

I Show Vulnerability

Sophie Whettnall in Conversation with Marina Abramović

Sophie: When I started thinking about this book, the very first idea I had was that I wanted to do a conversation with another artist, a woman artist, and I immediately thought of you. Not just because I feel a certain kinship with your work, but also because our mutual friends, Kendell Geers and Cendrine du Welz, are always telling me that I should meet you, and this book project provided the perfect opportunity for that. As it happens, I saw Kendell and Cendrine recently, and they told me that you love telling politically incorrect jokes, and I wanted to ask you about the role of humour in your work, because, when I think about it, it seems to me that there is an undercurrent of humour, of a dark and irreverent sort, running through it.

Marina: Yes, I do think that some of my pieces are quite funny – at least, they seem funny to me. It's curious that you should mention this, because I turned 70 recently, and one of the decisions I made then was precisely to work with humour in a more deliberate way, to have a lot of humour in the work. I would really like to do stand-up, for example. It's extremely important to be able to make fun of yourself, of life, of the fact that we see ourselves as kings of the universe, when really we're nothing more than dots on a tiny little planet, nothing more than specks of dust in the galactic theatre, the cosmos. Humour is like a higher point of view: I once spoke to His Holiness the Dalai Lama, and he told me that it's only possible to tell a terrible truth if you introduce humour into it, because humour opens the heart and allows us to hear that kind of truth. We can't achieve that opening if all we do is complain about all the things – and there are many! – that are wrong with the world, because bitterness closes the heart, whereas humour at least stands a chance of opening it. So yes, I think humour is essential.

Sophie: I agree that we need humour and love in our lives, and I think your work is very generous on that front. As you were speaking, I couldn't help but think of *The Artist Is Present*, of the fact that you gave a lot of love as part of that work. And, thinking about the interconnection between our practices, it is clear to me that violence is an important element in our work, even though we approach it very differently. I am curious to know, though, why is it so important to you to put your body in danger, as you do in so many of your performances?

Marina: First of all, it's crucial, essential even, to understand your physical and mental limits. Moreover, you have to always keep in mind that we're afraid of three things: mortality, pain and suffering. And I'm interested in staging these three things in front of an audience: my work depends on my having the energy and courage to put myself – and the audience – in this situation. The idea there is that if I can free myself of those fears through staging them somehow, then maybe the performance can free the audience as well, at least for a while. I see myself as their mirror. It's easy to do things that are safe, let's say, but people only change when they're confronted with difficulties. For me, the goal is always to climb the highest mountain, and then find an even higher one to climb. Who knows, maybe there's a better you on the other side of that.

Sophie: What is the source of this decision to stage pain and fear, particularly the fear of death?

Marina: Well, that has to do with my personal trajectory. What you see when you look at the entire history of art is that art emerges from what the artist knows, from what he or she has experienced. What you know is your life, your childhood, your parents... I used to think that the more fucked up your childhood was, the better your art might be, because you had no choice other than to work a lot harder than someone who had an easy childhood – assuming anyone ever did! Anyway, it's really simple, actually: things don't come from happiness. Happiness is a state that you hope won't change but, like any state, it's temporary: it comes to an end. And what follows it are suffering and sorrow, and we all have to deal with those things somehow. I deal with them in or through my work.

Sophie: Suffering and sorrow make you grow. In their throes, you feel overwhelmed, but with distance you also realise that they give you material, not just to grow as a person, but also as an artist.

Marina: Right. They're great teachers, but you have to learn their lessons, you have to try to understand why some things happen to you.

Sophie: Yes, and, on that note, do you think art is or could be a form of therapy?

Marina: Art is a lot of things. We can't single out one and say: art is political, or feminist, or therapeutic. Art is a multilayered entity composed of different things. The more layers art has, incidentally, the longer its life will be. If art is only political, it is prey to the fact that politics changes, and liable to become like an old newspaper that no one reads. Conversely, the art that's political, *and* spiritual, *and* disturbing, now that's interesting, not just today but, possibly, tomorrow as well.

Sophie: Some of the things you've been saying make me think of the notion of catharsis, the idea that what art and tragedy do is create a purification of the emotions. Does that idea hold any interest for you?

Marina: Sure. Actually, I think the Greeks are the people who saw the world and life in the clearest of lights. One of my biggest idols is Maria Callas, and who could stage tragedy better than someone with a divine voice like hers? In any case, the emotions are very important to me. So many artists are so theoretical that you have to read a lot just to understand what's in front of you. Personally, I don't care for that kind of art; I care about art that gives you butterflies in your stomach, that sends electricity coursing through your body, art that makes you think: my God, what's happening to me? After that, you look at who the artist is, at what she thinks and all that. But first you have to be moved, your emotions have to be stirred up. A friend, an American art critic, once said to me: 'I hate your work, because it always makes me cry.' He's an intellectual, and he doesn't want that kind of art, he wants something cerebral. But that's not what I do: I focus on the emotions, so of course I'm interested in catharsis, in the Greeks, and in tragedy.

Sophie: I'm with you there. I also sometimes feel like there's a barrier with contemporary art because it seems as if it's forbidden to talk about emotions in that context...

Marina: Not just about emotions, but about spirituality too. If you so much as utter the word, you're immediately tagged as New Age, or something like that. More recently, too, you have to be politically correct, and political correctness is anti-creativity in a nutshell. Here in the US, for example, some of the really radical work we did in the 1960s, 1970s or 1980s would be impossible today. Everything is wrong, everything is forbidden. It's really crazy, like a mob mentality. It's a good time for a new revolution...

Sophie: Actually, I was going to ask you about political correctness and its relation to creativity. Art is about generosity, about giving...

Marina: Not just art, but human life itself is about giving. Look at politicians today: what do they give, besides lies, corruption, and all the rest of it? Someone asked me recently if I had any advice to give a politician, and I said: 'Only this: read Gandhi's autobiography.' There's a man who brought about incredible change without shedding a drop of blood.

Sophie: Since you brought up spirituality, it seems to me that your work is moving in that direction, particularly in the way you use repetition...

Marina: Right, because the relation between spirituality and repetition is rooted in very ancient rituals: energy is built up through repetition. In ancient civilisations, people performed the same rituals over and over again for thousands of years, and it was through that repetition that the power of the ritual grew and the energy accumulated. The same is true with performance. I just did a workshop with young artists, and I said to them: 'What you'll do today is this: open the door, as slowly as possible, and then close it. Don't enter, don't exit: just focus on the action of opening and closing the door for three hours.' Needless to say, it's incredibly boring when you start, and I'm sure the participants were all thinking 'What the hell am I doing?', 'What's the point of this?!' Gradually, though, as you get into the gesture, the door stops being just a door and becomes opening – of space, of consciousness, of so many things. The point of the exercise is just that: take a very simple act and, by repeating it, that act allows you to enter into another state of mind.

Sophie: You did a work in which you interview your parents. I myself am finishing a work that revolves around hours of recorded conversations with my mother. You and I both had very tough mothers. In my case, my mother left when I was six, so that, instead of growing up with her, I grew up with her absence, with the lack of her care and affection. For the piece I'm working on, I brought my mother and my daughter into the studio, because I wanted to visualise the idea of transmission across generations: what we inherit and what we don't; what we give and don't give; what we see and know as opposed to what we think we've seen; what we know and what we project. It seems to me that your work also engages the question of transmission.

Marina: Yes, I did have a very tough mother, but I loved and liked my mother until the very end. I found her diaries when she died, and if I had read even one page of it long ago, my life and my relationship to her would have been completely different. She was incredibly vulnerable and fragile, but what she showed was a hard and ice-cold persona, and I didn't understand why. I think she thought that showing me this persona would turn me into a soldier and protect me from pain. What it did, of course, was deprive me of her love. Still, looking back, I can tell you that I have neither nostalgia for my childhood, nor bitterness about it. I've dealt with it through my work, and I feel free from it. I try to invest the work with all the love I have for human beings, birds, trees – for everything, really. I feel like I have a lot of love to give, and I feel that my mother, in her own way, did right by me. We always look at the past nostalgically; we're always trying to find out why we're hurt or wounded. I think we need to stop this 'poor me' bullshit: what I am now is exactly the product of the childhood I had, and I don't want things to be any different. Every step, including the painful ones, was important, and I would not have had it any other way.

Sophie: I feel that way too. The absence of my mother's love didn't result in self-pity for me, but actually in my sense that I have a lot to give.

Marina: Sure, though my own sense is that even talking about this is nostalgic, and usually I refuse to discuss my childhood, my mother, and all that, because the invariable result is that people start reading my work in biographical ways, when the work has its own life. I just did a series of performances in which I transfer work to younger artists. We just did *The House with the Ocean View*, in which you have to live in three rooms for twelve days with no food and no talking. I was standing in front of the woman doing it, and it was such a strange moment to see the work being done without me. There was no ego, no jealousy, but just the sense of letting things happen, of being free.

Sophie: I agree that as artists we have to accept that our babies will leave the studio and live a life of their own without us. And that's how it should be. You once said that artists have no gender. I agree with that, but I also question it. We're both women, and as women we have a certain power, and our awareness of that power is something that enters the work, don't you think?

Marina: I've never had a problem because I'm female artist...

Sophie: That's not what I mean. I'm saying that art may not have gender, but artists do, and it informs the art they make, doesn't it?

Marina: The reason why women artists don't show their work as much and are not in the same position as men is because women don't sacrifice as much. They don't want to give up having a family, a house, and so on. Men can have all that and still be artists, because they can count on women to take care of the kids, the house, etc. That's why it's essential to see what you really want as a person. We only have one energy coursing through our body, and that energy, although it is primarily sexual, can be transformed into love, struggle, destruction, creativity. But you can't have everything: if you have children,

and a family, and the obligations that come with that, you can't give 100 per cent to art, and that's what art demands of the artist. I decided very early on that I wouldn't have children, and I've never felt like I was lacking. I always felt powerful. Over the centuries, women have been stuck in the household, not because women aren't strong, but quite the contrary: we have the possibility to nurture life inside our body. I didn't exercise that possibility, even if it was open to me, as it is to you. But that is incredibly powerful, and I channelled that power, or that energy, into my work. In any case, if you look at families from southern Europe, like the Italians, you see right away that mothers differentiate immediately between sons and daughters. That creates a lineage, and sends a strong message. Look at American art from the 1950s: there were incredible women painters then, but we only know the men. Why is that? And don't forget that the gallery that showed most of that art, which we all know today, was run by a woman!

Sophie: I guess what I had wanted to say is that, if you were a man, the effect of your work would have been quite different.

Marina: That's possible, I don't know.

Sophie: Well, if we look at a particular case, such as *Rhythm 0*, I think you'll agree that, had a man been in the role that you played, the meaning of the work, and the reaction to it, would have been totally different.

Marina: That's true, I agree that a woman in that role has a bigger effect than a man. But let me say that, in that piece, I was questioning something more than violence towards women. *Rhythm 0* was also a piece about the public's relation to performance; truth be told, that was foremost on my mind while I was working on it. When I performed it, the prevailing attitude was that performance was just ridiculous, that it was not art at all. *Rhythm 0* was a reaction to that. In it, you have me, dressed in everyday clothes, standing for six hours with objects in front of me that the public can use to do whatever they want to me. I wanted to see what the public would do when the artist does nothing. And the public could kill the artist! That was the message, regardless of whether the person standing there is a man or a woman. Anyway, I feel empowered as a woman, but I also feel a lot of jealousy towards me, not from men, but from other women. And that jealousy is stronger now than at any other point in my life. I've had success, I'm in love, I'm happy, and it's as if this were not allowed: you have to be, forever and a day, the poor suffering artist! There's a lot of hatred and jealousy between women, and it seems seem to me that that's a much more interesting thing to talk about. I mean, think about this: when Ulay and I were in the midst of a court case, all the criticism was directed at me, and most of it came from other women, who accused my 'system' of damaging that 'poor man'. It was incredible, really. Today, Ulay and I are on good terms, we're working on a book together, and I'm happy about that. But when we had a problem, it was women who attacked me, not men.

Sophie: I had one last question...

Marina: OK, but I want you to ask me the question that you'd never have considered asking, and I'll answer it.

Sophie: Ah, there you've caught me off guard...

Marina: Go ahead, something unusual, something you would have been afraid to ask.

Sophie: Well, here's one: what are you most of ashamed of? What have you done that you won't even tell your therapist?

Marina: Well, I had a dog – her name was Alba – and I had done everything to ensure that she'd live a long and happy life. When she turned 16, I had a lot of work going on, and I left her with a friend of mine in Mallorca. And she died there when I was somewhere else, working, and that's something that I'm incredibly ashamed of, and that still hurts me to this day. I dedicated a book to Alba; when my mother saw that, she didn't speak to me for three months! Anyway, that's something I remember with deep shame.

Sophie: Shame is something to work through, and it's curious to observe that shame is an emotion that audiences never quite know how to react to, or what to do with.

Marina: That's true. I work with shame, and the more I'm ashamed, the better. It's a really difficult and very important emotion. And I think that's one reason why the work connects to the public: I show vulnerability.