

Performance Art and Illiberal Democracy

Marina Abramović's *The Cleaner* in Belgrade

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Figure 1. Serbian prime minister Ana Brnabić speaking at the opening of the passenger waiting area at Nikola Tesla Airport, designed as part of the national “Serbia Creates” campaign. An Air Serbia plane displays its buzzwords: trust, design, theatre, ideas, fun, experience, music, talent, film, tech, art, opportunities. (Photo courtesy of TANJUG/RADE PRELIC)

Marina Abramović opened her first Belgrade solo exhibition in 44 years on 21 September 2019 with a press conference scheduled at dawn (which that day was at 6:23 a.m.). There was an exhibition preview held the previous night for invited guests only. Attendees included Serbian prime minister Ana Brnabić, the United States ambassador in Belgrade Kyle Scott, and a number of luminaries from the world of politics, culture, and public life. Reporting on these events,

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Večernje novosti (Evening News), a tabloid-style daily close to the government, flashed the title: “Marina Abramović: I Am a Serbian Artist” (Kralj 2019).¹ *Politika*, the oldest daily newspaper in the country, also progovernment, picked a more measured statement for its headline: “I Returned to My Own Land.” The opposition daily *Danas* went for a fairly trashy title (“Marina Was Late, to Everyone’s Delight”), but it also carried one of the artist’s most important statements of the day: asked about her long absence from galleries and museums in her native Belgrade, Abramović responded that she “was never invited until Prime Minister Brnabić saw my exhibit in Oslo and invited me” (in Ćuk 2019). She was probably referring to the opening of *The Cleaner* at the Moderna Museet in Stockholm in February 2017. Since then, the exhibit toured to Denmark, Germany, Italy, and Poland.² The final destination of Abramović’s “European retrospective” was seen as her homecoming and a closure of sorts (the headline in the *New York Times* read: “Marina Abramovic Comes Home, and Comes Clean” [Dickson 2019]). With this exhibit, she also stepped straight into the minefield of Serbian politics.

By the time *Čistač* (The Cleaner) rolled into town, there were rumblings about its budget. Some sources reported the cost was €1.8 million, and that the Serbian government paid €600,000 for its Belgrade installment.³ In an interview she gave to Radio Free Europe, Dunja Blažević, a trailblazing curator who in the early 1970s led the Student Cultural Center’s gallery that gave a start to Abramović and other conceptual artists of her generation, assessed that the cost of the exhibit equaled the annual budget of the Museum of Contemporary Art (Blažević 2019). Questions about the appropriateness of this splurge on a single exhibition in an impoverished country prompted sharp criticism from opposition politicians and the liberal intelligentsia. *Buka* published a column by Marko Vidojković who openly questioned the Serbian government’s decision to invest in the exhibit: “On the billboard for the exhibit, side by side with MSU [Muzej savremene umetnosti, Museum of Contemporary Art], which blew its annual budget on this spectacle, is perched [the logo of] the government of Serbia, the biggest cleaner of your money in recent history” (Vidojković 2019). The title of the column, in which the last names of the president, prime minister, and artist were linked together (“Marina Abramović Vučić Brnabić”), implied a (serial) marriage of convenience.

Serbia’s president, Aleksandar Vučić, whose Serbian Progressive Party (Srpska napredna stranka, SNS) has been in power since 2012, shot to the top of political life in Serbia after making one of the most remarkable transformations in the recent political history of this small Balkan country. Throughout the wars of the 1990s, Vučić was a lieutenant to Vojislav Šešelj, the leader of the virulently nationalistic Serbian Radical Party (Srpska radikalna stranka, SRS), which sent its paramilitary units to the battlefields of Croatia and Bosnia, and some of its members were implicated in some of the most gruesome war crimes. In 2008, while his boss, Šešelj, was on trial at the International Criminal Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia in the Hague, Vučić broke off to start his own party, drawing with him a large number of SRS functionaries and members. He marked his remarkable about-face by styling himself as a progressive liberal, going as far as claiming the mantle of reformist prime minister Zoran Đinđić, whose 2003 assassination is still shrouded in mystery. One of Vučić’s boldest moves was in

1. All translations from Serbian, unless otherwise indicated, are my own.

2. The European tour of *The Cleaner* started at Moderna Museet in Stockholm, Sweden (18 Feb. 2017–21 May 2017); then moved to Louisiana Museum of Modern Art in Humblebeak, Denmark (17 June 2017–22 Oct. 2017); Bundeskunsthalle in Bonn, Germany (20 Apr. 2018–12 Aug. 2018); Palazzo Strozzi in Florence, Italy (21 Sept. 2018–20 Jan. 2019); the Centre of Contemporary Art Znaki Czasu in Torun, Poland (8 Mar. 2019–Aug. 11 2019); and the Museum of Contemporary Art in Belgrade, Serbia (21 Sept. 2019–20 Jan. 2020).

3. On 14 January 2020, a week before the exhibition closed, MSU acting director Slobodan Nakarada held a press conference in which he presented (close to) final information about the exhibit: according to him, the cost of the exhibit was €1.3 million, and the museum earned around €153,200 from ticket sales. He also noted that there were 1,728 newspaper articles published about the exhibit, and that approximately 60,000 people saw the exhibit.

2016, when he pulled Ana Brnabić, a young, openly gay business executive, out of obscurity, inviting her to join the Serbian government first as the minister of public administration and local self-government, and then a year later promoting her to the position of prime minister. That made her the first openly lesbian head of government in Serbia's history, and only the second one in the world (after Iceland's Jóhanna Sigurðardóttir). This move was supposed to bolster the Vučić regime's bifocal international policy. While Vučić and Minister of Foreign Affairs Ivica Dačić (part of Milošević's cadre from the 1990s) maintained close ties with Vladimir Putin's Russia, Prime Minister Brnabić faced westward towards the European Union, which Serbia has been unsuccessfully trying to join for over a decade. Initially establishing her public image on a double pillar of neoliberal economic policies and identity politics, in 2018, as the highest-ranking unelected politician in Serbia, she added culture to her portfolio by setting up the Council for Creative Industries, an advisory body to which she attracted some of most outspoken progressive voices, such as Biljana Srbljanović, who is by far the most internationally successful Serbian playwright, and Andrej Nosov, an artist and activist who was involved in pioneering work on the politics of memory and transitional justice in the former Yugoslavia. For all intents and purposes, by accepting Brnabić's support, Abramović endorsed her highly controversial political mission. If with her US retrospective *The Artist is Present* Abramović, as she described it, attempted to take performance into the mainstream, the conclusion of its European counterpart seemed to take the whole thing even further (in Akers and Dupre 2012).

Members of the liberal intelligentsia, who had refrained from criticizing the prime minister for obvious fear of being branded as homophobes, now finally had an opening to come out strongly against her. (It's worth remembering that Serbia is a country in which the first attempt to hold a gay pride walk in 2001 ended with severe attacks and beatings of LGBT activists by ultra-nationalist groups, and that the first successful gay pride parade took place in



Figure 2. A cartoon by Predrag Koraksić "Corax" from the daily newspaper *Danas* referencing Abramović's video piece *Confession*. The donkey is wearing a Serbian national cap, which in Corax's cartoons designates an ordinary Serb. (Courtesy of Predrag Koraksić)

2010, only thanks to security so strong that the police outnumbered participants.) The gloves quickly came off. Quite tastelessly, Vidojković started his column with a description of his morning bathroom routine as performance art. The director of the Belgrade Symphony (and former minister of culture in Vučić's government) Ivan Tasovac responded with an article in the tabloid *Kurir* accusing "Serbian intellectual starlets" of "ignorance and envy" (Tasovac 2019). The cartoonist Predrag Koraksić "Corax," a veteran of the struggle against Milošević in the 1990s, picked on

Abramović's 2010 *Confession* as a metaphor for the entire episode, responding to Tasovac that "Marina and Vučić are staring at us as if we were donkeys" (in Živanović 2019). Belgrade University professor emeritus Sreten Petrović, the author of a number of books on aesthetics, went as far as arguing that "performance [art] is not an aesthetic art." Setting aside (or simply not being aware of) the theoretical discourse generated by art historians and performance scholars over the past four decades, Petrović spoke about the autonomy of the art object, about

the artist's "struggle with content and its aesthetic transposition into form," even deploying categories such as "autochthonic Being," "talent," and "great European tradition" (Petrović 2019). What was striking about the entire debate was that the critics went so quickly from questioning the prime minister's spending decisions, to skepticism about the choice of the artist, to the disparagement of performance art itself.

Abramović seems to have an uncanny ability to bring performance to the forefront of public discussion wherever she shows up. Belgrade was no exception. Performance seemed to be on everyone's lips in the fall of 2019. What the fight over *The Cleaner* revealed right from the get-go was an impoverishment of discourse so extreme that the exhibition easily got lost in the fray. In fact, Belgrade's installment of *The Cleaner* didn't need external gimmicks—such as the choice of International Cleanup Day as its opening date—to set itself apart from other stops on its European tour. The initial conceptualization and production of the show was done by Lena Essling and Tine Colstrup, curators from Moderna Museet and the Louisiana Museum of Modern Art, respectively (and Susanne Kleine from Bundeskunsthalle, who joined this curatorial team at a later date). While Essling and Colstrup shared a general curatorial vision of the retrospective, their colleagues in each host museum had enough room to make their own interventions.

The curator of Belgrade's *The Cleaner*, Dejan Sretenović, added to the exhibition several pieces that were not seen in any of the other locations. There were two oil paintings Abramović did as a student, which emerged only recently: *Blue* (1964) and *The Portrait of Granma Raduša* (1969). If these early efforts can be seen as a curiosity that doesn't have much art historical value, the second addition is certainly an important contribution not only to the retrospective, but to the history of performance art in the former Yugoslavia and beyond. It is an 8mm film converted to a two-channel video recording of Abramović's *Rhythm 2* (1974) made in Zagreb's Galerija moderne umjetnosti (Modern Art Gallery), now in possession of the Muzej suvremene umjetnosti (Museum of Contemporary Art), also in Zagreb. What makes this video recording of *Rhythm 2* unique within the archive of early performance is the choice to fix one camera on the performer, while using the other to film the audience. Sretenović commented as he was giving me a tour of the exhibition that recording the audience in early video and film documentation of performance is usually incidental, while here it is intentional. I take this as yet another testimony of the level of sophistication of the artists, art historians, and curators in Yugoslavia in the early 1970s. That impression is strongly reinforced in the central part of the exhibit, consisting of video and photographic documentation of the solo performances Abramović did in Yugoslavia and her early collaborations with Ulay (I was pleasantly surprised with a film recording of her landmark *Rhythm 5* [1974], the one with a burning star, with which I was thus far familiar only from photographs and verbal descriptions). Finally, one of the particularly tall museum rooms held a display of Abramović's long dress from *Entering the Other Side*, which has not been exhibited since the 2005 premiere of *Seven Easy Pieces* at the Guggenheim. Sretenović told me that Abramović wanted to add this work to the exhibit because she was stimulated by the architecture of the museum. Indeed, Belgrade's Museum of Contemporary Art is an inspiring, atypical, and challenging exhibition space.

The first institution of its kind in Eastern Europe, MSU opened in 1965 with the mission to collect, exhibit, and promote Yugoslav modern art. The museum building, designed by architects Ivan Antić and Ivanka Raspopović, is a modernist monument in its own right. Instead of a series of discrete galleries, the architects envisioned this museum as a continuous upward-flowing space. Its six large modules are distributed on four levels, connected with staircases and large passages (Blagojević 2016:122). Instead of rigidly compartmentalizing the exhibit into distinct periods, Sretenović and his team used the museum's unique architecture to high-



Figure 3. Installation view of video documentation of Abramović's performances *Freeing the Voice*, *Freeing the Mind*, and *Freeing the Body* (1975). *The Cleaner*, September 2019–January 2020, Museum of Contemporary Art, Belgrade. (Photo by Bojana Janjić)



Figure 4. Reperformance of *Freeing the Mind* (1975). *The Cleaner*, September 2019–January 2020, Museum of Contemporary Art, Belgrade. (Photo Bojana Janjić)

piece; and the drumming from the video of *Freeing the Body* (1975) syncopates with the sound of a live performance of the same piece, as well as the fleshy sounds of slaps from the video recording of Abramović and Ulay's *Light/Dark* (1977).

The absence of traditional discrete galleries within the museum required curators to make radical decisions in presenting video documentation, such as setting up free-standing screens, or arranging multiple projection surfaces into rectangular structures. These strategies create immersive video environments that engage viewers more actively than when they encounter these moving images projected on gallery walls, theatre-style. The spectators at MSU have

light differences as much as continuities, repetitions, and variations of distinct themes within Abramović's long career. Overlaps and leaks between periods and individual works came across strongly. Actually, visitors began engaging with the exhibit as they approached the building through a vast sculpture garden surrounding the museum, which resounded with bird cries from the sound installation, *The Tree* (originally presented in front of the Student Cultural Center, or SKC, in 1971), only to plunge into sounds of rapid gun fire that ricocheted around them as they passed through the museum entrance—another sound installation from 1971, *Sound Corridor*. This aggressive auditory aspect of Abramović's work extends throughout the exhibit, and doesn't cede even in sections dedicated to quiet and meditative projects, such as *Nightsea Crossing* (1982–1986) and her most recent works such as *Counting the Rice* (2015) and *Dream House* (2017). As if trying to remind me of the tempestuous sources of this search for tranquility, the artist's voice from the recording of *Freeing the Memory* (1975) echoes through the exhibition spaces and mixes with the voice of the reperformer of the same

plenty of opportunities to engage with the exhibit in general, from the videos, to performances, to participatory installations. And beyond that, the museumgoers don't need to be especially framed in order to join the display: in the open modular structure of this architectural space, the viewer cannot escape being viewed, and is always positioned as an integral part of the museum experience. It seems as if the space aids Abramović in her attempts to engage “the basic problem” of art exhibitions, which she has recognized as the “passive and voyeuristic relationship of the public to the artist and the museum” (in Essling 2017:11). In her catalog essay, Essling suggests that the presentation of Abramović's work needs to “open up the traditionally fixed position between artist, audience, and institution” (11). Without even realizing it, the fiercest critics of *The Cleaner* in Belgrade bought this idea wholesale, extending it to include political institutions (specifically, the Serbian government) and even performance art, Abramović's art form of choice. What this exhibit requires instead is precisely the opposite: a careful consideration to discern the political power, the institution, the artist, the audience (critics included), and the art form, and an even more attentive investigation of the ties that bind these elements together, as well as the points of tension among them. Instead, the critics of *The Cleaner* seemed completely oblivious to its artistic and curatorial achievements, just as its defenders were doing their best to ignore the bizarre political circumstances that made it possible.

As it approached its final destination, Abramović's European retrospective developed an unusually prominent internet presence. In the spring of 2019, “Waiting for the Artist,” an episode of the *Documentary Now!* mockumentary series on IFC, aired with Cate Blanchett in the role of a performance art diva who returns to her native Budapest for a long-awaited career survey (the choice of Viktor Orbán's Hungary was apt, politically speaking; still, the producers had little idea of how illiberal a democracy can get). Promoting the exhibition, Abramović didn't refrain from self-ridicule: she sat with Serbian TV comedian Zoran Kesić (a local version of Jon Stewart) on his popular TV show, not hesitating to make fun of her own work (24 minuta 2019). As the debate around *The Cleaner* intensified, parodies of Abramović's performances and public appearances multiplied online. Still, none of that could come even close to the farce of thug neoliberalism in Serbia.

As I boarded the Air Serbia plane in New York for a nonstop flight to Belgrade, I couldn't help but notice a new design on an old Airbus 320: the back of the plane carried the inscription “Serbia Creates,” which pointed to a list on the airplane's back tail: “trust, design, theatre, ideas, fun, experience, music, talent, film, tech, art, opportunities.” (In the spirit of full disclosure, I want to say that MSU curator Sretenović invited me to participate in a lecture series about performance that accompanied the exhibit; in that same spirit, it may be important to mention that I had already planned a research trip to Serbia, so my travel expenses did not come from the museum budget.) Once in Belgrade, in the baggage claim area, I was greeted with a wall-sized ad for the recently reopened National Museum (both this museum and MSU were closed for over a decade for renovations; Vučić's government boasted that they were the ones who completed these marathon jobs). The writing on the plane and on the wall belonged to the “Serbia Creates” campaign, part of Brnabić's push for the development of creative industries in Serbia that would generate their own revenue instead of being entirely dependent on government funding. The same logo was prominently placed at the opening of *The Cleaner*, thus effectively folding Abramović's show into this government campaign. Even if we set aside the deep contradiction of a government that spends funds equal to the annual budget of one of the country's major public museums on a single exhibit while promoting the idea of unsubsidized culture, one doesn't need to look far to discover the deep irony of this influx of neoliberalism into Serbian society. Neoliberalism can be defined as the monetization of freedom(s), and the whole idea of “creative industries” rests on the premise of a free exchange of goods and ideas. A fierce supporter of Vučić, Brnabić does her best to ignore the deeply illiberal nature of his regime, which is so pervasive that even I got to experience it during my brief visit.

A few days before I boarded that “Serbia Creates” aircraft, *Politika* daily approached me for an interview during which I was asked to weigh in on *The Cleaner*. When I arrived in Belgrade and got hold of a copy of the newspaper with my interview in it, I realized that the editors had censored all of my references to specific politicians. Among other things, I said that “the coalition in power,” consisting of the converts from the radical nationalism of the 1990s and the remnants of Milošević’s Serbian Socialist Party, “is trying to establish a complete hegemony over Serbian society.”⁴ Further, I suggested that its goal is “to cover the entire ideological spectrum, from the darkest primitive nationalism” of the former members of Serbian Radical Party, “to the managerial technocracy” of Belgrade’s deputy mayor Goran Vesić and the Minister of Finance in Brnabić’s government Siniša Mali, “to the fake anti-fascism” of the Minister of Foreign Affairs, Ivica Dačić. Hegemony, understood in the Gramscian sense of domination of one group and its ideas over all other groups and ideas in a society, “simply doesn’t leave any room for alternative positions, which could provide some ground for a meaningful critique of the government. In Serbia, culture has been the only area of public life that, at least symbolically, kept that kind of hegemony at bay. With prime minister Brnabić, a total hegemony has been set up in that area as well.” All of that was excised from the interview I had authorized for publication. In addition, the editors found it appropriate to tone down my reference to Donald Trump: responding to the interviewer’s question about his political performances, I called him a “rogue,” which the editors changed to the ultra-neutral “somebody” (Serbian nationalists cheered his victory over Hillary Clinton, the wife of the president who led the NATO bombing campaign against Serbia in 1999). No one from *Politika* even attempted to contact me and ask for my approval of these editorial changes before my interview was published, which is standard for most journalists in Serbia.

Astonished, I sent an email to the journalist who conducted the interview, and some 20 minutes later her editor called me on the phone. When I asked her to publish a corrected version of my interview and issue a public apology for infringing upon my freedom of speech, she apologized for not contacting me for approval, but not for censoring my statements. Speaking over me, she tried to convince me that it was an act of heroism that she even published what she did. She insisted that she retained “the essence” of my comments, and that what was expurgated did not matter that much. It was one of the most nauseating conversations I’d had in a very long time, and I accepted her private apology to end it. She kept trying to relativize the whole thing: a few words here, a changed word there. After all, she said, when somebody agrees to talk to *Politika*, that person should know the limits of what can be published in this paper (“Serbia creates trust”?). This routine expectation and acceptance of self-censorship stopped me in my tracks. The very essence of illiberal democracy was contained in that off-hand remark. In this kind of society, the government builds around itself a living shield made of officials who consent to blackmail and humiliation in exchange for some level of job security, and sometimes even professional advancement (“Serbia creates opportunities”?). And the more illiberal the government, the thicker the shield it needs to generate. The ultimate tendency is to corrupt the entire society. Those in the outer echelons of this vast living barrier see no concrete benefits of this corruption. The goal is to normalize it and to engender thought patterns that make acceptable that which is otherwise unthinkable or morally repugnant. *The Cleaner* found itself in the midst of this kind of society, whose contradictions simply flooded over the art, the artist, and the museum. The final irony of this whole affair is that performance, which has been said to thematize more poignantly than any other art form the idea of a Western decentered subject, has been summoned to provide an appearance of coherence to a deeply conflicted patriarchal subject of illiberal democracy, exemplified in the Serbian prime minister.

4. The original interview was done over email on 8–14 October 2019.

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