

CONVERSATION

Marina Abramović and Tania Bruguera

TANIA BRUGUERA: One thing that I've encountered, mostly in the United States, is that a lot of people taking a performance class think they are entering into a kind of therapy session situation. That can be problematic in teaching performance because it jeopardizes the conversation about the process that transforms the personal into the collective. The other thing that I've encountered is a lot of tight restrictions in the art schools in the United States about liability, as well as a predisposition to censorship. Like, the first thing that a chair of the department tells you when you start teaching a performance class is that they are really afraid about its potential for institutional problems. They say, "No nudity, no cutting, no blood, no porn," and they don't say no to political disturbance, but it's somehow implied that the institution doesn't want to be sued or enter this discussion, almost as if they wanted a nonspoken agreement with you. It's like they want you to teach a medium that has transgression as one of its main elements, but without being transgressive. I don't know if you've had that experience.

MARINA ABRAMOVIĆ: Yes. This question is always there, but not only from the outside. Let me tell you a story about when I was the professor of performance in Braunschweig, Germany, and the school decided to do an event for the end of the year called "My Seventies." Now, you know, I really lived "My Seventies," but my students saw the [decade of the] seventies only as it was reflected in the works of older artists; they were too young to make them then. So one of my students did an action where she drank an entire bottle of whiskey, just

straight, and she had a T-shirt printed with my performance *Rhythm 0*, when I was experimenting with being conscious and being unconscious. And she's drinking this whiskey, lying down on the floor just in the middle of the school. So everyone was thinking that she is acting this idea of being drunk—you know, the seventies, wasted, drugs, and all the rest. People were doing other things, just kind of jumping over her, and after maybe two or three hours, I was looking at her again and I saw foam coming out of her mouth—something is very wrong. So we went for the school doctor, and he says, "She's in a coma." I really lost control at that point. We took her to the emergency. I spent the whole night with her, and she woke up in the morning.

For me, this was one of the most dramatic moments of being a teacher because I was thinking if something happens to her, I will just not teach again. It's such an incredible problem of responsibility. Yes, here in New York everything is forbidden. In Europe you really can experiment, but then it's your responsibility as a teacher how far you can go. I personally never show my work to my students. And I won't encourage them to do something similar. If they want to do something potentially dangerous where in the process they could hurt themselves and they give me the concept, I will absolutely stop it. If they become artists themselves and could take full responsibility, that's fine, but not in the frame of my class.

TB: It's true that performance works with limits and the understanding of danger, either body limits or social limits. And it does play a lot with some aspects of fear, or at least with elements that one usually doesn't encounter. For me, teaching performance is like a rehearsal for what is going to happen later. If students have to deal with danger, I think it's good to have a safe environment where they can try it, try all these limits—and where there's conversation about the process with someone who has already experienced it. An environment where they can get it out of their system and know if it's really what they want to be focusing on without the pressure of the critics or the expectations of the audience. Where they can learn how to negotiate all of these things with institutions for which the school can serve as a dry run.

MA: And this is another aspect that we have to think about—how important the presence of the public is when someone is doing a performance. When students do performances in class, somehow they never really give 100 percent of themselves because they are always kind of self-conscious, where they have friends that make fun of them. There was never really that kind of indication

of seriousness. In all my experience of teaching, most of the students are not very motivated, and they just start working toward the end of the semester for the group exhibition. I always think that art has to have a function, to communicate precise ideas. And when I was teaching at Braunschweig, I went to the closest Kunstverein, at that time it was in Hannover. In every Kunstverein in Europe, there is always time between exhibitions. There is always the time when you take down an exhibition and before the next one is put up. So I went there and I asked, "How much time do you have between shows that are coming up?" And he said, "We have twenty-four hours." So I come to my lazy group of performance students and I said, "Okay, we have twenty-four hours in the Kunstverein with all the spaces and infrastructure to set up a twenty-four-hour performance event." It was absolutely a miracle—what energy, and what kind of incredible dedication they had, because they had a real purpose. And they had a public for twenty-four hours. The title of the show was "Finally." There was a huge amount of people throughout the twenty-four hours, and for the public that didn't want to leave, there were sleeping bags, bottled water, and sandwiches. It was a real success. Immediately after, we were showered by invitations from different institutions to do similar performances. That was one of the most moving things for me. With performance, you have to deal with some kind of reality, and when this reality is removed, it doesn't work.

TB: Absolutely. I think it only works at the beginning of the class when they don't know each other and they want to impress each other.

MA: How do you make them audition for your class?

TB: Well, I'm not so interested anymore in body-related performance. I'm more interested in what I call *Arte de Conducta*, which can be translated as behavior art. I didn't want to carry the assumptions that come with the word *performance*. *Behavior* is a word that goes back to the beginning of performance art's aspirations, combined with the desire to make an art that activates society. For these kinds of works, reality and context are very important. So I ask the students first to forget they are artists.

MA: That's so refreshing.

TB: (Laughs) I have a few exercises I do with them. One is asking them to think about an unbearable thing in society for them and then, through a series of

mini-assignments, figure out a new job that would change or transform that thing. Then I ask them to become the person who creates the infrastructure and then who does that job. One thing that I am interested in, in terms of performance, is that it would be good for them to start acting within the parameters of reality and forgetting about art as they know it. And then they present a piece where they have to interact with that reality in concrete and functional terms. The work is not only for the art world but for the people in the place where that reality is. It becomes a way to see art as a temporary state of things, as a nonpermanent condition.

MA: That's really interesting. I love this behavior art because "performance" as a discipline is always misunderstood for dance or for theater or stand-up comedy. I mean, you come from Cuba and I come from Europe, and what we mean by performance is exactly something else.

TB: Exactly. I came up with this idea when I was doing my M.F.A. in Chicago because I felt that I didn't fit in. I was coming from a different context, like you, where societies and art have another role, mostly a useful one. So I came up with the idea of behavior because if your work is about society and politics, you should use their language and elements for your work. It isn't about representation, but about *presentation*. And behavior is one tool that society uses to judge and define who you and we are. It's a very social term. It's to have life as a point of reference, not art. Performance is *live* art.

MA: And in performance, acting is such a big obstacle. If a performer was a dancer before, we must reprogram them. If they were actors, we must make them forget what they have learned in order to be able to deal with a real performance attitude. We have to de-dance them, de-act them, somehow take it away. I think the only chance is to do long durational pieces. Because you can act for five minutes, ten minutes, three hours, fine, but after five or six hours, you drop acting, dancing, and everything. You just drop. You get to the kind of naked truths, which is, to me, the most interesting state.

You know, performance as a subject hardly exists in schools in Europe, or it is mostly part of something else. It will be film, video, and performance. When I got the job in Braunschweig, the title was *Raum-Konzept*, which means "space concept," which is basically a version of sculpture. They knew that I wanted to teach performance, but still they could not give me the job because it didn't exist and I wanted it to be precise: "Performance." So then I made lots

of paperwork, writing to the local government, and it took two years to change that *Raum-Konzept* into "Performance." I was the only professor who taught performance under that title, and then it was really amazing because every month I started having one day in which we would have an open class. Anybody from any country in the world could come and show their work. It got to the point where I'd have a hundred people from everywhere because there was not anywhere else where they could actually show their type of performance. That was a really great time, but unfortunately I had to leave Braunschweig because I started living in New York. The academy changed the class back to the *Raum-Konzept*, and it was absolutely old-fashioned. I still regret this.

TB: I have a question, because I have encountered the same thing. When you're a performance artist, that's what you want to teach. And sometimes you are kind of forcing performance into what they give you to teach—

MA: They give you the painters, the sculptors, they want you to have class visits—

TB: And you try to force it to go back to performance, but it's a big tension, I agree with you. Do you think that has to do with the fact that performance is not seen as a possibility for a successful career?

MA: I think in the past, to be a professor in the academy meant being a failure as an artist. Well, a person who was an exception was Luciano Fabro, you know, from *arte povera* in Milan. He created a completely new generation of artists as performers. But being in the academy meant that you failed to be an important artist—still today in most places the academy just doesn't want any progress. They are against technology. They are against the idea of what a new school of art can be because they actually feel like they're losing their territory. In Germany, there are really important artists who become teachers in their time, but you go to the academy in Rome and they're still painting the Acropolis! It's amazing! Greece is the same. There's an amazing number of incredible artists who never really put a foot in the academy and change anything. And I think that's one of the roots of the problem.

TB: But it also feels like performance is not a successful art form compared to a painter or sculptor, and it seems to me that at least in the United States the education is very oriented to success.

MA: Yes, but performance has never been accepted as a real form of art because it is so ephemeral. But maybe almost not being material lends to its strength and vitality. You do it and it disappears.

TB: I think in my case, the only way to deal with this is through the approach to documentation as the tangible trace in the aftermath of the experience—but not as a given. It's always a requirement to think about ways of transferring information, about transferring the experience as part of the tangible side of performance, even if it doesn't become manifest as an object.

MA: To me, a part of doing the workshops and trying to make the students great performance artists is to give them advice about how they can live from their own work. They can't live from their performances, but they can live from the products out of the performance. You know, objects, or if there's photography or there are installations. I really teach them how it should be done professionally. If you're going to photograph—what "edition" means, what "artist's proof" means—how you can sell it, how to approach the galleries, what the relation is between you and the gallery. And this is something I never learned on my own when I was a student because there was some kind of taboo about art business. I've had so many bad experiences, so that means I want to protect my students from bad experiences.

There was this Turkish girl, and she came to me and said, "There's a gallery that wants to make my work," but the dealer wanted five, like, major pieces to donate to the gallery. I said, "Just say no." And she said, "But this is my only chance." This is exactly how it works because she thinks she will never have a second chance. I said, "Just go tell her no." So she goes and tells her no. And then that woman, the dealer, just throws her out of the gallery, and the Turkish girl, she's crying, and I say, "Just wait." The next week, the dealer calls her and says, "Oh, let's talk." And then she asked her to do whatever . . . an edition, and she would pay or give her one proof. I said, "Say no." (Laughing) Until she really, through the process, learned actually to negotiate because young artists will be used until they get this experience.

Then, my other idea is to teach them how to explain their work.

TB: Exactly.

MA: So I was combining art critics of their generation who were in the same school, to put them together. And I say, "We'll make performances for you, and

you make interviews with these performance artists and see what this work is about." So we were printing these little kind of like manifestos, with interviews between young critics and young performance artists, so that the young critics started thinking and seeing how they can write about performance. Then I was also interested in the painting class. So I was saying, "Come and paint a performance because this is a subject." So they combined different activities, which is really important because everything's so isolated. I think that young critics and young performance artists should go together from the beginning.

TB: I totally agree. At the art school project I created in Cuba, which is, I think, the only performance art program in Latin America, we have eight or nine students per year (officially, because we have a lot who "audit" for years). We always have people who are nonartists, who have not studied art before but who want to do art each year. We have an art historian who has to do artwork like everyone else, in addition to recording the experience critically, and who said at the beginning, "I'm the viewer, the critic, I need distance." And I said, "No. You have to do performances, experience it, like everybody else and then write about it." It's the same for everybody. So for two years, they go through this experiment, this time in their lives when they go back and forth between being artists and critics, and they have both approaches from the inside and the outside. The students have to learn how to write about their own works and their ideas about art. It's a legacy we shouldn't lose.

MA: That's a very important side because the students, they usually can't articulate. And then one thing that's really interesting to address is the relation between the master, meaning the professor, and the student. It's just unbelievable. For me, the most striking example is Japan. I was teaching a lot in Japan, and the relation is really like a God. First, they don't look you in the eye. They're in a submissive kind of attitude of the body, always looking down and always saying, "Yes, yes." You have the power to say, "Open the window and jump." They, without questioning, open the window and jump (claps)—and that's really something that I hate. It's very important to have a democratic kind of relationship based on equality, and showing that anything you're asking them, you can also do it. Like if I say, "We don't eat for five days," I'm doing the same.

TB: Yes, the first thing is to break the power relationship and establish a kind of comrade relationship, where everyone respects everyone else and it's earned

through the quality of the work. At the end, after a few years, we all show together, and it's very important to learn how to interact with other artists.

I want to go back very quickly to documentation. When I teach about documentation, I want them to problematize documentation—not only to assume the traditional ways of documenting with photo and video but to try to see how they can problematize ways of transmitting the experience. Because the idea of having a photo taken from a performance is almost like making that performance an icon, meaning making the *lived* thing *dead* and taking away the most important part, which is the experience.

MA: It's extremely important how you transmit. The closest is video or film—

TB: But it still has this kind of journalistic quality, where people are just talking about what happened—where and when—which diminishes how it was felt.

MA: But there is one possibility if you don't have the public. If you just have the camera, and the camera is this imaginary public. So the product is different; then actually the film or the photo becomes the artwork.

TB: That becomes a different kind of performance. Trust is very important for performance, and it should be part of the documentation of the performance. I try to teach that by transferring the work from one person to another. For example, I have an exercise where somebody does a piece and then the next person takes it, so people understand there is no property in the work.

MA: Oh, that's interesting.

TB: A performance is not like an object, and it shouldn't be forced to follow the rules that come with making objects. Performance should bring with it new ways to conceive old solutions; it should keep its revolutionary and evolutionary qualities. It should bring its own sets of problems to be solved in its own terms. That's how I think about ownership. For that exercise where we transfer a piece from one student to another, they are changing it, doing it with their own elements as a way to document it. It creates a dialogue in the classroom where everybody feels connected to the art and to the idea of the context and conditions for an action, to performance as a nonpermanent form. And performance class should be something that makes the students go out of their

center—out of their comfort zone. It's important that they bring up their fears and their established patterns, and then we work with that.

MA: Yes, and it's important to work with them after the class is over, after the school. I started the IPG [the Independent Performance Group] after Braunschweig for this reason: to continue with some of them when they became artists. And this was interesting—to fill this threshold of leaving the academy and becoming an artist. For me, the biggest problem with teaching was that every time one group finishes, a new group is coming—and you always start from the beginning. And somehow you never really went to the end, and I really wanted to go to the end.

TB: That's something that most professors don't think about, but good professors actually understand that it's a path they have to walk together.

MA: So I made this performance group, but after all these years, I don't know—maybe seven—it's not working. They would never do anything for the group; they would do just for themselves. And then I was constantly exuding this enormous energy to create a spirit. If I didn't put them together, they would never be together. They would never develop their work together or take work from each other. So I'm dismissing it. This is a big deal for me. I just wrote this letter to them. I'll read you a little bit of it:

“Dear IPG Members, I'm writing to you after a long reflection about my relationship with IPG and about the future of IPG. Here is my conclusion: After all these years, I still feel treated by IPG as a professor at Braunschweig.” That was a big problem. I could *not* get out of that function, you know? I was a professor to them, and I am still a professor. I couldn't pass this threshold to become different. “So, unfortunately, IPG never developed the group spirit I hoped for. IPG comes together only during events that I organize. My dream was, always, that one day you would develop a group spirit like the past—the Futurists, Fluxus, Dada, the Russian Constructivists. I strongly believe that an individual does not lose his or her identity in a group. On the contrary, the group helps to nurture the development of an art career and to give the support which young individuals need at the beginning of their professional life.”

So now I'm making a foundation—the Marina Abramović Institute for the Preservation of Performance Art—which will have much more freedom.

TB: Was it always the same group of people? Because something I've found out in my school art project in Havana is that it's really good when people enter the group at different times, when there is a constant redistribution of power in the group, when people who feel secure, with their clear place in the group dynamic, have to at least consider this distribution when new people arrive.

I started the project five years ago, when I came back from documenta. I always wanted to do something with performance studies because I couldn't study performance in Cuba. It's called *Cátedra Arte de Conducta*—*cátedra* means “studies department” to emphasize its pedagogical intentions. It's a mobile space of discussion, creation, and learning, with the core space being my house—but we do events and classes in people's offices, in a park, at a barber shop, at other people's house, in the woods, etc. And we do this every week for forty-two weeks. We have one guest who presents ideas about creation in a larger sense, and we encourage diverse points of views—a mathematician, a lawyer, an architect, a journalist, a sociologist. I want the members of the project to learn how to work with limitations—either the limitations society puts on them or the ones they have to create for themselves. I don't know, maybe it's not that you have to have a school. It's maybe about creating a moment, like opening a space where people can go in, interact, get stimulated, and get out of there with something to be developed later. The challenge is how to rethink continuity and collectivity.

And things are changing so much now that how we show and how we think about learning or who we are learning from is forcing us to change our ideas about what a school and a learning experience are. I mean, YouTube has made a huge impact on performance classes right now. I think this game—at least in the United States—about what is real, what is not real, what is being performed, what is the reason for that performance, who is the audience for that performance, and what is the degree of the performance's permanence . . . YouTube has put all this out there. And this has become a reference point for a lot of students. Not everybody's doing this, but a lot of young kids are because that's their everyday medium of communication. It's almost like, how do they respond to this everyday way of displaying information and defining the construction of the real?

MA: You know, thinking about the future academy, they've been such isolated places. They have to address media. They should have their own technology programs. They have to have professors who really come from different areas, disciplines, scientists. It should be more of a laboratory, a real laboratory with

more than just art techniques being taught. I mean, it's like you go to a classical academy to learn classical languages, Latin or Greek, but if you don't want to, you go to a modern one. So there should be the one classical academy for everyone to create their own drawings or paintings or whatever—it's fine. But there are so many artists who never touch their artwork with their hands. The kind of people like Jeff Koons, who has eighty-six assistants, or Damien Hirst, who doesn't touch his paintings, somebody else is making them, or Donald Judd before them.

TB: Well, it would be nice to talk about creativity instead of production, experiments instead of career strategies. And it would be nice to provide conditions for artists who are dealing with other spheres of knowledge to be in direct connection with those fields, instead of observing from a distance. But like you say, art schools have to have some sort of structure where students can interact with people doing research on the same subject but in other fields, a school where those researchers are teaching alongside artists. That way, the artists we're training really can bring new languages and propositions not only to the art world but to the world.