

Marina Abramović
The Artist Is Present

MoMA

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Danger and Disturbance: The Art of Marina Abramović

Hans Ulrich Obrist: But, they all have to do with danger basically? With extremeness?

Marina Abramović: Yes, That's definitely what I'm interested in. I'm interested in art that disturbs and that pushes that moment of danger.¹

Marina Abramović's life as an artist is internally related to the history of performance art itself, beginning in the early 1970s—or the late 1960s—and coming down to the present day. As an art student in Yugoslavia, performance art initially existed somewhere between a distant rumor and a dream of almost magical artistic possibilities—a way of being an artist that was liberating, immediate, dangerous, and thrilling. Scholars of the subject can trace a chronicle of live performance that was ancillary to various movements in modern art—in Futurism, Dada, Constructivism, and beyond, but the kind of radical performance that excited her involved testing certain boundaries that defined admissible conduct or bodily endurance, and often put the artist in unexplored moral spaces. Oddly, this was not taking place only or even mainly in what one thinks of as centers of avant-garde investigation. "In the mid-seventies in Belgrade," she said in an interview, "news of recent developments in performance began filtering in from Bulgaria, Poland, and Romania."² It was not as though the new performance was somehow an Iron Curtain phenomenon, but rather that it was a global one, since the same edginess could be found to characterize performances in New York, Los Angeles, London, and Paris. Nothing could be imagined more distant from the aesthetics of the School of Paris than performances such as those of Gina Pane, a graduate of the École des Beaux-Arts, who climbed barefoot up ladders with razor blades embedded in the rungs. It was as though beneath and beyond the political divisions of the world, an art of voluntary ordeals was making its way into the consciousness of men and women everywhere who were concerned to press against boundaries, using their bodies as means.

By the end of the century, Abramović had become one of the defining artists of radical performance, which has now begun to be welcomed into museum precincts. It certainly was one of the vital threads of postmodernist art, marked particularly by its connection with feminism, and holding an appeal to the large number of women who were seeking a way, as artists, to express their wider concerns through their bodies. The art history of the seventies saw the marginalization of painting as the favored vehicle of experiment and expression, and the scene of performance replaced the canvas as an arena for artistic action, to preempt a famous metaphor from Harold Rosenberg, who inevitably still thought of painting as the basic medium on which to ground artistic theory. Performance opened up space for the treatment of issues central to women's consciousness, which gained edge and power when presented through the medium of the naked female body of the artist. In any case, the first tentative museum acquisitions were inevitably objects that had served as props for performance and carried the aura of having been used in performances, and so had the status of relics, whose claim to art had to be explained by describing the performances they helped facilitate. Since performances themselves cannot be hung on walls, to be looked at and compared with one another, the gap between performance and other genres of art had to be overcome. A natural strategy would be to invite artists to perform in the museum's gallery spaces. But how do we deal with the inevitable fact that as artworks, performances are destined to outlive their performers, who are intimately involved in what we might call the substance of the genre, because of the centrality, in performance, of the human body?

These questions were canvassed in a searching conversation that took place in 1998 between Abramović and the critic and theoretician Thomas McEvilley that touches upon the philosophy of performance and really deepens our philosophical understanding of art itself.³ This becomes obvious the moment we reflect on the title of Abramović's show at The Museum of Modern Art, *The Artist Is Present*. Presence almost belongs to the discourse of icons. Theoreticians in Eastern Europe used to speak of the mystical presence of the saint in the icon. Artists are not saints, but there is certainly a sense in which the question of their presence in a performance has at least a resonance in the metaphysics



2.
Rhythm 10, 1973. Performance, 1 hour.
 Museo d'Arte Contemporanea, Villa
 Borghese, Rome

of art. How do we present a performance when she whose performance it is, is no longer present? As a general rule, artists are not present in the works they make. But for the performer, the medium is his or her body. That is what gives this art its immediacy and unpredictability. Obviously, the question then becomes how we replace the body of the performer with the body of another. It is an extraordinary transplant, and indispensable if performances are to be preserved. If they are to be preserved, performance must be what the American philosopher Nelson Goodman distinguished as *allographic* (in contrast with *autographic*)—they are essentially two-staged, like plays or novels.⁴ This may have been concealed when the artist was present in the work because the work was essentially with her or his body, as in Abramović's first acknowledged work, *Rhythm 10*, in which she spreads her hands out flat on the floor and sticks knives between her fingers (fig. 2). The mere problem of preservation forces us to acknowledge the existence of something like a score—or script—and then the enactment through performance of what the score demands. Hence a two-staged entity.

At one point in their conversation, Abramović said to McEvilley, "I want to do a series of classical performances by performance artists of the 1970s, but I will be doing all of them myself, like a musician playing Mozart again years later."⁵ This is an amazing statement. It acknowledges that there is a canon of "classical" performances, dating from the seventies, which are deeply connected with the actual artists who created them. But they only exist as hearsay, augmented, if we are lucky, with photographs or primitive videos. The question is how to *bring them back to life*. In what I assume is a somewhat later conversation, this time with Hans Ulrich Obrist, she names some of the performances. "I definitely want to redo *Seedbed*, by Vito Acconci, you know, elevating the floor in the gallery and masturbating underneath. Then Chris Burden's *Crucifixion on the Volkswagen* piece. Then the Dennis Oppenheim *Tarantella* piece. And then Gina Pane and a work called *Candlebed*. And my own piece, *Rhythm 0* (fig. 3), where I am an object and there is a table with 72 objects including a pistol with a bullet."⁶

In effect, someone has to extrapolate a score, and then enact the score in a way that maps onto the original performances. Abramović gets the art history right and in the same breath gets the ontology of

performative artwork right. Getting all this right means that she already sees the kinds of difficulties raised by substituting herself for the performers who created those classical performances of the 1970s. The most I can contribute at this point is what a critical discussion of such a performance would look like. Fortunately, Abramović reconstituted several of these performances, including one of her own, some years after her talk with McEvilley. It was a tremendous beginning for the new phase in performance history and a prelude to the problems she would confront in *The Artist Is Present*.

Seven Easy Pieces was presented over the course of a single week in November 2005 at the Guggenheim Museum in New York. In it, Abramović undertook to reperform a number of historically significant performances that originally had been presented to audiences in the 1960s or '70s, most of them by artists other than herself. This involved replacing the original performer with herself—a live person for a live person—and then, in effect, reenacting the performance in such a way that a new audience would be able to experience the piece as the original audience did. Obtaining the use of a museum, rather than a theater, as her performance space for these often strenuous enactments emphasized that performers saw themselves as visual artists whose natural locus was the gallery setting, which set up a spontaneous affinity between the human body and a more conventional work of art. The difference was that the art was alive, and that it was ephemeral and, ideally, spontaneous: "No rehearsal, no repetition, no predicted end," as Abramović puts it.⁷ This meant that the original audience did not know what was going to happen. Performer and audience alike took their chances. Nevertheless, Abramović underwent the same risks and ordeals as the original performer, and the audience experienced a living performer undergoing real ordeals with flame and ice, so that some of the excitement and danger, and hence the uncertainty of the original event, got carried over into its re-enactment.

News of performance as a new form of art reached Abramović before she herself became a performer, and it greatly appealed to her because it promised something radical—a favorite word of hers—and entailed certain risks. This was, one might say, a personality trait with her. In her work *Biography*, she describes an episode that took place when she was fourteen. It involved Russian roulette, which was to figure in a



3.
Rhythm 0, 1974. Performance, 6 hours
(8 P.M.–2 A.M.). Studio Morra, Naples

number of her performances. On that occasion, she took a pistol and one cartridge into a room, placed the cartridge in the revolver, gave it a spin, held it to her head, and pulled the trigger. Nothing happened. She handed the pistol to her playmate and, again nothing happened when he pulled the trigger. She then aimed the gun at a bookcase, and the bullet entered the spine of Dostoyevsky's *The Idiot*. "A few minutes later," she writes, "I broke out into a cold sweat, and I was trembling through my whole body. I had an inexpressible fear."⁸ My own feeling is that this "inexpressible fear" can be addictive. It is the sour taste of death a person feels in certain extreme situations. "When I was in Yugoslavia," she told McEvilley, "I was always thinking that art was a kind of question between life and death, and some of my performances really included the possibility of dying, you know, during the piece; it could happen."⁹

As a general rule, this feeling is not part of normal aesthetic experience. It is rather the feeling one gets in driving at breakneck speeds, or coming down dangerous slopes, or waiting until the absolutely last minute to open the parachute. The possibility of dying was part of what drew her to this art, and the taste of death that daredevils speak of must have given her a sense of pressing against limits and overcoming them, and changing the parameters of her life. "In my life before leaving Yugoslavia I took a completely male approach, really go for it and heroism and the possibility of being killed. And I think that if I had continued my work as it was going, at some point I would have been killed."¹⁰ The possibility was the mark of Abramović's first phase of performance, and I think in general it is what drew her to performance in the first place. What makes the performance art of the seventies different from that of previous decades was that it brought the reality of extreme experience into being an artist. In 1971, in *Shoot Piece*, Chris Burden arranged to be shot at by a live bullet from a real gun. The shooter was a trained marksman, but even so the bullet is said to have taken away a piece of flesh. Performance was inflected by shed blood at the decade's outset, and the shadow of death haunted the boundary between life and art. In a piece Abramović described for McEvilley, she would come on stage dressed the way her mother wanted her to dress, but carrying a gun with a single bullet and pull the trigger. If she survived, she would dress the way she wanted to dress, leave the stage, and begin to live as a free woman. So

performance offered extraordinary possibilities most people can achieve without playing Russian roulette. In *Rhythm 0*, performed in Naples in 1974 (see pages 74–79), there was a loaded gun in an array of objects she arranged on a table. The audience was free to use any of these objects on her—needles, scissors, white paint, whip, lipstick—or the gun (fig. 3). The audience had the opportunity to kill the artist if they wished, or feed her grapes.

The challenge the avant-garde felt in the 1960s was overcoming the gap between art and life. In 1973 the poet Vito Acconci really ejaculated in the Sonnabend Gallery, though he was hidden from the eyes of visitors by an artificial floor, though he emitted sexual noises that were amplified in the space occupied by visitors. The Viennese Actionists poured blood over themselves, or cut themselves to death. VALIE EXPORT, associated with the Actionists, wore specially altered pants that allowed her pubic thatch to be seen by her audience. I've called all this *disturbatory art*,¹¹ and disturbance was the mark of seventies performance. Artists who engaged in it were not just reacting to Minimalism or Conceptualism. It was rather a manifestation of deep changes in the culture as a whole, a perturbation that rumbled through civilization, and to which young people were particularly susceptible. It took the form of hostility to the generation before theirs, as responsible for the wars and inequities that defined the world they were about to inherit. Disturbance in the late sixties was an amplification of the refusal to serve that took the form of buffoonery by Dada at the time of the First World War, for which the Dadaists held bourgeois society responsible. The avant-garde of the seventies invented disturbance. I have often cited an experience that Eric Fischl told he had at the new CalArts in 1970:

We had this drawing class that Allan Hacklin had put together. I arrived late. It started around nine or ten in the morning, but I couldn't get there until eleven. I walked into the studio and everybody was naked. Right! Everybody was naked. Half the people were covered with paint. They rolled around on the ground, on pieces of paper that they had torn off a roll. The two models were sitting in the corner absolutely still, bored to tears. Everybody else was throwing stuff around and had climbed up onto the roof and jumped into buckets of paint. It was an absolute zoo.¹²



4.
Lips of Thomas, 1975.
Performance, 2 hours.
Galerie Krinzinger, Innsbruck

This episode in art education belonged to the era that *Seven Easy Pieces* sought to recapture. Abramović was seeking to revitalize for the benefit of a post-disturbational audience some of the turmoil that defined the world in which she became an artist, when performance gave her and her peers a chance to play Russian roulette in the name of art. I have always felt that when major social changes take place, they first affect the arts. In 1968 her father, a partisan hero, addressed the students who were in revolt against what he had fought for while his daughter was mastering a new form of art in which she all but killed herself. She nearly immolated herself in the climactic work by lying down in a space constructed in the form of the partisan star. The performance—*Rhythm 5*—brought the seriousness of ritual into the Student Cultural Center in Belgrade in 1974. Here is the score:

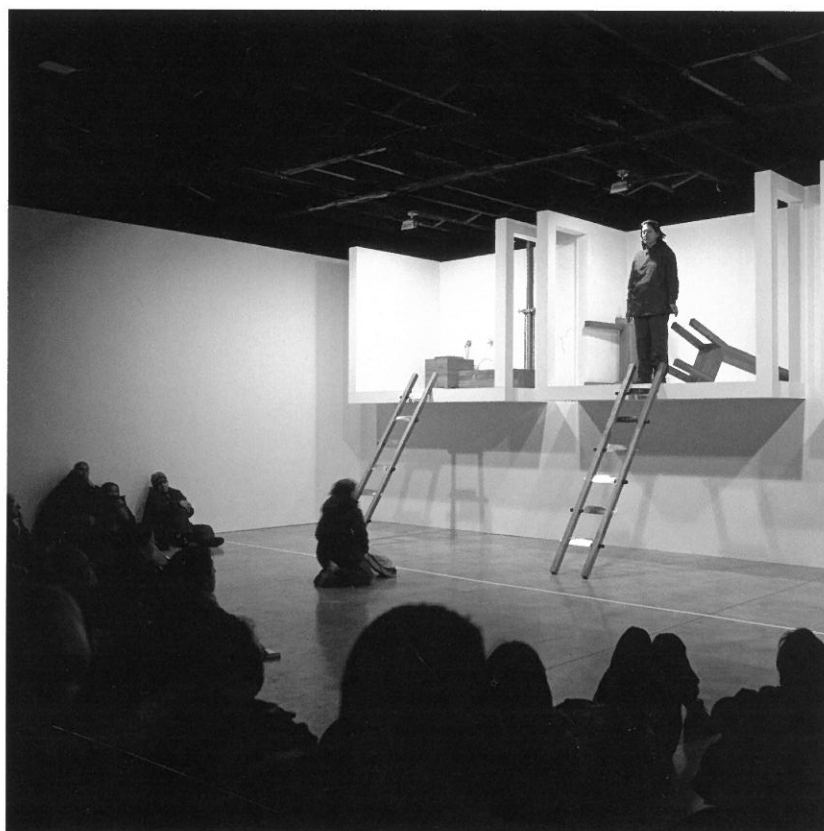
I construct a five-pointed star (the construction is made of wood shavings soaked in 100 liters of petrol)
Performance
I light the star.
I walk around the star.
I cut my hair and throw it into each end of the star.
I cut my fingernails and throw them into each end of the star.
I cut my toenails and throw them into each end of the star.
I enter the empty space in the star and lie down.¹³

"I was supposed to stay there," she tells McEvilley, "till it burned down, but as I was lying there the fire took up all the oxygen and I passed out. Nobody knew what was happening till a doctor in the audience noticed it and pulled me out. This was when I realized that the subject of my work should be the limits of the body."¹⁴

In the most satisfactory of the reperformed pieces in *Seven Easy Pieces*—*Lips of Thomas*—Abramović was herself the other artist: she had first performed it thirty years earlier to the day, on November 14, 1975, in Galerie Krinzinger in Innsbruck. In the course of the ordeal(s) of which it consists, the artist, in a state of nudity, eats a pound of honey, drinks a liter of red wine, carves a five-point star in her belly (figs. 1, 4), waves a blood-streaked white flag to the rhythm of a lugubrious Russian

song, which causes her to weep. She then flagellates herself to the point of endurance, and finally lies on a cross of ice. Warm air is blown down from a suspended heater, until, ideally, her audience removes her from the bed of ice and carries her away, covered with their coats. She was twenty-nine years old at the time. The performance lasted two hours. It was a shamanistic exercise, in which the performer underwent extreme cold, extreme pain, and extreme bleeding. In more primitive cultures, she would have been credited with great powers, and perhaps she must be credited with them today. In any case, the practice of no other art requires the sacrifices that performance exacts. It cannot, despite the title, be an easy piece to perform. But neither can it be an easy piece to witness. It crosses boundaries most art does not approach, though it has occurred to me that some of the strong depictions of physical suffering painted for purposes of strengthening faith in the Counter-Reformation, in Rome, have something like that effect. One cannot simply relish the brushwork in Poussin's painting *The Martyrdom of Saint Erasmus* in the Vatican Collection, in which the saint is disemboweled. In some way performance restores the horror and sympathy of Baroque depictions of agony—or it can. The mandate of the Council of Trent was to depict such scenes with naturalistic exactitude. According to the great art historian Rudolf Wittkower: "Many of the stories of Christ and the saints deal with martyrdom, brutality, and horror and in contrast to Renaissance idealization, an unveiled display of truth was now deemed essential; even Christ must be shown 'afflicted, bleeding, spat upon, with his skin torn, wounded, deformed, pale, and unsightly,' if the subject requires it. . . . It is these 'correct' images that are meant to appeal to the emotions of the faithful and support or even transcend the spoken word."¹⁵

The body itself renders pointless the effort to try to depict it naturalistically: this is what bodies are. The psychology of empathy, which participants in the Council understood perfectly, was to use the depiction of suffering as a way of bonding between viewer and victim. The Reformation sought to dispense with images, as a way of destroying Catholicism. Catholicism then understood that the power of images is to preserve faith. A performance like *Lips of Thomas* was not created for such a purpose. The aim is nevertheless to give reality the power of images and forge a bond between audience and performer through art



5.
The House with the Ocean View (detail), 2002.
 Performance, 12 days, Sean Kelly Gallery, New York

that uses the real body as its means. Of course, then, the performer must endure whatever will engage the viewers' feelings. There is no illusion: cold is cruel, bleeding happens to the broken skin as something natural. But that means that the successful performance, *Lips of Thomas*, deals in extremes. The audience understands through seeing. It suffers with the suffering of the performer. Why performers would do it for reasons weaker than those of religion is difficult to understand, but that must explain the danger and the excitement promised by the medium. Small wonder that a young intense woman like Marina Abramović in the early seventies must have felt that only performance could give her what she needed as an artist. But she also discovered that she was protected by the mode of performance itself, as a kind of anesthetic, that enabled her to endure extremity.

There are certain differences between the two performances of *Lips of Thomas*, so *Lips of Thomas* 2005 is not a mere repetition of *Lips of Thomas* 1975. As near as I can tell, this is the same in most of the replications I know anything about. The script for 1975 makes no provision for the musical interlude, in which Abramović, wearing a partisan cap, waves a blood-streaked white flag as she listens, weeping softly, to the nationalistic song *Slavic Souls*. There is a metronome in 2005, but not in 1975. There is a pair of hiking boots and a staff, used by Abramović in her legendary walk across half the length of the Great Wall of China, where she and her lover, Ulay Laysiepen, embraced and ended their relationship on June 27, 1988. The shoes have come to have talismanic meaning for her: "When I step into them, I step into another kind of reality."¹⁶ The shoes appeared in her spectacular twelve-day performance *House with the Ocean View* (fig. 5), performed in the Sean Kelly gallery in 2002 as a kind of lamentation for 9/11. In an essay composed by someone deeply familiar with the "score" of the original performance, we learn that Abramović cut herself this time not with a shard of glass, but with a razor blade. And we learn, too, that there is a line around the performer that the public is not allowed to cross. So the performance ends when she ends it—not when the public, in utter tune with the artist, rises as one and bears her away, covered with their outdoor garments. My sense is that a change in attitude toward her audience must have undergone a change from 1975 to 2005. Or perhaps she wants it to be clear that she is there for the sake of the audience.

If the two versions of *Lips of Thomas* vary to the degree that my description suggests, then there must be considerable openness between performance and score, with room for substantial variation from performance to performance. And her students, who must know where the differences are, will ponder the meaning of the variations, which we would have no way of knowing about had there not been a reperformance. The notion of a score must not strictly define the performance in performance practice. Nelson Goodman famously wrote, "the most miserable performance without actual mistakes does count as [a genuine instance of the work], while the most brilliant performance with a single wrong note does not."¹⁷ But that allows in performance a fairly loose notion of "the same work." The thirty years between Abramović's two performances were filled with episodes of highly personal meaning that must have come flooding back to the artist as she executed her piece. "For Abramović," Sandra Umatherm writes, "this evening signifies not only the reenactment and reinternment of her own composition, but also a look into and the recollection of a certain phase of her artistic and private past. This double level of meaning is one of the intriguing things about this new version of *Lips of Thomas*."¹⁸ In truth, the second performance is both reperformance and commentary on the first.

Abramović did not rely on the para-anesthesia of the performance mode in reperforming the 1973 *The Conditioning*, in which Gina Pane originally lay on an iron bed frame with fifteen burning candles beneath her body. Pane, according to the devoted witness Umatherm, held out for thirty minutes, but Abramović stayed the course of seven hours which each reperformance was intended to last in *Seven Easy Pieces*. She wore fireproof overalls, and got off the bed frame every hour to change the candles. According to Umatherm, there is a physical change: "Her face has turned pale, her movements are slower and more sluggish."¹⁹ There is evidently a moral change in the audience, "The longer the evening goes on the more I feel committed to her and to the performance." Similarly, a member of the audience, taped after *Lips of Thomas*, asks rhetorically, "How can you walk out on this piece?"

There is a piece of psychology here that I do not know what to do with in the domain of art. When Jesus takes three of his disciples to the Garden of Gethsemane and begins to pray that he does not have to



6.
Yoko Ono performing *Cut Piece*,
Carnegie Recital Hall, New York,
March 21, 1965

go through the physical agony of the crucifixion, the disciples fall asleep, incurring Christ's wrath. "He came to the disciples and found them sleeping, and said to Peter, 'What, could you not watch with me one hour?' Despite which, they sleep again. In the end Christ says 'Sleep on now, and take your rest. Behold the hour is at hand' (Matt. 26:40–46)." The thought is that they should have remained awake in the moment of truth in which his prayer is denied. In a great novel, *The Guide*, by R. K. Narayan, a con man agreed to pray for rain, thinking he can eat surreptitiously, but the people of the community remain awake, and he commits himself to them, even if it means his death. Something keeps the audience there, the spirit trumps the weakness of the flesh, even though this is just a performance. It is a feature of performance that it can set up as a para-religious connection between audience and performer, for which the presence of the performer is a necessary condition, at least for some performances.

It did not happen with all seven of the *Easy Pieces*. It did not happen with Abramović's reperformances of Acconci's *Seedbed* (see pages 188–89), where the performer and the audience are screened from one another. For just this reason, it is not clear how important a reperformance of this piece is, so far as re-creating the feeling of Acconci's audience is concerned. Neither, for different reasons, did it happen with the reperformances of VALIE EXPORT's *Action Pants: Genital Panic* (see pages 90–91), where the impulse of the original audience was to flee. As set up in the Guggenheim, Abramović did not advance on the audience, but sat, immobile, her pubis exposed, holding a gun—a kind of living statue. The gun promises some action, according to a famous thought of Chekhov: "If a loaded gun is on the stage in the first act, it must be fired in act three." The main point is that one cannot stretch the effect of EXPORT's performance over the seven hours allotted to the séance.

The problem of *Seven Easy Pieces* may ultimately be due to the fact that Abramović's gifts are realized in the kind of performance that appealed to her in the first place, where the possibility of violence tracked the performance from the beginning, as in *Rhythm 0*, where it was an abiding possibility that someone would aim the loaded gun at the performer. Like Yoko Ono's *Cut Piece* (fig. 6), it is in the nature of the performance audience to cut pieces out of her clothing if she sits immobile

on the floor with a scissors next to her. When Abramović met the German artist Ulay, they performed together in a way that kept the violence in the action, in the slapping and shoving and yelling, and the audience was neutralized by being excluded from the circle of love. When they broke up after twelve years, and she was on her own again, she created performances that called upon her remarkable shamanic talents. In her *House with the Ocean View*—a public mourning for 9/11, performed in the Sean Kelly Gallery in New York—she fasted publicly for twelve days, occasionally weeping, sometimes nude, on a kind of platform erected for the occasion (see fig. 5). There were three ladders, with rungs made of sharpened kitchen knives, leading to her aerie, cutting her off from the world. She drank a great deal of water, and peed in front of a body of witnesses too intimately related to her to be called an audience. It was a way of saying to her audience: "I have nothing to conceal from you."

The fasting is part of the ritual technology of purification, and it was part of her and Ulay's practice beginning in the early 1980s. Consider, a performance they did in various museum venues over the years of their partnership. Typically, they sat at the opposite ends of a table, dressed, as it were, for dinner (fig. 7). For seven hours, they sat there without speaking. In a way they could have been living sculptures, like Gilbert & George, a famous pair of British performers. The difference was that Marina and Ulay fasted after the session ended. For the duration of their engagement, they were in a constant pursuit of purification. It changed their perception of one another. It shifted them, so to speak, into a performance mode. I think that as a result of her years with Ulay, attainment of the performance mode replaced disturbance as the goal of performance. Its means were the duration of the performances and abstention. She allowed herself water and sleep. Of the performance artists known to me, Abramović's vocation has a strong religious component.

The exhibition *The Artist Is Present* consists of two parts. One part, in The Joan and Preston Robert Tisch Gallery on the sixth floor, consists of remnants and relics of Abramović's history in performance. There will be videos and reenactments. Someone will perform *Luminosity*, a piece in which a performer, presumably a woman, will sit, nude, on a small seat high on a wall. There will be video of *Seven Easy Pieces*. The structure in which she performed *The House with the Ocean View* will



7.
Marina Abramović and Ulay,
Nightsea Crossing, November
1985. Performance, 2 days.
18th Bienal de São Paulo, Brazil

be reconstructed, with the sound of Abramović's voice reciting the narrative of her actions over the twelve days. And of course there will be images of *Balkan Baroque*, a religio-political masterpiece in which she washes 1,500 cow bones.

The other part of it will take place in the Museum's great Donald B. and Catherine C. Marron Atrium, where Abramović will perform live through the duration of her exhibition. Initially, she had proposed composing a performance using a seven-tiered scaffold, connected by ladders, attached to the atrium's east wall. That concept proved retrograde, inasmuch as it would create a moral distance between her and her audience, who would sit passively while she enacted a performance from level to level on the wall. But as early as the interchange with Thomas McEvilley, she had envisioned a very different relationship to her viewers. "I just want to create a situation in which I am there with the public. And then in that moment something is going to happen."²⁰ McEvilley asks, "Will you enter the space without having any plan in mind?" "Yeah. Basically the only thing that's necessary is that you create the space and time field. You announce the performance for a certain place and time. Then the public will enter. Everything else has to be energy dialogue with no object. That is the main thing: no object." No knife, no candle, no ice, no pistol. Only the artist is present. Since the performances will extend over three months, abstention from food is out of the question. Her concern will be to create what she calls a "charismatic space," where some transformation of the audience into what we might call a "performance audience" takes place, and there will be again a kind of bond between its members and her.

At the end of May 2009, Abramović conceived of a way of achieving this. Rather than moving up and down distant scaffolding, she will sit in one of two chairs placed next to a table on the atrium floor, with the other chair left empty. A spotlight will shine down just on her. At some point, some member of the public will overcome the distance between it—the public—and her—the performer—and sit in the chair. In effect this will erase the space between performer and public, which will now be one. Through this setup, she will inadvertently have re-created the primordial scene described by Nietzsche in the *The Birth of Tragedy*, where some member of a group is possessed, becomes a hero, thereby

transforming the rest into a chorus. What will now take place? The hero, to continue to speak in Nietzsche's terms, may sit in silence across from the artist, much as Ulay and she sat in silence across from one another in *Nightsea Crossing*. Or a word may be spoken, breaking the silence. A dialogue may or may not emerge. The hero has taken on the responsibility of uniting the public with the performer either in silence or in speech. What happens next is unpredictable, but my sense is that this hero will be replaced by another, and another, and another. Only the performer, Marina Abramović, will remain the same, a kind of prime mover. What happens is actually up to the public. It is a magnificent conception, which only Abramović could have conceived of. Whether it will in actuality be magnificent is up to the public.

Notes

1. Marina Abramović, *Artist Body* (Milan: Edizioni Charta, 1998), p. 44.
2. Marina Abramović, *7 Easy Pieces* (Milan: Edizioni Charta, 2007), p. 15.
3. Thomas McEvilley, "Stages of Energy: Performance Art Ground Zero?" in *Artist Body*, pp. 14–25.
4. Nelson Goodman, *Languages of Art* (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1976), pp. 115–22.
5. McEvilley, "Stages of Energy," p. 21.
6. Abramović, *Artist Body*, p. 44.
7. Abramović, *7 Easy Pieces*, p. 15.
8. Marina Abramović, *The Biography of Biographies* (Milan: Edizioni Charta, 2004), p. 109.
9. McEvilley, "Stages of Energy," p. 15.
10. *Ibid.*, p. 16.
11. Arthur C. Danto, "Art and Disturbance," *The Philosophical Disenfranchisement of Art* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986), pp. 117–33.
12. Donald Kuspit, "Interview with Eric Fischl," in *Fischl* (New York: Vintage Books, 1987), p. 33.
13. Abramović, *Artist Body*, p. 62.
14. McEvilley, "Stages of Energy," p. 15.
15. Rudolf Wittkower, *Art and Architecture in Italy, 1600–1750* (Baltimore: Penguin Books, 1958), p. 2.
16. Abramović, *7 Easy Pieces*, p. 17.
17. Goodman, *Languages of Art*, p. 186.
18. Abramović, *7 Easy Pieces*, p. 54.
19. *Ibid.*, p. 51.
20. McEvilley, "Stages of Energy," p. 22.

Marina Abramović on Performance Art

If asked to define what performance art is, every artist would give a different response. "Performance art" is such a vague term. Performance can be music, dance, or theater, so it's not really a precise term for my kind of work—we will never really find the right designation. Every profession has its tool: for me performance is the tool I choose for bringing me to the moment.

Performance is a mental and physical construction that I step into, in front of an audience, in a specific time and place. And then the performance actually happens; it's based on energy values. It is very important that a public is present; I couldn't do it privately; that wouldn't be performance. Nor would I have the energy to do it. For me it is crucial that the energy actually comes from the audience and translates through me—I filter it and let it go back to the audience. The larger the audience, the better the performance, because there is more energy I can work with. It's not just about emotions.

Performance art is one of the most difficult art forms. The performance is really about presence. If you escape presence, your performance is gone. It is always you, the mind, and the body. You have to be in the here and now, one hundred percent. If you're not, the public is like a dog: they sense the insecurity. Then they just leave.

Time is very important. Time, consciousness, and existence. To me it is so important to introduce time in performance, because our time is becoming shorter and shorter. This is why I'm now struggling to make performances of longer and longer duration. I really like that moment when the performance becomes life itself. In *The Artist Is Present* I perform every day for three months. And I would like somehow to find a system so the performance would become life. That it actually becomes just timeless. I don't want an audience to spend time with me looking at my work; I want them to be with me and forget about time. Open up the space and just that moment of here and now, of nothing, there is no future and there is no past. In that way you can extend eternity. It is about being present. There are so many different meditation traditions all around the world that are concerned with this issue: how to get into that moment of *now*, that is always escaping us.

Both time and space are so important. It's critical to determine this space where things will happen. And then you have to allot a certain amount of time that you are going to give to yourself to make things

happen, in which things are going to happen. If I say, for example, I will be performing for ten hours, I don't even know what ten hours looks like. So you enter a kind of unknown construction, which you create for yourself. But then you have to have the willpower to actually keep your word, no matter how difficult it is. It's a very important task. It's so easy to give up, but you don't give up—you do it, no matter what. And then in this period of time—it can be ten hours or five or whatever—regardless of everything that could happen—for example if the electricity goes out or if everybody has left the space—the performance should not finish. No matter what, you have to do that period of time at this site. It is very important for your self respect.

You must confront your own fear. If you're afraid of pain, you have to do to find out what this pain is. When you open the door to pain, you'll find out that you actually might be able to control it. You'll be free from the fear of pain—which is a great feeling.

But performance art is about presence. It's all about energy, which is invisible, in a way. You go through purification, you elevate your consciousness, and that really affects the audience. So, that exact point of danger is what puts my mind and body in the here and now time. The public knows it and they are there with me. In the Sufi dance technique there is an exercise where they spin round and round. In this spinning around it's possible to actually lose consciousness. But you have the guys outside cutting swords through the air. If you lose the balance of consciousness, you'll fall outside the circle and be cut in pieces. You have to do the spinning and you have the possibility of losing control. But at the same time you must have an enormous mental control not to lose it, or you will die. I stage this kind of edgy situation in performance in order to get to the point of elevating the mind. But when you elevate your mind, automatically it is transmitted to the public. That's why it becomes so emotional. This is why people come and cry.

So, what is a good work of art? It has that energy that tunes you into what is going on behind your back. Bruce Naumann always likes to say, "Art is a matter of life and death." It sounds melodramatic, but it is so true. If you take whatever you do as a matter of life and death, and if you are there one hundred percent, then things really happen. Less than one hundred percent is not good art. It's so hard to do it, but it is the only way. And this means no compromises.