

## Marina Abramović: *White Space*

17 September – 1 November 2014  
27 Bell Street, London

Taking its title from an early, immersive sound environment, *White Space* presents a range of historic works by Marina Abramović, most of which have never been exhibited before. Featuring two important sound pieces, previously unseen video documentation of seminal performances and a number of newly discovered photographs, all dating from 1971-1975, the exhibition reveals the artist's first forays into a performance-based practice dealing with time and the immaterial, themes which have again become central to her current work.

First realised in 1972 at The Student Cultural Centre in Belgrade, *White Space* was a room lined with white paper containing a tape recording of the artist repeating the phrase "I love you". Visitors were instructed to "Enter the space. Listen." Never since recreated, this work forms the centrepiece of this display of rare, formative Abramović works, which nevertheless relate thematically to her recent decision to strip down her practice to its essence and empty out the Serpentine Gallery for her long-duration performance there, entitled *512 Hours*. A second audio work installed in its own environment, *The Tree* (1971) can be heard just outside the gallery, in its central courtyard, where a number of speakers blare out an artificially amplified repetition of birds chirping, the insistent recording perhaps referring to the recorded pronouncements of Josip Broz 'Tito', Yugoslavia's revolutionary socialist leader of the time, whom Abramović's parents fought with and eventually served under, as military officers in the Communist government.

Consisting of a series of 28 photographic works partially obscured by white correction fluid, also played on an accompanying slide projection, *Freeing the Horizon* (1973) represents Abramović's enigmatic and systematic erasure of a number of important buildings from the Belgrade skyline, many of which, coincidentally, the artist later discovered were physically obliterated by the NATO bombings of 1999 as part of the Kosovo War. Three other later works from this series will be presented in new formats: *Freeing the Memory* is a film projection with sound, depicting Abramović's attempt to recall every Serbian word she can, in a continuous stream of language, for over an hour. *Freeing the Voice* sees her lying prone on a white mattress with her head tilted back, screaming until she loses her voice, while *Freeing the Body* (all 1975) follows another of her own tightly-scripted scenarios: "I move to the rhythm of the black African drummer. I move until I am completely exhausted. I fall."

Also on show in her second solo exhibition with the gallery is a newly remastered and previously unseen film version of *Rhythm 5* (1974), which was captured by the artist's brother, Velmir Abramović. As the artist lays on the floor, in the middle of a burning five-point star (the symbol of Yugoslav Partisans), she loses consciousness due to a lack of oxygen resulting from the fire and has to be rescued by concerned onlookers. Then, as now, Abramović reveals, through her performative works and experiential situations, how heightened states of being and awareness can be achieved simply through the conjunction of her body, her voice and her presence in a space – or, conversely, through the absence of all of the above.

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## About the artist

Since the beginning of her career in Belgrade during the early 1970s, Marina Abramović has pioneered performance as a visual art form. Her early *Rhythm* performances married concept with physicality, endurance with empathy, complicity with loss of control, passivity with danger. They pushed the boundaries of self-discovery, both of herself and her audience. They also marked her first engagements with time, stillness, energy and the resulting heightened consciousness generated by long durational performance. The body has always been both her subject and medium. Exploring her physical and mental limits in works that ritualise the simple actions of everyday life, she has withstood pain, exhaustion and danger in her quest for emotional and spiritual transformation. From 1975-88, Abramović and Ulay performed together, dealing with relations of duality. She returned to solo performances in 1989 and for *The Artist Is Present* (2010) sat for eight hours per day over three months, engaged in silent eye contact with hundreds of strangers.

Marina Abramović was one of the first performance artists to become formally accepted by the institutional museum world. Her international solo shows include the Stedelijk Van Abbemuseum, Eindhoven, 1985; Centre Georges Pompidou, Paris, 1990; Neue National Galerie, Berlin, 1993, and the Museum of Modern Art, Oxford, 1995. She has also participated in many large-scale international exhibitions including the Venice Biennale (1976 and 1997) and Documenta VI, VII and IX, Kassel (1977, 1982 and 1992). Major performances include *Seven Easy Pieces* at the Guggenheim Museum, New York (2005); *The Artist Is Present* at the Museum of Modern Art, New York (2010) and *512 Hours* at the Serpentine Galleries (2014). Marina Abramović is establishing the MAI (Marina Abramović Institute) to support the future exploration and promotion of performance art.

## About Lisson Gallery

Lisson Gallery is one of the most influential and longest-running international contemporary art galleries in the world. Established in 1967 by Nicholas Logsdail, it pioneered the early careers of important Minimal and Conceptual artists, such as Sol LeWitt and Richard Long, as well as those of significant British sculptors from Anish Kapoor and Tony Cragg to a younger generation, led by Ryan Gander and Haroon Mirza. Lisson Gallery represents 45 of the most innovative and exciting artists working today, including Allora and Calzadilla, Ai Weiwei, Gerard Byrne, Tatsuo Miyajima, Rashid Rana, Pedro Reyes and Santiago Sierra. In addition to its two exhibition spaces in London, one in Milan and a fourth gallery to open under the High Line in New York in early 2015, the *Lisson Presents* programme also extends a legacy of curatorial innovation beyond the galleries, working with institutions and artists to present new initiatives around the world.

## Exhibition Facts

**Opening Hours:** Monday-Friday 10am-6pm, Saturday 11am-5pm

**Location:** 52 Bell Street, London, NW1 5DA

**Tel:** + 44(0)20 7724 2739

**Website:** <http://www.lissongallery.com>

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Marina Abramović: *White Space*

16 September – 1 November 2014

27 Bell Street, London

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Taking its title from an early, immersive sound environment, *White Space* presents a range of historic works by Marina Abramović, most of which have never been exhibited before. Featuring two important sound pieces, previously unseen video documentation of seminal performances and a number of newly discovered photographs, all dating from 1971-1975 (the period before she met and collaborated with Ulay), the exhibition reveals the artist's first forays into a performance-based practice dealing with time and the immaterial, themes which have again become central to her current work.

First realised in 1972 at The Student Cultural Centre in Belgrade, *White Space* was a room lined with white paper containing a tape recording of the artist repeating the phrase "I love you". Visitors were instructed to "Enter the space. Listen." Never since recreated, this generous, participatory work forms the centrepiece of this display of rare, formative Abramović works, an early chapter in her career which nevertheless relates thematically to her recent decision to strip down her practice to its essence and empty out the Serpentine Gallery for her long-duration performance there, entitled *512 Hours*. A second audio work installed in its own environment, *The Tree* (1971) can be heard just outside the gallery, in its central courtyard, where a number of speakers blare out an artificially amplified repetition of birds chirping, the insistent recording perhaps referring to the recorded pronouncements of Josip 'Tito' Broz, Yugoslavia's revolutionary socialist leader of the time, whom Abramović's parents fought alongside and eventually served under, as military officers in the Communist government.

Consisting of a series of 28 photographic works partially obscured by white correction fluid, *Freeing the Horizon* (1971) represents Abramović's enigmatic and systematic erasure of a number of important buildings from the Belgrade skyline, many of which, coincidentally, the artist later discovered were physically obliterated by the NATO bombings of 1999 as part of the Kosovo War. This physical, painted body of work was perhaps a rehearsal for three later pieces from this series, which are being presented in new formats: *Freeing the Memory* is a film projection with sound, depicting Abramović's attempt to recall and utter every word she can, in a continuous stream of language, for over an hour. *Freeing the Voice* sees her lying prone on a white mattress with her head tilted back, screaming until she loses her voice, while *Freeing the Body* (all 1975) follows another of her own tightly-scripted scenarios: "I move to the rhythm of the African drummer. I move until I am completely exhausted. I fall."

Also on show in her second solo exhibition with the gallery is a newly remastered and previously unseen film version of *Rhythm 5* (1974) – from her most extreme series of durational, ritualized performances – which was captured by the artist's brother, Velmir Abramović. As the artist lays on the floor, in the middle of a burning five-point star (the symbol of Yugoslav Partisans), she loses consciousness due to a lack of oxygen resulting from the fire and has to be rescued by concerned onlookers. Then, as now, Abramović reveals, through her performative works and experiential situations, how heightened states of being and awareness can be achieved simply through the conjunction of her body, her voice and her presence in a space – or, conversely, through the absence of all of the above.



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## *White Space*

1972, dimensions variable, sound installation (amplified sound of blank magnetic tape within a circular white papered space), magnetophone, amplifier, paper

This sound environment, one of a series created by Abramović in the early 1970s, was constructed of hundreds of individual sheets of white paper covering the walls, ceiling and floor with a central tape machine playing a recording of the words: "I love you". The rest of the looped sound came from the amplified white noise of the spooling blank magnetic tape. Outside the entrance to the installation was a simple text: "Instructions for the public: Enter the white space. Listen."

This sparse, circular space was built within Belgrade's Student Cultural Centre (the Studentski Kulturni Centar or SKC) and joined other sound works entitled *The Forest*, *The War* and *The Airport* of the same year (she eventually destroyed the installation in a filmed performance of tearing and throwing paper, as she joyfully rolled around the empty space). Having previously produced only paintings and a few experimental performances, this piece prefigured Abramović's famous *Rhythm* series of bodily interventions but also marked her first serious interest in the immaterial, an area of her work that she has again begun to focus on, as evidenced by two major recent performances: *The Artist is Present* (2010) at MoMA, New York and *512 Hours* (2014) at the Serpentine Gallery, London. This work has not been represented since 1972 but has been described as key to her artistic development: "Sound is among her points of departure, used for its resonance with architectural forms and with the human body, for its potential to structure time, and for its repeatability through recording." (Klaus Biesenbach, 2010).

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## *The Tree*

1971, dimensions variable, sound installation (amplified sound of birds chirping)

*The Tree* is a sound work that artificially amplifies a recording of birdsong through speakers located in an actual tree. It was first presented outside the SKC Cultural Centre in Belgrade, previously a social club for the secret police, which Abramović and her fellow students repurposed after calling for official acknowledgment of their artistic activities, demanding that: "...cultural and creative facilities are open to all". Although Josip 'Tito' Broz, leader of the Yugoslav Communists, responded and relented to the student protests of 1968, *The Tree* may also be seen as both a critical and humorous reflection on his hectoring public pronouncements, with the recording's insistent, distorted and amplified repetition perhaps showing Abramović's disillusionment with her parents' close ties with the all-powerful government. As the artist herself has said: "I think it comes from my childhood. My mother always used to give me sets of instructions for what I should achieve every day – to learn a certain number of French words, for example, or what I should eat, what kind of books I should read, what time I was supposed to be home. That time of my life was based in a frame of discipline." In reference to both *White Space* and *The Tree*, curator Germano Celant noted that, "At the time they certainly might have been considered as being more of a conceptual nature ... [but] the early works seem to express the existential separation of someone confined or blockaded in a circumscribed, closed country."

This new configuration of the work, its first since 1971, utilises hidden speakers in the vicinity of a tree, rather than the more literal first iteration of a tape recorder balanced in the branches.

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## *Freeing the Horizon*

1971, installation of 28 paintings on Agfa colour prints

Only previously exhibited as a projected slideshow at MoMA, New York (2010), this installation of unique, over-painted postcard-size photographs (only recently discovered in 2013 and originally titled *Liberation of the Horizon*) features photos of famous Belgrade monuments including the National Theatre, Republic Square, a statue of Serbian prince Mihailo Obrenović III and the so-called Old Palace, all of which have either been obliterated or partially obscured by white correction fluid. As the artist explains: "I photographed the important buildings of central Belgrade. Then I removed the buildings, freeing the horizon. Looking back at this piece, I was struck by the realization that some of the buildings from this project had been bombed and destroyed during the war in 1999."

It has been suggested that Abramović was influenced by a similar process of erasure that was being perpetrated by her mother in the Museum of Revolution, where photos of purged ministers or party members were unceremoniously removed from the walls and so from history. As well as being very rare extant examples of Abramović's early painted work, this iconoclastic series relates to other external sound pieces, in which she played the sounds of concrete buildings or bridges collapsing. The inherent themes of violence, ruin and destruction also relate to her bodily performances, as does the act of purification and emptying, which would become recurrent features of the later works.

# LISSON GALLERY



*Freeing the Horizon*  
1971, installation of 28 paintings on Agfa colour prints

# LISSON GALLERY



## *Rhythm 5*

1974, assemblage of 8 silver gelatin photographic prints; also 8mm film transferred to video, black-and-white without sound (duration 8:12)

"I construct a five-pointed star (made of wood shavings soaked in 100 litres of petrol). *Performance*: I light the star. I walk around the star. I cut my hair and throw it into each end of the star. I cut my fingernails and throw them into each end of the star. I enter the empty space in the star and lie down."

After this point in the hour-and-a-half performance at the SKC Centre, Abramović lost consciousness as the flames sucked all the oxygen out of the surrounding atmosphere. Although the audience (which included Joseph Beuys) weren't immediately aware of the situation, eventually someone stepped in to rescue her as fire began to lick at her feet, halting the performance prematurely. While the performance and multi-faceted symbolism of the five-pointed star of Communism (hence the title *Rhythm 5*) – also the pentagram of occultism – was a direct challenge to her parents, their politics and the state, it was also a challenge to herself and the first of many such endurance-based works. "In this period, Abramović focused on her body's limits, making it both object and subject of the artistic action in which the artist pointed toward the literal and direct physical act on the body: in a behavioral sense, potential energy is transformed into mechanical, biochemical, sexual, psychological, and social energy." (Biesenbach, 2010)

A newly discovered video of this performance – captured on 8mm film by Marina's brother, Velmir Abramović – has also been released for this exhibition, revealing through moving images for the first time, exactly how the events of this seminal performance transpired. The footage centres on Abramović first stoking the fire and performing her cleansing and cutting exercises, before entering the burning arena, adopting the star motif with her standing body and finally lying down in the corresponding shape. The final seconds reveal her being hauled up and back over the still-burning embers.

# LISSON GALLERY



## *Rhythm 5*

1974, assemblage of 8 silver gelatin photographic prints; also 8mm film transferred to video, black-and-white without sound (duration 8:12)

# LISSON GALLERY



## *Freeing the Voice*

1975, assemblage of 4 black-and-white silver gelatin prints

"I lie on the floor with my head titled backward. *Performance*: I scream until I lose my voice." The simple score to this work belies its painful performative reality and its three-hour running time, as well as its complex relation to her previous and subsequent sonic and bodily experimentations, with the scream becoming part of subsequent works performed with Ulay. In the catalogue for Abramović's recent show at the Serpentine Gallery, curator Sophie O'Brien remarks: "Connections between previous projects and *512 Hours* are numerous – for example in *Freeing the Voice*, *Freeing the Memory*, *Freeing the Body* (1975), the artist's commitment to a single action that will in some way elicit transformation in the performer (or a new freedom) is evident."

Observers recall her primal scream deepening and becoming abstract and somehow inhuman over the course of the performance, while the artist herself has commented: "It was important to have my body in that position because the public were in front of me and they could look directly into my mouth. When you scream continuously at first you recognise the noise as a scream, as your own voice, but later on as you push yourself to your physical limits the voice becomes almost like a sound object in space." Although this work has been exhibited as a single photograph and video (at MoMA Oxford, Irish MoMA, 1995; MoMA Sydney, 1998 and MoMA New York 2010) this new edition, revisited and reconfigured by the artist with the addition of previously un-exhibited negatives, has been specially made for this exhibition.

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## *Freeing the Memory*

1975, single channel video, black-and-white with sound and subtitles, duration 50:18, loop.

"I sit on a chair with my head tilted backwards. *Performance:* Without stopping, I continuously speak the words that come to mind. When words no longer come to mind the performance ends."

Performed in Tübingen, Germany at the Galerie Dacić, owned by a Yugoslavian couple, the artist attempted to recall every word of Serbian she could remember, which also included a few in English and Dutch. What at first appears to be a more-or-less random sequence of utterances, in the manner of automatic writing or poetry, soon reveals autobiographical threads and powerful personal word associations: "... leprosy, influenza, cold, walking, room, linoleum, chairs, armchair, chaise longue..." This was her first purely mental activity, centred around loosening her consciousness, and although it involved no immediate harm to her physically, the strain and panic of recollection appears on her face towards the end of the gruelling, cathartic hour-long performance.

The Serbian curator and critic, Ješa Denegri, who coined the term The New Art Practice for the emerging art movement in Yugoslavia that Abramović was an exponent of, wrote of her generation that, "All the artworks dealt directly with reality and used process. Any physical form was not an aesthetic object to be contemplated, but was the materialisation of a mental operation." It can also be interpreted as a political piece, says Klaus Biesenbach: "She ritually purifies her memory from the burden of her national heritage".



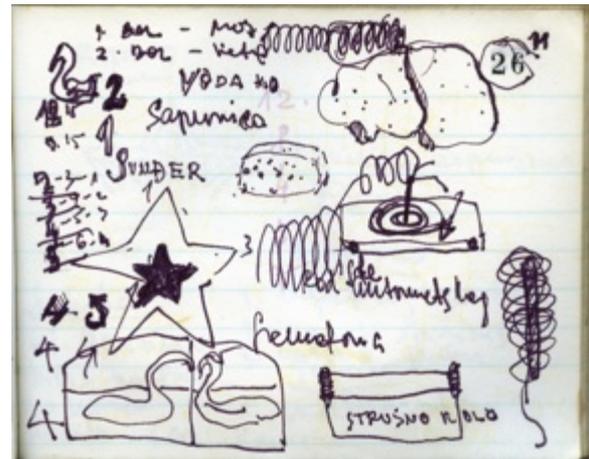
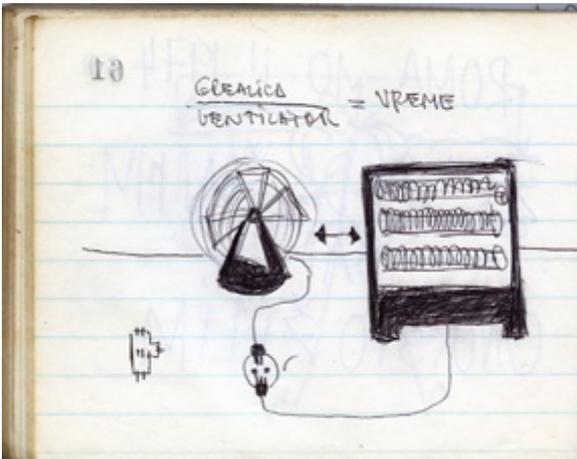
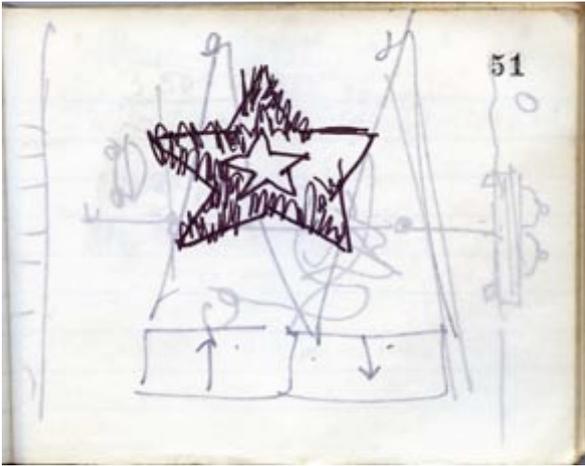
## *Freeing the Body*

1975, assemblage of 7 black-and-white silver gelatin prints

"I wrap my head in a black scarf. *Performance*: I move to the rhythm of the African drummer. I move until I am completely exhausted. I fall." As the final work in her performance trilogy, *Freeing the Body* was staged at the Künstlerhaus Bethanien in Kreuzberg, where she began dancing frenetically to the sounds of a bongo player. During the early part of the performance, she still has plenty of energy, and she rocks her hips and upper body vigorously to and fro. Over the course of the six hours, exhaustion sets in. Abramović falls back on a single monotonous movement, now and then visibly exerting herself in an attempt to reinvigorate her body. After a final convulsive movement, in which she tries to give her all for one last time, she allows herself to collapse onto the floor and remains lying there, completely exhausted. During the performance, Abramović's head was covered by a black mask. In this way, the audience was not distracted by Abramović as a person or personality, and attention can be focused on the body, which, due to its anonymity, has become an abstraction. By cutting off her own vision it was also a restriction placed on Abramović herself, this work thus becoming an attempt to reach a state where there is no fear of pain, death or physical restrictions.

As Abramović later said in 1990: "I believe the 21st century will be a world without art in the sense that we have it now. It will be a world without objects, where the human being can transmit thoughts and energy to other people, without needing objects in between. There will just be the artist standing in front of a public, which is developed enough to receive a message or energy. This is the future world I see as an artist: a non-objective world."

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## Sketchbook Drawings

1965-1975, 25-30 leafs of hand-drawn and notated pages of ink on paper

This collection of unseen drawings – collated from a group of four sketchbooks kept by Abramović over a period spanning around a decade – contain many original sketches and ideas for subsequent works, including her first usage of the five-pointed star for *Rhythm 5*, as well as nascent scripts for other performances. Among the many ideas she explored are a number of hugely ambitious, but never realised projects, including an idea for setting an entire island on fire or a performance that would involve submitting the body to various harsh elements including water, mercury, sulphur and stone. As well as proposals for performances that would incorporate walking, listening, being and burning, Abramović was clearly thinking in terms of “rhythm”, “wholeness” and “existence” (all words that appear throughout these annotated works in her native Serbian) and was envisaging a work that would place a cold air blower opposite a fan-assisted heater for an extended period of time, prefiguring the use of extreme temperatures and a high-powered fan which would characterise performances such as *Rhythm 4* and *Rhythm 5*. Most shocking are the original drawings that would lead to her most dangerous performance piece yet, *Rhythm 0* (1975), in which she submitted her passive self to a crowd of onlookers, able to arm themselves and manipulate the artist with any of the 72 items she began itemising and outlining in her sketchbook, including an axe, a bell, a feather, scissors, a hammer, a saw, a rose, a lipstick and a gun.

The drawings also document her travels from Edinburgh to London in 1972, where she filmed a double-channel video work in which a pair of adjacent screens depict two swans in different parks as they swim inexorably towards each other, their necks creating a heart shape where they meet at the centre. During this time she also visited the Lisson Gallery (drawing a map of the approaching streets), worked as a post-woman and met many important artists such as Joseph Beuys, Günter Brus and Bruce McLean.