence. She suffered injuries and harassment (although there was someone ready to prevent further abuse and even the risk of her being killed).

From the Seventies onwards a variety of new works and concepts by a growing number of artists led to new types of performance art. Works by artists such as **Yoko Ono**, **Joseph Beuys**, **Gina Pane**, **Chris Burden** – with the performance piece *Shoot*, in which he was shot in his left arm by an assistant from a distance of about five meters –, **Vito Acconci** with *Seedbed*, made performance one of the most widely practiced artistic languages precisely because of the opportunity it provides to have direct contact with the audience.

Vanessa Beecroft is a contemporary artist working with performance in an original way. The artist's work is a fusion of conceptual issues and aesthetic concerns, focusing on large-scale performance art, usually involving live female models (often nude). The performances are existential encounters between the models and the audience, their respective shame and expectations. Each performance is made for a specific location and often refers to the political, historical, or social associations of the place where it is held. Beecroft's work is deceptively simple in its execution, provoking questions around identity, politics and voyeurism in the complex relationship between the viewer, the model, and the context.



▲ **Gina Pane**,
Sentimental Action, 1973.
Image from the performance at the Diagramma Gallery, Milan.

a. Search the Internet for info and pictures about an artist of your choice among those cited in the text above and share your findings with the class. In addition, prepare three questions to help compare “your” artist with Abramović. Submit them to the class and lead a discussion on the comparison. You may use questions like these:

- How are bodies used?
- How does the audience interact?
- Is the performance expensive?
- How many people are involved?

9 Choose one of the art pieces from exercise 1 and describe it according to the guide below.

How to analyze an artwork: a step-by-step guide

◆ What. The artwork

Type (Building, photograph, fresco, sculpture, performance, vase, etc.):

.....

Author:

Title:

Date:

Materials (What materials and mediums has the artwork been constructed from, if any? Canvas, wood, wall, etc.):

.....

Subject (Have other artists explored a similar subject in a similar way? How? Does the subject come from myth, history, etc.):

.....

◆ How. The artwork

Style (Is the work characteristic of an artistic style, movement or time period?):

.....

Language (Line, colour, light, shape, space, composition, etc.):

.....

Iconology (Meaning and interpretation):

.....

◆ Who. The artist

Biography (Which key biographical details about the artist are relevant in understanding this artwork?):

.....

.....

Context (Is the work characteristic of an artistic style, movement or time period? Has it been influenced by trends, fashions or ideologies?):

.....

.....

Relation to other artists (Who was his/her teacher? Who did he/she work with?):

.....

.....

Reason (Personal/cultural reasons why the work of art was created):

.....

.....

Purpose (What is its original purpose? Private sale; commissioned for a specific owner; commemorative; educational; promotional, etc.):

.....

.....

◆ Where. Context

Place (Does the place where it was created have an influence on the artwork?):

.....

.....

◆ When. Context

Historical context (Social and political conditions):

.....

.....

Part 3

Tableaux vivants, or the ancient art of performance

10 Read the following text that presents a short history of *tableaux vivants*. Then do the activities that follow.

According to *The Oxford English Dictionary* a *tableau vivant* is “a representation of a personage, character, scene, incident, etc., or of a well-known painting or statue, by one person or a group of persons in suitable costumes and attitudes, silent and motionless.” In practical terms of people posing silent and still for some time in imitation of well-known works of art or scenes from history and literature. Particular emphasis is placed on staging, pose, costume, make-up, lighting, and the facial expression of the models. Sometimes a poem or music accompanies the scene, and often a large wooden frame outlines the perimeter of the stage, as in painted canvas.

The first *tableau vivant* was performed by the Italian actor Carlo Bertinazzi, who reproduced the *The Village Betrothal in Los Nocces d'Arlequin* by Jean-Baptiste Grueze for the court at the Palace of Versailles in 1760.

In Victorian England, people staged *tableaux vivants* at receptions, as a game to amuse guests and engage them in a deeper appreciation of art, but also because they would allow people to catch a glimpse of the female nude. Botticelli's *The Birth of Venus*, for example, was a famous *tableau* whose models were occasionally arrested if they revealed too much skin. During the second half of the 19th century, *tableaux vivants* spread throughout the United States and were used mainly in order to explore Americans' group and individual identities. For instance, small towns often organized parades featuring floats carrying people enacting pilgrim ones or allegorical ones such as *Columbia*, or *The Thirteen Original States*.

During the early 20th century, *tableaux vivants* were a form of protest especially used by women in their battle for the vote: a still, silent performance might not seem the best choice for a protest, but it can leave a mark in the minds of the audience, and therefore inspire change.

When cinema became popular, the season of *tableaux vivants* ended. In many ways, though, the genre has found its way into modern photography and performance art.

reading



▲ A still from *La ricotta*, by Pier Paolo Pasolini, 1963. Pasolini featured Rosso Fiorentino's and Pontormo's *Depositions* in the form of *tableaux vivants* in the film *La ricotta*.



▶ **Rosso Fiorentino**,
Deposition from the Cross, 1521.
Oil on wood,
341x201 cm.
Volterra,
Pinacoteca and
Civic Museum.



◀ **Jacopo Pontormo**,
Deposition from the Cross,
1527-1528. Oil on wood,
312x192 cm.
Florence, Church
of Santa Felicita,
Colleoni Chapel.

a. Fill in the following table about the many uses of *tableaux vivants* over time.

	When	Where	Why
a.	1760	.....	Entertainment
b.	The age of Queen Victoria	.....	.....
c.	.....	United States	Discover identities
d.	Early 20 th century	.....	.....

your turn!

b. Create a classic *tableau vivant*.

■ Choose your subject: each member of the group should suggest a painting they want to reenact. Discuss which is the best choice, considering the following issues:

- Is it easy to reenact?
- Can you reproduce the scene?
- How many people do you need?
- Which feelings should you convey?
- What is the meaning of your choice? What is your goal?

■ Split your group into actors and directors: you need somebody to check that everything is working.

■ If possible, find props and costumes to make the scene more realistic. You can also add lights and sounds.

■ Perform your *tableau vivant* in front of the class: stand still for at least 30

seconds. You can choose whether to show the original painting before or after the performance.

■ If you want, you can also take a picture of your *tableau vivant* in order to have it last longer.

■ Discuss the performance with your class.



▶ A *tableau vivant* showing Paul Gauguin's painting 'Ta Matete'.