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MARINA ABRAMOVIC: AN INTERVIEW

If there’s anyone who can rightly be called an art-world diva, it’s Marina Abramovic. A preeminent performance artist with a commanding presence on the international art scene for over 30 years, Abramovic is known for intense duration-based works that demand extraordinary physical, mental and emotional strength. The Belgrade-born artist has also produced an imposing array of sculptures, installations, photos and video pieces. As Abramovic approaches 64, she and her work (in many respects one and the same thing) are as vital and visible as ever. She was one of the five women artists featured in Chiara Clemente’s recent documentary, *Our City Dreams*. Last year, in Europe, Abramovic showed a provocative new multi-screen video, *Eight Lessons on Emptiness with a Happy End*, and a related photo series, “The Family,” all shot in Laos. She is the curator of an extensive performance-art program at this summer’s Manchester International Festival [U.K., July 2-19]. Two of the biggest endeavors on her horizon are the Marina Abramovic Institute in Hudson, N.Y., slated to open in 2012, and a career retrospective that will debut next year at New York’s Museum of Modern Art [Mar. 9-May 31, 2010] before embarking on a two-year international tour. On a recent visit to her office in Manhattan, I inquired about many of these projects and others.

DAVID EBONY: I would like to focus our conversation today on your recent experiences in Laos, the video and photos you produced there. But let’s begin with your upcoming MoMA show. Marina Abramovic First I’d like to show you the model of the MoMA installation and tell you about some of the plans for the retrospective. I haven’t really shared them with anyone yet. The show’s titled “Marina Abramovic: The Artist is Present,” and it opens one year from yesterday. I’m very excited about it.

DE: From the model, it looks like a very elaborate installation.

MARINA ABRAMOVIC: It’s going to be a radical display. It covers only my performance works. You know, basically I have made three groups of works: Artist Body works—these are my performances, and the focus of the MoMA show; Public Body works, including sculptures and interactive public installations, which aren’t so well known in the U.S.; and the Student Body works, about my teaching young artists to perform. It was Klaus Biesenbach [P.S.1 and MoMA curator] who decided to cover only the first group in the retrospective.

The show begins with the actual car, or van, that Ulay [Uwe Laysiepen, Abramovic’s early collaborator and life-partner for 12 years] and I lived in, traveled in and worked out of for several years early in our careers. In another room there will be slide projections, or rather videos to replace the slide projections that everybody used a lot in the 1970s. To represent my early performances that were restaged at the Guggenheim in 2005 [see *A.i.A*., Feb. ’06], we’ll show the videos made at that time.

DE: Are all the performances going to be represented by documentary material?

MA: Actually, we are auditioning performers right now—we need to hire 17 in all—who will reenact some of my past performances every day in the museum galleries. For a few of the pieces, I need someone with some experience with Butoh. The question here is also time. I can't expect performers to do these endurance tests all day long. There are some great challenges for the performers. Plus, there's a commitment of three months. This part of the exhibition will end with *Balkan Baroque* [Abramovic's hours-long performance, in which she frantically scrubbed with a brush heaps of butchered cow bones, and which many saw as a response to the war and carnage in the 1990s in the former Yugoslavia].

DE: That was the first of your performances I saw in person [at New York's Sean Kelly Gallery in 1995]. It was really unforgettable.

MA: You know, I toured that performance for about four years, and for four years after I still smelled the bloody bones on me. Even if I didn't really smell the bones, I thought I smelled them.

DE: Will you perform during the run of the show?

MA: Yes, every day. I'm planning that now. I'll appear each day on a sort of shelflike platform, one of 10 attached almost like a series of steps on the main wall of the second-floor atrium. It will be a very simple arrangement, with just me on the platform and a few props and objects, maybe.

DE: Will you be living there, as you did in *The House with the Ocean View* [a 12-day performance at Sean Kelly in 2002]?

MA: No, they won't allow me to. It's against museum security and regulations. I'll have to leave at closing time. It will be like a regular workday for me. I want to be humble and vulnerable in the work. I'll start from the top down. I'll be on each step for approximately one week. I'll use some different objects. It will be about a kind of geographic and spiritual journey of an artist. I'm planning to have lounge chairs in front of the wall, like beach chairs, where the visitors can sit and watch. There will be telescopes, too. The idea is that you really can see the detail if you want, but you can also see the entire image. I will leave objects on the platforms as I go. I'm thinking of it basically as a luminous painting on the wall.

On one of the platforms, I'm thinking of wearing nothing but an enormous strap-on dildo. The idea is a personal one from when I first started to study art. I was full of hope, but a professor said you don't have the balls to be an artist. I went home crying desperately, thinking I could never be an artist because I'm not a man. So I have this idea now to appear with a really grotesque, huge penis. But it won't be used for the same kind of feminist statement as Lynda Benglis's *Artforum* ad from the 1970s. And it's not about porn images. It's about the artist being self-sufficient, and using a kind of male-female equilibrium.

DE: I wonder if MoMA will let you do that!

MA: Well, it will be on one of the upper levels, so they'll have to climb way up there or send a helicopter or something to get me. Another idea I have is based on the Hindu goddess Kali, and some ancient images of the goddess with six heads. But the work will also represent a kind of circle of life. We'll see. The biggest problem now is finding the money for this, and for the 586 hours of recordings I'm planning.

DE: You still have some time.

MA: Yes, one year. But the catalogue materials are due the first of June. Arthur Danto is writing the essay, and I've been meeting with him several times a week to discuss the work. Another thing I want to do is record an Acoustiguide to the show. I've always been fascinated by those. I'll explain the story of each of my works in English, French, Italian, German and Slavic. I'll even try Chinese, although I don't think I could do it very well. Plus, all the early videos have to be restored and upgraded, so we need funding for that. There's so much to do. It's just insane. I'm also working on a theater piece with Robert Wilson titled *The Life and Death of Marina Abramovic*. It will premiere in 2011 and, hopefully, coincide with the other venues that the retrospective travels to after MoMA.

DE: Finding funding for a project like this must be extraordinarily difficult today.

MA: Yes, we are having an incredible economic crisis. But performance art really thrives during bad economic times. Performers always arrive when there's nothing to sell. Joan Jonas and I are maybe the only ones left from the early days still performing. But performance has always been an alternative art form. Beginning in the '80s, there was huge pressure on artists to make objects—to make paintings or sculptures. Maybe now things will be different. At the same time as my show, Tino Sehgal will be doing some performances at the Guggenheim Museum. And Klaus [Biesenbach] will be directing a performance workshop at that time. It will cover all of these questions: What are the conditions for performance art? How should documentation be made and presented? What is even considered an artwork?

DE: Has preparing for the show changed your way of thinking about the evolution of performance art, and about your own career?

MA: I'll be 64 at the time of the show. I do have this legacy, and I don't want to leave [the planet] without seeing it or examining it all in a certain way. This kind of thinking started with "Seven Easy Pieces" [the 2005 series of performances at New York's Guggenheim Museum in which Abramovic´c re-created a number of her early performance works as well as those by Joseph Beuys, Bruce Nauman, Vito Acconci and others].

DE: That series obviously required an enormous amount of training and discipline.

MA: For MoMA it will be similar. I've already started. When I make a new work, I have to go far away and isolate myself. To conceive the MoMA show, I went to an Ayurveda yoga retreat in south India for over a month this past winter. There are some strong restrictions there; you practically live on rice water. You totally detox. You really need time there. There's no computer, no phone, no fax. After a while, you arrive at a very peaceful state of mind. Sometimes, you need a period of time to disconnect in order to reconnect with the world.

DE: You returned with the concept for the atrium piece in mind?

MA: Yes. It parallels those stages of attaining complete emptiness. In the end, at ground level, you are the most powerful, though empty and vulnerable. The most important breakthrough for me was the idea to go from up to down, and not down to up. It's about humility. Our culture is so much about building up the ego of the artist. But it's not you who is important, it's the work. The ego is actually an obstacle to the work. In India this is somehow deeply understood. You have to go through a process of incredible discipline to get to a state of complete emptiness. At the lowest level, there is nothing. For a performance artist this is the most powerful tool. Then the art is truly the artist and not about the objects or props.

DE: But this is different from the ego?

MA: Yes, the artist should be empty and vulnerable, available and accessible. For me that's the point of the piece. Our culture is so much about labels, and the artists are made into Hollywood stars.

DE: Let's talk about the Laos project. First of all, how did you wind up working in Laos?

MA: France Morin [art historian and curator in charge of "The Quiet in the Land," a UNESCO and Laotian government-sponsored cultural endeavor] invited me to go to Laos as part of a program to introduce foreign artists to that country.

DE: Did you go with the intent of making a work?

MA: No, the first trip was just to look around and try to get to know the place. I asked to see the most important shamans. I just happened to arrive during a Buddhist holiday; it was a celebration of water. Everyone was out along the river. There were monks chanting. The entire population was there. At the same time the children were on the roads playing with Chinese-made, realistic-looking plastic toy weapons. During the ceremony they were running around shooting at each other and imitating bad TV shows. The adults and the monks didn't seem to mind. I was struck by the bizarre contrast of the children playing war games and the peaceful ceremony. It was a very ancient ritual with the shaman presiding.

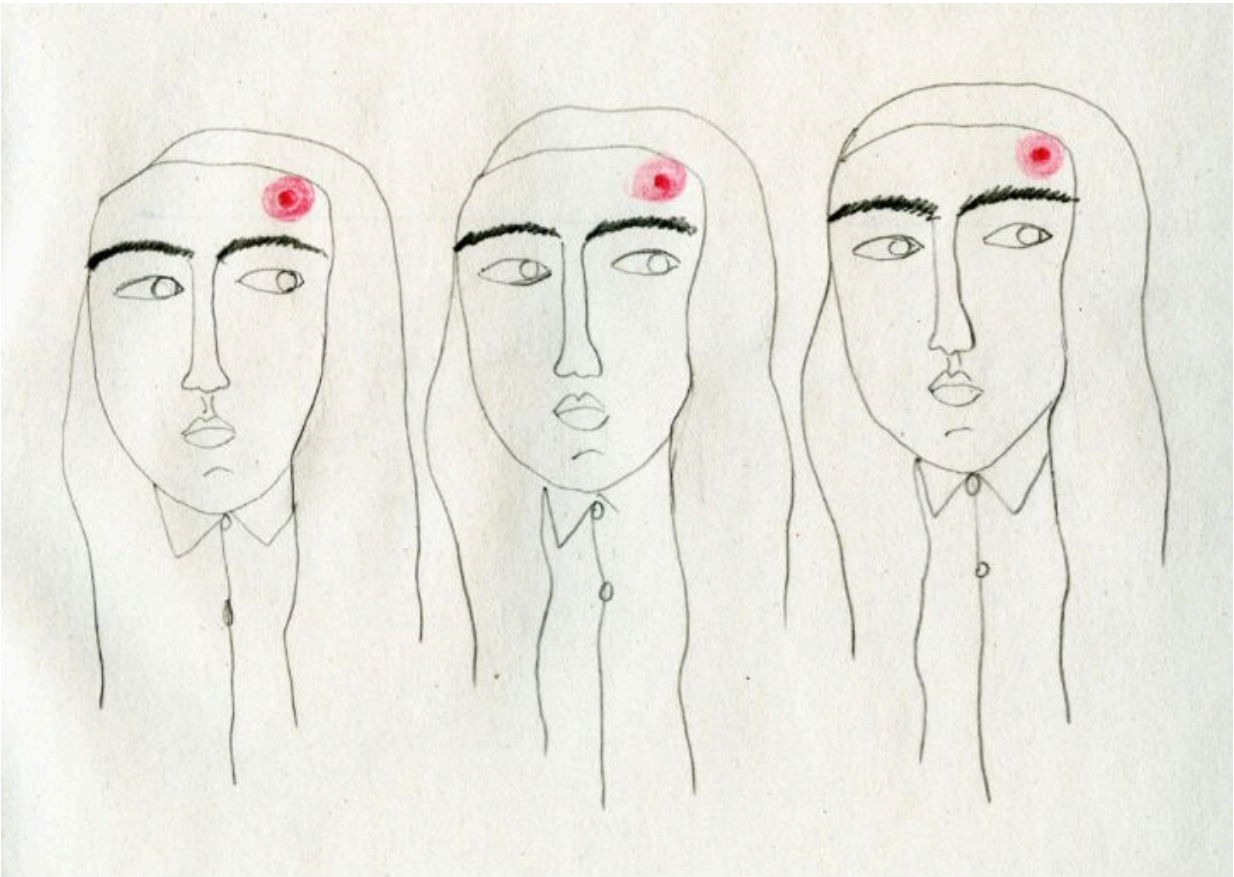
DE: It was a pre-Buddhist ritual?

MA: Yes. The shaman sacrificed a pig, and the ceremony was all about entering the spirit world. Afterward, I asked the shaman to tell me about or show me where the spirits lived. He took me to a holy island where no one ever sleeps. It was amazing. There was the sacred tree and the waterfall, which appear at the beginning and at the end of *Eight Lessons on Emptiness with a Happy End*. When I got back home, I had all of these ideas and images in my head. The children and their war games were haunting. The amount of violence shown on the TV in Laos is incredible. They watch completely unedited war scenes and ultraviolent Kung Fu movies.

DE: Do they receive TV signals from all over Southeast Asia?

MA: Yes. There are houses there where the antennas and the satellite dishes are so big, the houses are bending over. The antenna's bigger than the house. So the children are seeing all sorts of unedited material. And, in their war games, the children replay and imitate the images they see on TV all the time. I decided to return to Laos and make a film centered on the children's war games and the contrasts with Buddhism. I've worked with children before. It was also for a multi-channel video piece, made in Serbia, called *Count on Us* [2003]. I showed it at the Venice Biennale. We worked with 220 children all dressed in black.

They were a kind of chorus lying in a formation of a five-point star. I stood in the middle, also wearing black, but holding a human skeleton. In Laos, we built a simple house and filled it with furniture that was 20 percent bigger than in a normal house. It was to be more or less the children's headquarters. The logistics for the project were crazy. I took my Serbian crew with me, the same ones who worked on *Count on Us*. We had to rent a rice paddy from the village where we shot the film. It was very complicated with the local government. They thought we were going to use the film to criticize the communist system. One of the big problems was how to bring a large truck with a generator from Thailand to Luang Prabang in Laos. You can't make a film in Laos using local electricity because it's unstable. It comes and goes, and you could waste an enormous amount of time and money. So we got a generator in Bangkok, but they stopped the truck at the border. It was held up for days.



DE: Did the border guards want baksheesh—some kind of bribe?

MA: After the truck was held up for three days we went to talk with the border officials. Not a fee exactly, they called it a commission, a tariff or the local tax. Anyway, we finally gave an official $3,000, and *miraculously* the truck was allowed to cross the border. Then the casting was also complicated. There were lots of regulations about working with the children. There were 25 of them, accompanied by parents or other family members. Each child had to take a nap after lunch. There were some very young ones; they ranged in age from 4 to 10.

They were really amazing. One of the girls, especially, was a real actress, like a little Angelina Jolie. On the set, I really didn't want the children to perform without knowing what they were doing, so every time we shot a scene, we showed the playback or the images to them on the computer and explained everything. We bought lots of the plastic weapons at the local Chinese market and had uniforms made for the kids. Some of the machine guns had red laser guide lights.

DE: In your drawings and studies for the film, are those red dots on the faces and bodies the laser beams?

MA: Yes.

DE: At first I thought the red marks were wounds. The drawings are wonderful. Will you show them when you debut the video in the U.S.?

MA: I've been talking with Sean [Kelly] about that, about possibly making a gallery exhibition to coincide with the MoMA show. The Laos project won't be part of the retrospective.

DE: Since the children were the main performers in the Laos project?

MA: Yes, I'm in only one scene in the video, where I'm tied up, the vanquished one, and pulled by the children across the field. I'm kind of big, so the crew had to help with that. The children quickly learned to perform for the camera. Of course, from TV they already knew all sorts of combat moves, interrogation techniques and many ways of executing people. It's incredible. Not all of the images are about violence, however. Some scenes are of meetings and negotiations going on in the house.

DE: The house seems to be the center point of the film and the photos as well.

MA: Yes. I wanted to burn the house at the end of the film. But when I saw the poverty all around, I thought it would be obscene to destroy the place. In the end, it was recycled and the villagers use parts of it in other ways. I was thinking that I should burn a small-scale model of the house. We built the model, but it looked so fake in the video, I decided not to use it. Instead, we burned the children's weapons. That's the "happy end" in the title. They finally decide to get rid of the weapons. Near the end, the children run out of the house and throw the weapons in a pile to burn. For the final shots, the whole village came to watch. The head of the communist party for the region came, and local officials, plus all the families of the children and school professors. But the smoke from the pile of burning plastic toys was just horrible. It sent a thick black smoke cloud everywhere. The children wanted to keep the weapons, and were upset that we were burning them, so we had to buy them new ones. The film is about war, the killing and destruction, and in the end there's complete emptiness, a landscape without people. It begins and ends with the images of the waterfall and the sacred tree.

DE: The video, a 26-minute loop, is shown on five panels, two vertical and three horizontal, so it's doesn't have a linear narrative as in a conventional film.

MA: The format is similar to Count on Us, and there are similarities in the theme, too. The earlier piece refers in some way to my communist/Orthodox Christian upbringing. In later years, I turned to Buddhism and Buddhist practice, and so I am exploring here in the Laos project the communism/Buddhism culture and those relationships on a personal level, too. In some sense, all the themes are personal. That's why I called the photo series "The Family." The title, *Eight Lessons on Emptiness*, is completely Buddhist. It's dedicated to friends and enemies alike, an idea that comes from the Dalai Lama's thoughts on forgiveness.

DE: The photos in "The Family" series were shot at the same time as the film. Can you talk a bit about a few of the images?

MA: There's a negotiating scene [*The Family II*] inside the house, and another [*The Family IV*], where they are asleep. The children had to stay in those positions for a long time. For *The Family III*, the one with the girls sleeping under the pink blankets, we cut a hole in the roof of the house and set the cameras up there. After lunch the children took a nap, and so they are actually sleeping. I would never have been able to get them all to pose as if they were sleeping. I bought these hot-pink blankets in the Chinese market. I liked the extreme contrast of the children's innocence and the machine guns in this photo. Again, the image has a personal meaning. I think of my parents, who were often in uniform during the day, and at night they always slept with weapons nearby or under the bed.

DE: The one photo of you with all of the weapons [*The Family XI*] is a startling shot that doesn't seem as closely related to the film as the other pictures.

MA: While we were shooting the video, I was constantly walking around with armfuls of the children's weapons. After a while, I started to think of it as a bouquet. It's an ironic image as a bouquet of guns. It's part of the photo edition, but the image wasn't included in the film.

DE: *The Family B* is another powerful photo. It shows you with a boy holding a machine gun seated on your lap, and a boy in a monk's robe standing behind. It seems to merge Christian iconography with an image of a Buddhist ideal.

MA: It's a very important piece for me. It's the Laos family dynamic—one son is trained to kill, and the other trained to pray.

DE: Do you think of yourself as a political artist? When I first saw the images of your works from Laos, they struck me as your most direct political statement to date.

MA: A good work of art has to have layers of meaning and many components. If you limit yourself, it's not good. I don't ever think of myself as a political artist. Politics is just one facet of the work. I don't like to label myself. To label your work as performance art, conceptual art, political art or even feminist art is dangerous because it deals with specific issues. Then it's like the newspapers. Your work is dated. If you react to a specific current event, your work will always have that date. I avoid defining myself like that. That's how I am able to survive all this time.

DE: Some artists are able to do it quite well, though. I'm thinking of Hans Haacke, for instance.

MA: That's true. His "Germania" installation at the Venice Biennale [1993] was a really amazing experience. But it transcended so much. It was not only about Germany or specific to the German state. It had a universal theme. The same is true of my *Balkan Baroque* and also the Laos project. In some way *Eight Lessons* relates to young people in any country reacting to war and violence and to the issue of child-soldiers. The themes are not specific to Laos. I just happened to make the piece there, but it could just as well apply to Middle America. Any kid in the world today plays these incredibly violent video games that could easily become a reality. The Laos piece addresses the issue on many levels. And it's also personal in some way.

DE: The most recent of all your works, which you produced since the Laos project, the photos *Happy Xmas, Portrait with Potatoes* and *Portrait with Onion* [all 2008], are self-portraits. Especially in contrast with the Laos works, these seem totally personal and intimate.

MA: The series is called "Back to Basics." I shot the photos in upstate New York. In a way, the series is about poverty, inflation and money. I really felt the need to go back to basics. The potato image is very much an homage to van Gogh, especially his Potato Eaters. There's something very basic about peeling potatoes. I always sit at the kitchen table alone peeling them. *Portrait with Onion* is a meditation on onions. In the photo, you can see that, underneath the onions, there's an article about Sarah Palin on the front page of the *New York Times*. The photo relates to a performance work I did in 1995, when I ate onions and cried, complaining about my life [*The Onion*]. It goes with a text I wrote. I'll read some of it to you: "I am tired of changing planes so often, waiting in the waiting rooms and tired of waiting for endless passport controls. I am tired of more career decisions. I'm tired of lonely hotel rooms, room service, long distance phone calls, bad TV movies, tired of always falling in love with the wrong man. I'm tired of being ashamed of the wars in Yugoslavia . . . I want to get old, really old, so that none of this matters any more. I want to understand and see clearly what is behind all of this. I want not to want anymore." And I'm eating this onion and constantly crying. I thought it was time to make another version.

Happy Xmas is also an image of me crying. Artists work better with pain than with happiness. Pain transforms you. When you are happy, there's not much to do. Pain, emotional pain, can sometimes enable you to make deep changes in your life. In my present situation of being abandoned again, I was crying and crying. *Happy Xmas* is a kind of Butoh image; it shows a state of mind. Lately, I've been reading passages from my biography written by James Westcott, a young author who spent two years researching the book. He's now selecting the illustrations, working with my assistant, Davide Balliano. The book's being published by MIT Press and will come out early next year, in time for the MoMA show. It's called When *Marina Abramovic Dies*. What do you think of the title?

DE: I think it's good. It's mysterious. There's a certain suspense about it that makes you want to find out if and when you did die. Maybe it suggests that you might never die, or that you die again and again.

MA: James interviewed most everyone who knows me in Belgrade, Amsterdam and New York. The contradictions that people say are amazing, but so are the connections. It begins and ends with the death of my mother, Danica. Everything she did was official. She was the director of the Museum of Revolution and Art in Belgrade, and was a friend of Tito. She died just last year.

DE: Was she supportive of your work, and your career?

MA: After she died, I went to her apartment and found that in all of the catalogues, books and clippings about my work that I had given her, she had gone through and made black bands across the body in pictures of me naked, or she cut them out altogether. When reading James's book, I really cried a lot when I read the passages about my split with Ulay. A friend once asked him, "How could you break up with Marina?" And Ulay replied, "Because I thought I deserved less." I always think I'm too much for everybody. Just too much, you know.

DE: And you've gone through that again recently.

MA: Yes, Paolo [Italian artist Paolo Canevari] and I were together for 12 years also. I just can't seem to get to 13 years with anyone.

DE: Well, if it makes you feel any better, you know 13 is an unlucky number.

MA: This time it's worse because we're older. For example, Paolo drove us everywhere. Now I have to work on getting my driver's license. I've been practicing with a driving instructor at my place upstate. If I pass the driver's test next week, I'll be the first female in my family ever to have a license.

DE: You've also been working upstate on your foundation in Hudson. You recently bought a large disused theater there for the purpose. Are there new developments?

MA: Yes. It's going to be called the Marina Abramovic Institute. I think it's a better name than "foundation."

DE: It suggests more possibilities, a broader range of activities.

MA: That's true. It can be a study center, a performance space, many things. Its nonprofit status finally came through. At first I had an architect's plans to make complex renovations, but I brought some friends to see the theater, and they gave some good ideas for a much simpler plan that's a lot less expensive. It will be doable. Its main focus will be duration-based art. The Institute will sponsor performances and films that are a minimum of six hours long. We will have comfortable chairs, like chaise longues or beds, provide blankets and have food available so the audience can really spend time there. If a piece is 10 hours long, you can go to sleep and wake up and still be in the art space. It's very important for artists to think of duration works to perform. The most important thing artists can do now is to stretch the present moment. Life is becoming faster and faster, and so we have to absolutely make art slower and slower.

Photo credit:

- Marina Abramovic: *Portrait with Potatoes,* 2008, chromogenic print, 48 inches square. Courtesy Sean Kelly Gallery, New York. All works © Abramovic/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York.
- *The Family VII*, 2008, chromogenic print, 88½ by 70⅞ inches. Works this article, unless otherwise noted, courtesy Guy Bärtschi Gallery, Geneva.
- *The Family I,* 2008, chromogenic print, 70⅞ by 88½ inches.
- This spread, stills from *8 Lessons on Emptiness with a Happy End*, 2008,5-screen video installation, 26 minutes.Courtesy Guy Bärtschi Gallery and Laboral Escena, Gijón.
- Drawing from the artist's diary, 2008, pencil and watercolor on paper, approx. 12 by 16 inches.
- *The Family B*,2008, chromogenic print,59 by 47¼ inches.
- *The Family VI,* 2008, chromogenic print, 70⅞ by 116 inches.