

MARINA ABRAMOVIĆ INTERVIEW
FRAGMENTS OF PARADISE
LIFE STORIES

Marina Abramović, Performance Artist
October 7, 2020
Interviewed by Katie Davison
Total Running Time: 31 minutes and 29 seconds

START TC: 00:00:00:00

00:00:05:00

KATIE DAVISON:

Okay. First, can you just tell me who you are?

ON SCREEN TEXT:

Life Stories Presents

Marina Abramović

Performance Artist

00:00:08:00

MARINA ABRAMOVIĆ:

My name is Marina Abramovic, I am an artist who work different medias but specify very much on performance art, so using my body as my main material for working. If we--now it give me this. I want to tell this part. If you ask me the question, "Who is Jonas Mekas?" this is something coming to my mind and I really have to read to you. If you ask me what is and who is Jonas Mekas, so many different things do come into my mind and I actually need to read to you. He's visionary, intelligent, poetical, dangerously seductive. Simple.



Complicated. Generous, charismatic, pure, honest, humorous, politically incorrect, Joker, great filmmaker, and the most important, the wonderful human being. That's the honest purity. Exactly what he wants, you know. There is something about about him. You know how to see. How he see the world through the eyes. You know, it's very difficult to see, to keep innocence when you're old and to see the eyes as a child for the first time. And he have this quality to do that. I do the same change. He was as childish, as shy, as innocent, as pure, you know, as he was ever. And I think somehow getting old, he become more mischievous, they become more there is more fun to it. There is a more joy. I see learn he understand the purity of life. You understand that we are here, you know, in short time the human beings who understand, you know, beginning and end. Yes, you get older, you get wise. I, I interview was a very old woman in Brazil. She was 120 when I interview. She died the year later. And I ask her, what is the most important thing in life? I actually said two things how to enter and how to exit. And I think honest knew both ways if I should describe Jonas. To you. I should say that Yanis was visionary, intelligent, poetical, dangerously seductive. Simple. Complicated. Generous. Charismatic. Pure. Humorous. Politically incorrect. Joker. Great filmmaker and most of all, wonderful human being.

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KATIE DAVISON:

So I'm curious, how did you two first meet?

00:03:25:00

MARINA ABRAMOVIĆ:



You know, in 1978 is the first time I came, to Anthology Film Anthology, which was at that time in Wooster Street. And, I was invited to go there together with my friend John Janis. And we both have the dogs. And I was saying, you know, it's possible. I'm sure it's not possible, but it's possible to bring the dogs there. And so, sure, I always go with my dog, suffer and to see the films. So we both and I had the Albanian shepherd, which is pretty big dog. So we, we both went there to see the Maya there and uncut the, the files of the for the the films. It was wonderful evening and the dogs was in the first row and we all sit there and look the look, the movies. And after this she introduced me to John s makers, and this is the first time I met him. You know, we're talking early 70s in New York. He was so bohemian, so easygoing, simple, uncomplicated. And, you know, he have this little smile on his face. And the most important to me was the sparkling eyes. There was something with eyes that was so full of joy and always little, little sparkling, little, little lights, like, flashing in. And I immediately liked him. But also the fact that he come from Lithuania and I come from Mexico, Slovenia. It was very, you know, similar DNA in, in that we can really connect very easily.

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KATIE DAVISON:

How did you become friends over time?

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MARINA ABRAMOVIĆ:

It's, you know, it's just because of the work. Connect us. You know, he was working and and I was doing my performances, and he was always interesting in everything new and interesting. You know, the he he showed



the first time ever Jack Smith movies. And it was such a Avant-Garde time. At that time, nobody even was questioning people's art at all. So he was really, you know, on the frontier. And my work was very frontier, too. So through the work, we actually start knowing each other and respecting each other's work. We never had actually heavy conversations about art. We always have it, you know, the, exchanging the jokes because everything was about humor. We really, I think we, we didn't need to talk about because each of us knew, you know, what they are doing. But what we had connection is the humor. And the humor was so important, you know, and I think still today, if you think what's happening now in the reality, what we are living now, the humor is somehow gone. We have to go give back humor to everything. And in his work was lots of humor.

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KATIE DAVISON:

There's this great scene of you and Jonas in the beginning of Sleepless Night Stories where you're at a cafe and you're telling him about a recent break--do you remember that moment? I'm wondering if you could tell us the story of what was happening in that moment.

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MARINA ABRAMOVIĆ:

Oh, this was the my breakup with my my husband. And this breakup was so difficult for me because I almost have, you know, broken. I really had broken heart. And just because of that breakup right now, I made this opera called seven that somebody of colors because she died of a broken heart, and I almost died of a broken heart. So I ended to fight this story with her. So I was



telling him about broken hearts. I think that was the moment and really kind of pulling for him, my emotions to him. And he was the right person to understand what I was going through, because I could tell him anything and he could understand completely. And he always have this, this twinkling eyes, you know that. You know that always there is a little bit of smile and humor and but also warmth and love, you know, which is beautiful. And he was a good listener and, and, you know, I could I could really pull my heart to him. We was always trying to say the most, correct jokes to each other, but we, you know, we forget them. And and by the way, the time right now, you can't even tell a political joke without consequences. You can talk about joke about anything you can talk about. I mean, it's it's it's very difficult. Especially we like the jokes were truth. The joke really is a true joke. There is a political things about the truth.

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KATIE DAVISON:

So a lot of people we're interviewing were influenced by Jonas but I see you almost as peers, like pioneers, you know, in different mediums, do you think that's correct?

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MARINA ABRAMOVIĆ:

Yeah, this is correct. Jonas Mekas was very important for discovering for me somebody who I consider like my grandfather and a huge amount of inspiration it was Parajanov. This was in the 80's. He made the entire, you know, viewing. All week or put a channel movie, start with pomegranate and so on and so on. And I never saw put a genre before. And I remember coming,



you know, and looking to put a journal and, and could not believe because the, the type, the static, the idea, the way how to tell the story, the the rituals, the oldest, the Slavic elements that I have in my work, I could recognize and put a channel. So this was for me incredible gift that he on his gift to me discovery, put a channel for me.

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KATIE DAVISON:

Do you think that there is a connection between Avant-Garde film and performance art?

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MARINA ABRAMOVIĆ:

Well, definitely. You know, I think the the the I like the brother and sister, you know, together going to historically because, you know, the somehow is the happening at the same time it's, you know, filmmaker had a different vision how to see the how to see the reality and performance art to have also different visual reality to, you know, the using different tools. But results are similar. You know, artists place with so many different things. You know, if we just say that that, you know, the political art is the only right art, I will not agree with this because that will be like, you know, you're reacting on the political news of the day and next day's old news, so you work will not exist. The good art of to have so many, layers of meaning, good arts have to be and political and social and dealing with community and the, you know, the the spiritual and also the most important, the good art is to predict the future. And if you have all these components, then the one piece of art in many lives and the very important work of art to have many lives, not just when it's



happening, but, you know, generations to come and to discover new elements of that work if they have so many structures inside to live the human spirit, that's the only purpose that I see that is noble and worth living for is to lift human spirits, not to put your spirit down. It's so easy to put spirits, human spirit, down, and it's about lifting. You know, I'm always I'm always fascinating about the in the time when Second World War, when all the artists was really reflecting the war with atrocity and and the killing and the pain and suffering of the nations. And, you know, Matisse was painting entire Second World War. He was painting flowers. And look what he was doing. The Yanis, he lost his life. He was. He was looking to nature. First of all, my main question. Why you think you're an artist. And if they ask for me, they want to become an artist. I send them home. Because you, you come. You can't become an artist. You are or you're not. It's in your DNA. In the creating, art is like a is like a necessity of breathing air. You wake up in the morning with ideas and you have to make them is as strong as breathing. And if you do that, you're an artist. But becoming is not possible. You can learn the technique. You can learn the lots of different things about you know how to do things, but becoming you have it in yourself. And then you have to follow your heart. You have to follow your intuition. You have to not look into the trends. You have to look deep inside yourself. To become universal for everybody else. And you have to sacrifice and is lonely life. And is not easy. And if you want all of that. There's. Go and do it. You can't. You you can't divide. This is like you. You actually entire you been it's inside that there's no one like all of was outside life and art is, is is just together.

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KATIE DAVISON:



The post-war generation seemed to--you know, Jonas' generation seemed to be really impacted by what they had experienced. Do you think that that's a correct read? Was there like a reaction to sort of that existential crisis that that generation was going through?

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MARINA ABRAMOVIĆ:

I think Jonas is older than me. So I just was born after the war. I was born in 1946. Jonas born early during the war. So he's actually had much more traumatic experiences and understand what means hunger and the suffering and the loss, which I didn't have because I was born in the time. What was communism building the new country? And it was about after the war, enthusiasm and some kind of, the determination about, let's see, let's build things together about community, about hope. And so in his work, you know, you have reflecting this more than in my in my case was different. You know, we we was born with the Tito building the country. We was born with the, you know, the the five point star communist communist symbol. And, you know, we was born with the restrictions, that for the, the, you know, political joke. You go for four years to prison. We knew what we can do and we could not do in even. He was, you know, saying how liberal was actually was not at all. And we could not just leave the country as we will. And so it was my, my, my reaction was, you know, to rebuild is to rebuild a system and find my own, you know, personal freedom.

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KATIE DAVISON:

Did you watch any of Jonas' diary films?



00:14:02:00

MARINA ABRAMOVIĆ:

I watched his movies. And and you know what? I think that that that we we have to really now think about his archives. I think that probably 80% we still don't know. But Jonas is so much things that they have to be discover because it's such a many layers of, of, of the content, what he was doing. I didn't need to talk to him about it. I didn't need to explain. We both live it, and that's more than than enough, because there's so many people write about experiences, in the books and or talk about experiences. But if you don't of your own personal experience, if you don't make your own journey, then you actually you will never understand what what that meant meant. So to live in the moment is the only only reality we have. We we can't we we should not look into past, which were already happen. I don't need to explain. I just feel it. You know his films deeply, emotionally. I'm always deeply emotionally touched by his movies and always discover beauty in it. And you really never know where is the next, what takes you to next second, because it's always every time you look the movie, you discover something new, something surprising as something true, you know? And there is the little things, like a little lizard appears from somewhere and cross the road, and then lizard arrive again, but is now sitting on the rock and taking sunshine. You know, that kind of moments, the simplicity of life. You know, we we develop our technology so incredibly complicated the human brain can't follow anymore. But he bring us to simplicity really to to enjoy the the that moment here now again and again, over and over again. I think his work is highly spiritual again, I we never as I said, the only time we talk is telling the jokes and and doing things together, but not really talking about art because it's so clear I didn't



need to talk about these things. It's, you know, the the mystical part is very evident. The ritual part is very evident because it's is in, in the something to connect me with him, because we have this inside of us coming from that kind of world and that part of culture. It's somehow is you DNA. You're born with that. You're born with the, with, with, with the idea that is, is some kind of extraordinary, invisible world up there and that you can enter this invisible world if you really, focus yourself, your perception, into that reality. And that invisible world is visible in his films over and over again. I think if you look at these movies, maybe it's a good point of view that he's anthropologist because he actually, you know, he how he see things, how he actually take them apart and how he put them together again, like really anthropologist method. You know, your honest work is going to be always been my vanguard and always will be for smaller amounts of people than a larger audience. It's made. It's made its way. And I think that as as the time goes, the new generation is going to discover and every time and there's going to be another new generation, another new generation, because your work is is timeless, but it's going to leave. So the new generation always young people who will look into it in different ways. This is what I call the work of art, who have many lives and Uranus work many, many lives to come. You know, I in Europe, he's very known in America. It's always difficult. I mean, it's been always like that, you know, the avant garde especially, you know, heart is so easily to become commodity and to cost, you know, millions and to be seen that way. You know, he work. He was always, you know, on, on the, on the border of modesty and, and, and art is the most important thing and not not the money, not not compromise. Uranus never compromise.

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KATIE DAVISON:

I'm wondering if you could tell me about New York in the late 70s. Like, what was it like? What was Soho like at the time?

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MARINA ABRAMOVIĆ:

First of all, my New York is 70s. It was a three weeks. New York is 70s, so I can't really talk about because I came here to stay three weeks. It was extremely difficult to leave ex-Yugoslavia at that time, because we didn't have money to travel at all, and getting visa from the communist country and entering America was another nightmare. So I was I was granted visa for three weeks and I spent here three weeks. And you know, I was so hungry for art, for looking things to see what's going on. You know, go to the museum and, and, you know, my perception was this was the center of the world. And the center will do all the way how the Patti Smith described in the Little Book of Just the Kids, which was so pure in that time because the art was not seen as a commodity. Art was not having this enormous prices on the art market, and there was no collectors buying for this enormous prices. Art like? No. Everything was so modest and so pure. Somehow artist had to create because. Because they could not live without creating. Because was it was like breathing the air. You could ask if you have to breathe the air. If you don't breathe, you die. Same. You wake up in the morning and you have new ideas and you have to do it. And that kind of enthusiasm and and beauty was here in New York at the time. And poverty in the same time with the artists community. So anybody you know, in that time that there was I knew Jack Smith at the time. We traveled together in Europe and for some time. And I really, you know, had a more view about, you know, his way of working. And



John Janis and another person who really influenced me the most was John Cage. I, I traveled to the Micronesia with John Cage and the, the very interesting project. And then later on, you know, we became friends. And John Cage was somebody who learned me, you know, about things, learned me about, you know, modesty and and being thankful and, and, and not having huge ego in what was as eagle can be obstacle in your work and everything was all the teachings of John Cage was done in the meat, cutting garlic in his kitchen while he was making macrobiotic food. I knew a little bit, I know the but in that time I the another people that I met in the early 70s was actually I'm John Pike and Joseph boys, but I didn't meet them in America. I made them in Europe, you know, one in the colon in Germany. And Joseph Boyce, first time I met in 73, in Edinburg, in at the book festival. And it was the first time that he actually left the German country to go.

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KATIE DAVISON:

Do you know the famous story of Jack Smith and Jonas getting arrested showing Flaming Creatures? What was Jack Smith like?

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MARINA ABRAMOVIĆ:

He was, you know, bigger than life. So Jack Smith at that time, there was the art wearing in in come in Germany and he was showing, his, his movies. And in the middle of the projection, you know, people were seen in the room. He would take the match and hold in the front of the projector and start screaming. The films are burning. This is originals. This is the only film I don't have. It is disaster. Please stop rejection. Please stop. And everybody was



suffering and think it's all true. It was all invented by him. And I been on that rejection and I like it so much. So I start talking to him and and in that time I had the partner working together all I so we both actually become friends. And then he wanted to come to Amsterdam and we had the little van. So we said, come with us. And he came with his assistant and. And the three huge suitcases, and in one suitcase was the life size stuffed gorilla. And every. And we all sleep in the loft, you know, just on the mats on the floor. It was very, very simple lodging. And I remember the for every single day, Jack Smith took over this gorilla and position in Mr. Position. How he moved would affect the gorilla and how things happen per day. And I remember after five days being numb to them, one day I wake up and I see the gorilla facing the windows, facing the mirror, and with the suitcases packed and the knife in his back. And I was so scared. I say, okay, this is a time I think jokes me just about to leave and he left that day.

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KATIE DAVISON:

There's this other story he tells, you I think went to Austria together and you were receiving a medal? Do you remember that?

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MARINA ABRAMOVIĆ:

We both. Yeah. This was unbelievable. I still don't know why, but both of us received the highest cross of the, you know, for the honoring our work achievements in life, which is the the ceremony of the president of the country, Austria. It was almost three hours. The ceremony. It was the incredibly elaborate it. And this is the gold and medal and this huge thing that



we were both of us around the neck. And I remember he was so impressed that he was filming all the time and, you know, supposed to film, you're supposed to receive the medal. It was a mess. But anyway, we did. We received that very high honor. It was so much ritual and very old Austrian, you know, like in old Austrian Gary and fashion. This was incredible. And we was was there pretty avant garde art is never been accepted in that kind of, you know, level. It was it was, you know, the next to what we call my God, this with Iceland story. We had lots of good stories. The most famous story that this was handsomely so the, the, the story with Ice of Iceland was crazy handsomely. Corbridge was invited to join us, you know, and inviting me and some other artists to go to Iceland to symposium and talk and propose something. And I was thinking, okay, always the symposiums are so boring, let's propose something new. So I was thinking, you know, about Doctor wrote. So Doctor Ruth is the when I remember looking television in, in late in the 70s, how I was so impressed by this little Jewish, Austrian lady talk about sex. And she not only bore the sex, but she was so explicit talking of masturbation, showing the, you know, the way how should be done, say the size doesn't matter, and so on and so on. And I was he was look for me was like my grandmother talk about sex I will be I will shame looking at her to telling all this story I remember anyway. So she wrote lots of lots of books and so on. So I was thinking she kind of stopped doing TV shows because she's pretty old. She's in the, I think, a beginning of 90s or late 80s. So I was thinking, so what if you we all artists have sexual problems, why we don't invite Doctor Ruth and we make the kind of, you know, public talk with her. We have little red telephone next. So the artists will call and tell the sexual problem and Doctor Who to give them advices. So that could be interesting, you know, kind of change of the of the symposium and put some humor into



it. So the everybody, the love, the idea I was going to be great. And then I was flying together with Doctor Ruth, in a plane from, from New York to Iceland. Doctor Ruth totally. You know, with the credit. Rude to me. Doesn't even want to talk. I don't think she liked too much women. And anyway, she had she had three suitcases and she was asking me to carry for her, so. And the suitcases was so heavy, full of books. So then she she, she also was trying to not to go to Iceland only for symposium, but also to sell some of her books. And there was a brand new book called *The Sex for dummies*. So she gave me one copy, but she said to me, you have to read this by night and tomorrow morning give me back. She didn't want to give me the copy. Then the journalist came to make photographs with me in her, and she said, I don't want to take photos with you. I prefer myself. So he was like, I actually one reason why she was there and to kind of renew her career against the really art and be really generous. It was it was my idea and she ignored me the old way. So I got really frustrated and I was telling to Jonas all my problems, and he said, what are we going to do? Why we don't make a plan against Doctor Root? Because finally, she didn't even want to do this red telephone. She want to do any of these things? What? All she wanted to do is to actually give a lecture like she always do. Like a television. Same, same kind of thing about sex for dummies. And this was it. But this was not the reason why she was there. So we decided to put her lecture in the morning when. We know that Iceland people drink all night and nobody will come in the morning ever, because they are sleeping. So we put the lecture 9:00. So she came 9:00 with them to to do the sex for dummies lecture, which was like six people in the audience because the only organizers okay to come. No problem. And then we made the know little film, Jonas, Yanis and me and his son, we made a film about, you know, this unsuccessful visit of Doctor Ruth. It was lots of fun. This is something



that I didn't realize. He didn't like it behind the camera with me. Because basically, when we are together, we talk. And this his son will take the camera and film little or, you know, make little snapshots with the phone and stuff like that. But we, we really talk face to face, but probably with a larger audience. And, and I think this was the case that I noticed in receiving the this big award in Austria that actually he was filming the entire ceremony, including president gave him the words, he had the camera in his head, which was impossible to do, but he did.

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KATIE DAVISON:

I think it's interesting how much Jonas and the people who were kind of leaving after World War Two coming from Europe changed American culture. I'm just wondering, you also have done a lot of work here, if there's something that you can fill us in on about the experience of being from kind of like a small country.

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MARINA ABRAMOVIĆ:

The biggest problem with this, especially for the, you know, East European, you know, people, it's that when they work in their own country, they have to really work with restrictions. And these restrictions have to actually they have to create their own rules to break this restrictions. And the work have the power because of the fact they're breaking restrictions and they have the message, which is very strong. But then most of the East European people coming out of the of the countries and going to the like, in my case, I came out of exit was Slavia into Amsterdam in the 70s, which everything was free. I



mean, me being naked in ex-Yugoslavia and cutting my hair was burning in the in the five point star. It was one thing in there. What if I will do the same thing in Amsterdam? Nobody care. Because, you know, there was there was people, was there crazy, and there was already complete freedom. So this was really difficult. And many people get lost because of that translation from one restriction to non restriction of situation. So you have to actually find your own way. You have to reinvent yourself in a different way and creative different type of restrictions that you have to break in the country which freedom is much bigger. And this is what he done.

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KATIE DAVISON:

One last question I had for you was when he passed, how did you--how did you feel?

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MARINA ABRAMOVIĆ:

I know for a while that he was not well, first of all, and just few days before he passed away, the consulate Corbis was our mutual friend told me that he's not going well, not doing well, and his son also sent a note. So I was ready. And, you know, everybody have expiring dates and I see the life in that in in different ways than many other people. I love the Sophie Sophie centers. And I hope that will happen. You know to me too, that life is a dream and that is waking up. And I also like the three things that we should also face when we are dying. Not to be angry, not dying. Fear a dark consciously. And I feel that with you on us happen all these things. I think he was very aware of of his

dying, and I think he was ready for it. And this is a blessing and we hope this kind of that to everybody.

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