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Embodying the Sacred:
Marina Abramović, Transcultural Aesthetics, and the Global Geography of Art

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the
Requirements for the degree Doctor of Philosophy

in

Art History, Theory, and Criticism

by

Chanda Laine Carey

Committee in charge:

Professor W. Norman Bryson, Chair
Professor Thomas Csordas
Professor Ricardo Dominguez
Professor Elizabeth Newsome
Professor Kuiyi Shen

2016

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Chair

University of California, San Diego
2016

DEDICATION

To my family, friends, and teachers who have accompanied me on this journey.

EPIGRAPH

It is in this fathom-long body, with its perceptions and its mind,
that I describe the cosmos, the origin of the cosmos, the cessation of the cosmos,
and the path of practice leading to the cessation of the cosmos.

Buddha

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research to approach the experience performance of long duration in in a scope worthy of Abramović's endurance.

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- “Cosmic Thing: Astrology, Space Science, and Personal Cartography in Robert Rauschenberg’s Autobiography.” In *The Inspiration of Astronomical Phenomena VI*. 441:221-4. Proceedings of the Astronomical Society of the Pacific, 2011.
- (with) Electronic Disturbance Theatre and banglab; Cultural Liaison. *Sustenance: A Play for All Trans [] Borders*. Ser: Artists and Activists 12. Printed Matter, Inc; New York City, 2010.
- “Pueblo Folklore, Landscape Phenomenology and the Visual Poetics of Fajada Butte.” In *Cosmology across Cultures Proceedings of a Workshop Held at Parque de Las Ciencias, Granada, Spain, 8-12 September 2008*. Proceedings of the Astronomical Society of the Pacific. San Francisco, CA: Astronomical Society of the Pacific, 409:289–96, 2009.
- “Justin Michael Moore: No Room for Error.” Cirrus Gallery: Los Angeles. 2007.
- Jean Michel-Basquiat: Famous Negro Artist* ©. Art Center College of Design. 2006.

ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

Embodying the Sacred:

Marina Abramović, Transcultural Aesthetics, and the Global Geography of Art

by

Chanda Laine Carey

Doctor of Philosophy in Art History, Theory, and Criticism

University of California, San Diego, 2016

Professor W. Norman Bryson, Chair

In 2014 Marina Abramović (1946-) was repeatedly recognized by the international art press as the most powerful woman in the world of Contemporary art, achieving creative significance greater than ever before. Abramović's global prominence

is unquestioned, yet major art historical surveys foreground trauma and her youth in communist Yugoslavia rather than her extensive investment in non-Western culture and religion as her most significant, creative influences. This study, argues the career of the artist as a paradigm of global Contemporary art based on her transcultural performance aesthetic with emphasis on religious sources developed through worldwide travel. This study establishes how her work brings a new set of bodily practices into use, uniting sacred and secular across cultures and religions on five continents, transforming how the public encounters diversity.

Abramović's performance aesthetic has three major phases of development that receive phenomenological analysis in terms of her experience of intersubjective contact. Her early works highlight the instability of boundaries between art and life through the repeated interventions of the public in her work. Collaboration with partner Ulay expanded her engagement with others through their exploration of ritualized intimacy. Her late solo works diversify this engagement with participatory works that include the public, resulting in an open aesthetic that secularizes spiritual experience across religious traditions.

Nine chapters survey Abramović's career with specific attention to embodiment as the paradigm of transculturation. Her body as the medium of art is at the center of forces of climate, geography, indigenous peoples, transnational diplomacy, religious practice, and intimacy, which this study demonstrates are influences on her performances of long duration. The project's wide scope relies on scholarship and methods from anthropology, art history, digital humanities, geography, literature, performance studies, and philosophy to articulate the origins and outcomes of Abramović's aesthetic pluralism.

I trace the influences Abramović introduced into her aesthetic as expressions of her experience of landscape and culture, detailing the religious dimensions of ritual in her performance. The dissertation places events in their global spatial context of landscape, institutions, and digital mediation to argue her practice participates in cultural globalization as an agent of transculturation.

Introduction: In Search of the Nameless Science

I think the real base of art is spirituality.
—Marina Abramović¹

In 2014 Marina Abramović (1946-) was one of the most recognized women in the world of Contemporary art, achieving global prominence greater than ever before. Germany's *Artnet News* recognized Abramović as the most influential woman in the art world, while in the United States of America newsweekly *Time* named her one of 2014's "Most Influential People."² UK publication *Art Review* named her the international Contemporary art world's 5th most influential person in its "Power 100," giving her the distinction of being the most powerful artist and highly ranked woman.³

Abramović's global prominence is unquestioned, yet the major art historical survey of her work foregrounds trauma and her early influences in communist Yugoslavia, rather than her extensive investment in non-Western culture and religion as her most significant, formative creative influences.⁴ I argue the career of the performance artist as a paradigm of global Contemporary art based on her inclusive transcultural aesthetic with emphasis on religious and spiritual sources developed through worldwide travel.

The 1997 photographic work *Victory* (Figure 0.1) encapsulates the receptivity of Abramović's work to multivocal or polysemous meaning and interpretation. *Victory*

¹ Delia Bajo and Brainard Carey, "Marina Abramović," *The Brooklyn Rail*, December 1, 2003, <http://www.brooklynrail.org/2003/12/art/marina-Abramović>.

² "The 100 Most Powerful Women in Art: Part One," *Artnet News*, accessed July 24, 2015, <https://news.artnet.com/people/the-100-most-powerful-women-in-art-part-one-124409>; "Marina Abramović," *Time*, April 23, 2014, <http://time.com/collection/2014-time-100/>.

³ "Marina Abramović / Power 100 / Art Review," accessed August 18, 2015, http://artreview.com/power_100/marina_abramovi/.

⁴ Kristine Stiles et al., *Marina Abramović*, Contemporary Artists (London: Phaidon, 2008).

could allude to triumph or conquest in political conflict, saluting her parental role models of war heroism. In light of Abramović's interest in anthropology, spirituality, and world travel, *Victory* can be interpreted as her successful negotiation of a foreign environment—the adventurous Eastern European woman exploring a lush tropical landscape, clearing a path with the aid of a kitchen knife, which is also her shamanic tool. Her red lipstick, simply elegant black clothing, and striking physical appearance are dislocated from her conventional social context, blurring the lines between art and glamour photography, introducing the sphere of commodifiable beauty and celebrity within which Abramović has become highly recognizable.

Abramović's biography and the formal economy of her aesthetic embrace all of these interpretations and each can be argued as primary sources of her stratospheric power and influence in the present. It is the purpose of my work to apply interdisciplinary methods and scholarship to identify and analyze the transcultural and religious sources of Abramović's performance aesthetic through a critical survey of several of her most significant works. While Abramović's childhood and artwork include considerable emphasis on Christianity via Eastern Orthodox Christianity, Michelangelo's *Pietà* (1498-99), and Spanish mystic Saint Teresa of Ávila (1515-82),⁵ my research focuses on establishing the non-Western influences that form the foundation of many of her best known performances.

While numerous texts, including interviews, exhibition catalogues, critical and scholarly essays, as well as news media have documented the relevance of the global, the

⁵ Performances and photographic works emphasizing the *Pietà* pathos formula include *Pietà* (1983), *Positive Zero* (1983), *Anima Mundi* (1983), *Pietà Stromboli Pietà* (2006)

spiritual, and the sacred, to Abramović's work—especially Buddhism and the amorphous category of *shamanism*—no systematic, scholarly inquiry has been undertaken to develop a theoretical and historical understanding of these major elements of Abramović's work and artistic process. It is the purpose of my research to begin this work, with specific attention to developmental, formal, and spatial case studies of key performances and exemplary objects in her oeuvre. Both the artistic process and the final works can be understood in terms of conscientious embodied practice. These performances provide an ideal context for articulating the transcultural aesthetic and global scope of Abramović's art practice, in cultural terms informed by geography and the sacred.

The body is Abramović's medium and source of inspiration in an exploration of her subjectivity that approaches ritual in her creative investigation of experience. Abramović's contribution to the history of art is rooted in high-risk, solo performances in her place of birth, the former Yugoslavia and other European countries (1974-75); her world embracing canonical body of work with her partner of 12 years, Ulay (Frank Leysiepen, 1943-) from 1976-88; and a career-long emphasis on austere, physically, and psychologically demanding performances of long duration, best represented by her digitally globalized, monumental 75-day performance *The Artist is Present* (2010). My project traces Abramović's career through these distinct phases in her performance oeuvre, as she opened her work to wider experiences of intersubjective contact with others.

Marina Abramović: Origins and Experience

As a native of the former Yugoslavia, Abramović's early work is informed by and in dialogue with the communist political regime, but also characterized by class privilege and parental alienation, as well as a substantive religious presence in her environment. The strong influence of communism was complicated by a close familial relationship to a Patriarch of the Orthodox Church and the intense religiosity of her grandmother, who was her primary caregiver until age six.⁶ As a child and young woman, Abramović was emotionally and physically unstable, and described the harmful influence of her controlling and abusive mother as central to her unhappy upbringing. Like Abramović's father Vojin, Danica Abramović served with distinction as a Partisan in the revolutionary war that established Yugoslavia as a communist country and held a high position in its party structure. As an art historian and eventual Director of the Museum of Revolution, Danica offered many privileges and opportunities to her children, having her daughter and son tutored in English, French and music, and took Marina with her to the Venice Biennale, a major international Modern art exhibition from the time Abramović was 12 years old.

Emerging from this environment, Abramović's studied to be an academic painter and became involved in the circles of Contemporary art in Belgrade, distancing herself from her mother's establishment influence. Abramović shared and discussed mystical interests in Theosophy and Zen Buddhism with five other Belgrade artists known as the Group of Six, which included Rasa Todosijević, Zoran Popović, Gergelj Urkom, Slobodan Milivojević and Nesa Paripović. Important figures for the group included

⁶ James Westcott, *When Marina Abramović Dies: A Biography* (Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 2010), 10.

scholar of religion Mircea Eliade, Suprematist Russian painter Kazimir Malevich, German mystical and political artist Joseph Beuys, and French artist Yves Klein.⁷ With the Group of Six, Abramović was a founding member of the Studentski Kulturni Centar (SKC) in 1968, where she eventually left painting for a practice that embraced sound, installation, and performance. Her early performances were cathartic, risky, ritualistic, physically and emotionally demanding. Abramović's international mobility and burgeoning performance practice opened doors to participating in international exhibitions. These performances were also informed by her contact and collaboration with other international artists including Beuys and Hermann Nitsch. It was in the context of a re-performance of *Thomas Lips* (1975) for the camera that she journeyed to Amsterdam and met her long-term collaborator, Ulay.

Abramović and Ulay, a German national, met in Amsterdam in late 1975. On the day of their first meeting, they were magnetically attracted. There was a sense of fatefulness to the meeting and they immediately formed an intense relationship. Over the course of their passionate and spiritual 12-year intimate and working partnership, they developed a practice informed by a highly focused inquiry into the body as medium.⁸ The *Relation Works* (1976-80) established them as major innovators in performance, utilizing their intimacy as the source of their work. Their work was also deeply influenced by their nomadic lifestyle and travels to cultures and sites around the globe,

⁷ Ibid., 38–42.

⁸ Thomas McEvelley, *Art, Love, Friendship: Marina Abramović and Ulay Together & Apart*, 1st ed (Kingston, N.Y: McPherson & Co, 2010); Chrissie Iles and Jan Debbaut, *Abramović/Ulay: Performances 1976-1988* (Art Data, 1998); Marina Abramović, *Marina Abramović: Artist Body: Performances 1969-1998* (Milano: Edizioni Charta, 1998).

many of which are distinctive for their spiritual or religious significance.⁹ As a result, their meditative works and Abramović's subsequent career as an individual have challenged the understanding of 20th century aesthetics as secular and appropriative, while highlighting the limitations of traditional art historical methods.

Marina Abramović's later works both diverge from and refine her prior bodies of solo and collaborative work. After her separation from Ulay in 1988, artifice, glamour, and goddess imagery entered her performances, as well as elements of theatricality. Late works, particularly those of the 21st century, are marked by a return to austerity and extremely long duration, as well as an intense emphasis on intersubjective contact with viewers. Works such as *The House with the Ocean View* (2002) and *The Artist is Present* (2010) are formally dependent on the participation or collaboration of the public, and the strictures of the performance can be described by anthropological methods as religious rituals, despite their secular gallery and museum contexts. In addition to the complex issues raised by repetition and ritual, the subjective experience and participation of the public has resulted in a wide range of responses and a strong emphasis on transcendent, as well as mundane experiences, and the formation of communities that have been described in terms of religion, spirituality, and the sacred. Abramović's personal practice of Tibetan Buddhism and the importance of tantra and shamanism to her spiritual, artistic, and pedagogical practices are of increasing importance as she introduces the public to her artwork as a practice they can participate in transmitting the Abramović Method in exhibition spaces.

⁹ Marina Abramović and Ulay, *Relation Work and Detour* ([Amsterdam?]: M. Abramović, Ulay, 1980); Jan Debbaut, *Modus Vivendi: Ulay & Marina Abramović, 1980-1985* (Eindhoven: Stedelijk Van Abbemuseum, 1985).

Since her move from Amsterdam to New York in the new century, Abramović has introduced major issues into the history, institutionalization, and theory of performance. Her approach to the repetition of past works brought widespread critical and scholarly attention to her interest in preservation and exhibition. Her interpretation of the authorized works of other artists at the Guggenheim in the weeklong event *7 Easy Pieces* (2005), and reperformance during her retrospective, which relied on performers trained by Abramović to recreate works at the Museum of Modern Art (2010) are major events that exceed the focus on my study.¹⁰ In light of my focus on religion, Abramović's investment in reperformance and subsequent development of her own institute supporting public practice of her Abramović Method raises compelling questions around the intersections religious ritual and art practice that are addressed by my analysis of her original works. As my work depends on a living artist, Abramović offers significant opportunities for further research along these and other related lines of inquiry in the coming years.

Review of the Literature

Among academic scholarly publications, my dissertation contributes to a literature of very few monographic studies of Abramović. The vast majority of studies of

¹⁰ For the purposes of my study, reperformance is recognized as crucial to the history of performance and art history, but not central to my argument. Jessica Chalmers, "Marina Abramović and the Re-Performance of Authenticity," *Journal of Dramatic Theory and Criticism* 22, no. 2 (Spring 2008): 23–40; Robert C. Morgan, "Thoughts on Re-Performance, Experience, and Archivism," *PAJ: A Journal of Performance and Art* 32, no. 3 (April 8, 2011): 1–15; Gwyneth J. Shankes, "Lying with a Speaking Spine: Reperforming Marina Abramović's 'Nude with Skeleton,'" *Journal of Dramatic Theory and Criticism* 27, no. 1 (Fall 2012): 109–23; Lydia Brawner, "The Artist Is Present: Performing the Icon," *Women & Performance: A Journal of Feminist Theory* 23, no. 2 (June 17, 2013): 212–25; Amelia Jones, "Live Art in Art History: A Paradox?," in *The Cambridge Companion to Performance Studies*, ed. Tracy C Davis (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008); Amelia Jones, "'The Artist Is Present': Artistic Re-Enactments and the Impossibility of Presence," *TDR/The Drama Review* 55, no. 1 (March 31, 2011): 16–45; Amelia Jones and Adrian Heathfield, eds., *Perform, Repeat, Record: Live Art in History* (Bristol ; Chicago: Intellect, 2012).

Abramović are exhibition catalogue essays and scholarly articles, which include a significant number of interviews. Art historian Kristine Stiles' long survey essay for Taschen embraces a critical model with a focus on trauma and psychoanalytic methods, privileging Abramović's Yugoslavian communist background.¹¹ 2010 was a significant year for major publications on Abramović, as an authorized biography, critical scholarly introduction to the artist, and a volume of collected critical essays surveying her career were published simultaneously with her major retrospective at MoMA.¹²

The biography *When Marina Abramović Dies* by critic and former Abramović assistant James Westcott contributed an indispensable narrative to the study of Abramović that established an authoritative chronology of her personal life and professional events based on extensive interviews and access to the artist's personal archive. His work forms a bridge with the essays of prolific scholar and critic Thomas McEvelley (1939-2013), to whom I am deeply indebted in my study. McEvelley's criticism of Contemporary art and its many facets from conceptual and performance art to issues of postmodernism, multiculturalism, and globalism rest on transcultural scholarship of the ancient world and fluency in world culture, its arts and philosophy. His writing reflects his shared interests in Abramović's spiritual, religious, and cultural concerns in her collaboration with Ulay and as a solo artist. His work has marked out the territory of the global sacred that makes this work possible.¹³ In addition to his crucial

¹¹ Stiles et al., *Marina Abramović*.

¹² Westcott, *When Marina Abramović Dies*; Mary Richards, *Marina Abramović* (London: Routledge, 2010); McEvelley, *Art, Love, Friendship*.

¹³ Thomas McEvelley, "An Archaeology of Yoga," *RES: Anthropology and Aesthetics*, no. 1 (April 1, 1981): 44–77; Thomas McEvelley, *Art & Otherness: Crisis in Cultural Identity*, 1st ed. (Kingston NY: Documentext/McPherson, 1992); Thomas McEvelley, *Capacity: History, the World, and the Self in Contemporary Art and Criticism*, Critical Voices in Art, Theory and Culture (Amsterdam, Netherlands:

critical essays on Abramović and her partner, Ulay collected under one cover in *Art, Love, Friendship: Marina and Ulay Together and Apart*, McEvelley's criticism considers a constellation of artists and practices who influenced and intersected Abramović's life and work.

The dearth of major scholarship on Ulay underwent a radical shift in late 2014 with the publication of *Whispers: Ulay on Ulay*, by curator Maria Rus Bojan and journalist Alessandro Cassin.¹⁴ Cassin's extensive interviews with Ulay provide exceptional detail on the specifics of his creative process with Abramović and the important place religious practice took in it. His commentary on Buddhist meditation, tantric symbolism, and his perspective on their art practice provide essential and extensive evidence for the importance of meditation to their work, expanding the references McEvelley introduced in his criticism. Bojan's critical essay reveals Ulay with sensitive insights into the spiritual dimensions of his work with Abramović. *Whispers* presents a compelling, comprehensive survey of Ulay's work with a focus on his own words and those of close associates, richly illustrated with works that demand further study for their contribution to photography, installation, and performance as expressions of Ulay's ethical trans aesthetics. These aesthetic concerns are radical and inclusive, ranging from transgender performance, transcultural actions and interventions across the lines of social class.

G+B Arts International, 1996); Thomas McEvelley, *Sculpture in the Age of Doubt* (New York: School of Visual Arts ;Allworth Press, 1999); Thomas McEvelley, *The Triumph of Anti-Art: Conceptual and Performance Art in the Formation of Post-Modernism*, 1st ed (Kingston, N.Y: McPherson & Co, 2005); McEvelley, *Art, Love, Friendship*; Thomas McEvelley, *Yves the Provocateur : Yves Klein and Twentieth-Century Art*, 1st ed. (Kingston N.Y.: McPherson & Co., 2010).

¹⁴ Maria Rus Bojan et al., *Whispers: Ulay on Ulay*, 2014.

Alongside the significant shift in major publications of recent years are a series of publications that inform my study and make significant contributions to discourse surrounding Abramović's global and spiritual practices. Curatorial texts, other catalogue essays and interviews form the bulk of the literature on Abramović, many of which feature essays by Thomas McEvelley, Chrissie Iles, RoseLee Goldberg, and more recently, Klaus Biesenbach, providing brief descriptions of key works and illuminating various critical positions while highlighting the changing concerns of the artist.¹⁵ *Marina Abramović: Artist Body* organized by the Kunstmuseum and Grosse Halle of Bern in 2001 forms the primary source for reproductions of Abramović's performances. Two subsequent volumes, *Marina Abramović: Public Body* and *Student Body* focus on Abramović's objects, installations and her "Cleaning the House Workshop," documenting the other key elements of Abramović's art practice. In these volumes, the artist's performance scores and descriptions of each work provide additional materials that formally define the contours of Abramović's project for scholars.¹⁶ Abramović's close friend, curator Chrissy Iles has produced key texts on the artist, curating the

¹⁵ Debbaut, *Modus Vivendi*; Marina Abramović and Ulay, *The Lovers* (Amsterdam: Stedelijk Museum, 1989); Marina Abramović et al., *Marina Abramović: double edge : Kunstmuseum des Kantons Thurgau, Kartause Ittingen, 8. Oktober 1995-28. April 1996* (Sulgen [Switzerland]: Niggli, 1996); Iles and Debbaut, *Abramović/Ulay*; Marina Abramović, Pablo J Rico Lacasa, and Thomas Wulffen, *The Bridge = El Puente: Marina Abramović, Exposición Retrospectiva* (Valencia: Editado por/published by Consorci de Museus de la Comunitat Valenciana, 1998); Marina Abramović and Dobrila Denegri, *Marina Abramović: Performing Body*, I Libri Di Zerynthia (Milano: Charta, 1998); Marina Abramović, *Marina Abramović: The House with the Ocean View* (Milano: Charta, 2003); Marina Abramović, *Marina Abramović: Balkan Epic*, ed. Adelina von Fürstenberg (Milano: Skira, 2006); Marina Abramović, *7 Easy Pieces* (Milan; New York City: Charta, 2007); Marina Abramović, Klaus Peter Biesenbach, et al., *Marina Abramović: The Artist Is Present* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 2010); *Marina Abramović. Dream Book*. (Tokyo: Gendai Kikakushitsu, 2012); Marina Abramović et al., *The Abramović Method* (Milan; Woodbridge: 24 ORE Cultura; ACC Distribution [distributor], 2012).

¹⁶ Marina Abramović, *Marina Abramović: Artist Body: Performances 1969-1998* (Milano: Edizioni Charta, 1998); Marina Abramović, *Marina Abramović: Public Body: Installation and Objects, 1965-2001* (Milano: Charta, 2001); Marina Abramović, *Student Body: Workshops 1979 - 2003 : Performances 1993 - 2003* (Milano: Ed. Charta, 2003).

comprehensive survey of the *Relation Works* for the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam and a solo show at the Museum of Modern Art Oxford that is distinctive for including Abramović's objects, videos, and sound installations.¹⁷ Since the 1980s, Iles' periodic essays and interviews provide links and analysis which develop Abramović's relationship to Eastern thought within the context of other artists, bringing Jung, Duchamp, Zen, Abramović's spirituality and other global artists including Nam Jun Paik into the discourses surrounding Abramović's work.

Other notable contributors to extensive catalogues include performance scholars Peggy Phelan and Erika Fisher-Lichte. Phelan's personal letters addressed to the artist in her essay, "On Seeing the Invisible: Marina Abramović's House with the Ocean View" opens new fields of critical writing to performance scholarship balancing intimate perspectives on experience with analysis of Abramović's work art historically, spiritually, formally, and within the more broad context of theater and ritual performance.¹⁸ The performance scholarship of Fischer-Lichte is vast and magisterial in scope, recently attending to the transformative aesthetics of performance.¹⁹ Her essay about Abramović, "Experiencing Liminality" theorizes the aesthetics of Abramović's performance as

¹⁷ Chrissie Iles, "The Shadow and the Reflection: The Relation Works of Marina Abramović and Ulay," in *Ulay/Abramović: Performances, 1976-1988.*, ed. Stedelijk Van Abbemuseum (Eindhoven: Stedelijk Van Abbemuseum, 1997), 9–16; Marina Abramović, RoseLee Goldberg, et al., *Marina Abramović: Objects, Performance, Video, Sound*, ed. Chrissie Iles (Oxford, U.K: Museum of Modern Art Oxford, 1995); Stiles et al., *Marina Abramović*; Abramović, Biesenbach, et al., *Marina Abramović*; Chrissie Iles, "Taking a Line for a Walk," *Performance*, no. 53 (May 1988): 14–19; Chrissie Iles, "An Interview with Marina Abramović," *Performance Research* 1, no. 2 (1996): 20–26.

¹⁸ Phelan's scholarly essay contributes to a sensitive study of Abramović's work. Her Judeo-Christian ethics provide a counterpoint for my own scholarship which is oriented towards eastern philosophy and religion. Peggy Phelan, "On Seeing the Invisible," in *Marina Abramović: The House with the Ocean View* (Milano: Charta, 2003), 171–79; Peggy Phelan, "Marina Abramović: Witnessing Shadows," *Theatre Journal* 56, no. 4 (2004): 569–77, doi:10.1353/tj.2004.0178.

¹⁹ Erika Fischer-Lichte, *The transformative power of performance: a new aesthetics* (New York: Routledge, 2008).

transformation using methods and scholarship that also inform my argument. Fischer-Lichte theorizes a process of possible transformation for the public in the context of performing arts based on rites of passage. Grounding her analyses in the work of anthropologist Victor Turner and his application of the ethnographies of Arnold van Gennep in his study of rites of passage, Fischer-Lichte makes an argument in performance studies that structures performance practice in the art world in terms that frame it as an emotively charged, liminal experience in terms that are of a secular nature.²⁰ Fischer-Lichte's argument about the liminal element of Abramović's work provides a robust basis for the understanding of performance as a process of aesthetic experience, which is educational, initiatory, or transformative according to the receptivity of the individual members of the public.²¹ Based on my study of Abramović's work, I argue for religion and ritual to remain central to an understanding of Abramović's performances, but do not focus on the combination of sacred and secular forms of the performances that make up *7 Easy Pieces*, the catalogue to which Fischer-Lichte contributes her analysis.²²

Limits and the liminal form a critical center in Beatrix Ruf's essay in the important catalogue for *Double Edge* (1996), an installation in a Carpathian monastery in Switzerland. "Wu Wei, Short Circuit, Paradox" takes the title of the exhibition and Abramović's use of knives in her installation to expand the metaphor of the double to

²⁰ Numerous critiques of Turner have altered the application of his theory of *communitas* and the liminal in anthropological studies of ritual, but his work form the basis of many key works of performance theory.

²¹ Erika Fischer-Lichte, "Performance Art ~ Experiencing Liminality," in *7 Easy Pieces* (Milan: Charta, 2007), 33–45.

²² As stated earlier, I speculate Abramović's interpretation and reperformances of her own and other artist's works strengthen the relevance of religious ritual to Abramović's work in light of the importance of collective repetition to establishing cultural practices that transform and discipline the body.

Abramović's interest in shamanic tools as symbols of overcoming limits and boundaries. Taking the edge and its double as the sign of dualism, Ruf illuminates the artist's practice of Tibetan Buddhism through her non-dual approach to the liminal states and boundaries between consciousness/unconsciousness, spirit/body, nature/culture, life/death, male/female and passivity/activity. The limits that define these binaries are challenged by Abramović's art and her practice of religion, which are set into deep relief by the poetry, essays, and images that position *Double Edge* as a catalogue of great significance documenting a rare exhibition that places no emphasis on her body or performance.²³

Further sources of Abramović's dissolution of boundaries through transculturation and religion are central to *Unfinished Business* (1999) and *The Bridge* (2008).

Abramović's pedagogical practice and its exercises are set into religious and cultural context in *Unfinished Business*, including texts that clearly link the importance of ritualism, Australian Aboriginal ceremony, and Tibetan Buddhist subtle body practices to her teaching and theory of performance. Building on this work is the essential catalogue *The Bridge/El Puente*, a comprehensive Spanish retrospective surveying Abramović's multimedia body of work and global practice. Taking its title from the image that represents Abramović's intent to use her body as a vehicle of transculturation, *The Bridge* articulates Abramović's nomadic pursuit of the liminal state as durational life experience with the phrase "permanent transition." Taking the artist's world travels and spiritual interests as the focus of the essay and the organization of the exhibition, *The Bridge* is an essential introduction to the cultural depth and global scope of the transcultural in Abramović's life and art.

²³ Abramović et al., *Marina Abramović*.

Abramović's latest researches into shamanism, consciousness, and energy have attracted her to Brazil, where she has recently participated in ayahuasca ceremonies, Candomble rituals, and spiritual healing with world famous medium and psychic surgeon João de Deus (John of God). The recent catalogue *512 Hours* (2015) is unique for its emphasis on the artist's diaristic writings composed during her time with João de Deus, whom she occasionally assisted.²⁴ The writing is distinctive for its detailed focus on the artist's personal spiritual practice and its relationship to her creative process. This text and an unreleased documentary film about Abramović's time in Brazil, *The Current* (2015) are essential documents that provide compelling material to further my research on Abramović, reinforcing the artist's inclusive emphasis on religious practices as central to her transcultural aesthetic and ethos.

No review of the literature on Abramović can be considered complete without reference to the artist's extensive interviews. Such interviews provide essential evidence of the importance of religion and culture in the artist's ethos. In my research, in addition to those included in catalogues, long interviews by Chrissie Iles, Bernard Goy, Janet Kaplan, Delia Bajo, Brainard Carey, Laurie Anderson, and Hans Ulrich Obrist have brought Abramović's deep investments in travel, spirituality and transcultural diversity into nuanced and fine grained focus.²⁵

²⁴ Marina Abramović, Sophie O'Brien, and Serpentine Gallery, *Marina Abramović: 512 Hours*, 2014.

²⁵ Iles, "Taking a Line for a Walk"; Iles, "An Interview with Marina Abramović"; Bernard Goy, "Marina Abramović (interview)," *Journal of Contemporary Art*, June 1990, <http://www.jca-online.com/Abramovic.html>; Janet A. Kaplan, "Deeper and Deeper: Interview with Marina Abramović," *Art Journal* 58, no. 2 (Summer 1999): 7–21; Bajo and Carey, "Marina Abramović"; Laurie Anderson, "Marina Abramović," *Bomb Magazine*, no. 84 (Summer 2003), <http://bombsite.com/issues/84/articles/2561>; Hans Ulrich Obrist, *Marina Abramović, The Conversation Series 23* (Köln : New York: W. König ; D.A.P./Distributed Art Publishers, 2010).

Of great significance to the Abramović literature are select catalogues and publications addressing multiple artists. Most significant is the interdisciplinary symposium and accompanying publication *Art Meets Science and Spirituality* (1990) where Abramović is interviewed by Dutch critic Johan Pijnappel amidst luminaries including the Dalai Lama, physicists David Bohm and Fritof Capra, and artists John Cage and Robert Rauschenberg.²⁶ Looking to academic scholarly publications concerned with art since World War II in relation to religion, significant publications in art history surveying the field have a distinctively Eurocentric and Judeo-Christian focus.²⁷ Other, more inclusive art historical texts exploring spirituality and Modernism form the foundation of a widening field of scholarship.²⁸ Charlene Spretnak's *The Spiritual Dynamic in Modern Art: Art History Reconsidered, 1800 to the Present* is an encyclopedic introduction to the major issues, artists, philosophers, and global influences of the Euro-American art world opening a rich field for further inquiry. While this text does not address the full scope of global Contemporary, the few attempts at inclusion promise a rich field for globalists ready to continue the work on the importance of spirituality to artists of Asia, Latin America, Africa, and indigenous peoples actively participating in the global art world.

Several exhibition catalogues of the past thirty years demonstrate the consistent efforts of scholars to attend to religion and transculturation in Modern and Contemporary

²⁶ Louwrien Wijers and Johan Pijnappel, eds., *Art Meets Science and Spirituality*, Art & Design Profile 21 (London: Academy Editions, 1990).

²⁷ Mark C Taylor, *Disfiguring: Art, Architecture, Religion*, Religion and Postmodernism (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992); James Elkins, *On the Strange Place of Religion in Contemporary Art* (New York: Routledge, 2004); James Elkins and David Morgan, eds., *Re-Enchantment*, The Art Seminar, v. 7 (New York: Routledge, 2009).

²⁸ Roger Lipsey, *An Art of Our Own: The Spiritual in Twentieth-Century Art*, 1st ed (Boston: Shambhala, 1988); Charlene Spretnak, *The Spiritual Dynamic in Modern Art: Art History Reconsidered, 1800 to the Present*, First edition (New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014).

art, as well as marking the topic as a source of key debates in the emergence of a global context for Contemporary art.²⁹ Jean Huber Matin's controversial Pompidou exhibition *Magiciens De La Terre* (1989) included Abramović and opened the discourse on religion to include non-Western Contemporary artists. It remains a touchstone for discourses of the global in the present.³⁰ These exhibitions set a wider historical context for art histories with a focus on the transcultural importance of Buddhism to Western artists, a growing number of studies to which my research contributes.³¹ Critic and art historian Doris von Drathen emphasizes the historic correlates to contemporary environmental and spiritual concerns in her transcultural and transhistorical consideration of Abramović, "World Unity: Dream or Reality."³² She thematically connects Abramović's work and life to art historian Aby Warburg's similarly vast field of inquiry through the symbol of the serpent, bringing Warburg's anthropologically inspired lecture on the Hopi Serpent Ritual into resonance with Abramović's performances emulating images of goddesses of the ancient world who hold snakes. The use value of Warburg to art criticism and history

²⁹ Maurice Tuchman, *The Spiritual in Art : Abstract Painting 1890-1985* (New York: Abbeville Press, 1986); Museum of Contemporary Art (Chicago, Ill.), *Negotiating Rapture: The Power of Art to Transform Lives*, ed. Richard Francis, Homi K. Bhabha, and Yve-Alain Bois (Chicago: Museum of Contemporary Art, 1996); Jean Hubert Matin, *Magiciens De La Terre: Centre Georges Pompidou, Musée National D'art Moderne, La Villette, La Grande Halle* (Paris: Editions du Centre Pompidou, 1989); Alfred Pacquement, *Traces Du Sacré* (Paris: Centre Pompidou, 2008); Franklin Sirmans, *NeoHooDoo : Art for a Forgotten Faith* (Houston Tex.; New Haven: The Menil Collection ; Distributed by Yale University Press, 2008); Alexandra Munroe, *The Third Mind: American Artists Contemplate Asia, 1860-1989* (New York: Guggenheim Museum, 2009).

³⁰ Hu Hanru, "In Defense of Difference: Notes on Magiciens de La Terre, Twenty-Five Years Later," *Yishu: Journal of Chinese Contemporary Art* 13, no. 3 (June 2014): 7–30.

³¹ Helen Westgeest, *Zen in the Fifties: Interaction in Art between East and West* (Zwolle : Amstelveen: Waanders Publishers ; Cobra museum voor moderne kunst, 1996); Jacquelynn Baas, *Smile of the Buddha: Eastern Philosophy and Western Art from Monet to Today* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005); Jacquelynn Baas and Mary Jane Jacob, eds., *Buddha Mind in Contemporary Art* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004); Chris Thompson, *Felt : Fluxus, Joseph Beuys, and the Dalai Lama* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2011).

³² Doris von Drathen, "World Unity: Dream or Reality—A Question of Survival," in *Marina Abramović* (Stuttgart: Edition Cantz, 1993), 225–39.

is manifold. Von Drathen's study emphasizes the role of religious historicity to Abramović's interests, as a reflection of religious forms travelling across centuries through art. Warburg's relevance to Abramović's work has also been noted by Iles and the meditative *Denkraum* (space for contemplation) she cultivates around her performances, emphasizing the importance of innovative art historical methods to the study of Abramović.³³

Methodology

The rich scope of methods in the scholarship of the history of art provides extensive evidence of the discipline's interdisciplinary receptivity.³⁴ While it is possible to depend on sources within the discipline to support my project's wide scope, including semiotics, geography, the body, and religion, interdisciplinary studies have significantly enhanced my ability to ask and answer my research questions about the global and transcultural nature of Abramović's practice. I rely on scholarship and methods from anthropology, art history, digital humanities, geography, literature, and philosophy to support my research on the aesthetics of Abramović's pluralism and cross-cultural experience.

My interdisciplinary methodological approach draws on the historiography of art history in the increasingly influential figure of Aby Warburg. The scope and pluralism of his researches across cultures, art history, and anthropology have left a vast legacy of ever-changing ideas inspired by his studies of the forms of antiquity through the

³³ Chrissie Iles, "Marina Abramović: Staring at the Ocean," in *Marina Abramović: The House with the Ocean View* (Milano: Charta, 2003), 165.

³⁴ Donald Preziosi, ed., *The Art of Art History a Critical Anthology*, 2nd ed (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009); Dana Arnold, "Art History: Contemporary Perspectives on Method," *Art History* 32, no. 4 (2009): 657–63; Thomas Crow, "The Practice of Art History in America," *Daedalus* 135, no. 2 (April 1, 2006): 70–90, doi:10.1162/daed.2006.135.2.70.

Renaissance to the 20th century, as well as his contact with indigenous American culture and ritual.³⁵ Warburg's wide ranging methods and objects of study exceeded the traditional boundaries and subfields of art history. As a result, contemporary scholars of art have described his Nameless Science and development of his Pathosformel (pathos formula) as methods and projects similar to scholarly cultural studies.³⁶ Rather than locate my approach within the realm of Warburg's thought in relation to the image and visual culture, I assert the amplified borders of his "cultural science" of images must be expanded to include the body in performance in the study of Contemporary art history.

Warburg's project adds terms and approaches that greatly enrich the study of art in global context and Abramović's practice specifically. Warburg's psychological theory of art depends on a reappearance of specific forms at different times in history. The experience of fear is contained in forms as physical gestures, which migrate across the ages, reappearing in times when the cultural psychology reflects similar anxieties and phobias. Similarly, Abramović's project often relies on a confrontation of fear and aversion to overcome them rather than ward them off. As she has said, "I have always staged my fears as a way to transcend them."³⁷ While Abramović's work transcends

³⁵ Key volumes on Warburg, as well as outstanding scholarly articles support the transcultural, aesthetic, and interdisciplinary elements of my project. Giorgio Agamben, "Aby Warburg and the Nameless Science," in *Potentialities: Collected Essays in Philosophy* (Stanford, Calif: Stanford University Press, 1999), 89–103; Colleen Becker, "Aby Warburg's Pathosformel as Methodological Paradigm," *Journal of Art Historiography* 9 (December 2013): 1–25; E. H Gombrich, *Aby Warburg: An Intellectual Biography*, 2nd ed (Oxford: Phaidon, 1986); Aby Warburg, *The Renewal of Pagan Antiquity: Contributions to the Cultural History of the European Renaissance*, Texts & Documents (Los Angeles, CA: Getty Research Institute for the History of Art and the Humanities, 1999); Claude Imbert, "Aby Warburg, Between Kant and Boas: From Aesthetics to the Anthropology of Images," *Qui Parle: Critical Humanities and Social Sciences* 16, no. 1 (n.d.): 1–45; Philippe-Alain Michaud, *Aby Warburg and the Image in Motion* (New York: Zone Books, 2004).

³⁶ Colleen Becker cites, Giorgio Agamben, Griselda Pollock and Kurt Forster in her impressive analysis of Warburg and scholarly method. Becker, "Aby Warburg's Pathosformel as Methodological Paradigm," 8–9.

³⁷ Judith Thurman, "Walking Through Walls," *New Yorker* 86, no. 3 (March 8, 2010): 24.

Warburg's reliance on the unconscious as the source of such psychological expressions, the social function of such activities is clearly marked in Abramović's approach to her work. She uses ritualized performance to confront some of humanity's deepest and constant fears. "'We are afraid of dying, and we are afraid of pain, so much," she said. "I like to get rid of the fear of pain by staging the pain in front of the audience, going through this pain and showing them that it's possible. It turns into something else. Then you have this energy to do it."³⁸ In Warburg's pathos formula form and content are inextricable, while Abramović seeks to consciously disentangle them.³⁹ Her intervention in the social field through performance depends on assumptions similar to Warburg's approach to the psychological function of art.

Warburg scholar and art historian Collen Becker describes the preoccupations that define Warburg's intellectual project in her study of his methods and their use across the disciplines,

Trans-disciplinary research; his consideration of visual culture outside the fine art canon; his fascination with the way in which images and metaphors travelled temporally and geographically; his interest in the implications of gesture, emotion and expression; his identification of specific forms from the past as transmitting crucial information about the context and underlying psychology of the era in which they were revived; his blending and analysis of popular culture and high art.⁴⁰

In the history of Contemporary art, the diversity of media and art practices allow me to situate Warburg's contributions as essential to the study of art history and performance through attention to the anthropological and spatial conditions that define Abramović's art world.

³⁸ Randy Kennedy, "Self-Mutilation Is the Sincerest Form of Flattery," *New York Times, Late Edition (East Coast)*, November 6, 2005, sec. 2.

³⁹ Agamben, "Aby Warburg and the Nameless Science," 90.

⁴⁰ Becker, "Aby Warburg's Pathosformel as Methodological Paradigm," 2–3.

The temporal and geographic dimensions of Abramović's practice closely mirror Warburg's approach to aesthetic transculturation. Her performance gestures and practices travel cross-culturally, like Warburg's study of astrological decans in the Italian renaissance, traced through the astrologies of Egypt, India, Persia, Greece and Rome.⁴¹ Abramović's religious and ritual forms travel with her body at the speed of modernity, carrying traces of antiquity that reassert the importance of the same and more cultures in the art of today. Such geographies articulate the diversity and heterogeneity of influences that define the true scope of the history of art in its traditional European context, as dependent on transcultural sources and reflective of a global scale of influences. Art historian Georges Didi-Huberman's exhibition catalog *Atlas—Or, How to Carry the World on One's Back* brings the importance of geography to Warburg's project to the center of art historical evaluations of his work for the first time. The relevance of contemporary theory and Warburg to art history meet in the realm of the spatial, indicating the importance of my methodological approach to the discipline and philosophy through Warburg's project. Drawing on Foucault and Deleuze, Huberman's project grapples with the complexity of spatial concerns in a manner that reflects the concerns of this project with regard to better known theorists of space.⁴²

Philosopher Giorgio Agamben's *Potentialities* takes hold of Warburg's phrase "Nameless Science" and its object, the image, to define the parameters and challenges of his project. Agamben summarizes this element of Warburg's thought,

⁴¹ Warburg, *The Renewal of Pagan Antiquity*, 569.

⁴² Georges Didi-Huberman et al., *Atlas - How to Carry the World on One's Back?: Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía (MNCARS), November 26, 2010 - March 28, 2011 ; ZKM Museum Für Neue Kunst, Karlsruhe, May 7 - August 28, 2011 ; Sammlung Falckenberg, Hamburg, September 24 - November 27, 2011* (Madrid: MNCARS, 2010), 44–59.

“...he reaffirms his aversion to a formal approach to the image, which, Warburg writes, cannot grasp the image's biological necessity as a product "between religion and artistic production." This position of the image between religion and art is important for the delimitation of the horizon of Warburg's research. The object of that research is more the image than the artwork, and this is what sets Warburg's work resolutely outside the borders of aesthetics. In the conclusion to his lecture of 1912, "Italian Art and International Astrology in Palazzo Schifanoia in Ferrara," Warburg had already called for a "methodological amplification of the thematic and geographical borders" of art history:

Overly limiting developmental categories have until now hindered art history from making its material available to the "historical psychology of human expression" that has yet to be written. Because of its excessively materialistic or excessively mystical tenor, our young discipline denies itself the panoramic view of world history.⁴³

This invocation of the Nameless Science of the image between art and religion highlights my inversion of Agamben's articulation of Warburg's project. My work pursues the abstract and poetic category of the Nameless Science by contending with the body, rather than the image of it as the site of scholarly potential located in the interstice between aesthetics and religion. Like the image, the performing body does not inherently or inevitably define the work of art, but is more often understood as the site of reception or cultivation of the aesthetic. Yet, rather than position my work resolutely outside the borders of aesthetics, I seek to interrogate and trouble the borders of aesthetics with my attention to the body as medium and the relationship of its experience to the work of art.

Within my use of Warburg's Nameless Science I choose to deploy various concepts that framed his project. In my appeal to geography, as well as anthropology I emphasize global space and Warburg's methods that allow scholars to articulate “a

⁴³ Agamben, “Aby Warburg and the Nameless Science,” 91.

virtually open-ended network of image and maps”⁴⁴ and “the migration of forms across cultures.”⁴⁵ His *Pathosformeln* (pathos formula) operates in the visual space of his *Mnemosyne Atlas* (memory map), a 70-panel collection of more than 1,000 images tracing the transmission of forms across the history of Western civilization since pagan antiquity. For the purposes of my project, the basis of an atlas is not composed of historic images, but of Abramović’s travels and performances, emphasizing non-Western terrain, cultural forms, and aesthetics to articulate the close relationship between certain forms and practices across cultures.

Philosopher Claude Imbert summarizes the importance of performance as ritual to Warburg’s pathos formula, linking philosophy to anthropology through his study of body images, the unconscious, and ritual.⁴⁶ Calling on pagan antiquity to create the modern present as Warburg argued, I agree, in the Contemporary, the traffic in culture allows Abramović and her artworks to play out fears and formulas based on global and transhistorical religious experience in a context that is the domain of the history of art. The spatial context that Abramović creates for her performances mirrors Warburg’s formulation of the *Denkraum*, a space for contemplation within the image. The space for contemplation appears in the creation of meditative or sacred places within Contemporary art spaces, marking an interval between the disappearance of religion from secular modern life and its reappearance denuded of familiar cultural forms.

I set Abramović’s practice in a specialized global context of the internationally recognized individual artist with transnational concerns and influences that exceed the

⁴⁴ Imbert, “Aby Warburg, Between Kant and Boas: From Aesthetics to the Anthropology of Images,” 33.

⁴⁵ Becker, “Aby Warburg’s Pathosformel as Methodological Paradigm,” 5.

⁴⁶ Imbert, “Aby Warburg, Between Kant and Boas: From Aesthetics to the Anthropology of Images,” 34.

globalized currents of art markets and exhibition venues. In my appeal to the global Contemporary as Abramović's historical period, and the Modern as a source of her Western aesthetics, the importance of the global as a sphere of extensive cultural practice places my project in a frame of scholarship of similar artists, which I claim is a measure of their importance to the global Contemporary.⁴⁷ Studies by Jane Blocker and Hiroko Ikegami emphasize transnational and transcultural travel and geography as central to the development of Ana Mendieta and Robert Rauschenberg and use those frames to argue for their art historical importance. It is significant that like my study, these studies depend on performance as central to their arguments.⁴⁸

The proliferation of biennials and international exhibitions is accepted as one of the defining characteristics of globalization in Contemporary art. While these exhibitions represent the transnational activities, geographic diversity and mobility of this generation of artists, artworks and art practices in this context are circumscribed by both the specificity and changeability of their location. This is most easily observed in the frequent indication of an artist's nation of origin and the location in which they live and work.⁴⁹ The plurality of position and ambiguities produced by the mobility of the globalized art world can also be seen as an index of success, power, and privilege particularly when reflected by studios and residences on multiple continents; for example, "Lives/Works: Beijing, New York, London." While Abramović's practice participates in

⁴⁷ For the purposes of my own research, Xu Bing and Isaac Julien are excellent examples of important 21st century artists with global transcultural aesthetics.

⁴⁸ Jane Blocker, *Where Is Ana Mendieta? : Identity, Performativity, and Exile* (Durham [NC]: Duke University Press, 1999); Hiroko Ikegami, *The Great Migrator: Robert Rauschenberg and the Global Rise of American Art* (Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 2010).

⁴⁹ Mónica Amor et al., "Liminalities: Discussions on the Global and the Local," *Art Journal* 57, no. 4 (Winter 1998): 29–49.

this international and institutional system, it also provides an ideal context for developing necessary histories and global geographies of art, informed by the body and the travel, religious, and pedagogical practices of the artist beyond performance and exhibition.

Recent scholarship on the geography of art history emphasizes the value of mapping images and styles cartographically through the category World Art, as well as tracing cultural flows within smaller areas of exchange, resulting in an approach that has increasing interest for art historians.⁵⁰ My research also draws on methods of analysis and scholarship from human, humanist, and political geography to articulate Abramović's movement through phenomenological space in cultural terms that occasionally intersect with topography and geology.⁵¹ Like many scholars, the far-reaching and inclusive elements of my project resonate with the philosophy of Gilles Deleuze, which has proven influential to geographies based on embodiment or performance, as well as art.⁵² My

⁵⁰ John Onians, ed., *Atlas of World Art* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004); John Onians, *Compression Vs. Expression: Containing and Explaining the World's Art*, Clark Studies in the Visual Arts (Williamstown, Mass: Sterling and Francine Clark Art Institute, 2006); Thomas DaCosta Kaufmann, *Toward a Geography of Art* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004); Thomas DaCosta Kaufmann, ed., *Time and Space: The Geohistory of Art*, Histories of Vision (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2005).

⁵¹ Humanist geographer Yi-Fu Tuan has influenced work in humanist geography. His lucid, readable prose celebrates the culture and the arts, as well as many dimensions of psychology in geographic terms. Yi-fu Tuan, *Space and Place: The Perspective of Experience* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1977); Yi-Fu Tuan, "Space and Place: Humanistic Perspective," in *Philosophy in Geography*, ed. Stephen Gale and Gunnar Olsson, Theory and Decision Library 20 (Springer Netherlands, 1979), 387–427, http://link.springer.com/chapter/10.1007/978-94-009-9394-5_19; Yi-fu Tuan, *Passing Strange and Wonderful: Aesthetics, Nature, and Culture* (Washington, D.C: Island Press/Shearwater Books, 1993); Yi-fu Tuan, *Religion: From Place to Placelessness*, 1st ed (Chicago, Ill: Center for American Places at Columbia College Chicago, 2009); Yi-fu Tuan, *Humanist Geography: An Individual's Search for Meaning* (Staunton, VA: George F. Thompson Pub, 2012).

⁵² Jon May and N. J Thrift, eds., *TimeSpace: Geographies of Temporality* (London: Routledge, 2001); N. J Thrift, *Non-Representational Theory: Space, Politics, Affect*, International Library of Sociology (London: Routledge, 2008); N. J. Thrift, ed., *Globalization in Practice*, First edition (Oxford ; New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), <http://site.ebrary.com/lib/ucsd/docDetail.action?docID=10886702>; E. A Grosz, *Chaos, Territory, Art: Deleuze and the Framing of the Earth* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008); Mark Bonta and John Protevi, *Deleuze and Geophilosophy: A Guide and Glossary* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2004); Rodolphe Gasché, *Geophilosophy: On Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari's What Is Philosophy?*, Northwestern University Studies in Comparative and Continental Philosophy (Evanston, Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 2014).

participation in these approaches to art history is reflected by analysis supported by the use of digital humanities methods to produce maps and spatial analyses that establish the geographic scope of Abramović's practice. Multimodal digital methods are essential to the online research environment that defines Abramović's globalized art works, which also require historical methods appropriate to the born-digital archive.

The unique circumstances of my study have allowed me to engage in archival and participatory research. The experience of live art as an embodied experience of presence has placed performance and its documentation in a context of robust scholarship and critical theorization to contend with performance as the object of art historical research.⁵³ Questions of participation and observation that attend fieldwork in anthropology are not contentious in the history and criticism of performance, as the critical authorial voice of the humanities is not subject to certain modes of objectivity as are the social sciences. Still, based on my interest in performance as a product of culture and the transcultural nature of my research, my participation and subject matter support a serious engagement with my intention to be both historically objective, critically rigorous, and personally present.

Within the discipline of anthropology proper, my project depends on two main categories of focus, embodiment and religion. In my analysis of Abramović's work, I depend on the innovative work of Thomas Csordas and his use embodiment as a paradigm for anthropology, as well as his argument identifying alterity as the basis of

⁵³ Catherine Elwes, "On Performance and Performativity," *Third Text* 18, no. 2 (2004): 193; Amelia Jones, "'Presence' in Absentia: Experiencing Performance as Documentation," *Art Journal* 56, no. 4 (December 1, 1997): 11–18; Jones, "Live Art in Art History: A Paradox?"; Jones and Heathfield, *Perform, Repeat, Record*; Peggy Phelan, ed., *Unmarked the Politics of Performance* (London: Routledge, 1993).

religion.⁵⁴ The paradigm of embodiment provides a rich field of investigation and my work benefits from transcultural, spatial, and aesthetic scholarship that attends to the body in terms that expand the discourses of art history.⁵⁵ In addition to these essential elements of anthropological scholarship, I analyze Abramović performance in terms of religious ritual using conditions defined by philosopher and anthropologist Marcel Hénaff. My use of the term *transcultural* to describe Abramović's global and cross cultural aesthetic also depends on scholarship in anthropology, indicating the close and valuable relationship the discipline has to the interests of the art historian working in a complex, diverse, and expanded cultural field.⁵⁶

Aesthetic Theory

The origins of contemporary aesthetic discourse in the modern Western philosophical tradition arguably emerges from that interstice between art and religion, inextricably intertwined as the relationship of beauty to morality in Kant's *Critique of Judgment*, or Schiller's aesthetic freedom derived from the integration of the sensual and the rational. The autonomy of the aesthetic from the domain of the religious or theological is central to definitions of secular modernity, while aesthetic spaces manufacture the spatial correlate of Kantian disinterestedness by adhering to conventions

⁵⁴ Thomas Csordas, "Embodiment as a Paradigm for Anthropology," *Ethos* 18, no. 1 (1990): 47, 5; Thomas J Csordas, ed., *Embodiment and Experience: The Existential Ground of Culture and Self*, Cambridge Studies in Medical Anthropology 2 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994); Thomas J. Csordas, "Asymptote of the Ineffable: Embodiment, Alterity, and the Theory of Religion," *Current Anthropology* 45, no. 2 (April 2004): 163–85; Thomas J Csordas, ed., "Intersubjectivity and Intercorporeality," *Subjectivity* 22, no. 1 (May 2008): 110–21.

⁵⁵ Marcel Mauss, *Sociology and Psychology: Essays* (London: Routledge and K. Paul, 1979); Setha M. Low, "Embodied Space(s) Anthropological Theories of Body, Space, and Culture," *Space and Culture* 6, no. 1 (February 1, 2003): 9–18; Richard Shusterman, *Body Consciousness: A Philosophy of Mindfulness and Somaesthetics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008).

⁵⁶ Fernando Ortiz, *Cuban Counterpoint: Tobacco and Sugar* (Knopf, 1947).

that are theorized as sanctified and sacramental.⁵⁷ The ideology of the gallery and museum space of 20th century art is theorized as a blank, a placeless space of potentiality existing outside of, or beyond, time, and completely isolated from other types of differentiated space. The transcendental spatiotemporal characteristics of the “white cube” mark that which falls within its confines as art, and elides the autonomous subjectivity of the public as viewer, spectator, beholder, and body. The gallery space is troubled by body art, performance art, and installation art destabilizing the integrity of that space. This understanding of gallery space in terms of modernist aesthetics becomes a permeable space within the category of postmodernity, allowing the transcendent to seep out and the market to seep in to the museum.

Abramović’s practice, within and without the art institution, troubles that terrain through body, time and space, also dislocates aesthetic discourse beyond the confines of the tradition of Western aesthetic philosophy. This aesthetic is beyond the presumption of the contours of a Western culture. Even beyond the negation of an anti-aesthetic. This position within the Modern and Contemporary, which disturbs the sacred space of the gallery can be explored by way of Nameless Science, locating the forms and practices of the body of the performance artist, not “resolutely outside the borders of aesthetics,” but resolutely outside of borders.⁵⁸ Negotiating, exploring, and testing boundaries and limits explicitly defines Abramović’s project, resolutely inside the experience of the body.

⁵⁷ Brian O’Doherty, *Inside the White Cube : The Ideology of the Gallery Space*, Expanded ed. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999).

⁵⁸ Agamben, “Aby Warburg and the Nameless Science,” 91.

My use of the term practice depends on the work of sociologist Pierre Bourdieu and his theory of *habitus*.⁵⁹ Abramović operates in cultural spheres that have theories of practice that differentiate them as distinct *habitus*. The most important for this study discipline her body in art and religion. I argue Abramović has actively integrated the practices of body art and meditation as an aesthetic strategy of performance, drawing on transcultural practices of spiritual discipline to attenuate her attention of mind and body, expanding her awareness in long duration performance.

Acknowledging the socially constructed status of the category aesthetics, a category with a particularly Western orientation, a significant challenge of this project is to address and use that category in its inextricable relation to the history of art. I pursue this line of research in a manner that seeks the aesthetic as a set of dynamic relations, in this case framed by cultures. Non-western aesthetics is a category that may not in any real sense, exist. Like religion, it is a category that emerges in those cultures as a result of contact and transculturation, mainly through the German intellectual tradition of scholarship.⁶⁰ Anthropology provides the most robust disciplinary context for the study the aesthetics of most non-Western societies within the term ethno-aesthetics.⁶¹ Given the introduction of the art of the indigenous peoples of my study to the world of global Contemporary art, to divide their cultures and practices from the scope of my larger aesthetic inquiry through the prefix ethno- undermines the inclusive field of art historical research that I am attempting to navigate.

⁵⁹ Pierre Bourdieu, *The Logic of Practice* (Stanford, Calif: Stanford University Press, 1990).

⁶⁰ The scholarly category of religion is founded in the Religionwissenschaft of Max Muller, presupposing the category based on western cultural practices. Non-western cultures may not divide or organize socially or culturally into a category of religion, but more frequently sacred and profane.

⁶¹ Wilfried van Damme, "Some Notes On Defining Aesthetics In The Anthropological Literature," *Journal of the Anthropological Society of Oxford* 22, no. 2 (1991): 167–81.

Art historian Cecelia F. Klein articulates the slow inclusion of non-Western societies, other than Asian cultures, in the fields of study covered by art history departments with the category “fourth world.” This category includes aboriginal and colonized peoples including the Americas, Africa, and the Pacific.⁶² It is important to recognize and analyze the ethnic character of material and performance culture with specificity that is inclusive in the aesthetics of art history rather than divisive, grouping or excluding societies outside the aesthetic concerns of art history based on their scale of technological, social, or infrastructural development.

Notably, religion and aesthetics are brought together in numerous scholarly contexts attempting to articulate the aesthetic of non-western cultures and art practices. Buddhism, Zen, and Daoism are the framework within which East Asian aesthetics are often framed, and Hinduism, that of South Asia.⁶³ Philosophers of the aesthetics of non-Western cultures tend to emphasize the departure from Western norms with reference to the philosophy of ancient Greece, rather than in the Germanic tradition, setting attempts at culturally diverse articulations of aesthetic theory into a historical frame more appropriate to the histories of the philosophical, religious and artistic traditions that inform those aesthetic theories.

⁶² I expand this category to include Australian aboriginal peoples in my analysis of Abramović’s global and transcultural aesthetic development. Cecilia F. Klein, “Around the Fourth World in Seventy Days: Art History and the Colonized Other,” in *Compression Vs. Expression: Containing and Explaining the World’s Art*, ed. John Onians, Clark Studies in the Visual Arts (Williamstown, Mass: Sterling and Francine Clark Art Institute, 2006), 22.

⁶³ Kenneth K. Inada, “A Theory of Oriental Aesthetics: A Prolegomenon,” *Philosophy East and West* 47, no. 2 (April 1997): 117–31; Kenneth K. Inada, “The Buddhist Aesthetic Nature: A Challenge to Rationalism and Empiricism,” *Asian Philosophy* 4, no. 2 (October 1994): 139; Richard Schechner, “Rasaesthetics,” *TDR: The Drama Review* 45, no. 3 (2001): 27–50.

In my analysis of Abramović's aesthetics, I benefit from the plural and inclusive participatory aesthetics defined by Umberto Eco in his theory of the *open work*.⁶⁴ His literary criticism and theory form the foundation of my analysis of Abramović's career as reflecting an increasingly expansive focus on intersubjective contact as an embodied practice. In addition to the primary frame of the open work, literary criticism and studies of poetics open fields of aesthetic inquiry that I use to articulate the importance of geographic scale and minor transnationalism to her aesthetic.⁶⁵ The relevance of literary scholarship to my work is supported by transdisciplinary and transcultural aesthetic theory that attends to embodied experience as the ground of health, pleasure, bliss, and tranquility rather than Western models of judgment and reason as the foundation of aesthetic quality.⁶⁶ These foci allow me to maintain my focus on the importance of ritual, religion and transcultural experience to Abramović's development and art work from perspectives that are more attentive to her sources than to Western approaches to evaluation that limit substantive understanding and appreciation of the artist's work.

Abramović's increasing and established commitment to duration is so prominent I assert the position of her work within subsequent histories of performance will not only recognize duration as a formal element of her work, but as the materiality of her work. Duration is a material no less essential to her practice than the body. In the economy of her aesthetic, Abramović has worked most consistently with relation to commitment and duration. It is also apparent in the formulation of her late works that the legacy of her

⁶⁴ Umberto Eco, "The Poetics of the Open Work," in *Participation*, ed. Claire Bishop, Documents of Contemporary Art (London : Cambridge, Mass: Whitechapel ; MIT Press, 2006), 20–40.

⁶⁵ Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1994); Françoise Lionnet and Shumei Shih, eds., *Minor Transnationalism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2005).

⁶⁶ Shusterman, *Body Consciousness*; Schechner, "Rasaesthetics"; Inada, "The Buddhist Aesthetic Nature."

work with Ulay is the source of some of her most persistent and pervasive relations to time. Bergson's articulation of the unity and multiplicity of duration provides a context for considering the transcultural components of her practice in poetic terms, but also defines many of the key philosophical positions that inform contemporary criticism.

Whether measured by exhaustion or failure, hours, days, months or cosmic measure, the temporality of Abramović's body has a presence more consistent than her differentiation of the body's position in space. As a formal quality, I argue Abramović's stillness exemplifies a Buddhist aesthetic of duration that both highlights and blurs the boundaries between art and life. Stillness in art is closely associated with *tableaux vivants*, an embodied practice that can be differentiated from avant-garde aesthetics of duration on the basis of its pictorial intentions (literally, a living picture). Abramović's duration has come to highlight *durée réelle* (real time), or slowness, rather than the almost ironic mimetic function and practice of *tableau vivant*.

Chapter Summaries: Towards a Scholarly Heteroglossia

In the writing of this study, I have included many voices. Marina Abramović and Ulay represent their experience in their own words, as do critics, curators, scholars, and participants in Abramović's open works. In this heteroglossia, I do not invoke Bakhtin's criticism of the novel, but the diversity of experience represented in the text that is a reflection of the global, a nine chapter multiperspectival history that relishes other points of view. Chapter One surveys Abramović's early works tracing her development as a painter into sound, installation and performance works that demonstrate her primary interest in other cultures, extremes, and ritual. In her performative tests to the body, Abramović opened her work to international exposure, consensual and non-consensual

contact with others, experimenting with personal and social boundaries until they failed. I trace these events through a critical history, arguing for an emerging religious dimension to her performances while focusing on her works with the star as a recurring symbol.

Chapter Two introduces Abramović's German partner Ulay and his formation as an artist. His trans- aesthetics form a potent point of contact for Abramović's exploration of transcultural exchange through intimate contact. I locate the aesthetic of their emergent collaboration in their last solo works that challenged the ego and crossed social boundaries with spatial analyses of Abramović's *Role Exchange* (1976) and Ulay's *There is a Criminal Touch to Art* (1976). Chapter Three takes the universal imagery of selected *Relation Works* as its focus, following the nomadic travels of the couple geographically. My analysis draws on the anthropology of religion and art criticism to argue a religious dimension to Abramović/Ulay's emphatically physical performances rooted in their ideal of the divine androgyne of alchemical philosophy.

Chapter Four develops the importance of geography to Abramović's collaboration with Ulay, locating the aesthetic transformation they experienced in the climate of the Australian Desert. I explore the transcultural practice and imagery they developed to support that aesthetic in the performance *Nightsea Crossing* (1981-87) through the practice of Buddhist meditation and their use of cross-cultural co-presence to exhibit ritualized transcultural experiences of consciousness. Chapter Five focuses on the importance of landscape and geography to the final collaborative work by Abramović and Ulay situating the *Great Wall Walk* (1988) in its Chinese context of global cultural symbolism, international negotiations, and complex human relations. I emphasize the

importance of scale and endurance to Abramović's Walk and the objects she developed to communicate her experience of the geologic properties of the earth to art contexts.

Chapter Six departs from my focus on performance to examine a key example of Abramović's transcultural aesthetics in global context. I undertake a close reading of the "Object Book" *Personal Archaeology* (1997-99) comparing its function and organization to Warburg's *Mnemosyne Atlas*. My interview with Abramović provides new commentary on this understudied work, which I place among Abramović's most significant. From this exemplar of the diversity of her religious thought, I follow her work back into performance and its increasing emphasis on public participation.

Chapter Seven takes *The House with the Ocean View* (2002) as a paradigmatic example of religious ritual in an art context. I place the work in critical and theoretical context, addressing Eurocentric responses to the work, while emphasizing the transcultural forms and practices that inform my interpretation of this work as a public meditation retreat. Chapter Eight situates *The Artist Is Present* (2010) in global context through analysis of its digital mediation, its openness to artistic interventions by participants, and production of religious discourse. I emphasize the importance of religion to the reception and interpretation of the work and its aesthetic of duration, calling on the critical responses of scholars, first person narratives of participants, and my own long duration participation to define the historical importance of the performance in terms of its polysemous image of intimacy as a form of the sacred.

Chapter Nine documents the Abramović Method as a pedagogical and exhibition practice with emphasis on my own participatory research. I describe the exercises and activities involved in preparation for the sound performance *3015* (2015), and

Abramović's collaboration with choreographer Lynsey Peisinger and science fiction novelist Kim Stanley Robinson. I use participant narratives to link Abramović's gallery and museum practices to her work as a professor. I set her Method in her growing body of transcultural wisdom teachings by including significant extracts from her private talk emphasizing the development of a personal method for cultivating the self.

Chapter One: Testing the Body — Early Works

Marina Abramović's early career presents a picture of a disturbed and disturbing young woman, preoccupied with violence and rebellion. From this root of anguished and expressive force, she created a number of works that are remarkable for their intensity and extremes. In this chapter, I briefly analyze selected installations that reflect Abramović's early interest in the transformative power of violence, expansive possibilities of global travel, and transcultural Buddhist aesthetics. I also undertake a chronological survey of her early performances that constellate a series of unplanned interventions that distinguish early works from performances I discuss in later chapters. My survey and commentary include multiple foci including attention to varied critical interpretations of violence in her work, interaction with others during performance, and her use of the star as an occult symbol.

Abramović's early confrontations of the self and provocations of others took place in a social context of familial repression and disharmony, a privileged cultural position rooted in Communist politics in Belgrade, Yugoslavia, as well as one influenced by her awareness of diverse spiritual and religious practices inside and outside the art world. These make possible different interpretations of her work based on ethno-aesthetic, religious, and political imagery, which are often conflicting, yet equally viable allowing for a polysemous approach to Abramović's imagery. My approach focuses on the religious and ethno-aesthetic dimensions of her influences. Abramović's anthropological interest in cultures began early. As she told arts journalist Alessandro Cassin,

I love to travel and explore the world. This has been a desire I had since I was a little girl in Yugoslavia. I knew that country was not for me and started to imagine the rest of the world. At age 15, I discovered a man called Tibor Sekelj, an anthropologist who took incredible trips and came back to Belgrade to lecture about them. He spoke about fantastic faraway lands, like Papua New Guinea or Patagonia, and the people he met there. I did not miss one of his lectures and listened carefully to each word this man said. Leaving and travelling was my inner dream: I wanted to discover our planet.⁶⁷

For the purposes of my larger argument of a career-long cultivation of transcultural aesthetics through geographic and cultural exploration, in this chapter I focus on the importance of interpreting the content of her work, and the circumstances of its creation in a larger frame than her Communist origins with emphasis on geography, intersubjectivity, and personal inquiry. With regard to Abramović's developing aesthetic, I use two terms. I use the term *transcultural* to describe the application of concepts from non-Western cultures in her work, which develops transcultural aesthetics by combining international streams of Japanese Zen with cosmopolitan Euro-American Contemporary art. I also use the term *ethno-aesthetics*, an anthropological category, to refer to something larger than varied definitions applied in anthropology.⁶⁸

In an effort to expand aesthetics to include global cultures in the manner art history is becoming more inclusive,⁶⁹ I choose to include all societies in the category aesthetics and develop an etic perspective of art across cultures including the anthropological subfield of ethno-aesthetics within the philosophical category aesthetics. Rather than limiting the use of "ethno-aesthetics" to refer exclusively to primitive

⁶⁷ Rus Bojan et al., *Whispers*, 262.

⁶⁸ Wilfried van Damme, "Some Notes On Defining Aesthetics In the Anthropological Literature," *Journal of the Anthropological Society of Oxford* 22, no. 2 (1991): 167–81.

⁶⁹ Klein, "Around the Fourth World in Seventy Days: Art History and the Colonized Other."

societies, here, I include Slavic aesthetic forms and folkloric traditions in the category ethno-aesthetics.

At various times throughout her career, Abramović has expressed an interest in transforming herself or the public through her artwork. Erika Fischer-Lichte frames a process of possible transformation for the public in the context of performing arts based on rites of passage. Grounding her analyses in the work of anthropologist Victor Turner and his application of the ethnographies of Arnold van Gennep, Fischer-Lichte argues that performance practice in the art world is an emotively charged, liminal experience described in anthropological terms that are religious, rather than sociological, secular, or political.⁷⁰

Fischer-Lichte's argument about the liminal element of Abramović's work provides a robust basis for the understanding of performance as a process of aesthetic experience that is educational, initiatory, or transformative according to the receptivity of the individual members of the public.⁷¹ Abramović's interest in transformation has roots in her early sound installations and has become central to her aesthetic intentions in the 21st century. In numerous early performances, Abramović's transformation of the audience went beyond the aesthetic realm into the ethical, encouraging spectators to intervene in the work, leading to the conclusion of the performance. In later sections of this chapter, I discuss three works that concluded with interventions by the audience, once to save her life.

⁷⁰ Numerous critiques of Turner have altered the application of his theory of *communitas* and the liminal in anthropological studies of ritual, but his work forms the basis of many key works of performance theory.

⁷¹ Fischer-Lichte, "Performance Art ~ Experiencing Liminality."

Sound Installations

Following her education as a painter, Marina Abramović moved into new genres of art making. The two most significant genres in the early part of her career were installation and performance that afforded her a wider range of expression than available in academic painting. Many of these works reflect a pronounced interest in extremes and violence, which reflect the traumatized post-war culture in which Abramović lived, and the conflict laden relationship she had with her mother. Scholars have attributed Abramović's emotional instability to psychological problems resulting from a disturbed home life and childhood trauma.⁷² Her authorized biographer, James Westcott thoroughly documents the varieties of significant emotional and physical disturbance of Abramović's personal life.

Abramović's post-painting practices were typical of intermedia Contemporary art, including sound installation, video, and performance works. Many of these works involved disturbing elements, including the sound of gunfire, as in *Sound Corridor* (1971).⁷³ The most somatically oriented works proposed sensory extremes of light and dark or sound and silence—showing a distinctive interest in challenging the public's sensory and perceptual limits.⁷⁴ After developing proposals in other media, including the use of airplanes for skywriting,⁷⁵ Abramović began to push geographic boundaries, formally and symbolically. This alteration to her art practice enlarged her content to matters beyond the Yugoslavian milieu through the medium of sound, which reflected the

⁷² Stiles et al., *Marina Abramović*; Westcott, *When Marina Abramović Dies*.

⁷³ This work is identified as having taken place in both 1971 and 1972, I rely on the texts *Artist Body* and *Public Body* for dates 1965-2001.

⁷⁴ Westcott, *When Marina Abramović Dies*, 48.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*

aesthetic development of her interest in wide-ranging geography. These themes grew into an art practice inextricable from the later nomadic travels that supported her performance work.

Sound Corridor (1971)

Abramović expressed her interest in transforming the experience of the museum and gallery public in an aesthetic that is especially violent in *Sound Corridor (1971)*, installed at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Belgrade.⁷⁶ Abramović called on the most threatening of sonic material, gunfire, to transform their awareness.⁷⁷ In describing these works, Abramović has said,

In the 1970s for me what was important was to make something really disturbing and dangerous, some kind of image that could shock the public and create a space in them so that they could receive something new, giving them a different awareness. [. . .] But it was not any kind of political statement. What was important for me was that by entering the space you left everything behind you, because the shock and the sound completely filled the body and when the sound stopped, you went into the silence and were ready to receive art.⁷⁸

⁷⁶ Abramović's interest in violence and catastrophe was extensive. She painted car accidents and created sound installations near bridges that exposed listeners to the sound of the structure's collapse.

⁷⁷ This work is known by various titles, I use Abramović's 2001 career survey *Public Body* as my source. Abramović has retitled, or variously presented a small number of works in this way, which over time results in a more neutral conceptual coherence with her performances across her career. Performance scholar Mary Richards identifies *Sound Corridor* by the title *War (1972)*, and Chrissy Iles identifies it as *Sound Space – War*, which radically alters its communicative power from a politically inflected title. Marina Abramović, *Marina Abramović: Public Body: Installation and Objects, 1965-2001* (Milano: Charta, 2001), 40; Mary Richards, *Marina Abramović* (London: Routledge, 2010), 84; Ulay and Marina Abramović, *Ulay/Abramović: Performances, 1976-1988* (Eindhoven: Stedelijk Van Abbemuseum, 1997), 13.

⁷⁸ Stiles et al., *Marina Abramović*, 19–20.

The artist likened the experience to a Tibetan Buddhist retreat taken under a waterfall, where the sound of water obliterates discursive thought, resulting in a new silent receptivity as result of cleansing through immersion in sound.⁷⁹

The shock and stress to the museum goer in *Sound Corridor* set up challenging instinctual, physical, and emotional responses to gunfire, which for many people might be associated with fear and withdrawal, rather than Abramović's intended receptivity. Abramović believed results from her own experiences of transformation generalized to the public. She held this view despite the fact her mother and critics viewed many of her works as masochistic.⁸⁰ These contrasts between Abramović's intentions and the variety of individual's instinctual, psychological, and physiological responses to stress result in an unpredictability of outcomes for the public her aesthetic of shock. In this aesthetic, the most intense experience is desirable and assumed a positive result. In the coming years, rather than focusing these interests on the public—exhibiting extremes of sound and silence in gallery installations, Abramović developed performance works that centered extremes of experience on her body. These performances were considerably more destructive than her works intended to affect the public's perceptual faculties.

Airport (1972)

As a student artist, Abramović's aesthetic concerns used conceptual frameworks and deployed sound, a non-traditional material, to bring distant places into relationship with art contexts. The artist strained against psychological and physiological limits set by her restrictive family life and the geographic limits set by the circumstances of

⁷⁹ Ibid., 20.

⁸⁰ Westcott, *When Marina Abramović Dies*, 73.

Yugoslavian Communism. *Airport* (1972), was exhibited in the Studenski Kulturni Centar (SKC) in Belgrade, is a sound installation that suggests possibilities for international travel by recreating the sense of an airport terminal and its audio announcement system. Summaries of the work are in the artist's own words, drawn from a three-volume survey of her career,

Airport Instructions for the public:

All passengers on the J.A.T. flight are requested to go to gate 343. The plane is leaving immediately for Tokyo, Bangkok, and Hong Kong.⁸¹

In the SKC, Abramović set up a hypothetical airport lounge by projecting sound into a space in the student center with dramatic floor to ceiling windows with metal frames in modernist style. The space was furnished with chairs and tables similar to many public spaces of international transit, establishing the sense of an airport terminal or lounge. The worldwide scope of the imagined airport terminal included flights to “Karachi, Cairo, Paris and Rome” from gate 265.⁸² Abramović's selection of destinations includes European capitals she had visited, as well as destinations that can be interpreted as exotic, orientalist, global, or simply further away than locations accessible to Yugoslavian students and artists.

In *Airport* (Figure 1.1), implied freedom stands in stark contrast to the travel opportunities that were available to Abramović and her peers, though Abramović had significant exposure to transnational opportunities to develop her aesthetic through

⁸¹ Abramović, *Marina Abramović: Public Body: Installation and Objects, 1965-2001*, 44.

⁸² Westcott, *When Marina Abramović Dies*, 58.

exposure to the national pavilions at the Venice Biennale. The most mobile young people and artists of the time, including Abramović, travelled outside the Balkans, but such privileges were a reflection of the family's social position, not the general freedoms of the populace. Westcott interprets *Airport* as a “deliberate tease,” offering opportunities for travel beyond those available to the students of the SKC.⁸³

The anthropologist Marc Augé deploys spaces of transit, specifically international airports, to define his theory of supermodernity, which unifies anonymous transnational spaces of transit worldwide. Augé bases his theory on homogeneity of form and function in space he calls “non-places.”⁸⁴ The SKC occupied the building formerly used as the secret police social club. Within its walls, Abramović used the place-making technique of sound installation to imbue the existing architecture with a sense of transcultural non-place.⁸⁵ While Westcott describes the architecture of the social club as “kitschy mock-castle,”⁸⁶ photographic documentation of the interior, which Abramović used as an exhibition space cum lounge, reflects the aesthetic sense of the supermodern non-place. *Airport*'s architectural environs evoke a sense of real opportunities or frustrated dreams to travel to distant capitals via careful selection of space for her sound installation. The modernist design and architecture of the section of the SKC where Abramović installed her sound work created an aesthetic resonance with globalized non-places.⁸⁷

⁸³ Ibid., 58.

⁸⁴ Marc Augé, *Non-Places: Introduction to an Anthropology of Supermodernity* (London ; New York: Verso, 1995).

⁸⁵ Westcott, *When Marina Abramović Dies*, 38.

⁸⁶ Ibid., 49.

⁸⁷ Abramović's use of modern furnishings is an important part of her later performance installations.

In light of her later travels around the globe, my interpretation of this work emphasizes themes of travel as an expansion of personal boundaries, out of the restricted world of Communist Yugoslavia and into the sphere of the global. In its personally and politically repressive context, *Airport* was an absurd escapist alternative to the suicidal gestures she had proposed in prior years. Notable not only for lacking themes of violence, *Airport* also centers on themes of world travel that became increasingly important for Abramović in later decades. Unlike most of her other works of the time, *Airport* is formally concerned with the global, drawing attention to possibilities beyond the local, reaching out sonically to far-flung reaches beyond Yugoslavia.

Sound Ambient White – Video (1973)

In addition to appealing to the possibilities of the global, Abramović's early works also emphasize transcultural aesthetics in their formal austerity, emphasizing emptiness and absence in a variety of media through the color white and the use of silence. The closely related works *Sound Environment White* and *Sound Ambient White – Video* exemplify Abramović's interests in an aesthetic that resonates with the works of other Contemporary artists influenced by Zen.

To create a white environment Abramović covered all the surfaces of a room in the SKC with white paper and placed a tape player playing a blank loop in the center. She created a temporal and sonic loop with magnetic tape connected end to end, without any sound recorded on it. Temporally, her all sound work functioned as loops, without perceivable limits defining a beginning or end. The use of loops in sound installation allowed Abramović to express a scale of time measured as “forever,” not clock or

calendar time.⁸⁸ The blank audiotape correlates with the absence of color, white, and functions without a beginning or end to its duration. Like a paradoxical koan, *Sound Ambient White – Video* (1972-3), also specifies an endless sonic absence, established through the through repetition of a loop, which also goes on indefinitely.⁸⁹

To continue the sense of forever in other media, Abramović adapted the formal qualities of *Sound Ambient White* from audiotape and built environment to video format. *Sound Ambient White – Video* presents a blank white video screen without audio content. The ‘silence’ of this work is described as “a scratchy hissing sound,” and has distinct similarities to the formal and content concerns of American artist John Cage’s *4’33”* (1952) and Korean-American Nam Jun Paik’s *Zen For Film* (1962).⁹⁰ These works all emphasize transcultural Zen Buddhist themes and aesthetic of emptiness through the absence of activity in the artistic media of sound and image.

Documentation of Cage and Paik’s Zen influences and explicitly Zen works are extensive, better than the details of Abramović’s. With other students at the SKC, Abramović was interested in Zen Buddhism and knew Cage’s work. In *Sound Ambient White – Video*, Abramović’s choices resonate with both of these artists via the silent audio portion of Cage’s composition and blank screen of Paik’s film.⁹¹ The importance of Zen to these works, as well as the formal similarities to Klein’s *Le Vide* supports placing Abramović’s work in a transnational and transcultural Zen aesthetic.⁹²

⁸⁸ Stiles et al., *Marina Abramović*, 11.

⁸⁹ The importance of a sense of forever, or timelessness is important to Abramović’s later performances and video works that emphasize stillness and *tableau vivant*.

⁹⁰ Westcott, *When Marina Abramović Dies*, 59.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*

⁹² In *Le Vide* (The Void), Klein exhibited an empty gallery. Alexandra Munroe, *The Third Mind: American Artists Contemplate Asia, 1860-1989* (New York: Guggenheim Museum, 2009); Helen Westgeest, *Zen in*

Scholars have taken contrasting positions on the reception of Zen by western artists, which invites careful consideration of the flow of ideas among artists, as well as the depth of understanding derived from the transmission. In the context of Contemporary art, transcultural transmission of Zen ideas is widespread. In 1958, philosopher Alan Watts's essay "Square Zen, Beat Zen, Zen" identified a misreading of Zen by American writers of the 1950s, who used its concepts too subjectively and didactically.⁹³ Forty years later, curator and art historian Alexandra Monroe clarified how Western artists used Zen as a conceptual framework to develop new aesthetic strategies that "abandon artistic intention and compositional structure."⁹⁴ In the case of Abramović, her early influences and works are not Zen by the Chinese standards Watts applies, but do reflect the values of Munroe's Neo-Avant-Garde.⁹⁵

Solo Performances

Several scholars have explored the direct relationship between the conventional mediums of fine art, painting, sculpture, and architecture and performance art practices.⁹⁶ Abramović's background as a painter informs a number of analyses and presentations of her performance work which foreground painterly concerns. In his essay contributing to

the Fifties: Interaction in Art between East and West (Zwoll: Amstelveen: Waanders Publishers; Cobra museum voor moderne kunst, 1996).

⁹³ Alan Watts, "Beat Zen, Square Zen, and Zen," *Chicago Review* 12, no. 2 (1958): 8.

⁹⁴ Alexandra Munroe, "Buddhism and the Neo-Avant-Garde: Cage Zen, Beat Zen, and Zen," in *The Third Mind: American Artists Contemplate Asia, 1860-1989* (New York: Guggenheim Museum, 2009), 200.

⁹⁵ By Watts's standards, Chinese Zen is difficult for Japanese and Anglo-Saxon people to absorb, a position that has become less relevant to tracing historical processes of transculturation as Chinese artists show receptivity to Japanese Zen. One outstanding example of Zen transcultural cycles of transmission is Xu Bing, an important Chinese Contemporary artist influenced by the writings of DT Suzuki. Bing Xu, *Materials of the future: Documenting Contemporary Chinese Art From 1980-1990*, accessed April 7, 2015, http://www.china1980s.org/en/interview_detail.aspx?interview_id=71.

⁹⁶ Paul Schimmel, *Out of Actions: Between Performance and the Object, 1949-1979* (Los Angeles, Calif: The Museum of Contemporary Art, 1998); Marina Abramović and Art Gallery of New South Wales, *Body: Marina Abramović ... [et Al.]*. (Melbourne, Victoria, Australia; Sydney, New South Wales, Australia: Bookman Schwartz; Art Gallery of New South Wales, 1997); RoseLee Goldberg, *Performance: Live Art Since 1960* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1998).

the exhibition catalogue *Body*, “Embodying the Real,” Anthony Bond associates the practice of body art with painting by defining it as “the site of the work, thereby conflating figure and ground.”⁹⁷ Abramović often painted and exhibited nudes, bringing the relationship of figure and ground directly into her oeuvre through two media, painting, and performance.

Danger, violence, and marks made on her body describe the actions and outcomes in Abramović’s best-known early performances. Scottish artist and performing arts organizer Richard Demarco invited Abramović to Edinburgh on the strength of her aestheticized actions, describing her practice in terms of the language of drawing and painting.

I realized she was a classic example of an artist who was a brilliant draughtsman. All these actions, performances, whatever you want to call them, were really manifestations, not of a performer but a superb maker of marks. Whether she was using knives or electric fire or a block of ice, she was actually producing exquisite visual marks.⁹⁸

In her early performances, her willingness to face danger and self-mutilate are most consistent formal qualities.⁹⁹ Other established and emerging artists of the time also focused on dangerous or symbolically violent performance, including Viennese Actionists Hermann Nitsch, Otto Muehl, Rudolf Schvartzkogler, German Fluxus artist Joseph Beuys, Ulay (later her partner and collaborator), American Chris Burden, Franco-Italian performance artist Gina Pane, and Stelarc of Australia. In the 1970s, these artists performed self-inflicted violence and risk in such a consistent manner that ordeal and

⁹⁷ Bond specifically locates the body as site in the work of artists who explored the body’s limits including Abramović, Gina Pane, Mike Parr, and the Viennese Aktionismus group. Abramović and Art Gallery of New South Wales, *Body*, 55.

⁹⁸ Westcott, *When Marina Abramović Dies*, 79.

⁹⁹ In addition to the risk taking elements of her work, Abramović was consistent in her wardrobe of black shirt and black pants, or performing in the nude.

injury became synonymous with the category of Body Art.¹⁰⁰ As Abramović has summarized, “[...] the body art movement of the seventies, had a lot to do with pain and injuriousness in order to push the body to its border, even to the border between life and death.”¹⁰¹

Abramović’s early performances form the basis of a specific set of fraught social relations, which form an unexpected prelude to late works that became vehicles for less violent experiences of aesthetic transformation and transculturation. The fraught social relations Abramović experienced through her performances were a result of self-injurious and high-risk behaviors that occasionally deployed ritual forms, religious, and occult symbols.

The star played a major role in *Rhythm 5* and *Thomas Lips*, two ritualistic performances that resulted in rescue and intervention by the observers. In the following pages, I survey Abramović’s early performances and undertake a semiological study of Abramović’s use of the star. I also trace its interpretation by other authors, placing my emphasis on the importance of Abramović’s explicit intention to invest the star with occult significance. I offer occult interpretations in addition to the political interpretation favored by other art historians developing the historical threads of magic and religion that are primary sources of her aesthetic.

The early performances also constitute the basis of a widening geography of performance practice to include several cities in Western Europe. After a visit from

¹⁰⁰ Goldberg, *Performance*; Amelia Jones, *Body Art/Performing the Subject* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1998); McEvelley, *The Triumph of Anti-Art*; Schimmel, *Out of Actions*; Tracey Warr, *The Artist’s Body* (London: Phaidon, 2000).

¹⁰¹ Bernard Goy, “Marina Abramović (interview),” *Journal of Contemporary Art*, June 1990, <http://www.jca-online.com/Abramović.html>.

Scottish gallerist and curator Richard Demarco to Eastern Europe seeking new artists, Abramović received opportunities to work internationally at the Edinburgh Festival.¹⁰² The success of her performance work resulted in meetings that enlarged the geographic scope of her career, eventually resulting in her collaboration and intercontinental nomadic lifestyle with lover Ulay, which I will discuss in the following chapters.

Body as Medium

The artist theorizes her own work as a form of examination of the body in different states, as well as the instinct for self-destruction. Most of Abramović's early performances involve self-injurious behavior, more aestheticized than her early proposals that included suicidal gestures. The self-destructive elements of her performance repeatedly led to interventions by the public to prevent further injury and accidental death. In the 70s, Abramović attempted to prevent unplanned participation through formal strictures. Ultimately, those strictures failed to prevent spectators from intervening in her performance. In her efforts to solve this formal problem, she developed new approaches to performance, including public participation and collaboration. The interactions Abramović experienced with a partner became one of the most significant elements of her performance history and aesthetic, which later developed into a shared and explicit interest in vitality and transformation.

My work with the body, 1974

Body as performer of previously defined projects

Body in a conscious and unconscious state

Body as object in different situations

¹⁰² Westcott, *When Marina Abramović Dies*, 58.

Examining frontiers of pain

Examining frontiers of heat

Examining frontiers of cold

Examining the instinct of self-destruction

Examining the possibilities of getting into a trance state/state of trance

Carrying out the idea of switching personas for a certain time period

Carrying out the idea of draining the negative energy through killing

Carrying out the idea that, through hypnosis, another person can become me in another situation.

—Marina Abramović¹⁰³

Abramović's brief artist statement (1974) summarizes performances undertaken before the text was written and serves as a guide to other early performances she developed contemporaneously. Abramović's performance scores and this artist statement reflect a formal economy that has resonance with her visual aesthetic. The terse, clear, and simple statements describe intentions and establish conditions in a manner that gives the scores significant artistic significance worthy of consideration in addition to documentation media such as photography and video.¹⁰⁴ "My Work with the Body" formalizes the essential qualities and factors that interest her as an artist. As a summary of performance art events and aesthetic interests, Abramović's focus on her senses, psychology, and identity condition the work as intensely introspective.

Curator Klaus Biesenbach theorizes Abramović's work through several related terms, which generalize the artist's examination of the body with specific vocabulary

¹⁰³ Stiles et al., *Marina Abramović*, 122.

¹⁰⁴ Jones, "'Presence' in Absentia."

including; control, time, time as sound, loops, danger, pain, shame, nomad, and home.¹⁰⁵ I reduce the elements of Abramović's work with the body to their essence, danger, accompanied by an oft-noted outcome, but little analyzed element of her work, intersubjective experiences produced by her risk-taking behaviors. This theme of direct interaction, or engagement, with others is so prominent in her work that she has developed her theory of performance to accommodate it.¹⁰⁶

Early works resulted in interventions—most of which can be described as rescues, rather than planned engagements by the artist with the public. Danger, or the appearance of it, resulted in public perception of a need to protect or rescue Abramović, often resulting in spontaneous or uninvited action. This interactive experience, which consistently grew from a seed of danger, sets her *Rhythm* series (10, 5, 2, 4, and 0) apart from her painting and early installations. Interactivity with the artist is a key quality of the *Rhythm* series, which, along with their contribution to the emerging category of Body Art, has helped make it the most discussed body of work in her early oeuvre. The numerical order of the work does not correspond to their chronology. The artist appears to have organized the numbers around the number of actions or objects she controls in the performance—ten knives, five points of a star or the five extremities of her body (including head), two pharmaceutical pills, four blades of a fan, and zero as the indicator of the number of objects she would use, offering the 72 objects to be used by the public.

¹⁰⁵ Stiles et al., *Marina Abramović*, 8–30.

¹⁰⁶ Collaboration with Ulay absorbed the need for an intercorporeal foil. After their separation, she performed alone. In the 21st century, Abramović returned to an emphasis on intercorporeality in late works that strongly emphasize on interaction with the public. Unlike the physical interventions in her early works, late works emphasize the hinge of the gaze.

Rhythm 10 (1973)

Several early performances took place outside of Yugoslavia, granting her performance practice a transnational geography from the beginning of her explorations. Abramović's painting did not result in similar opportunities for international exhibitions and related travel. *Rhythm 10 (1973)*, performed in Edinburgh, Scotland and Rome, Italy drew on her interest in sound, looping, and repetition, while injecting the risk and self-discipline for which she has become renowned.

Drawing on repetition of risk, mistakes, and personal wounding, , the artist audio-recorded her performance of Slavic knife play, an ethno-aesthetic that would not reappear in her work until the 1990s. She adapted a drinking game adapted from Yugoslav and Russian peasantry.¹⁰⁷ Numerous popular sources identify this activity, which uses knives to test and demonstrate hand-eye coordination, as The Knife Game, Stabscotch, and Five Finger Fillet, coming into popular culture through films, most notably Roman Polanski's *Knife in the Water* (1962) and Ridley Scott's *Aliens* (1986).

The artist Charlemagne Palestine recalls meeting Abramović for the first time, before she was included in the international gallery scene. She was performing with a single knife at an outdoor performance. Palestine recalls, "I could not help but notice that one of her fingers was bandaged. She smiled and said: 'This has never happened, I cut my finger.'"¹⁰⁸ Abramović's subsequent work reflected an interest in mastering her mistake. The added dimension of self-harm, repeating the mistake accommodated error transforming it into an intentional act.

¹⁰⁷ Westcott, *When Marina Abramović Dies*, 62.

¹⁰⁸ Rus Bojan et al., *Whispers*, 152.

Rhythm 10 I place a white sheet of paper on the floor.

I place 20 knives of different sizes and shapes on the paper.

I place 2 tape recorders with microphones on the floor.

Performance.

I turn on the first tape recorder.

I take the first knife and stab in between the fingers of my left hand as fast as possible.

Every time I cut myself I change the knife.

When I've used all the knives (all the rhythms) I rewind the tape recorder.

I listen to the recording of the first part of the performance.

I concentrate.

I repeat the first part of the performance.

I take the knives in the same order, follow the same order, follow the same rhythm, and cut myself in the same places.

In this performance the mistakes of time past and the present time are synchronized.

I rewind the second tape recorder and listen to the double rhythm of the knives.

I leave.

Duration: 1 hour

1973

Museo d'Arte Contemporanea

Villa Borghese, Rome.

The first version of this performance (with **10 Knives**) was performed at the Edinburgh Festival, 1973.¹⁰⁹

¹⁰⁹ Abramović, *Marina Abramović*, 1998, 56.

The folk source material became exponentially more harrowing in her adaptation of it to performance art, emphasizing danger by increasing the game of a single knife to a test of ten in Edinburgh and twenty in Rome.

Rhythm 10 (Figure 1.2) marks Abramović's first opportunity to complete a proposed performance characterized by emphatic extremes of intensity, danger, and risk that resulted in injury. Doubling the number of knives not only doubled the number of cuts from twenty to forty—the alteration of formal stricture also increased the time required to complete the action. By performing the rhythm of stabs and cuts like a composition, she attenuated the duration of her studious form of knife play into a percussive performance of fearless rhythmic musicianship. Abramović's interest in holding the attention of the audience for as long as possible defines her performance practice for the entirety of her career.

Abramović described the discomfort of the audience with the content of the work, “The result was not a real danger, but the structure I created. And this structure gave the observer some kind of shock. He wasn't sure anymore: he was unbalanced and this made a void in him.”¹¹⁰ The sort of discomfort described is widely recognized as a particularly shocking element of avant-garde modernism. From Walter Benjamin to Robert Hughes, the concept of shock has defined the history of modern art and criticism.¹¹¹ In the case of many body artists, the “shock of the new” was a context for a disruptive aesthetic of shocks, which was not always violent, but often transgressive.

¹¹⁰ Helena Kontova, “Marina and Ulay: Half Man, Half Woman (reprint 1978),” *Flash Art* 41, no. July/September (2008): 127; Richards, *Marina Abramović*, 85.

¹¹¹ Walter Benjamin, *Selected Writings* (Cambridge, Mass: Belknap Press, 1996), “On Some Motifs In Baudelaire” vol. 4 313–355; Robert Hughes, *The Shock of the New*, 1st American ed (New York: Knopf : Distributed by Random House, 1981).

Abramović's recognition of her creation of a "void" in the spectator results in an intersubjective transformation she does not define as positive or negative. It can be located within a modernist aesthetic of shock and one from which the audience did not interrupt or intervene in her performance. A positive psychology of *Rhythm 10* depends on an understanding of Abramović's mastery of mind and body as a distinct element of her performance aesthetic, which later evolved from violence against her body into ascetic discipline. Abramović established this self-mastery in *Rhythm 10* by executing an act of challenging hand-eye coordination for an attenuated duration. The obstacle of injuries required courage to surmount the formal structure that involved repetition of pain, injury, and mastering her response to them so they could be systematically repeated.

The risky gestures of the work impressed the international audience and led to further opportunities to perform. After seeing the performance, Austrian gallerist Ursula Krizinger invited her to perform as a solo artist in Innsbruck, leading to opportunities to perform with the Orgien Mysterium Theatre (OMT) of Viennese Actionist Hermann Nitsch. Her next performance was not as successful in its transformations, as it led to unintentional injury and life-threatening levels of danger.

Rhythm 5 (1974)

Rhythm 5 I construct a five pointed star (the construction is made in 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 toenails and throw them into each end of the star.

I enter the empty space in the star and lie down.

Duration 1 ½ hours

1974

Studentski Kulturni Centar, Belgrade¹¹²

Abramović performed *Rhythm 5* (Figure 1.3) at the SKC, in conjunction with an annual visit from an international artist. In 1972, the SKC began an international artist program and the guest artist in 1974 was Joseph Beuys.¹¹³ 1974 was also the year the German artist performed his key work, *Coyote: I like America and America Likes Me*, a three-day confinement in a New York gallery with a coyote, which set a historic benchmark for risk in long durational performance.

Like Beuys' *Coyote*, the risk of *Rhythm 5* was obvious. After enacting the personal ritual of burning the hair and nails she cut from her body, the sacrifice or burnt offering, Abramović concluded with the action of lying down in the star with arms and legs outstretched. The artist lay still and concern for her safety did not develop until the flames touched her leg. She did not respond to the heat, or move the limb to safety. Realizing the artist had lost consciousness, two fellow Yugoslavian artists carried

Abramović to safety.¹¹⁴ As the artist described nearly 40 years later, "My hair was burning; I was burned everywhere. In the morning, my grandmother was in the kitchen

¹¹² Marina Abramović, *Marina Abramović: Artist Body: Performances 1969-1998* (Milano: Edizioni Charta, 1998), 62.

¹¹³ Despite photographic evidence of Beuys visit (but not attending the performance), according to Serbian art historian Branislav Dimitrijević, the guest in 1974 was Radomir Damnjanović Damnjan. Branislav Dimitrijević, "A Brief Narrative of Art Events in Serbia after 1948" n.d., 7, <http://www.eastartmap.org/text/knowledge/selectors/dimitrijevic.pdf>; Westcott, *When Marina Abramović Dies*, 87.

Branislav Dimitrijević, "A Brief Narrative of Art Events in Serbia after 1948," n.d., 7, <http://www.eastartmap.org/text/knowledge/selectors/dimitrijevic.pdf>.

making breakfast. She saw me and thought she saw the pure devil and threw everything on the floor and ran away.”¹¹⁵

This was the first in a series of performances that concluded only when the public intervened. *Rhythm 4* and *Thomas Lips* also evoked levels of concern and discomfort in the viewer strong enough to solicit ethically motivated action in Abramović’s best interest. Her intentional and unintentional risks to life and limb demonstrate there was a thin line between art and life demanding a stronger relationship with her public to protect her. The early performances reflect a need for human contact to maintain the integrity of her bodily health, a need she would eventually satisfy through an intense, but more stable relationship with a collaborator. Beyond the value of another participant in her performance action, she was also developing a symbolic vocabulary that was also vexed, challenging social mores and ethics.

In his biographical study of the artist, James Westcott lists a number of key points of reference for the iconography of the work, the star, a form that appears repeatedly in Abramović’s work over the decades. Westcott interprets *Rhythm 5* as a response to the ubiquitous Communist star, a view shared by performance scholar and artist Kristine Stiles. In his analysis of the confrontation of the artist with the political symbol, Westcott reads the performance as an engagement of her parents’ heroism and the mythology of Yugoslavia. He asserts the artist used the performance to confront Partisan and state communism, and engaging in a heroic act of her own, “politics on the surface, more transcendent and primordial motivations lay beneath.”¹¹⁶ He describes the star as “an

¹¹⁴ Westcott, *When Marina Abramović Dies*, 87.

¹¹⁵ Andrew Goldman, “The Devil in Marina Abramović,” *New York Times Magazine*, June 17, 2012.

¹¹⁶ Westcott, *When Marina Abramović Dies*, 69.

archetypal symbol with multiple ancient religious and mathematical associations from Mesopotamia to the Pythagoreans, to early Christianity and the occult.”¹¹⁷

Westcott’s analysis may draw on Stiles’ survey essay on the artist, which emphasizes the star as a “symbol of place and marker of identity” used in psychological negotiation of her social and cultural situation.¹¹⁸ While later re-performances of works of the 1970s in the new millennium did invest the star with additional communist references, Abramović’s performances of *Rhythm 5* and *Thomas Lips* (1975) make no symbolic or explicit references to Communism other than the 5-pointed star and its contextual significance. Abramović emphasized the occult the source of its symbolic content.¹¹⁹ Stiles strengthens her focus on Communism based on the presence of a star on Abramović’s birth certificate, used in a later performance of the 1970s, her collaboration with Ulay, *Communist Body/Fascist Body* (1979) which lacks ritualistic content. Stiles also foregrounds a re-performance of *Lips of Thomas* (2004) thirty years later, rather than the inverted pentagram which plays a central role in the symbols deployed in performances of *Thomas Lips* during the 1970s. I discuss the use of the inverted pentagram in that work at the end of the chapter.

Rather than attempt to make an argument for a unified understanding of the star as semiotic sign in Abramović’s work, I intend to attempt a more nuanced interpretation based on sources beyond the political. Attention to a wider range of interpretations expands the discussion of Abramović’s work to include more attention to the religiously and philosophically diverse influences throughout her career. While Westcott

¹¹⁷ Ibid.

¹¹⁸ Stiles et al., *Marina Abramović*, 52.

¹¹⁹ Westcott, *When Marina Abramović Dies*, 82.

foregrounds Stiles' alternate interpretations, Stiles chooses to relegate those other, prominent symbolic meanings of the star to her endnotes. Instead, she focuses her analysis on the Communist milieu of Abramović's early life as the most salient and relevant to her art historical analysis of Abramović's use of the star.¹²⁰ She writes,

In communist nations, the star symbolized the five fingers of the workers hand, the five continents where communism could grow, and the five social groups that would lead Russia to communism: the youth, the military, the industrial labourers, the agricultural workers or peasantry, and the intelligentsia.¹²¹

According to Stiles' notes, "significations of the pentagram vary from Greek associations with light and knowledge to Pythagorean mathematical perfection and from the five wounds of Christ to European Satanism and witchcraft."¹²²

Other critics and art historians' interpretations of Abramović's use of the star emphasize esoteric and occult meanings. Bojana Pejić places the star, as pentacle, in the Hermetic tradition, emphasizing the many layers of symbolism in *Rhythm 5*, with the star symbolizing life and health when linked to "Mother Earth, or 'microcosm' when linked to Man."¹²³ In her analysis of the use of the star in a later work that formally echoes *Rhythm 5*, *Count on Us* (2003), L.P. Streitfeld interprets the esoteric meaning of the star as a magical tool. She uses vocabulary specific to western occultism and witchcraft, "In

¹²⁰ Stiles et al., *Marina Abramović*, 56.

¹²¹ Stiles does not provide a source for this iconography which can be traced to Wikipedia. "Red Star," *Wikipedia, the Free Encyclopedia*, March 21, 2015, http://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Red_star&oldid=652942497. Stiles et al., *Marina Abramović*, 56.

¹²² Stiles et al., *Marina Abramović*, 136.

¹²³ Bojana Pejić, "Being-In-The-Body: On the Spiritual In Marina Abramović's Art," in *Marina Abramović*, ed. Friedrich Meschede (Stuttgart: Edition Cantz, 1993), 33.

this work, she entered fire in order to deconstruct the five-pointed Communist star and transform it into a pentacle.”¹²⁴

In esoteric, pagan, and occult philosophy, the star has numerous meanings. Streitfeld’s reference to the pentacle, a magical talisman, has close relationship to the use of the pentacle, or pentagram in neo-paganism or witchcraft. In the western esoteric and pagan traditions, the five pointed star, or refers to the elements, Earth, Water, Fire, and Air, under the topmost point, which symbolizes spirit, or, in older pre-Enlightenment natural philosophy, Aether. Given the prevalence of ritualistic and occult interest in European performance art at the time—most notably in the work of Hermann Nitsch, inspired by ancient Greek paganism—religious, esoteric or occult interpretations have historical relevance that gains significance in the context of Abramović’s performance. In a form similar to an illustration from Agrippa’s *De Occulta Philosophia Libri Tres* (Figure 1.4), she placed her own body in the star.

According to Iamblichus’ *Theology of Numbers*, Pythagorean symbolism of the five pointed star or pentad is manifold including, Alteration, Immortal, Androgyny, Lack of Strife, Aphrodite, Manifesting Justice, Demigod, Nemesis, Forethought, and Light.¹²⁵ Later mystical and magical philosophy developed close associations between the human body and the solar system through the star, as evidenced by the Renaissance author Heinrich Cornelius Agrippa’s *De Occulta Philosophia Libri Tres (Three Books Of Occult Philosophy, 1533)*. In Agrippa’s illustration, a human body is inscribed within a circle, with arms and legs stretched to the perimeter. With the head, the fifth appendage

¹²⁴ L. P. Streitfeld, “Encountering the Sacred Feminine: Marina Abramović and the Resurrection of Performance Art,” *Art New England* 25, no. 5 (September 2004): 16–19.

¹²⁵ Kenneth Sylvan Guthrie, *The Pythagorean Sourcebook and Library: An Anthology of Ancient Writings Which Relate to Pythagoras and Pythagorean Philosophy* (Grand Rapids: Phanes Press, 1987), 322–323.

touching the perimeter of the circle, the human body marks out the form of a pentagram, which in Agrippa is illustrated as a star, rather than a pentagon. The abstract symbolism and substantive relevance of the number five to the human form exists on a number of different concrete levels of embodied experience, ranging from the numbers of fingers and toes on a limb, to the five senses, and orifices on the head (ears, nostrils, mouth).

The writings of French occultist Eliphas Levi (given name Alphonse Louis Constant, 1810-1875) include several influential books on magic, which emphasize the extensive use of the five-pointed star in upright orientation, as in *Rhythm 5*, in magical ritual.¹²⁶ The symbolic encyclopedia of Spanish Surrealist poet and scholar Juan Eduardo Cirlot summarizes several relevant symbolic significations, as reflected by his entry on the star (singular, not “stars” plural), which adds further interpretations including “teacher” and “to educate.” It serves as a brief survey of significations that receive extensive treatment in European occultism. Abramović uses unattributed sections of the book in her major sculptural work *Private Archaeology* (1997-1999).

As a light shining in the darkness, the star is a symbol of the spirit. Bayley has pointed out, however, that the star very rarely carries a single meaning—it nearly always alludes to multiplicity. In which case it stands for the forces of the spirit struggling against the forces of darkness. This is a meaning which has been incorporated into emblematic art all over the world (4). [. . .] The five-pointed star is the most common. As far back as in the days of Egyptian hieroglyphics it signified ‘rising upwards towards the point of origin’, and formed part of such words as ‘to bring up’, ‘to educate’, ‘the teacher’, etc. (19). The inverted five-pointed star is a symbol of the infernal as used in black magic (37).¹²⁷

¹²⁶ Eliphas Lévi and Arthur Edward Waite, *Transcendental Magic, Its Doctrine and Ritual* (London: G. Redway, 1896), <http://archive.org/details/transcendentalma00leviuoft>.

¹²⁷ Cirlot’s encyclopedia is a valuable reference for modern and contemporary historians attempting to trace the esoteric symbols and images that have appeared in the work of esoterically-inclined artists. J. C. Cirlot, *Dictionary of Symbols* (Routledge, 1990), 309–310.

In light of Abramović's interest in mysticism, religion, youthful political agitation, and rebellion, the confluence of esoteric and political meanings of the star allow deeper consideration of her actions in the performance. Journalists, critics, and scholars more consistently emphasize lethal threat to life and limb than analyze the symbolic content of forms in the piece in relation to her actions. Abramović's willingness to risk her life and harm herself was not acquiescence to a loss of control over the performance. While she adapted performances immediately after *Rhythm 5* to continue successfully even if she lost consciousness, the primary relevance of her actions in the performance itself is the removal of her nails and hair and throwing them into the fire. This act is a clear evocation of ritual behavior, a sacrificial offering to a geometric fiery form.

Performance art as a type of ceremonial or ritual action must be established by the actions of the artist with reference to other performance practices recognized as ritual. Anthropologist of religion Roy Rappaport describes ritual as a practice of formalized display.¹²⁸ In the 15 years prior to the *Rhythm* series, the art actions and Happenings that helped define performance events were not formal, repeatable rituals, but interpretations of religious rituals and symbols did form the basis of the aesthetic of artists Abramović collaborated with, including Hermann Nitsch (1938-) and his Orgien Mysterien Theatre. In *Rhythm 5*, the artist builds a form and casts elements of her body into a fire created within the bounds of that specific form, the star. In this case, the ritual is self-referential,

¹²⁸ Roy A. Rappaport, *Ritual and Religion in the Making of Humanity*, Cambridge Studies in Social and Cultural Anthropology 110 (Cambridge, U.K.; New York: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 24.

in both symbolic form and content, inserting the body of the artist into the center of the star, using parts of that body to fuel its flames.

According to Rappaport, this form of self-referential ritual “serves to express ‘the individual’s status within the structural system in which he finds himself for the time being.’”¹²⁹ While the form of the star can be understood as explicitly communist in the Yugoslavian political context, as a performance of ritual the actions and content are radically different from political rituals of the time. Abramović’s art ritual appropriates the ubiquitous symbol of the state setting her into conflict with it through her occult reference. The insertion of self into the boundary of fire emphasized her identification with the center of the star, a choice marking her autonomy rather than her participation in the collective body of the communist party. The fire consuming the artist’s hair and nails is an oblique form of self-destruction, as much as sacrifice and purification. In this context, the combination of formal elements of the performance, its symbolic structure, and the body of the artist as offering is a significant joining of political and occult forms that produced a rupture in the secular social context, introducing Abramović as ritualist with shocking and ambiguous intentions.

Later performances would also include formal elements and techniques that help position Abramović’s works in a category that is intentionally art, and arguably religion. In the development of these works and my application of anthropological theories of ritual and religious performance, Aby Warburg’s Nameless Science located between the aesthetic and religion haunts Abramović’s performance oeuvre. The nascent theory of the Nameless Science suggests the value of Warburg’s insights from a location that is not

¹²⁹ Ibid., 52. Rappaport cites Leach, 1952.

art history, and not anthropology, but an inquiry into the use of the body human that demands new ways of thinking about creativity.¹³⁰ In the interest of furthering a clear understanding of Abramović's artistic contributions to art history, I position her work within its art context, with special attention to form, content, and actions that also place it in the categories of magic and religion.

Performances following *Rhythm 5* took care to include the possibility that the performance would not end with the artist's unintentional loss of consciousness, while simultaneously introducing risk that would allow her to use her body as her medium in and out of consciousness. In *Rhythm 2* (1974), she took two psychiatric medications one after the other, and in *Rhythm 4* (1974) placed herself in front of an industrial fan until she lost consciousness. For *Rhythm 2*, Abramović acquired powerful psychiatric drugs by seducing a doctor.¹³¹ The medications were used to treat two radically differing conditions, aggressive behavior and catatonia. *Rhythm 2* is significant for its early exploration of altered states of consciousness, an experience the artist would continue to explore through performances of long duration, some of which include fasting. Later performances and participatory works adapted Abramović's interest in consciousness into safe, legal forms of exploration developed through her spiritual practice and personal development. In contrast to these later works, *Rhythm 2* has more in common with countercultural experimentation with drugs through the options available to her in Yugoslavia. As a consenting user of the drugs, she was in control of her body, but lost her familiar mastery over it under their influence.

¹³⁰ Agamben, "Aby Warburg and the Nameless Science."

¹³¹ Richards, *Marina Abramović*, 87.

Rhythm 4 returns the shock of ethical discomfort as a focus that resulted in viewer intervention. In *Rhythm 4*, Abramović knelt nude in front of an industrial fan set on the floor, leaning into its flow of air. The force of the fan was strong enough that it kept her body elevated, rather than falling to the floor after she lost consciousness. As in *Rhythm 5*, onlookers present at *Rhythm 4* were uncomfortable with the vulnerability of the artist while unconscious. Rather than film her unconscious for the viewing public, the camera operator and gallery staff chose to assist her.

In her tests of limits, Abramović exhibits a non-dual approach to mind and body, testing her physical limits as well as demonstrating the force of her will—at times testing the limits of one through the exercise of the other. When performing unconscious, she established control through mastery of the physical body's decorum, rather than mastery of it through the presence of awareness. Submitting her body to the force of her will via a commitment to a lack of control over outcomes was vividly marked in the last of the *Rhythm* series, *Rhythm 0*.

Rhythm 0 (1974)

Rhythm 0 (1974) is one of Abramović's most discussed early performances, one in which she objectified herself, rather than enacting any specific performative action. At Gallery Studio Morra in Naples, Italy, the artist presented the public with a table with 72 objects including paint, food, flowers, weapons, bandages, and knives with which they were free to act upon her for a period of six hours. This performance, the last of the *Rhythm* series, is distinctive in terms of her obvious emotional response to the experience. It differs from photo documentation of her earliest works in her stalwart, but

tearful countenance. Like Yoko Ono's *Cut Piece* (1964), participants cut her clothes from her body, as well as other indignities for which she made herself available.

Rhythm 0 Instructions
There are 72 objects on the table that one can use on me as desired.

Performance.

I am the object.

During this period I take full responsibility.

Duration: 6 hours (8 pm – 2 am)

1974

Studio Morra Naples

This performance is the last in the cycle of Rhythms
(*Rhythm 10, Rhythm 5, Rhythm 2, Rhythm 4, Rhythm 0*)

I conclude my research on the body when conscious and unconscious.

List of Objects on the Table

gun
bullet
blue paint
comb
bell
whip
lipstick
pocket knife
fork
perfume
spoon
cotton
flowers
matches
rose
candle
water
scarf
mirror
drinking glass
polaroid camera

feather
chains
nails
needle
safety pin
hair pin
brush
bandage
red paint
white paint
scissors
pen
book
hat
handkerchief
sheet of white paper
kitchen knife
hammer
saw
piece of wood
ax
stick
bone of lamb
newspaper
bread
wine
honey
salt
sugar
soap
cake
metal pipe
scalpel
metal spear
bell
dish
flute
band aid
alcohol
medal
coat
shoes
chair
leather strings
yarn

wire
 sulphur
 grapes
 olive oil
 rosemary branch
 apple¹³²

The wide range of objects and the public's focus on art resulted in photographic documentation of the early phases of the performance in which participants' decoration of Abramović's body and the space around her suggests the formal sculptural concerns of Arte Povera and minimalist art. As hours passed, the actions of participants progressed into more domineering and exploitative forms of action on Abramović's body. The tears on her face are eloquent enough to convey the challenging experience of objectification (Figure 1.5), and the artist confirms the stressful situation she created resulted in a streak of white hair.¹³³ In 2010 Abramović remembered,

It was a little crazy. I realised then that the public can kill you. If you give them total freedom, they will become frenzied enough to kill you." What was the worst thing that happened? "A man pressed the gun hard against my temple. I could feel his intent. And I heard the women telling the men what to do. The worst was the one man who was there always, just breathing. This, for me, was the most frightening thing. After the performance, I have one streak of white hair on my head. I cannot get rid of the feeling of fear for a long time. Because of this performance, I know where to draw the line so as not to put myself at such risk.¹³⁴

Abramović communicates evidence of her fear and emotional experience in terms of the change to her body, the focus of her art practice. The transformed signifier, white hair, is most often associated with aging, and secondarily, fear, which is the signified of her experience of transformation.

¹³² Abramović, *Marina Abramović*, 1998, 80–81.

¹³³ Stiles et al., *Marina Abramović*, 60; Westcott, *When Marina Abramović Dies*, 76.

¹³⁴ Sean O'Hagan, "Interview: Marina Abramović," *The Guardian*, accessed February 4, 2015, <http://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2010/oct/03/interview-marina-Abramović-performance-artist>.

Written into the structure of *Rhythm 0* are fear, provocation, expectations of, and invitation to violence. Including the gun and bullet, 11 of the 72 objects offered to use on the artist are capable of cutting or piercing. The need for emergency response, triage, or rescue as in *Rhythm 5*, suggested by the presence of a scalpel and safety pins, also opened the artist to further implements of injury. The artist created a tableau with these objects, placed in a context that included disinfectant and bandages, creating a distinct focus on receptivity to wounding of the conflict-laden, as well as surgical kind. Other than cosmetics, food, and objects that could be used for binding such as yarn, chains, leather strings, and wire, these tools of cutting and piercing, such as the weapons of spear and ax, are by far the most salient and provocative thematic group of objects. The inclusion of piercing and cutting tools forms a distinct repetition of the dangerous object theme of *Rhythm 10* and its 10-20 knives.

Despite the availability of cutting tools and the artist's past works structured around cuts to her hands, participants inflicted few wounds of the physical kind on the artist during *Rhythm 0*, while her clothing and other items were disassembled. In his 1983 essay for *Artforum*, Thomas McEvilley reports that Abramović was cut with a razor and her blood drunk in the fourth hour of the performance.¹³⁵ Documentary photographs show this wound as a bandage over a thin stream of blood above the artist's collarbone. The psychological violence of the experience was most memorable for the artist. As she told *New Yorker* profiler Judith Thurman, "The women didn't touch me," she said, "but some of them egged the men on."¹³⁶

¹³⁵ Thomas McEvilley, *Art, Love, Friendship: Marina Abramović and Ulay Together & Apart*, 1st ed (Kingston, N.Y: McPherson & Co, 2010), 38.

¹³⁶ Thurman, "Walking Through Walls."

McEvelley's essay, based on interviews with the artist, stands in marked contrast to her textual description of the work in various catalogues and monographs. In her performance score, Abramović favors the word "responsibility" rather than an emphasis on her will to endure. She presents the work as a performance of body as object and her aesthetic autonomy as an artist in taking responsibility for the outcomes made possible by her selection of objects and strictures of time, rather than restrictions on the public. McEvelley notes Abramović had submitted to a complete abdication of will, making it clear she would not defend herself from rape or murder, an indication of the collapse of her human psychology, rather than arguing the will to assume responsibility for the actions of others.¹³⁷

Rhythm 0 was Abramović's first and last open work of performance in which she consented to objectification and passive physical contact with the public. Abramović continues to be interested in revisiting this unique sort of ethical and aesthetic autonomy in the context of participatory performances. In 2005, she intended to recreate the piece at the Guggenheim Museum in New York, but the museum would not allow use of a loaded gun.¹³⁸ The artist cannot assume legal liability for the museum, a fact that tends to limit the confrontation of ethical concerns of performances like *Rhythm 0*.¹³⁹

The open-ended and passive, yet complicated and suggestive nature of the invitation of the artist to act on her as an object, as well as the objects she offered, did result in a variety of transgressive liberties being taken, not only by the participants, but also in critical responses to it. In 1975, Radivoje Bojičić a critic in her native

¹³⁷ McEvelley, *Art, Love, Friendship*, 38.

¹³⁸ Richards, *Marina Abramović*, 38.

¹³⁹ Marina Abramović, *7 Easy Pieces* (Milan; New York City: Charta, 2007), 228.

Yugoslavia, explicitly discussed the prospect of Abramović's sexual availability in the publication *Jež*,

What if, instead of in Naples, M.A. organized her performance here in the Balkans? We could have understood "body art" as "nabodi art" (= implying penetration). Maybe some philistine would make use of M.A. since she does not look bad. That would be a happening! Similar to those in Danish night clubs.¹⁴⁰

The tacit implication of the sexual availability of the artist is rarely dealt with in such frank terms, marking the *Jež* publication unique among critical and historical responses to the work. The comment, which Richards positions as a form of ridicule, also reflects the critic's range of geographic references reflecting the wide ranging discourse of the Eastern European art world.¹⁴¹ Bojičić demonstrates familiarity with American performance art concerns in his reference to Happenings, and the sex club subculture of the permissive 1970s in Western Europe. His essay reveals the highly diverse set of cultural geographies informing his critique.

Bojičić's critique emphasizes the value of geographic and ethnographic perspectives in understanding the reception of Abramović's performance. By implying there would have been a more sexualized response in the Balkans, Bojičić articulates a geo- and ethno-aesthetic of the contemporary art scene. He posits Balkan human geography is significantly different from that of Italy in sexual mores. He also sees the performance and its potential as discrete from, but similar to, American Happenings and the sexual activities in night clubs in Denmark.

¹⁴⁰ Dimitrijević, "A Brief Narrative of Art Events in Serbia after 1948," 7.

¹⁴¹ Richards, *Marina Abramović*, 91.

The boundaries, as well as ethics of the participants-observers are often couched in terms of those who tested the artist as object most violently or exploitatively, removing her clothes, putting a loaded pistol in her hand pointed at herself, chaining her up, and touching her in an erotic manner. Of less prurient interest were the application of lipstick to her body and objects. A participant used the cosmetic to write on a mirror held in front of her face the phrase “Io sono libero” (“I am Free”).¹⁴² The nature of the artist’s perceived lack freedom, or liberated status, is a rich field for speculation given the social context of liberated women and the Feminist Movement in the 70s.

In her feminist reading of *Rhythm 0*, Bojana Pejić argues Abramović is “un-making concepts circulating around ‘femininity.’” Through the process of identifying the body as an object and then placing the public in the role of a group which must observe its own behavior, Pejić asserts that Abramović confronted and un-made notions of femininity which are assumed passive. By performing passivity, Abramović rendered the concept of feminized passivity “absurd.”¹⁴³

The conclusion of the *Rhythm* series led to other solo performances, which were not dependent on an intentional interactive component, as in *Rhythm 0*. Instead, Abramović made performances that centered on the exhaustion of her faculties, focused on various forms of activity resulting in exhaustion.

Freeing the Body (1975)

Themes of freedom appear in other work of the period. Abramović painted out important buildings on photographs of the skyline of Belgrade in *Freeing the Horizon*

¹⁴² Westcott, *When Marina Abramović Dies*, 76.

¹⁴³ Pejić, “Being-In-The-Body: On the Spiritual In Marina Abramović’s Art,” 28–29.

(1973). Freedom is also explicitly emphasized in her series of three endurance-focused performances, *Freeing the Voice*, *Freeing the Memory*, and *Freeing the Body* (1975) in which Abramović pushed these elements of her body to their limit, enacting a single activity—screaming, speaking, and dancing, until she could no longer continue. In 1978, Abramović was referring to these works with the term *Liberation*, rather than *Freeing*.¹⁴⁴ In light of her consistent efforts to distance herself from feminist labels,¹⁴⁵ and her popularity with feminist critics, the term *freeing* serves to define these works in terms that are independent from the language of feminism of the time.

Freeing the Body (Figure 1.6) is distinct among the three performances in the *Freeing* series for its transcultural emphasis. In the eight-hour performance recorded at Mike Steiner Gallery in Berlin, Germany, Abramović danced continuously to the accompaniment of an Afro-Cuban drummer. The beat of the drum provided the rhythm, while the performer danced until her endurance ran out and she dropped to the floor. In video documentation of the performance, Abramović wears a black scarf tied tightly over her head, covering her face. She gyrates, rarely lifting or moving her feet in front of a white scrim in an empty space. The drummer, identified as an Afro-Cuban man, is shirtless, wearing a necklace and seen from the back.¹⁴⁶ In various shots, the camera frames the top of his head and shoulders. Occasionally, the camera focuses exclusively on Abramović. Unlike prior performance documentation, which Abramović tightly

¹⁴⁴ Kontova, “Marina and Ulay: Half Man, Half Woman (reprint 1978),” 126.

¹⁴⁵ Janet A. Kaplan, “Deeper and Deeper: Interview with Marina Abramović,” *Art Journal* 58, no. 2 (Summer 1999): 15; “Marina Abramović | VICE | United States,” *VICE*, accessed January 23, 2015, <http://www.vice.com/read/marina-Abramović-599-v17n11>; Goldman, “The Devil in Marina Abramović”; Thurman, “Walking Through Walls.”

¹⁴⁶ “Freeing the Body | Wwww.li-Ma.nl,” accessed March 6, 2015, <http://www.li-ma.nl/site/catalogue/art/marina-Abramović/freeing-the-body/4487>.

controlled, the presence of another body is emphasized, opening the frame to focus on the wider cultural significations of the work.

The performance of the drummer sets the aesthetic tone and tempo of the performance as his playing moves at different paces, faster and slower, lending an ethno-aesthetic of the African diaspora. Abramović's movements are not recognizable as any particular form of dance, African or other. By bringing African aesthetic forms and a human body into the context of her work, Abramović presents a transculturally and transnationally integrated performance through sound and vision, and remains notable for cross-cultural themes and the inclusion of non-white participants in 1970s performance.¹⁴⁷

Thomas Lips (1975)

In 1975, during her work with Hermann Nitsch's Orgien Mysterien Theater she met and had a brief affair with a Swiss man, Thomas Lips.¹⁴⁸ Her lover's name became the title of one of her most notorious performances. Abramović's marriage to artist Nesa Paripović from 1971-76 is rarely discussed in critical histories of her work, as the artists continued to live separately after their wedding, each with their parents, until Abramović left the marriage for her famous partnership with Uwe Laysiepen (Ulay).¹⁴⁹ Despite the

Westcott, *When Marina Abramović Dies*, 82.

¹⁴⁷ Performance was a diverse, global practice that included artists from Japan and Korea. In the 1960s African American artist Adrian Piper was working with performance. Still, in the context of performance studied by art history, Abramović's use of African cultural forms and participants was distinctive. Participation of non-European collaborators also distinguishes the art of Abramović's future collaborator Ulay, who included a Turkish family in his action, *There is a Criminal Touch to Art* (1976). During their collaboration, the pair performed repeatedly with Aboriginal Australians and Tibetans, as well as making films involving other cultures in which they did not appear.

¹⁴⁸ Westcott, *When Marina Abramović Dies*, 79.

¹⁴⁹ Paripović refused to speak to Abramović biographer James Westcott, hanging up the phone when contacted by the author. Marina Galperina, "When Marina Abramović Dies, An Interview with Biographer

critical distance from Abramović's first marriage, adultery forms the foundation, if not the center of one of her most enduring performances. She re-performed *Thomas Lips* for the camera the same year, for video installation in 1997, and in 2005 at the Guggenheim New York as a part of the weeklong, solo performance event titled *7 Easy Pieces*.¹⁵⁰

First performed in October 1975 at Krinzinger Gallery in Innsbruck, Austria, Abramović's summary of *Thomas Lips* succinctly describes the performance actions she undertook. The score does not reflect the harrowing elements of the results of the performance, marked by vividly welted and frozen skin, flowing blood, symbols, and ritual actions, which created transgressive tension among occult, magical, and religious realms. Cutting of skin was, and continues to be, a prominent theme in Abramović's work, but nowhere so marked as in *Thomas Lips* during which Abramović cut herself with broken glass and a razor blade, followed by self-flagellation.

Thomas Lips Performance.

I slowly eat 1 kilo of honey with a silver spoon.

I slowly drink 1 liter of red wine out of a crystal glass.

I break the glass with my hand.

I cut a five-pointed star on my stomach with a razor blade.

I violently whip myself until I no longer feel any pain.

I lay down on a cross made of ice blocks.

The heat of a suspended heater pointed at my stomach causes the cut star to bleed.

and Author James Westcott," *Art F City*, accessed February 26, 2015, <http://artfcity.com/2010/04/05/when-marina-abramovic-dies-an-interview-with-biographer-and-author-james-westcott/>.

¹⁵⁰ Abramović's uses the title *Lips of Thomas* in recent iterations. Abramović, *7 Easy Pieces*; Marina Abramović et al., *Seven Easy Pieces*, videorecording (Distributed by Microcinema International, 2010).

The rest of my body begins to freeze.

I remain on the ice cross for 30 minutes until the public interrupts the piece by removing the blocks from underneath me.

Duration: 2 hours

1975

Krinzinger Gallery, Innsbruck.¹⁵¹

Westcott describes *Thomas Lips* (Figure 1.7) as “originally meant as a demonstration, a plea, a play, and an offering for Lips, it became Abramović’s most violent and baroque piece yet.” The biographer describes *Thomas Lips* as an unconscious accumulation of symbols that held “primal power” over Abramović, ranging from the religious sacrament of Eucharistic wine to the star of communism. Westcott makes clear the star had specific iconography for the artist, “the star her parents fought for, which she preferred to think of as a pentagram of the occult (as in *Rhythm 5*).”¹⁵² In his interesting analysis of the work, he emphasizes the unconscious accumulation of political and religious symbols used in a performance during which Abramović “distilled and attacked her culture.” Westcott states, “In the end, none of this had anything to do with Thomas Lips the man.” Westcott makes clear in his description of the piece, Abramović engaged in one action of great significance not documented in her textual summary, or score, “she drew a pentagram—in the negative goat headed-like formation with two points up—around a photograph of Thomas Lips on the wall.”¹⁵³ Westcott does not analyze the presence of image of the star or the photo, but does note Abramović kneeled in “obeisance” in front of the photo after cutting the star on her abdomen.

¹⁵¹ Abramović, *Marina Abramović*, 1998, 98.

¹⁵² Westcott, *When Marina Abramović Dies*, 82.

¹⁵³ *Ibid.*

I assert that despite the brevity of the affair and the absence of Thomas Lips as a viewer of any of the performances of the work which bore his name, the symbol of the pentagram cut into Abramović's abdomen and drawn around his photo mark the work as having a great deal to do with the man and their adulterous link. It also deploys magical symbolism in the midst of Christian rituals, including acts of penitence. Abramović challenged religious rituals and symbols, including communion and the crucifixion, while suggesting penitence for her adultery through self-flagellation.

Abramović emphasized her focus on Lips through the presence of his image and name in the title, choices of artistic and symbolic importance that I affirm as what they are, explicitly personalized and occult. The 2005 performance of *Lips of Thomas* leaves out the photo and the inverted pentagram, emphasizing Abramović's cultural and political origins in Communist Yugoslavia. She wore a hat from a Yugoslav partisan uniform, saluted, and sang Slavic folk songs. The emphasis on political symbolism and ethno-cultural origins in Abramović's later performances seems to have had a distinct influence on recent interpretations of performances of *Thomas Lips* of 1975.

As Westcott states specifically, the artist intended an occult meaning for the pentagram in *Rhythm 5* and in *Thomas Lips* (Figure 1.8).¹⁵⁴ French occultist Eliphas Lévi provides extensive symbolism for the use of the pentagram in magic and details the significance of the inverted pentagram as a negative signification.

By placing it in such a way that two of its points are ascendant and one is below, we may see the horns, ears and beard of the hierarchic goat of Mendes, when it becomes the sign of infernal evocations.¹⁵⁵

¹⁵⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵⁵ Eliphas Lévi and Arthur Edward Waite, *Transcendental Magic, Its Doctrine and Ritual* (London: G. Redway, 1896), 227, <http://archive.org/details/transcendentalma00leviuoft>.

The inverted pentagram is a symbol of power over the material world, subordinating spirit to the influence of human will, as detailed in *La Clef de la Magie Noire* by Stanislas de Guaita, published in 1897. De Guaita was an Italian noble who settled in France and founded a Rosicrucian order, which taught esoteric and magical secrets based on the Hebrew bible.¹⁵⁶ The explicit relationship of the inverted pentagram to black magic, the highly ritualistic nature of the performance, and its objects define the artwork with a vividly explicit set of magical references that are far from benign. As a symbol, which is widely associated with witchcraft and Satanism, the inverted pentagram suggests that there was a level of intention imbedded in the work wholly appropriate to the ritually transgressive performance milieu of 1970s Austria.

Thomas Lips took place the same year as Abramović's performance in an OMT action. During the action, she was doused with sheep's blood, poured over the genitals of her naked body. Having participated in OMT work herself, Abramović was in a position to develop an esoterically informed performance for an art public in which OMT had operated for 15 years. Nitsch's OMT and its use of blood, feces, and sex acts in art contexts, as a revival of Greek-inspired cathartic ritual, supports the importance of historicizing *Thomas Lips* in its social context where the use of religious and occult symbolism was central to some of the best known performance art in the region. Abramović's transgressive performances were establishing her as an artist in a context with an already receptive and informed audience for her work, resulting in positive outcomes for her performance career.¹⁵⁷ A Dutch television program invited her to

¹⁵⁶ Stanislas de Guaita, *La clef de la magie noire: seconde septaine* (Paris: Chamuel, 1897).

¹⁵⁷ As I noted earlier, Abramović was invited to Austria to perform after gallerist Ursula Krzinger saw her perform *Rhythm 10*.

perform in Amsterdam the same year and Abramović chose to perform *Thomas Lips* again.

While the work did not gain Thomas Lips' overt attention, and he did not attend the performance, his image was linked to her body in a combination of dramatic gestures that are contradictory. The perception of transgressive or sacrilegious use of the symbols of Christianity is not common but a well-known cause of controversy in Contemporary art. Abramović's acts of penitence and symbolic crucifixion beside an inverted pentagram position *Thomas Lips* squarely inside the contemporary realm of religious and magical ritual. Her use of nudity and the pentagram draw in the symbols of witchcraft to her actions, which suggest there is value to focusing on the idea the work intends to develop some relationship of between her body and the man through his photo, using the inverted pentagram to affect some undisclosed act of transformation.

Ultimately, for the public, the elements of the work that were most disturbing were not the self-flagellation, mutilation, or occult symbolism, but the discomfort and increased bleeding she exposed her naked body to a cross of ice under heaters. This final act after the accumulation of the other acts of violence left the audience with an image of violence as stillness and inaction enduring extremes of heat and cold. As in *Rhythm 5*, the artist's immobility resulted in action by the spectators, now participants. The performance concluded with the intervention of well-known performance artist VALIE EXPORT and others who assisted her.¹⁵⁸ In the end, the conclusion of the performance could not be determined by the limits of Abramović's willingness to withstand the

¹⁵⁸ Westcott, *When Marina Abramović Dies*, 82.

strange combination of heat and cold, or the melting of the ice, but the spectators' unbearable experience of watching it happen.

Conclusion

Abramović's explorations of the body under different environmental stresses took place in a framework of repetitive and ritualized risk. The physical and emotional risks she performed have resulted in interpretations emphasizing trauma, courage, communism, and the occult. I have developed my analysis to deepen understanding of the importance of transcultural aesthetics, ritual performance, occult symbolism, and the relevance of spectator participation to her developing performance practice. The frequency of interventions by the public into Abramović's early performances opened the work through action both planned and unplanned, establishing her early work has consistently depended on formal and informal elements of collaboration beyond passive spectatorship.

Her work as a performance artist resulted in significant opportunities for travel, eventually introducing her to Ulay, an intimate partner with whom she would collaborate creatively for the next 12 years. In the coming years, Abramović's clear orientation towards spiritual and religious themes broadened into a wider cultural and geographic sphere in the years to come, deeply exploring an aesthetic of performative intercorporeality as the artist Abramović/Ulay. The love affair they would develop was the foundation of their collaborative partnership providing a foil or balance for each other in exploration of the body, spirituality and culture that would take them all over the globe.

Chapter Two: Meeting Ulay

The meeting of Ulay and Marina Abramović is one Contemporary art's greater myths, and they did much of the mythologizing themselves. Writers mark the near instantaneous formation of an extremely intense relationship with references to their bodies, the material of their art, their similarity in appearance, and the bond that they shared. Both were born on November 30, both tall, both slim, with long, dark hair. Ulay was also an experienced performance artist, as well as photographer. He recognized his frustrated sexuality fueled his self-destructive work,¹⁵⁹ and had explored his own body through intense relationship, transvestitism, and sociopolitical provocation.

In this chapter, I briefly discuss the circumstances of their meeting, and follow with a biographical summary of Ulay and his art up until meeting Abramović. Themes of ego erosion and marginality permeate the works of this time, prefiguring their emerging transcultural Buddhist aesthetic. My analysis focuses on geography and identity in his photographic practice, as well as artistic, political, spiritual, and cultural influences that permeate his preoccupation with exploration of trans identity. I conclude with a discussion of the solo performances the artists undertook after their meeting that emphasize explorations of transcultural social identity. I develop a semiological phenomenology of Abramović's use of a mobile spatial field in *Role Exchange* (1976) and Ulay's ethically motivated, cross-cultural gestures in *There is a Criminal Touch to Art* (1976).

¹⁵⁹ Kontova, "Marina and Ulay: Half Man, Half Woman (reprint 1978)," 126.

Meeting Ulay

In November of 1975, the de Appel Gallery of Amsterdam invited Abramović to make a performance for the Dutch television program *Beeldspraak* (Picture Speak).¹⁶⁰ Her guide and assistant in preparing for the December reperformance of *Thomas Lips* was German artist Uwe Laysiepen. He was working as an artist, and defining himself by way of a pseudonym created from the first syllables of his first and last names, Ulay. The instant attraction and bond the two developed at the time grew rapidly, especially following Ulay's question as to when her birthday was, finding both were born November 30. Ulay described meeting Abramović,

We met in December 1975 and fell terribly in love. It just clicked. Marina did one of those self-mutilating pieces. Afterwards I felt a very strong attraction for her and started licking her wounds and caring for her. I fell in love with her. She fell in love with me.¹⁶¹

Describing the unique circumstances that surrounded the prospect of collaborating as artists, he phrased his description in terms that foreground the Buddhist value of overcoming ego,

We were both working as autonomous artists. Artists in general are rather egoistic people. They usually won't work with other artists for a long period. Giving up your ego and working with someone who maintains a very ego-based personality is an unusual thing to do. That was the thing to shake out: to reduce our egos and our personalities.

Then Marina went back to Belgrade. I remained in Amsterdam and we decided to meet again on neutral ground, between Belgrade and Amsterdam. January 1976 we met again in Prague and found that we maintained the love and the passion. So we said, "Alright let's do it, let's try."¹⁶²

¹⁶⁰ Westcott, *When Marina Abramović Dies*, 85.

¹⁶¹ Paul Kokke, "An Interview with Ulay and Marina Abramović," in *Ulay/Abramović: Performances, 1976-1988*, ed. Stedelijk Van Abbemuseum (Eindhoven: Stedelijk Van Abbemuseum, 1997), 119.

¹⁶² *Ibid.*

Ulay's ego formed in post war experiences similar to Marina's origins in Yugoslavia, but in radically different social circumstances in Germany. His formation as an artist also had unique parallels and dramatic differences.

Ulay: Origins and Art

Ulay was born during an air raid November 30, 1943 in Solingen, Germany. Solingen was a city where the Nazis retooled factories for the manufacture of canons, tanks, and rifles to support the German war effort, which resulted in the city being a major target of the allied forces during the Second World War. At the time Ulay was born his father was on the Eastern front in Stalingrad. His father was drafted into the First and Second World Wars, an unfortunate distinction that resulted in his fighting at age 50.¹⁶³ Ulay's mother eventually attempted to flee Germany to Lithuania where relatives of Ulay's father lived and in spite of her efforts to avoid danger, encountered more. Moving east, they met with Russian soldiers who raped her and took infant Ulay as a wartime "souvenir." She went to great lengths to get Ulay back, which took some time bartering vodka and cigarettes.¹⁶⁴

According to Thomas McEvelley's key essay on Ulay, "The First Act," the stress of the war on both parents was obvious and took a serious toll on physical and emotional health. Ulay's father's poor health resulted in moving to a tiny village in the hopes country air would relieve his asthma, which resulted in making it worse. He died shortly before Ulay's 15th birthday, after which Ulay's mother completely withdrew from social

¹⁶³ Thomas McEvelley, "The First Act," in *Art, Love, Friendship: Marina Abramović and Ulay Together & Apart*, 1st ed (Kingston, N.Y: McPherson & Co, 2010), 166.

¹⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 167.

life until her death in 1982.¹⁶⁵ Unlike the privilege of post-Revolution Yugoslavia Marina's family lived in, the bitterly difficult black market economy of postwar Germany directly affected Ulay.

As a young man, Ulay developed as a commercially oriented photographer, founding a successful photo processing business that resulted in facility with making large format prints and other types of photographic images with a high level of professional skill. He had a large studio, the first in Germany which could produce color prints in 24 hours and occasionally he worked as many as 20 hours a day.¹⁶⁶ He married and had a son by his 20th birthday, rapidly settling into a conventional life of social and professional obligations. Feeling unsettled with his conventional life, Ulay began to experience what he recognized as identity issues that would drive some of his earliest artwork. In 1968, Ulay told his wife Uschi Schmitt-Zell, he "must do something impulsive," and set off for Czechoslovakia to enroll in film and theatre school, instead, ending up developing his political and aesthetic ideals in Amsterdam.¹⁶⁷ He never reunited with Uschi.

In Amsterdam, Ulay became active among the Provos, an ecologically aware group he describes as "the avant-garde of the 70s European anarchy, from which later on European terrorism developed."¹⁶⁸ Provo, short for provocation, was important to Ulay's political consciousness, but he separated from the group in 1969 as they became more conventional and directly active in city government. In 1968, he became interested in art

¹⁶⁵ Ibid., 168.

¹⁶⁶ Ibid., 175–6.

¹⁶⁷ Westcott, *When Marina Abramović Dies*, 86; McEvelley, "The First Act," 178.

¹⁶⁸ McEvelley, "The First Act," 181.

and developed collaborative practices with Jürgen Klauke, a flamboyant artist interested in criminality and transvestism.

Ulay shadowed Klauke for a year, moving between Amsterdam and Cologne, making Polaroids and became increasingly interested in the transvestite underworld, cross dressing himself, as well as taking photos of others in drag. With Klauke, he published the art book *Ich & Ich* (1971), and through intellectual connections they became interested in the French transvestite artist Pierre Moulinier (1900-1976), who extensively photographed himself in women's lingerie and made elaborate collage images from his photos. Molinier began his practice as an artist as a post-Impressionist painter, and eventually began to combine esoteric and autoerotic concerns while developing an interest in Tibetan Buddhism.¹⁶⁹ Ulay's interest in Tibetan Buddhism would grow into a personal practice during his years with Abramović.

During the same period Ulay's photographic acumen, which he further developed with some courses at an art school in Cologne, led to opportunities to expand the geography of his practice. In 1970, he approached Polaroid International, based in Amsterdam, and the film and camera company granted him support to create a portfolio of urban photography. As a part of the Polaroid Artist Support Program, he developed a portfolio published as *Uwe's Polaroid Pictures of 5 Cities*.¹⁷⁰ In addition to experimenting with new Polaroid materials, he traveled to London, Amsterdam, Paris, Rome, and New York.¹⁷¹ It was a part of the opportunity to go to Mexico City, but the photographer never visited. Fearing he would never return to Europe, Ulay chose to

¹⁶⁹ Ibid., 195.

¹⁷⁰ Ulay, Scott Miller, and N.V Polaroid (Europa), *Uwe's Polaroid Pictures of 5 Cities [: London, Amsterdam, New York, Paris and Rome]* (Amsterdam: Van Soest, 1971).

¹⁷¹ McEvelley, "The First Act," 185.

photograph Amsterdam instead.¹⁷² Ulay found interesting subjects in his urban travel, taking up platonically with a beautiful woman in New York who invited him to travel with her to India. After an ill planned practical joke went sour, he speedily left her at the ticket counter. A few months later in Amsterdam, he learned the diplomat's daughter he had captured with his lens, Bianca Pérez-Mora Macias, had just married Mick Jagger.¹⁷³

In the world of art and entertainment, feminist artists and music stars such as David Bowie and the New York Dolls were playing with and performing gender through androgyny and crossdressing. Significant works by American artists Adrian Piper, Eleanor Antin, and Ana Mendieta are notable for their transvestite performance for the camera. Ulay's gender performance operated in similar non-art contexts, allowing him to explore this world of transvestism extensively in his own art and the European social field from 1970-73.¹⁷⁴

McEvelley positions this time in Ulay's life, photographic practice, and exploration of identity through art and relationship, in a critical context imbued with references to mystery traditions. McEvelley's sources range from Nazi occultism's investments in Gurdjieff, Blavatsky's Theosophy, and Austrian Rudolf Steiner's Anthroposophy. Elements of McEvelley's argument about transvestism gesture towards the wider significance of Ulay's androgyny. His examination of gender identity in world history and culture surveys the cross-dressing practices of shamanism, gender dualism of Greek and Indian philosophy, Hindu Shaivism, Dionysian revelry and eroticism.¹⁷⁵

Appealing to "mysteries of transformation, redolent of strange powers," McEvelley notes,

¹⁷² Westcott, *When Marina Abramović Dies*, 87-88.

¹⁷³ *Ibid.*, 88.

¹⁷⁴ McEvelley, "The First Act," 189.

¹⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 179.

“Around the world, in many lineages, shamans have performed their rituals in drag.”¹⁷⁶

These elements include the ritual and religious significance of gender dualism in cultures to which Ulay and Abramović would later travel, Aboriginal Australia and India.¹⁷⁷

McEvelley’s long essay on Ulay integrates different forms of text, ranging from historical narrative, to interview, combined with multiple research driven sections that focus on the historical context of Germany, as well as diverse religious, occult, and esoteric spheres of culture without making direct reference to their importance to Ulay’s formation. Tantra and Ayurveda were popular in Amsterdam at the time, and taught by Tantric author and painter Harish Johari at the home of critic and artist Louwrien Wijers.¹⁷⁸ Of particular interest in McEvelley’s analysis is a reference to the role of sexual dualism in tantra yoga and psychoanalysis. Tantra yoga includes specific models of sexual union between two partners of opposite sex that a yogin can apply individually through the practice of *ultra-sadhana* in which,

One may attempt to activate both the male and female in oneself and bring them into an internal union that does not require the cooperation of another. [. . .] The physical union of male and female within the yogin’s body is a distant precursor of the assertions, made by Sigmund Freud and Carl Jung, that every human is psychologically bi-gendered and needs, for psychological wholeness, to develop this duality and sense of self.¹⁷⁹

Ulay’s self-portraits in drag frequently emphasize a simultaneous gender dualism. He is neither performing male or female gender, but both, in a visually divided self that appears to the lens as a modern western variation on the image of Hindu god Shiva. As *Ardhanarishvara* (Figure 2.1), or half male and half female, Shiva incorporates the

¹⁷⁶ Ibid., 189.

¹⁷⁷ Ibid., 190.

¹⁷⁸ Westcott, *When Marina Abramović Dies*, 116.

¹⁷⁹ Ibid., 193-194.

appearance of his other half, wife Parvati. In his Polaroid series, *S'he* (Figures 2.2, 2.3, 2.4), Ulay distinctively divides his face between male and female gender appearances. Ulay presents a feminine identity in an extreme form of gender performance that is closer to the hyperbolic performance of femininity of drag queens, than the image of a male who intends to pass as a woman.

The short hair, tanned face, unshaven jaw, and tropical print shirt Ulay wears in *S'he* stand are visually defined by strong contrast to Ulay's feminized identity which is heavily made up with fair skin, red lipstick, arched brown, blue eye shadow, and nude from the waist up, but for the fox stole covering his shoulder.¹⁸⁰ Such extremes of gender performance were not a characteristic of the appearance of some of the relatively androgynous women with whom he formed relationships, but mutual experiences of sexual and emotional intensity defined the relationships he engaged in before he met Abramović. Extreme behavior was a distinctive similarity the two shared expressed in Ulay's personal life, as well as his performances. Ulay displays his propensity for self-injurious behavior in a self-portrait where he pierced the skin of his chest with a pin to place a brooch of an airplane on his bare chest to express pain over the absence of his lover. This work, *Plane* (1974), has its roots in a dramatic affair he had with a "hyper female," married woman, Paula Françoise-Piso.¹⁸¹ He engaged in a number of acts that reflected the destructive nature of the contact. Her husband, a pilot, was rarely around, aware of the relationship with Ulay and only intervened after the second of her two related suicide attempts.¹⁸² Despite being "sexually dominated by her," Ulay was

¹⁸⁰ This work has also been exhibited and published with the titles *Hermaphrodite* and *sHe*.

¹⁸¹ Westcott, *When Marina Abramović Dies*, 89.

¹⁸² McEvelley, "The First Act," 196.

interested in her, “not conventionally as a man wanting sex.”¹⁸³ As Westcott argues, he wanted to be her, taking to signing his photos “Pa-ula-y.”

Ulay described his psychologically potent, and violence laden performances as “‘treatments’, to liberate myself from traumas. I didn’t want to exist with such traumas. My art was a kind of freeing.”¹⁸⁴ After their separation, Ulay mourned her absence and his loneliness by cutting into his feet in the shape of her small shoe that he could not wear.¹⁸⁵ The Polaroid photographic work shows the process of baring and cutting the body as Ulay undressed, made isolated images of the black ankle boots, and took photos of the guidelines formed by the knife he used to cut the tops of his feet. He describes the act as a good idea that did not work. “I had to cut something away to bring myself back to what I was before.”¹⁸⁶ In less violent works, Ulay continued to cut away elements of himself as a part of his artistic process.

The performance oriented photographic work, *Exchange of Identity* (1975), took Ulay’s concerns with identity to the explicit center of his work in a gallery context. Combining two practices, he moved his photographic process into performance art-- moving from the darkroom into an engagement with spectators and radical exploration of photographic process. At Galerie Het Venster in Rotterdam, the artist placed photosensitive linen on the walls and exposed it with a flash while members of the public stood between him and the linen. He also took Polaroids of the same individuals. The exposed linen left a blank body shape, which he developed by pouring buckets of

¹⁸³ Westcott, *When Marina Abramović Dies*, 89–91.

¹⁸⁴ Kontova, “Marina and Ulay: Half Man, Half Woman (reprint 1978),” 126.

¹⁸⁵ Iles, “The Shadow and the Reflection: The Relation Works of Marina Abramović and Ulay,” 9; McEvelley, “The First Act,” 198–199; Westcott, *When Marina Abramović Dies*, 91.

¹⁸⁶ Marjoleine Boonsma, “Ulay in Photography | Www.li-Ma.nl,” accessed March 30, 2015, <http://www.li-ma.nl/site/catalogue/art/ulay/ulay-in-photography/7071>.

chemicals over them. Dressed in a white mask and body stocking, Ulay inserted himself into the spaces left by the figures of the public, and projected the Polaroids onto his body, visually replacing his surface identity with the photographic images of the public.¹⁸⁷

Westcott interprets *Exchange of Identity* as “an attempt to erase himself entirely and make a blank canvas out of his body.”¹⁸⁸ As Ulay describes, “This work was mostly the identity issue.”¹⁸⁹ In the context of Ulay’s exploration of female gender performance, interest in shared identity as Pa-ula-y, and fusion of self with the image of his audience, *Exchange of Identity* engages deeper levels of aesthetic experimentation through his mastery of the medium of photography. By way of two different modes of photography, the use of projection, and costumed performance, Ulay created a technological form of trans identity for himself. *Exchange of Identity* is a form of intersubjective cross-dressing, or drag, that he established solely through methods other than culturally coded dress. While his methods effectively erased the appearance of his individuality by way of costume and projection, he took on the arrested appearance of another, an appearance that he could swiftly change for any other appearance among his projected Polaroids. As a “blank canvas,” Ulay’s monochromatic ensemble can be also be understood, not as an costume, but as a fluid, yet neutral trans-identified body that is receptive to others. His neutral trans body engaged participants through the social practice of portrait photography and the acceptance of their appearance as his own.

From critical accounts, it is not possible to determine what element of the exchange the public received. The reception of their appearances by the artist, and his

¹⁸⁷ Westcott, *When Marina Abramović Dies*, 93.

¹⁸⁸ Ibid.

¹⁸⁹ McEvelley, “The First Act,” 207.

social engagement, suggest that the substitution of his body for their appearance enacted a form of intersubjective exchange so substantial, that for the artist it was equal to his titular identity. This unified experience of trans identity through a blank body is an erasure of Ulay's appearance that plays with the possibility of the erasure of ego, a performance of no self, or *anatta* (Pali) in Buddhist terms. Such qualities of unfixed, impermanent and transient of images and identity were typical of Ulay's photographs appealed to Abramović.¹⁹⁰

Working Together: Documentary Support

After moving to Amsterdam and beginning her intimate union with Ulay, Abramović's performances also took on direct interaction and exchange with others. They began their relationship with informal collaboration, documenting each other's performances. Ulay's prior works emphasizing exchange clearly resonate with Abramović's role driven work. Abramović also had an established interest in the exchange of identity, reflected by her earlier interest in hypnosis.¹⁹¹ Given the intimacy the Ulay and Abramović had established, I argue the development of Abramović's intentional acts of intersubjective contact and resulting exchange directly relate to the context of artistic influence the two had on each other.

Role Exchange (1976)

In 1976, Abramović created *Role Exchange*, a work Ulay documented that explored the realm of identity, ego, social roles, sex roles and exchange in which she

¹⁹⁰ Westcott, *When Marina Abramović Dies*, 113.

¹⁹¹ Stiles et al., *Marina Abramović*, 122.

switched places with an Amsterdam prostitute she befriended.¹⁹² The prostitute Suze went to Abramović's opening in her place, while the artist sat in Suze's window in the red light district for four hours. During the performance, they both took "complete responsibility for their roles."¹⁹³

Role Exchange

I find a woman who has worked as a professional prostitute for ten years.

At this point I have also worked as an artist for ten years.

I propose to exchange roles.

She accepts.

Performance.

The woman replaces me at my opening at the De Appel Gallery in Amsterdam.

At the same time I sit in her place in a window of the red light district in Amsterdam.

We both take total responsibility for our roles.

Duration: 4 hours

1975

De Appel Gallery and Red Light District, Amsterdam.¹⁹⁴

Role Exchange (Figure 2.5) is Abramović's only exploration of an alternate identity, or identity equivalence, here framed as a role based on the body's location in

¹⁹² In the vast majority of critical and historical literature, *Role Exchange* is described as taking place in 1975. James Westcott, Abramović's biographer notes Ulay took documentary photos of Abramović in the brothel window, and more logically locates the work in 1976. In this case, I follow Westcott. Westcott, *When Marina Abramović Dies*, 104.

¹⁹³ Marina Abramović, *Marina Abramović: Artist Body: Performances 1969-1998* (Milano: Edizioni Charta, 1998), 112.

¹⁹⁴ Abramović, *Marina Abramović*, 1998, 112.

space as that which defines the individual. In the *Relation* works with Ulay, similar themes would come to the fore. Abramović actively sought out the opportunity to complete the *Role Exchange* as a solo performer, taking three months to find a willing and appropriate collaborator. Abramović frames the work as a conscious confrontation of her fears surrounding the social status of the prostitute. Not only did her mother stigmatize prostitution as a moral failing, the artist was interested in confronting and eliminating the ego. As she told critic Anna Novakov,

[. . .] every time I am afraid of something, I know it's something important: how to take myself with all this ego that I had built up and then to become nobody. I was interested in the idea of being at the lowest social level, the prostitute. It involved for me a great deal of mental pressure. Physically it wasn't nearly as difficult an idea as it was mentally.¹⁹⁵

In her analysis, Novakov's interest in the spatial dimensions of *Role Exchange* diverge from Abramović's moral concerns, which also emphasize the utilitarian and functional aspects of the brothel. According to the artist, the utilitarian aspect of the brothel is comparable to military space.¹⁹⁶ Novakov's theoretically rigorous analysis emphasizes in the economic, sexual, and spectacular elements of the architectural space.¹⁹⁷ These elements provide the theoretical focus for her engaging spatial account of the work with specific attention to the feminist concerns of commodification of the sexualized body and the way in which the built environment displays and conditions reception of the female body.

¹⁹⁵ Anna Novakov, "'Role Exchange': Desire, Beauty and the Public," in *Veiled Histories: The Body, Place and Public Art*, ed. Anna Novakov, vol. 24 (New York Critical Press, 1997), 27.

¹⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, 28.

¹⁹⁷ Anna Novakov, "Point of Access: Marina Abramović's 1975 Performance 'Role Exchange,'" *Woman's Art Journal* 24, no. 2 (October 1, 2003): 31–35, doi:10.2307/1358784.

Body and architecture both constitute spatial fields, which are coded and encode meaning. In *Role Exchange*, the spatial fields of the art gallery and the brothel are essential to the creation of meaning. Each becomes a performative space, constituting the meaning of actions which take place there as a stage for the performance of a professional role. The architectural space of the gallery replicates the proscenium arch, the boundary between performer and spectator in the theatre.

Sitting in the frame of a large picture window, passersby were spectators to the performance of prostitution, regardless, of their interest in crossing the boundary that can mark a boundary between art and life. Abramović relied upon her urban location, as well as the architecture of the brothel to code her body as prostitute inside a spatial field of sex work. Dressed in a simple black dress, wearing classically glamorous make-up, the artist smoked cigarettes and sat in the window that framed the role she was performing. Unlike the theatre, the boundary of the brothel's threshold signified a junction of life with the performer's art. From the street in front to the bed behind, the urban spaces of the brothel allowed Abramović to code and perform her identity in a legitimate sex professional role, and establish simultaneity of artist and prostitute roles based on the combined experience of her body's geographic conditions.

The prostitute Suze took Abramović's place in the gallery and performed the role of artist in an art context. The space of the gallery provided the conditions to legitimate her role-play as a performance artist. The interior of the white cube and the blank video screen visible in photos of *Role Exchange* place her in a space, which is less explicit with regard to role than a window in the red light district. She was dressed fashionably, but not in a manner that was overtly provocative or associated with the arts. Her apparent

comfort with her environment and responsibility for her role are perceptible in photos from her time at De Appel Gallery.

Drawing on anthropologist Setha Low's survey of theories of embodied space, I argue the historic relevance of this performance to art history is Abramović's use of space that creates a phenomenology of integrated and exchanged contexts of art and sex.

Abramović achieves this through the body's formation of a "mobile spatial field."¹⁹⁸ In Nancy Munn's theory of the mobile spatial field, spacetime is "a symbolic nexus of relations produced out of interactions between bodily actors and terrestrial spaces."¹⁹⁹

The architectural elements of the urban environment and activities therein establish the locations, or spacetime, of the artist and the prostitute as signifiers and their mobile bodies as signifieds, which Abramović and Suze alter through the location of their mobile spatial fields into each other's field of professional activity. Abramović's performance score emphasizes the work as a commemoration of her ten years working as a professional artist. She focuses duration as a key formal concern in the work, developing a temporal focus for the authenticity of each woman in her chosen profession—a durable signification inflected by her use of urban space. Time is the enduring factor in which the body and space become slippery or polysemous in meaning, resulting in a trans aesthetic of urban cultures, the art and sex trades. Their phenomenological flexibility is rooted in time (served). The importance of duration in Abramović's aesthetic is underscored by the primary emphasis on time in the score of the

¹⁹⁸ Low summarizes Nancy Munn's application of Lefebvre's "field of action." Low, "Embodied Space(s) Anthropological Theories of Body, Space, and Culture," 14.

¹⁹⁹ Ibid.

performance, as well as destabilized by the brief duration for which each woman has “total responsibility” for the other’s role.

This destabilization of the professional roles of the performance artist and prostitute through two bodies constitutes a social interaction and action which is markedly different from other interventions into the field of sex work as art, and sex workers as artists. Abramović’s *Role Exchange* stands apart from other sex work performance art by Cosi Fanny Tutti, Annie Sprinkle, and Andrea Fraser, which display, demystify, and interrogate the relationship between sex work and artwork through a single body. By intervening artistically through the mobile spatial field of the artist and the prostitute, Abramović engages in transculturation of two spaces simultaneously, developing a dual role for each. This transculturation of space depends on the built environment and social field to legitimate Suze as surrogate artist and Abramović using her mobile spatial field to establish the brothel window as an art space, where she continued to take risks and open herself to the interventions of the public.

Abramović’s *Role Exchange* develops a multi-focal geography of performance through the inclusion of multiple bodies and spaces. Thus, Abramović created a work that culturally transformed the codes of the work of art and sex through bodies and space via an inclusive, participatory social act. Ultimately, *Role Exchange* does not commodify the sex act or work of art, but depends on the intersubjective relationship she established with Suze, not spectators or clients.

Despite the emphases of various artworks and critical texts on the issues of power and economic exchange around the women’s bodies and work, neither completed any transactions during the role exchange. In fact, Abramović paid Suze for “lost wages”

rather than paying for her appearance at the artist's exhibition opening.²⁰⁰ According to Abramović, "the prostitute said that I would starve to death in her job. I said 'Why, what did I do wrong?' and she responded, 'Everything.'"²⁰¹ The artist did interact with three potential clients during the performance, including one of Suze's regulars.²⁰² In Suze's analysis, Abramović's performance was not sufficiently oriented to seduce or seem receptive to the passerby on the street, a skill that Suze developed to attract clients of different ages and perceived personality types.²⁰³

Ulay documented Abramović's performance by hidden camera from across the street, while the apparatus of recording was visible at Suze's location at de Appel gallery. Ulay's presence at Abramović's performance as documentary photographer complicates the action, which Abramović perceived as immoral, and in most locations, illegal. Similarly, she would soon support Ulay's illegal performance on German soil, leading to the first performances they would make together, the *Relation Works*.

There is a Criminal Touch to Art (1976)

One of Ulay's most significant performance works focuses on a German painting by Carl Spitzweg, *The Poor Poet* (1839). In 1949, the work was discovered in Hitler's personal collection. Ulay first saw the work in elementary school. It was the only color reproduction in his first reading book. The work of Spitzweg is emblematic of the German identity, and described as Germany's "national treasure." The painting depicts an older man in bed in an attic room surrounded by books. McEvelley Spitzweg as an artist who "equates loosely with the position of Norman Rockwell in the United

²⁰⁰ Westcott, *When Marina Abramović Dies*, 104.

²⁰¹ Novakov, "'Role Exchange': Desire, Beauty and the Public," 28.

²⁰² Westcott, *When Marina Abramović Dies*, 104.

²⁰³ Novakov, "'Role Exchange': Desire, Beauty and the Public," 28.

States.”²⁰⁴ Ulay’s early contact with national identity through childhood art education developed into fully formed performance work that challenged the ethnocentric boundaries of that national identity, developing his identity as an ethical artist with an emphasis on transcultural aesthetics.

Abramović played a supporting, documentarian role to Ulay’s performance action. Their full collaboration, the *Relation Works*, would follow one of Ulay’s best-known works, “Correspondence to the Situation--there is a criminal touch to art” (*Da Ist Eine Kriminelle Berührung In Der Kunst*, December 12, 1976).²⁰⁵ In *There is A Criminal Touch to Art*, Ulay entered to the Neue Galerie in Berlin and stole Spitzweg’s *The Poor Poet*. After pulling the painting from the wall, evading security, and reaching a getaway vehicle, the artist drove across the city to the immigrant section of the city. There, he posted various posters illustrating the painting and proceeded to enter the home of a Turkish family, with whom he had made prior arrangements. He hung *The Poor Poet* on the wall and photographed it in situ. He phoned the museum, informed them of the painting’s location, and the police subsequently arrested him. Abramović photographed the action, storing the exposed film in her bra, and was identified in newspapers as his accomplice accompanied by nude, veiled stills from her performance *Freeing the Body*.

An oft-repeated headline from the extensive coverage of the art action stated, “Leftist Radical Steals Our Most Beautiful Painting.”²⁰⁶ German authorities and citizens assumed Ulay was a part of Bewegung 2, Juni or the Baader-Meinhof-Gang.²⁰⁷

Eventually, after a lawyer hired by gallerist Mike Steiner argued the theft was an art

²⁰⁴ Ibid., 170-71.

²⁰⁵ Ibid., 213.

²⁰⁶ Ibid., 218; Westcott, *When Marina Abramović Dies*, 113.

²⁰⁷ McEvelley, “The First Act,” 216.

action. Ulay was sentenced to 56 days in prison, or payment of a 3,600DM fine. After evading capture and landing on a customs blacklist, the artist paid the fine with the help of friends.²⁰⁸

The political import of the performance focused on the Turkish immigrant community, which was a point of interest Ulay intended to highlight. As Thomas McEvelley notes, placing the cultural treasure in the home of immigrants was a “renunciatory gesture towards his inherited national and cultural identity.”²⁰⁹ I interpret this work as a gesture of inclusion. Ulay established temporary inclusion of immigrant families as full participants in German culture via the display of images closely associated with national and cultural identity in the ethnically coded domestic space.

The work Ulay removed to hang *The Poor Poet* was a conventional European-style floral still life, an indication of conventional tastes already in place. By substituting a national treasure in the place of decorative genre art, Ulay highlighted a level of integration through popular taste that was already present in the family’s domestic life. He drew the attention of to the larger German cultural sphere to that space through his action.

Obliquely, the action highlighted issues of inclusion and exclusion in German identity. More pointedly, the popularity of the painting with Hitler, the leader of a racist government, foregrounded the changing demographics of Germany and the claim of immigrants to the icons of German national identity. McEvelley would later parallel this performance with the xenophobic tensions roused by the unification of East and West

²⁰⁸ Ibid., 219.

²⁰⁹ Thomas McEvelley, “Flags for the European Community,” in *Art, Love, Friendship: Marina Abramović and Ulay Together & Apart*, 1st ed (Kingston, N.Y: McPherson & Co, 2010), 160.

Germany, and the subsequent formation of the European Union, as well as “a massive influx of non-white refugees from the Third World.”²¹⁰ Interpreting Ulay’s action as indicative of the predominantly exclusionary nature of European society requires granting him a place outside it, rather than as an enfranchised, yet marginal and provocative participant in it. I argue Ulay’s actions are more appropriately understood as the latter, an active expression of a transcultural agent highlighting, critiquing, and briefly transforming fractured and exclusionary social relations. Ulay’s later gestures continued to be overtly international, transcultural, and socially inclusive in his work with Abramović and after, but first he engaged in a deep exploration of articulated intersubjectivity so deep it was defined as unitary, Ulay/Abramović’s *Relation Works*.

Conclusion

Abramović and Ulay’s meeting and subsequent collaboration arose out of a memorable first contact that immediately affected them both. I have presented Ulay’s origins and art as a source of his unique practice, which deeply explored trans themes in the development of personal and cultural identity. Ulay’s influence on Abramović shows in subtle alterations to her practice, taking on similar explorations of identity in the form of social roles. Their mutual support as documentarians of each other’s art is distinctive for the importance of space to the works’ emphasis on marginal roles and identities as well as the use of multiple built environments to establish the meaning of those people and their actions. Both Abramović and Ulay explored the margins by refusing their social positions and aligning themselves with the marginal elements of their society. In their future collaboration, the body and space would take on new significance and nuance

²¹⁰ McEvelley, “The First Act.”

through their turn towards each other in an intimate exploration known as the *Relation Works*.

Chapter Three: Contending with Universals—*Relation Works*

Abramović/Ulay and the *Relation Works* are an expression of an ideal, not in terms of perfection, but in their simple and compelling expression of a common experience of intimacy with which many can identify or relate. As the product of a unique, amorous collaborative partnership, the *Relation Works* hold an exceptional place in the history of performance, and also the Body Art category of which Abramović/Ulay wanted no part.²¹¹

Out of their aesthetic and ethos of a single, yet dual, androgynous artist emerges the possibility for investigating the importance of the impression they made on their milieu. As a highly visible and mobile pair, the two have been described as icons, models, alchemical archetypes, symbiotic, shadow, double, and reflection of male-female love relationship emanating “pure charisma.”²¹² This reception of the pair and their work, both critically and personally, reflects a greater significance for their union that places their work in a sphere of influence that supports examining their results in the sphere of an emergent religious practice, as well as art practice.

In this chapter, I argue a place for the *Relation Works* as a unique body of work that aestheticizes human experience through universals. They model intimacy through a theory of unity that challenges the boundaries between religion and art, troubling the categories Aby Warburg attempted to negotiate in his call for a Nameless Science of the image. I draw on arguments by anthropologist Thomas Csordas and critic Thomas

²¹¹ Kontova, “Marina and Ulay: Half Man, Half Woman (reprint 1978),” 126.

²¹² Rus Bojan et al., *Whispers*, 186; Ulay and Abramović, *Ulay/Abramović*, 9; T. McEvelley, “Marina Abramović/Ulay,” *ARTFORUM (U.S.A.)* 22, no. 1 (September 1983): 52; Westcott, *When Marina Abramović Dies*, 118; Charles Green, “Doppelgangers and the Third Force: The Artistic Collaborations of Gilbert & George and Marina Abramović/Ulay,” *Art Journal* 59, no. 2 (Summer 2000): 37–45.

McEvilley to place the aesthetic of the *Relation Works* within the practice of art and religion via their embodied representation of alterity predicated on assertion of a unitary identity. The alchemical psychology of Jung provides a point of reference for the artists, whose interest in relationship as both the form and content of their work established a fundamentally spiritual orientation to their collaboration, prefiguring the inclusion of non-Western religious practices in their performance.

While the importance of Jung as a reference for Abramović/Ulay's works would not arise explicitly until 1981 in *Nightsea Crossing* (1981-1986), the importance of the Jungian alchemical model of identity to the early collaboration of Abramović and Ulay is recognizable. Jung is important to critical readings of the *Relation Works*, most notably that of Chrissie Iles, curator at the Whitney Museum of American Art and curator Maria Rus Bojan.²¹³ As Iles notes in her essay for a 1997 retrospective of the *Relation Works*, the psychoanalytic double as Freudian *unheimlich* and Jungian shadow are exemplified in their alchemically informed relations.²¹⁴

Dissolving categories into universal ideals on the level of gender, Abramović/Ulay articulated the ideal of the alchemical union of male and female as a single hermaphroditic entity, themselves as lovers and artists. They spoke to *Flash Art* editor Helena Kontova in 1978,

MA: I feel the perfect human being is a hermaphrodite because it's half man, half woman, yet it's a complete universe. The man is only half and the woman is only half. Together they're perfect. Intercourse is the only act where man and woman are near the universe because they're one

²¹³ Chrissie Iles, "The Shadow and the Reflection: The Relation Works of Marina Abramović and Ulay," in *Ulay/Abramović: Performances, 1976-1988.*, ed. Stedelijk Van Abbemuseum (Eindhoven: Stedelijk Van Abbemuseum, 1997), 9–16.

²¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 9.

complete person. We're a man-and-woman. I am half, he is half, and together we are one. And one can do more than half!

U: We might do three things. First, Marina might work from the feminine side, second I might from the masculine side, and third we might work together. And the third possibility is our case.²¹⁵

The third possibility is the artist they were together, Abramović/Ulay. They explicitly recognized in their union the resolution of psychologically harmful and self-destructive elements that typified much of their prior work. Ulay acknowledged the change in their work, "Together we've stopped trying to shock. Formally, we're still near this, as we're still examining our physical possibilities."²¹⁶ Both Ulay and Abramović characterized their earlier solo works as showing "traces of frustration," which Ulay specified as, "A sexual frustration. . .!"²¹⁷

Moving forward from that awareness, together they formed one of the most important bodies of performance art work known as the *Relation Works*.²¹⁸ They grounded their relationship in a commitment to work together as a single artist, which they described as a "two-headed body" that can be understood as a reference to the divine androgyne of European alchemical philosophy (Figure 3.1).²¹⁹ The paradigm of embodiment has as a principle characteristic the collapse of dualities between mind and body, subject and object.²²⁰ Ulay/Abramović (also Abramović/Ulay) challenged the paradigm of embodiment through aesthetic and rhetorical strategies that attempted to

²¹⁵ Kontova, "Marina and Ulay: Half Man, Half Woman (reprint 1978)," 126.

²¹⁶ Ibid., 127.

²¹⁷ Ibid., 126.

²¹⁸ Documentation for the *Relation Works* can be found in Marina Abramović and Ulay, *Relation Work and Detour* ([Amsterdam?]: M. Abramović, Ulay, 1980); Ulay and Abramović, *Ulay/Abramović*; Marina Abramović, *Marina Abramović: Artist Body: Performances 1969-1998* (Milano: Edizioni Charta, 1998).

²¹⁹ Kontova, "Marina and Ulay: Half Man, Half Woman (reprint 1978)," 127.

²²⁰ Csordas, "Embodiment as a Paradigm for Anthropology," 7.

collapse the duality between self and other. Taking the body as their primary material and the interaction of their bodies as one of their most durable formal conceits, they raised their exploration of self and other in a *mysterium coniunctionis* to the ultimate focus of their collaboration.²²¹ Their representation of their union in terms of esoteric and alchemical philosophy is the root of a phenomenological art history that is emblematic of intersubjective and intercorporeal aestheticization, while frustrating the notion of co-presence by theorizing their work as that of a single individual artist.²²²

The *Relation Works* in their form and action are representative of one of the most basic forms of difference, gender difference, bringing to the fore the experience of intimate alterity. Their distillation of various principles of the experience of the living, vital body in relationship to another communicates the basic alterity of intersubjectivity, or the social field. Anthropologist Thomas Csordas argues alterity is the phenomenological kernel, or existential ground, of religion.²²³ Locating this kernel in embodied experience that can be both individual and social, Csordas argues a useful frame for interpreting the *Relation Works* that prefigures and preempts explicitly religious forms of performance in Abramović and Ulay's collaboration. Contrary to Csordas' argument of nuanced differences between religion, politics, art, and athletics rooted in alterity, the *Relation Works* provide an example of all of his different categories of alterity under the umbrella of art. Csordas argues,

²²¹ Following the *Relation Works*, the pair developed a formulation of their partnership they called, "That Self."

²²² Green describes the unified self of combined doppelgangers as a phantom identity he calls the Third Force. Green, "Doppelgangers and the Third Force: The Artistic Collaborations of Gilbert & George and Marina Abramović/Ulay."

²²³ Csordas, "Asymptote of the Ineffable."

Alterity itself is the object of religion. To state this point in more general terms, when alterity is elaborated as oppression of the other we are in the domain of politics; when it is elaborated as striking beauty we are in the domain of art and aesthetics; when it is elaborated as competition we are (perhaps) in the domain of athletics; but when it is elaborated as alterity in and for itself, we are in the domain of religion.²²⁴

Understanding alterity as a form of difference, or estrangement—the uncanny, unified personality Abramović and Ulay represented as their artistic identity, foregrounds the simplicity of form and action in the *Relation Works* as closest to Csordas’ definition of the object of religion. This experience alterity was an estrangement from the universal that Abramović and Ulay attempted to overcome through their union.

A core element of their artistic partnership was a shared interest in occult and religious practices, particularly those of tantra in the forms of Tibetan Buddhism, alchemy, and Theosophy.²²⁵ The “androgynous” they sought to embody with their aesthetic best represents these knowledge systems.²²⁶ While not expressly reflective of their private relationship, the *Relation Works* grew out of, and fueled their bond. Several of these early performances tested the limits of their endurance, emotionally and physically, and in themselves are a fascinating moment in the exploration of embodied experience and engagement with geographic and architectural space in European Contemporary art worthy of extensive analysis.

A key element of several of their performances is bodily contact, and the manner in which their bodies meet—a link, connection, or place of contact that is always also indicative of a gap, space, or distance that divides or separates them in their androgynous

²²⁴ Ibid., 173.

²²⁵ McEvelley, Thomas. *The Triumph of Anti-Art: Conceptual and Performance Art in the Formation of Post-Modernism*. 1st ed. Kingston, N.Y: McPherson & Co, 2005, 273.

²²⁶ Ulay and Marina Abramović, *Ulay/Abramović: Performances, 1976-1988* (Eindhoven: Stedelijk Van Abbemuseum, 1997), 10.

unity. Merleau-Ponty uses the term *écart* to describe this subjective space, which Csordas retains, in French, in his phenomenological theory of religion.

The “object” of religion is not the other; it is the existential aporia of alterity itself. The difficulty in recognizing this is precisely the difficulty of distinguishing a psychological from an existential language and moving from a language of interiority to a language of intersubjectivity.²²⁷

We are in the realm of the religious whenever we encounter otherness in its own right, whether or not it is impressive, and whenever imagination sends a spark across the *écart*, animating the alterity that is the phenomenological kernel of our existence.²²⁸

In their vital union, one flaming with the spark of eros and imagination, the intercorporeal *écart* provided a primary location, place, or sign of their aesthetic inquiry and exploration. Many *Relation Works* turn around an *écart* so vivid in the image and execution of the performance that the *Relation Works* constitute a paradigmatic exploration of the *écart* that sends sparks across time to the viewer of their documentation. These sparks allow me position them as a prototype of religious performance in their secular simplicity, as well as identify a formal key to their lasting significance to the history of art.

I argue a fusion, a removal of barriers, a (re)union of the categories of art and religion in the case of the *Relation Works*, rooted in their dependence on the body, rather than the image as the medium of their beauty. The importance of the striking beauty of the body, as the nude, is well established as the object of Western art, but in the realm of performance, the body is also the medium of the work of art. Thus, in Csordas’ terms the *Relation Works* reduce the experience of aesthetic alterity to the religious domain of alterity alone. In a similar vein, drawing on unity rather than alterity—sameness, rather

²²⁷ Csordas, “Asymptote of the Ineffable,” 167.

²²⁸ *Ibid.*, 176.

than difference—in his discussion of Abramović/Ulay, philologist and critic Thomas McEvelley makes similarly potent claims for art on the basis of language,

By manipulating semantic categories, by dissolving their boundaries selectively and allowing the contents to flow one into another, shifts in cultural focus can be forced through language's control of affect and attitude. In the extreme instance, a certain category can be declared universal, coextensive with experience, its boundaries being utterly dissolved until its content melts into awareness of itself. This universalization of a single category has at different times taken place in the areas of religion, philosophy, and, in our time, art.²²⁹

Csordas is careful to maintain categories with specific focus on the body, while ultimately arguing a religious ground for all expressions of alterity, in contrast with Thomas McEvelley's linguistic claims for art. Other critics also contend with the universal or ultimate ground of experience in the *Relation Works*. In an attempt to categorize the work of Abramović/Ulay, curator Maria Rus Bojan fails to confine them, instead assigning the challenge posed by the work to the realm of universals. "The signs of otherness and difference were no longer recognizable as such, and were recovered instead as signs of a strange universal experience."²³⁰

These signs of a declared, strange, or religious universal locate the aesthetic of Abramović and Ulay beyond boundaries, borders, and categories. This location, beyond a differentiation made plain to the eye, locates the *Relation Works* in the location of the ineffable, an absolute Csordas describes with the mathematical term *asymptote*. Rather than appeal to my category transcultural, or intracultural here, I acknowledge the universality of their aesthetic of specific bodily actions and gestures resonates with the formal concerns of abstraction in modern art.

²²⁹ McEvelley, *The Triumph of Anti-Art*, 234.

²³⁰ Rus Bojan et al., *Whispers*, 31–32.

I reveal my inclusive, yet selective impulse by dissolving logical boundaries between art and religion in the case of the *Relation Works*, and Abramović's aesthetic over the course of her career. In this terrain, a unified, intra-categorical, or liminal field of inquiry—this place of categories between art and religion—I find myself in the borderless geography of Warburg's thought, not seeing the contours of his Nameless Science between formalism in the history of art and mysticism in the study of religion, but in contact with its ideal object in the study of Ulay/Abramović.²³¹

The meaning that Abramović and Ulay developed through passing experience back and forth between their bodies in their *Relation Works* is an aesthetic that is received as universal, a common ground of experience closely associated with forms of pure abstraction in modernist aesthetics. Their approach to their work at the most basic of levels, their sexed intimacy, produces a universal that can be experienced as all human relationship, writ small, not large upon the work of performance art. Simple gestures and actions are abstractions of all intersubjective alterity, moving into the space of the social an unhomely, subjective strangeness of the inner self that was suffering without peace. From this space, they sought to develop an ethical aesthetic.

Ulay's aphorism, "Aesthetics without ethics is cosmetics" brought the confrontation of his individual experience of suffering into the androgynous, doubled and shadowy social through collaboration with Abramović.²³² The *Relation Works* locate the ethical question in the sphere of gender and equivalence, positing a solution in

²³¹ Agamben, "Aby Warburg and the Nameless Science."

²³² Alessandro Cassin, "ULAY with Alessandro Cassin," May 4, 2011, <http://www.brooklynrail.org/2011/05/art/ulay-with-alessandro-cassin>.

performance as androgynous unity, an ethical aesthetic that would ultimately move outward towards other forms of relationship and include of other forms of alterity.

Abramović's choice to collaborate with Ulay and the structure of their early works mark the beginning of a sustainable approach to her aesthetic of performance as an open work. In his seminal essay, "The Poetics of the Open Work," semiotician and literary theorist Umberto Eco theorizes the open work as a work of art, including literature and music, which tends to encourage "conscious acts of freedom."²³³ In his examples, the limit in some of these musical works is time, marked by acts of freedom. Eco states,

"The possibilities which the work's openness makes available always work within a given field of relations. [. . .] we can say the work in movement is not an amorphous invitation to indiscriminate participation. The invitation offers the performer the opportunity for an oriented insertion into something which always remains the world intended by the author."²³⁴

In the *Relation Works*, both Ulay and Abramović are an author, as well as participants in a work that is more open than the majority of Abramović's prior solo performances.²³⁵

Often, the choice of one of the artists to suspend the activity they were enacting concluded the performance. They performed until one could, or would not continue.

Within the open poetics of the *Relation Works*, Abramović took a step towards an aesthetic of the open work, which now fully includes the public within her authorship. In the openness of the *Relation Works*, Abramović continued to open herself to danger, risk, and extremes within the hermetically stable relationship that framed her existence.

²³³ Eco, "The Poetics of the Open Work," 23.

²³⁴ *Ibid.*, 36.

²³⁵ As described in a prior chapter, Abramović's early performances were prone to unplanned participation, to intervene in their dangers, which opened them in ways that set the events beyond a poetics of the open work. The events reduced Abramović's ability to express her performative intentions completely.

Their personal and professional relationships flourished through a series of performances that are iconic examples of the avant-garde, anti-materialist, transnational art world of the late 1970s. The solution to their individual frustrations in their intimate and artistic partnership is also reflected by the charisma and magnetism of the reductive and sometimes dangerously violent images they projected in their art. The interest of art audiences in difficult material can be typified by the enduring interest in performances that challenged social mores and held potential for harm, or intimate violence. I will examine a few of these performances, as they are exemplary for their formal concerns with symmetry, intimacy, and vitality. Ulay emphasized the importance of symmetry through profile as a way of differentiating performance from theater. “Profile means you don’t deliberately turn away from the audience, but you don’t face them either.”²³⁶

The frequency of violent actions in the *Relation Works* raises the question of the aesthetic value of suffering. In his theory of religion as alterity, Csordas draws on the transpersonal experience of suffering to turn his text,

Again to foreshadow my argument, Kleinman suggests that the profound otherness of suffering can be understood only insofar as one understands that “experience is both within and without the boundary of the body-self, crossing back and forth as if that body was permeable” (p. 326), and that meaning-making is most consequential insofar as it is a bridge between cultural representations and transpersonal processes, on the one hand, and bodily processes and embodied subjectivity, on the other.²³⁷

In the following pages, a discussion of selected *Relation Works* brings us to a turn, the field of embodied experience that reduces the dynamic activity of violent confrontations between bodies in performance to a minimum—stillness and tableau—a

²³⁶ Rus Bojan et al., *Whispers*, 185.

²³⁷ Csordas, “Asymptote of the Ineffable,” 166.

stillness that ultimately expands Abramović's practice out of European geography. While many of the best-known works of performance art after WWII reflect extreme actions—a profusion of symbols, techniques, gestures, politics, archaic cultural references, and object-centered demands on the body, much of the *Relation Work* reflects what is arguably a reductive, modernist aesthetic.

This modernity is an aesthetic austerity in the forms of the earliest *Relation Works*. Several of these works were performed entirely in the nude, and are an exploration of intimate alterity codified in forms associated with a number of traditions, especially tantric, alchemical, and theosophical. Traditions McEvelley describes as “mystical-philosophical approaches to the two-in-one, the mutual dependence of opposites—even the interchangeability of opposing forces.”²³⁸

Opposing forces are marked by distinct symmetry in the relationship of their bodies in a number of the best known of the *Relation Works*. The appearance of confrontation in the documentary images enlivens photographs in ways that video documentation does not. In the form of video mediation, the range of *Relation Works* gain greater interest for the viewer in their representation of events, sound, and motion. Still, the symmetrical performances are distinctive for the strength of their emphasis on the écart, which is the punctum, a communicative center, of each documentary image.²³⁹ The nudity, or other physical écart of the artists, and their similarity in difference are strongly marked by documentation of these works, *Imponderabilia* and *Relation in Space* being particularly well known examples.

²³⁸ McEvelley, *The Triumph of Anti-Art*, 275.

²³⁹ Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*, 1st American ed (New York: Hill and Wang, 1981).

Often performing nude, they grounded their work in a theory, score, manifesto, poetic, framework, or *technique du corps* of nomadic innovation they called *Art Vital*. After each performance, the pair felt a vitality that they attributed to an experience of regeneration, which Ulay also described as a process of “charging” themselves, the space, and the audience.²⁴⁰

Art vital
 no fixed living place
 permanent movement
 direct contact
 local relation
 self-selection
 passing limitations
 taking risks
 mobile energy

no rehearsal
 no predicted end and
 no repetition
 extended vulnerability
 exposure to chance
 primary reactions²⁴¹

Beyond “direct contact,” *Art Vital* does not frame the content or forms of their artwork, but the nomadic way of life that produced it. Their nomadic lifestyle resulted in a pattern of geographic movement that radically expanded Abramović’s personal range of experiences far beyond those of her earlier years. Ulay’s earlier tour of five cities under the auspices of Polaroid expanded with Abramović and the former French police van they lived in from 1976-1980. Their constant movement resulted in an itinerary of more than 200 stops—a range of locations crossing a remarkable number of islands and four continents (Figure 3.2). This increasingly vast geographic footprint encompassed both

²⁴⁰ Rus Bojan et al., *Whispers*, 185.

²⁴¹ *Marina Abramović: Artist Body: Performances 1969-1998* (Milano: Edizioni Charta, 1998), 130.

space and place. Their nomadic movement through space focused on many locations, but for the purposes of art historical footing, the centers of interest are the places defined by art practices.

The (un)contested zones of the museum and gallery are key spatial confines of an art world—particular social and exhibition contexts which have received extensive attention for the role they play in regulating and legitimating fine art. As a space of display, the austerity of the modern or contemporary art exhibition posits the white cube as a *tabula rasa* on which artists present their work.²⁴² As an environment conditioned by the sociopolitical contexts of Marxism and modernity, few things are less welcome in art space than the religion that it replaces with transcendent aesthetic experience.

O'Doherty argues the white cube provides a space for display that is allied with, and a descendent of, churches and other religious space. This transformation can be understood as a secularization of the sacred through the removal openings like windows, and limits of lighting to the ceiling. Like the axial space of Merleau-Ponty, the gallery and museum of the modern art obey the Cartesian grid. The grid maintains boundaries and structures of thought, excluding and including practices and objects through the rituals of display, of exhibition. The unwelcome ritual practices and objects of religion have been reoriented to gain entry to the white cube, eliding their function and reinscribing their meaning within the vocabularies of art. Almost tacitly, Abramović/Ulay began to bring the fruits and methods of their nomadic, alchemical, tantric practice into the white cube.

²⁴² Brian O'Doherty, *Inside the White Cube: The Ideology of the Gallery Space*, Expanded ed. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999).

The innovative nature of their work innocuously slipped the form of the embodied sacred within it. The critic Thomas McEvelley describes the documentation of these performances, “They are like cartoons of the alchemical Great Work.”²⁴³ Later Ulay/Abramović works undertaken in a “given” or “chosen space” were performed in deconsecrated religious buildings, marking these spaces as even more closely related to the architectural space of contemporary art, making each coterminus with its opposite, sacred and secular. The artists’ bodies accomplish the same dissolution of categorical boundaries between sacred and secular through their rituals of ethically aestheticized alterity. This dissolution of differences between sacred and profane in the sphere of religion can be called *mysticism*, especially in the West, as well as *tantra*, its name in the East.

Relation in Space (July 16, 1976)

The *Relation Works* all address some form of highly specified or restricted form physical activity. *Relation in Space* addresses the social corporeal self in ambulatory motion. Their first collaborative performance was a response to an invitation Abramović received to participate in the 37th edition of the Venice Biennale.²⁴⁴ The performance took place on July 16, 1976, on the island of Giudecca, in the Dorsoduro sestiere of Venice.²⁴⁵ Lasting 58 minutes, Ulay and Abramović began the performance by walking towards each other, colliding in the center of the warehouse-like space that was as simple as the nude bodies of the performers, a bare concrete floor, and background of a simple white wall flanked by microphones. The emphasis on nudity was not purely a part of the

²⁴³ McEvelley, 275.

²⁴⁴ Westcott, *When Marina Abramović Dies*, 100.

²⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 101.

artists' intent to develop a reductive visual aesthetic, but intended to insure the sound of their bodies striking against each other was audible to the audience.²⁴⁶

Relation in Space In a given space.

Performance.

Two bodies repeatedly pass, touching each other.
After gaining a higher speed they collide.

Duration: 58 minutes

July, 1976

XXXVIII Biennale, Giudecca, Venice.

Visitors: 300²⁴⁷

Phenomenologically, not only does the body come to the fore in this work, its nudity allows the historical frame to recede in the neutral space of the gallery as 'white cube'. This space and its documents have a near timeless, classic appeal, restrained by as few cultural references as possible. The edges of the backdrop are visible in some photographic and video documentation of the performance, which makes the space one which emulates the ideology of the white cube, a built environment typical of the ideal, modernist exhibition space which encapsulates the space of earlier art histories, specifically the religious realm of art. In Venice, as in several of the other spaces in which they performed, Ulay constructed their spatial aesthetic, which always mimicked the particulars of the white cube with bright light, white walls, or columns and microphones. These art spaces were made places for their androgynous exploration of the écart between themselves and others. Abramović/Ulay developed an edenic aesthetic that constitutes those performances as performance degree zero.

²⁴⁶ Ibid.

²⁴⁷ Abramović, *Marina Abramović*, 130.

In that secularized space, the ideals of the white cube are inherently formalist and residually spiritual. Like the surface, support, and pigment that are the essential qualities of Modernist painting, Abramović/Ulay reduced the practice of performance down to its simplest expression. Body. Space. Time. In 1996, Ulay described the work, “Performance may be seen as a ‘choreographed existence’ as ‘edited life.’”²⁴⁸ His comments in 1988 demonstrate the relationship of their work to Modernism,

I am an enemy of postmodernism. Modernism still had an appreciation of tradition. [. . .] The work, whatever you see in it, is only a portion of what it should really become. You can find its richness and fullness if it involves your whole life, if you choreograph your whole existence. The work will restructure itself through how we live.”²⁴⁹

An editorial approach to the body’s limits is the subject of the early *Relation Works* and the phenomenological or spatiotemporal relation of one body to another in alterity is their form and aesthetic.

The repetition of routine motion became a ritual of difference that captured the most basic confrontation of phenomenological difference in movement as an experience of meeting. They began the piece slowly walking towards each other, allowing their shoulders and the upper half of their chests to strike each other, like strangers passing on a crowded street and unable to avoid each other. They repeated their strides, taking the same path again and again, slowly picking up speed as the repetition of their became action taking up a defined space and expanding into time. As the duration of the piece grew longer and their speed increased, the collision of their bodies with each other grew variably unequal in force. Ulay’s greater height and weight began to exceed

²⁴⁸ Paul Kokke, “An Interview with Ulay and Marina Abramović,” in *Ulay/Abramović: Performances, 1976-1988.*, ed. Stedelijk Van Abbemuseum (Eindhoven: Stedelijk Van Abbemuseum, 1997), 120.

²⁴⁹ Iles, “Taking a Line for a Walk,” 16.

Abramović's momentum to pass him by. They ceased passing by each other and eventually were colliding like the balls of Newton's Cradle, a demonstration toy of physics that inspired them, returning to their point of origin and meeting in the middle after their motion was reversed by their connection.

As the performance continued Ulay's greater mass seemed to result in a slight withdrawal from the collision by Abramović, who slowed her approach and allowed her body to receive Ulay's full frontal blows as the piece wore on. His studied casualness diverged from Abramović's subtle hesitancy, and her occasional fall from her feet. Their representation of physical equality as assertive relation in space displayed its imbalance through the destabilization of the body of the smaller woman. Ulay's stride in the performance was remarkable for its consistency. After each collision, he turned and walked away with a precision that was graceful in movement, long arms, and legs swinging loosely and naturally, with machine-like consistency in strides of graceful, crisp, and unvaried repetition.²⁵⁰

The routine of Abramović/Ulay's walking made a single action into a ritual of durational. The *écart* of *Relation in Space* (Figure 3.4) is the constant reiteration of opening and closing of the gap between their nude bodies. The variable distance made manifest by their movement was aesthetically accentuated through the medium of sound. While the documentation foregrounds the splay and spread of limbs and hair, bouncing genitals, blurred bodies in motion—the punctum of the performance itself is the perceptible closing of the *écart*, an *écart* which was never closed, but simply amplified.

²⁵⁰ Marina Abramović and Ulay, "Relation in Space (2012) | Www.li-Ma.nl," accessed April 20, 2015, <http://www.li-ma.nl/site/catalogue/art/Abramović-ulyay/relation-in-space-2012/18373#>.

The emphasis on the sonic friction between the artists moved out among the spectators whose experience of the *écart* was intensified by the sensory focus on its percussive rhythm.

Breathing in, Breathing out (April, 1977)

Kneeling side by side, with long hair tied back in loose buns, Abramović and Ulay faced each other in an overlapping symmetry. After resting silently for a few breaths, the pair plugged their noses and taped microphones to their throats in full view of the packed Belgrade's SKC (Figure 3.5). The Yugoslavian locale was the place selected for a vivid performance of their intimacy, at the center Abramović's creative origins. Spectators who could not fit inside could hear the performance amplified outside. Ulay took the breath they would share for the next 19 minutes. With heads tilted to opposite sides, they opened their mouths wide and deeply locked together. Their united jaws obscured the view of their lips, expanding beyond the openness experienced in the deepest of kisses, while still evoking the image of that romantic caress. With their hands placed on their own knees, the two audibly exchanged the long deep breath that lost its small ration of oxygen as it passed between them.

**Breathing in
Breathing out**

In a given space.

Performance.

We are kneeling face to face, pressing our mouths together.

Our noses are blocked with filter tips.

Ulay

I am breathing in oxygen.

I am breathing out carbon dioxide.

Marina

I am breathing in carbon dioxide.
I am breathing out carbon dioxide.

Ulay

I am breathing in carbon dioxide.
I am breathing out carbon dioxide.

Duration: 19 minutes

April, 1977

Studenski Kulturni Centar, Belgrade.

Visitors: 250²⁵¹

Connected in a futile union, highlighting the impossibility of such symbiotic interdependency, and the physicality of finding how long such an untenable union could last, their bodies rocked back and forth. As the minutes passed the urgency of their need for fresh oxygen—a new individual breath—forced their movements into a desperate interdependence. The rhythm of their breath drove the tempo and depth of their forward and backward movement into expression of increasing range of movement and intensity. Video documentation shows Abramović's face grow shiny with sweat and the drip of saliva from around their mouths. Shot in close up, the video cannot convey the symmetry of their bodies, while the full-length photographs cannot communicate the stressful urgency of their performance and its dynamic striving to share that most vital element of life.

The corporeal aesthetic of biological function and vocalized sound comes to the fore in their technological emphasis on mediation via microphones. As in *Relation in Space*, sound is the primary aspect of their performance accentuated for the spectators. As the struggle developed over the passing minutes, the regular heave of Ulay's breath

²⁵¹ Abramović, *Marina Abramović*, 148.

alternated with Abramović's vocalization, a sound from the larynx somewhere beyond breath—like a muffled cry, sigh, or moan.

Centered on the breath as monstrous kiss, the *écart* carried the spark of imagined sameness as difference is *pneuma*—a religious sign meaning spirit—the breath, the most crucial of the elements that sustains our lives. Focused intently on the breath and a commitment to share it to the fullest extent, *Breathing in, Breathing out* comes closest to representing the loving, or erotic dimensions of Abramović/Ulay's relationship in a way not found in any of the other *Relation Works*. By locating the strictures of the performance in plugged nostrils and a single breath, the predictable outcome of reached a limit that demanded separation emphasizing their spiritual and corporeal difference while attempting to elude it for as long as possible.

***Imponderabilia* (June, 1977)**

The performance *Imponderabilia* (Figure 3.6) raised abstract questions about the behavior of the spectator as a part of the work itself. The spectator/participants viewed the nude bodies of the artists in profile, standing closely together in a shallow and narrow white passageway, facing each other linked by the *écart* of eye contact. Their deep gaze into each other's eyes formed the center of their performance as an intersubjective action. In documentation of the work, the strength of bond between the two is obvious, as their gazes reflect their deep intimacy in a connection that does not break through the entire performance.

The legendary magnetism and charisma the pair shared is clearly on display in *Imponderabilia*, palpable in the photos in a way few performance documents can capture. The simplicity of their standing pose increased the importance of a strong link, as the

spectators chose which one to face while passing between them. The transgressive presentation of nude bodies in mirrored symmetry, “naked” bodies, in a space of compulsory socialized, physical contact places *Imponderabilia* among Abramović/Ulay’s best-known and most provocative performances.²⁵²

Imponderabilia

In a chosen space.

Performance.

We are standing naked in the main entrance of the museum, facing each other.

The public entering the museum have to pass sideways through the small space between us.

Each person has to choose which one of us to face.

Duration: 90 minutes

June, 1977

Galeria Comunale d’Arte Moderna, Bologna

Visitors: 350

The performance was interrupted and stopped by the police.²⁵³

The space of the museum was altered to create a place for the performance to engage the public. The narrowly spaced columns and the presence of the artist’s bodies subverted the conventional architecture of the space, set further outside the conventional exhibition space through the presence of security, lights and cameras recording participants’ movement through the performance space. The deterritorialization of the museum did not extend the influence of global modernity into the Italian sphere, but instead established a geography of performance within global modernity developing a

²⁵² In the year 2010, New York’s Museum of Modern Art required a greater space between performers recreating the work. This change to the performance insured the participant was not crowded between bodies, an alternative to passing between them was also offered.

²⁵³ Abramović, *Marina Abramović*, 1998, 150.

new formulation of sacred space bounded by the caryatids of Abramović/Ulay's ideal androgyne.

In this open work of independent choice, the majority of the participants chose to face Abramović, and in the abbreviated video documentation, none tried to make eye contact with either artist.²⁵⁴ In the large gallery, which the spectator could enter only by passing between Abramović/Ulay, the spectator faced a diagram of the process they had just experienced. On the wall, three life-sized figures represented the pair of artists and the spectator, their bodies reduced to simplified, genderless graphic icons, geometrically rendered as bodies and heads without arms or legs. Embedded in the same wall were two video screens on which they could observe others participating in the same process, and a large hand written summary of Abramović/Ulay's action, an aesthetic inquiry into questions about human experience and behavior the artists attempted to place beyond our ability to conceptualize (Figure 3.7).

imponderable

such imponderable human factors
such as one's aesthetic sensitivity

the overriding importance
of imponderables in determining
human conduct²⁵⁵

By placing the awareness of others in the realm of aesthetic sensitivity, the artists appropriated the categories of ethics, morals, and manners for the context of art, ruling out convention in the making of choices. They stripped down intersubjectivity to the

²⁵⁴ Marina Abramović and Ulay, "Imponderabilia (2012) | Www.li-Ma.nl," accessed April 20, 2015, <http://www.li-ma.nl/site/catalogue/art/Abramovic-ulyay/imponderabilia-2012/18369>.

²⁵⁵ Abramović, *Marina Abramović*, 1998, 157.

particulars of skin and closeness. The spectators became participants in an open work as they chose to engage the work, close the écart between themselves and the performers' bodies, and enter the gallery beyond, triangulating the question of alterity with a solution of confrontational (in)attention. In the case of *Imponderabilia*, the confrontational space created by the artists and engaged by spectators enforced a choice of inclusion and exclusion. The type of alterity they chose to face inserted participants into an archetypal ritual, entering an art space through the liminal boundaries composed of bodies, beyond which the artists framed their ethical ritual of engagement as an aesthetic question participants could explore more deeply by observing each other on screen.

Light/Dark (October 29, 1977)

At the Cologne Art Fair of 1977, the *Relation Works* turned toward another striking investigation of the artists' bodies and minds in relation to each other. Prior performances had gentler, as well as more violent themes, emphasizing exchanged gazes, and bodies colliding in space. In *Light/Dark*, the couple explored gestures of conflict and endurance that emphasized their equality. This time, as in *Breathing in, Breathing out*, the pair knelt facing each other, with their hands on their thighs. Slowly, gently, Ulay raised his hand and gently slapped Abramović's face, returning his palm to his thigh with an audible slap. Abramović repeated and returned the gesture, setting in motion a cyclic exchange of single blows, the slap suggesting forms of social conflict ranging from an exchange of insult to domestic violence.

Light/Dark In a given space.
 Performance.
 We kneel, face to face.
 Alternately, we slap each other's face until one of us stops.

Duration: 20 minutes
 October 1977
 International Kunstmesse, Cologne.
 Visitors: 70²⁵⁶

The documentation of the piece in video captures a single angle, the two in profile with their actions broadcast, again through microphones and speakers.²⁵⁷ As in other *Relation Works*, their installation of lighting and recording equipment established a space for the performance, the field of documentation delimiting the boundaries in which they would perform. The presence of bright lights illuminating their faces obscured their ability to see the hand of the other approaching their faces. This sort of light blindness can only prevent a sense of the approaching slap, as the regularity of their movements insured a predictable rhythm to the agreed upon action. The formal stricture of the lights served to focus their perception on their own actions, closing the gap and completing contact with the other's face (Figure 3.8).

The exchange of blows closed the gap between the two, an *écart* rooted in communicative gesture. That gesture expanded into duration through repetition evolving into an opportunity to observe their responses to the experience as they slapped each other, exchanging communicative content with a ritual-like formality and sobriety. As the minutes passed the speed and strength of the blows increased. The two began to flinch from the pain and at times appear to be returning the slaps, aggressively settling a score that was intended to be equal from the beginning. They seemed, at times, to be balancing their scales of consensual pain through the movement of slapping each other's faces again and again. As the intensity of the performance increased, the symmetry of

²⁵⁶ Abramović, *Marina Abramović*, 174.

²⁵⁷ Marina Abramović and Ulay, "Light / Dark (Cologne) | Wwww.li-Ma.nl," *LIMA*, accessed April 19, 2015, <http://www.li-ma.nl/site/catalogue/art/Abramović-ulyay/light-dark-cologne/7824#>.

their regulated movements broke down. Ulay' began to lean forward, jutting his chin towards Abramović. Abramović's slap became circular, swinging at Ulay like a cat swatting his face, rarely reconnecting her palm with her thigh.

The écart of the space between hand and face and the sound of their connection encapsulates the difference between bodies and becomes the active sign of alterity. The exchanged slap as a sign of conflict is most easily understood as a difference of opinion or perspective resulting in displeasure shared equally, one with the other. This is not the intention of the performance, but instead in to the *Relation Works* and the Art Vital value of unrehearsed actions exploring physical relationship. In her description of the interest of the artists in the performance *Light/Dark* Abramović said, "It is not the pain itself that matters. We never did things for the pleasure of pain. We were looking for a key, a way to break through the body, to open something up, which is a desire that comes from another side of truth or reality."²⁵⁸

By setting the temporal limits of the work in the sphere of choice in many *Relation Works*, Ulay and Abramović consistently set up a test of the dynamics of "truth or reality" in negotiation, endurance, tolerance, and a test of ethics in the form of compassion. Where in that écart, where is the écart, of compassion for the self and the other in an act of mutual harm and simultaneous violence that gets at the root of our spiritual obligation to the other in romantic relation, the most intimate of differences? The écart of the ethical act of compassion is in the space of cessation of action, an aesthetic they would develop in the coming years. *Light/Dark* raises new questions for art. If consensual intimate intercorporeal pain is art does the suffering matter? Does a

²⁵⁸ Ibid.

blow hurt me as much as it hurts the one I strike? And, beyond the skin, why does it not hurt more? As physical and spiritual discipline, the blows exchanged in *Light/Dark* constitute a mastery of pain, both physical and emotional, until one of the artists refuses to go further, or passes through their limit into a different kind of vital awareness.

AAA-AAA (1978)

They mimic and confront, alternate and compete, cry out in unison, coming closer and closer together, nearing the connection of mouths as in *Breathing In, Breathing out*. Voices break, gasp, skip without stutter, marking the presence and absence of language in their confrontation.²⁵⁹ In *AAA-AAA*, competition and conflict was implied by the relation of bodies, but at times, from the intimacy of their proximity arises a sense of a shared human condition of suffering made vivid by the vehemence of their screams.

AAA-AAA In a given space.

Performance.

We are facing each other, both producing a continuous vocal sound.

We slowly build up the tension, our faces coming closer together until we are screaming into each other's open mouths.

Duration: 15 minutes

February, 1978

RTB, television studio, Liege, Belgium

Performed for television.

March 1978

Amsterdam.

Performed for film.²⁶⁰

²⁵⁹ "AAA-AAA | Wwww.li-Ma.nl," accessed April 20, 2015, <http://www.li-ma.nl/site/catalogue/art/Abramovic-ulay/aaa-aaa/18360>.

²⁶⁰ Abramović, *Marina Abramović*, 184.

Their breaths and the sounds they made are linked closely in a many-layered *écart*, a gap closed by the encroachment of their bodies on each other and their concentrated focus on each other's eyes (Figure 3.9). The meaning of their actions brings the intimate and universal into the aesthetic while highlighting the expressive power of vocalized sound drained of the meaning of spoken language.

Their personal intimacy and the meanings of sexed bodies emphasized the interpretation of lovers' quarrel, without appeal to any particular language to condition the culture of their dispute, each is native to the form of expression. Their mode of address, which began as wordless sound, grew in volume and physical proximity that can be interpreted as a model of all forms of conflict that do not come to blows. The artists connected with their other, in the appearance of twins, lovers, and human kind through displays of dominance in the space that fell between voices and gazes. As in many of their performances, Abramović was the last to stop their agreed upon action. At the end, she shouted with a force that placed the performance squarely within the realm of pure competitive aggression.

As an aesthetic and artistic deployment of a sign of alterity in a sphere I argue is religious, *AAA-AAA* can be transposed from its moment of a battle between the sexes in a time of changing gender norms and relations, into the present and the past of religious conflict. It is a work that poses interesting questions for the penultimate alterity of religious difference that de(i)fies belief and the heteroglossia of the global sphere, as meaningful categories that place evolutionary questions of competition, endurance, and survival at the center of the religiously potent confrontation between selves and others.

AAA-AAA is the last of the *Relation Works* that applies the equality of confrontational symmetry as a performance aesthetic. In later works, discontinuity between their bodies, precarious asymmetry, and cooperative action take precedence. In the series *Modus Vivendi*, the importance of confrontational and symmetrical forms in performance return to their work in the development of this body of work that includes ethnic, spiritual, and cultural diversity in its purview. In the subsequent body of work, religious forms are again reduced to their essence, a static symmetry in opposition called *Nightsea Crossing*.

Conclusion

Whether I choose to locate Abramović/Ulay's alchemical method and aesthetic in an intracultural domain of some sort of edenic, Abrahamic religious experience of relationship, as the embodied Tao of yin and yang, or as the foundation of collaborative performance art of the most reductive and austere kind, a space for questions of religion and art history can be argued to be solved by the application of semiotic methods, geographic or sociological spatial analysis, or even within the intentions of the artists. When faced with these possibilities, I find myself interested in a Nameless Science with flexible boundaries and methods that open the work of Marina Abramović to establishing the transcultural and transdisciplinary force of her *Relation Works* into a category that interrogates their aesthetic as a sign of a burgeoning global sense of the secularized sacred in Contemporary performance art.

The *Relation Works* provide an ideal object for this kind of inquiry, I place them into a space of quality, interest, meaning, and durability that set them and the artists apart as exceptional. As the kernel of religion, their modernist forms prefigure an explicitly

religious and occult aesthetic that emphasizes and reduces difference in bodies of work that expand their nomadic moment through space and place into more diverse experiences of alterity, beyond European culture.

Chapter Four: Into the Desert — *Nightsea Crossing*

“The desert reduces you to yourself, that’s all that happens.”
—Marina Abramović²⁶¹

The alchemical investigations into vitality and intersubjectivity that defined Abramović and Ulay’s *Relation Works* took a sharp, yet subtle turn as Abramović and Ulay moved into climes that were more diverse and made contact with other cultures further afield of their Western European base in Holland. Moving in wider and wider geographic circles along longer and longer vectors, Abramović and Ulay eventually were invited to regions far flung from the Euro-American context. Their nomadic travels had taken them to a remarkable number of islands and beaches in North Africa and the Mediterranean, as well as along the coast of Mexico. Their network of frequently visited European cities opened to include opportunities to perform in New York City and Sydney, Australia.

It was their trip to Australia and their exploration of its Central Desert that led to a significant shift in their aesthetic. The expanse of heat, its exotic alterity, and that of the people who lived there arrested the pair into a state of stilled consciousness, trained on the experience of the self, the other, and their energies. From that experience, the dynamic and physically challenging *Relation Works* grew into a series of performances that depended on the capacity for complete stillness for long periods of time. In the desert, their creative focus on vitality altered radically into a practice of meditative

²⁶¹ J. Phipps, “Marina Abramović/Ulay: Ulay/Marina Abramović,” *ART AND TEXT (AUSTRALIA)* 3 (Spring 1981): 47.

tableaux vivant, a form of living pictures. These works differed from the *Relation Works* in their predetermined ending and repetition of the same work at sites around the globe. To sustain the new artistic practice they developed for themselves, they learned Buddhist meditation in India, collaborated with Aborigines, and established ties to the exiled community of Tibetan monks in Europe and India.

In this chapter, I trace Abramović and Ulay's travels and experiences in the desert with an emphasis on the geographic importance of climate to transforming their aesthetic. I analyze the importance of transcultural content drawn from Buddhist meditation technique and tantric philosophy of India on the performance *Nightsea Crossing* as a foundation for linking the work to somaesthetics and rasaesthetics. The work of philosopher Kenneth Inada allows me to articulate the Buddhist transcultural aesthetic of presence and time in Abramović/Ulay's aesthetic of stillness and long duration.

As in other chapters, my analysis depends on interviews, archival video documentation of performances, and critical essays by Thomas McEvelley. He summarized their project as “work which tries to unify space—East and West—and time—past and present—in an essentially humane transcultural iconography.”²⁶² In their performances, which took place around the globe, Abramović/Ulay began to reflect practices of minor transnationalism, linking nodes of cultural experience that participate in alternate geographies of transnational flows associated with globalization.

As described by literary scholars Lionnet and Shih, the transnational “is not bound by the binary of the local and the global and can occur in national, local and global

²⁶² Thomas McEvelley, “Ethics, Esthetics, and Relation in the Work of Marina Abramović and Ulay,” in *Modus Vivendi: Ulay & Marina Abramović, 1980-1985*, ed. Jan Debbaut (Eindhoven: Stedelijk Van Abbemuseum, 1985), 9.

spaces across different and multiple spatialities and temporalities.”²⁶³ *Nightsea Crossing* is a series of performances with a strict score repeated for 90 days across all these aforementioned types of spaces, from museums to public squares, deconsecrated churches to unbuilt outdoor sites. Reflecting Lionnet and Shih’s “politics of recognition,” *Nightsea Crossing* also draws on religious forms across cultures of minority, colonized, and exiled participants to represent an aesthetic of recognition based on religious forms so universal they appear secular. These forms accomplish the transcultural enactment of the transnational in *Nightsea Crossing Conjunction*, in particular, which represents a “space of exchange and participation wherever processes of hybridization occur, and where it is still possible for cultures to be produced and performed without necessary mediation by the center.”²⁶⁴

Geographies of Aesthetics: Australia and the Central Desert

We had just left the Pintubi tribe who we lived with. For some weeks they had accepted us as their guests, allowing us to share their daily life; hunting and gathering food with them, exchanging dreams and stories.

All looks red, the sand, the dust, all moves with us. Even our skin and clothes are covered in red.

For weeks now we have been exposed to temperatures never falling below the temperature of our bodies.

We drink hot water, as much as we can allow for the journey’s ration. The days are long, time swells with heat. The desert is an ocean, so is the mind, in motion.

There is no shelter provided by nature. We improvise day by day.

²⁶³ Lionnet and Shih, *Minor Transnationalism*, 6.

²⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 5.

We move by night, but it is still hot. The desert becomes a frozen lake.

—Abramović/Ulay²⁶⁵

In 1979, the Marina Abramović and her partner Ulay journeyed for 10 days to the first Australian Biennial of Contemporary Art to participate with a performance, *The Brink*. This invitation piqued their interest in the Australian outback, specifically the Central Desert region. After application for a grant and some negotiation with the government regarding their interest in Aboriginal land rights, the pair was granted access to the region for a year.²⁶⁶ The pair intended to spend six months in the desert and another six giving lectures and making art related to the experience. They spent time in the Central Desert of Australia from October 1980 until March 1981.²⁶⁷ Their visit took place at time when this region was restricted to visitors and significantly less accessible than it became over the following decades. During this same period, painting practices thrust Central Desert peoples into the art world and its markets from their isolated territory.

Even more significant to their art practice than their participation in land rights issues, map-making, and an unfulfilled interest in developing deep understanding of the Pintubi and Pitjantjatjara people who lived in and around Alice Springs, was their experience of the geography of the desert.²⁶⁸ As Ulay and Abramović told multiple sources, their interest in the people of the region resulted in some measure disappointment. Abramović arrived with expectations and was especially interested in

²⁶⁵ Debbaut, *Modus Vivendi*, 20.

²⁶⁶ Rus Bojan et al., *Whispers*, 233; Marina Abramović, “Marina Abramović- Night Sea Crossing, a Lecture” (Guggenheim Museum (New York), April 7, 2009); Westcott, *When Marina Abramović Dies*, 158.

²⁶⁷ Phipps, “Marina Abramović/Ulay,” 45–46.

²⁶⁸ Phipps, “Marina Abramović/Ulay,” 46.

what she and Ulay perceived as telepathic abilities.²⁶⁹ Despite the fact Ulay was able to develop close contacts and was offered initiation, he was repeatedly disappointed with the outcome of his efforts, especially when returning to the desert many years later to find he had been forgotten.²⁷⁰ They did become close enough with the local people to find participants for performances they would undertake in 1983 and 1985.

The environment and culture of the Australian Aboriginal peoples are deeply intertwined. Humanist geographer Yi-Fu Tuan discusses the performative aesthetic of the Aboriginal culture as central to the understanding of their culture's sites, features, tracks, and events (Figure 4.1).²⁷¹ These elements take precedence, rather than the Western or Asian conceptions of landscape. Their worldview and history, described as Dreaming stories, or the Dreamtime, traces events of the past and their ancestry to tribal lands and events linking their kinship, paths of movement, and stories to the land. Ceremonies and performances by Aboriginal people are the primary mode of telling stories and passing on their cultural knowledge. This is an extremely resilient form of communication. Recent studies have shown that some of the Dreamtime stories likely reflect astronomical events from thousands of years ago.²⁷²

Performance and ceremony express the importance of geography to the people and people to geography, as well as including the importance of animals and distinctive

²⁶⁹ Westcott, *When Marina Abramović Dies*, 320; Phipps, "Marina Abramović/Ulay," 46; Rus Bojan et al., *Whispers*, 389.

²⁷⁰ Ulay's return to visit Charlie Watuma Tjungurrayi after he had suffered a stroke was poignant in his hope for recognition by the old man who had given him his clan name, Tjungurrayi. During his trip to the desert Ulay, also continued his photographic project with large-scale portraits of women's ceremonial dance. Boonsma, "Ulay in Photography | Wwww.li-Ma.nl"; Rus Bojan et al., *Whispers*, 232.

²⁷¹ Tuan, *Passing Strange and Wonderful*, 127.

²⁷² Duane W. Hamacher and Ray P. Norris, "Meteors in Australian Aboriginal Dreamings" 38, no. 3 (2010): 87–98; "To Find Meteorites, Listen to the Legends of Australian Aborigines," *Smithsonian*, accessed May 8, 2015, <http://www.smithsonianmag.com/science-nature/find-meteorites-listen-legends-australian-aborigines-180952941/>.

features of the environment to their worldview. Abramović observed similar values, with special interest in the women's daily performance of dreams they had. She recounted some of the dreams were performed over more than one night.²⁷³ She compared the performance of Dreamings to her own worldview.

When they make a ceremony, they spend a long time making the most beautiful objects. The moment the ceremony is finished, the objects are left there, destroyed. And then they start all over again. So there was no material culture. It was very close to how we thought about our life and performance as a way of living.²⁷⁴

In his text addressing geography and aesthetics, Tuan writes in terms that are closely associated with anthropological, as well as humanistic inquiry. He states, “Culture is performance—facial expression, gesture, and social ballet.” Referring to Shakespeare and the world as stage, Tuan's choice of words emphasizes the importance of the use of the term *performance* as crucial to understanding human behavior more widely. Sociologist Irving Goffman put forth a similar argument in *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*.²⁷⁵ This point of view also informs the basis of Ulay/Abramović's *Relation Works*. These grew into a series of new works, where the performance of self was further reduced in activity by the circumstances of everyday life in the sweltering summer heat of the desert. While Tuan locates the theatrical impulse in Western culture, his discussion of Australian geography from a humanist perspective depends on the universal or global nature of performance. The importance of performance, costume,

²⁷³ Westcott, *When Marina Abramović Dies*, 163.

²⁷⁴ Janet A. Kaplan, “Deeper and Deeper: Interview with Marina Abramović,” *Art Journal* 58, no. 2 (Summer 1999): 12.

²⁷⁵ Erving Goffman, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1959).

drawing, and other forms of aestheticized behavior in Aboriginal culture impacted Abramović and Ulay in their travels, but not in terms of their aesthetic. They did leave traces of their presence among the Pintubi and their Dreaming.

The importance of the Dreaming in maintaining Aboriginal culture reflects the importance of Abramović and Ulay's visit to the Central Desert. One of the key sources of information about the region and its people is Bruce Chatwin's 1987 novel, *The Songlines*. It includes a dreaming story, the "Quantas Dreaming" told by a character named Joshua. The Quantas Dreaming tells the story of Charlie Watuma Tarraru Tjungurrayi's participation in an iteration of the *Nightsea Crossing* performances, *Conjunction*.²⁷⁶

Traveling the outback in the region around Alice Springs, described by Abramović as "east of the Lake of Disappointment," Marina and Ulay explored Aboriginal tradition, the landscape, and their own practice (Figure 4.2).²⁷⁷ In a 2009 lecture at the Guggenheim Museum, Abramović characterized this nomadic experience of Australia as emblematic of a key liminal element in developing her practice, "in-between places, passages, between habits, one is open to destiny."²⁷⁸ The climate of the desert and its separation from the everyday urban environment was a time in-between for Abramović. She had an attenuated liminal experience where there were no rituals but the

²⁷⁶ Bruce Chatwin, *The Songlines* (London: Cape, 1987), 154–155; Westcott, *When Marina Abramović Dies*, 175–176; Abramović, Biesenbach, et al., *Marina Abramović*, 12 and 20.

²⁷⁷ Abramović, "Marina Abramović- Night Sea Crossing, a Lecture."

²⁷⁸ In addition to her retrospective, quasi-mystical, new age inflected description of the culture twenty years later, Abramović's understanding of Aboriginal ritual reflects the transformation of cultural distinctions in language as religion and the secular have become metaphorically, if not literally intertwined. Coming to the understanding that when Pintubi people speak of the rituals that maintain and are a part of the Dreaming, one finds the language of commerce is used. "We have a business, there is the office." The high value placed on business in a market economy, makes it relevant that *ceremony* and *sites of practice* are referred to as *business* and *office*. Abramović, Marina. "Night Sea Crossing." Lecture, Guggenheim Museum, New York, NY, 7 April 2009.

rising and setting of the sun, setting of fires for cooking and keeping animals away from their camp.²⁷⁹ During this time, in the heat of the Central Desert they acquired a new perspective on the body, and time. The phenomenological experience of desert space moved them to an even greater stillness, where during the heat of the day, they would not move at all. Enamored of the time spent in the desert and inspired by its people, the pair would later embark on a new body of work, the performances known as *Nightsea Crossing*.²⁸⁰

The climate of the desert was at its most harsh during their visit. The reversal of seasons of in the Southern hemisphere from the Northern resulted in them making their entire trip during the desert summer where temperatures regularly reach 35°C, or 95°F.²⁸¹ Ulay described the experience,

The temperature was about 122 Fahrenheit. In that heat, you vegetate, you are just a plant. Before moving at all, you ask yourself ten times if you should do it. Living in those circumstances made us think differently about motion, action, and just about everything. It forced us to economize our energies and in turn to eliminate anything superfluous. It made us appreciate what it is to be, as opposed to do.

We came to the conclusion we wanted to test whether the artist's presence would be enough to change the audience's behavior.²⁸²

Abramović also recounts the heat as the most significant influence on her during their time away from the tribes and shelter in the desert.

²⁷⁹ Westcott, *When Marina Abramović Dies*, 159; Phipps, "Marina Abramović/Ulay," 47.

²⁸⁰ Communitas and liminal experience in the sense of Turner's formulation of rites of passage becomes increasingly important in subsequent works, specifically, *The House with the Ocean View* (2003). The author deals with this in another paper, "Marina Abramović's *The House with the Ocean View*: Redefining the Sacred in Secular Public Space."

²⁸¹ Commonwealth of Australia; Australian Bureau of Statistics, "Chapter - Australia's Climate," accessed May 7, 2015, <http://www.abs.gov.au/ausstats/abs@.nsf/94713ad445ff1425ca25682000192af2/bbd307d0202ca25bca2570d>; Commonwealth of Australia; Australian Bureau of Statistics, "Feature Article - Australian Deserts, Climatic Aspects of Australia's Deserts (Feature Article)," accessed May 7, 2015, <http://www.abs.gov.au/ausstats/abs@.nsf/Previousproducts/1301.0Feature%20Article22006?open>.

²⁸² Rus Bojan et al., *Whispers*, 234.

The heat was a strong effect because the permanence of the heat was so big—it was as if you were slung on a very hot wall and then the heat became almost physical. I couldn't move so much during the day—almost nothing—just sit somewhere—but then I had the incredible experience of my thoughts—they are just subconsciousness, pictures. I'd permanent visions and visions and visions, most of the time just about my life, seeing everything from a different angle, the work, you know, the whole thing [. . .] Because of the incredible bonds of nature, you just function as a receiver, and as a sender, of certain energies and actually it's the most important experience, we felt.²⁸³

The role of the climate and the stillness it forced upon them resulted in a capacity for inactivity of the body unlike they had experienced before. While they had made a single long duration performance during which they were virtually immobilized, *Relation in Time* (1977), the works that they produced after their time in the desert were newly strict in ascetic restrictions and sought to express the energy they felt during their time in the Central Desert. As Abramović said in a 1999 interview,

It was very interesting how much we learned, how much we were inspired by this culture. We didn't produce any work there; in nature, you can't make art. Nature is so perfect as it is that art becomes an obstacle. Art can only be done in destructive societies that have to be rebuilt. I see the artist as a bridge between nature and the city. We went to nature to get, and we went to our society to give.²⁸⁴

She continued to develop this idea of the artist as a bridge, not just between nature and culture, but also between cultures.²⁸⁵ With Ulay, she also developed an interest in further

²⁸³ Phipps, "Marina Abramović/Ulay," 47.

²⁸⁴ Kaplan, "Deeper and Deeper," 13.

²⁸⁵ Abramović invested in this idea of her work as a bridge, seeing herself and the culture of the Balkans as a bridge between east and west. She discusses the importance of "geographical belonging" and describes the geography of the Balkans as a land bridge between continents. *The Bridge* is also the title of a retrospective exhibition of her work held in Spain in 1998. Marina Abramović, Pablo J Rico Lacasa, and Thomas Wulffen, *The Bridge = El Puente: Marina Abramović, Exposición Retrospectiva* (Valencia: Editado por/published by Consorci de Museus de la Comunitat Valenciana, 1998); Bernard Goy, "Marina Abramović (interview)," *Journal of Contemporary Art*, June 1990, <http://www.jca-online.com/Abramovic.html>; Kaplan, "Deeper and Deeper," 19; Lynn MacRitchie, "Marina Abramović: Exchanging Energies," *Performance Research* 1, no. 2 (May 1, 1997): 31.

exploring the world's deserts as a specific type of geography. They came out of the Central Desert with a new work, *Gold Found by the Artists* (1981).

***Gold Found by the Artists* (1981)**

Performed in Australia, *Gold Found by the Artists* (Figure 4.3) is the first in a series of similar performances that were intended to encompass 90 days in total, *Nightsea Crossing* (1981-87).²⁸⁶ The initial performance took place at the Art Gallery of New South Wales in 1981. Drawing on their experience of the desert, the couple sat opposite each other in complete stillness. For the length of the gallery day they were seated at the ends of a long, rectangular table with three items placed on its center. In addition to gold nuggets the couple found in the desert with a metal detector were a boomerang and a python snake. They had named the python Zen.²⁸⁷

The duration of the performance was 16 days, during which they would sit in silence looking at each other between the eyes, or in their reflections in the table. Their goal was not to change their positions and not blink. To further challenge, focus, and purify themselves they decided to keep silent and fast for the duration of the performance, breaking their fast for a small serving of an almond, juice, or yogurt in the evening.²⁸⁸ During his fasts, Ulay chose to eat an almond a day in emulation of the Buddha. "That didn't count as breaking the promise of fasting, it was just one almond. The Buddha calls the Middle Path 'one almond a week.'"²⁸⁹

²⁸⁶ The number 90 is a recurring theme in the work. The artists parted, ending their relationship after a 90-day walk towards each other from opposite ends of the Great Wall of China to say goodbye in *The Lovers – The Great Wall Walk* (1988). Abramović's upcoming retrospective performance will also total and seasonal, or circular quarter, of 90 days.

²⁸⁷ Westcott, *When Marina Abramović Dies*, 166.

²⁸⁸ Ibid.; Rus Bojan et al., *Whispers*, 237.

²⁸⁹ Rus Bojan et al., *Whispers*, 234.

The performance took a serious toll on the artists, each lost more than twenty pounds. The immobility produced excruciating pain for them both, which was exceptionally difficult for Ulay. After 12 days, he went to the hospital, where doctors found his spleen was injured by the pressure of his pelvis and ribs on his internal organs.²⁹⁰ Ulay returned to complete the performance, which had different results on their perception than the heat of the desert. Both saw the other's aura, and had expanded states of consciousness described as 360-degree vision and acute hearing.²⁹¹

This work and its title(s) gesture towards alchemical influences, as well as the direct physical experience of the artists. The title *Gold Found by the Artists* refers to literal gold the artists found during their Australian travels, as well as alchemical philosophy. The objective of the alchemical Great Work is comprehensible in both physical and psychical terms—the evolution of base matter into a purer substance. The alchemist intends to turn lead into the gold of the Philosopher's Stone, as well as transform the psyche through the union of opposites, anima and animus, into the Archetypal Self, as described by Jung.

The title, *Nightsea Crossing*, is a specific element of Jung's psychology of the subconscious, a symbol of a journey through the psychological underworld, or a form of oceanic experience of the soul, psyche, or unconscious. The symbologist Juan Eduardo Cirlot details the sources of the night sea crossing of the psyche and its origins in classical literature.

[The expression "Night Sea Crossing"], frequent in works of symbology, originates in the ancient notion of the sun, in its nightly course through the

²⁹⁰ Rus Bojan et al., *Whispers*, 237.

²⁹¹ Abramović, "Marina Abramović- Night Sea Crossing, a Lecture"; Rus Bojan et al., *Whispers*, 237; Westcott, *When Marina Abramović Dies*, 167.

lower abyss where it suffers death. [. . .] This abyss was associated with the watery deeps of the third-or infernal-level, either in the sense of a lower ocean or of a subterranean lake. . . For Jung, this symbol is a kind of Journey into Hell comparable with the journeys described by Virgil and Dante, and also a sort of journey to the Land of the Spirits, or, in other words, a plunge into the unconscious [. . .].²⁹²

This theme or result of transformation showed strongly in Abramović's approach to her work, newly inspired by her experience of her inner life through the stress of the environment on her body. *Gold Found by the Artists, Nightsea Crossing*, as well as two other performance works, *Positive Zero* (1983) and *Vivendus Mundi* (1985) were significantly inspired by the time Abramović and Ulay spent in the Australia's Central Desert. Abramović's time in the desert transformed her approach to art making, resulting in an exploration of the geographies and indigenous cultures of other deserts. As she told Bernard Goy in a 1990 interview,

We explored four deserts which may have influenced our work a lot, the Gobi desert, the Taar desert, the Sahara, and the Central Australian desert.

I teach what I learn. Being in those deserts and being confronted with Aboriginal and Tibetan cultures, I realized what enormous power the body has, and my work should show ways to that power.²⁹³

Abramović's claim that her work should show ways to power resulted in a focus on complete stillness for long periods of time. That practice developed in the searing heat of the Australian outback, where high temperatures immobilized the body and her focus on energy became concentrated in an unblinking gaze. She continues to use this gaze in her performances and workshops in the present. Ulay has put more emphasis on

²⁹² Cirlot, J. C. *Dictionary of Symbols*. Routledge, 1990. 228-9.

²⁹³ Bernard Goy, "Marina Abramović (interview)," *Journal of Contemporary Art*, June 1990, <http://www.jca-online.com/Abramović.html>.

the concrete results of their experience. “The desert conditions you in a certain way, and that leads to a different solution. It puts a concept in you. The desert is extremely hot. You sit, you meditate. You become extremely economic with your energies, empirically and in your mind. Then we just polished and ended up with this work.”²⁹⁴

Vipassana Meditation

The next performance in the series would not take place for nine months. In the interim, the artists travelled to India and learned the Buddhist practice of Vipassana meditation in Bodhgaya. Thomas McEvelley writes their performances were directly influenced by the Burmese tradition of Vipassana.²⁹⁵ Practicing Vipassana in Bodhgaya, India suggests they received instruction in the style of SN Goenka (1925-2013).²⁹⁶ Goenka was a Burmese national of Indian ethnicity who established donation-based centers for the practice of Vipassana around the world.²⁹⁷ At the time of this writing, at Goenka’s Vipassana centers, teachers or assistant teachers lead meditation courses supported by recorded instructions and *dhamma* talks given by Goenka.

Interviews with Ulay provide essential insight into the application and results of Buddhist meditation training that made their new, long duration works possible.

Meditating became a necessity. [. . .] Vipassana is a meditation technique, one of the oldest. What I like about it is that it is also possibly the simplest one, as far as meditation can be simple. A great benefit of having learned Vipassana is having a technique of how to deal with inner or outer sensations, especially when you want to remain motionless under

²⁹⁴ Steven Durland, “From Warriors and Saints to Lovers: Marina Abramović and Ulay,” *High Performance* 9, no. 2 (1986): 54.

²⁹⁵ McEvelley, “Ethics, Esthetics, and Relation in the Work of Marina Abramović and Ulay,” 12.

²⁹⁶ “Vipassana Research Institute,” accessed May 9, 2015, <http://www.vridhamma.org/Home>; “Vipassana Meditation,” accessed May 9, 2015, <https://www.dhamma.org/en-US/index>.

²⁹⁷ There are no other Vipassana centers in Bodhgaya. The city is the location where Siddhartha Gautama attained enlightenment, and is a center of Buddhist pilgrimage and practice for many global traditions.

the critical eye of observers. Unavoidably you get pain, and you can control pain.²⁹⁸

Ulay's description of Vipassana focuses on the method of controlling pain, which is achieved through the process of dispassionate observation. Cultivated detachment in the form of equanimity allows the meditator to move through experiences of pain and purify karmas, or the mental state, by not reacting to negative sensations and thoughts with aversion. In the contemporary Vipassana technique of retreat, fasting is not encouraged, but complete stillness is a requirement for meditation periods of a single hour at a time.²⁹⁹

Abramović's biographer James Westcott summarizes their training, which is similar to courses given in a number of Vipassana traditions, many of which have been influenced by Goenka's teacher, Burmese civil servant Sayagyi U Ba Khin (1899-1971).³⁰⁰ "The meditation involved fasting and reducing their activities to fundamentals: sitting, standing, lying, walking—all done in contemplative slow motion, the better to observe and conquer their distracting thought patterns." These four activities are the primary activities of the human body.³⁰¹ In the "Mahā Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta" (Great Discourse on the Establishing of Awareness, 5th century BCE), the primary discourse on meditation, the Buddha taught the importance of continuity of conscious, intentional

²⁹⁸ Rus Bojan et al., *Whispers*, 234.

²⁹⁹ These comments are based on my own experience of Vipassana meditation in the same tradition. Since the year 2000, I have participated in more than 10 retreats, or courses, and practiced thousands of hours of Vipassana meditation.

³⁰⁰ The courses have changed over the decades. Westcott description reflects practices and texts, which are taught after beginning meditators, have sat for 3-5 courses. U Ba Khin learned Vipassana from the monk and scholar Ledi Sayadaw.

³⁰¹ Joseph Goldstein, *The Experience of Insight: A Simple and Direct Guide to Buddhist Meditation*, Reissue edition (Boulder, Colo.: New York: Shambhala, 1987).

observation and awareness during all these activities.³⁰² This was the primary technique taught by the historical Buddha to achieve liberation from suffering, or enlightenment.

In *Gold Found by the Artists* and *Nightsea Crossing*, the artists practiced a very demanding form of immobility, far more challenging than a conventional retreat. The pain observed in a single hour of meditating in complete stillness can be quite intense, and was made exponentially more demanding by the strictures of their performance demanding several hours of stillness at a time. Altered states of conscious achieved while fasting and undertaking such a strict practice took a toll on the relationship, as Ulay's thin body and fast metabolism resulted in a tremendous amount of discomfort. The challenges of the performance, both physical and social, sometimes erupted in arguments.³⁰³ Still, in 1983, Ulay was satisfied with the artistic results of the work. "Motionless is the best thing I've done. It synthesizes everything. It is the homework."³⁰⁴

The positive results of the meditation can be a complete dissolution of the physically coarse, or anatomically specific experience of the body, which opens up to experiences of subtle vibration, which is peaceful and tranquil in body and mind. The term describing this experience of dissolution in Pali is *bhaṅga*, which Goenka teaches is the awareness of subatomic particles.³⁰⁵ As Abramović described, "all the pain

³⁰² "Mahasatipatthana Sutta - The Great Discourse on the Establishing of Awareness," accessed May 9, 2015, <http://www.tipitaka.org/stp-pali-eng-parallel>.

³⁰³ Westcott, *When Marina Abramović Dies*, 171.

³⁰⁴ Thomas McEvelley, "Marina and Ulay/Ulay and Marina," in *Art, Love, Friendship: Marina Abramović and Ulay Together & Apart*, 1st ed (Kingston, N.Y: McPherson & Co, 2010), 44; T. McEvelley, "Marina Abramović/Ulay," *ARTFORUM (U.S.A.)* 22, no. 1 (September 1983): 52–55.

³⁰⁵ SN Goenka, "Discourses on Satipatthana Sutta," *Vipassana Research Institute*, accessed May 9, 2015, <http://www.vridhamma.org/Discourses-on-Satipatthana-Sutta>.

disappears and the body is like a shell and you're really free inside."³⁰⁶ It was from this basis of training and purifying the mind that the couple pursued their years long series of performances, *Nightsea Crossing*. These performances were of such great importance to Abramović's work that she based her performance at her 2010 MoMA retrospective on them.³⁰⁷

Nightsea Crossing (1982-87)

With the benefits and insights they gained from learning Vipassana, Abramović and Ulay embarked on a series of performances that would last for the next six years. Including the Australian performance, from 1981 until 1987, the pair performed *Nightsea Crossing* 22 times on four continents (Figure 4.4). They introduced symbolic variables onto the table that separated them, intended to represent the energy they embodied in the performance. In some locations, they included additional items as a part of an installation. The site-specific nature of the work, never performed for less than one day resulted in great variety of conditions. Thomas McEvelley details the importance of architectural space to the work, emphasizing an interest in "grand classical forms."³⁰⁸ McEvelley's analysis attends to the concerns of theatre and Abramović/Ulay's attack on the proscenium arch, while recognizing the integrity of the performance required the institution of limits or barriers preventing intervention and approach by the public.³⁰⁹ Similar challenges to maintaining the integrity of the tableaux aesthetic of stillness attended the 2010 performance *The Artist is Present*. These limits came to constitute a ritual space for the performance blurring boundaries between art and religion by

³⁰⁶ Westcott, *When Marina Abramović Dies*, 171.

³⁰⁷ Abramović, "Marina Abramović- Night Sea Crossing, a Lecture."

³⁰⁸ McEvelley, "Marina and Ulay/Ulay and Marina," 45.

³⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, 46.

delimiting physical boundaries and undertaking meditative and ascetic actions within them.

In Toronto, Canada (Figure 4.5) and Ushimado, Japan, they performed outside. The built environment of a public square was a challenging space in which to perform, for Abramović. The exposure to the elements and the urban environment was markedly different from the climatological intensities of desert geography where they developed their aesthetic of stillness. In response to a dream Ulay had, boundaries between the natural landscape and built environment were blurred in Ushimado.. Instead of performing in an institutional context, a rectangular pit was dug in the ground with a table and chairs sculpted out of the earth.³¹⁰ The score of the complete series of performances follows,

Nightsea Crossing

Presence.

Being present, over long stretches of time,
 Until presence falls from
 Material to immaterial, from
 Form to formless, from
 Instrumental to mental, from
 Time to Timeless³¹¹

Performance.

We are sitting motionless at either end of a rectangular table facing each other, out profiles turned towards the audience.

Time of the performance.

Most museums of the world are open from 10 am to 5pm. We decided to sit the entire opening time of the museum (7 hours).

The audience never witnesses the beginning or end of the performance.

Duration of the performance.

This depends on the different locations. Minimum one day, maximum sixteen.

³¹⁰ Abramović, *Marina Abramović*, 1998, 265.

³¹¹ *Artist Body*, 258.

Conditions of the performance.

During the entire period in which the performance takes place both inside and outside the museum we remain silent and completely abstain from food only consuming water.

Performance installation.

1 mahogany table, 210cm by 90cm by 81cm (30 years old) without any metal parts, 2 armchairs (neither comfortable nor uncomfortable).

Colors.

We dressed ourselves for each *Nightsea Crossing* performance in different color combinations of clothes according to the Vedic square.

Example:

Ulay/Marina

Red/Blue

Yellow/Green

Dark Violet/Light violet

Red/Orange

Black/Black

White/White

List of Objects.

Sometimes in the *Nightsea Crossing* we used different objects.

List of Objects on the Table.

250 gram gold nuggets found by us in the Australian Desert

an Aboriginal boomerang covered in 24 carat gold leaf

a living python

a piece of clear quartz

a pair of Chinese scissors

a small boat made of white paper

an unbaked clay elephant tied to the table with pieces of string

List of Objects in the Space.

4 Aboriginal boomerangs

12 golden spears

A drinking fountain with a gold leaf floating in the water for the public to drink

church bell ³¹²

³¹² *Artist Body*, 259.

The artists were presenting themselves as museum and gallery objects no different from paintings or sculpture—a living embodiment of art that reflected the same static values of the familiar conventions of art institutions. Abramović described the work,

We found new energy for performance, but now less physical and much more mental. We came from the Aborigines with this idea for the *Nightsea Crossing* piece, in which we just sat for long periods of time opposite each other at a table in the museum. Nobody would see us start or end the performance.

When the public arrived in the museum, we were already there. When they left, we were still there. So they would see this image with no beginning, no end. The difference between us and the object in the museum is that the objects have another kind of energy, a static energy, but we have a live energy.

And that was really the answer to the '80s. Working with the body, but with the mental area, opened in a different way.³¹³

The colors and objects that completed the table, chairs and costumed presence of the artists all had significance drawn from non-Western cultures. Vedic, or tantric numerology informed the selection of colors, as well as having deeper significance. These choices imbued their experience with aesthetic specificity, as well as deep symbolic meaning intended to cultivate certain states of energy, which they experienced and intended to affect viewers as well.

During the late 1970s, Marina had become involved with the tantric teacher Harish Johari in Amsterdam through her friendship with writer and artist Louwrien Wijers. Wijers and Abramović shared an interest in esoteric knowledge and Eastern philosophy, deepening her knowledge of Hindu and Buddhist mysticism. Johari would stay with Wijers while teaching in Holland and introduced Abramović to numerology, a

³¹³ Kaplan, “Deeper and Deeper,” 13.

practice she has continued to use consistently in her life, making numerological readings for others.³¹⁴

The numbers and the related colors in *Nightsea Crossing* have detailed significance, which Ulay remembered with detailed specificity more than twenty years later.

We were fascinated by numerology, by the number seven and the number three. The whole *Nightsea Crossing* event and performance was based on the number three. The table was based on the number three; ninety days, the entire non-consecutive duration of the performance was based on the number three, and the numbers were based on Vedic numerology. The Vedic square from one to nine, indicates that every number has particular color, referring to a particular organ, referring to astrology, referring to a particular metal, referring to a particular mandala, a mantra, etc. So the colors we were wearing—the clothes were custom made for us in India—referred to the Vedic square numerology. [. . .] The colors we wore on each occasion were also linked to the date and the place.³¹⁵

While the subtleties of the numerological significance did not have documented observable influence on the reception of the work, the artists' intentions and approach to executing the performance depended on influences from diverse global sources and forms of religion. While fundamentally syncretic, the performance was produced via a series of specific conditions that can be described as ritualistic in structure, without emulating the obvious forms of religious ritual. The organization of Vipassana retreats, which developed their ability to sit for several hours a day without moving, is highly ritualized in form and pedagogy, or method of transmission of the technique of meditation. By taking their seats and remaining in a specific orientation with cultivated states of mind,

³¹⁴ Westcott, *When Marina Abramović Dies*, 116.

³¹⁵ Rus Bojan et al., *Whispers*, 237–238. Abramović continues to teach elements of this material in her workshops (San Diego, 2015), as well as draw in the color scheme in performances including *The House with the Ocean View* (2002). Three is associated with the planet Jupiter, gold, yellow topaz, Thursday, and various professions and psychological qualities. See, Johari, Harish. *Numerology: With Tantra, Ayurveda, and Astrology*. Rochester, Vt.: Destiny Books, 1990.

Abramović and Ulay did not emulate a retreat environment, but intended to affect the viewer with specific experiences of energy based on the presence of their bodies and concentration abilities. In the Vipassana tradition, these efforts support meditative awareness of others. Groups of people meditating together are expected to transmit, or share the strength of their practice with others, merely by their presence. Abramović and Ulay created an art ritual based on similar assumptions, which they enacted all over the globe.

Unlike the objects that filled the other galleries, the Abramović/Ulay's performances referred explicitly to cultivation of psychological transformation. Their performance invoked the experience of the subconscious, a less than visible, yet always present reality that lurks below awareness of social experience and enduringly informs it. The practice of Vipassana meditation allowed the artists to maintain their unmoving positions, but the psychology they referred to was not Buddhist psychology of the *Abhidhamma*. Instead, the alchemically-oriented analytical psychology of Carl Jung informed the title of the work.

Based on their experience of the desert, it is possible to formulate their desert crossings as a night sea from which they emerged with a new practice. The night sea is also the space they inhabited as performers, a social sculpture of embodied silence representing the foundations of Buddhist practice—noble silence of body, speech, and mind—interrupted or intruded upon by the passage of thoughts arising from the subconscious to the conscious mind like waves, manifesting as sensations both sublime and agonizing.

I describe the performance of *Nightsea Crossing* (Figure 4.6) as a religious ritual in anthropological terms. Drawing on several key scholars of anthropology, including Levi-Strauss, Mauss, Malinowski, and Turner – philosopher and anthropologist Marcel Hénaff has developed seven necessary factors describing religious ritual.

Conditions Describing Religious Ritual

1. Spatial
2. Temporal
3. Corporeal
3. Decorum
5. Equalization
6. Public Action
7. Procedural³¹⁶

In their performances, the installation of furniture and objects in a repetitious, itinerant form of place making established the *spatial* conditions of religious ritual. An emphasis on the architectural elements of the space aestheticized the spatial elements of the performances that ranged widely, including conventional contemporary museum galleries, ornate interiors, a deconsecrated religious building, a public plaza and an outdoor venue sunk into the earth. The *temporal* element of the ritual structure of their performances was determined by the hours of operation of the exhibition venue, most often a museum. Over the course of a single day or multiple days, *Nightsea Crossing* was ritually constrained by temporal conditions of secular institutions, complicating the function of the space with the ritualistic nature of the work. The restrictive and ascetic elements of the performance were exceptionally demanding on the artists, who observed the meditative discipline of complete stillness, while engaging in an ascetic practice of fasting. These *corporeal* elements formalized the religious dimensions of ritual as an

³¹⁶ This theory of ritual comes from Dr. Marcel Hénaff's 2009 seminar "Secularization. Beyond Political Theology and the Disenchantment of the World," given at the University of California, San Diego.

embodied practice through reduction of activity, rather than performative gestures that actively communicated the religiosity of their practice.

The artists further developed the religious ritual structure in Henaff's terms by way of their *decorum*, through their presentation in specific color-coded dress and observation of complete silence. Silence is a form of decorum that disciplines the corporeal, simultaneously integrating two conditions of ritual. A form of *equalization* between the artists was established by their symmetrical presence at the table. While not including the viewers within the work formally, the location of the performance was conducted as a *public action*, displaying the rite in open view of the public. Their interest in including the public in the mental state they cultivated expanded the intention of the ritual to more subtle forms of public action and equalization. Lastly, the procedural elements of Hénaff's conditions of religious ritual were established by the formal temporal, spatial, and corporeal discipline—establishing this performance, by anthropological methods, within the realm of ritual in the realm of religion. These conditions also describe the performative elements of their transcultural aesthetics, which remain central to Abramović's practice in the 21st century.

Transcultural Aesthetics

In the catalogue of their travels and collaborations including Australia and *Nightsea Crossing*, titled *Modus Vivendi*, Abramović/Ulay selected a handful of texts to expand the cultural dimensions of their practice. Their choices connect their experience of the desert and meditation to other cultural contexts and complete the transcultural transmission into an intracultural aesthetic of stillness.

You don't need to leave your room.
 Remain sitting at your table and listen.
 Don't even listen, simply wait.
 Don't even wait.
 Be quiet, still and solitary.
 The world will freely offer itself to you.
 To be unmasked, it has no choice.
 It will roll in ecstasy at your feet

—Franz Kafka³¹⁷

In addition to the Australian influence, the Buddhist cultures of India, Burma, and Tibet were present in the aesthetic of the work. Ulay and Abramović's interest in Tibetan Buddhism was made the focus of other performances including *Nightsea Crossing*, *Conjunction* and *Positive Zero*. The documentation of these works includes an excerpt from an interview of the Dalai Lama discussing the topic of *sunyata* (Sanskrit, emptiness). This text is of such great significance to the work that Abramović included it in a later publication, as well as in the catalogue for *Modus Vivendi*.³¹⁸

This series of performances moved Abramović away from the ritualistic pursuit of the body's limits, and into the realm of performance practice as religious ritual. No longer limited by the capacity of their bodies, Abramović and Ulay's performance was restricted by discipline. By reducing the formal components on the performative level to stillness and gazing and the aesthetic experience to representation of co-presence, *Nightsea Crossing* brought intersubjectivity to the fore as the primary subject of performance.

Aesthetically, this tableaux, or performance of stillness can be understood as the most abstract of performances, within the Greenbergian formalist framework introduced

³¹⁷ Debbaut, *Modus Vivendi*, 37.

³¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 75–77; Abramović, *Marina Abramović*, 272–273.

earlier. While the presence of clothing and objects did inflect the perception of the body differently, in the context of austere meditation practice and duration of the performance, the abstract nature of the performance became more intensely communicated by way of stillness than in the *Relation Works*. In their attention to meditation practice as a foundation of the performance after the experience of desert climate, new approaches to understanding their aesthetics are valuable. Aesthetics is a philosophy of the senses, not reason. Performance art emphasizes the somatic sensory experience of subject and object, observer and observed, to a degree beyond any of the plastic arts. This marks the body as the site of aesthetic communication and experience that is made more profoundly dynamic, vivified by the intersubjective medium of the body in performance.

Looking to non-Western aesthetic approaches to consider *Nightsea Crossing*, the rasaesthetics of performance scholar Richard Schechner comes to the fore as appropriate to their approach. Drawing on the *Natyashastra* (dated 1st century BCE to 3rd century CE), an Indian aesthetics of performance by Bharatamuni, and important commentaries by the prolific 10th century Kashmiri tantric philosopher Abhinavagupta, Schechner has developed an approach to performance practice that emphasizes the body in sensory terms that foregrounds an alternative, non-specular model of aesthetic experience. The visual nature of performance is not underemphasized, but deemphasized. Rasaesthetics develops from the meaning of the word *rasa*, which is gustatory, having relation to the words *taste*, *flavor*, and *juice* in Sanskrit.

Schechner emphasizes the bodily experience of the audience, which is subject to experiences of bliss when exposed to works of art that reflect rasaesthetics. Schechner summarizes his theory with regard to observers, “Rasic performance values immediacy

over distance, savoring over judgment. Its paradigmatic activity is a sharing between performers and partakers (a more accurate term than ‘audiences’ or ‘spectators,’ words that privilege ear or eye).”³¹⁹ He explicitly differentiates Indian aesthetic theory from Greek performance theory found in Aristotle’s *Poetics* (4th century BCE), a distinction made by scholars seeking to develop aesthetic theory that is not dependent on, or subject to the foundations or limitations of classical Greek philosophy.

As performers and partakers in the context of *Nightsea Crossing*, bodies were exposed to an experiment in energy, or co-presence. The artists’ interest in attempting to change the behavior of the partakers with their meditative presence allies their intentions with the rasaesthetics of Indian performance. While their actions lay far outside the performance arts traditionally informed by the *Natyashastra*, Schechner’s approach to rasaesthetics forms a key link to performance art, as well as the symbolic accoutrement and numerological organization of the performance in space and time, which are explicitly tantric.

In addition to the tantric aesthetics of esoteric philosophy, the artists deployed the role of the performer as a partaker of their own actions, which is central to Schechner’s Indian influenced theory of performance. He elaborates this experience with the term *abhinaya*, “Abhinaya literally means to lead the performance to the spectators, and the first spectator is the performer herself. If the self-who-is-observing is moved by the self-who-is-performing the performance will be a success.”³²⁰ As a meditative performance created with the intent to transform the behavior of the audience to a state more like that

³¹⁹ Schechner, “Rasaesthetics,” 31.

³²⁰ *Ibid.*, 46.

of the performers, *Nightsea Crossing* is an example of Contemporary performance art that embodies successful rasaesthetic values.³²¹ Abhinaya is an experience that Abramović has continued to develop in her best-known performances of the 21st century.

By arresting their movement to allowing themselves and others to see the “formless form” of their bodies as temporary sculptures, Abramović/Ulay performed a minimalist model of Buddhist thought in terms of temporality, aesthetics, and meditation. The performance of stillness is, in fact, a volitional action magnifying the possibility of understanding a complex representation of impermanence through the appearance of its opposite, an event which is ‘nothing’ but sitting.³²² In their silent meditation, Abramović and Ulay brought the central elements of Buddhist aesthetics out of their careful observation of their own experiences of mind and body in the Australian desert. From this insight, they developed *Nightsea Crossing*, a performance of long duration uniting transcultural experience and knowledge into an aesthetic that emphasizes the intracultural understanding that is their aesthetic.

Abramović experienced heightened states of consciousness achieved through extended practice, resulting in perception of auric fields including “360 degree vision,” and acute awareness of smell, particularly the scent of other bodies. Having developed an appreciation for what Abramović described as the inborn sensual acuity and “telepathic” abilities of the Aboriginal people of the desert; Abramović, and presumably

³²¹ Schechner ends his article with reference to Contemporary performance artists and practices that revel in bodily functions, which “elide differences between the interior and the exterior; to emphasize permeability and porosity; to explore the sexual, the diseased, the excretory, the wet, and the smelly. Performances used blood, semen, spit, shit, urine-as well as food, paint, plastics, and other stuff drawn from the ‘literal’ rather than the ‘make believe.’ On the surface, this work is not very Asian, but at an underlying theoretical level, it is extremely rasic.” *Nightsea Crossing* is arguably more Asian and less literal in its rasaesthetic, by way of its presentation of Asian cultural forms in an art context. Ibid., 47.

³²² Inada, “The Buddhist Aesthetic Nature.”

Ulay, drew the conclusion that Tibetan Buddhism offers a similar, deep understanding of embodied consciousness developed through practice. From this perception of the similar perception and consciousness of the Aboriginal and Tibetan Buddhist peoples, the artists developed a unique performance in the *Nightsea* series titled *Conjunction*.³²³

Nightsea Crossing: Conjunction (1983)³²⁴

Nightsea Crossing: Conjunction (Figure 4.7) is the best-known work in the *Nightsea* series, and represents a significant event in the transculturation of religion across geographically determined cultures and the once unified but presently separated categories of art and religion. By bringing together people from cultures that had no prior contacts, both with great investment in dreaming.³²⁵ Through the performance of co-presence as intentional practice, *Conjunction*'s deployment of intimate alterity and intercorporeality mark art practice as a location of transculturation, and the body as its site.

Conjunction

For this piece we invite a Tibetan Lama and an Aboriginal from the Central Australian Desert to perform with us.

We construct a round table (diameter: 4 meters) for the occasion covered with pure gold leaf.

³²³ Abramović, "Marina Abramović- Night Sea Crossing, a Lecture."

³²⁴ This section draws on my conference paper "Abramović|Ulay's *Night Sea Crossing*: 'Conjunction' and the Transculturation of the Sacred." Delivered at *Art+Religion*, Max and Iris Stern International Symposium 4. Musée d'art Contemporain de Montréal/Concordia University, Montreal, Canada, April 15-17, 2010.

³²⁵ Zhenji Zhang, *Six Yogas of Naropa & Teachings on Mahamudra* (Ithaca, N.Y., USA: Snow Lion Publications, 1986), 88-94; Louise Child, *Tantric Buddhism and Altered States of Consciousness* (Aldershot, England; Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2007), <http://public.eblib.com/choice/publicfullrecord.aspx?p=438589>; W. Y. Evans-Wentz, ed., *Tibetan Yoga and Secret Doctrines, Or, Seven Books of Wisdom of the Great Path, according to the Late Lama Kazi Dawa-Samdup's English Rendering*, 2nd ed (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), -; Lynne Hume, *Ancestral Power: The Dreaming, Consciousness and Aboriginal Australians* (Carlton South, Victoria, Australia: Melbourne University Press, 2002); Jean A. Ellis, *This Is the Dreaming: Australian Aboriginal Legends* (North Blackburn, Vic: Collins Dove, 1994).

Performance

with Watuma Tarraru Tjungurrayi
Ngawang Soepa Lueyar

In a given space.

In the center of a large dome of a former Lutheran church a gilded round table is installed. Around the table in the directions north, south, east and west, four seats are placed.

Four participants are seated on each of the seats and remain motionless, silent. The first sitting starts at sunrise and lasts four hours. The second sitting starts the next day at noon and lasts four hours. The third sitting begins the third day at sunset and lasts for four hours. The fourth sitting starts at midnight on the fourth day and lasts for four hours.

Duration:

Four days
April, 1983
Sonesta Koepelzaal, Museum Fodor
Amsterdam ³²⁶

Again, in the reference to the Nightsea, the title *Conjunction* underscores Jungian themes, marking the coming together as a psychical, physical, and sociocultural event of embodied transculturation. While not explicitly identified anywhere in extant literature, it is plausible that Jung's last Great Work, *Mysterium conjunctionis. An inquiry into the separation and synthesis of psychic opposites in alchemy* informs this work.³²⁷

The alchemical union of *Nightsea Crossing Conjunction* draws on religious forms across cultures of minority, colonized, and exiled participants to represent an aesthetic of recognition based on presence, attention, and awareness. These forms accomplish the enactment of the transnational and transcultural in *Nightsea Crossing Conjunction*, in particular, representing a "space of exchange and participation wherever processes of

³²⁶ *Artist Body*, 288.

³²⁷ C. G Jung, *Mysterium Conjunctionis: An Inquiry into the Separation and Synthesis of Psychic Opposites in Alchemy* (London; New York: Routledge; Columbia U.P., 1974).

hybridization occur, and where it is still possible for cultures to be produced and performed without necessary mediation by the center.”³²⁸ While it can be argued the museum curators, and European artists constitute a center of mediation, the emphasis on bodily presence negates the question of mediation, reducing the process of hybridization to similarity in difference—human presence.

In his introduction to *Transnational Transcendence*, Thomas Csordas presents a theoretical framework for articulating the specific form of transculturation of religion within *Conjunction* and other important works in Abramović’s oeuvre.³²⁹ While the globalization of Tibetan Buddhism and Aboriginal painting can be associated with the globalization of religion, I assert that *Nightsea Crossing Conjunction* is an exceptional example of an event of pan-indigenous transculturation through disciplined co-presence of different religious and cultural traditions, presented by Abramović/Ulay as art (Figure 4.6). These conditions also fulfill Henaff’s clearly articulated conditions for religious ritual.³³⁰ *Nightsea Crossing Conjunction* fulfills these conditions, emphasizing the practical and performative similarities between cultures and religious traditions in an art context. This doubling, or layering, of aesthetic and religious content was further underscored by the location of the performance—Museum Fodor in Amsterdam, which is a deconsecrated church.

The organization of the participants along spatiotemporal axes of the compass and diurnal motion, the double significance of the church as museum, as well as the spherical

³²⁸ Lionnet and Shih, *Minor Transnationalism*, 5.

³²⁹ T. J. Csordas, “Introduction: Modalities of Transnational Transcendence,” *Anthropological Theory* 7, no. 3 (September 2007): 259–72, doi:10.1177/1463499607080188; Thomas J. Csordas, ed., *Transnational Transcendence* (University of California Press, 2009).

³³⁰ Csordas, *Transnational Transcendence*; Csordas, “Introduction.”

dome and circular table reiterated the ritual religious nature of the space, the practice, and the participants—in intercorporeal exchange. Each living person embodied the arrival, coming together and exchange of cultures. The ecumenical practice of simple sitting and gazing underscores and makes possible the argument that this performance is a specific example of the transculturation of religion, without resorting to syncretism. Ulay described the meeting of Tjungurrayi and Lueyar,

As soon as Rinpoche saw Watuma, he was completely taken by him. He felt something instantly, yet didn't even come close to him. Later on I asked the translator why that was, and he said that he perceived Watuma as a highly enlightened person. He saw him as Milarepa, the great Tibetan saint.³³¹

In her retrospective analysis of documentation, Abramović noted the spatial markers of each participant as they related to their spiritual mode or development. The two Europeans were photographed against equally discordant, contrasting, grid-like, geometric backgrounds. The Lama is visible against a pure black field with a small exit sign above his head, and Tungurrayi is seen as simply, surrounded by an unbroken field of deep black (space).³³²

As there was no shared or established tradition, but that of performance art, *Nightsea Crossing Conjunction* blurs and challenges the boundaries of art and religion. This is further complicated by the fact that the performance took place in the context of numerous ritualized performances totaling 90 days. The boundaries of art and life were challenged by Abramović and Ulay, and as a result, their intentions for transformation, *Night Sea Crossing Conjunction* constitutes an instance of re-Enchantment or the post-

³³¹ Rus Bojan et al., *Whispers*, 410.

³³² Abramović, "Marina Abramović- Night Sea Crossing, a Lecture."

secular in Contemporary art, while also creating a work that can be understood as a transculturation of body practices through religious and avant-garde methods, simultaneously.

Conclusion

Of their collaborative works, *Nightsea Crossing* best exemplifies the need for the expansion of art history's methodological and geographic boundaries in favor of a Nameless Science. In my effort to unify the anthropological, geographic, philosophical and religious the investigation of the image which obsessed Warburg I find a contemplative object in the body at the interstice between art and religion posed by Abramović and Ulay's meditation. The series of performances *Nightsea Crossing* defines a key period in performance art, where the practice and representation of spiritual traditions from other cultures were seamlessly integrated into the context of the museum world of objects and the rise of postmodern aesthetics. Their use of Indic symbolism and religious practices before and during the development of the work defined this innovative approach to performance, which provides a source of formal and performative influence on Abramović's art practice in the present.

The experience of transnational and transcultural geographies lured the couple into multiple deserts and set their experience of Australia apart as a profound formative influence on their aesthetic. Ulay's understanding this was some of his best work, and Abramović's use of its aesthetic in the present defines *Nightsea Crossing* as a work of greater lasting significance than has been recognized. The intensity of the *Relation Works* and the romantic eroticism that fueled them evolved into a spiritually subdued and more challenging period of mastery of mind and body.

Notably, both Abramović and Ulay recognized this extended period of still eye-gazing, over a period of years, with its fasting and total engagement produced an experience of intercorporeality that slowly eroded their relationship. As Ulay said, “Never sit too long with a woman together at one table!”³³³ Over a long period of ascetic performance defined by endurance meditation, fasting, celibacy, and silence, their love affair and working partnership turned to adultery, conflict, and hate. Even so, during this years long period they planned their last Great Work, *The Lovers –The Great Wall Walk*, eventually parting instead of performing the Great Marriage they had originally intended.

³³³ Rus Bojan et al., *Whispers*, 238.

Chapter Five: Across a Great Divide — *The Great Wall Walk*

Travel is a demand we make upon ourselves to be our own home.

—Marina Abramović³³⁴

Those parts of the wall left standing abandoned in particular regions could easily be destroyed again and again by the nomads, especially by those back then who, worried about the building of the wall, changed their place of residence with incredible speed, like grasshoppers, and thus perhaps had an even better overall view of how the construction was proceeding than we did, the people who built it.

—Franz Kafka “The Great Wall of China”³³⁵

While travelling the desolate outback along a 3,300-mile long dingo fence that cordoned off the sheep of southwest Australia, Ulay began to think of the Great Wall of China. From that thought in 1981, Marina Abramović and Ulay began to plan a performance, taking their nomadic style of movement to China. There they intended to create a performance where they would walk towards each other from opposite ends of a monumental divide, meet in the middle, and marry.³³⁶ Over the course of the next seven years, after completing ninety days of *Nightsea Crossing* performances, arduous negotiations with the Chinese government, and the breakdown of their relationship, they finally embarked on their *Great Wall Walk*. Instead of meeting in the middle and marrying, on June 27, 1988 they would end their personal and professional partnership, and not speak to each other for the next ten years.

³³⁴ von Drathen, “World Unity: Dream or Reality—A Question of Survival,” 234.

³³⁵ Franz Kafka, “The Great Wall of China,” trans. Ian Johnston, *Franz Kafka Online*, accessed March 31, 2011, <http://www.kafka-online.info/the-great-wall-of-china.html>.

³³⁶ Westcott, *When Marina Abramović Dies*, 158, 163–164.

From the foundation of their meditation practice, they undertook a practice of walking, one of the four elements of human embodied experience observed in Buddhist meditation. In prior works, they had performed sitting, standing, lying down, and walking. In *Relation in Space*, the first of their *Relation Works*, Abramović and Ulay walked toward each other, meeting in a center, colliding again and again repetitiously for an hour. The Walk of the Wall expanded the same experience of walking towards each other into a monumental gesture of extremely long duration and global geographic scale.³³⁷ The artists made the simplicity of the action sublime by the scale of the path and the effort needed to complete it (Figure 5.1). Ulay did not view it as a performance, but as an action or event, something beyond the realm of performance.³³⁸ In their minds, the Walk also represented their ambulation over the sensitive energy of the earth itself. The pair was interested in the Wall's mythology, a belief it could be seen from space and the lines of its path were divined by geomancers—the dragon in the earth.³³⁹

The walk was the result of careful planning, composed of many dreams and ideals, complex negotiations, all of which would end in results completely different from those envisioned. Their final creative result was an exhibition presented in Holland as *The Lovers*, a title that highlighted the ideals and the reality of who they had been, not who they had become. In China, Abramović would face a new sort of art making experience, one where there was no art public to receive her efforts. As in *Nightsea Crossing*, their goals took precedence over the toll they took on their relationship.

³³⁷ Throughout this chapter, I follow McEvelley and capitalize Walk to identify Abramović and Ulay's *Great Wall Walk* as an action and artwork.

³³⁸ Rus Bojan et al., *Whispers*, 277.

³³⁹ C. Carr, *On Edge: Performance at the End of the Twentieth Century*, Rev. ed (Middletown, Conn: Wesleyan University Press, 2008), 30; William Furlong, "Audio Arts: Volume 7 No 4," accessed June 11, 2015, <http://www.tate.org.uk/audio-arts/volume-7/number-4>.

During the Walk which became *The Lovers*, the ambitions, strictures, and ideals of the project were transformed by the new cultural context in which they intended to create their art. In the complex environment of an unfamiliar country and forbidding terrain, circumstances forced them to adapt to realities they had not faced before.

I trace this project along multiple registers with attention to the complex networks of cross-cultural contact, critical observers, and the artists' images and projects related to the Walk. The artists were surrounded by Chinese officials and guides through whom they were exposed to the people of the country. Closer were the critics who accompanied them and brought the spectator's eye of the art public to the work, writing and reporting their experiences.³⁴⁰ Last, are the artists, with attention to Abramović and the work she made after the Walk to communicate her experience in art contexts. Film director Murray Grigor, recreated the Walk with the artists for British television channel BBC 4.³⁴¹ In the poetic, quasi-documentary film, *The Great Wall: Lovers at the Brink* (1988) each appeared to walk in complete solitude, rarely meeting locals, but intently fixed on their journeys.

A work of major significance for both political reasons and the profound endurance required for the 90-day performance, *The Great Wall Walk* is a work made in China that is impossible to characterize as tourism. Nor is it a part of an indigenous or diasporic practice that can be described as Chinese Contemporary art as a result of its geography. In the conclusion to his key essay "Great Walk Talk," McEvelley positions the practice of the pair as "tourism" despite the careful attention of governmental

³⁴⁰ Thomas McEvelley, "Great Walk Talk," in *Art, Love, Friendship: Marina Abramović and Ulay Together & Apart*, 1st ed (Kingston, N.Y: McPherson & Co, 2010), 74.

³⁴¹ Westcott, *When Marina Abramović Dies*.

approval and support in their travels in Australia and China. He foregrounds the “delectation of artist as connoisseur, selecting and aestheticizing elements of foreign cultures.”³⁴² In light of Abramović and Ulay’s efforts to sustain their performance practice during their nomadic travels, and the extensive diplomatic apparatus needed to complete *The Great Wall Walk*, it is necessary to position the artists not as tourists or members of the leisure class, but as workers.

In historic and social context, the position that Abramović and Ulay have held are not tourists, but closer to that of migrant laborers and diplomats moving from place to place, supporting themselves with various types of financial support from arts organizations, being remunerated for their performances.³⁴³ As a product of geographies, social relations, and aesthetics that transcend conventional boundaries of nations, landscape and categories of art, *The Great Wall Walk* is paradigmatic of global Contemporary art in its resistance to confinement within narrower schemes of classification.

The Lovers

“The earth is small and blue.
I am a little crack in it.”

Huang Xiang, 2nd Century³⁴⁴
Confessions of the Great Wall

“Seen from up here.
The earth is small and blue.”

Yuri Gagarin, First Astronaut

³⁴² McEvelley’s summation is an excellent description of his approach to the visual and literary arts of China as represented and cited in his key essay. McEvelley, “Great Walk Talk,” 151.

³⁴³ During their five years living a nomadic lifestyle Abramović knitted her own sweaters and did farm work for money, including milking goats.

³⁴⁴ The poem is dated 1971, Huang Xiang (1941-).

**The Lovers
The Great
Wall Walk**

At a chosen location.

Performance.

We walked the entire length of the Great Wall of China.

We started on March 30, 1988.

I started walking from the eastern end of the Wall at Shan Hai Guan, on the shores of the Yellow Sea, Gulf of Bohai, walking westward.

Ulay started walking at the western end of the Wall, at Jai Yu Guan, the south-western periphery of the Gobi Desert, walking eastward.

We walked until we met.

After we both continuously walked for 90 days, we met at Er Lang Shan, in Shen Mu, Shaanxi province.

Duration: 90 days
March-June, 1988
The Great Wall of China³⁴⁵

The Meaning of the Wall:

Global Geographies of Scale and Chinese Cultural Identity

The importance of the Wall to Chinese culture is significant, but it is fractured and constructed in parts as the Wall itself. Originating in the Qin Dynasty (221-206 bce), which gives China its name, the Great Wall of China is a series of intersecting and noncontiguous borders and fortifications (Figure 5.2). The image of the Wall in the global understanding is best typified by the imposing scale of the Ming Dynasty (1368-

³⁴⁵ Abramović, *Marina Abramović*, 1998, 298.

1644) wall, which differs greatly from the rammed earth, tamarisk and clay walls of the Han Dynasty (202 bce-220 ce) slowly eroding in Gansu province and the Gobi Desert of western China. Built over 2,000 years, the many long walls of China hold different places in the global imagination, mainly focused on the walls of the Ming Dynasty. While western scholars attribute great geographic significance to the Wall, Chinese humanist geographer Yifu Tuan relegates it to two brief references in his geography of China.³⁴⁶ Historian Arthur Waldron states, “The Wall for me was as close to being a part of China’s natural geography as any man-made feature could conceivably become.”³⁴⁷

The importance of the Wall to the perception of China and its accomplishments distinguishes its history abroad from its perception in China. Waldron details a series of legends and attitudes about the walls that are critical, indicating past dynasties as despotic and cruel, rather than emphasizing the accomplishment recognized today. In Chinese literature, the walls are more closely associated with forced labor as a source of suffering, hardship, and death, than as the engineering and architectural feat recognized today.³⁴⁸ The difficulties posed by the construction of the wall and the dark history of Qin rule left traces of a history of tyrannical rule in legends and songs. According to Waldron there is agreement in Chinese culture about “the significance of the Wall: it symbolized the failure of Ch’in (Qin) rule, and the way the emperor had failed to grasp the importance of virtue in supporting rule, but instead had relied on force.”³⁴⁹

³⁴⁶ William Lindesay, *The Great Wall*, Images of Asia (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003); Yi-fu Tuan, *A Historical Geography of China* (Piscataway, N.J: Aldine Transaction, 2008).

³⁴⁷ Arthur Waldron, *The Great Wall of China: From History to Myth*, Canto ed, Cambridge Studies in Chinese History, Literature, and Institutions (Cambridge [England] ; New York: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 3.

³⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 196–203.

³⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 195.

Cultural differences in relation to the Wall historically, inside and outside China are marked. McEvelley summarizes the global symbolism of the Wall as “the great symbol of China and of its long isolation from and fear of the outside world.”³⁵⁰ Ripley’s “Believe It or Not” popularized the fiction that the Wall is the only manmade structure visible from the moon in 1932 (Figure 5.3), dubbing it “The Mightiest Work of Man.”³⁵¹ It is significant that in past centuries the Chinese had no special name or interest in their walls as culturally significant, lacking any specific name or designation like other significant features ranging from rivers and mountains to palaces and temples.³⁵² Despite the complexity of systems of walls built over the centuries, the “Great Wall” is often included on maps by cartographers. Thus, the importance of the Ming Wall raises a manmade structure’s topographical presence to the status of a major geographical feature.³⁵³

Its massive scale has established it as one of the unofficial ‘wonders of the world’. Remarkably, the length of the Wall and walls according news organizations, governments, and scholars varies greatly, due to the paucity of archaeological or aerial researches to establish definitive numbers. Lengths ranging from 1,684 to 4,000 miles have appeared in Chinese and Western media.³⁵⁴ The Ming defenses covered more than 6,700 km, one third of which are intact or rebuilt, and these are the features of the built environment included on maps.³⁵⁵ In many places the Wall is 25 feet high and twenty

³⁵⁰ McEvelley, “Great Walk Talk,” 118.

³⁵¹ Waldron, *The Great Wall of China*, 213.

³⁵² *Ibid.*, 27.

³⁵³ Lindesay, *The Great Wall*, 4.

³⁵⁴ Waldron, *The Great Wall of China*, 5.

³⁵⁵ Lindesay, *The Great Wall*, 27.

feet wide, covering the crests and peaks of the highest mountains, giving a panoramic view of the land surrounding Beijing and beyond.

The scale of the Wall astounded foreign visitors who used geographical analogy to describe it. In one of his seven books about the Wall, William Lindesay traces the geographic lore of the Wall in the West from the 18th century. In 1790, the amount of stone used to build the Wall was described as “equivalent to all the dwelling houses in England and Scotland,” enough to circle the globe at the equator twice. In the United States, *National Geographic* circa 1923 showed readers the scale of the Wall in comparison to the land mass of the USA. British expatriate L. Newton Hayes, who asserted the Wall would be visible from Mars, first suggested the Wall can be seen from space in 1929.³⁵⁶

While the Ming Wall is currently understood to be a key representation of Chinese national identity as late as 1920, Chinese locals informed explorer Frederick the “Great Wall” was the ancient Qin Wall north of the more recent Ming Wall.³⁵⁷ Still, the Ming Wall in its length and scale has come to represent China and since USA President Richard Nixon’s visit in 1972, has become a place where more than 400 foreign leaders have been brought to experience this grand emblem of cultural and national identity.³⁵⁸

In the 20th century, the role of the Wall has changed dramatically. Its images include an obsolete border of a nation, a symbol of past tyranny, becoming an image of a past to be overcome, and ultimately a source of global pride in Chinese culture worthy of

³⁵⁶ Ibid., 2; Waldron, *The Great Wall of China*, 215, 253.

³⁵⁷ Waldron, *The Great Wall of China*, 203.

³⁵⁸ John Man, *The Great Wall* (London: Bantam, 2008), color insert between pgs. 164–165.

preservation. The poetry of Chairman Mao Zedong reflects a sentimental interest in its poetics in the landscape, dwarfed by a blanket of snow.

In 1936, Mao described the country around the Wall as a sort of canvas for the poetry of the Communist era. He used the Wall to create images of the ideal status of the present, “For truly great men Look to this age alone.”³⁵⁹ The 1950s saw efforts to restore the Wall. Later, during the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976) the Wall turned to an object to be potentiated for its building materials, making way for a new China out of the legacy of the old. Hundreds of miles of the Wall were dynamited and deconstructed, providing material for roads, dwellings, and shelters for livestock.³⁶⁰

By 1984, the Wall had regained a place as valued cultural heritage, but still faced threats from the elements and vandalism that continue into the present. In an effort to return the Wall to its former glory and define a new national campaign, Deng Xiaoping created calligraphy that loosely translated, “Let us love our country and restore our Great Wall.”³⁶¹ During this time, Abramović and Ulay were developing their *Great Wall Walk*, attempting to navigate official bureaucratic channels and becoming immersed in their own geographies and mythologies of the Wall.

Chinese Bureaucracy and Artistic Diplomacy

After the conception of the project, Abramović and Ulay had an extremely difficult time bringing it to fruition. The Walk was no small feat of physical effort, but could not begin until the pair received permission and support from the Chinese government. Dealing with the bureaucracy of the Communist Party of China required the

³⁵⁹ Mao Zedong, “SNOW-to the tune of Chin Yuan Chun,” February 1936
<http://www.wengewang.org/read.php?tid=17159>

³⁶⁰ Waldron, *The Great Wall of China*, 216–218.

³⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 219.

artists form an official body to manage international relations and delegate the trip's details abroad, as they could not be recognized as individuals. In order to begin the organization of the event, which took more than five years, they formed the Amphis Foundation, a group based in Holland formed of art world figures. The Dutch government designated the event a foreign exchange project, and the Chinese government agency hosting the participants was the China Association for the Advancement of International Friendship (CAAIF).³⁶²

Critic Thomas McEvelley was involved with the project from the beginning of the planning stages and wrote the history of the project in his catalogue essay, "Great Walk Talk."³⁶³ His observations explore many different registers of the project, from planning, to personal experiences with the artists along the Walk, meditations on Chinese history and poetry, Western colonialism and orientalism, as well as his interest in the politics and events taking place inside post-Cultural Revolution China. Among its documents, McEvelley's essay provides the most legible history of the Walk. Despite recognition of other foreign interest in the Wall, the Chinese government made no reference to the project in the media.³⁶⁴ Despite this aporia in the traces of the project from the Chinese perspective, theories of performance and transculturation assert such contact results in "two way" transference,³⁶⁵ raising questions about the role of the project in China's slow process of "Opening to the West."³⁶⁶

³⁶² McEvelley, "Great Walk Talk," 72–73.

³⁶³ McEvelley, "Great Walk Talk"; Abramović and Ulay, *The Lovers*.

³⁶⁴ British expatriate William Lindesay was acknowledged for his researches along the Wall which began in 1987. William Lindesay, "My Biography WildWall," accessed June 17, 2015, <http://www.wildwall.com/html/index.html>; Westcott, *When Marina Abramović Dies*, 199.

³⁶⁵ Jon McKenzie, "Performance and Global Transference," *TDR/The Drama Review*, no. 45(3) (2001): 5.

³⁶⁶ McEvelley, "Great Walk Talk," 67.

For the artists, the most significant lack of control over the project's form was the result of participation by the government's teams, which supported and accompanied them along the Walk (Figure 5.4). Ulay made extensive plans to camp along the Wall, while Abramović focused on her research on legends and symbols, allowing the Chinese government to handle details that preoccupied Ulay, like food. She also expected there to be support for her pack. Ultimately, along the Walk, the artists stayed far from the Wall in developed areas, villages, and hotels. Their entourage favored a slower pace and a widely recognized culture of dining. The multi-course meals, speeches, and greetings that formalized the nights and travel from place to place during the Walk formed an unexpectedly major element of the Walk as an event.³⁶⁷ This dimension was minimized in the visual art created from the experience of the Walk.

In McEvelley's observations of the group's negotiation of the foreign environment that was at times hospitable and inhospitable, the question of the Amphis Foundation's finances and money loomed large. The "demands" of the Chinese government for the budget to support the expedition with food, translators, drivers and surveillance eventually resulted in requests for "more and more" of the budget.³⁶⁸ Then, after beginning the Walk, which shrunk from an intended duration of one year to three months, the artists moved much faster than planned resulting in efforts to delay them along the route.³⁶⁹ In the "Troubles" section of his essay, McEvelley speculated the reason for this was to insure the project consumed the entire budget, as the schedule transferred payment to the Chinese government on the ninetieth day of the Walk. While the long duration of

³⁶⁷ Ibid., 94, 105; C. Carr, "A Great Wall," in *On Edge: Performance at the End of the Twentieth Century*, Rev. ed (Middletown, Conn: Wesleyan University Press, 2008), 44.

³⁶⁸ McEvelley, "Great Walk Talk," 74.

³⁶⁹ Ibid., 85.

the Walk was of great importance to the aesthetic mode of Abramović/Ulay, an extended period without walking the Wall, the presence of their local drivers at the hotel, dining on fourteen course meals nightly led to suspicions about economic interest being the primary concern of the CAAIF's representatives.³⁷⁰

Critics as Participant Observers

In the context of the structures of social relations and mediation necessary to the work, the critics form a key node in its transculturation. From the performance's location in the Chinese geography and its translation into text, essays by Cynthia Carr and Thomas McEvilley are key views on the work created by participants other than the artists. Their essays are set up like the catalogue, beginning their walk with Ulay and ending with Marina. In the decades since the Walk, the sites of reception have migrated from the narrowly distributed media of the art exhibition catalogue and the independent newspaper, *The Village Voice*, into scholarly monographic collections of essays by each of the critics.

Performance scholar Chloe Johnston has interpreted their position as participant-observers as a first audience of the performance who, through writing, disseminated it over time and space to the "secondary audience" who were not able to view the live performance. Johnston notes, the Walk is unique in that no one observed the performance in its entirety.³⁷¹ There are some notable similarities in Carr and McEvilley's observations. Abramović's aversion to the ugly, drab, and familiar socialist aesthetic in architecture reminded her of Yugoslavia and depressed her, while Ulay

³⁷⁰ Ibid., 84–86, 133.

³⁷¹ Chloe Johnston, "'The Lovers': On the Great Wall and beyond," *Performance Research* 17, no. 5 (October 1, 2012): 19, doi:10.1080/13528165.2012.728435.

reveled in the ideal of finding a family, as well as feeling profoundly alien to the Chinese culture and landscape.³⁷²

Carr's description of the artists as "exemplars of those who make the inner journey, who use art to sculpt the self" deftly articulates the unique role she had observing the process.³⁷³ The meditative, internally focused and relationship driven performance of Abramović/Ulay was dislocated from its conventional art contexts to the unique location of a site specific performance outside the Western world. Unlike their trips into the desert to interact with nature and people without making art, the Walk represented the completion of, as well as a departure from their geographic investments in transcultural experience. Abramović's commitment to bringing that experience back through performance was changed by the immensity and inaccessibility of her performance to the public. While her efforts to make that experience available did result in new approaches to making objects, the processes and experience of cultural exchange and descriptions of the artists' experience are primarily mediated through the critical essays. These essays expand the terse poetics and minimalist images of the artists' mediation of their Walk into narratives of contact, communication, silences, and discoveries through immersion in the landscape of a familiar icon and alien culture.

Carr details important elements of Abramović's interest in legends and the spiritual experience of energy, which Abramović cultivated via the demanding action of hiking through mountain ranges. Abramović's interest in legends resulted in discovering stories

³⁷² Carr, "A Great Wall," 26, 34, 36–7, 42; McEvilley, "Great Walk Talk," 111, 122–123, 134.

³⁷³ Carr, "A Great Wall," 26.

and local methods of directing locals to “energy spots” along the Wall where copper pots were covered by stones.³⁷⁴ Carr described Abramović’s dragon lore,

Judging from the legends she’d heard, Marina believed the wall’s origins were connected more to mythology than to defense. The legends spoke of marvelous fierce dragons. White, yellow, and black. Mountain dragons. Sea dragons. They fought. They caused earthquakes and tidal waves. Where she’d started, at the Yellow Sea, the builders of the wall had sunk ships—representing, in some legends, the sea dragon; in others the head of one dragon slain by the Emperor of the air.³⁷⁵

In addition to the legends, Abramović focused her interest in energy on her own internal process of transformation. The Walk was a conscious and intentional pursuit of transformation leading to the development of aphoristic language to describe her process, “‘boat emptying, stream entering.’ She would empty her mind as a meditator does—the danger she faced forcing her to stay in the moment, to stop thinking of past or future. The stream was the energy of the wall, the force line, nature.”³⁷⁶ This may also refer to the experience of “stream entry” as the first of four stages of enlightenment. One who has achieved this stage of progress on the Buddhist path is a *sotapanna* (Pali), meaning stream enterer.³⁷⁷ According to Buddhist doctrine, a *sotapanna* will attain nirvana within seven lifetimes. Whether Abramović’s body is the boat and her stream the way of the Buddhism’s Noble Eight-fold Path is not explicit, but the effort of the Walk removed all distractions during her performance, cultivating new meditative awareness.

Carr’s essay digests the great themes of the Walk, with specific details of her own experience differentiating her narrative from the highly developed perspectives of the

³⁷⁴ Ibid., 45.

³⁷⁵ Ibid., 44–45.

³⁷⁶ Ibid., 45.

³⁷⁷ Bhikkhu Bodhi, ed., *A Comprehensive Manual of Abhidhamma*, Buddhist Publication Society, Sri Lanka edition (Seattle: Pariyatti Publishing, 2003).

artists, which they represented in their own poetic reflections on the Walk. The grandeur and beauty of the landscape figure prominently alongside observations of social conditions. In Abramović's search for legends, she had always asked to be introduced to the oldest person in the village where she was staying. Carr notes, the eldest person was invariably a man.³⁷⁸

Abramović later told her biographer, James Westcott, "I could not believe how brainwashed the people were: no culture, no background of the history of Confucius, all the great Chinese philosophers, Lao Tse, nothing. Just that kind of communist reality, which I know so well."³⁷⁹ Being carefully watched waking and sleeping were common experiences during the Walk for all the westerners, unused to the communal living common in the Chinese countryside. Locals communicated the harsh nature of local conditions when Abramović's group attempted to stay in a village where no foreigner had stayed before. There, and elsewhere, Carr observed locals said "'conditions' were not so good" for the workers and villagers.³⁸⁰ Her observations of the conditions of communist China were not political or politicized, a strong distinction differentiating her critical perspective from McEvilley's.

McEvilley was especially close to the project. As a close friend of the artists and author of a critical essay for the Stedelijk Museum, McEvilley held a special title in relation to the Amphis Foundation, CAAIF, and the Chinese government. In his official

³⁷⁸ Carr, "A Great Wall," 44.

³⁷⁹ Westcott, *When Marina Abramović Dies*, 203.

³⁸⁰ Carr, "A Great Wall," 43–44.

capacity, the Chinese government recognized him as a delegation under the titles *Project Director for International Relations* and *Distinguished Foreign Visitor*.³⁸¹

While the ownership of the work resides exclusively with Abramović/Ulay, McEvelley's essay in the catalogue observes and records the social relations, foreign context, and complex events arising out of the journey each artist made across China. The details are important to McEvelley not only while walking on the Wall, but in his account of the artists and writers supported by large teams of Chinese nationals, including informants who reported everything he said to the Party. Carr's essay also focuses on the relationships of the artists to the local people and the teams supporting the work, with much less emphasis on the recurring conflicts that studded travels with Ulay. McEvelley had purposefully chosen to travel with each artist during the second of three months of walking, when he "thought there would be the greatest tension and loneliness in the Walk."³⁸²

Among his many historically focused sections, critical discourse and cultural commentary illustrate deep contrasts and change. His catalogue essay provides modern and ancient counterpoints with great emphasis on the idealized, wine soaked verses of Taoist poets, Orientalism, and Confucius, contrasted with his observations of the "cultural pollution" (official term) he posed as a "foreign devil." He found himself in the midst of conflicts in cross-cultural contact he experienced personally and observed in the news media.³⁸³ The alienating experience of post-Cultural Revolution society and

³⁸¹ McEvelley, "Great Walk Talk," 78.

³⁸² *Ibid.*, 74.

³⁸³ McEvelley dedicates an entire section of his long essay to a selection of Chinese poems about the pleasures of wine as an introduction to his reflection on drinking with Ulay. His direct experiences note

architecture was viewed with suspicion, even as the stunning landscape that the Wall inhabits fulfilled all of the foreign participants' expectations. Despite the strongly historically and politically aware dimensions of his lengthy text, he framed his authorial approach as storytelling of a folk type.

Basically, I just followed a principle ... just say what interests you about it ... just tell it like you were trying to tell an interesting thing to a friend ... then I contextualized it art historically, art critically, but mostly it was just a matter of spinning a yarn for a friend.³⁸⁴

His preparations for the Walk included hiking around New York with a backpack, visiting the Asia Society with Abramović, and carefully editing a small digest of some of his favorite Chinese poetry.³⁸⁵ His interest in the artistic past of China showed in his appreciation of the scenery, and he makes comparisons to painting noting where the landscape looked like the paintings of the Song dynasty. In this way, McEvelley is one of the primary forces of transculturation related to the work, presenting a many layered, scholarly view of China with the keen eye of the art and cultural observer.

In his observations, McEvelley describes the hardship of the countryside juxtaposing the past devastation of a catastrophic earthquake with the hardship of coal mining villages, industrial landscapes and conflicts with outsiders reported in the news. Among his gripping descriptions, he summarized the extremes of the environment after observing the fraught power dynamics between Ulay and one of the members of his team.

trends towards conflict between the Chinese and foreign people and "ethnic slurs" applied to Africans and Euro-Americans, alike. McEvelley, "Great Walk Talk," 81-84,100.

³⁸⁴ Johnston, "The Lovers," 20.

³⁸⁵ McEvelley's aesthetic and scholarly interest in poetry spans publications addressing multiple cultures.

“What I was beginning to see is that contemporary China is in a cultural crisis as intense as any natural one.”³⁸⁶

Cultural differences in expectations of the walk and its objectives are vivid in his descriptions of walking with Ulay. While the support team would deliver them to what seemed to be the easiest and nearest place to access the Wall, rather than begin their walk there, they had the driver take them to a point along the Wall where that, “looked nice to us in terms of conventional western ideas of landscape beauty.”³⁸⁷ This approach to walking differed greatly in Abramović’s group (Figure 5.5), as the determined artist told him “I walk every fucking centimeter of the wall.”³⁸⁸

Transcultural Aesthetics

In 1983, Abramović and Ulay began their *Continental Video Series*, a series of works expanding their art practice to include filmmaking focused on other cultures. With techniques drawing on ethnographic film, as well as their interest in tableau vivant the series culminated with their film of *China Ring* (1986), made during exploratory travel and preparations for the walk.³⁸⁹ Unlike the prior works made in Thailand, the United States of America, and Sicily that emphasized transcultural aesthetics with language and spiritual texts, *China Ring* features unedited ambient sound and long duration shots filmed from a moving train showing Chinese mountain ranges in the western deserts, emphasizing the movement of the pair over long distances. Interspersed with these landscape shots are sequences of village life, train passengers, and close-up video

³⁸⁶ McEvelley, “Great Walk Talk,” 83.

³⁸⁷ Ibid., 105.

³⁸⁸ Ibid., 126.

³⁸⁹ Marina Abramović and Ulay, “China Ring (unedited Video Notebook) | Wwww.li-Ma.nl,” accessed June 17, 2015, <http://www.li-ma.nl/site/catalogue/art/Abramović-ulyay/china-ring-unedited-video-notebook/7320>.

portraits of Chinese peasants met along the length of their train travel. Ulay operated the camera, not appearing at all, keeping the focus on people and places throughout the *Continental Video Series*. In the work that followed, Abramović's interest in folklore and symbolism added narrative dimension to their work in China.

Like many popular sources that establish and repeat orientalist fantasies and conflate or unify disparate ideas into a grand and appealing symbolic whole, Abramović and Ulay were attracted to inaccurate myths of the Wall that fueled its global reputation. In addition to an historically accurate representation of the history of wall building, Abramović's interest was also cultural. Her focus on energy and the metaphysical level of life was clear. Abramović described the Wall as constructed by the guidance of diviners, geomantic principles of energy (feng shui) and suggested the Wall followed "ley lines."³⁹⁰ Principles of feng shui were rising in influence during the time of the Qin Dynasty, but are not well documented as a part of the Wall's design. Early Chinese historian Ssu-Ma Chien quotes the confession of Meng T'ien, a collaborator of the Emperor, "It is impossible I have not cut through the veins of the earth. This is my crime."³⁹¹ The energy Abramović attributed the Wall is represented in her art objects by different minerals and metals, which can be understood as veins of the earth. She used these materials to create interactive objects for public exhibition. This semiotic translation of the geography of the Wall into art objects also abstracted the geography and geology of China into an experiential object to be used as a tool.

³⁹⁰ Furlong, "Audio Arts"; Iles, "Taking a Line for a Walk," 15; Carr, "A Great Wall," 30.

³⁹¹ Waldron, *The Great Wall of China*, 195.

In interviews that took place before the Walk, Abramović spoke of her interest in the Wall describing China and its culture in symbolic rather than historical terms. In her descriptions of the project, myths of the Wall's visibility from space and its relationship to geomancy reflect her fascination with legends of the past and of her own making.

Shortly before the Walk she told Chrissy Iles,

We were also interested in the comment from astronauts that from the moon the Wall of China is the only visible construction made by human hands. We researched the whole story and found a little poetry made in the second century called *The Confession of the Great Wall*. It was written, "The earth is small and blue. I am a little crack in it." That was precisely the information the astronauts gave twenty centuries later as a description of the wall. This ancient vision of outer space and actual vision of the astronauts made a very interesting combination.³⁹²

The poem, "The Confessions of the Great Wall" was written in 1971 by Huang Xiang, one of China's best known dissident poets who now lives in the USA.³⁹³ The long poem and the opening lines Abramović quoted emphasize a fractured land and culture, representing the Wall and China's many walls as an emblem of repression, obscuring views and symbolizing censorship. Xiang's poem, written during the Cultural Revolution, personifies the Great Wall as divisions between the different peoples of 20th century China. In strong contrast, Abramović's emphasis on the Wall from space and her appeals to its vast and ancient history through poetry encapsulates her vision of China. She uses the language of an 'ancient' poem to bridge historical time mythologizing humanity's visionary and visual views of itself and the earth through China. While her statements about the astronaut's views and dating of the poem are inaccurate, the

³⁹² Iles, "Taking a Line for a Walk," 14.

³⁹³ Waldron, *The Great Wall of China*, 218.

perspective helps emphasize the aesthetic appeal of the vast geographical scope of the Walk through the Wall itself.

Abramović's Endurance

For Abramović, *The Lovers/The Great Wall Walk* was a form of grieving, and also reflects a sort of liberation. She has described its conclusion as the saddest moment of her life.³⁹⁴ Originally planned as a performance to culminate with a wedding, five years of planning and negotiation with the Chinese government coincided with the death of the intimate and working partnership of Abramović/Ulay that had lasted more than twelve years and produced a historically potent body of artwork. Abramović's Walk comes across time and space through mediation and exhibition, framed historically by two key essays, and the work she produced during and after the Walk. Her months of physical fitness training before the Walk prepared her for her movement over the spine of a dragon, the most challenging terrain of the Ming Wall. Photos of Abramović walking and climbing in the forbidding and unsettled landscape exploit the most dramatic vistas to communicate the physical and mental accomplishment in terms of time and space.

Tacit conditions of the performance included the division of the Wall according to the male and female ends of a bi-gendered dragon. This division placed Abramović at the demanding mountainous half of the Wall, while Ulay's trek was through hard deserts, soft sand dunes, and farming country. He frequently spent hours in a van to travelling hundreds of kilometers to and from the Wall.³⁹⁵ Abramović walked mountains so difficult, she and her guide risked serious injury, walking as far as two, and three hours to

³⁹⁴ "Artifacts | It's Marina Abramović's World, Willem Dafoe's Just Living In It," *T Magazine*, accessed February 4, 2015, <http://tmagazine.blogs.nytimes.com/2013/12/16/artifacts-its-marina-Abramovićs-world-willem-dafoes-just-living-in-it/>.

³⁹⁵ McEvelley, "Great Walk Talk," 86.

reach the Wall in extremely steep terrain.³⁹⁶ Even though she suffered a knee injury early in the Walk, Abramović's commitment to the process of walking as durational performance held fast.³⁹⁷ When later pressed to stop and "rest up" for three or four days, she refused.³⁹⁸

As the artists enacted a ritual of separation by coming together one last time, they confronted the vast landscape of the Wall as a territory. The awesome human accomplishment that is the Wall links the vast geography of China touching ocean, desert, deep canyons, rolling sand dunes, steep clay cliffs, and vistas of seemingly limitless peaks. This landscape magnified their simple act of walking into the aesthetic of the sublime by tracing the Wall with their bodies. In his vast scholarship on walking, anthropologist Tim Ingold describes the stride as an act that is central to the criteria of understanding humanity, our supremacy over other species and global domination.³⁹⁹ In their striding through the landscape, their vividly colored dress—Ulay in blue and Marina in red—marked their bodies as signs of the westernized present amid the magnificent ruins and architectural achievements of the Wall that identified their location as China and symbolized its millennia of history.

In the distinct appearance of two solitary walks along the length of the Great Wall of China, Abramović and Ulay's performance dissolves the historical function of the Wall as a barrier between cultures, transforming it into the sign of a link between them, and China. Tracing the ground with their feet along its seemingly insurmountable length,

³⁹⁶ Carr, "A Great Wall," 40; McEvelley, "Great Walk Talk," 127.

³⁹⁷ Westcott, *When Marina Abramović Dies*, 200.

³⁹⁸ McEvelley, "Great Walk Talk," 133.

³⁹⁹ N. J. Thrift and Tim Ingold, eds., "Walking," in *Globalization in Practice*, First edition (Oxford ; New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), 27, <http://site.ebrary.com/lib/ucsd/docDetail.action?docID=10886702>.

the event of the Walk and the location of the Wall magnified the core themes of Abramović and Ulay's relationship and art. Through the most dramatic of settings and expansive scale their aesthetic of intimacy and transcultural experience was magnified and dislocated, as relationships and expectations between people and cultures were formed and dissolved. By the end of the Walk, Ulay would fall in love with his Chinese translator. He later married and had a daughter with her. Abramović would use the Walk to process her emotions and the end of the relationship.

From this rupture to their relationship, Abramović returned to her performance as an act of solitary strength, dependent on the support of CAAIF and Chinese bureaucracy, but completing her performance from a space of psychological independence (Figure 5.6). During the Walk, she explored an experience of intimate immensity, an experience described by philosopher Gaston Bachelard in his seminal text, *The Poetics of Space*.⁴⁰⁰ The space of intimate immensity describes a daydream or meditative experience of the boundless, which has a correlate in the sublime experience of the forest. For Abramović in her performance, as well as in the photographs that document it, the mountains of China provide the image of this immensity of experience that can also be experienced within the phenomenological limits of the self.

Across cultures, Kitaro Nishida illuminates the diverse experience of landscape with an Eastern perspective spatial aesthetics, "space—in art of the Far East—is not the space facing the self, but the space in which the self is situated."⁴⁰¹ In documentation of her performance illustrated in exhibition catalogues and the film *The Great Wall Walk*:

⁴⁰⁰ Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*, 183–210.

⁴⁰¹ Chrissie Iles, "The Shadow and the Reflection: The Relation Works of Marina Abramović and Ulay," in *Ulay/Abramović: Performances, 1976-1988.*, ed. Stedelijk Van Abbemuseum (Eindhoven: Stedelijk Van Abbemuseum, 1997), 14.

Lovers On the Brink, most images isolate Abramović's figure as a small element in a challenging and remote landscape emphasizing the vast scope of the empty space around her, as well as the strength, agility and endurance required to reach her location. The mental and physical accomplishment of the artist is emphasized by her location and echoes the accomplishments of the builders of the Great Wall. Bringing these elements together across cultures, the human will to master the landscape becomes cultural and personal across national, ethnic, and gender boundaries.

In the image that reflects the most impressive dimensions of Abramović's accomplishment, she does not appear at all. Abramović's ascent to a high peak at Jinshanling is especially striking. There, more of the Wall is visible than at any other location.⁴⁰² Seen from the summit of a mountain the Wall stretches to the horizon, the immensity made intimate solely by the camera's point of view, which is shared with the viewer. The photo overlooks the crests of an arduous terrain dramatizing Abramović's relationship to the Wall—a wall that undulates over mountaintops as far as the camera can capture, the vista filled with mountain ranges and the towers that dot the ridges and summits (Figure 5.7).

Abramović's intention to walk the length of the Wall, as well as avoid the long travel from a village or county seat to sleep resulted in a memorable test of her ability to endure the harsh environment. On one occasion, she decided to camp on the Wall for the night instead of making the hours long walk to and from the Wall from developed location. The winds were so severe that she and her guide had to fill their pockets with

⁴⁰² Man, *The Great Wall*, 265.

stones to keep from being blown off the top of the Wall into the canyon below.⁴⁰³ In 1991, Abramović told art historian and critic Doris von Drathern about the openness to experience and determination required of the feat for endurance,

For the first two or three hours, thousands of feelings passed through my mind, then my whole body began to protest, my muscles tightened, everything hurt, I thought I would faint at any moment. Then something strange happened: At the moment when I stopped thinking about my body, when I no longer bothered about it, the pain stopped, I simply no longer felt my body. My thoughts ceased. I was in a state of complete inner emptiness. And at precisely that moment—I only realise this looking back—I came closer to my body. I became my body. Perception altered completely. I could see with my whole body.

Abramović was tearful along the Walk, undertaking a painful process of personal transformation ending her long-term relationship in the process of collaborating on one last work. She described the collaboration and breakup with Ulay in the context of the Walk,

Before was this strong emotional link, so walking towards each other had this impact . . . almost epic story of two lovers getting together after suffering. Then that fact went away. I was confronted with just bare Wall and me. I had to rearrange my motivation. Then I always remember this sentence of John Cage saying, when I throw the I Ching the answers I like the less are the answers I learn the most.⁴⁰⁴

She described her emotional experience of the Walk twenty years later, “There is an emotional kind of thing about the private life that kind of affects me in the walk, the private separation, not just the walking separation, there is also the separation of somebody. That is really what stays in the memory.”⁴⁰⁵

⁴⁰³ McEvelley, “Great Walk Talk,” 130.

⁴⁰⁴ Carr, “A Great Wall,” 40.

⁴⁰⁵ Johnston, ““The Lovers,”” 21.

As an experience of transformation, Abramović described the challenges of the Walk as “a broom for my soul.”⁴⁰⁶ Cynthia Carr writes of the demands of her personal process while quoting the artist,

“I put myself in a circumstance where all my defense is broken and my habits don’t exist.” Every day of the walk in the mountains had exhausted her and caused her pain. She’d had two months of that. She thought it essential to push herself for a long time. “Then—is like gate to me, when the body give up.”⁴⁰⁷

In the immensity of the landscape and the intimacy of her own meditative practice of presence and concentration, Abramović’s performance embodies Bachelard’s intimate immensity. Her Walk brings the poetic of space from the page of the poem into the world of visual and performance art with an aesthetic and ethic of endurance that transcends boundaries becoming a sign of Bachelard’s daydream of immensity—“it contemplates grandeur. And this contemplation produces an attitude that is so special, an inner state that is so unlike any other, that the daydream transports the dreamer outside the immediate world to a world that bears the mark of infinity.”⁴⁰⁸

Geography, Objects, Photography

Bachelard developed his theory of the experience of immensity as intimate through poetry and objects, a boundless experience of phenomenological immensity given form in the aesthetic. “When a relaxed spirit meditates and dreams, immensity expects to see images of immensity. The mind sees and continues to see objects, while spirit finds rest in the immensity of an object.”⁴⁰⁹ With some of her earliest sculptural objects, Abramović aimed to transmit the immensity of the inner experience of

⁴⁰⁶ Carr, “A Great Wall,” 45.

⁴⁰⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁰⁸ Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*, 183.

⁴⁰⁹ Ibid., 190.

meditative awareness derived from confrontation and engagement with distant geographic immensity.

In the years before and after the *Great Wall Walk*, Abramović was developing a theory of art that eradicated mediation between the artist and public. She told Cynthia Carr, “We believe in the art of the twenty-first century. [. . .] No object between the artist and observer. Just direct transmission of energy. When you develop yourself strongly inside, you can develop your idea directly.”⁴¹⁰ Unable to do this in her performance on the Wall, she created a new form of expression to convey her ideas, *Transitory Objects*. The development of this idea and its relationship to the Wall were made explicit in her interview with critic Bernard Goy in 1990,

Art has changed a lot, but the public didn't change that much, and the artists are preparing, by the way they live and transform themselves, an art which could be completely mentally developed. I believe that the art of the future will be an art without objects, because in the communication of pure energy, the object appears as an obstacle. The only way for me to transmit my experience from the Chinese Wall was to build those “transient objects,” which are not sculptures but tools that help to make a work. During my walk I realized that my state of mind was different according to the metals in the ground. This relates to legends which describe the Chinese Wall as a dragon of energy. We all know that quartz is used to convey energy: this is not culturally limited.⁴¹¹

Abramović's theory of her objects allows them to stand in as a surrogate for her performing body. As she told art historian Janet Kaplan,

For me, the most important thing is experience. Transformation only matters if you really go through something yourself. As a performer, I'm going through this thing. But it's not really the public's experience. So I decided to build these transitory objects. I don't call them sculptures.

⁴¹⁰ Carr, “A Great Wall,” 27.

⁴¹¹ Bernard Goy, “Marina Abramović (interview),” *Journal of Contemporary Art*, June 1990, <http://www.jca-online.com/Abramović.html>.

They're objects that the public can perform, like props. When they trigger their own experience, the object can be removed.⁴¹²

The series title *Transitory Objects* refers not only to impermanence, it also alludes to the psychological function of the transitional object defined by Winnicott—the transitory need for a surrogate comfort object.⁴¹³ Instead of a substitute for the mother or body part, *Transitory Objects* fulfill the role of the performer and her transmission of the aesthetic experience of energy and consciousness that defines many of Abramović's works. She told art historian, critic, and curator Germano Celant about her interest in durational transformation of her functional objects comparing them to holy places that receive many visitors over the centuries, “I had thought of an object where one would be sitting or lying down, and each was to be covered with a copper coating, so that its wearing away by the body would cause brightness. The removing of the coating was a trace of the passage of bodies, a variant of testimonials of use.”⁴¹⁴

The first *Transitory Objects* were intended to communicate her experience of the Wall and the transformation she attributed to the changing mineral and geological composition of the earth along the path of the Wall. The meditative challenge of the walking the Wall and her sensitivity to the environment inspired her to develop a system of correspondences between the body and the earth in stone and metal, similar to natural philosophy and magic of centuries past.⁴¹⁵ As critic and art historian Doris von Drathen describes, “The aim is to meet the eye of the earth with one's inner eye.”⁴¹⁶ Abramović

⁴¹² Janet A. Kaplan, “Deeper and Deeper: Interview with Marina Abramović,” *Art Journal* 58, no. 2 (Summer 1999): 8.

⁴¹³ D.W. Winnicott, “Transitional Objects and Transitional Phenomena—A Study of the First Not-Me Possession,” *International Journal of Psycho-Analysis* 34 (1953): 89–97.

⁴¹⁴ Abramović, *Marina Abramović*, 2001, 12.

⁴¹⁵ von Drathen, “World Unity: Dream or Reality—A Question of Survival,” 226.

was reflective about her intentions, as well as how making objects out of mined minerals and metals transformed the natural world.

If only a few people develop a new consciousness and approach the idea of unity between body and soul, between body and soul and the cosmos, then the benefit will be so much more than the damage I have caused. Very soon I shall need no more crystals. It would certainly be a catastrophe if everyone started to take crystals out of the earth. I only want to create a new consciousness and point out exactly which treasures we must protect. I want to demonstrate the unbelievable construction of our planet, point out its sources of energy, and how, with a new consciousness, we can learn to rearrange our body and soul within this structure, making ourselves into a true location of our true selves.⁴¹⁷

While the early *Objects* were not well received as strong transmitters of energy, but better understood as enhancements to her own practice,⁴¹⁸ she has continued to focus on the value of crystals and stone in the vast majority of her three dimensional objects.

In addition to her interest in the geological and geographical sources of energy and transformation, Abramović also focused on the importance of specific types of body awareness to the experience of her objects. The *Dragon Series of Transitory Objects* (1989-) allow the body to function in the three most common positions of stillness described in Buddhist meditation, with the *White Dragon* relating to standing, *Red Dragon* to sitting, and *Green Dragon* (Figure 5.8) to lying down. The minimalist forms of the objects emphasize their materials, being composed of a large slab of oxidized copper finished with details to support the feet, seat, or body in a static position. In each of the positions, the head is cradled by a rectangular cushion composed of crystal or

⁴¹⁶ Ibid., 227.

⁴¹⁷ Abramović mined her crystals in Brazil, further complicating the transcultural content of her work. The materials she chose related directly to her observations of the geological make-up of the terrain along the Wall. von Drathen, "World Unity: Dream or Reality—A Question of Survival," 227.

⁴¹⁸ Westcott details the reservations of Victoria Miro, the first gallerist to exhibit the objects. Westcott, *When Marina Abramović Dies*, 214.

semiprecious stone, frequently rose quartz, finished with a small depression to conform to the head. In addition to the functional objects Abramović created for exhibition, she also expanded her work into the medium of photography to represent transformation of consciousness through the interaction of the body with landscape.

In her images of the Walk, Abramović used photographs to abstract scale of the Wall through the diversity of its building materials (Figure 5.11). Set out in a 2x3 grid, six images of close ups of the Wall condense the materiality, scale, and age of the wall into a single image. From the neatly ordered red bricks without mortar—apparent evidence of recent restoration—to the masonry of irregularly shaped stones, color and texture represent the variety of building strategies, centuries of effort, and sheer immensity of the building project of the Great Wall of China. Photos of the scored bricks of yellow clay are seen above gray moss covered bricks suggest an antiquity beyond easy reckoning. These are markers and mementoes of her journey signaling the visual interest of the Wall itself reduced to the simplest of forms, its materials.

Abramović's guide Da Hai Han played a crucial role in the Walk. He was her translator, accompanied her along all of her Walk on the Wall, and appeared in conceptual art photographs taken during the Walk. As translator, he was a unique agent of transculturation and had unique international qualifications having spent a year at Disney World and writing a Chinese language book about break-dancing.⁴¹⁹ Han's presence in the diplomatic exchange and art event permeates Abramović's stories, photos, and he appears with her in the film as her companion over a meal with Chinese villagers. He appears most distinctively in the work *Chinese Guide* (Figure 5.12), a

⁴¹⁹ McEvelley, "Great Walk Talk," 125.

series of life-sized photos made during the Walk. Despite greater curatorial emphasis on her performance and objects, Abramović's interest in the non-Western body as a medium for her art has been a consistent refrain since her earliest performances, which often include idealized male bodies to symbolize and model spiritual experience.⁴²⁰ Han's presence in the work signifies the Chinese location providing a link between the experience of her performance and the various types of experience she wished the public to associate with the event.

Chinese Guide

During my entire walk on the Great Wall of China I had a Chinese guide with me. Right at the beginning our relationship was very tense and together we passed many difficult moments. As the walk progressed our relationship started to change and we became closer and closer.

In the last months of the walk, with his collaboration, I made this work.

Chinese legends talk about the Great Wall. They often refer to the dragons (mythological snakes) meaning different magnetic forces.

Through different body and hand positions and using colour pigments I tried to visualize these forces.⁴²¹

For the photos, Abramović styled his hair with sugar and water, and photographed him making Tantric mudras with meanings including “holding small emptiness” and “holding big emptiness.”⁴²² These photos, printed in a scale to address the body of the viewer as if Han were present provide models in the gallery for the viewer to mimic or observe as methods of energy cultivation based on Tantric ritual practice. Han's Chinese

⁴²⁰ In *Freeing the Body* (1975), she collaborated with a Afro-Cuban drummer. The video installation *The Hunt* (1998) she deploys Asian, Anglo and African male bodies dancing to symbolize the spiritual quest, while in *At the Waterfall* (2003) the asynchronous chanting of Tibetan monks produces the titular sound on the landscape water feature. *8 Lessons on Emptiness with a Happy End* (2008) is performed by Thai children.

⁴²¹ Abramović, Rico Lacasa, and Wulffen, *The Bridge = El Puente*, 168.

⁴²² Westcott, *When Marina Abramović Dies*, 205.

ethnicity provides an embodied link to her experience of China, as well as representing his entire ethnic group to the viewer. His body provides a recognizable sign of Chinese culture locating the viewer in a social field beyond that of a remote observer of the artist's Walk as an event. His performance of Tantric mudras is a transcultural gesture that inflects his appearance with subtle indications of philosophy from beyond China's borders, and brings the complexity of Abramović's engagement with Eastern philosophy into her new body of solo work.

The objects and images Abramović produced for exhibition after *The Great Wall Walk* constitute an important shift in her practice. As she continued to develop her art practice without Ulay, she put increasing emphasis on creating somatic experiences for the public through opportunities to participate in the completion of the work. Crystals, copper, and flowers became important materials for interactive installations. These materials referred to different states of energy she observed on her travels and through her research inspired by her contact with geographic and cultural experiences and worldviews that are marginalized by the dominant Euro-American culture.

Conclusion

The Great Wall Walk has ascended to legendary status among Abramović's performances. The scale of the accomplishment, drama of the end of her relationship with Ulay and the feat of accomplishing the performance in the challenging social and geographical contexts of China define it as a unique work in the history of art, marking her endurance as an expression of the performative sublime. The significance of the Walk to Abramović has been emphasized in later performances, during which she has performed in the boots she wore. The boots have become a sign of determination and

endurance that signify the steps she took over many hundreds of kilometers, as well as the body's accumulated experience as accomplishment.

As a performance of complicated transcultural negotiations of culture and terrain, *The Great Wall Walk* defines Abramović's importance and investment in creating a body of work that extends far beyond the conventional limits of the Contemporary. *The Great Wall Walk* enacts the global through the phenomenological conditions of the body in space, and its production under auspices of art institutions as agents of diplomatic globalization. It is emblematic of new processes that must be attended to by histories of art. Operating outside of the conventional contexts of art's globalization in Contemporary art, Abramović's Walk provides an instance of pioneering exchange and contact that locates her practice in a sphere of the global shared by few international artists of the highest stature.⁴²³

⁴²³ Other Western artists visiting and working in China during the 1980s include Andy Warhol and Robert Rauschenberg.

Chapter Six: The World is a Body—*Personal Archaeology*

[*Private Archeology*] creates this treasure, a private treasury. For me, it has lots of meaning and I think when you put them together they present how my mind functions.

—Marina Abramović⁴²⁴

After her the end of her partnership Ulay in 1988, Marina Abramović understood the need for a process of redefining herself as an individual artist. A series of performances, biographical theatre works, videos, installations, and objects define the time between the separation and the important work *Personal Archaeology* (1997-1999) made after she won the Golden Lion at the Venice Biennale for her performance and installation *Balkan Baroque* (1997). The “Object Book” is a mixed media installation enclosed in a case of more than fifty shallow drawers and an architectural element of three steps, allowing the public to reach its top (Figure 6.1). The artist constructed each layer like a stratum of geological history with photos, objects, and pages cut from books—all enhanced by Abramović’s personal commentary and drawing. The material, which spans the global reach of Abramović’s travels and imagination, is organized into five categories inscribed around a photo of a five-pointed star cut on the artist’s abdomen—“Places of Power,” “Food,” “Preparation to Enter,” “Death,” and “Entering to the Other Side.” Not only does this *Personal Archaeology* look to places and peoples outside her native culture and direct experience, an important component of her definition

⁴²⁴ In the transcription and editing of this interview I have preserved Abramović’s distinctive use of English, that of a non-native speaker. Chanda Laine Carey, Interview: The Spiritual and Religious Influences of Marina Abramović, Skype, February 2, 2015.

of self is a series of images illustrating performances by her peers—other performance artists who inspired and influenced her work.

Transcultural Aesthetics—Towards a Global Geography of Art

As a document and object representing how Abramović's mind works, *Personal Archaeology* is emblematic of the theories and methods of art historian Aby Warburg. Similar to his multi-paneled *Mnemosyne Atlas*, Abramović's *Archaeology* spans time and place finding commonalities and points of interest with cultural and art historical resonance. Like counter-chronological art histories that span space and time, Abramović's life and work combines and juxtaposes seemingly disparate images into a cohesive whole that can be navigated like a site.⁴²⁵ As 'maps' of consciousness, the heterotopias of Warburg's *Atlas* and Abramović's *Archaeology* demand fluency in and openness to the harmonies and disjunctions that constellate images as a navigable field of cohesive meaning. These works can be understood as intellectual statements of an underlying unity across times and places. As objects that represent unique approaches to vast subjects, they are dynamic spaces of inquiry and reflection that allow a viewer to choose their own path within a limited set of significations.

Archaeology is a discipline that is often organized with both art history and anthropology, yet strays from the present—Abramović's historical position. Abramović's work lies within those vast fields of art and religion in whose interstice Warburg placed his Nameless Science, the study of images located between the aesthetic and the religious.⁴²⁶ Warburg's interest in non-Western cultures and scholarly fields

⁴²⁵ Groom notes art historians Georges Didi-Huberman, Alexander Nagel and Christopher Wood all follow Warburg in their transhistorical researches. Amelia Groom, *Time*, 2013, 15.

⁴²⁶ Agamben, "Aby Warburg and the Nameless Science."

more closely related to anthropology than traditional art history lays a foundation for understanding the value of Abramović's project as an exemplar of his Nameless Science. *Personal Archeology* and Abramović's oeuvre as a whole can be interpreted as its object, or as an exploration of the subject, falling into a specialized realm of art practice that I define as endemic to the transcultural and essential to understanding the most important creative practices of Global Contemporary Art.

In this chapter, I undertake analysis of Abramović's archaeology as a spiritual geography of self, unifying body and earth as equivalents that contain and transmit the energy of light. I draw in her complete body of work and our 2015 interview to articulate the system of correspondences and transcultural pathways of meaning contained in *Personal Archaeology*, a summation of her inspirations and influences marking her performance as an experience of transformation preparing her for the ultimate transformation of death. The work's title has resonance with Michel Foucault's archaeological method of writing history and philosophy, allowing for a multiplicity of sources, origins, and relation akin to his theory of modern places and spaces as heterotopia.⁴²⁷ As heterotopia, *Personal Archaeology* extends Abramović's reach beyond the space of the phenomenological world into an imaginary world of pictures and books, remote and idealized experiences that represent an ancient or historical self to be excavated by way of archaeological investigation.

In her heterotopia, Abramović aggregated and embellished her *Personal Archaeology* with content drawn from all of the world—transcultural and transhistorical

⁴²⁷ Foucault draws on Bachelard's *The Poetics of Space* and his phenomenological approach to space that extends it into the realm of the object and imagination. Michel Foucault, "Of Other Spaces (1967), Heterotopias," accessed October 8, 2009, <http://foucault.info/documents/heteroTopia/foucault.heteroTopia.en.html>.

points of reference that distill her wide ranging understanding of ritual, art, and culture into a single work. The following map and my analysis emphasize locations—regions, cities, and countries—inscribed on the many strata, or pages of the work. The conceptual organization of the work orders the extent of her travels and illuminates the extremely focused interests that reach out to every inhabited continent on earth, constructing a personal history and identity that embraces the diversity of human experience through her singular focus on developing and exploring energy through her human body as an artist (Figure 6.2). Describing her spiritual development and research, she told me about the radical inclusiveness of her approach, which gives a sense of her highly religious and anthropological search for understanding.

My experience is very diverse, because I was always so interested to see so many different cultures, but for me the beginning was DT Suzuki. This was interesting, the Zen Buddhism. Then, Zen Buddhism didn't really fit my completely baroque mind. And then I went into Gurdjieff, Blavatsky and Ouspensky, Besant, automatic writing. I was very fascinated by Sufism and these other kinds of mystical ceremonies. What is happening in Indonesia? What is happening in Sri Lanka with the piercing and stretching of the skin with hooks, walking on the fire with no explanation about burned feet? All this kind of stuff. And then, the last thing was to research shamanism.⁴²⁸

The public encounters this *Personal Archaeology* as an object book, which can also be experienced as an artist's book, *Marina Abramović: Cleaning the House*.⁴²⁹

Unlike the archaeological experience of digging into the present in the layers closest to the top at an archaeological site, the viewer is located in Abramović's origins of the deepest past. In a 2015 interview, Abramović told me about the structure of the work and its importance to her,

⁴²⁸ Carey, Interview: The Spiritual and Religious Influences of Marina Abramović.

⁴²⁹ Marina Abramović, *Marina Abramović: Cleaning the House*, Art and Design Monographs (London: Academy Eds, 1995).

Private Archaeology is how you actually connect things, and how you make meaning. [. . .] *Private Archaeology* is your own private understanding of things, by putting elements together in your own original order. [. . .] For me, it has lots of meaning and I think when you put them together they present how my mind functions.⁴³⁰

Abramović's introduction to the work is a memory of a pageless book with a glossy dark cover "glowing with stars," though "in Yugoslavia during the 1950s, such a book would not have existed." *Personal Archaeology* is her "star book" constructed of books she loves and objects she has collected—experiential and imagined contacts with the world that became embedded in experience as memory.⁴³¹ As a world of her own, *Personal Archaeology* makes visible the invisible. It constellates experience as creative, inclusive, without borders, magical and spiritual, entranced with the body and dressed in its blood. It represents an exploration of the sacred on a journey towards death—a world of the numinous and spiritual accessed through the most substantial of materials, the body and earth. She described her mystical experiences from the time of her childhood star book,

[Coming] from my background, coming from my grandmother being extremely religious, everything has to do with the miracles and superstition and dreams and clairvoyance. It was all in my kitchen. My grandma was looking into beings, white beings and she was predicting things would happen. That kind of reality was for me, very natural. That's how things are. You know? I was looking for similar types of people who have these extra special abilities. I was always interested in this. To me, this invisible world, it's visible. This comes also from very young childhood. I thought when I was very young I could see invisible people. I was always talking in the dark to somebody who was there. I could see them. I knew them. I talked to them. I think that children forget that. I somehow never forgot.⁴³²

⁴³⁰ Carey, Interview: The Spiritual and Religious Influences of Marina Abramović.

⁴³¹ Abramović, *Marina Abramović*, 1995, 2 (unpaginated).

⁴³² Carey, Interview: The Spiritual and Religious Influences of Marina Abramović.

Cleaning the House

In this chapter, I organize my analysis along the same lines as Abramović organized her artist's book *Cleaning the House*, framing *Personal Archaeology* along the artist's lines and interpreting its contents through her past practices and statements. Abramović locates the viewer in centuries past, entering history as architecture through a bodily introduction—a threshold—an image of her navel with a star cut around it, as in the performance *Thomas Lips* (1975/1997/2004). The star is annotated with the titles of the sections of *Cleaning the House* that provide the armature for this chapter, “Places of Power,” “Food,” “Preparation to Enter,” “Death,” and “Entering to the Other Side.”

Body as Place—“Places of Power”

Through this introduction to the body itself as a star book, we enter another cosmos through an image Abramović's star-crossed navel (Figure 6.4), and enter her places of power—images of locations remote from the urban world. A circular mountaintop fort or hermitage in Montenegro illustrates her ethnic origins, the Great Wall of China her accomplishments, and the next page turns the understanding of place from the land to the body. A watercolor of abstract strokes of deep blue with a wash of black ink forms the ground for her handwritten description of the limits of the human endurance,

40 days without eating
 4 days without water
 4 minutes without air
 4 minutes without impressions⁴³³

⁴³³ Abramović, *Marina Abramović*, 1995, 11 (unpaginated).

The drawing fills one-half of the landscape format drawers that set the boundaries of each layer of archaeological strata. Opposite it is a photo of a monastery on the island of Athos, Greece seen from the water, a holy place of Orthodox Christianity (Figure 6.5). This location and the next, the Kaaba of Mecca, Saudi Arabia are spaces of Abramović's imagination, sacred places reserved for men. She described her interest in these places with special reference to the image of Mecca that she chose, a dynamic long exposure photo of the Hajj where the blurred movement of people around the "Black Stone" identifies it as an "energy spot" on the earth.

I always had lots of fantasies about Mecca. First, because it is forbidden. The two places I have always been interested in were Mecca, which is forbidden if you are not Muslim and the second one is Athos in Greece, which you also could not visit if you are not a man. So, I was always visualizing myself growing facial hair or getting a moustache, changing my look to go as a man to Athos the holy mountain.

Mecca is also to me such interesting place because it is definitely powerful. When I refer to places of power, this is Mecca. If you look at images of that strange structure, the black structure, there is constant movement around it. This energy never leaves the space. It is always being generated and new every time. There are also mystical stories that inside this old structure, there is a meteorite, or a spaceship, or remains of some alien structure, or knowledge. So many interesting things, but I am fascinated by the places that human beings can generate. In Mecca, around the black stone is a permanent tornado of human activity—around, and around and around.⁴³⁴

She inscribed the photo with references to holy places of many traditions written over the top of the image of the Hajj. These sacred places of religions are places "where people get the energy just by being there, on a certain spot geographically. . . ." ⁴³⁵

Abramović's interest in religious centers as places of power treats them universally as spaces of human activity of a spiritual sort, with no emphasis on the beliefs or

⁴³⁴ Carey, Interview: The Spiritual and Religious Influences of Marina Abramović.

⁴³⁵ Abramović, *Marina Abramović*, 1995, 12–13 (unpaginated).

correctness of the religion or practice, simply articulating the sensitivity of people to locations and increasing their power through activity. Like urban centers, Abramović's places of power are foci of cultural "energy," agglomerations human activity that concentrate and prioritize spiritual power instead of capital.

In her archaeology of places of power, the images and objects map a set of relations or locations that move between experiences of place, art, and the body. Past the sacred places of masculine power, she invokes the sacred feminine, juxtaposing an image of a British erotic relief from the medieval Christian period, a sheela-na-gig, with a Russian icon believed to make miracles wherever it was seen. The site specificity of the sheela-na-gig and the portability of the icon constellate the work of art as a place of power that is both fixed and movable in its transmission of power and energy. In the accumulating strata, these strong counterpoints of male and female codes of religious places and images continue to vibrate outward from her Balkan body, expanding the geography of Abramović's exploration beyond familiar sources of Abrahamic and Western pagan religion into the world of non-Western religion and culture.

Gendered and sexual images and objects find a place in her geography of power, identifying art objects, the body and its sexuality as places of import, as significant as a holy site is as a sociocultural center. Her collection of penis sheaths from Papua New Guinea appears in selective reproductions of the work, singling it out as a favorite detail among her archeological finds, which she said, "I really, really love. They are so very funny."⁴³⁶ Like the sheela-na-gig, a nude female figure with spread legs and emphasized genitals found on medieval British churches, the penis sheaths of Oceania emphatically

⁴³⁶ Carey, Interview: The Spiritual and Religious Influences of Marina Abramović.

convey humans' emphasis on the body's fertility and capacity for reproduction. They also provide cross-cultural exemplars of Abramović's identification of sexuality as the body's main source of energy.⁴³⁷ This aesthetic is most explicit in the inclusion of a black and white photo of "anonymous artist graffiti" in Paris that displays a nude female body with legs spread and her hands opening her vulva like a sheela-na-gig surrounded by several disembodied erect peni that focus their heads towards the vulva, "attracted to the centre of power."⁴³⁸

Photos of landscapes of Tibet, and semiprecious stones represent the importance of the earth. These images are layered archeologically with pictures of human bodies—people with special abilities, holy people from around the world distinguishing the body itself as a place of power, empowered by its cultural specificity and unique wisdom. Unlike the well-known sites of Athos and Mecca, Abramović finds the sanctity of the body in monks, elders, wise people, and the initiated. Pictures of women—a "shaman woman" of Namibia and a Maori woman with the traditional *moko* facial tattoos join each other as the embodiment of places of power in Abramović's personal civilization of spiritualized existence.⁴³⁹ These join images of a Thai monk and sadhu from India as representatives of the spiritual genealogy in which Abramović locates the archaeology of her person.⁴⁴⁰

⁴³⁷ Marina Abramović and Velimir Abramović, "Time-Space-Energy or Talking about Asystemic Thinking," in *Marina Abramović: Artist Body: Performances 1969-1998* (Milano: Edizioni Charta, 1998), 412.

⁴³⁸ Abramović, *Marina Abramović*, 1995, 16 (unpaginated).

⁴³⁹ *Ibid.*, 36–37 (unpaginated).

⁴⁴⁰ Abramović identifies the tree Thai monk is seated under as a "sequoia." Sequoia are native to California, and the monk is beneath a banyan. In her error Abramović displays the extent of her interest in the extraordinary flora of the world as well as its people.

Abramović's world as a body encompasses different people, different religions, with emphases on Australia and Tibet. Strata featuring a large image of the barren ground and winding road of the high Tibetan plateau, multiple photos of Tibetan people, and pages from *With Mystics and Magicians in Tibet* by explorer and author Alexandra David-Neel (1868-1969) create a sense of the space of Tibet, illustrating and narrating its mysteries and ritual. A Tibetan medical illustration for bloodletting connects the artist's interest in symbols through juxtaposition with the Eurocentric symbolism of the "blood" entry from Cirlot's *Dictionary of Symbols*. The inclusion of voodoo dolls with David-Neel's pages connects the religion and magic of the African diaspora with that of the Himalayas investing her interests with an expansive geography focused exclusively on charging objects with intentions and powers.

The body is subjected to similar rituals of preparation and empowerment. Discipline and repetition form a center for Abramović's archaeology of the Tibetan body. Repetitious preliminaries for high initiations occupy a single archaeological stratum, uniting the body to the earth through the ritual of prostrations. Abramović draws special attention to the 100,001 repetitions of prostrations, when body meets earth, listing a geography of their performance, "Tibet, Ladakh, India, Nepal . . ." ⁴⁴¹ Abramović valorizes the long duration of Tibetan physical preparations for more advanced religious practice through the inclusion of multiple images of the same act.

The importance of Tibetan culture and religion has become central for Abramović over the decades. In our interview, she emphasized Tibet's importance to her spiritual formation,

⁴⁴¹ Abramović, *Marina Abramović*, 1995, 29 (unpaginated).

I looked into the soul practices, but really the practice that touches my heart the most is Tibetan Buddhism. Somehow, the Tibetans are where I can relate the most and also, they are so down to earth. They have this kind of healthy humor, which some other religions don't. There is something down to earth that I can really relate to. It's like a science of the mind more than anything else and they have reasoning that's great. They have this healthy reasoning, so you don't just take the truth as it is, you analyze. You have to be part of your own research. You accept it because somehow it is clear to you. That is the process.⁴⁴²

The process of spiritual and physical development finds an unexpected form in images of termite mounds in the Central Australian Desert simply labelled, “women warm themselves in the sun.” Snake men of red earth await their wives, and dogs communicate with monsters in other expressions of the body of the earth and the body as earth in the Dreamtime.⁴⁴³ Such descriptions allude to the worldview of the Australian Aboriginal culture without explaining the intimate relationship between people, ancestry, and the land—an intermingling of kinship that informs Abramović's way of seeing and being in the world.

Her interest in elders and wise women across cultures vibrates with an aesthetic of creative connection. A Polaroid of an Aboriginal “medicine woman” is placed beside a dramatic portrait of an Indian sadhu, a “holy woman” who stands tall, looking down into the camera lens (Figure 6.6).⁴⁴⁴ Her ankle length matted locks streaked with gray mark her body as that of a long time devotee of the Hindu god Shiva. Abramović links the two images with two overlapping outlines of her hands creating a bridge with the form of her body. Her hands pass over and connect the respected and spiritually accomplished women of cultures to which she has made deep personal connections in

⁴⁴² Carey, Interview: The Spiritual and Religious Influences of Marina Abramović.

⁴⁴³ Abramović, *Marina Abramović*, 1995, 34–35 (unpaginated).

⁴⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 40–41 (unpaginated).

her life and art. She describes the importance of the separation or connection of art and life performance and ritual with a handwritten entry among the strata of archeological places of personal power.

They art is not art is
a part of general
ritualistic complex.
They use it as a tool.
Only in a disconnected society like ours, the
Western society, art
is called art, it's
isolated and not a part of the whole
system.⁴⁴⁵

She concludes the section with different stones, those used in her objects, combined with a photo of her curled up on a huge boulder. Her body seems tiny in proportion to the stone beneath her. Both take the same oval shape. Around it she inscribed, "I'm in my work dealing with these two bodies, human body and the body of the PLANET."⁴⁴⁶ Abramović's summation with an explicit theory of the human body and planetary body as the materials of her work create a geography of identity and pilgrimage of spirit that locate the sacred in a heterotopic geography of difference and asceticism. Power of place and space is rendered as self and other, near and far, collapsing dualities while celebrating the necessity of a work of layers, ways of being as strata in which no one is coterminous with another, but in her personal archaeology of energy and aesthetics. These associations lay a foundation for sustenance of culture and the body through geology and geography, offering the viewer her understanding of the nourishment of earth and its atmosphere as sources of bodily energy.

⁴⁴⁵ Ibid., 45 (unpaginated).

⁴⁴⁶ Ibid., 49 (unpaginated).

Living on Light—the Archeology of “Food”

Abramović has most clearly demonstrated her relationship to food in her art by its explicit absence. In her teaching and a number of long duration performances created over the decades, she has fasted for days and weeks at a time. The archaeology of food in Abramović’s object book is a reflection of her world of spirit and discipline.

Religious and personal rituals define this entire world of food, present in *Personal Archaeology* as exemplars of the process of healing, completion of a fast, or celebration of the self. Its geography alights on familiar nodes of Abramović’s personal experience—Orthodox Christianity, Hindu tantra, Tibetan Buddhism, Australian Dreaming.

A primary value of food is located not in sustenance, but in the power of fasting.

Introducing her archaeology of food, she tells the reader,

At the end of the twentieth century we are more and more faced by our need for consumption.

We forget there is great power in the absence of food and we are very afraid of this.⁴⁴⁷

The strata and pages that follow illustrate ritual foods, developing an understanding of sustenance that step by step, page by page, stratum by stratum, reaches beyond conventional categories of daily and celebratory meals into the context of spiritual and physical transformation of the subtle sort.

Her transcultural aesthetic of religion and ritual intersects her history of intimate ceremonies developed with Ulay. The photograph *Floating Breakfast* (1979) sits

⁴⁴⁷ Ibid., 51 (unpaginated).

opposite a picture of a sandwich covered in gold leaf, which Abramović shared with her partner to observe their birthday on November 30, 1978. *Floating Breakfast* (Figure 6.7) is a recurring image in Abramović's exhibitions and publications—an image of a meal served in a shady oasis in the midst of Australia's Central Desert. The 'table' of the breakfast is the surface of an idyll pool without ripples, set with two places for the artists. On the complete stillness of the water's surface, two plates, spoons, a serving bowl, and teapot float on the reflection of trees and deep red rocks surrounding the watering hole. An abiding sense of the miraculously impossible quality of the event set it into a space of ephemeral installation art materializing a transitory moment of calm perfection outside the searing heat and dusty earth that defined their Australian travels. In the context of her archaeology, the importance of the first meal of the day as breaking a fast resonates with subsequent strata—formal rituals of fast breaking and precious pills from India and Tibet ritualize processes of physical and spiritual transformation.

The Indian tantric teacher Harish Johari (1934-1999) has been a significant influence on Abramović and her work. I asked Abramović about Johari's influence on her and cooking was central to her reminiscence,

I met Harish Johari in the late 70s and it was wonderful. He was a true Indian man. He was a guru. He was a philosopher and at the same time a kind of life coach. He told me about the importance of numerology, told me about the importance of food, how to distribute energy. He told me so many things, and many times the best knowledge was shared during cooking lessons. He was always cooking for us and telling the spices he used, the medicine, and how to mix them—how you can get with the food the most energy possible out of the body. And then, how to make your mind still and how to protect yourself from the negativity people bring to you when they come into your environment—so much down to earth knowledge that I still use.⁴⁴⁸

⁴⁴⁸ Carey, Interview: The Spiritual and Religious Influences of Marina Abramović.

On a bed of white paper, Abramović wrote out one of his recipes she has used in workshops and celebrations many times.⁴⁴⁹ With her handwritten text, almonds, cardamom pods, and peppercorns rest beside and upon a single square of gold leaf. A shining drizzle of honey, and a simple spoon holding a half teaspoon of water complete the array of necessary ingredients. These conventional materials of Indian cooking and Ayurvedic medicine become a ritual food carefully prepared to break a fast. The inclusion of the alchemical potency of 24-carat gold divinizes the concoction. A food to “be eaten in solitude,” Johari’s gold bowl receives the longest text in the whole of the archaeology. Abramović tells its story, “This recipe was given to me in the house of Harish Johari (India). This practice of eating a gold bowl after a long period of fasting and seclusion dates from the 6th century and helps to achieve a calm state of mind.”⁴⁵⁰

A mix of the pragmatic and esoteric teachings of tantra permeates Abramović’s work, finding popular expression in the transnational transmission of Johari’s teaching and that of Tibetan Buddhism. Abramović’s commitment to tantra’s meditative rituals, esoteric magic and medicinal substances is woven through *Personal Archaeology*. The instructions and products of the Tibetan Medical Center of Dharamsala are an archeology of food as the site of healing pills promising rejuvenation (Figure 6.8).

Scattered among pages describing the effects and methods of administration of “Precious Purified Moon Crystal,” “Old Turquoise,” and the “King of Medicines,” in English and

⁴⁴⁹ She also identifies the source of the recipe as a “Tibetan monastery.” Marina Abramović, *Student Body: Workshops 1979 - 2003 : Performances 1993 - 2003* (Milano: Ed. Charta, 2003), 96; James Westcott, “Silence Is Golden,” *Art Review* 2, no. 6 (2004): 77; Hannes Malte Mahler et al., eds., *Unfinished Business: Marina Abramović ; [anlässlich Der Ausstellung “Unfinished Business”, Marina Abramović and Students, Studenten Der HBK Braunschweig Vom 16. Mai Bis 4. Juli 1999]* (Köln: Salon-Verl., 1999), 5, 49–50.

⁴⁵⁰ Abramović, *Marina Abramović*, 1995, 56–57 (unpaginated).

Tibetan are precious pills—a handful of small spheres wrapped in jewel colored silk, tied with multicolored thread.⁴⁵¹ Vermilion, turquoise, scarlet, and purple precious pills seem like decorative baubles, yet promise liberation from common ailments. Composed of many undescribed ingredients, each is to be consumed with careful preparation and rituals on an auspicious day. The instructions direct the consumer to support their effect with a restricted diet and avoidance of strenuous exercise. Abramović completed her array of precious pills with a ritually knotted red blessing cord, intended to be worn by practitioners of Tibetan Buddhism. Powdered gems, mysterious ingredients, silks, cords and austerities insure the connection of health of the body and spirit are coded in this food, as well as subtle relationships to the body through its decoration.

From the esoteric foods of the spirit to be consumed by mouth, Abramović widens her understanding of food to include other forms of energy, crystals and light. Her introduction explains, “With the absence of food we become very sensitive to our perception, hearing, and touch.”⁴⁵² A book printed in Sanskrit is embellished with silver leaf covered pages and handwritten instructions that it be read by the light of a full moon. This invocation of light as food precedes reproductions of her own artwork. *Transitory Objects*, four massive crystals photographed atop four tables for one are a document of her *Waiting Room* (1993), where the public can receive the food of the earth’s energy in the form of crystals and semiprecious stones. Chrysocolla, black quartz, clear quartz, and lapis lazuli are mineral specimens presented as art objects providing energy to be received. In the image, four members of the public are seen from

⁴⁵¹ Ibid., 60–61 (unpaginated).

⁴⁵² Ibid., 50–51 (unpaginated).

the back occupy seats before the stone at each table where they can be still, take nourishment, and observe for a “limitless” duration.⁴⁵³ In the succeeding image, the seats are empty and the stones can be seen. The energy of the earth, presented as stone allows the artist to depart from conventional understanding of food to the expressive possibilities of transcultural understanding linking the power of place and food to crystals. Her theory of energy and the earth is closely related to crystals as conductors of information, symbols of spiritual power, and correlates to a state of illumination the body can achieve.⁴⁵⁴

She claims that during a period of fasting, “One’s body starts to use the direct outside energy which is always there, always available.”⁴⁵⁵ An illustration cut from book demonstrates her transcultural understanding of outside energy, concluding her archaeology of food. Australian rock art representing a “Vijana” is described in her hand, “spirit without a mouth because it feeds on sunlight.”⁴⁵⁶ Abramović does not make any connection to other forms of light as food, as in photosynthesis, but appeals to the world of stones, spiritual discipline, and cultivation through fasting and ritual to achieve an understanding that is in harmony with the ancient Dreamings of the Central Desert.

For Abramović, “Food is an obstacle to the purification of the body.”⁴⁵⁷ Fasting and ritual consumption are techniques of self-transformation—process that attune her

⁴⁵³ Abramović, *Marina Abramović*, 2001, 192–195.

⁴⁵⁴ Abramović and Abramović, “Time-Space-Energy of Talking about Asystemic Thinking,” 416.

⁴⁵⁵ Abramović, *Marina Abramović*, 1995, 51 (unpaginated).

⁴⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 66 (unpaginated).

⁴⁵⁷ Marina Abramović and Velimir Abramović, “Time-Space-Energy of Talking about Asystemic Thinking,” in *Marina Abramović: Artist Body: Performances 1969-1998* (Milano: Edizioni Charta, 1998), 411.

awareness of the energy available as light. She explains in her text, “Normally we don’t even have access to it because we are never open to it. In this heightened mental state we become very aware of things.”⁴⁵⁸ Abramović’s investment in fasting as technique to heighten her consciousness has been central to her performance practice, both as preparation and performative gesture making food and energy the material of her performance practice, the substrate of her aesthetic.

Performance as “Preparation to Enter”

Abramović’s attraction to the opera diva Maria Callas (1923-1977) serves as an opening to her archaeology of performance, at once a theory and history of performance art, a genealogy of contemporaries, autobiography of performance, and allusion to future work. A photo of James Lee Byars’ (1932-1997) performance at Documenta 7 in 1982 faces a photo of the Serbian scientist Nikola Tesla (1856-1943) under which she wrote, “The artist is the transmitter of energy.”⁴⁵⁹ Her interest in Tesla is rooted in his use of his own body as a transmitter and receiver of energy represented by photos of him with his wireless light.⁴⁶⁰ Placing her countryman, an inventor, among a constellation of performance artists of the 1960s and 70s unifies Tesla’s achievements with energy and its wavelengths to performance practice. His accomplishments inspired her understanding of the energy potential of crystals and a belief the relationship between light, crystals, and energy “is the secret entry of cosmic transconsciousness” that Tesla understood.⁴⁶¹ Two photos of him in his laboratory surrounded dramatic bursts of electricity accompany a quote from John Cage cut from a magazine. Cage articulates his

⁴⁵⁸ Abramović, *Marina Abramović*, 1995, 51 (unpaginated).

⁴⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 72–73 (unpaginated).

⁴⁶⁰ Abramović, “Marina Abramović- Night Sea Crossing, a Lecture.”

⁴⁶¹ Abramović, *Marina Abramović*, 2001.

identity as the “son of an inventor” whose radical aesthetics are rooted in a spirit of invention, as well as the opinion “if my work is accepted, I must move on to the place where it isn’t.”⁴⁶²

In her strata, she layers Tesla with turn of the century photos of early twentieth century materializing medium Stanislawa P. at a séance producing ectoplasm, believed to be an etheric extrusion of the human energy body.⁴⁶³ Despite the lack of any proof for the existence of spiritual ectoplasm, Abramović’s theory of the performing artist as an inventive transmitter or medium of energy intersects with science and the theatrics of the paranormal. In linking her own performance practice to that of turn of the century mediums, Abramović expands the theatrical roots of performance beyond Vaudeville and Dada into the worlds of spiritualism and parapsychological performance.

Her early break from painting after her first performance and the intense experience of energy she never had alone in her studio led to agreement with Camus about the social responsibility of the artist. She quotes him, “if there is any man who has no right to solitude, it is the artist.”⁴⁶⁴ Her own performances are contextualized as a process of development written in bright red ink and documentation photos. The social and interpersonal work developed through performance, and deepened in collaboration with Ulay is traced through her archaeology to a breakthrough to the understanding of the body. “The whole idea of the body as a material, as a material through which you transmit something” is represented by her *Freeing Series*, where the body, memory and voice were exhausted to find her limits. Her inscriptions in vivid red ink explain, “. . .

⁴⁶² Abramović, *Marina Abramović*, 1995, 74 (unpaginated).

⁴⁶³ Marina Warner, “Ethereal Body: The Quest for Ectoplasm,” *CABINET*, Fall/Winter 2003, <http://www.cabinetmagazine.org/issues/12/warner.php>.

⁴⁶⁴ Abramović, *Marina Abramović*, 1995, 80 (unpaginated).

So the deeper you go into yourself, the more universal you come out on the other side.” Interspersed with her own work, she illustrates an archaeology of 1970s performance artists—peers and predecessors.

As her archaeology of performance is a personal one, the inclusion of Yves Klein’s *Leap Into the Void* (1960), as well as documentation of works by all the artists whose work she would reenact at the Guggenheim in 2004’s series *7 Easy Pieces* serves as clues to her past, as well as a future she was researching at the time. Her selection of works is a reflection of her own radical approach to performance, a genealogical history of Euro-American performance art. Her aesthetics were articulated in an interview with Guggenheim curator Nancy Spector, “The most radical work at that time for me were the early pieces of Denis Oppenheim, Vito Acconci, Chris Burden, and Terry Fox, because it was something I could understand. I loved the radicality of works like this, the simplicity.”⁴⁶⁵ European contemporaries include Joseph Beuys, Gina Pane, and Valie Export, all selected for a specialized survey of performances she wanted to undertake herself. As a document of Abramović’s thought processes, her archaeology of performance is also a clear and detailed digest of her preparations and interests leading up to *7 Easy Pieces*. Seeking the limited information about many of the performance works that interested her most, Abramović began to study their documents and accounts, experiencing the study of fragmented and incomplete performance histories as an “archaeological” process that made her feel like an “archaeologist.”⁴⁶⁶ Yves Klein, Joseph Beuys, Gina Pane, Chris Burden, and Bruce Nauman’s inclusion reflect the

⁴⁶⁵ Nancy Spector, “Marina Abramović Interviewed,” in *7 Easy Pieces* (Milan: Charta, 2007), 18.

⁴⁶⁶ Nancy Spector, “Marina Abramović Interviewed,” in *7 Easy Pieces* (Milan: Charta, 2007), 21; Sandra Umathum, “Beyond Documentation, or The Adventure of Shared Time and Place. Experiences of a Viewer,” in *7 Easy Pieces* (Milan: Charta, 2007), 48.

artist's determination to engage with performance histories and artists with similar interests in religious ritual and mystic truths.

The wide ranging spiritual leanings, religious interests, and commitments of performance artists in Abramović's archaeology are extensive. Klein's commitment to Rosicrucian mysticism was coextensive with his practice of the martial art of Judo and Japanese Zen. His focused commitment to specific traditions contrasts with Beuys's relationship to Tibetan Buddhism and extensive investigation of shamanic practices from around the world. Beuys's interest in shamanism played a key part in his self-mythologizing, claiming that during the Second World War, he had been shot down over the steppes and rescued by a shaman by being wrapped in felt and smeared in fat. These were key materials for his art practice, despite the fictional nature of his narrative. Gina Pane and Chris Burden both deployed the forms and gestures of Catholicism in their work. Abramović was interested in reperforming Burden's *Trans-Fixed* (1974), a work in which he was crucified on the back of a Volkswagen Beetle. Pane's work was inspired by the religious experience of martyrdom and often involved self-mutilation in protest to war in South East Asia and other inequalities she observed as a lesbian feminist artist. Nauman's sincerity in his description of the spiritual role of the artist was complicated by the commercial advertising material of neon in *The True Artist Helps the World by Revealing Mystic Truths (Window or Wall Sign)* of 1967. Ostensibly, an interest Abramović shares, but translated into archeology by applying his simple approach to performance and its scores in *7 Easy Pieces*. These artists all

informed Abramović's practice, and eventually approached to have their works reperformed.⁴⁶⁷

The depth of Abramović's commitment to religious rituals and forms is most salient in her selection of photos of her own performances *Lips of Thomas* (1973) and *Biography* (1993) that conclude her "Preparation to enter." The form of the cross holds the center of each image. In *Lips of Thomas* her body is spread out on a crucifix of ice, while in the *Biography* she is elevated, suspended high over a pile of cows' bones as she mimics the pose of Minoan snake goddess holding two live serpents. The performances fuse ritual and symbolic objects, actions, and imagery in a fusion of meaning across traditions signaling her performance as a process that marks her performance aesthetic as experiences that prepare her to die.

Experiencing Transformation—Images and "Death"

Marina Abramović's recognized "fascination with death and strange customs" resonates through many levels of her life and work.⁴⁶⁸ In *Personal Archaeology*, her meditation on death and dying explores fear, danger, magic and ritual, ghosts and demons, violence and mystery. Secret beliefs and knowledge reverberate through the images and objects of Abramović's deepest depths of archaeology, alluding to the magical permanence of past intimacies with Ulay through a symbol of their union in her assemblage. A photograph of Siamese twins joined at the sternum is placed below a copy of Pauwels and Bergier's counterculture bestseller of esoteric and occult history of

⁴⁶⁷ In the case of deceased artists, Abramović sought permission from their estates. Burden refused permission to reperform his work, and Klein was not included among the artists reperformed in *7 Easy Pieces*.

⁴⁶⁸ Laurie Anderson, "Marina Abramović," *Bomb Magazine*, no. 84 (Summer 2003), <http://bombsite.com/issues/84/articles/2561>.

science *Le matin de magiciens* (1960), bound shut with black thread.⁴⁶⁹ The photo played a central role in the couple's representation of their bond in their art and its position in the archaeology—accompanied by three lit magical candles of couples in black, red, and white—casts a spell of (im)permanence over the idea 'til death do us part.'

Such strong images of magical ritual and private meaning are complicated by three pictures on the next page as a Spanish torero, Thai shaman, and sculpture of an Inuit warrior all brandish weapons. The terror and violence of danger and death are made explicit by the torero's tragic condition, thrown and gored by the bull, turned heels overhead. Human rituals of danger segue into rituals of death, as David-Neel's text returns, with a section about the Tibetan "The Corpse Who Dances."⁴⁷⁰ Abramović circled and illustrated David-Neel's brief description of the intimate sorcery of its creation with an image of a Tibetan dancer costumed as a skeleton (Figure 6.9). This otherworldly experience of the most worldly of endings foregrounds the performance of spiritual experts and adventurers using the mastery of their minds and bodies to confront death.

In Abramović's mind dancers of death as performers and ritualists can be any or all of us. Abramović's hand written text on the following page emphasizes life's literal

⁴⁶⁹ Publisher Gallimard describes the work, "This book is not a novel, although the intention is romantic. It is not science fiction, though rubs myths that fuel this kind. It is not a collection of bizarre facts, though the Angel of the Odd is there at ease. It is not a scientific contribution, the vehicle of an unknown teaching, testimony, documentary, or a fable. It is the story, legend and sometimes exact, a first trip in fields of knowledge hardly explored." "Le Matin Des Magiciens - Blanche - GALLIMARD - Site Gallimard," accessed July 11, 2015, <http://www.gallimard.fr/Catalogue/GALLIMARD/Blanche/Le-Matin-des-magiciens>.

⁴⁷⁰ Abramović, *Marina Abramović*, 1995, 104 (unpaginated).

and metaphorical deaths, which bring us into the “here and now.”⁴⁷¹ Set opposite two photos, one of a group of children of Asia and another of a grave in the Australian desert, her discussion of the process of confronting fear and death describes experience of life’s changes as opportunities to prepare for the loss of the lived body. Her explication of death’s purpose in the experience of life leads to the funerary rites of the Tibetan plateau, dramatically illustrated with photos of antique and modern events. Open air rituals display the exposure and dismemberment of the charnel ground, captioned with selections from David-Neel’s journey’s in Tibet (Figure 6.10).

In Abramović’s use of British artist Mark Quinn’s *Self* (1991), his entombment gestures towards the strange customs of art worlds. The sculpture pictured displays a cast of the artist’s head in his own blood, frozen and preserved in a vitrine. Self-portrait, relic, and effigy, Quinn’s sculpture weaves between the worlds of the morgue, museum, and the mausoleum—a performing object that casts the artist as a hermetic trickster, suspending animation as a form of creative self-preservation. Art ritual of the west flows into social rituals of Australia, as Abramović’s exploration of death resolves into images of Central Desert ceremonies of entering the earth and sky. These aestheticized acts of meaning making emphasize the communal and the cosmic abstracted into a handwritten dream of “spirit exit.”

In her transcultural meditation on death, Abramović sets the stage for her own aestheticized experience of funerary ritual. In her biography, *When Marina Abramović Dies*, the book opens with a summary of her instructions for her funeral as described in her last will and testament. Three coffins, one with her body and the other two with

⁴⁷¹ Ibid., 106 (unpaginated).

imitations are to be distributed to America, Europe, and Asia.⁴⁷² Spreading her body symbolically and ritualistically across the globe to her personal places of greatest importance reflects the far-reaching sense of self and the earth that characterizes the personal as archaeological site.

Conclusion—“Entering to the Other Side”

As a summation of her global cultural influences, theory of energy, and curated history of Contemporary performance art, Abramović’s *Personal Archaeology* provides an opportunity to reflect upon the paths that led her to develop a transcultural aesthetic. Like Aby Warburg’s *Mnemosyne Atlas*, it constellates images and objects as symbols of cultural continuity that operate across space and time, linking cultures and histories. As heterotopia, the diversity of cultures is excavated as objects, texts, and images of religion and ritual, shared practices of magic and worship that link them through the body to the earth.

Abramović’s process revels in an aesthetic context of minimal and conceptual gestures of Contemporary art, informed by her experiential perspective on the diversity and religious forms of the world. The accumulation of the different references and contacts sets the Object Book in a unique place in her oeuvre, digesting themes that must be observed across works, scattered and often inaccessible. Concepts distilled and explained across many interviews and bodies of work find a space here in a most refined and aestheticized form, providing insight that does not encompass all the possibilities, but like an ancient archaeological site is a terrain littered with objects and ephemera in varying states of use to explain Abramović as an individual with her own culture.

⁴⁷² Westcott, *When Marina Abramović Dies*, xiii.

After death there is only “Entering the other side.” *Personal Archaeology* suggests finality, yet is an emblem of work in progress. In 2004, *Entering the Other Side* would become the title of a seven hour performance at the Guggenheim, closely related to the archaeology, which instead of containing a past, also held a seed of the future in which she would strive to be fully present as a performer.

Chapter Seven: Transcultural Ritual—*The House with the Ocean View*⁴⁷³

“The audience reveres. This is how religions start. People are willing to believe in something, anything, anyone who offers some kind of sacrifice.”

—James Westcott⁴⁷⁴

In November 2002, at Sean Kelly Gallery, Marina Abramović undertook a twelve-day performance of intense spiritual potency, modeled on the Vipassana practice of Theravadin Buddhist meditation retreats. Longstanding interests in spirituality, energy, and relationship, which have been a constant presence over almost four decades of Abramović’s performance art influenced the work. Rooted in repetition and ritual, the performance of *The House with the Ocean View* (Figure 7.1) draws on private, introspective themes of religious retreat and opens them to social exchange through the presence and participation of the viewing public. The strictures of attendance produced a collective awareness of participation that formed a community of viewers that ultimately included several individuals who attended all or several of the 12 days of the performance, or living installation.

Abramović’s instructions for the public were to,

- 1) remain silent
- 2) establish energy dialogue with the artist
- 3) use telescope

⁴⁷³ A version of this chapter was presented at the College Art Association 97th Annual Meeting Los Angeles Convention Center, February, 2009; Los Angeles, California. “Marina Abramović’s *The House with Ocean View*: Redefining the Sacred in Secular Public Space” was presented on the panel *Altars, Relics, and Ascetics: The Invention of Religion in Contemporary Art*.

⁴⁷⁴ James Westcott and Tim Miller, “Marina Abramović’s *The House with the Ocean View*: The View of the House from Some Drops in the Ocean,” *TDR/The Drama Review* 47, no. 3 (April 8, 2011): 134, doi:i:10.1162/105420403769041437</p>

These conditions allowed the public to participate in an open work within Abramović's authorship.⁴⁷⁵ Of her major performances, this work was the first to include an explicit participatory element since *Rhythm 0* of 1975. As she said at the end of the performance, "This work is as much you as it is me."⁴⁷⁶ From this late turn in her practice, Abramović has continued to open her work further to the participation of the public, with the intention to create an immaterial art experience. Stretching beyond performance, Abramović's expression of immateriality emphasizes the element of time.⁴⁷⁷

I locate this work in a transcultural position by highlighting the emphasis on Western modes of thought in scholarship and criticism of the performance, which require additional voices to describe the importance of transcultural aesthetics to its form more accurately. In addition to the public, the participant-observers who can be described as a community of interested supporters, practitioners, or believers, *The House with the Ocean View* also formed a node for the participation and emergence of a community of critics, journalists, and scholars. This community's relationship and textual responses to the project constellate a number of issues around the theory and practice of live performance, which in a few instances became a site of resistance to both intersubjectivity (as community) and the integrity of the performance itself. In addition to these sites of resistance, I use perspectives from anthropology to establish the ways *The House with the*

⁴⁷⁵ Eco, "The Poetics of the Open Work."

⁴⁷⁶ RoseLee Goldberg, "Marina Abramović," *Artforum (U.S.A.)*, February 2003, 137.

⁴⁷⁷ "IMMATERIAL - Marina Abramović Institute," accessed June 1, 2015, <http://www.mai-hudson.org/immaterial/>; Jerry Visco, "Marina Abramović, Immaterial Girl," *Interview Magazine*, May 29, 2013, <http://www.interviewmagazine.com/art/the-life-and-death-of-marina-Abramović>; Susanna Davies-Crook, "Marina Abramović's IMMATERIAL," *Dazed*, 2012, <http://www.dazeddigital.com/artsandculture/article/11867/1/marina-Abramovićs-immaterial>.

Ocean View also resisted or eluded some of the most significant theoretical formulations of performance via its transcultural aesthetics and religious sources.

This chapter relies on a textual exchange between artists, critics, historians, and anthropologists to document and reproduce some of the conditions of energy dialogue. This dialogue is rooted in the artist's philosophy and preparation for the piece, as well as accounts, responses, and analyses of the work after the fact. Via co-presence of textual voices, this chapter aims to resonate with the energy dialogue of the original work through the presence of the voices of the "Ocean" and the textual eye on Abramović as the occupant of the 'House with the View' while articulating an analysis of the religious nature of its ritual structure in transcultural terms.

Thomas McEvilley identifies the formal structure of the "living installation" as having its roots in the meditation retreats of Vipassana technique, an increasingly popular style of meditation from the Theravadin Buddhist tradition.⁴⁷⁸ Close attention to Abramović's interviews also reveals symbols of the shamanism of the Amazon, seen in the presence of knife ladders. While the presence of Buddhist forms suggests a facile application of the term religion, the gallery and museum are not sacred spaces, nor are their rituals inherently sacred, spiritual, or religious.

The space itself was occupied by an elevated, three bay architectural form, separated by spaces which opened to the concrete floor beneath. It was simply furnished in a modern minimalist style with all of its areas, including the shower and toilet, exposed to the viewers. Abramović remained there for the entirety of the performance, sleeping

⁴⁷⁸ Thomas McEvilley, "Performing the Present Tense," *Art in America (U.S.A.)* 91, no. 4 (April 2003): 114–17, 153; Marina Abramović and Thomas McEvilley, "Performing the Present Tense," in *Marina Abramović: The House with the Ocean View* (Milano: Charta, 2003), 167–70.

on a bed with a pillow of rose quartz. The inclusion of the crystal, as in her *Transitory Objects*, was intended to support her own energy, based on her researches on crystals during her travels and work in Brazil.⁴⁷⁹ Abramović developed her own intuitive system for working with crystals, attributing rose quartz to the heart.⁴⁸⁰

What was inventive about this performance? By thinning the boundaries between public and private, Eastern and Western cultural contexts, secular and sacred locations, as well as the practice of religion and art making, *The House with the Ocean View* opened a space for the consideration of the potentiality of both art and life for direct and nonsectarian experience of enchantment, or the experience of the sacred. As in *Nightsea Crossing*, Abramović had an explicit interest in changing the energy of the public with her performance. In this performance, she exposed selected details of the Vipassana practice during retreats, which were tacit in *Nightsea Crossing* (1981-87). While this chapter does not address the reception of the performance beyond the work of writers in various fields, for many participant observers, the work was highly successful in changing both the energy of the artist, the space, and the gallery visitors. Of special interest is the blog and art project of artist Nina Meledandri, who attended every day of her performance and also was a regular participant in Abramović's *The Artist is Present* (2010).⁴⁸¹

⁴⁷⁹ Zoe Kosmidou, "Transitory Objects: A Conversation with Marina Abramović," *Sculpture (U.S.A.)* 20, no. 9 (November 2001): 26–31; Thomas McEvelley, "The Serpent in the Stone," in *Art, Love, Friendship: Marina Abramović and Ulay Together & Apart*, 1st ed (Kingston, N.Y.: McPherson & Co, 2010), 241–54.

⁴⁸⁰ Doris von Drathern, "World Unity: Dream or Reality A Question of Survival," in *Marina Abramović* (Stuttgart: Edition Cantz, 1993), 230.

⁴⁸¹ Nina Meledandri, "TheHouseWithTheOceanView," accessed May 31, 2015, <http://www.meledandri.com/art.htm?http://www.meledandri.com/ma/thehousewiththeoceanview.htm>; Nina Meledandri, "A Flower Every Day (for Marina Abramović)," accessed March 31, 2011, <http://present2artist.tumblr.com/tagged/performance/chrono>.

The conditions of the performance were carefully detailed with restrictions and activities that reflected the conventional restrictions of a silent Vipassana meditation retreat with a few exceptions including fasting, and singing.

The House with the Ocean View: conditions

November 15-November 26, 2002

THE IDEA:

This performance comes from my desire to see if it is possible to use simple daily discipline rules and restrictions to purify myself. Can I change my energy field? Can this energy field change the energy field of the audience and the space?

CONDITIONS FOR LIVING INSTALLATION: ARTIST

| | |
|-----------------------|-----------------------------------|
| Duration of the piece | 12 days |
| Food | no food |
| Water | large quantity pure mineral water |
| Talking | no talking |
| Singing | possible but unpredictable |
| Writing | no writing |
| Reading | no reading |
| Sleeping | 7 hours a day |
| Standing | unlimited |
| Sitting | unlimited |
| Lying | unlimited |
| Shower | 3 times a day |

CONDITIONS FOR LIVING INSTALLATION: PUBLIC

use telescope
 remain silent
 establish energy dialogue with the artist

CLOTHES

The clothes for the House with the Ocean View were inspired by Alexander Rodchenko. The color of the clothes were selected in accordance with the principles of the Hindu Vedic square. The boots are the ones I used to walk the Great Wall of China in 1987.

STORAGE

1 bottle pure almond oil
 1 bottle rose water
 1 bar of soap without perfume

1 wooden comb
 12 thin cotton towels
 12 cotton underwear
 12 cotton t-shirts
 7 cotton trousers
 7 cotton shirt⁴⁸²

Religious Ritual as Transcultural Performance Art

“Rituals do a mental job in another state of reality.”

–Marina Abramović⁴⁸³

Abramović’s ritualized performance was a direct response to the events of September 11th, 2001, which transformed the world after the attack of the World Trade Center in New York City. Literary and film scholar Maureen Turim framed Abramović’s effort as shamanic, articulating the transcultural transformation of the Buddhist meditation retreat into a public ritual, “The shaman, through ritual, exemplary acts, mediates a community’s violence, sexuality, and willingness to endure, and in a society in which such rituals are no longer generally available.”⁴⁸⁴ The presence of knives and crystals referred to and drew on Abramović’s exploration of Brazilian geography and religion establishing a transcultural aesthetic rooted in objects, as well as behaviors.

The structure of the performance conforms to the conditions of religious ritual defined by anthropologist Marcel Hénaff—spatial, temporal, corporeal, decorum,

⁴⁸² In addition to these items, McEvelley’s account describe a hair band which the artist took on and off throughout the living installation. The other furnishings are not described in the summary. Abramović, *Marina Abramović*, 2003.

⁴⁸³ Kosmidou, “Transitory Objects,” 30.

⁴⁸⁴ Maureen Turim, “Marina Abramović’s Performance: Stresses on the Body and Psyche in Installation Art,” *Camera Obscura*, no. 54 (2003): 108.

publicity, equalization, and procedure.⁴⁸⁵ By applying an understanding of religious ritual as understood in anthropological terms, *The House with the Ocean View* eludes the need to determine necessary or sufficient conditions for the religiosity of its ritual structure. It fulfills all of them. This framework includes Abramović's aesthetic of simplicity, endurance, and relationship, informed by non-Western spiritual traditions, which I foreground as central to her art.

Abramović used *spatial* elements to demarcate the area of public ritual. She created a sacred space for her performance within the walls of the gallery and behind the line on the floor the public did not cross. The *temporal* elements of the ritual were established in relationship to past events, as well as the specific duration of the performance. As a twelve-day response to the crisis of September 11, 2001 Abramović developed a clear relation between a healing process of ritual performance and past traumatic events. The *corporeal* discipline she observed was classically ascetic, including abstention from food, speech, and writing. The public observed silence. The specific mode of dress she affected was not that of religious ritual, but a transcultural design based on the avant-garde clothing designs of Russian Constructivist Alexander Rodchenko in colors related to the numerology of Indian tantric mysticism. The semiotics of her dress established her own *decorum* as separate from mundane or secular life in New York with reference to both art and religion.

The physical limits imposed on the space and on the artist served as the context for the reception of the public. As a *public* act, the participation and inclusion of the

⁴⁸⁵ Hénaff's conditions are spatial, temporal, corporeal, decorum, equalization, public action, and procedural. Marcel Hénaff, "Sufficient Conditions of Religious Ritual," in *Secularization: Beyond Political Theology and the Disenchantment of the World (Seminar)* (University of California, San Diego, 2009).

public required an element to *equalize* them. The stricture of silence for the public was the central ritual activity establishing a community of equals through corporeal discipline. In their silence, the public and the artist subjected themselves to *procedural* behavior, which included the condition of “energy dialogue.” These elements defined the performance in its sociological art context, but also defined it as a religious ritual in specific anthropological terms. Hénaff’s approach firmly places Abramović’s performance within the realm of the religious in urban space, a set of conditions that allow Abramović’s practice to operate in any number of social or geographic contexts, while maintaining the religious character of the event.

In addition to the specific spatial elements of the performance as ritual, the geography of art has special potency in the urban space. Scholar of comparative literature Loren Kruger clearly articulates the importance of urban geography to artistic performance.

As Lefebvre argues, playful or artistic practice in the city is effective not because it prettifies surface elements but because it tests new 'models of appropriating space and time' and thus illuminates the intersection of the 'city as art and the art of life' (1968: 139; 1996: 173). As 'structures of enchantment' (Lefebvre 1968: 139; 1996: 173), the performances test and renegotiate the limits of playing culture that I outlined at the start by marking and blurring the boundaries between spaces, times, levels of performance, and between purposelessness and productivity. By marking and unmarking boundaries between extraordinary acts and ordinary activity, between the subjunctive and the indicative, between precarity and endurance, and between play and productivity, these events provide a field and a discourse for playing, producing and undoing the borders between them.⁴⁸⁶

⁴⁸⁶ Loren Kruger, “Performance, Production and Other Spatio-Temporal Practices in the Edgy City,” *Themes in Theatre* 8 (2014): 109.

This blurring of borders develops a liminal space akin to religious ritual, marking performance art as a mode of expression that slips between art and religion by way of conditions that are fundamentally spatial. The spatial conditions of artistic marking and unmarking that happen in Kruger's analysis of performance are determined by the actions of the body in the city, emphasizing the creative process of performance as art that redefines and redeploys urban spaces in the interest of aesthetic activity. The importance of spatiality to Aby Warburg's *Nameless Science of the Image* between art and religion not only requires that art history rethink its borders geographically around the globe, but also in the familiar urban centers that support its exhibition. Further understanding of the importance of Warburg's interest in anthropology and appeals to a global approach to the study of art can be found in critic Doris von Drathern's approach to arguing an understanding of Abramović's art based on the "audacity of global thinking," and her effort to "place the work of Marina Abramović into a context that encompasses worlds."⁴⁸⁷

While Abramović's dress, behavior and environment all composed specific elements of the work, ultimately, the artist and the viewers were the endpoints and collaborators in the production of a ritual, co-presence that allowed for a transformation of consciousness to happen. Of the participant-observers, Thomas McEvilley most clearly described this element of the energy dialogue,

In a sense, what was actually on display was a quality of mind or a state of concentration associated with certain types of meditation retreats. [. . .] The one activity that Abramović introduced from outside the tradition of these retreats was gazing at the viewers. In a *vipassana* retreat, one is not supposed to have eye contact with anyone. She introduced this subversive

⁴⁸⁷ von Drathern, "World Unity: Dream or Reality—A Question of Survival," 225.

element in order to break the performance out of the ashram and make it a social sculpture.⁴⁸⁸

McEvelley's familiarity with the spiritual traditions and practices Abramović referenced imbue his analysis with a tremendous amount of insight into the sources of the artist's work, but do not elaborate the aesthetic ramifications of the social sculpture created by such a choice to move from the introspective to the relational. At the conclusion of Vipassana retreats, communication and socializing allow participants to share the merit acquired from the practice including *metta* (Pali, loving kindness). Eye contact is allowed and natural after the process of deep introspection. Abramović turned this element of Vipassana or insight into a receptive and projective experience of intersubjectivity through eye contact as energy dialogue.

Anthropologist Michael Taussig's borderland between Self and Other, as described in *Mimesis and Alterity*, reverberated in the exchange of gazes between Abramović and the viewers.

To become aware of the West in the eyes and handiwork of its Others, to wonder in fascination with their fascination, is to abandon border logistics and enter into the "second contact" era of the borderland where "us" and "them" lose their polarity and swim in and out of focus. This dissolution reconstellates the play of nature in mythic parts of contactual truths. Stable identity formations auto-destruct into silence, gasps of unaccountable pleasure, or cartwheeling confusion gathered into what I call "mimetic excess" spending itself into a riot of dialectical imagery.⁴⁸⁹

As an experience of transculturation, the contactual truth was not between the West and the Other, but between Abramović's transcultural experience of another culture and

⁴⁸⁸ One of the reasons for the avoidance of eye and physical contact in meditation retreat is the intense exchange of energy that takes place, disrupting the experience of individual internal reflection. McEvelley, "Performing the Present Tense"; Abramović and McEvelley, "Performing the Present Tense."

⁴⁸⁹ Michael T. Taussig, *Mimesis and Alterity: A Particular History of the Senses* (New York: Routledge, 1993), 246.

returning that experience through performance to New York City's art world, creating a borderland exchange where her experience and practice, in the past and present, formed the bridge. This exchange was a riot of "energy dialogue" located in the body and shared through the gaze (Figure 7.2). The mimetic faculty embedded in the exchange of eye contact and the "contactual truth" of that exchange provides a context for further understanding the liminal state entered by the artist and the viewers during those twelve days in the gallery. Like a trance state created by religious or magical ritual, the restricted actions of the artist and the prescribed conditions of audience presence and participation formed a ritualized community performance in public space (Figure 7.3).

Confined by a self-selected array of activities—including standing, sitting, lying down, and showering—Abramović's ritual of simple repeated everyday actions as performative gestures is elaborated at length in the text that documents the installation. In addition to the activities described in the conditions of the work, other activities reoccur regularly in Abramović's textual account of the piece, produced by transcription from the video documentation that recorded the entire duration of the performance. These include "filling the glass, drinking water, kneeling, peeing, and winding the metronome."⁴⁹⁰ The highly detailed, dispassionate description of these activities, day after day, invested each action with a quality of sublime banality produced by deep concentration and the absence of other distractions in the environment. Akin to praying a rosary or performing ritual prostrations, Abramović's account of these repetitious actions invests them with the purifying force of her water fast and austere environment. In the text, ritual is further expanded into the practice of reading the account, "each day for

⁴⁹⁰ Abramović, *Marina Abramović*, 2003.

twelve days or all in one sitting” to complete the experience of looking at photographic documentation of the performance, “for the reader to have a full sense of the duration of the performance.”⁴⁹¹

Performance Criticism and Theory

In marked contrast to earlier writing in *Unmarked*, performance scholar Peggy Phelan’s response to *The House with the Ocean View* relies less on the objectless ephemerality of performance, recognizing the importance of ritualized seriality, repetition, and documentation to the conditions of Abramović’s performance practice.⁴⁹² Still, Phelan continues to position Abramović as an “ordeal artist,” a description appropriate to some of the circumstances of her work, but dependent on a particular approach to, and understanding of, the mind and body, consciousness and sensation—one that differentiates pleasure and pain. Given her discussion of life and death, and the relationship of physics to psychoanalysis, Phelan’s understanding of the work and the positions she holds are intensely conditioned by philosophical models that illuminate a space for a transcultural analysis of *The House with the Ocean View* and reconsideration of some of the key themes in *Unmarked*.

When understood in light the cultural and philosophical influences that resonate in this work, particularly those of South Asian Buddhism, the formulation of the present or the “liveness” of the body and performance existing in a moment bounded by birth and death is particularly problematic. In her discussion of Angelika Festa’s performance, Phelan relies on a Christian metaphysics of death and resurrection to develop an ontology

⁴⁹¹ Ibid., 41.

⁴⁹² Peggy Phelan, “Marina Abramović: Witnessing Shadows,” *Theatre Journal* 56, no. 4 (2004): 569–77, doi:10.1353/tj.2004.0178.

of performance that assumes not a continuity of consciousness, but a continuity of embodiment.⁴⁹³ If, in fact, the performer and viewer are linked as witnesses to the performer's death, the philosophical implications of reincarnation, rather than resurrection, are essential to theorizing performance work with references that elude the dominant discourses of Western religious tradition. Phelan does briefly recognize the non-western spiritual traditions in *The House with the Ocean View*, which she describes as "especially similar to Zen Buddhism," a late development in the esoteric Mahayana of Japan, rather than explicitly referencing Abramović's longstanding relationship to the Tibetan Vajrayana tradition and the explicitly Theravadin style of meditation that informed her public retreat.⁴⁹⁴ In this manner, like anyone crossing into the domain of an other, Phelan experienced "first contact" in her exchange of energy with Abramović, domiciled in her ocean view house.

The central importance of the "energy dialogue" during a long period of purification via fasting and restricted activity in *The House with the Ocean View*, resonates with themes of exchange found in Michael Taussig's "Reflection" in *Mimesis and Alterity*, where participants "enter into the "second contact" era of the borderland where "us" and "them" lose their polarity and swim in and out of focus. This dissolution reconstellates the play of nature in mythic pasts of contactual truths. Stable identity formations auto-destruct into silence.⁴⁹⁵ One stable identity that is destroyed by Abramović's silence is not just the performative speech act, endemic to Phelan's early

⁴⁹³ Phelan, *Unmarked the Politics of Performance*, 162.

⁴⁹⁴ I am a longtime Vipassana meditator, having sat a dozen such retreats in the past decade. This direct experience to most of the elements of *The House with the Ocean View* informs my response to Phelan's approach to this work and Abramović in general. Phelan, "Marina Abramović," 574.

⁴⁹⁵ Taussig, *Mimesis and Alterity*, 246.

ontology of feminist performance, but that of the “ordeal artist.” When placed within the cultural context of Buddhist philosophy and meditation practices, the view of Abramović’s practice as an ordeal, mortifying, painful, or accentuating mortality becomes extremely unstable.

Phelan’s theorization of performance as metonymic, via non-reciprocal pain and death, is incompatible with Abramović’s intentions, as well as the nature of pain and death in Buddhist philosophy, and medical science.⁴⁹⁶ The elusive character of pain is perceptual, and the practice of meditation as the observation of sensation has the potential to refine awareness of painful sensations and emotions on the vibratory level of being that lies beneath discrete embodiment and describes the essential continuity of matter and energy described by physics.⁴⁹⁷ Dispassionate observation of all sensation without preference, craving, or aversion is central to the process of purification that characterizes Vipassana meditation as a technique of enlightenment. This somatic psychology of Buddhism, Vipassana meditation and its model of the body-mind, resonates in the political dimensions of *The House with the Ocean View*.

Abramović’s main concerns during the development of the piece emerged in the wake of the events of September 11th 2001, and centered on the need for an act of purification on behalf of the disturbed people of New York City. As she told artist Laurie Anderson, “It is so difficult to change. Radical change can only happen in with some

⁴⁹⁶ Phelan, *Unmarked the Politics of Performance*, 152.

⁴⁹⁷ Vipassana meditation as a technique of pain management is taught by Buddhist scholar Shinzen Young of Vipassana Support Institute(VSI).Shinzen Young, “The Science of Meditation in Action,” accessed May 30, 2015, <http://www.shinzen.org/index.htm>.

kind of tragedy that shakes your life. The only changes I can expect are from my own performance. I don't learn in life otherwise."⁴⁹⁸

The healing and purifying approach to energy dialogue suggests that Abramović's performance was intended to transmute the experience of tragedy while also witnessing, accessing, and sharing in the emotional residue of the event from the citizens of the city, the antithesis of Phelan's non-reciprocal pain. In another interview of 1999, Abramović articulates the experience of trauma as an essential part of "civilization that necessitates art making," and tacitly, her approach to art making as an inherently spiritual process. "Nature is so perfect as it is that art becomes an obstacle. Art can only be done in destructive societies that have to be rebuilt."⁴⁹⁹ Rather than rebuilding society, Abramović assumed a stance of purification. On the psychic rubble of destruction, she attempted to affect a change both in herself and the environment, not through rebuilding, but through austerity. This process of purification was enacted, not only through her own physical activity, but also through a philosophy of energy dialogue that centered on eye contact between the artist and the public.

The gallery's space formed a microcosm of the city of New York open to all its inhabitants, during regular viewing hours, while the installation and performance continued unbroken through the nights. Abramović makes no differentiation between the spiritual practices that inform her work and the art making itself. She represents her work as performing an essential process bridging cultures, West and East, while cleansing and

⁴⁹⁸ Laurie Anderson, "Marina Abramović," *Bomb Magazine*, no. 84 (Summer 2003), <http://bombsite.com/issues/84/articles/2561>.

⁴⁹⁹ Abramović on the relationship between nature and culture as informed by a year with Australian Aborigines. Janet A. Kaplan, "Deeper and Deeper: Interview with Marina Abramović," *Art Journal* 58, no. 2 (Summer 1999): 13.

purifying through practices that are vital to the energetic balance of Western culture. In conversation with New York Times journalist Steven Henry Madoff just before the commencement of the piece, the religious dimension is transparent even as she identifies the ordeal or perception of “punishment” as “superficial.”

“No!” she said. “This isn’t about getting something material through political action. This is about taking away, about a way to cleanse and purify. People always see the superficial part, the punishment, but this is no different from the rituals of Asian and Indian cultures, of the Tibetan monks I’ve spent time with every year since 1981: to go through a difficult task to come to another state of mind. I see myself as a bridge, like the Balkans, between the West and the East. I use my body as the way to get across. But it isn’t about vanity.”⁵⁰⁰

This use of transcultural religious and ritually potent cultural forms in an art space did not resonate communicate the intended meaning to all viewers. The transcultural element was secular and familiar in its visuality lending the piece openness to interpretation, which drew careful criticism. Selected accounts of the piece ignore the central concept of energy dialogue completely, instead relying on the familiar critical modes of Modern and Contemporary art, holding Abramović to the standards of other political positions. It becomes apparent in some of these responses that the energy being exchanged with the artist was not purifying, but disruptive and aversive. The characterization of the work in terms other than those formulated by the artist recall Taussig’s formulation of “second contact,” but not as dissolution of polarity and point of entry into a contactual borderland, but as an intense enactment of a “first contact” mode of judgment, critique, and observation.

⁵⁰⁰ Steven Henry Madoff, “A Viewable Feast, Enforced by Knives,” *New York Times*, November 12, 2002, sec. Arts, <http://www.meledandri.com/sidepages/a%20viewable%20fast,%20enforced%20by%20knives.htm>.

This distanced and contrary position was occupied most intensely by the scholar, performer, and critic Johannes Birringer, whose response to the work uses remarkably hostile vocabulary, as well as the use of “we” as the public to empower his argument as serving some undefined community for whom he speaks. He notes Abramović’s deployment of ritual in the gallery,

[. . .] has shifted from the highly symbolic to a highly reduced, minimalist existentialism which, to some, may be infuriatingly close to an uncritical and unreflected new age spiritism.⁵⁰¹

Birringer’s phrase “new age spiritism” is difficult to locate as describing anything clear or specific about Abramović’s interests in shamanism and Buddhism or how they operated in the performance. The ambiguous “some” who may be infuriated is never identified as his own position, but those whom he addresses. The dialectic pits the reader with Birringer, against the artist. Those who resist the religious and spiritual dimension of the work as legitimate content for performance and installation frame Abramović’s work as an insufficiently critical practice that fails to meet undefined criteria of artistic authenticity. He goes on to assert that the documentation process does not serve a purpose in the making of art, which was a source for future text, as well as recording all of Abramović’s actions.

I assumed these cameras were for documentation of the process, yet they cast a certain light on the pretension that this was a completely unmediated direct action [. . .]⁵⁰²

While none of the documentation suggests any element of the performance was unmediated other than eye contact, and the presence of the telescope points toward the

⁵⁰¹ Johannes Birringer, “Marina Abramović on the Ledge,” *PAJ: A Journal of Performance and Art* 25, no. 2 (April 8, 2003): 66, doi:i: 10.1162/152028103321781565</p>

⁵⁰² *Ibid.*, 68.

mediation inherent in the lens, Birringer criticizes her “pretention” based on assumptions rather than inquiry (Figure 7.4). This tone permeates the entire review and account of his experience, which he projected on other members of the viewing public. “Her abstentions, at the same time, provoke a reaction in us; audience members will become aware that their visit is not on the same level as her ‘self-purifying’ trance performance.”⁵⁰³

Speaking for the collective as “us,” Birringer rejects the possibility of an exchange relationship, in favor of a reading of provocation, an interaction that diminishes the public in relation to the artist. Rather than recognizing the participation of the audience, as intended, he rejects the possibility of the work achieving its intent and reproduced the contents of his own psyche as the essential quality of both the performance and its reception by others in the environment. He failed to document interaction with other viewers to confirm his perception, or discern a variety of viewpoints from within the “ocean.” He resisted the process of reflection and exchange produced by “contactual” participation.

It is clear, after all, that such a “purifying ritual” cannot stand outside its cultural or political contexts; especially such notions as “purity” or contractual relations between bodies in a public/private space are heavily contested and subject to numerous interpretations. It seems disingenuous that Abramović would be content to foreground the healing or empowering aspects of a purifying fast, without acknowledging the privilege she enjoys to put on a spectacle in a commercial Chelsea gallery.⁵⁰⁴

Disinterested in the subtle aspects of the work and continuing to persist in a limited viewpoint of the cultural pluralism of the urban and gallery environment, the relevance of

⁵⁰³ Ibid.

⁵⁰⁴ Ibid.

the political context of the wake of the events of September 11, 2001 recedes from his reading of the work. While he is, of course, correct in his invocation of the multiplicity of interpretations, he fails to offer one other than a suggestion that the Abramović is a condescending narcissist.

Ocean View declares itself non-narcissistic, and dependent on interpersonal relations with the audience as a re-transmitter of energies, thus making the collective “endurance” necessary, metaphorically, for the shared survival of the life giving forces that reside in nature, in the water, in the air, in an environment that would not divide us by ladders made of knives.[. . .] reducing physical choices and emptying the self out—has larger cultural ramifications in today’s paranoid world that we may care to accept.⁵⁰⁵

Birringer’s concluding sentence brings to the fore paranoia, one of the toxic mental states Abramović sought to purify in the work, not only demonstrating that she failed in connecting with a portion of her audience, but also demonstrating that the receptivity of the participants is truly essential to the production of the performance intended. The openness of the work allowed a strong and vocal site of resistance to be occupied. While one may suggest that there was an exchange of energy between Abramović and Birringer in the gallery, I argue that Birringer arrived with a set of assumptions that not only reflected the timeliness of the piece, but also his refusal to participate. Indeed, in his review in *Performance Art Journal*, it appears that the experience of the space and the energy in the gallery resulted in a withdrawal and contraction of energy that was ultimately poured out on the page, not purified, but made more disturbing. Abramović aims to intervene in such mental states, also through disturbance and openness to multiplicity of meaning.

⁵⁰⁵ Ibid., 69.

To me art has to be disturbing. It has to ask questions and have some kind of prediction of the future within it. It has to have different layers of meaning. Each generation has to take what is needed at that time [. . .] Art has to have spiritual value and something that opens certain states of consciousness, because we are losing ourselves so much.⁵⁰⁶

In some way, Birringer's response provides both an exemplar of Abramović's art as disturbing, but not in the manner generally associated with it. One can argue the intensity of Birringer's response is indicative of his taking exactly what he needed from the work. He found the impetus to deploy his critical foundations and remind the reader that the freedom to practice and perform in a spiritual or art context is exactly the sort of elevated or privileged status he occupies and from which exerts influence. Ultimately, within the framework of alterity produced in Taussig's "Reflection," Birringer maintains the stability of his ego-identity at all costs and rejects inclusion in the community of the "ocean" of being of contactual truth. Birringer's interpretation of the ladders of knives is not developed as a provocative challenge to everyday consciousness, but as a border that cannot be overcome.⁵⁰⁷ As one who interrogates borders and difference in his own work, the insurmountable obstacles he perceives in Abramović's environment are more suggestive of his own consciousness than hers. This "border" is one of many possible meanings, but one can find the origins of this imagery emerging in Abramović's thought long before the performance and construction of *The House with the Ocean View*.

⁵⁰⁶ Kaplan, "Deeper and Deeper," 16.

⁵⁰⁷ Abramović uses knives to represent spiritual abilities to overcome obstacles with reference to transcultural spiritual traditions of the Inuit, Amazon, and India. Dangerous ladders also appeared in the work of Gina Pane as an object of self mortification, not the ability to use dangerous objects without bodily harm. Marina Abramović et al., *Marina Abramović: double edge: Kunstmuseum des Kantons Thurgau, Kartause Ittingen, 8. Oktober 1995-28. April 1996* (Sulgen [Switzerland]: Niggli, 1996); Marina Abramović, *Marina Abramović: Public Body: Installation and Objects, 1965-2001* (Milano: Charta, 2001), 21.

Can we walk on a ladder with knives? Of course we can. It depends on our state of consciousness. If you put this ladder with knives in front of a shaman in Brazil, he will walk on it. It's our problem that we can't.⁵⁰⁸

Throughout the piece, Abramović wept as she made eye contact with the public, and felt that she was indeed accomplishing her goals.

But just being there with this openness—there is just skin and bones; there's nothing else but being there for them. I was there to be projected upon. The whole thing has to be an almost invisible exchange. [. . .] To me the eyes are a door for something else, and whatever is happening in their lives, I pick it up. You can't imagine how much I cried in that piece. This sadness comes because they project their own sadness onto me and I reflect it back. And I cry in the saddest way, so they are free. People would come like drunks—instead of a shot of vodka they came to have a shot of connection with the eyes. [. . .] A lot of them told me later that they are not even connected to art. I was thinking that people usually do not look at them in this intimate way.⁵⁰⁹

If she felt some of the negativity in the space as a response to her own presence and actions, it was not articulated, but is reflected in criticism of the performance. In various accounts, it becomes apparent that the process of purification was certainly present for the artist, if not all members of the audience. As Abramović told *Village Voice* critic C. Carr, “I became so hypersensitive, I could absolutely pick up everything in the space. I picked up auras—for me it was like an ocean of minds there. I could see everybody's light.”⁵¹⁰

The wonder of the conclusion of the piece did permeate a number of the accounts. New York Times critic Roberta Smith occupied a more even-handed critical distance.

The gallery [. . .] feels a little bit like a pilgrimage site, with visitors sometimes lingering for hours. It is undeniably inspiring to watch someone maintain such dignity and concentration while conducting a 12

⁵⁰⁸ Kaplan, “Deeper and Deeper,” 9.

⁵⁰⁹ Anderson, “Marina Abramović.”

⁵¹⁰ C. Carr, “Hunger Artist | The 12 Days of Marina Abramović,” *Village Voice*, December 3, 2002, <http://www.villagevoice.com/2002-12-03/news/hunger-artist/>.

day public fast. [. . .] Ms. Abramović clearly draws strength from the gallery's visitors, so her formalized self-exposure is offset by the sight of an artist living, quite literally, on her audience's response. At times the hushed atmosphere can be a little too reverential; [. . .] The angle of sight recalls portrayals of the Crucifixion.⁵¹¹

As with Birringer's essay, an essential distance from the spiritual impact of the work is present, but Smith did recognize the inspirational nature of the performance, if not the subtle dynamics of energy, ritual, and purification written into the documentation of the work. In this sense, Smith also resisted the "contactual" experience of participatory observations and exchange, assuming a classic posture of journalistic objectivity.

Aesthetics, Ethics, and Culture

Notably, in both Birringer's and Smith's discussions, the presence of psychoanalytic and Christian terminology define their reception of the work. These traditions also provide the armature for Phelan's theory of performance, highlighting the vast gulf of difference that divides the work from much of its critical context, a work that may or may not have provided that "bridge" Abramović seeks to make of her body. In an essay contemporaneous with *The House with the Ocean View*, Phelan articulated a framework that provides a more descriptive, secular theoretical context in which to place *The House with the Ocean View*, but still firmly within the entrenched classical and Judeo-Christian ethics that are regularly reproduced in academe and art writing.

The philosophical position in the liminal space between ethics and aesthetics occupied by Phelan is drawn from the philosophy of Immanuel Levinas.⁵¹² Ultimately,

⁵¹¹ Roberta Smith, "ART REVIEW; Where Seeing Is Not Only Believing, but Also Creating," *The New York Times*, November 22, 2002, sec. Arts, <http://www.nytimes.com/2002/11/22/arts/art-review-where-seeing-is-not-only-believing-but-also-creating.html>.

⁵¹² Phelan cites Levinas, *Ethics and Infinity: Conversations with Philippe Nemo*. Phelan, "Marina Abramović," 574.

some of the most potent and sympathetic discussions of *The House with the Ocean View* rest in a theoretical and philosophical territory that need not indulge the mystical romanticism or rational resistance observable in the great variety of responses. Terms that circulate and harmonize with Taussig's construction of the "contactual truth" of "second contact" are located in the essential intersubjectivity of the work and its transcultural ethic of dialogue.

As a practitioner and explorer of "contactual truth," Abramović aims to make second contact with other people and cultures, dissolving a sense of separateness or difference, and return with her altered consciousness to produce performance works in the Western context. Art historian Jennifer Fisher summarizes Abramović's transcultural ethics,

Abramović made a distinction between cultural tourism as a kind of voyeuristic exploitation, and 'using' people of other cultures, and going to one place for a long time, involving oneself there, forming relationships, and letting something happen.⁵¹³

It is from this place of contact, that some of the most useful ethical positions arise, emerging from the conversations between Buddhist artists Laurie Anderson and Marina Abramović.⁵¹⁴

Abramović: I find that beauty hurts.

Anderson: For me sometimes it does and sometimes it doesn't. One of my favorite baffling quotes comes from Lenin: "Ethics is the aesthetics of the future." I guess it means that sometime in the future we'll all be good

⁵¹³ From a 1991 interview with Fisher and Drobnick, footnoted in, Jennifer Fisher, "Interperformance: The Live Tableaux of Suzanne Lacy, Janine Antoni, and Marina Abramović," *Art Journal* 56, no. 4 (Winter 1997): 33.

⁵¹⁴ Anderson has made references to her preoccupation with the (non)dialectic nature of the ethical and the aesthetic since the early 1980s.

to each other and communicate so clearly that we won't need those things we put in the beauty category. They'll just be fetishes, relics.⁵¹⁵

Although this conversation took place after the conclusion of the performance, the paper Anderson is discussing predates the performance and is included in the book, *Buddha Mind in Contemporary Art*, to which both artists contributed.⁵¹⁶ Exploring the contactual space where the ethical and the aesthetic meet resonated with the critical contributors to book *The House with the Ocean View*. Both McEvelley and Peggy Phelan locate the ethical at the center of Abramović's concerns, while Phelan reformulates it in numerous essays.

[. . .] The possibility of mutual transformation of both the observer and the performer within the enactment of the live is extraordinarily important, because this is the point where the aesthetic joins the ethical.⁵¹⁷

This place can be understood as the écart of Abramović's performance where the aesthetic joins the ethical is the place of energy dialogue, where boundaries dissolve and alterity becomes contactual truth. Freed from the limits of principles of pain or pleasure, performance can be understood as a distinct and unique location for contactual truth, intersubjectivity or face-to-face encounters that, for Levinas, distill the ethical. Through a process of ritual and austerity, Abramović seeks to attain a sort of undifferentiated state, while simultaneously reaffirming her bodily separateness. The affirmation of this separateness depends not only on the austerity, or on the violence of her practice, but also the presence and participation of the audience.

Three days before a performance, this very uncomfortable state of mind sets in. I can't calm myself. It just takes possession of me. But the moment the public is there, something happens. I move from the lower

⁵¹⁵ Anderson, "Marina Abramović."

⁵¹⁶ Baas and Jacob, *Buddha Mind in Contemporary Art*.

⁵¹⁷ Phelan, "Marina Abramović."

self to a higher state, and the fear and nervousness stop. Once you enter into performance state, you can push your body to do things you absolutely could never normally do.⁵¹⁸

This “performance state” is in no way different than the trance or altered states of conscious entered by the participants in religious ritual, or the subjects of ethnographic films. “I step out of my personal self to a higher self and always try to transform the personal matter into the universal.”⁵¹⁹ Unlike Phelan, rather than identifying performance as ontologically discrete via its living death, I assert the shared experience of communal consciousness, and the “higher” state described by Abramović suggest alternative models of embodiment, psyche and psychology may produce more inclusive ontologies of performance, less circumscribed by cultural difference.

Phelan affirms the success of the project through her own summation of the personal experience of energy dialogue, as well as the position of the historian and critic, encompassing many of the perspectives represented in a few cogent sentences.

There was no object. There was a kind of fused subjectivity, a condensation of the main themes of psychic, emotional, and perhaps spiritual, development. It passed through and touched on aggression, surprise, trust, fear, or betrayal, fear of annihilation, acceptance, connection, beauty, exhaustion, transformation. The strength of it still surprises me, not only because I remember it so vividly, all these months later, but also because at the heart of the performance was an embrace of simplicity.⁵²⁰

By performing and vivifying such spiritual practices that are marginalized in Western culture, Abramović collapsed the space between “us” and “them” and reestablished the belief in the possibility of participating in the unified, oceanic consciousness and being, through the body of the artist as transcultural communicator, secular ascetic, priestess,

⁵¹⁸ Kaplan, “Deeper and Deeper,” 10.

⁵¹⁹ Kosmidou, “Transitory Objects,” 30.

⁵²⁰ Phelan, “On Seeing the Invisible,” 178.

renunciant, and shaman. Perhaps this inherent resistance within Phelan's text to the work's expressly cross-cultural points of reference will illuminate the other side of the bridge, or make dull that forbidding ladder of foreign knives, from whence Abramović's simplicity came to New York.

Conclusion

In *The House with the Ocean View*, Marina Abramović brought shamanic themes from Brazil and the Vipassana meditation tradition of Buddhist South Asia into New York City as a religious ritual. The unification of performance art and religious ritual intended to transform and purify her energy, as well as attempt to transform and purify the difficult experience that had transpired in the city on September 11, 2001. In her effort to communicate the aesthetic value of presence and purification she stimulated a critical discourse that both acknowledged her spiritual intentions and sources, as well as others framing them in anti-spiritual and Christian terms.

I have given special emphasis to the importance of understanding Abramović's performance as the aesthetic transculturation of religion in the urban geography of New York's contemporary art world, as well as address the ways in which Peggy Phelan's influential theories of performance are inadequate to analyze performance aesthetics in Contemporary art that do not conform to Judeo-Christian metaphysics and ontology. Abramović's work does have relationship to Christianity, but she explicitly professes a lack of belief in the tenets of that faith.⁵²¹ Despite the wide-ranging series of spiritual and

⁵²¹ Chanda Laine Carey, Interview: The Spiritual and Religious Influences of Marina Abramović, Skype, February 2, 2015.

religious references, many of Abramović's critics continue to emphasize the religious values and origins of the dominant culture in discussion of her work.

As Abramović opened her performance to the participation of the public, she initiated a major turn in the work which would culminate in a monumental performance at the Museum of Modern Art in New York, *The Artist Is Present* (2010). The open and participatory aesthetic Abramović has developed has continued to expand the meditative themes of presence and awareness to the public, marking *The House with the Ocean View* as a seminal solo work in her developing aesthetic of immaterial public engagement. Abramović is using her artistic explorations of body to educate herself and others, saying, "The thing is to learn from your own art because it is much farther along than you are."⁵²²

⁵²² Kaplan, "Deeper and Deeper," 10.

Chapter Eight: The Sublime Is Now—*The Artist Is Present*

Who records the history and remembers? Each one who sits remembers differently, each consciousness who sits, observes, exchanges, also interprets, remembers and is recognized. This surprised me most - the strange sense of recognition....

—Nancy Popp, performance artist⁵²³

The Sublime is Now

When I arrived at the Museum of Modern Art in New York to see *The Artist Is Present* (Figure 8.1) and participate in the performance, the wall text beside Barnett Newman's painting *Vir Heroicus Sublimus* (1950-51) captured the resonance between Abramović's performance and Newman's high modernist aesthetic. Abramović sat in silent eye contact with anyone willing to enter the brightly lit square in Marron Atrium surrounded by cameras for as long as they wished. The performance was held concurrently with her retrospective from March 10 to May 31, 2010. As in *Nightsea Crossing* (1981-1987) performed with Ulay, she would not move from her place in the chair for 7-10 hours a day, six days a week, staying seated from before the museum opened until after it closed.

It was mid-April, and Abramović was performing in a modest, brilliant red gown. During March she wore the same gown in midnight blue, and in May pure white. Abramović's raiment echoed the palette of Newman's massive modernist painting (Figure 8.2), while her performance embodied the intentions of his art as described by the ever changing, transitory texts of MoMA's permanent collection.

⁵²³ Nancy Popp, "Day 22, Portrait 19," accessed July 25, 2015, <http://essaysaboutsitting.tumblr.com/post/1161671971/day-22-portrait-19>; Nancy Popp, "Sitting With Marina : Day 22, Portrait 19 (17min.) "Each One Who Sits...," accessed July 25, 2015, <http://sittingwithmarina.tumblr.com/post/1161697688/day-22-portrait-19-17min-each-one-who-sits>.

Vir Heroicus Sublimus (1950-51)

The Latin title of this painting can be translated as “Man, heroic and sublime.” It refers to Newman’s 1948 essay “The Sublime is Now,” in which he asks, “If we are living in a time without a legend that can be called sublime, how can we be creating sublime art?” His response is embodied in this painting—his largest ever at the time. Newman hoped that the viewer would stand close to this expansive work, and he likened the experience to a human encounter: “It’s no different, really, from meeting another person. One has a reaction to the person physically. Also, there’s a metaphysical thing, and if a meeting of people is meaningful, it effects both their lives.”⁵²⁴

I was delighted by how completely Newman’s description of his painting was manifesting downstairs as performance. Abramović’s monumental durational performance rhymed with the expansiveness of the painting, establishing a sublime experience of metaphysical meaning from her exclusive attention to the human encounter. Performing presence and intimacy as the durational now, Abramović’s radical attention to the present moment of human encounter embodied the performative sublime, transforming lives through the medium of time and attention affecting the public profoundly. Abramović’s sublime at MoMA was durational and spectacular. Like *Vir Heroicus Sublimus*, Abramović was creating her longest museum performance, rather than largest work to date. In MoMA, art rituals evoking religious experience marked her apotheosis into the canonical body of institutional modernism in an enactment of her transcultural aesthetic that reached out through the digital apparatus of globalization that allowed anyone who could stream video through the internet to ‘be present’.

⁵²⁴ Barnett Newman, “Vir Heroicus Sublimus 1950-51 (wall text)” (Museum of Modern Art, New York, April 2010).

Abramović's sublime has roots in meditation, a cultivated awareness of the present. In her performance, she fixed her meditative attention on more than 1,500 participants, holding the attention of hundreds of thousands of viewers. 715.5 hours of her performing presence recalled the importance of duration to her present moment as the goal of her meditative traditions. In this work, Abramović formalized the human encounter as her present moment in an austerity of attenuated intimacies that established a community of participants who shared her practice of gazing, a practice that exceeded the performance space and engaged the world. The remarkable result was the development of relationships, intimacies, friendships, and community that arose around the performance in the gallery, supported by digital media. The Buddhist and yogic *weltanschauung* underlying much of Abramović's performance also elicited a large number of responses to the work by participants who compared their experience to meditation, practiced or experienced meditation during their performance, or recalled meeting religious figures.

In this chapter, I survey Marina Abramović's performance *The Artist is Present* examining its aesthetic as an open work of transcultural religious imagery, duration, public participation, and global mediation. I assert that to see *The Artist Is Present* was not only to experience the liveness of the work in person or online, but also to be a participant as a sitter. The experience of sitting constitutes the open aesthetic of participatory performance in *The Artist Is Present*, as well as the closest vantage point from which it could be seen. Recognizing this fact through my own participatory research I answer artist Nancy Popp's question, "Who records the history and remembers?" I appeal to the historic importance of representation to *The Artist Is*

Present through heteroglossia, creating a multivocal text to organize the responses of participants into three key categories of experiential commentary selected for the vividness and detail of their descriptions. These constitute an anthology of first person narratives of *The Artist Is Present*, which I contextualize historically and critically as an act of inclusion. Via text, I establish an intracultural community of participation that allows the voices of sitters to answer the question most commonly posed to participants after their performance. “What was it like?” Here, participants represent the event in terms of waiting in “The Line,” the experience of “Sitting with Marina,” and “(Against) Hagiography: Sitters Contemplate Religion,” a thematic focus on commentary that utilizes religious language in order to articulate personal experience. I conclude with my own personal narratives written immediately after six sittings with Abramović in April and May 2010, accompanied by a text that responds to questions posed to me privately by a member of the press.

Presence and the Personal

In her descriptions of the performance, Abramović used secular, psychoanalytic language to describe her intentions, focusing on the gaze, stillness, and time as sources of trust and emotional stability. In 2013, she articulated her psychological interest in eye contact to television journalist Charlie Rose,

You know there's a huge research on the infant children that the gaze of the mother and holding the mother of the infant children makes their life incredibly emotionally stable later on. To me it was very traumatic. You know, my life took me a long time to actually get this emotional stability and to me the love of my audience became the really important kind of

feedback because I never got from the mother. You can always explain this kind of stuff.⁵²⁵

As with all her performances, she sought an experience of transformation. She explained the personal wounds and insecurities that informed the time she intended to “leave behind,” endowing the work with a process that not only aimed to serve the emotional needs of others, but her own as well. The similarity to circumstances during *The Great Wall Walk* when she explored independent endurance to support her transition out her relationship with Ulay was differentiated by the formal emphasis on intersubjective relationship in *The Artist Is Present*. When arts journalist Robert Ayers inquired about her intentions to change her life, she answered,

Yes! Especially after the last year and a half. My husband left me. I got divorced. So this has been such a hard time. I’m really just looking to do this piece and then to come out the other side of my own life, leaving behind my fears and my loneliness and everything else.⁵²⁶

In addition to her concern with emotional stability, Abramović’s aesthetic reiterated concerns with energy and luminosity developed over time through the practice of being present. In her interview with Ayers, she framed presence in terms that succinctly describe the goals of mindfulness meditation, “It’s about the here and now. It’s not about future or past. It’s just about the present moment.”

And the chair opposite me is always empty, and any member of the audience is welcome to come and engage in the gaze with me. There will not be talking, there will not be anything, just the motionless gaze. The eyes are the windows of the soul. You can see so much. And it will create an energy, a luminosity around it. The more time goes past with this piece, the more the piece will go where it should go – into that

⁵²⁵ “A Discussion on North Korea, ‘Lucky Guy’, Conversation with Marina Abramović,” *The Charlie Rose Show : Transcripts*, April 3, 2013, <http://search.proquest.com/docview/1323153039?accountid=14524>.

⁵²⁶ Robert Ayers, “A Sky Filled with Shooting Stars » ‘The Knife Is Real, the Blood Is Real, and the Emotions Are Real.’ – Robert Ayers in Conversation with Marina Abramović,” *A Sky Filled with Shooting Stars*, March 10, 2010, <http://www.askyfilledwithshootingstars.com/wordpress/?p=1197>.

timeless state. It's about the here and now. It's not about future or past. It's just about the present moment. I want to construct many present moments during the 600 hours, and be available and vulnerable for anybody in the audience. This which will create a trust so that the other person looking at me can also be available and vulnerable, and we can create a contact which is very direct and very human.⁵²⁷

Abramović's commitment to a presence that was humane, maternal, and emotionally secure, yet vulnerable was predicated on intersubjective contact. The chair was only empty for brief periods, ensuring Abramović never wanted for company. This coming together of people to fulfill the recognized and projected emotional needs of the artist evoked numerous critiques and accolades stimulating wide-ranging conversation in the public sphere about her work and the performance itself.

Transcultural Aesthetics

The Artist Is Present is one of the most important works in the reception of Abramović's transcultural aesthetic. Abramović's practice of stillness as tableau vivant was first established to equalize her embodied art practice with museological objects of painting and sculpture, always emulating the art object and its relation to space and architecture in museum performances.⁵²⁸ The Marron Atrium provided an ideal white cube for the secular expression of universal transcendence, the ritual space required for the liminal transformation promised by modernist museum experience.⁵²⁹

The concentration she cultivated to create a static image and transmit energy drew on meditation experience, which she has developed into her own method of mindfulness training and consciousness expansion. In *The Artist Is Present*, Abramović's body,

⁵²⁷ Ibid.

⁵²⁸ Goy, "Marina Abramović (interview)."

⁵²⁹ Carol Duncan, "The Art Museum as Ritual," in *Civilizing Rituals: Inside Public Art Museums, Re-Visions* (London, England) (London ; New York: Routledge, 1995), 7–20.

performance, dress, and setting created an image of the contemplative who gives and receives the contemplation of a beholder. As beholder, Abramović exemplified the expression of *abhinaya*, Schechner's model for the reception theory of his rasaesthetics.⁵³⁰ Abramović and her sitter beheld each other, expanding the stillness of tableau vivant into an act of mutual absorption in the human encounter. Partaking in the abhinaya of her performance—Abramović led the participants to an aesthetic experience of the present through the engaging presence of her gaze.

I continue to develop my analyses of transcultural aesthetics from the vocabulary and theoretical researches of Aby Warburg who developed multiple influential approaches to the history of art. The complexity and ever changing nature of Warburg's project at the end of his life, leaves his work without final conclusions, opening up his work to various interpretations applying the principles that define his project. In this section, I argue Abramović's performance is a transcultural religious expression of Warburg's *Pathosformel* (pathos formula), evoking a human psychology of contemplation and transcendence, as well as Warburg's interest in pathos formula as transhistorical forms and gestures that serve a psychological function during political upheaval.⁵³¹ As an art historian, Warburg described his method as the "Aim to investigate sociological conditions, the universally existing inhibitions against which the individual has to assert himself" with emphasis on formal analysis of body language in the image by "restricting conditions due to the nature of man's expressive movements."⁵³²

⁵³⁰ Schechner, "Rasaesthetics," 46.

⁵³¹ Scholars of Warburg's thought and times often attribute his specific political concerns to unstable conditions in Germany and Europe during his lifetime. He fled Germany during the First World War and was exposed to significant political instability in years prior.

⁵³² E. H. Gombrich, *Aby Warburg: An Intellectual Biography*, 2nd ed (Oxford: Phaidon, 1986), 143.

This focus on the body in images found a natural correlate in performance through his contact with the indigenous people of the American southwest and the Snake Dance of Hopi Pueblo.⁵³³ This focus on ritual was a seminal moment in his personal and intellectual formation, expanding his researches from antiquity and the Renaissance to anthropology through a personal relationship and correspondence with Franz Boas. While Warburg's approach to indigeneity and the Hopi presents problems for the interest of art historians in his studies, Claire Farago's critique of Warburg's use of the "primitive" to locate turn of the 19th century Hopi in a cultural context that was equivalent to Greek antiquity, as well as his disruption of cultural norms and taboos in the interest of his research indicates essential matters of concern in applying selected elements of his art historical methods.⁵³⁴ Consideration of these dimensions of his project allows me to reframe his contact the Hopi as his scholarly and personal experience of transculturation, fundamentally different from Abramović's participatory approach. In this instance, adapting his interest in ritual performance to avant-garde art practices of the last century does not depend on developing a hierarchy of cultures in this analysis.

In the interest of amplifying the borders of cultural discourse beyond the dominant Abrahamic themes of Euro-American politics and mass culture, I argue it is essential to recognize the transcultural nature of the uniquely religious discourse of public life engendered by Abramović's performance, positioning it as a key work of Global

⁵³³ A. Warburg and W. F. Mainland, "A Lecture on Serpent Ritual," *Journal of the Warburg Institute* 2, no. 4 (1939): 277–92, doi:10.2307/750040.

⁵³⁴ Claire Farago, "Silent Moves : On Excluding the Ethnographic Subject from the Discourse of Art History," in *The Art of Art History a Critical Anthology*, ed. Donald Preziosi, 2nd ed (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009).

Contemporary Art. The co-presence of these eastern and western religious themes in the development, form, criticism, and scholarship of *The Artist Is Present* mark the work as an expression of pathos formula of religious experience, a semiotics of transcultural contemplation.

As in Warburg's *Mnemosyne Atlas*, a massive scholarly project tracing forms through images organized conceptually and formally, I juxtapose images of seated figures of contemplation to illustrate the transcultural aesthetic and activity of Abramović's performance in a Pathosformel of meditative or contemplative sitting. The image of the seated contemplative crosses cultures and the polysemous meaning of Abramović's performance ranges from meditator to saint. I also draw on images and historical figures that have been introduced to scholarly discourse around the performance. Lydia Brawner refers to the icon and Jennifer Fisher to the long duration *darshan* (spiritual audience) of living Hindu saint Mata Amritanandamayi (Amma, 1953-) in their analyses of *The Artist Is Present* (Figures 8.3, 8.4).⁵³⁵ In her own work and autobiographical commentary, Abramović has emphasized the importance of Orthodox Christianity and its icons as miracle making places of power discussed in Chapter Seven. I expand these images to include a sculpture of a seated figure of the Buddha (Figure 8.5), amplifying the assortment of images to include the pathos formula of Buddhist meditation as *mudra* (Sanskrit, gesture) within the semiotics of Abramović's performance (Figure 8.6).

With the exception of the meditating Buddha, these images all address the beholder or spectator in a form of engagement that implies recognition, or actually

⁵³⁵ Jennifer Fisher, "Proprioceptive Friction: Waiting in Line to Sit with Marina Abramović.," *The Senses & Society* 7, no. 2 (July 2012): 153–72, doi:<http://dx.doi.org/10.2752/174589312X13276628771488>; Lydia Brawner, "The Artist Is Present: Performing the Icon," *Women & Performance: A Journal of Feminist Theory* 23, no. 2 (June 17, 2013): 212–25, doi:[10.1080/0740770X.2013.815522](https://doi.org/10.1080/0740770X.2013.815522).

includes reception of the viewer with reciprocated gaze or physical contact. The passivity of the seated posture emphasizes the peaceful, benign and contemplative nature of the image and individual, marking the pathos formula with a function of cultivating tranquility, serving as an alternative to suffering. The function of the Christian icon as an object of devotion not only provides an ideal image of femininity, the reciprocal gaze of the Madonna or other depicted saint functions as a divine presence that perceives the presence of the devotee. Abramović and Amritanandamayi receive the public with their physical presence, embodying an image of the welcoming presence of benign attention. Amritanandamayi is famed for receiving all comers with a hug, the ritual that defines her long duration practice of presence. In the image provided, Abramović is depicted in her white gown, the last of three she wore, a choice that emphasizes the formal similarity between her seated reception of museum goers and that of the living Hindu saint, Amritanandamayi.

Abramović's presence is the result of the personal practice of many different forms of spiritual discipline, with a strong emphasis on meditation in the Tibetan Buddhist tradition. As in *Nightsea Crossing* and *The House with the Ocean View*, Abramović's performance can be understood to tacitly depend on Vipassana meditation to sustain her presence. Unlike traditional images of the meditating Buddha with closed or half closed eyes, Abramović enacts the active form of meditation. She presents an image of intersubjectivity in meditation, rather than a model of seated introspection, as seen in the figure of the Gandhara Buddha. Such images, have distinct similarities in form and function, uniting religious practice across centuries, traditions and cultures with the same pathos formula.

In the variety of responses to Abramović's work invoking religious and mystical language nowhere is this cultural diversity better represented than in the narratives of participants of *The Artist Is Present*. These responses are anthologized in Appendix 1: section 3, "(Against) Hagiography: Sitters Contemplate Religion," a narrative history of the performance that not only attests to its transcultural aesthetic, but to the globally inclusive nature of that aesthetic in its appeal to diverse religious discourse. Indeed, for numerous observers, Abramović's secular form approached the approximation of a universal experience of ritualized transcendence Carol Duncan attributed to the institution of MoMA itself.⁵³⁶

Secular appraisals of the work have consistently utilized psychoanalytic language to discuss participation in terms of projection, which is comparable to reception of Abramović's performance as a mirror of her beholder. As Abramović observed in the 2012 documentary filmed during the performance, "It's not about me anymore. I'm just the mirror of their own self."⁵³⁷ Beyond critical observations of narcissism and exhibitionism,⁵³⁸ this experience of projection was repeatedly figured in transcultural language and religious references. Through the documentary, critic Emily Hornsby finds a paragon of Christian values, idealizing Abramović's mirror as Christ-like.

⁵³⁶ In her analysis of haptic aesthetics and the experience of proprioception at *The Artist is Present*, art historian Jennifer Fisher appeals to secular museum rituals and celebrity to argue the establishment of an "art cult" around the performance, as well as appealing to the saints and pilgrimage practices of Hinduism to contextualize Abramović's presence. Fisher describes the artist's gaze as a "distal embrace, a proprioception based analysis of Abramović's aesthetic that expands Abramović's performance into the gesture of physical embrace that defines Mata Amritanandamayi's religious performance. Duncan, "The Art Museum as Ritual"; Fisher, "Proprioceptive Friction," 157; Alisa Solomon, "The Artist's Present < Killing the Buddha," accessed July 20, 2015, <http://killingthebuddha.com/mag/icon/the-artists-present/>; Nina Meledandri, "A Flower Every Day (for Marina Abramović)," accessed March 31, 2011, <http://present2artist.tumblr.com/tagged/performance/chrono>.

⁵³⁷ Matthew Akers et al., *Marina Abramović: The Artist Is Present* (Music Box Films, 2012).

⁵³⁸ Jerry Saltz, "In the End, It Was All About You," *NYMag.com*, May 23, 2010, <http://nymag.com/arts/art/reviews/66161/>.

The internal gaze is self-focused, and so gazing externally at yourself can only ever be internal. Marina becomes the mirror that reflects only acceptance and love. In her external gaze, you see yourself as the object in her mirror—yet there’s no evaluation. I’m reminded of the story of the rich young ruler in Mark chapter 10, where Jesus looks at him in all of his self-righteous ignorance, in the midst of his heart’s mess, sees only him, and loves him.⁵³⁹

Transcultural significations of mirroring can be further developed through Abramović’s practice of Tibetan Buddhism and the deity figure of Akshobya, Dhyani Buddha of the east and Mirror-like Wisdom, as well as the gaze and methods of dharma transmission in Zen. Several participants in the performance independently used the mirror to describe their experience. Mirroring was multiply signified as confrontation of dark selves, Abramović as mirroring *tvat tam asi*—Sanskrit understanding of the self as ultimate reality, a blank canvas, and the Tibetan Lama as mirror of the aspirant.⁵⁴⁰ The contribution of Vanessa Lodigiani to the artist’s book *SEVENTY-FIVE* exemplifies the poetics of mirroring that Abramović perceived in her own experience of *The Artist Is Present*. Lodigiani celebrated the experience in religious terms, invoking the divine feminine across cultures,

Present, I surrendered, melting into a voyage that
revealed itself as a theater of my unconscious.
Oracle, Virgin, martyr, Kali: ferocious divine mother
in your blue - white aura...pure vibrating energy.
Mirror, mirror, mirror.
You embodied the key element in the act of all
creation: Contemplation. Offering us your being
as unconditional space to reach inside for truth

⁵³⁹ Emily Hornsby, “With Only a Look, Marina Abramović Is Making People Cry,” *Mockingbird*, accessed July 31, 2015, <http://www.mbird.com/2013/07/with-only-a-look-marina-Abramović-is-making-people-cry/>.

⁵⁴⁰ Monika Bravo, “Dear Marina: I Sat Twice with You within 5 Days... | PROCESS+ STUDIO: A Scrap Book,” accessed July 20, 2015, <http://monikabravo.tumblr.com/post/753795585/dear-marina-i-sat-twice-with-you-within-5-days>; Paco Blancas, ed., *SEVENTY-FIVE*, 2010, Winnie Tessmacher 75/44, Jeremy 75/28; Yazmany Arboleda, “Bringing Marina Flowers,” *The Huffington Post*, accessed July 20, 2015, http://www.huffingtonpost.com/yazmany-arboleda/bringing-marina-flowers_b_592597.html.

and realize that taking the time to be present and observe, beauty unfolds and all becomes now.⁵⁴¹

The duration of the gaze is coterminous with aesthetic and religious experience in Abramović's performance, by way of Csordas' formulation of alterity as the kernel of religion.⁵⁴² Abramović's emphasis on time to construct many present moments over a period of long duration tacitly evokes the Buddhist concept of impermanence, in which time and experience are understood as always changing. In a present moment of constant change, impermanence marks time as a constant experience of alterity. Alterity manifests in observation of things as they are in the present moment, eschewing thoughts of past and future—an experience of the present as a constant which is never familiar. The gaze also represents the reciprocal attention of the divine in the theology of the icon that looks back at the beholder.⁵⁴³ Art historian Hans Belting describes these icons as “living pictures,” “On the one hand so close to nature as to transcend the limits of art, yet on the other hand it exactly fulfills art's task of expressing life, as poetry had done.”⁵⁴⁴

Duration

Over time, watching the artist sit with participants became a slow minimalist exchange of subtle movements, blinks, breaths, and sighs making up the substrate of emotions as facial expressions, tears, and the occasional gesture that held a rapt fascination for engaged partakers, spectators to the marathon of intersubjective presence and individual endurance. The importance of duration to the comprehension of the

⁵⁴¹ Blancas, *SEVENTY-FIVE*, Vanessa Lodigiani 75/15.

⁵⁴² Csordas, “Asymptote of the Ineffable.”

⁵⁴³ “Icons as Religious Art - Loyola Press,” accessed July 27, 2015, <http://www.loyolapress.com/icons-as-religious-art.htm>.

⁵⁴⁴ Hans Belting, *Likeness and Presence: A History of the Image before the Era of Art* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), 261.

nuances of the work came to the fore for those interested in the piece as collaborative performance, an event nested inside layers of ritual and spectacle exploded through digital mediation beyond the confines of its specific spatiotemporal existence. Josephine Decker and Jeremy Lubman approached the piece and its duration as necessary, not only to see the substance of the work and its intimacies, but also to develop the state of mind Abramović's performance represented. Lubman summarized his experience of the transformation of consciousness achieved over time, "Anyone who watches this exhibit long enough and quietly enough will come into a state of openness. Of watching, and listening. It starts to become so clear how little we take the time to truly connect with other humans without an agenda."⁵⁴⁵

Neither observer sat with Abramović, but Decker achieved notoriety by stripping off her dress and attempting to sit nude on the final day of the performance, writing,

The Artist Is Present" isn't a work you can understand in passing, or even in sitting with it for 30 minutes. It's a durational piece, and it can take an entire day (or month) of watching to get inside of it and fully comprehend the intensity, the hard work and the intimacy being witnessed.⁵⁴⁶

Participants Ewa Zender and Nina Meledandri describe the experience of duration in starkly different terms. Zender's experience of the present moment reflects duration as experiential, observable as expanded awareness of the present, while Meledandri's

⁵⁴⁵ Jeremy Lubman, "LIMINAL RITES: The Art of Presence," *LIMINAL RITES*, June 8, 2010, <http://liminalrites.blogspot.com/2010/06/art-of-presence.html>; Jeremy Lubman, "Sitting With Marina : May 31st "...I've Begun to Think of This..." accessed July 25, 2015, <http://sittingwithmarina.tumblr.com/post/914959381/may-31st-ive-begun-to-think-of-this>.

⁵⁴⁶ Josephine Decker, "Why Does MoMA Hate My Body? | Manhattan, New York, NY | News," accessed July 20, 2015, <http://www.nypress.com/why-does-moma-hate-my-body>.

commitment to the piece involved several sittings and introspective blogging about her experience of the performance from beginning to end. Zender enthused vividly,

she's pure LOVE and it comprises everything: all dimensions of love... and it's LIVE, AUTHENTIC, REAL... and most importantly: INTENSE! when you step into this 'unique' time-space zone of presence with Marina Abramović, you know there's no way back.... or forward! there's just, right here, right now. It's eternity!⁵⁴⁷

As one of the regular visitors and repeat performers, Meledandri responded to questions on twitter about perception of repetitive and durational participation as pathological.

i can only speak to why i am compelled to return
(i sit for a number of reasons which are outlined at the end of my post from 2 visits ago.)
the first is my desire to witness the performance in its totality.
since this is a piece about duration,
it makes sense to me,
that to get the full impact of what is being exhibited
requires experiencing it over time,
this includes, for me gaining an experiential understanding of both the highs and the lows of what making durational art entails.[. . .]

this is a work of art
many of us revisit paintings, sculptures, etc. countless times over the years
to experience the transformative power these works have for us.
this piece will last 2.5 months,
then it will be over,
one way of preserving it is through the experience of it.⁵⁴⁸

Anyone could know how long the artist planned to sit. Sitting, and being willing to wait for the privilege was an element of the performance observed by several commentators as distinct from the experience of duration as a spectator. Frustration, connection, anticipation, meditation, and exhaustion characterized the long-term

⁵⁴⁷ Ewa Zender, "Day 64, Portrait 10," accessed July 25, 2015, <http://essaysaboutsitting.tumblr.com/post/958263375/day-64-portrait-10>; Ewa Zender, "Sitting With Marina : Day 64, Portrait 10 (38 Min.) "i AM Still T/here,..." accessed July 25, 2015, <http://sittingwithmarina.tumblr.com/post/958295021/day-64-portrait-10-38-min-i-am-still-t-here>.

⁵⁴⁸ Meledandri, "A Flower Every Day (for Marina Abramović)."

experience of duration as waiting. In the context of the long duration performance, one of the key questions circulating among participants waiting to sit with the artist was, “How long do you plan to sit?” Interest in the length of sittings and the goal of a handful of participants to sit for as long as they could underscored the importance of duration as a part of the participatory economy of the piece. The freedom from obligations and wealth of patience needed to wait most of the day or over multiple days to ‘sit with Marina’ defined the limits of a performance that was distinctive for its capacity to respond to participants’ investments in its temporal expansiveness.

As a performance requiring tremendous physical and emotional endurance of Abramović, duration produced myriad responses and results for participants and the rest of the viewing public. Multiple critics and participants observed the artist looked tired, recognizing the impact of the piece on the artist, not only as the days passed, but over the many hours she performed each day.⁵⁴⁹ The artist’s aesthetic of transformation through her performances is observable in the moment to moment changes in facial expression captured in photographs, but also in its long term results (Figures 8.7, 8.8, and 8.9). After the conclusion of the performance, she acknowledged the toll in terms of the three years

⁵⁴⁹ Carolina A. Miranda, “Asceticism as Art: Sitting in Silence with Marina Abramović,” *WNYC Culture*, March 12, 2010, <http://culture.wnyc.org/articles/features/2010/mar/12/asceticism-art-sitting-silence-marina-Abramović-moma/>; Amelia Jones, “‘The Artist Is Present’: Artistic Re-Enactments and the Impossibility of Presence,” *TDR/The Drama Review* 55, no. 1 (March 31, 2011): 16–45, doi:10.1162/DRAM_a_00046</p><p>; Ann-Sargent Wooster, “Sitting With Marina : Day 72, Portrait 49 (5 Min.) ‘Marina Wasn’t The...,’” accessed July 25, 2015, <http://sittingwithmarina.tumblr.com/post/930089950/day-72-portrait-49-5-min-marina-wasnt-the>; Kristen Hutchinson, “Forays into Performance Art: Sitting with Maria Abramović | Imaginations,” *Imaginations Journal of Cross Cultural Image Studies*, February 17, 2011, <http://imagination.csj.ualberta.ca/?p=6776>; Joe Holmes, “Day 42, Portrait 10,” accessed July 23, 2015, <http://essaysaboutsitting.tumblr.com/post/1729143721/day-42-portrait-10>; Tarynn Wiehahn, “Sitting With Marina : Day 72, Portrait 35 (11 Min.) ‘Once You Make It...,’” accessed July 26, 2015, <http://sittingwithmarina.tumblr.com/post/826248738/day-72-portrait-35-11-min-once-you-make-it>.

it took her to recover physically and emotionally.⁵⁵⁰ Multiple observers noted suffering as an essential component of the durational emphasis.⁵⁵¹ Performance scholar and performer in the retrospective exhibition Lydia Brawner observed the effects of the performance on Abramović during her regular work at the museum.

The physical toll on Abramović's body began to show in obvious ways: her skin looked ashen and her posture increasingly bent. For those who chose to watch often, myself included, it became less about the excitement of participating in a splashy art event, but instead about the strange ritualistic viewing of a body in discomfort, of a body in pain.⁵⁵²

In the image she created visually, Abramović did not maintain complete stillness, but maintained her performing presence in the seated posture for the 75 days of the event. Exhibition curator Klaus Biesenbach offered her the option to end the performance early.⁵⁵³ Instead, Abramović altered her aesthetic of stillness to accommodate her body, and the formal element of duration became essential to the aesthetic integrity of *The Artist is Present*.

She ritualized receiving each sitter by lowering her head and closing her eyes between each individual, raising her gaze to theirs after they took their place in the chair opposite her. Over time, movements and gestures punctuated the process. To accommodate the physical strain on the body, the artist would rub her neck and press her hands into her eyes between sitters, occasionally altering the position of her hands. In the

⁵⁵⁰ Fan Zhong, "Artist Marina Abramović Discusses Her New Show at Sean Kelly Gallery," *W Magazine*, October 22, 2014, <http://www.wmagazine.com/culture/art-and-design/2014/10/marina-Abramović-new-performance-art/>; Rachel Cooke, "Marina Abramović: 'This Piece Is Deeper and More Profound than Anything I've Ever Done before'," *The Guardian*, August 23, 2014, sec. From the Observer, <http://www.theguardian.com/theobserver/2014/aug/23/marina-Abramović-512-hours-serpentine>.

⁵⁵¹ Heather Rose, "Sitting with Marina," *Art and Australia* 49, no. 3 (March 2012): 470–75; Popp, "Day 22, Portrait 19"; Dan Visel, "Day 21, Portrait 14," accessed July 26, 2015, <http://essaysaboutsitting.tumblr.com/post/880658564/day-21-portrait-14>.

⁵⁵² Brawner, "The Artist Is Present," June 17, 2013, 224.

⁵⁵³ Akers et al., *Marina Abramović*.

last month of the performance Abramović removed the table that was between her and the other chair, creating a space in which she could lean forward, leave the chair and crouch between sitters, relieving tensions in her body. Within the long periods of stillness defined by the autonomic motions of breath and blinking, these intentional movements became a dramatic expressions of the significance of duration and dimensions of the performance that were adapted to accommodate it.

Performance and the Open Work

The Artist is Present is an open work that functioned within a brief set of strictures open to interpretation or variation based on the inclinations of the participant. The formal understanding of the piece centers on a silent, seated encounter involving eye contact (Figure 8.10). The “conscious acts of freedom” that define Umberto Eco’s poetics of the open work were operating in *The Artist Is Present*, as the public had the opportunity to become a performer placed “at the focal point of a limitless number of interrelations, among which he chooses to set up his own form.”⁵⁵⁴ Within the strictures of the performance the single element explicitly open to complete freedom of choice was the duration of their sitting.

Many participants chose to sit more than once, some developing a level of public recognition described as “microcelebrity.”⁵⁵⁵ Makeup artist Paco Blancas was the only participant to sit with Abramović for an entire day, ultimately sitting with the artist a total of 21 times, observing all of the strictures. He had the number 21 tattooed on his forearm to commemorate the experience and organized an artist book of participant responses of

⁵⁵⁴ Eco, “The Poetics of the Open Work,” 23.

⁵⁵⁵ Julia Kaganskiy, “MoMA | Visitor Viewpoint: MoMA’s Mystery Man,” accessed August 2, 2015, http://www.moma.org/explore/inside_out/2010/05/10/visitor-viewpoint-momas-mystery-man.

75 words, one for each day of the performance as a gift presented to Abramović at the conclusion of the exhibition.⁵⁵⁶ In addition to Blancas, myriad artists, students, and other interested people who sat multiple times were regular visitors to *The Artist Is Present* and developed their own projects within the limits of Abramović's strictures.

Painter Nina Meledandri established herself as a notable participant in Abramović's work during *The House with the Ocean View* (2004) attending every day of the twelve-day performance.⁵⁵⁷ During *The Artist Is Present*, Meledandri blogged her observations while conducting a parallel project, painting a flower for every day of Abramović's MoMA performance.⁵⁵⁸ High school student Dana Danica Ljubicić sat several times and organized a parallel performance in the lobby and atrium in May where numerous people gathered in pairs and engaged each other in silent exchange of gazes, emulating Abramović's performance.⁵⁵⁹

Rather than reflecting the openness of interpretation found in modernist literary open works, a sense of unlimited behavior was bestowed upon some participants, several of whom were interested in closing their eyes, bringing gifts, performing rituals, and undertaking their own discrete artworks within the purview of Abramović's authorship. Eco quotes Pousseur to elucidate the infinite variety of subjective experiences possible within such an open work.

In the midst of an inexhaustible network of relationships, and to choose for himself, so to speak, his own modes of approach, his reference points and his scale, and to endeavor to use as many dimensions as he possibly

⁵⁵⁶ Blancas, *SEVENTY-FIVE*.

⁵⁵⁷ Meledandri, "TheHouseWithTheOceanView."

⁵⁵⁸ Meledandri, "A Flower Every Day (for Marina Abramović)."

⁵⁵⁹ *Ibid.*

can at the same time and thus dynamize, multiply and extend to the utmost degree his perceptual faculties.⁵⁶⁰

Artist Ananda Day Cavalli sat 29 times to commemorate her mother's death and every year of her own life, wearing her mother's antique kimono, and blogging the brief notes she made in the sculpture garden after every sitting on a blog titled "Conversations for Non-Human Use—Art As Religious Experience: Engaging In Marina Abramović's Meditation: A Practice And Investigation."⁵⁶¹

Costumed and disruptive interventions were a periodic event, resulting in tighter security and increasingly strict instructions and observations by museum security. On March 27, 2010 performance artist Anya Liftig undertook a six-hour sitting dressed like Abramović while wearing a wig to replicate Abramović's appearance, titling her intervention *The Anxiety of Influence* (2010) after Harold Bloom's work of literary criticism (Figure 8.11). Liftig was aware of various disruptive interventions in the performance during which participants spoke, put their shoes on the table, and attempted to stand on it.⁵⁶² In her performance *This Is Not Me, This Is Also Me* (2010) artist Vanessa Lodigiani sat six times with Abramović in different costume each time, completing her performance by sitting in a burqa and touring the retrospective upstairs afterwards (Figures 8.12, 8.13). She described her performance, "The performance was

⁵⁶⁰ Eco, "The Poetics of the Open Work," 29.

⁵⁶¹ Ananda Day Cavalli, "Conversations for Non-Human Use: Fourth Sitting," *Conversations for Non-Human Use*, March 18, 2010, <http://sittingwithmarinaAbramovic.blogspot.com/2010/03/fourth-sitting.html>.

⁵⁶² Anna Liftig, "The Anxiety of Influence : Anya Liftig," accessed March 31, 2011, <http://www.anyaliftig.com/index.php?/performance/the-anxiety-of-influence/>; Tatiana Berg, "The Anxiety of Influence," *BOMB Magazine*, March 29, 2010, <http://bombmagazine.org/article/4326/>; Anna Liftig, "No Smarties » Seein' Dis: The Anxiety of Influence," accessed March 30, 2010, <http://nosmarties.com/2010/seein-dis-the-anxiety-of-influence/>.

based on the experience of annulling the individual. I no longer represented myself but a collective identity. I became a symbol. A question. A contrasting figure. The "other."⁵⁶³

Marriage is a gesture that was repeatedly deployed in artists' performances. Five years after the performance, Abramović recalled the pleasure she took in the performance of Amir Baradaran who made two interventions during which he spoke (Figure 8.14).⁵⁶⁴ In *The Other Artist Is Present* (2010), he wore an identical red gown and proposed a temporary marriage to Abramović in the terms of his Persian Shiite heritage while honoring her physical body and body of work.⁵⁶⁵ Ceremonial performance in the form of nuptials also appealed to performance artist Jody Lyn-Kee-Chow who "married art" during her sitting dressed in a bridal veil and gown (Figure 8.15). She recalled her performance, "I expected to have a conversation with her through the eyes, and I did. [. . .] She was my priestess. I was actually marrying art in the chapel. Maybe I was also confronting the institution in which this all took place."⁵⁶⁶

Security thwarted several artists in their plans to open the work beyond the strictures that Abramović set and the institutional restrictions against public nudity. Baradaran's performance and that of others resulted in ejection from the performance and the museum by security. Several participants detailed the increasingly specific

⁵⁶³ Vanessa Lodigiani, "This Is Not Me, This Is Also Me.," *Vanessa Lodigiani*, accessed July 25, 2015, <http://vanessalodigiani.com/performance/this-is-not-me-this-is-also-me/>; Vanessa Lodigiani, "Sitting With Marina : Day 32, Portrait 12 (40 Min.) "I Sat in Front Of...," accessed July 25, 2015, <http://sittingwithmarina.tumblr.com/post/1104343440/day-32-portrait-12-40-min-i-sat-in-front-of>.

⁵⁶⁴ Abramović mentioned the "guy who proposed marriage" to me during recording sessions for *3015* (2015) at the University of California San Diego.

⁵⁶⁵ Amir Baradaran, "Amir Baradaran - The Other Artist Is Present," accessed March 30, 2010, <http://www.amirbaradaran.com/>.

⁵⁶⁶ Jody Lyn-Kee-Chow, "Sitting With Marina : Day 70, Portrait 19 (28 Min.) "I Sat with Marina...," accessed July 23, 2015, <http://sittingwithmarina.tumblr.com/post/1525659365/day-70-portrait-19-28-min-i-sat-with-marina>; Jody Lyn-Kee-Chow, "Day 70, Portrait 19 (28 Min.)," accessed July 23, 2015, <http://essaysaboutsitting.tumblr.com/post/1525619103/day-70-portrait-19-28-min>.

instructions from security personnel supervising participation in the performance. Nina Meledandri summarized the final instructions defining the limits of the work's openness, which were strictly enforced.

do not put anything on the table
 not even your hands
 do not speak to the artist
 maintain eye contact
 stay relatively still
 as one guard put it:
 "you are being invited to participate in a performance, these are the
 parameters, by not abiding by them you are disrespecting the artist"⁵⁶⁷

Mediation⁵⁶⁸

The unique circumstances of distribution, documentation, and archival preservation of Abramović's monumental performance, *The Artist Is Present* resulted in an internet-based archive that was born digital. Digital distribution facilitated real time diffusion of Abramović's performance, which reached an unprecedented number of people inside and outside the museum as it occurred. Preceded by a media blitz that included several major art magazines and profiles in other major publications, *The Artist Is Present* is a unique event in exhibition history as a result of Abramović's receptivity to contact, facility with performance, and popularity with journalists. During the performance and in the months leading up to it, director Matthew Akers and crew were constantly filming Abramović for HBO Films and the 2012 documentary *The Artist Is Present*.

⁵⁶⁷ Meledandri, "A Flower Every Day (for Marina Abramović)."

⁵⁶⁸ A version of this section was presented at "The Web as Art Historical Archive of the Present: Marina Abramović's *The Artist is Present*." European Science Foundation-European Cooperation in Science and Technology (ESF-COST) High Level Research Conference. *Networked Humanities: Art History in the Web*. Maratea, Italy, October 9-14, 2010.

In addition to publications and cinema, the role of the web in the mediation of major components of the artwork's historical impact is unparalleled. It resulted in a predominantly digital set of documents related to the performance and its reception, producing a unique research environment for the practice of art history, which included the spectrum from participation live event to online digital explorer. During the performance, mediation via the internet expanded the public's opportunities to observe, resulting in a worldwide phenomenon among enthusiasts of Contemporary art. In addition to the visitors from all corners of the world who came to MoMA specifically for Abramović's exhibition, the performance was a focus of attention around the globe. Arts journalist and *Hyperallergic* editor Hrag Vartanian described the response of the international arts community by citing Defne Ayas, international curator and art executive, "She mentioned that people in Shanghai, where she lives part of the year, were discussing the piece as if it was taking place a few minutes away from the city. She confirmed that it became an international phenomenon."⁵⁶⁹

Real time images of the performance, which had duration of 72 museum days and included three preview days (75 days), were streamed live over the Museum of Modern Art's website (Figure 8.16). In addition to this web presence established by the museum, the social media site Flickr was used to host photographer Marco Anelli's portraits of Abramović and 1,545 collaborators who participated in the performance (figure 8.17). In addition to these highly unconventional modes of exhibition, primary source documents produced by observers are secondary elements of performance hosted primarily on the

⁵⁶⁹ Hrag Vartanian, "MoMA's Abramović Ends With a Bang," *Hyperallergic*, accessed July 27, 2015, <http://hyperallergic.com/6611/moma-abramovic-line-ends/>.

web. Journalism and blogging in major news outlets such as the *New York Times* and other sites widely available to the public provide the primary archival material generated by critics of the performance. Tumblr, Blogger, Facebook, Flickr, Twitter, and other sites have emerged as major sources of first person narrative, creative writing, and critical discourse, making the web a primary historical archive of the piece.

Digital MoMA

The Artist Is Present was a significant departure for the Museum of Modern Art, as its first retrospective devoted to performance art. The web presence of Abramović's performance during the exhibition was complimented by the distribution of Italian photographer Marco Anelli's portraits of the artist and sitters throughout the exhibition. The museum's exhibition website included an embedded version of Anelli's photos, which were also posted to the museum's photostream on Flickr.⁵⁷⁰ Anelli photographed each sitter in close-up from his location just outside the square, using a telephoto lens to capture a fraction of each sitter's performance. His aesthetic favors the full range of all the subtleties of human expression with emphasis on tears, beatific countenance, awkward moments of silent emotion, deep contemplation, challenging confrontation and blank inscrutability punctuated by rarer broad smiles, and moments of joy. During the performance, updates to the set attracted significant of attention from journalists, bloggers, and participants, resulting in high traffic to the site. The photostream and

⁵⁷⁰ "Marina Abramović: The Artist Is Present—Portraits," *Flickr - Photo Sharing!*, accessed July 31, 2015, <https://www.flickr.com/photos/themuseumofmodernart/sets/72157623741486824>; Museum of Modern Art (New York, N.Y.), Marina Abramović, and Marco Anelli, "MoMA.org | Interactives | Exhibitions | 2010 | Marina Abramović: The Artist Is Present | Portraits," accessed March 31, 2011, <http://www.moma.org/interactives/exhibitions/2010/marinaAbramovic/index.html>; Marco Anelli et al., *Portraits in the Presence of Marina Abramović* (Bologna, Italy: Damiani Editore, 2012).

streaming video provided worldwide access to the exhibition and immediately accessible documentation that spawned a number of responses using its content. At the time of this writing, the photo set has received more than 1.6 million views, an increase from 900,000 in the fall of 2010.

The online presentation of streaming video included a frame highlighting the title of the exhibition, links, and timecodes in the upper left corner of the image that framed Abramović and her companion in profile during the hours the museum was open. Among regular visitors to the museum in person and online the popular streaming video feature came to be known as the *marinacam*. Inside the atrium, a MacBook and cameras mounted high on the wall captured the artist and her sitter. The profile shot was streamed online, while cameras mounted behind Abramović and the sitter filmed each chair singly. Four banks of klieg, high intensity cinematic lights gave a brighter than daylight effect within the square where the performers sat. This square was rigorously patrolled by security. Although photography was forbidden in the atrium, Museum wi-fi enabled onsite image capture from the webcam, allowing a strange doubling of image production that favored the use of computers in the atrium to document the performance without violating the rules. Capturing images from the *marinacam* was an important means of documenting the performance for observers on and off site. Photographer Dimitri Chrysanthopoulous made hundreds of screenshots from the museum's webcam feed, posted links to them in the comments of sitters' Flickr portraits, and edited them into a three-minute video that animated the actions of some of the sitters and Abramović.⁵⁷¹

⁵⁷¹ My own final sitting on the second to last day of the show was animated by Chryanthpoulous. Dimitri Chrysanthopoulous, "Marina Abramović Webcam Capture Animation Video on Vimeo," accessed April 27, 2011, <http://vimeo.com/12226459>.

Social Media

From the content of MoMA's Flickr photostream blogs appeared, creating archives of certain types of photos and aggregated personal narratives. Tumblr was the portal of choice for content related to the performance, appealing to archivists and commentators with practices engaging the full duration of the event. In addition to Flickr galleries of the performance, the image-focused advantages of the Tumblr format were put to use for the blog "Marina Abramović made me cry."⁵⁷² Curated content focused exclusively on the distinctive category of tearful portraits went viral across the internet.

Author and repeat participant Lisa Tharpe was a key user of web portals as archival tools, using both Flickr and Tumblr to solicit, edit, and preserve first person accounts from around the web and personal contacts. On her Tumblr "Sitting With Marina," she Anelli's portraits of participants to their essays about the experience. Content ranges from journalistic and critical appraisals to personal blogs, solicited essays, and selected contributions from the artist's book *SEVENTY-FIVE*. An invaluable resource, her efforts to connect faces to stories constitutes one of the most important archives of material available to scholars allowing a chronology of narrative to be established. Unlike the vast majority of journalistic and critical responses to *The Artist Is Present*, Tharpe's archive focuses exclusively on accounts by those who sat with the artist, or created major responses as accounts of their attempt to sit. On Flickr, Tharpe

⁵⁷² "Marina Abramović Made Me Cry," accessed July 31, 2015, <http://marinaAbramovićmademecry.tumblr.com/>.

created galleries of “repeat performers,” and MoMA security staff who sat with the artist.⁵⁷³

Social media kept participants in contact with each other throughout the performance. Without the creation of new content on the photostream, or screenshots to be taken from the marinacam, a few weeks after the performance’s conclusion digital activity and exchange reverted to traditional forms of digital communication and real world meetings. Several of those who can be found among participants who contributed to a book for Abramović, *SEVENTY-FIVE*, each text consisting of 75 words. This group continues to communicate and organized events in New York City the year following the performance, some with the artist in attendance.

The Line

Blue, April 8, 2010

“The community of people in line is glorious.”⁵⁷⁴

Red, May 8, 2010

“I miss the people from the time before. Today the people are reminiscent of Disneyland.”⁵⁷⁵

White, May 29, 2010

“There is a tension in line, a seemingly sincere interest and appreciation for Marina that seems less about the spectacle and more about art.”⁵⁷⁶

—Patricia Brace, artist

⁵⁷³ Lisa Tharpe, “Sitting With Marina,” accessed March 31, 2011, <http://sittingwithmarina.tumblr.com/>; Lisa Tharpe, “Plastic Tourist’s Galleries on Flickr,” *Repeat Performers--The Artist Is Present*, accessed July 20, 2015, <https://www.flickr.com/photos/plastictourist/galleries/>.

⁵⁷⁴ Patricia Brace, “Day 52, Portrait 19,” accessed July 25, 2015, <http://essaysaboutsitting.tumblr.com/post/1027086226/day-52-portrait-19>; Patricia Brace, “Sitting With Marina : Day 52, Portrait 19 (47 Min.) “My Arms Are Stiff,...,” accessed July 25, 2015, <http://sittingwithmarina.tumblr.com/post/1027130293/day-52-portrait-19-47-min-my-arms-are-stiff>.

⁵⁷⁵ Brace, “Day 52, Portrait 19”; Brace, “Sitting With Marina.”

⁵⁷⁶ Brace, “Day 52, Portrait 19”; Brace, “Sitting With Marina.”

Unlike prior performances that involved intersubjective gazing, *Nightsea Crossing* and *The House with the Ocean View*, Abramović did not explain *The Artist Is Present* as intended to change or transform the audience as an explicit part of its development or form, but to bring stillness to a space. Several participants did observe a collective experience around the square. Some attributed the heightened attention to duration, while others found it in the collective experience of observing, describing it as “collaborative, meditative clarity.”⁵⁷⁷ In Chapter Five, I discussed the importance of collective experience in meditation and its relationship to the performative presence of Abramović and Ulay. With *The Artist is Present*, participants have begun to independently report the types of experience she has intended to transmit with her performance.

To the larger public, the quality of intimacy transmitted by Abramović’s performance was supported by the experience of the collective, a spontaneous *communitas* established around the square as participants waited their turn. Prolonged contact between participants resulted in the formation of brief and lasting bonds. Rather than exclusively observing the artwork, conversation took place among strangers. These experiences led to senses of community and deeper experiences of intimacy, as well as feelings of antagonism. Unlike most museum experiences, social exchange and discussion were a constant, as those waiting in line were ripe for inquiry from each other and passersby.

The importance of waiting to sit in “The Line” was recognized as an important part of the piece by multiple observers and participants. Some of the most detailed

⁵⁷⁷ Solomon, “The Artist’s Present < Killing the Buddha.”

reports of the dynamics around the performance were written by scholars and critics who attended the performance with the intention to sit, without achieving their goal.⁵⁷⁸ Others recounted the diversity of people they encountered and the variable perception of waiting. Some reveled in the meditative nature of the experience, while others confronted and discussed negative responses to those who were judged for sitting for ‘too long’. Participants summarized the importance and experience of hours of waiting, the line as a major element of the performance that was so significant as to be a defining element of the event (Appendix 1, Section One: The Line).⁵⁷⁹

In my own experience of waiting, I met writers on research trips that could easily be described as pilgrimages, devotees of Abramović’s work from across the Atlantic and the Pacific, there, as I was, to work. I made memorable, lasting connections with artists and yogis, astrologers and meditators finding connections that were comfortable and easy. These contacts have broadened my circle of colleagues, friends, and research subjects, all around an interest to be present as art, a unique opportunity afforded by Abramović’s historic performance. The generosity and community that arose around the piece extended so far as to support my research. Lisa Tharpe generously used her frequent flier miles to ensure my return to New York for the end of the performance, happy to receive my account of the final days in exchange for her patronage of my research. Connections and outcomes that reflect the rapid and significant encounters that occurred in “The Line.”

⁵⁷⁸ Fisher, “Proprioceptive Friction”; Solomon, “The Artist’s Present < Killing the Buddha”; Jenny Sauers, “Long Day’s Journey: 8 Hours With Artist Marina Abramović,” *Jezebel*, accessed July 20, 2015, <http://jezebel.com/5540839/long-days-journey-8-hours-with-artist-marina-abramovi>; Decker, “Why Does MoMA Hate My Body? | Manhattan, New York, NY | News.”

⁵⁷⁹ I have organized these accounts chronologically in terms of waiting for Abramović rather than by date of publication.

Sitting with Marina

During the performance, the community of observers and participants became well established. The ritual of waiting and entering the square drew a number of critics, scholars, and practitioners of the arts who contributed their accounts to the internet. Some were journalists, others occupied the blogosphere. In her attenuated engagement with the public, the familiarity created by past contact with Abramović's art, the retrospective, and the performance resulted in an informality that became an intimate experience of "Marina." The personal connection articulated by the phrase "sitting with Marina" appeared in the discourse in text and between participants, reframing Abramović as an intimate stranger whom all could call by her first name.

These sitters numbered more than 1,400, and those who recorded their experience as text are a self-selected set commentators who held a unique position by being able to attend. Art historian Jane Blocker privileges the position of the legitimate witness through testimony, which I locate in the authorial voice of text.⁵⁸⁰ In Appendix 1, section 2 "Sitting with Marina," I have organized these accounts chronologically in terms of the authors' sitting with Abramović rather than by date of publication. The writers selected are featured there as necessary representations of the work and its history.

The diversity of experience falls into various flows and nodes of description, some eschewing the language of faith and religion that surrounded the performance, finding secular and aesthetic terms to ground their points of view. Emotions and sensations of immobility and physical estrangement, lost sense of time, intensity,

⁵⁸⁰ Jane Blocker, *Seeing Witness: Visuality and the Ethics of Testimony* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2009), xxxiii.

recognition, projection, hallucination, peace, love, synchronization of the breath, vacillation from sadness to joy, telepathic monologues and dialogues punctuate descriptions of sitting with Marina. Descriptions of affect are accompanied by observations of the artist herself—her fatigue, her strength, her love, her remoteness, and sitters intentions to support her in her performance by sending positive energy.

Among other distinctive and shared experiences of sitting with Marina, negative psychological experiences of fears of being judged were fleeting anxieties that receded after time spent in the opposite chair. The experience of looking into Abramović's eyes led two participants to analyze the differences between her right and left eyes, finding darkness and suffering in the right, and light and compassion in the left. Poet Sarah Fox observed,

Sitting with Marina was empowering. I lost touch completely with time and with the spectatorship, the live performative aspect as it existed (physically) outside the square and (virtually, archivally) online. I became thoroughly engaged with and fascinated by my encounter with Marina in the space and moment of our creative/live/temporary merger. The first reaction I had after we'd established our gaze was one of shock at the extent of her physical suffering. I felt almost assaulted—energetically, in my body—by her discomfort. I then began to notice that she had trained herself to endure this discomfort by housing all of her suffering in one eye (her right) and sustaining all of her light and fierce attention—it felt almost like a spotlight—in her other eye. (Did others notice this?) We shared an indeterminate sadness with each other.⁵⁸¹

Filmmaker Tarynn Weihahn made strikingly similar observations,

I'm lost in her right eye. I can't take my eye off of her right eye. We're in an eye lock. Is she giving me a bad look? Is she angry at me? This eye seems dark and evilish and sad. I see weight, misery, darkness, fear, shame, hiding, hate, abuse, death. Is she looking into the same eye I

⁵⁸¹ Sarah Fox, "Sitting With Marina : Day 63, Portrait 23 (27 Min.) "If the Piece....," accessed July 25, 2015, <http://sittingwithmarina.tumblr.com/post/990571147/day-63-portrait-23-27-min-if-the-piece>; Sarah Fox, "Day 63, Portrait 23," accessed July 25, 2015, <http://essaysaboutsitting.tumblr.com/post/990431268/day-63-portrait-23>.

wonder? I look over to her left eye and I'm suddenly looking into peace, warmth, care, softness, beauty, stillness, compassion, understanding, nurture, mothering, love, acceptance, openness. She is looking into the same eye.

[. . .]

I see her breathing and my breath links into a synching slow rhythm with my mouth still open and I feel the breath rise and fall between us at the same speedlessness. The eyes begin to cross until I don't see any fixed eyes, everything blends and blurs and I no longer see or think good and bad.⁵⁸²

Others experienced altered states of consciousness in terms of hallucination, an experience artist Kneya Robinson attributed to Abramović's investigations into culture and consciousness,

When I did finally reach the chair I witnessed a hallucinatory vision of her face. No lie, her visage was a disembodied object that hovered a few inches from her face-place. [. . .] The literature mentions that Marina Abramović studied hypnosis and with aboriginal groups in Australia. I think she must have learned some techniques that create this experience in a way that harnesses her own personal energy into manifestations that are visible to others.⁵⁸³

Poet Anthony Thornton made similar observation, without analysis.⁵⁸⁴

Once seated, I breathed deeply, gazed, and hallucinated. Her face became a syrupy oscillation of decay and rebirth. Her features would corrode and, as quickly as they dispersed, would reconfigure.⁵⁸⁵

⁵⁸² Tarynn Wiehahn, "Day 72, Portrait 35," accessed July 26, 2015, <http://essaysaboutsitting.tumblr.com/post/826204127/day-72-portrait-35>; Wiehahn, "Sitting With Marina."

⁵⁸³ Kenya Robinson, "Kenya (Robinson) Workspace: The (Artist) Is Present: Part II," *Kenya (Robinson) Workspace*, May 8, 2010, <http://kenyaworkspace.blogspot.com/2010/05/artist-is-present-part-ii.html>; Kenya Robinson, "Sitting With Marina : Day 51, Portrait 18 (7 Min.) "No Lie, Her Visage....," accessed July 23, 2015, <http://sittingwithmarina.tumblr.com/post/1499711316/day-51-portrait-18-7-min-no-lie-her-visage>.

⁵⁸⁴ Such hallucinatory experiences of intersubjective gazing were also reported by participants in The Abramović Method Workshop.

⁵⁸⁵ Anthony Thornton, "Day 53, Portrait 12," accessed July 26, 2015, <http://essaysaboutsitting.tumblr.com/post/825943193/day-53-portrait-12>; Anthony Thornton, "Sitting With Marina : Day 53, Portrait 12 (40 Min.) "A Lesley Gore Song....," accessed July 26, 2015, <http://sittingwithmarina.tumblr.com/post/825973352/day-53-portrait-12-40-min-a-lesley-gore-song>.

One of the most consistent experiences among those who recorded their observations was a feeling of weakness, or being emotionally overwhelmed after leaving the square.

Numerous participants reported they felt their bodies shaking, or overcome by the desire to dissolve into tears. Such intensities of experience elicited a wide vocabulary of description, often compared to religious practice.

(Against) Hagiography: Sitters Contemplate Religion

In focusing on religion, I foreground a category of experience that permeates accounts of *The Artist is Present*. Rather than interrogating the approximation of the performance to any particular strands of belief and practice, I emphasize the diversity of expression that marks religion as a human activity. I draw upon Abramović and her audience to illustrate the diversity of global religion as a key factor in understanding the plurality of religio-aesthetic experience and the transcultural potency of Contemporary art as a tool in public discourse with global implications.

In Appendix 1, section 3, “Sitters Contemplate Religion,” first person accounts and reflections set Abramović’s performance into global religious context. These accounts refer to religion to disavow, as well as explain religious experience as a part of participation in *The Artist Is Present*. Accounts refer to religion in general, Hinduism, paganism, Christianity, meditation, Daoism, Buddhism, and shamanism. Anecdotes likened sitting with Abramović to the Jewish mourning practice of sitting *shiva*, while another overheard in the atrium rejected the idea she was portraying a Russian Orthodox icon.

One distinctive set of responses agrees with art historian Jennifer Fisher, contextualizing Abramović’s performance in terms of *darshan* (sacred audience) of her

contemporary, the Hindu saint Mata Amritanandamayi, widely known as Amma.⁵⁸⁶ Amma is known worldwide for offering *darshan*, or spiritual vision of her saintly attainment receiving pilgrims, devotees, and other participants with a hug. The proliferation of these comparisons of performance of the artist to peers with worldwide recognition is an important indication of the popularity of receptive performance practices in our time and the value of considering art practices in the broader context of globalized performance by individuals without resorting to discourses of stardom or celebrity. I amplify Warburg's Nameless Science to understand that not only does the image lie between the aesthetic and religion, in a world history of Global Contemporary Art the body does, too.

As artist and critic Mead McClain observed, many participants seemed to be seeking a dimension of experience that would fulfill an interest in a unique encounter of a mystical type.

My experience in talking to the other sitters around me makes me think that for some people, this piece contains echoes of visits to oracles, mediums, saints, monks, wise men, and other sage-types.⁵⁸⁷

His own experience in Buddhist traditions led him to conclude the experience of Abramović did not match his experience of recognized Buddhist masters. Notably, the artist herself resorted to the language of the sacred to describe the bodily experience of her performance, without defining the experience in terms of specific cultural forms,

This feeling of beauty and unconditional love, this feeling of there's no kind of borders between your body and environment—you start having this incredible feeling of lightness and harmony with yourself. Something

⁵⁸⁶ Fisher, "Proprioceptive Friction," 160–162, 170.

⁵⁸⁷ Mead Mclean, "Interpretations. Marina Abramović 3 of 2.," *Mead McLean*, June 8, 2010, <http://meadmclean.blogspot.com/2010/06/interpretations-marina-Abramović-3-of-2.html>.

becomes, like, holy. I can't explain. And that other state of mind is exactly what public start feeling—that something is different.⁵⁸⁸

This religious dimension of the experience is the part of her experience she has described in greatest detail, refraining from describing the dimensions of suffering that were observed in the atrium, taking a toll that took her years to recover.

The fragility and transitory nature of religious optimism was observed by philosopher and critic Arthur Danto, who contributed an essay to the catalogue. He recalled, “For a wild moment I thought my physical ailments would fade away, as if I were at Lourdes.”⁵⁸⁹ He also invoked the shamanic to describe his experience of Abramović’s performing presence, an observation that may owe more to his study of the literature around her work than his engagement with shamanic practices. Artist and critic Ann-Sargeant Wooster also observed the ephemeral nature of the heightened emotional experience, comparing it to the performance practice of teaching. She condensed many of the dimensions of participants’ observation, across cultures and altered states of consciousness in her essay reflecting on her experience,

I never thought she was a mother to me but I saw her incarnation in the performance as historical things I know about including the worship of the Great Goddess, the Delphic Oracle and the Libyan sibyl. I have visited the hug mother(Amma) which this has elements of and had a confusing experience with her. She hugged me and said, “no, no, no.” What did that mean?[. . .]

I have never felt I had the god gene and have been unable, nor desired, to follow gurus. There was something about my experience that was like a drug high that leads you to addiction trying to recapture that first intense magical moment. I know it was a performance but it felt briefly like love, the kind of love you might go to the ends of the earth to recapture but bankrupt yourself and never feel it again in the process. I know the art of the classroom where students feel there is an intimacy

⁵⁸⁸ Akers et al., *Marina Abramović*.

⁵⁸⁹ Arthur C. Danto, “Sitting With Marina,” *Opinionator*, accessed July 20, 2015, <http://opinionator.blogs.nytimes.com/2010/05/23/sitting-with-marina/>.

between you that vanishes when the class is over and the curtain comes down. I still find it extraordinary that that kind of experience with its crescendo building over time happened in an art museum.⁵⁹⁰

The Self is Present: On Sitting

In the interest of recording my subjective experiences as accurately as possible, I made an effort to write in the atrium immediately following my sitting with Abramović, recording the intentions, actions, and impressions of my performance. The paragraphs that follow are accounts that privilege experience over analysis, participation as performance, and the projection of my personal experience of presence as most substantively cultivated via meditation.

First Sitting
Wednesday April 21, 2010
day 37, portrait 12
#0766, 37 minutes

Today was the day for sitting. I finally got to the front of the line around 2:40 and finished at 3:17. As the line thinned out, others giving up, I found myself in line next to Paco Blancas. As I came to my own sitting, I was terrible tired. The seat was far more comfortable than I expected, quite welcoming and I could have remained a long time. But it was long enough anyway. I met her eyes, which seemed tired, with a smile in mind and the intention to be present. I was struck by the color of her eyes. They're green. "The eyes of Marina Abramović." (as in the film, *The Eyes of Laura Mars*) The outer line of green entranced my eye, seeing the coppery rusted center near the iris. As the sitting progressed, it seemed that the rust -hazel color receded and the green became dominant.

⁵⁹⁰ Ann-Sargent Wooster, "Day 72, Portrait 49," accessed July 25, 2015, <http://essaysaboutsitting.tumblr.com/post/929070902/day-72-portrait-49>; Wooster, "Sitting With Marina."

My breaths were deep and my heart beat fast, from both excitement and caffeine. As I sat in the chair, she took some time to gather herself and come into the energy exchange. This seemed to be very important to me, the idea that she derived the strength to do the work from the audience. Whether or not this was from the sitter, or the surroundings, I don't know. I found myself drifting in my gaze and my attention. I struggled to keep centered, distracted by motions in the background, drawing back into myself, looking to one eye. While the desire to maintain focus on one of her eyes was strong, my intuition led me to do my best to look equally from each eye into hers. The running narrative was almost ceaseless, though at times it was just an expansive breath I needed to stay present. At times, I felt as if our gaze was a horizon and had a vision of the two, rather than the one. Knowing clearly that all of manifestation is a variation of these two divided by the horizon, not the vertical. Heavens from earth, water from land. It is all in the horizon of the gaze. That was my understanding of the exchange of energy, not any cycle or any extension of myself into her field, though there were moments of *metta*, the key was this thread of the gaze. A tightwire binding the two into two, not one. At some point I felt my own sadness come up, the aching heart of love's disappointment.

To all who want to know what it was like, I respond, "Are you a meditator?" The key part of the experience is not just the focus, which does indeed waver, but space within her gaze. It is spacious and empty like a cloudless sky. At times, I felt that she was very beautiful, more beautiful than tired, while tired seems to be the prevailing energy in the piece. An essential world-weariness that cannot be denied. But still, there is the space and the impermanent beauty that arises like a glow, like a mirror in fact. In

some of those moments when she became more radiant it seemed to me that we were also closer together, that like the sadness the beauty was my own and more present in the horizon of the gaze between us. The lights that fill the gallery are somewhat blinding, they are hard to adjust to and lend an unusual sense of the squint to the time in the chair.

The sit closed most spontaneously. While at times my lids grew heavy for a short time, I returned to exchange the gaze. In the last instant, I was completely present, therefore did not know I was done until I was done. In the moments before it ended, there was a strong, substantive exchange of energy. It seemed to be an unconditioned connection. What was exchanged was more the experience of shared presence and the essence of that moment was focus and strength.

I felt I was following her lead. I would go in and out, unfocused, the eyelids would just hang, and I would go into the zone. The sound and the motion in the background are rather distracting. It's a very different experience from inside and outside the queue. I tried to tune into her: I did get flashes, glimmers of her looking at me intently. I felt that she was looking at me, rather than being the 500th person. The tedium, the exhaustion of it came through. But she popped through a couple of times. "How did you know it was time to close?" I wasn't ready to go.

Second Sitting
Thursday April 22, 2010
day 38, portrait 8
#0780, 45 minutes

The rush to sit this morning was bad energy. So much urgency, so few able to stay that long. Faster to the front than yesterday. I sign the photo release for the second sitting. I am #0780. I sit from 1:25-2:10 pm. I feel like there is some recognition of my

return. She seems less tired today, but maybe that is my projection. My breakfast has served me well and my attention is much stronger and more focused. The chair is smooth and welcoming. I feel more connected and truly present. As I settle into the performance, I have more of an expressive sit. Cracking a big smile and at another point feeling the tears well up. The emotions connected to these expressions are *metta* and gratitude. Early on the phrase, "May all beings be happy" was in my mind and I was filled with a happiness to be there, to be with her. It is a joy to participate in such a piece. I am entirely too conscious of the camera, but other than that was able to play in the performance, to play in my gaze, to feel the space around me.

At that point of sensation of space, I became aware of the field of my energy and its expansion beyond my body and then the field of energy surrounding us. I started to practice the awareness of the space that Norman taught me, connecting to the corners and filling it, as she is filling it. I remembered the words of the writer who came from Utah, that it is completely different inside the square. The space is sacred and the ritual of the gaze and sharing presence is quite fulfilling. I noticed more changes in her breath and face this time, less impassive.

I connected to the space and expanded my awareness to fill the square and the atrium, in the form of a cube. In my mind, I felt that she may have considered this ambitious, but it was really more about being in the space and performing with her, my interpretation of the performance at that time. I became aware of the expansive space of MoMA, thinking that I might shine so far as to fill the building, but it was not as easy as the atrium. So I concentrated on filling the space to the top of the six storey column, energy of a radiant sort. At some time, I begin to feel a lot of love for her and think about

the nature of my identification with her. That she doesn't really want (lack/desire), that she is strong, fierce and beautiful and this great strength is very powerful. I feel my gaze become very strong with hers and Marco the photographer moves back into position to take a photo of my face, after having put the camera away, or moving it around. The sense of settling in and feeling very good, able to play with the form of the breath and with the gaze, to experiment characterizes the sitting.

The tears start to well up, but not fall, when I begin to touch the gratitude that I have for her work, that all of us here in the performance have for her work. The realization that my coming constitutes my actually having a performance practice, here in MoMA with her and I am grateful. The time seems to expand and my sense of it is not so good. I note the subtle vibration that fills my body and the free flow of subtle sensations that rarely appears in the context of such a short sit when I have been off the meditation cushion for a while. In that way I know I am sitting with a profound meditator, whose strength on the cushion assists the depth of my meditation. It is the *bhāṅga* of a lovely intensity, completely effortless awareness of the impermanence of the body. I get up. I sat 45 minutes.

Third Sitting
Friday April 23, 2010
day 39, portrait 7
#0797, 31 minutes

No comments.

Fourth Sitting
Saturday April 24, 2010
day 40, portrait 7
#0823, 64 minutes

I sit from 11:47-1:01

My sit is a struggle with painful feelings, with letting go, with chaotic mind. I sensed as soon as I sat down that the need to release was into tears. The desire for an elegant single tear is frustrated by how dry I am. How closed, and resistant. There are a few sobs and I feel the constriction in my body. I work so hard to let go, but vanity and constriction block me. My mind floats through the emotions blocked there. Sorrow, pain, sadness, loneliness, insecurity. They all come to the fore at some time. She moves away for a time, I'm not sure when, but I can imagine how difficult it is to sit with those feelings. I come very close to tears when I choose "Art is beautiful, artist must be..." I so want to be beautiful and know that the block mars my face and energy. The need to change posture arises until I am sitting cross-legged in the chair in meditation.

As I work with the energy to see where it goes, I find I am attached to outcomes, not really present. Over the intercom an announcement asks for a "Mrs. somebody." I enter a meditation on her lost child, how Marina and I are both in tune with that in some way. Thoughts of wanting come in and out through the sit. Not wanting. I miss the transitory essence of this wanting, enshrined forever in a video. Must ask her about this impermanence and want (*Eating an Onion*) Eventually, I come to accept that I am not prepared to dissemble in MoMA and begin to close the sit. It changes into a long loving kindness meditation.

After the chaos of the prior 45+min, I begin with gratitude to her, but then realize I need it myself. As the meditation progresses, the vibrations of loving kindness grow strong and I send them out to her and the room. I keep with this for 20-25min approximately, and then draw in my energy from her. She looks most beautiful as I do this practice. I feel very suffused, but not attached and spend a couple of breaths closed, gathering myself to leave the sitting. (Heather Rose, I learn later, claps) As I exit the square, Crystal Z Campbell is right there and I give her a big hug. I feel her energy is so far from me and she is not available. Some small talk and goodbyes. I continue to need to collect myself.

At one point, I felt quite alone out there—truly separate from her.

Fifth Sitting
Sunday April 25, 2010
day 41, portrait 13
#0852, 19 minutes

The one with the red lipstick almost got me booted from the museum. Ecstatic. Pure loving kindness meditation, because I was so *energized and happy*. I smiled the whole time. Fully present. Pure happiness. I ran into the head of security up in the retrospective and he told me he planned to "talk to Marina" about my sit. Strange, and painful. The threat of profound public humiliation because *my vibration was too high* was a bit demoralizing. Well, nothing came of it, but it certainly made for an interesting reflection back from the institutional space. It is so clear that in the atrium, for all its energy, was never really the safe intimate space that it felt like. This illusion is a part of the larger spectacle that I will revisit.

*Sixth sitting:
Saturday May 30, 2010
day 71, portrait 13
#1459, 14 minutes*

The absence of the table was so important, but I feel it was also protective in April.

In my own final sitting, I had more of a conscious conversation with her, reflecting on the experiences I had been having in April and May, which were ridiculously intense. When I got grounded and let go, she became like a mountain and her face shone with a very smooth youthful beauty. That beauty that one might possess in those moments of being truly open which can be attenuated into a state of grace. In my mind, I circumambulated her, as I would if I ever went to Mount Kailash. I was very aware of the energetic axis of the gaze, again, as the horizon and the energy which can be drawn down to ground through the crown. Still, I observed with my own eye some of the electromagnetic circuits and flows of energy around the body, as in the Taoist and yogic diagrams. Esoteric anatomy in the flesh.

Still, my sitting was strong. The energy in the square had increased 10 fold.

Interview

During my visit to the performance in April 2010, I met Dimitri Katadotis, a producer at Canadian Broadcasting Company. We exchanged emails privately. What follows are my responses to his questions about the performance. An experienced interviewer, Katadotis emphasized his understanding of presence as a moment of intersubjective contact where the interviewer draws the interviewee into an account of

their own story in an experience that exceeds the mundane account and becomes emotively potent in a performative sense he compared to theatre. His questions foregrounded reflecting on the experience as intimacy, rather than in terms of art and aesthetics resulting in a personal account that distances my commentary from scholarly objectivity resulting in a clear representation of my private subjectivity.

Did you get lost in her eyes?

I don't know that I was ever really available to get lost in Marina's eyes. As I mentioned, the whole element of being in public and filmed is pretty inhibiting, but as a meditator, there's a lot of leeway and agency. On the third day (I sat five in a row) I was working with some of the ideas from my conversations with Paco Blancas who is one of the more recognizable regular sitters. "Letting go." I knew that if I really let go in the sense of getting lost, I would have lost track of her eyes and the environment altogether. I wasn't willing to dissemble in MoMA, but the opportunity to explore a sort of deep meditative consciousness with my eyes open and fairly easily was revelatory. I think this is the distinction between a sort of romantic eyegazing and the sort of presence I experienced there in the square. Others likely have very different experiences, but mine was more along the lines of altered and extreme states of consciousness and emotion. I'm intrigued by this word choice "lost." Perhaps this is a 'letting go'? The freedom to let go can mean so many different things. To give up agency, to surrender, abandon, release. What can one find through any of these understandings of loss? Surrender is a big part of a number or psychodynamic, mystical, or religious experiences, as well as certain formulations of eros. All of these topics are of interest to me, so that is the language that asserts itself. Another word that comes to mind is control and whether or not giving up or losing a certain control is a part of that loss is worth thinking about. I think that awareness of one's own need to lose or find has very little to do with the access or opportunity to get those needs met through another's presence. It's in that space that the essential humanity of the experience comes to the fore. The sense that we are all here alone together and yet, so intimately intertwined. Are we willing to lose or find some element of our understanding of those paradoxes? This idea of lost and found is about core truths for me, ultimately. To a certain degree, I know what those are and I am in need of greater continuity in that place between lost and found. That's one of the great lessons of the piece, the power of continuity, duration, commitment.

In the larger sense, I think some of the other sitters could agree with me, that taking that sort of attention out into the world—to really see

other people and give them our full attention is worthwhile. There's even a chance it might be reciprocated. As performance art goes, only Marina has engaged that sort of reciprocity and attention in her work, and that is the element that must be understood and reckoned with, as that is what gives the work its power.

What are we looking for in the other?

Ourselves, what we lack, validation, wonder, acceptance, competition—I saw all of those in the sitters. A few of them have something to prove, an odd determination that is more about time than experience. I was bringing an intention to be open to the experience, rather than come with the idea that there was something that I was there to communicate or receive. In that space, what arose, again, was very much like a mirror. Her mind was very open and present, so all I could find was myself. As the days passed, especially on the difficult day, it was her ability to hold the space for me to have that experience that was in her eyes.

To me, that is a kind of trust I think most of us are looking for, but few people are able to give with complete acceptance, or without judgment. That is one of the compelling, or rewarding elements of the performance—its consistency—the guarantee that there will be no rejection if you follow the rules. One can stay as long as one likes. I don't think 'the Other' promises that to us, but unconditional presence is generally only available for a fee, or a transaction laden with significant expectations. Notably, 'personal' intimacies are a matter of commitment and the total commitment Marina brings to her performance is not the same as in her private life. Knowing a bit about her private life, her own relationships have a legendary intensity, but also involve partners who are more passive and grounded. She is very clear about the role of the public in supporting her practice.

What do we find there?

I found a mirrored self, my self, at various times seeing places where my own experience touched hers. During my second sitting, there was a very strong consciousness of the qualities in myself that I identify with in her. Those were laden with a sense of my own powerful intensity. I see a number of similar qualities, minus the self-inflicted violence. Interestingly enough, on Sunday, one of the viewers remarked my gaze was much more intense than hers. My response was that I doubt I could bring that sort of energy or attention for 10 weeks 7-10 hours a day. Still, I know that same intensity is there and I felt free to 'go there'.

In other contexts, I don't think that many are free to simply be present and let things come up. Not only does 'real life' lack the stability of a structured interaction like the performance, there are any number of expectations and inhibitions that freight interaction. I felt that she kept

some distance at times, or was simply tired. She was not obviously available to take on baggage, or allow others to become enmeshed in her gaze. There was a palpable sense of distance, sometimes drift.

What are we looking for?

It depends on one's values and philosophy. Seeking with expectation or attachment to a particular outcome is one of the surest routes to disillusionment there is. If one's ideal is to see things and others as they are, disillusionment is a good thing. That ideal lack is invariably devoid of a desire for anything other than what is.

What are *you* looking for in the gaze? Didn't you say your wife was with you? Would you not value that sort of stability and consistency in her as your Other? The freedom to look deeply and let go? I'm intrigued by your reference to being haunted by the experience of watching the performance. In what way?

Are we looking for/at them, ourselves?

Again, totally dependent on one's worldview. I think if you bring presence and attention to this looking, your direct experience will answer. The answer to this question is probably personal and universal. For me the interest lies more in what happens in the looking, not the motive. One of the other people in line on another day was interviewing people along those lines. I think if someone declares their motivation, they will tell you the truth, or reveal their tacit intention unconsciously. For example, those who come with the intention to sit all day. There's a forcefulness there that I reflected on as a possibility for my own sitting, but instantly understood as incongruous with the idea of simple presence.

Perhaps a good question is, are we able to be present without seeking and to stay with that, then to move through it peacefully? I think the rule of silence and how to close the sitting makes that looking or presence infinitely safer. In my opinion, this was a good idea because such radical availability is risk laden even without a deeper personal exchange. Whether it is more or less risky because she is such a powerful presence is something I am not clear about. It's in my nature to push my own boundaries, so that's what I did. In a way, I wasn't looking for anything and what I found there was a space for the processes I value a great deal. I was inspired with gratitude for the opportunity and did a fair amount of loving kindness meditation during my sitting. That is such a feel good vibration and the feeling was so strong and effortless, it seems to me other than the very mundane difficulties of my subjective human condition, what I was and am looking for and attempting to create is a "divine abode." The divine abodes (*brahma viharas*) of Yoga philosophy and four immeasurables of Buddhism are meditation practices intended to

generate sympathetic joy, loving kindness, equanimity, and compassion.⁵⁹¹

Becoming Mountain

In interviews before the performance, Abramović framed her approach to the performance geologically. “I just want to be there like a rock, so when you come in I’m always there.”⁵⁹² An ontology of stone arose in her language. Instead of telling a Dreamtime story of ancestral features in the Australian desert, Abramović aspired to embody the earth. She told James Westcott,

I have to be like a mountain," the artist told me a couple of days before going into her "big silence" for the performance. [. . .] The atrium is such a restless place, full of people passing through. The acoustics are terrible – it's too big, too noisy. It's like a tornado. I try to play the stillness in the middle.⁵⁹³

Over the course of three months, Abramović played the stillness in the middle, changing her gown to white and removing the table that separated her from sitters on May 1. The change in the piece was notable to participants who sat multiple times. As artist Ananda Cavalli noted, “No table changes everything.”⁵⁹⁴ Painter Nina Meledandri described the atmosphere in the atrium as, “lighter, happier, more expansive.”⁵⁹⁵ The

⁵⁹¹ Private communication, April 27, 2010.

⁵⁹² Ayers, “A Sky Filled with Shooting Stars » ‘The Knife Is Real, the Blood Is Real, and the Emotions Are Real.’ – Robert Ayers in Conversation with Marina Abramović.”

⁵⁹³ James Westcott, “Performance Artist Marina Abramović – ‘I Have to Be like a Mountain,’” *The Guardian*, accessed July 20, 2015, <http://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2010/mar/19/art-marina-abramovic-moma>.

⁵⁹⁴ Ananda Day Cavalli, “Conversations for Non- Human Use: Nineteenth Sitting,” *Conversations for Non-Human Use*, May 6, 2010, <http://sittingwithmarinaAbramovic.blogspot.com/2010/05/nineteenth-sitting.html>.

⁵⁹⁵ Meledandri, “A Flower Every Day (for Marina Abramović).”

change in color resulted in a different affective quality to the work, which Abramović intended to cultivate purity.

In the change of color, the enduring presence in the gallery and the sublimity of the art created with her body and space, Abramović achieved her goal. Author Sarah Deming described her experience of the aesthetic in Abramović's imposing gaze during her May visit.

Writing about it now, it makes me think of what Kant said about the difference between the beautiful and the sublime. The beautiful is pleasant and comfortable and it seems to reinforce your sense of self. The sublime is like looking at a mountain. The mountain doesn't care about you. It is majestic but also a bit annihilating.⁵⁹⁶

My own final sitting was my first with the artist in white, and the removal of the table also produced a significant change in the visual appearance of the work. No longer was Marina's body hidden behind the bland expanse of the blond wood table that separated where we had sat five times before. In front of me, at close range, was a white gown pooling over her feet obscuring the base of her chair (Figure 8.19). Her pale face and dark hair the summit of a triangular, mountainous form. She appeared to me as a glacial peak, a vision of white snow and black stone evoking the image of Mount Kailash in western Tibet. High in the Himalayas stands Mount Kailash, one of the least visited and most revered sacred sites on earth. Sacred to four religious traditions, it represents a center to be ritually circumambulated by pilgrims. And so I did. In my mind, I walked around Abramović in her chair, the image of a mountain, Mount Kailash. Sacred to

⁵⁹⁶ Sarah Deming, "PART OF THE ART - An Essay on Marina Abramović's," *The Spiral Staircase*, accessed July 20, 2015, <http://sarahdeming.typepad.com/spiralstaircase/2010/05/part-of-the-art-an-essay-on-marina-Abramovićs-the-artist-is-present.html>.

Hindus, Jains, Mahayana Buddhists, Bon sorcerers, and shamans, Marina as mountain embodied a geography of the sacred. In her appearance, a pilgrimage that is nearly impossible to complete became real to me as a vision. Her performative body became the site expressing her intended energy, and an ephemeral symbol of a sacred site of the earth, giving *darshan* (spiritual vision) of a *tirtha* (crossing, pilgrimage site) of two kinds. Though her her austerities and in her visionary appearance as the image of a mountain, I had an experience of the union of religion and the aesthetic as it rose up out of my mind and memory—an ideal of experience art as Nameless transcendence—unbidden, unanticipated, fully receiving her performative intention in the present.

Conclusion

With *The Artist Is Present*, Marina Abramović's transcultural aesthetic moved from the global into the sphere of globalization on a massive scale. While Abramović has participated in the international exhibitions that define the globalization of Contemporary art throughout her career, the mediation of her performance by MoMA radically increased her exposure. The celebrity that erupted and the media saturation that attended and followed *The Artist Is Present* have transformed Abramović's public presence into one of global celebrity and influence. In 2014, *Artnet News* recognized Abramović as the most influential woman in the art world, while *Time Magazine* named her one of 2014's "Most Influential People."⁵⁹⁷

Abramović's route to stardom and influence rests on the intensity of her performances, dramatic relationships and iconic images, but is fueled by the experience

⁵⁹⁷ "The 100 Most Powerful Women in Art: Part One," *Artnet News*, accessed July 24, 2015, <https://news.artnet.com/people/the-100-most-powerful-women-in-art-part-one-124409>; "Marina Abramović," *Time*, April 23, 2014, <http://time.com/collection/2014-time-100/>.

of intimacy, community, and transformation—effects of her performative presence. In the 21st century Abramović's long duration performances have brought her meditative gaze and transcultural aesthetic into exchange with the public, collaborating on open works of public inclusion blurring the boundaries between art and religion so far as to relocate Warburg's Nameless Science into the sphere of the aesthetic.

As a Contemporary artist working with the body and images, Abramović challenges the borders and boundaries that separate the ephemeral nature of performance from the institutionalization of the art object, moving live performance from the unmarked location that escapes capture into the intended permanence of representation and globalized mediation. Between the borders of the ephemeral and mediated work of art are the experiences of participants, the substance of the work of art that lies somewhere between theory and criticism, narrative and history, resulting in a geography of event and memory composed of digital traces. Texts and images of participation mark *The Artist Is Present* with the monumentality of quotidian human encounters, transforming the artist and her art as performance, into activated exhibition spaces—locations where art can be collectively practiced.

In the years that followed *The Artist Is Present*, Abramović has tended her legacy with pedagogy. She trains and leads performers, facilitators, and the public in her own practice of the Abramović Method, allowing her performing presence to gain power and influence in the sphere of celebrity, and changing the gallery into a space to be occupied by experiences of cultivated consciousness that develop the presence and attention she performed in Marron Atrium.

Chapter Nine: Durational Deceleration—*Abramović Method Workshop*

After three days of being around Marina, I saw that she has an incredible power for attracting people to her, but that this stems from a genuine presence, rather than an intentional “charm,” or “charisma.” I’ve come to realize that this presence she possesses is not only inspiring in its sincerity and power, but that it is what makes her ways of being viable as art, when the average person’s ways of being would not be. I’ve also realized that her kind of presence can be learned, and that this, in fact, is exactly what the Abramović Method teaches.

—Ana Freeman⁵⁹⁸

The Abramović Method has developed over decades out of the artist’s personal development and teaching. As early as 1979, Abramović was working with student artists in Australia, and has held multiple academic positions in Germany. She has also held numerous workshops at art institutions around the world and at her home in Hudson, New York where she prepared the artists who reperformed her work in her retrospective at the Museum of Modern Art in New York in 2010. The documentary, *The Artist is Present* (2012) documented that workshop. In addition to the film, her workshops have spawned numerous publications including exhibition catalogues and journalism.⁵⁹⁹ Workshops of three to seven days have included strict abstemious practices of fasting, silence, no cell phones, no smoking, celibacy, and nudity. *New Yorker* profiler Judith Thurman summarized her sources, “She has often used Ayurvedic, shamanistic,

⁵⁹⁸ Ana Freeman, *Abramović Method Workshop—UCSD* (“the hard problem”/3015), 2015.

⁵⁹⁹ Hannes Malte Mahler et al., eds., *Unfinished Business: Marina Abramović; [anlässlich Der Ausstellung “Unfinished Business”, Marina Abramović and Students, Studenten Der HBK Braunschweig Vom 16. Mai Bis 4. Juli 1999]* (Köln: Salon-Verl., 1999); Marina Abramović, *Student Body: Workshops 1979 - 2003: Performances 1993 - 2003* (Milano: Ed. Charta, 2003); James Westcott, “Silence Is Golden,” *Art Review* 2, no. 6 (2004): 74–77; L. P. Streitfeld, “Encountering the Sacred Feminine: Marina Abramović and the Resurrection of Performance Art,” *Art New England* 25, no. 5 (September 2004): 16–19; Marina Abramović, S. Francesco (Church: Como, Italy), and Fondazione Antonio Ratti, eds., *Marina Abramović, Quaderni del Corso superiore di arte visiva = Advanced course in visual arts publications 6* (Milano: Charta, 2002); Marina Abramović and Padiglione d’arte contemporanea (Milan, Italy), *Marina Abramović*, 1. ed (Pero (Mi): 24 ore cultura, 2012).

Buddhist, Gurdjieffian, and other holistic or ascetic practices to initiate her students.”⁶⁰⁰

The Method has developed as a means of educating performance artists in her methods of self-cultivation and preparation to make their own works. Abramović’s workshops are “designed for students of Art to go through different stages of experience and investigate their Endurance, Concentration, Perception, Will Power, Confrontation with Limits (Mental and Physical).”⁶⁰¹

In the years since her most recent major durational performance in 2010, Abramović has moved away from gallery and museum works that emphasize a central focus of attention on her, to working with the public with exercises drawn from her workshops teaching the Abramović Method. Since *The Artist is Present* she has conducted four major events transmitting the Abramović Method on four continents including, *512 Hours* (2014) at the Serpentine Gallery in London, *Generator* (2014) at Sean Kelly Gallery in New York, *Terra Comunal: Marina Abramović + MAI* (2015) at Sesc Pompeia in Sao Paulo, and *Marina Abramović: In Residence* (2015) at Kaldor Public Art Projects in Sydney. MAI refers to the Marina Abramović Institute, a foundation Abramović is developing to teach “mindfulness” to the public via her Method,⁶⁰² while fostering relations between art, science, and spirituality, as well as present long durational performance art.

⁶⁰⁰ Thurman, “Walking Through Walls.”

⁶⁰¹ Abramović, *Student Body*, 48; Janet A. Kaplan, “Deeper and Deeper: Interview with Marina Abramović,” *Art Journal* 58, no. 2 (Summer 1999): 21.

⁶⁰² Nancy Groves, “Marina Abramović Reveals Plans for Her Funeral, ‘the Artist’s Last Piece,’” *The Guardian*, accessed July 15, 2015, <http://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2015/jul/01/marina-abramovic-reveals-plans-for-her-funeral-the-artists-last-piece>; Nancy Groves, “Marina Abramović: ‘The Planet Is Dying. We Have to Be Warriors,’” *The Guardian*, accessed July 15, 2015, <http://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2015/jun/18/marina-abramovic-the-planet-is-dying-we-have-to-be-warriors>.

These recent performance events constitute a significant shift in Abramović's artwork, focusing on an immaterial experience of art as expanded consciousness. The new work takes the public's performance beyond the gaze she shared in prior performances into various techniques that do not require her presence. The activities and exercises support the cultivation of awareness and introspection, taking individuals on a "physical and emotional journey" to the "inner self."⁶⁰³ In these works, Abramović has worked with assistants as facilitators, trained by her closest collaborator—choreographer, theatre director, and performance artist Lynsey Peisinger.

The primary characteristic of the work is the development of a radical openness to choices by the performing public, guided by Abramović's Method. As an open work, the artist conditions the freedom of the public to make choices through the simplicity of the Method's actions and environments that allow the mind to range over different levels of attention to one's own activity and little else. Spectatorship is deemphasized, but can be facilitated by opportunities to sit and watch or examine participants' detailed reactions through a telescope. The aesthetic experience is determined by the awareness, interest, and commitment of the public to explore, practice a single exercise, or different exercises. Abramović intends the exercises to remove the influence of technology, slow down participants' activity, and focus awareness on more subtle states of energy, such as those cultivated in mindfulness and Vipassana meditation. The artist has described the work as "nothingness," but in fact; the use of props, sound, and interaction result in

⁶⁰³ "Project 30 - Marina Abramović," 30, accessed July 15, 2015, <http://kaldorartprojects.org.au/projects/marina-Abramović>.

works that leave the public with an embodied experience cultivated via several physical techniques, rather than the predominantly visual experience of her prior open works.

In this chapter, I discuss the Abramović Method from the perspective of a participant in a three-day workshop held January 12-14 at the University Art Gallery at the University of California, San Diego (Figure 9.1). My survey includes excerpts from Abramović's lecture on the last day of the workshop, highlighting her transcultural sources and the uninhibited humor that informs her wisdom teachings. As in other longer pedagogical workshops and courses with artists, the participants also created artwork, and elements of the workshop were open to observation by the public, creating an exhibition element. Rather than develop individual works from their own art practices, the participants collaborated on *3015* (2015), a sound work developed by Abramović and award winning science fiction novelist Kim Stanley Robinson. After the workshop was over, I circulated a survey by email to the participants. The interview resulted in responses from twenty percent of the participants, whose responses are central to illustrating the diversity of experience, as well as distinctive areas of agreement around elements of the Abramović Method presented in museums and galleries.

Day One: January 12, 2015

Over the course of three days, from 11 am to 5 pm twenty-four participants selected from more than 200 applicants met in the University Art Gallery (Figure 9.2) on campus at UCSD. The event was organized by John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Chair and professor of Visual Arts Sheldon Brown, and cognitive scientist Dr. David Kirsh, principal investigators the Arthur C. Clarke Center for Human Imagination. The morning began with a round of introductions where each participant, selected for their

experience in performance, Yoga, meditation, or athletics discussed their interest in the Method. Students, alumni, faculty, and affiliates of the university formed the bulk of the group. A few had traveled from as far away as Colorado and New York to participate. Performance artists, Yoga teachers, dancers, theatre directors, art historians, and musicians made up the circle of participants completed by Abramović and Peisinger, filmed by many cameras and a crew of three. The Director of Abramović's office, Giuliano Argenziano filtered in and out of the gallery over the days, disappearing as activities began in earnest.

After introducing myself as the author of a dissertation about Abramović interested in experiencing the Method I had read so much about, I realized I had forgotten the key to my participation. As a meditator and yogini, I looked upon the workshop as an opportunity to be on a research retreat, away from the schedule of dissertation writing that adds stress to the days. I approached the workshop as one with experience at Abramović's performances and exhibitions, at ease in the context and eager to bring my attention to whatever the events made possible. I had the expectation that Abramović's Method would include activities I would find meditative and healthy. Arriving with the full expectation of a positive result, the content of the workshop exceeded the familiar, challenged me, and through Robinson's writing included creative dimensions that enhanced the experience significantly.

Lynsey Peisinger—Body Awareness Exercises

After introductions, the small stools on which we sat were cleared away and we began morning exercises led by Peisinger. Over the course of the Abramović Method Workshop the structure would be the same, morning movement and sound work with

Peisinger, two midday exercises led by Abramović and afternoon creative work with Robinson and Abramović. Peisinger described the origin of her methods with little detail, a collection of movement techniques drawn from a number of different styles, all simple and easy to do. The most distinctive exercises involved partner work and the use of sound. I was especially interested in the ones that were unfamiliar to me as a Yoga teacher and former student athlete, including a careful facial massage, using the hands to “put energy into the joints,” and dynamic movements coordinated with the breath that seemed like martial arts.

After bringing the body to a higher state of both alertness and relaxation, we began pair practices. The first pair practice was the “Energy Wash.”

Energy Wash

Brush hands over a person’s entire body from the crown of the head down to the feet. Use the hands to infuse energy through touch into the partner. The one giving the wash cultivates positive thoughts to transmit to the one receiving. Switch roles.

Duration: 2-3 minutes for each wash

The experience of the “Energy Wash” was notably vitalizing, far more powerful than any of the individual warmup activities. Working with another human being and feeling comfortable in the situation allowed my senses to tune in to my skin and I felt better than invigorated, noticing a warm electricity all over. The second partner practice expanded the heart’s energy and built upon the prior exercise with the use of vocalization.

Expanding Heart Energy

The partner who is giving stands beside the receiver with one hand on their sternum and the other on their back between the shoulder blades. As the giver slowly and repeatedly draws their hands away from the receiver, both repeat the syllable “ah.” After about three minutes, the vocalization stops and the giver quickly rubs their hand over the receiver’s upper back giving a quick massage.

Duration: 10 minutes

This exercise continued to deepen the connection between the partners through touch and opened the breath with the use of sound and the warmth of the giver’s hands. I found the experience positive and surprising given the introspective and visual foci of many of Abramović’s exercises. The eyes became more important as Peisinger instructed us to walk around the room making eye contact with others, increasing our speed on her command three times. I felt a broad smile cross my face during this exercise, enthusiastic to engage in friendly contact with others after the positive experience of partner work.

Peisinger’s contribution to the workshop during each day’s first hour was distinctive and original. Her techniques and teaching brought energy into the body, heightening awareness of the self and others internally and in motion. At the end of the third day’s exercises with Peisinger, I told her about my experience at Abramović’s *Generator* exhibition at Sean Kelly Gallery in 2014. While blindfolded with my ears covered by noise cancelling headphones I encountered a man who engaged me. I interacted with him in an exchange much like her partner practices. My account from the gallery visit on December 3, 2014 was striking in similarity to her instructions.

As I found the walls and walked away from them again, I connected with another person. I smelled him as a smoker. He took his hand and placed it on the center of my chest. I recognized this gesture as a

heart connecting touch common to neo, or western tantric practices of intimacy. I often associate these practices with partner bonding in sexual intimacy, but the openness to intersubjective experience through touch was more distant here, a human connection of a surprising, but not unexpected type of contact. I returned the touch, seeing his back t-shirt and broad chest through the bottom of my blindfold. Receiving the touch consciously, I placed my own hand on top of his and returned the touch with my other hand, connecting the whole of my palm to his chest on the sternum. Standing, observing silently, analyzing little, and feeling slightly more, I considered how to develop and go into the experience. I placed my hand on the top of his head. His hair was very short and bristly, buzz cut.

Drawing on my own knowledge of related energy practices, after a few breaths of shared observation I circled round his back and placed both of my hands on his spine behind the heart allowing the energy of my palms to flow to him. I noted there was little arousal or sense of heightened connection or energy as a result of these touches, unable to discern a significant response from myself, or this faceless man composed of touch and scent. I was in the moment. I took one of my hands to the crown of his head, and then placed both hands on his shoulders briefly, with intention to be allowing a sense of myself, of my energy to be expressed to him—to be positive. As with some bodywork techniques, I gently brushed my hands down his arms, then the back of his body, signaling the end of my contact and then slowly moved away.

After the long time I had spent in the space and a few glancing touches with others, to be fully engaged was powerfully exciting to me—personally and socially expressive of themes I believe underpin much of Abramović's work. The contact validated me and my interest in being a part of a community of art enthusiasts with specific interest in transcultural practices of intimacy that are hinted at in Abramović's prior works, expressed here as tantric touch—deep acceptance and rituals of human contact disallowed between strangers everywhere. The art was more than I'd hoped, and hoping for nothing, the nothingness was tantric.⁶⁰⁴

I wondered aloud if she had done these exercises in the New York gallery with the facilitators. The similarity was not synchronous or uncanny, but aroused questions about space and human activity related to Abramović's understanding of ritual, repetition, and places of power.

⁶⁰⁴ Chanda Laine Carey, "Marina Abramović: Generator (Sean Kelly Gallery October 24 - December 6, 2014)," December 4, 2014.

Abramović's Exercises Day One

Abramović describes the value of her Method in a major survey of her student's work, *Marina Abramović: Student Body*. "Each exercise is designed to help further understanding of how our body and mind function."⁶⁰⁵ Her first exercise of the workshop was walking as slowly as possible for one hour (figure 9.3). She described the technique as Vipassana meditation, which she taught with an emphasis on labelling each element of the action. "Lifting, stepping, moving, lifting," these elements of the instruction ensured that when linked to movement, each element of the body and mind's activity was focused on this simple action.⁶⁰⁶ Slowing the movement down as much as possible expanded the conventional approach to the meditative observation of walking into a decelerated action requiring special endurance of attention.

Vipassana Exercise

As the group spread out and began to walk from one end of the gallery to the other, Abramović joined hands with Sheldon Brown and intoned her own actions while the rest of us followed along at the pace she set. Eventually she released us into silence and we all moved along as a group, none passing the other, taking the full hour to walk the length of the gallery twice. As I walked, I relished the familiar action of Vipassana meditation, focusing my attention on sensations as well, a nuance drawn from my own well established practice.

As the hour wore on, the most only sound in the room was the bellows-like sound of the *ujjayi pranayama* of Yoga teacher and Buddhist meditator Deborah Johnson. The

⁶⁰⁵ Abramović, *Student Body*, 49.

⁶⁰⁶ Ulay performed this meditation in *Modus Vivendi* (1981).

amount of physical awareness produced by the disciplined and audible *victorious breath* seemed to be an expression of how demanding or centering the practice could be for some of the participants. Novelist Kim Stanley Robinson found it to be one of the most difficult exercises. “I found it hard to walk so slow. I walk hundreds of miles while hiking in the Sierra, and going that slow was very hard.”⁶⁰⁷

I didn't find the process difficult, by my own subjective experience was of a radically altered state of consciousness after the first half hour. My head and upper body buzzed with a vibration that seemed to exceed my skin by several inches, leaving me feeling as if I was moving in a cloud-like haze of expanded attention that I focused on my feet. As I kept my eyes toward the ground and the sensations grew stronger, I wondered how long the hour would last. I was counting on the impermanence of the sensations, rather than hoping for sustained after effects of the exercise. My mental and physical state had become intensely fused in concentration of a simple, yet challenging kind through maximum deceleration. A few moments or minutes later, well after I had fully inhabited my altered state of focus Art History PhD candidate Samara Kaplan stumbled as she reached the wall, collapsing in a state of subtle, yet strenuous meditation. The challenging experience of Vipassana as a moving meditation helps to generalize through direct experience, the feat of Abramović's hundreds of hours of simple sitting in museums around the world. As Kaplan was guided to a seat and tended to by Peisinger and gallery staff, I continued my walk. I have been conditioned during my own experiences of meditation retreats to remain one pointed in my concentration and focus on my meditation, not others. The natural interest to help and or look was set aside to

⁶⁰⁷ Kim Stanley Robinson, *Abramović Method Workshop—UCSD* (“the hard problem”/3015), 2015.

finish the hour of walking uninterrupted. I had significantly heightened my concentration in a very short time. Moments later, I was surprised to find that the hour was over.

Kim Stanley Robinson—“the hard problem”

The end of the day consisted of collaborative work. There was a circle of canvas deck chairs in the center of the gallery surrounded by simple stools (Figure 9.4). Stan (Kim Stanley Robinson) passed out lists of star names to everyone sitting on the stools. Stan instructed us to read the star names of our choices as we went around the circle. In the center, workshop participants were to listen with closed eyes. Later, our rounds were the links in sections of his text, related to his upcoming novel *Aurora*.⁶⁰⁸ His narrator’s script centers on a journey between the stars. An artificially intelligent starship carries descendants of the inhabitants of earth on a centuries long journey from the star Tau Ceti to our sun. Most of the narrative focuses on human activities, language, communication, and relations. Robinson memorably narrates the experience of the body during such a journey—short centuries passing in a deep sleep under the care of a computer.

The text, redolent with the mysteries of particle physics, fractal imagery, cyborg theory, and interstellar travel is a poetic narrative of brief rhythmic sentences organized to be read with the accompaniment of a chorus of voices, ours. Elements of the choral part emphasize the abilities of humanity through phrases based on Alan Turing’s list of things a machine will never do.

(Other voices): Be kind. Be resourceful. Be beautiful. Be friendly. Have a sense of humor. Tell right from wrong. Make mistakes. Fall in love. Enjoy strawberries and cream. Make someone fall in love with you.

⁶⁰⁸ Kim Stanley Robinson, *Aurora*, 2015.

Learn from experience. Be the subject of your own thought. Do something really new.⁶⁰⁹

In-between his vividly poetic descriptions of space travel, references to neuroscience, fate, and biblical characters are punctuated by different expressions of “the hard problem.” In the *mélange* of star names ranging from alphanumeric series to ancient and foreign languages the human questions loom large. Love, home, and an abiding sense of the presence and absence of intimacy circulate amid the wonders of technology and space made manifest in a journey between the stars—a journey that will end in the heart of the sun. “Deceleration,” “getting people to listen to you,” “consciousness,” and “meaning” are all revealed as big questions—The Hard Problems. Hard problems are technological and ontological. Deceleration is the hard problem for space flight in a technological society, the same problem of time and space for reflection that inspires Abramović’s interest in long durational performance. In this instance, the duration of our performance is short, attenuated by a sound loop that begins the journey between the stars again, just as it seems to end.

The rehearsal dimension of our work was informal and exploratory. The group sitting in the center circle of chairs gave their responses to the work, as the first audience. The reading and listening groups switched places to share the experience. A great deal of enthusiasm for the work seemed to flow throughout the group. It felt inclusive and serious despite the range of concerns everyone had as thinkers and artists.

Day Two: January 13, 2015

The second day got off to a similar start as the first. Our exercises with Peisinger were almost the same as the first day, with different kinds of sound and minimally

⁶⁰⁹ Kim Stanley Robinson, “the hard problem” (unpublished text, 2014).

choreographed movement wrapping up our session of body awareness. After my morning Yoga practice alone, I found the work with Peisinger added significantly to my sense of subtleties of energy and vitality, also creating a sense of collective connection. Freewheeling movement and sound involved us all making vowel sounds as we gathered closely together at the center of the room. We then dispersed and all walked to face a wall in a quick moment of self-reflection in an engagement that moved from intimately collective to deeply personal in a matter of seconds.

Looking at Each Other Exercise

Our work with Marina in the Method began with an exercise of looking into another's eyes that has surfaced in numerous important performances *Nightsea Crossing* (1981-1986), *The House with the Ocean View* (2002), and *The Artist is Present* (2010). In her book *Marina Abramović: Student Body* it is called the "Looking at Each Other Exercise," and is featured in a number of texts.⁶¹⁰ Though popular responses to *The Artist is Present* describe the practice as a staring contest, I have consistently approached my experience of the work as an exchange of gazes, being present to another in a non-competitive meeting, which is not quite looking at someone as much as being open and present to seeing them. After participating in a past workshop, Abramović's biographer described his experience of the exercise during a workshop as less than comfortable. A sense of confrontation permeates his brief account. "I sit opposite Marica, a severe Italian woman with intimidating composure. I manage not to look away for one hour, but the stare feels combative. We shake hands at the end and rub our faces and stretch."⁶¹¹

⁶¹⁰ Mahler et al., *Unfinished Business*, exercise 4 (unpaginated); Abramović, *Student Body*, 100; Westcott, "Silence Is Golden," 76.

⁶¹¹ Westcott, "Silence Is Golden."

In our exercise, partners were chosen at random and we paired off to sit on stools opposite one another for 45 minutes. Robinson especially liked this variation on *The Artist is Present*. “My favorite was the looking into someone else's eyes for 45 minutes exercise. It was fascinating.”⁶¹² Visual distortion during the long period of focused attention was a common experience. Performing artist, playwright, and student Ana Freeman wrote,

My vision got darker and darker, I felt a sensation as though everything in the room was buzzing, and I became light-headed. Then I felt myself starting to faint, but caught myself as I began falling back—and blinked, which cleared my vision. As soon as I resumed staring into Sheldon’s eyes without blinking, I again saw and felt strange things, almost fainted, and caught myself and blinked at the last moment. This cycle repeated itself several times over the course of the 45 minutes.⁶¹³

I sat with Jeffrey Pinkston. I had spoken to him before the workshop started, and learned he is a creative writer. Our conversation ranged from Hinduism to meditation and Yoga. I was pleased to be matched with the person I had spoken to the most among those I didn’t know already. I spoke with him a bit about my experience at *The Artist is Present* while we waited to begin, and mentioned gender roles in neo-Tantric gazing practices. During the exercise, my gaze focused on one eye, then the other, then both. My mind wandered a bit, settling on sensations in my body as I tried to stay present in the moment. Jeffery has large, soft greenish eyes like Marina, and is young and handsome, making for a very pleasant face to look at. In my focus on the exercise, I made special effort to stay eye to eye, rather than taking in the whole of his face or anything in my peripheral vision. My head started to buzz with the feeling of long-term concentration I felt during the Vipassana walking. Unlike my seated, closed eye meditation, the open

⁶¹² Robinson, Abramović Method Workshop—UCSD (“the hard problem”/3015).

⁶¹³ Freeman, Abramović Method Workshop—UCSD (“the hard problem”/3015).

eyes and external focus resulted in an unusual state of awareness that felt more ‘plugged in’ than peaceful.

About 30 minutes into the exercise, I engaged much more deeply and perceived a change in Jeffrey’s gaze. I tried to look at him with my third eye, *ajna chakra*, or mind’s eye and noticed an intense activation of the frontal lobe that resulted in a feeling of greater openness, presence, and intimacy. My concentration came into the present without drifting into thoughts of past experiences sitting with Abramović, or other extraneous thoughts. I became more engaged in the looking with this alteration in approach. When the time was up, the positive feeling between the two of us was strong enough that we hugged warmly. I don’t know that any other participants had a similar sense of connection, but in the next afternoon session, Stan invited everyone to say anything they wanted to share with their gazing partner as a part of our rehearsals.

After the exercise, Jeffery mentioned he felt he connected with my child self—that our child selves connected. Over the past couple of years, I have been reflecting on my ideal childhood self, about three years old, in an attempt to regain a sense of identity I felt I’d lost. The images he had perceived were much like the childhood photos I had contemplated. I told him sitting with him was as rewarding as sitting with Abramović at MoMA. His presence was more intimate. We were sitting closer together, and my experience at *Generator* had shown me contact between people need not depend on the personality of the artist to establish the aesthetic value or success of the activity. In the workshop, some personal affinity went far to establishing the sense of a positive link, but most of my experience was an outgrowth of the improvement of my own attention. I was deeply satisfied by the shift I had felt emotionally when I opened my sense of looking to

include the whole mind. The results were good, and at other times since I have enjoyed a feeling of being more connected and aware by opening my gaze, especially while walking and contemplating nature.

Jeffery was generous in response to my interview questions after the workshop.

The following passage are selections from his essay, “Between the Stars/3015.”

For my experience, two of the exercises stand apart from the rest. First, the sitting and staring, made famous by Abramović in *The Artist is Present* exhibition. We were paired off, Marina drawing names from a bowl, so we wouldn’t just pick people we were already accustomed to. I got paired with an eclectic fan of Marina’s, Chanda, a doctoral student on art history that is in fact doing her dissertation on Marina’s work. As she was one of the few people I had talked to in the little warm-up room before the workshop began, I was relieved.

Relieved, but not quite prepared. This, after all, was going to be the hardest thing for me. I hadn’t meditated in years. [. . .]

It was amazing. I sat with my hands resting on my knees, and they did not move for the duration of 45 minutes. Chanda moved in rhythm with her breath, but her eyes stayed focused on mine. After a few minutes, her face seemed to distort, the afterimages of her face superimposing on each other. At times, it was as if there was nothing but a gentle, cinnamon brown eye floating in space. [. . .]

Energy seemed bounce between us, echoing the title of the workshop “between the stars,” becoming the journey between the eyes.[...]

Far into our staring, something happens. I reach a calmness and my thoughts seem to stop. I know at this point, I am no longer blinking at all, an urge I had been fighting the whole time. But I am so removed from my body, it doesn’t matter. Words can’t do the moment justice, the closest analogy I can think of is that I was only aware of awareness itself. Later, Chanda said at that point she started looking at me through her third eye. Perhaps I had done the same. [. . .]

I wonder if third eyes shed tears, and how those tears manifest.⁶¹⁴

Jeffrey’s sensitivity to my presence, and mine to his was an especially powerful interpersonal experience. It reflects the results possible in an open work in which the aesthetic experience of the public or participants is determined by the quality of attention they bring to the experience, their absorption in the activity and experience of the present.

The formal conditions of the work are open, not only to interpretation but to the type of

⁶¹⁴ Jeffery Pinkston, “Abramović Method Workshop, ‘Between the Stars/3015’” (unpublished essay, 2015).

art experience one has. Tired or bored, fascinated or moved, to experience of some Abramović's exercises is to participate in one of her open works and increasingly immaterial aesthetic. The substance of the work is produced by her strictures rather than her body and then completely variable within the awareness of the viewer and their conscious choices as participants (Figure 9.5). Unlike certain states of meditation, it is not a choiceless awareness, but disciplined openness—choices are Abramović's immaterial medium, durational choices to be aware and observe all the body and mind bring to that space and time.

Counting Rice and Lentils Exercise

After a break, the group gathered for another rehearsal of star names and then helped arrange tables for the last exercise of the day. For the first time, the group would split into two parts. One would stay and do the exercise while the other walked across campus to the recording studio to begin *3015*. For our exercise, we were given a mixed pile of lentils and rice to sort and count. Counting for a long period of time, like writing one's name slowly, is one of the exercises of the Abramović Method the artist has taught in a video disseminated to the general public through the British news outlet *The Guardian*.⁶¹⁵

Abramović described the activity as one with no purpose. After completing the practice there is no sense of accomplishment, just total focus on the activity of counting. Careful attention is required to undertake the task, and its lack of a distinct end result allows participants to define themselves in terms of their approach to the task. As I

⁶¹⁵ Mae Ryan and theguardian.com, "Have You Got What It Takes to Follow the Abramović Method? – Video," *The Guardian*, accessed July 15, 2015, <http://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/video/2014/may/12/marina-Abramović-method-video>.

looked around the table, I noticed that different forms of sorting and organization described our differences. I found finding a system that would allow me to sort lentils and rice with economical movement was more important to me than working quickly.

Abramović has woven the significance of work without a goal throughout her oeuvre. In *Personal Archaeology* (1997-1999) she includes a 1968 text by Walter de Maria alongside images of Tibetans performing ritual prostrations. He concludes, “. . . Meaningless work is potentially the most . . . important art action one can undertake today.”⁶¹⁶

After the exercise, Peisinger mentioned the piles we had been given were too small, she noted that during Abramović’s strenuous fasting workshop titled “Cleaning the House” her employees were given piles far too big to complete in an hour (Figure 9.6). This lends a sense of futility to the task and deprives the ego of a sense of accomplishment. In its lack of a goal, sorting and counting grains and legumes is much like Abramović and Ulay’s *Work Relation* (1978), a performance that involved using buckets to transport piles of bricks across the gallery for hours at a time. As there was no choreography for our exercise, the openness of the task allowed the experience to center on process, becoming a creative expression of each individual’s sense of order and rhythm to sculpt the time allotted rather than complete a task.

In the Studio

After the exercise, my group went down to the small recording studio. We were given new lists of stars. Stan was working with the text in the evenings, adjusting and refining his emphases. PhD candidate in Music Adam Tinkle played a vital role in the

⁶¹⁶ Abramović, *Marina Abramović*, 1995, 29.

development of *3015*, bringing his expertise in conducting, recording, and editing into the booth as we began to produce artwork. We gathered around the microphone and performed together, each selecting the stars of our choice to add to the vocal mix. Marina commented on the beauty of all the voices appreciating our uniqueness (Figure 9.7). I imagined how sincerely she must have enjoyed the experience of so many different people coming to sit with her during *The Artist is Present*.

The voices showed our diversity of gender, age, and training. During our recording session the voice control, modulation, and expressiveness of actor and theatre director Katherine Harroff stood out to my ear enough to comment on the pleasure I took in her performance. As another day ended, I reflected on how the process had built throughout the day, with all of the day's activities preparing us for the performance we were developing together for Abramović's exhibition in Venice.

Day Three: January 14, 2015

On the morning of the third day, parking difficulties and talk of recent tickets filled the anteroom. I did my best to photograph all the participants standing in front of their work from the "Writing the Name Exercise." As I got towards the end of the group, Abramović came towards me in my blind spot and gave me hug in morning greeting. Her gentle touch surprised me—a lightness of being and energy that was unexpected from her strong body, trained in endurance. Soft. It was my closest brush with her—more physically intimate than the days spent looking into her eyes during *The Artist is*

resent. There is no interpersonal touch required in the Abramović Method, which removed the hug from the space of art and transported me into the realm of life.⁶¹⁷

Our daily awakening of the body with Lynsey built upon the work of the prior days. I paired up with a young student artist, Rebecca Limerick, who favors bright colors in her dress—athletic wear and the vintage look of big-shouldered suits of the 1980s. As we did the “Heart Expanding Exercise,” we moved our voices over each other, up and down the scale, adding an interesting variation to the types of vibration felt inside and out.

After the two familiar partner practices we began to do more sound work together, using one body in contact with another, while vocalizing vowels. First, we sat back to back repeating the syllable “oh.” This practice gave a subtle massage from the sound vibrations, and I felt my spine lengthen and chest expand gently. Then, we lay down foot to foot on Yoga mats saying a long “ee” with each exhalation. The last variation we lay down ear to ear, intoning a long “mm” and we were encouraged to experiment with covering the opposite ear with our hands. The awareness of vibration caused by sounds and contact between human bodies left me with a deep and subtle sense of pleasant awareness in parts of my body I wasn’t attuned to before. The last exercise was especially interesting. The head became an internal amplifier of its experience, seeming louder and more intense in its effect through contact between ears.

⁶¹⁷ Abramović touched participants at *512 Hours*, but contact with her was not guaranteed. Participants are not required to touch others to perform any exercise.

Breathing Exercise

We were ready we get back on our feet and begin work with Marina. As we all stood in a large circle, she stood in the center and led us in a breath exercise she learned among the Aborigines. We bent at the knee, slightly leaning over with our hands on our knees. She instructed us to breathe in once, then out once, then inhale twice followed by exhaling twice. She demonstrated the technique adding a breath to each cycle of inhalation and exhalation until reaching nine repetitions. We all practiced together, and then she explained we would feel the pulses of breath throughout our bodies.

Similar exercises appear in texts related to her teaching. Their structure appears to be based on alternate nostril breathing intended to clear and balance the *ida* and *pingala*, channels of the subtle body closely related to the parasympathetic nervous system. In the Yoga tradition of India, alternate nostril breathing is known as *nadi shodana* and has travelled transculturally into Tibetan preparatory practices for meditation. In her texts, she directs students to begin the cycles of inhalation and exhalation with each nostril individually, then through the mouth.⁶¹⁸

I did not feel a strong sensation of the pulses of breath, but imagine the effects could be quite interesting under conditions of fasting or repeated practice. As a Yoga teacher with a therapeutic certification, my practice and experience of breath control, or *pranayama* is more conservative, as intense breath work is quite disturbing without adequate preparation which requires a long, consistent commitment to Yoga practice. Breath practices are one of the most consciousness transforming categories of bodywork

⁶¹⁸ Mahler et al., *Unfinished Business*, exercises 9 and 17 (unpaginated); Abramović, *Student Body*, 60.

and the cycles of interrupted inhalation and exhalation were a bit daunting for me to consider pursuing Abramović's practice further.

Making Sound Exercise

One of the most popular exercises of the workshop was adapted from Abramović's Tibetan training. Unlike texts that direct the students to sit in a circle, we all rolled out Yoga mats and lay on the floor.⁶¹⁹ The exercise lasted 45 minutes, while we placed our hands on parts of the body and made vowel sounds. U, O, A, E and M were linked to the sex, belly, heart, throat, and top of the head, respectively. With our hands and minds, we placed our attention in the Tibetan sequence of five chakras and chanted seed syllables as we moved through the sequence from lowest to highest.

Lying on floor with eyes closed, the 9-10 minutes we spent on each syllable was almost magical in the energy it created in the room. Listening to the voices of the workshop participants made cascading and rising layers of sound, each the length of a breath. The volume was loud enough one's own vocalization worked inside the body and the sounds of others' voices touched it from outside. Each person explored and added to a powerful experience of sound without any composition, required pitch, or length of expression, lending an accessible, uninhibited collective power to the experience of an exercise that also gives transformative positive results when practiced alone. I found this the most pleasant and transformative exercise of the entire workshop by far. Ana Freeman's transformation experience involved "a meditative, slowed-down state" and the exercise allowed her "to feel a strong sense of shared energy with the other

⁶¹⁹ Mahler et al., *Unfinished Business*, exercise 10 (unpaginated); Abramović, *Student Body*, 86.

participants.”⁶²⁰

The last syllable “M,” or “em” when nasalized or focused in the head, is the end of the best-known sacred syllable of Sanskrit, *Om*. It is also found at the end of many of the seed syllables of tantric mantras. The experience of chanting seed sounds, or *bija mantras* asynchronously in a group was profound, introducing uplifting and expansive sensations to my body and mind. The sound appealed to me so much, at the end of the exercise I approached Stan and suggested the practice would make an excellent addition to our recordings for *3015*. While the recording in the gallery was not intended to be exhibition quality, the chanting of the lower chakras was used in the final mix presented to the public in La Jolla.

Marina’s Words of Wisdom – On shitting, etc

I have learned it is very important to have your own individual technique of charging your body. You can’t charge your body anymore with just one good sleep or take a shower. You need much more than that. Today, we have all these stresses. We have all this pollution, all this technology. We need more than that and that is to create your own system and we are trying to show you some of this stuff here. It’s really very important.

—Marina Abramović⁶²¹

After the transformative chanting Marina pulled up a stool while we all gathered around her, sat on the floor and listened to a colorful, humorous talk conveying her personalized wisdom and Method informally, rather than practically. She covered material that informs her artwork and her Abramović Method adding many possibilities for further exploration of exercises and lifestyle choices to the workshop. Abramović teaches an approach to the physical body that is inherently cosmological. Biological

⁶²⁰ Freeman, Abramović Method Workshop—UCSD (“the hard problem”/3015).

⁶²¹ Marina Abramović, *Talk: The Abramović Method Workshop, UCSD* (University Art Gallery--UCSD, 2015).

functions, the daily rhythms of the planet, spending time in nature, and lessening our environmental impact formed the basis of a transcultural approach to teaching from her experience.

In the following section, I have excerpted her talk at length, illustrating the difference between her live teaching, and the minimal texts she uses to transmit the Abramović Method in print. She opened her talk,

Shitting, okay. What is important to know is just how everything functions in nature. When the sun go down, everything falls asleep, trees, nature, animals, us. Everything goes to sleep. When the sun comes up all the energy rays goes up and everybody is awake. So what is very important is to shit before sunrise. It sounds like crazy, but it took me so long to learn that. It doesn't matter if you fall asleep, go back to sleep. You have to wake up. Now, I do it automatically. [. . .] If you sleep later, the sun is up 8:30, and the sun is already one half hour up all the toxins of the shit in your body raise with the sun and new life and you're full of this stuff. This is why so many people wake up and they are tired and the first thing they need coffee, because these things are not good and they completely exhaust you. You are more receptive and the more you collect these kind of toxins they create diseases, your inner system collapses and all this stuff. So shitting before sunrise that's the real key. This is the golden key! It's true!⁶²²

I traced several elements of the wit and wisdom she shared to the texts of Harish Johari, Yoga and Ayurveda,⁶²³ including a strong emphasis on becoming conscious and intentional in daily routines of waking and breathing to establish harmony in the natural patterns of daily life. Abramović linked traditional understanding of the patterns of breath and the time of day one was born, not to spiritual practice, but to the best time to do creative work.

⁶²² Ibid.

⁶²³ Harish Johari, *Breath, Mind, and Consciousness* (Rochester, Vt.; [New York]: Destiny Books; Harper and Row [distributor], 1989); Harish Johari, *Dhanwantari: A Complete Guide to the Ayurvedic Life* (Rochester, Vt.: Healing Arts Press, 1998); Harish Johari, *Numerology: With Tantra, Ayurveda, and Astrology* (Rochester, Vt.: Destiny Books, 1990).

The nose is always changing during the day—one open, one closed, one open, one closed, but there is a moment of the day when they are both open. When both nostrils are open is when you are the most balanced with nature and with the outside. When you are completely kind of in tune with everything. It is not easy to find. You have to find what is the best time of your day. And it's very strange, sometimes it's related to the time of your birth. So, if you are born 7:15 in the morning it is very possible at 7:15 both your nostrils are open, or in the afternoon. [. . .] So when this is open, both, that means you are ready for creative work. It's the time that you don't need to write the checks or do something unpleasant, shopping stuff or go to supermarket. This is the time that you should sit and be with yourself and the ideas come. Something is unclear in your mind, it becomes clear.⁶²⁴

Her theory of color derives from ancient correspondences of planets, gems, and colors to the days of the week, informed by her own long-term experimentation with meditating on and wearing color. Performances emphasizing Abramović's interest in color include *Nightsea Crossing* and *The House with the Ocean View*, in which she carefully color-coded her costume to generate and harmonize with certain energies and cosmological correspondences. Yellow is one of the colors Abramović uses in her exercises, as a one-hour meditation on one of the primary colors.⁶²⁵

Yellow is very difficult color. Yellow is a Buddhist color, but is also color of ultimate death. Especially strong color like lemon yellow, they use it very much in advertising. If you see, all advertising use yellow because it is the first thing you see. It works very directly in your system. If you want to lose weight get yellow sheets, yellow trousers, it kind of makes you nervous. It makes you really unsettled. And this is why the Tibetans like to use yellow, if there is something that you have to fight.

In her approach to managing anger, the “Stopping Anger Exercise,” Abramović is unconventional.⁶²⁶ Her Method requires the practitioner to test their physical limits.

⁶²⁴ Abramović, *Talk: The Abramović Method Workshop, UCSD*.

⁶²⁵ Westcott, “Silence Is Golden,” 76; Mahler et al., *Unfinished Business*, exercise 3 (unpaginated); Abramović, *Student Body*, 70.

⁶²⁶ Mahler et al., *Unfinished Business*, exercise 19 (unpaginated); Abramović, *Student Body*, 82.

So, how to change pattern of anger? You have the answer to that, you have the answer to everything. The conscious thing you know, “I am incredibly angry. I can’t calm down.” And it is no help having another cup of tea. So what you do? You sit down quietly and concentrate with your breathing. You breathe like here, as we have been learning so much. You breathe full of air in your lungs and stop breathing. You don’t breathe. And you really don’t breathe. And you don’t breathe. And you are getting so close that you are going to explode, and you are kind of blue and your eyes are popping out. You have to get that far. You get really far. You say, “If I don’t breathe in this moment I am going to suffocate. I can’t!” At that moment, you breathe deeply. The pleasure of breathing this new air, 90% of the anger is gone. It’s amazing. It’s really good.

Biological functions were a point of multiple personal anecdotes, revealing aspects of culture rarely favored as subjects of scholarly research, but relevant to adventurous international travelers. She described the cultural context of sunrise toilet rituals of India.

You know, in India and eastern cultures, which is so wonderful in the morning you see entire village. They do mostly in the fields, so at the same time you are doing something good, you are giving food to the crops. So you see the entire line of men, you know shitting in the sunrise, just as the sun is coming up. And the next day you see the line a little bit closer. They do it very precisely in different lines. And the women do by the sea and the sea just come and take it away.⁶²⁷

At the end of the talk, favorable response to the opening of her talk led to a scatological story from her travels walking the Great Wall of China.

All the village women waiting to go to the bathroom, because they wanted to wait for me as a kind of friendship gesture. In the bathroom, there is no bathroom, just a kind of hut. Everybody shit on the floor and they put water on it. It’s full of flies and you have to find a little space. So, in the morning I have entire village coming with me, holding hands, shitting and singing friendship songs. There was the most serious constipation. Then came this journalist from the *Village Voice*. [. . .] I say to her, “You have to do something when you go to the bathroom. Can I come with you and

⁶²⁷ Abramović, *Talk: The Abramović Method Workshop*, UCSD.

hold your hand.” She nearly lost it. I just want to prepare her. There she is the next morning, holding hands, singing friendship songs.⁶²⁸

As expected from her global travels and transcultural influences, cultures outside of Europe and America formed the basis of many of her insights. She concluded her talk by formulating an ethic of emotional detachment and abstemious living, cutting across cultures and topics swiftly, marking her speech and life as transculturally informed at their core.

For me the really life changing experience was living with Aborigines for one entire year of my life without having one penny of money. [. . .] It was really important to understand how little we need in our life. There is also this Sufi statement. They use it in advertising now, ‘less is more’. This is my saying, “Let’s have more and more of less and less,” because actually we don’t need all the things that we think we need. We need very little. You need things to have meaning and a reason why you have them and to focus on the really important things. So I always think of death. I think of death every single day. The only way that you can get rid of fear of death is to enjoy every moment of your life. And then you understand that we spend so much time on bullshit, and uninteresting things. It doesn’t make any sense. So every day you need to have a concept to look at your life from a very, very high plane. See it somewhere from the top and see, “Where is my problem?” And it’s so tiny you see it doesn’t exist from that side.⁶²⁹

Ultimately, Abramović’s life lessons are an amalgam of personally refined approaches to the teachings she has experienced throughout her travels and teaching. Emphasizing the development of a unique approach to care of the self, grounded in connection to nature, purification, and the mystical traditions of Asia her Method approaches aphoristic folk wisdom in its simplicity, while integrating the nuances of spiritual cultivation from advanced practices.

⁶²⁸ Ibid.

⁶²⁹ Ibid.

Blindfold Exercise

After a break, the gallery opened to the public. Lynsey passed out blindfolds and noise-cancelling headphones as we prepared to practice the exercise Abramović presented as *Generator* (2014), moving very slowly around a controlled space, with visual and auditory sensory deprivation. *Generator* creates an experience of nothing but being present to the energy of the space, focused through deprivation of the senses. Press materials for *Generator* describe it as “an opportunity for forced introspection.”⁶³⁰ At UCSD’s University Art Gallery, the development of community and attunement to the body resulted in a great deal of intimacy between the participants. Video documentation of the “Blindfold Exercise” shows handholding, caresses, and long hugs exchanged between the participants.

Similar to the “Looking at Each Other Exercise” on Day Two, the “Blindfold Exercise” generated some of the most enthusiastic positive responses. Most of the respondents to my interview questions selected the experiences of the last day and the “Blindfold Exercise” as their favorite and gave the most detailed answers about why it appealed to them. Artist Amy Kaps found, “found my body slowing down and my other senses being amplified.”⁶³¹ Ana Freeman felt similar alterations to her perception, finding “heightened state of consciousness” that emphasized touch and smell. Much like Abramović in her performances, she felt she communicated through non-verbal means.⁶³²

Communication and connection within a context of sensory isolation was the most salient experience of the respondents. In the absence of sight and sound, the sense

⁶³⁰ Sean Kelly Gallery, “Sean Kelly Gallery - Marina Abramović - Generator Press Release,” accessed July 15, 2015, http://www.skny.com/exhibitions/2014-10-24_marina-abramovi/pressrelease/.

⁶³¹ Amy Kaps, Abramović Method Workshop—UCSD (“the hard problem”/3015), 2015.

⁶³² Freeman, Abramović Method Workshop—UCSD (“the hard problem”/3015).

of touch provided a refuge for many of the participants, who used their alter state of consciousness to establish different approaches to communication, and social interaction. As Jeffery Pinkston described, “We laid head beside head, touching each other’s faces and reading expressions.”⁶³³ Both Ingrid Hoffmeister and Adan Tinkle reflected in the experience in terms of its intimacy. Tinkle vividly described his experience in terms of eroticism and intoxication,

The thing that made it so amazing was how directly it engaged our social, intersubjective selves in a totally exploratory, experimental, testing way. [. . .]

The blindfold, for me, started with people trying to be really careful of each other, flinching from touching one another even, but, by halfway through, it felt like everyone was so desperate to touch one another and connect. Not knowing what part of someone, and WHO I was touching made it feel like I was re-experiencing the feeling of touching another body for the first time...I had sensations of the erotic unfamiliarity of others' bodies that I don't think I've felt since high school. Because of this intensity of sensing at the periphery of my own body, the outstretched fingers and alertness of my whole skin to being touched, I left the exercise burning and buzzing with an energy that I can only liken to the experience of coming down off of psychedelic drugs.⁶³⁴

Tinkle’s narrative highlights the altered sense of consciousness that several participants in *The Artist Is Present* described as hallucinatory. Outside the strict confines of monastic or spiritual disciplines, Abramović’s alterations to conventional approaches to introspection in the Blindfold Exercise and radically decelerated meditation in Vipassana Walking result in significant transformation of participants beyond conventional expectations of meditative discipline. Such changes demonstrate the significance of introducing such practices in altered form to an art context, while the group dynamics of

⁶³³ Pinkston, “Abramović Method Workshop, ‘Between the Stars/3015.’”

⁶³⁴ Adam Tinkle, Abramović Method Workshop—UCSD (“the hard problem”/3015), 2015.

the gallery also change expected outcomes from conventional spiritual practices into new dimensions of shared experience social interaction.

My participation in the “Blindfold Exercise” was informed by two visits to the *Generator* exhibition in New York. In New York, I had immediately noticed I could move around the space with some awareness of sound in the room, as well as being able to see down to the floor through the bottom of my blindfold. I had used the smallest ability to see a few times at the *Generator* exhibition and decided to keep my eyes closed for the duration of the workshop exercise, a choice I recommended to those within earshot at the beginning of the exercise.

While orienting us to the piece, facilitator Lynsey Peisinger mentioned the importance of moving slowly, and then we were left to our own devices. In New York, the facilitator mentioned I might be touched and “some people choose to sit or lay down.” These comments stayed with me, as did my inclination to take such an opportunity to meditate. Unlike the event in New York, spectators were present, appealing to my understanding of the exercise as both introspective and performative.

Vaguely aware of my position in the room I began to walk slowly across it, as in the “Vipassana Exercise” until I reached the other wall. I sat down for a while on one of the stools placed along the walls of the gallery for about 10-15 minutes. When I stood up the cool temperature of the space inspired me to let the very long sleeves of my shirt hang down past the tips of my fingers. The choice was an intentional one to make me feel comfortable, but also intended as a quotation or homage to James Lee Byars’ famously dandyish performance attire and presence. He often performed in a blindfold under his

top hat in a dramatic gold lame suit reminiscent of a Chinese *Kung Fu* suit with very long sleeves.

I slowly crossed the room again, found a seat, and resumed my seated meditation. I felt someone approach me of my right and touch my hair. I recognized MFA candidate Angela Jennings, who moved on after staying a short time. I deeply engaged with my emphasized physical sensations and became interested in returning to the floor where we had performed our sound exercises. I slid off the stool and onto the floor lying with my head beneath the stool. The feeling and motion of sliding down to the floor was so fluid, fast, and smooth I felt I had been poured out of my seat like liquid. Later, I wished I could see how it appeared to others.

After another several minutes reclining, I resumed my walking meditation intending to cross the room. I encountered someone who held my hand. After the exercise, I was not surprised to find my intuition was right and I had encountered performance artist, UCSD MFA Alumna, and close friend Elle Mehrmand. When we spoke about the exercise, she said she tried to get me to follow her, but I let her go. Resting in a very heavy feeling of the body and a deeply grounded sense of my interior, I allowed her to move on as I continued my ambulation of the room, punctuated by sitting meditation. Towards the end of the hour, I found myself in the center of the room and heard a great deal of noise, later identified as an “impromptu drum circle.” Committed to the sensory deprivation of the piece and the importance of silence I made a gesture, bringing my index finger to my lips calling for quiet with my performance.

Working in the Studio—3015

To conclude the day we repeated our process from the day before. This time working in the studio with Marina, Stan, and Adam Tinkle. New extracts of the text appeared for us to work with and Adam conducted our performance to produce the desired rhythms, pauses, and clarity. Jeffery Pinkston described his experience of the performance process,

Beyond the workshop elements, taking part in and witnessing the creative process for *3015* was a unique experience. The first practice was one of those beautiful, improvised moments, as if each participant was in tune. [. . .] We journeyed from star names building up to a beautiful crescendo of inspired quotes, finishing with the mantra *Be kind*.⁶³⁵

Over the rest of the evening and well into the next day, Adam worked with Marina and Stan to prepare the work in progress *3015*, for the opening to take place the next day, January 15.

The opening resulted in presentation of two distinct works. Stan’s edit focused on the text as he composed it. His narrative and the choral parts came together over the sound of *bija mantra* resulting in an otherworldly sense of a deep space sound that never existed. Abramović’s edit made Robinson’s text more “abstract” as she read choice extracts of the narrator’s part over star names and the frequent refrain, “Is there anybody out there?” Out there, at the opening were crowds of people. Sitting in the deck chairs, on stools and pillows the workshop participants and public listened to the first cut of the sound work Abramović would debut at the exhibition “PROPORTIO” held at Museo Fortuny during the Venice Biennale of 2015.

⁶³⁵ Pinkston, “Abramović Method Workshop, ‘Between the Stars/3015.’”

Abramović Method—Results

In an effort to evaluate the short-term influence and results of the Abramović Method immediately after the workshop, I asked participants to summarize the benefits of the workshop, as well as discuss how they were using elements of the Abramović Method in their own life or creative work. Adam Tinkle and Ana Freeman were clear about the relationship of the workshop to the creative process. Tinkle reflected on the process as essentially removed from everyday life, and difficult to continue, as he does not share the practice with others, but did find the Abramović Method contributed to his own ideas about “creating my own transmissible practice.”⁶³⁶ Freeman noted how participation in the Workshop gave her direct experience of the differences between performance art and theater, and established that “performance art consists of ways of being, rather than modes of acting.”⁶³⁷ Such different responses to the Method suggest that the creative potential of the participants is directly related to their concerns with their own practices, rather than emulating Abramović in their own work. The independent approach to applying the benefits of the Method in other creative work reflects Abramović’s emphasis on developing individualized approaches to care of the self, and the flexibility of her highly disciplined approach to participatory art experiences.

The emotional experience and meditative dimensions of the Method connected with multiple respondents. The qualities of intimacy and psychological health were palpable for some. Several formed friendships that continued after the event. The inclusion of talking and conversation, rather than silence may have been a significant

⁶³⁶ Tinkle, Abramović Method Workshop—UCSD (“the hard problem”/3015).

⁶³⁷ Freeman, Abramović Method Workshop—UCSD (“the hard problem”/3015).

influence on the connections that participants made with each other. Jeffery Pinkston described a freedom, different from the wider social field. “At several points during the workshop, it’s as though I was given permission to connect with others in a way that I would not under normal circumstances have been able to do.”⁶³⁸ Ingrid Hoffmeister clearly articulated a comforting experience of equalization, an element of Hénaff’s conditions for religious ritual, often found in rites of passage. “When I arrived at the workshop, I felt some fear of inadequacy. This fell away after each experience resulting in a feeling of human equality with all, including Abramović.”⁶³⁹ Such experiences with others in the Workshop environment contributed to a pervasive sense of connection and community that help to establish new ways of being in the world, taking elements of the experience into everyday life.

An emphasis on being attentive to the present and a slower, more attentive approach to being and doing also developed in daily lives because of practicing the Abramović Method. Moving forward from his experience, Jeffery Pinkston noted, After the workshop, I feel like I have a different connection with the world. I tend to make more eye contact, and I walk slowly and am more patient. [. . .] The concept of mindfulness, of a contemplative practice is what has stayed with me most from the workshop.⁶⁴⁰ Pinkston’s past experience with meditation provided fertile opportunity to connect to the meditative dimensions of Abramović’s Method, reconnecting and reestablishing the importance of practice in daily life. The temporality of the Method, and its meditative focus produced different results for Ana Freeman, who emphasized

⁶³⁸ Pinkston, “Abramović Method Workshop, ‘Between the Stars/3015.’”

⁶³⁹ Ingrid Hoffmeister, Abramović Method Workshop—UCSD (“the hard problem”/3015), 2015.

⁶⁴⁰ Pinkston, “Abramović Method Workshop, ‘Between the Stars/3015.’”

and embodied experience of “greater presence, focus, and centered energy” that favored endurance and “moment to moment” existence.⁶⁴¹

My own experience of the Method was familiar and new. The awareness of the meditative possibilities and experience with the work added the value of repetition, something Abramović values highly. The elements that satisfied and transformed me the most were those that engaged the whole body and developed expanded awareness as well as concentration. As one experienced in long duration concentration practices, I found that those involving interaction with others and an emphasis on the body held the most positive results. The focus on the manipulation of objects and labor in the writing and counting exercised lack the positive dimensions of significant consciousness development I appreciated in the other exercises. The dimension of sound was an unexpected focus of the workshop and the positive results of exercises with Peisinger and Abramović show great potential in personal, pedagogical, and participatory practices inside and outside art contexts.

Conclusion

The Abramović Method Workshop was a unique event that has great similarity to Abramović’s recent exhibitions in galleries and museums. Concentration by means of timed tasks and deceleration mark time as the primary medium of the Method. Drawing explicitly on her transcultural influences from Australia, India, and Tibet, Abramović’s Method participates in a process of transculturation that is occurring throughout the world as a part of spiritual development, community building, and various forms of self-actualization. By developing her new work out of her academic teaching and personal

⁶⁴¹ Freeman, Abramović Method Workshop—UCSD (“the hard problem”/3015).

practices, Abramović has bridged the spaces between aesthetic experience, art education, and art practice.

The aesthetic experience of the Abramović Method is located in the experience of expanded consciousness produced through the cultivated experience of physical deceleration. The artist invites the public to contribute whatever level of interest they have in becoming absorbed in highly accessible activities that abstract the mundane into different states of awareness. By placing the integrity of the work in the participants' attention, discipline, and cognition under loose contractual obligations to forego technology and participate for allotted amounts of time, Abramović has opened her work. Her art is expanding beyond the challenges participation poses to spectatorship, privileging an aesthetic of introspection and co-presence that can be the seed of surprising intimacies.

When participants cultivate states of mind for the purpose of art experience that is performative, they experience Schechner's rasaesthetic as partakers. In Abramović's Method, she has changed the transmission of her own experience as energy into the cultivation of that experience within the participant. Each becomes a partaker of her performance as well as their own, expanding the abhinaya of rasaesthetics into an embodied experience of transculturation that not only exists in the moment of the exhibition, but also can be cultivated long after.

In her collaboration with author Kim Stanley Robinson, and her inspiration of a character in one of his novels, Abramović has expanded the geography of her practice beyond the cultures of earth into a dialogue with machines and travel between the stars. The speculative fiction of "the hard problem" and the novel *2312* transport Abramović's

spatial presence into a cosmography of interstellar travel affirming her idea that the art of the future is Abramović's evolving aesthetic of time and consciousness.⁶⁴²

⁶⁴² Kim Stanley Robinson, *2312*, (London: Orbit, 2013).

Conclusion—Towards an Open Work

Since the 1970s, Marina Abramović has been expanding her performances to include more of the geography of the world and more of the public in her practice. Rooted in a fascination with other cultures, religion and the experience of the body, her performance oeuvre has developed a distinctive emphasis on spiritual and religious gestures and practices incorporating non-western forms into the secular context of Contemporary art. I have argued this approach is essential to the high levels of success and public exposure she has achieved in the 21st century, becoming a global media phenomenon with *The Artist Is Present* (2010).

Abramović's formation in the communist milieu of the former Yugoslavia, and the distinctive inclusion of religion in her upbringing by her Eastern Orthodox Christian grandmother provides the root of a distinctively spiritual approach to life and art. Her encounter with other emerging artists expanded her interests to Theosophy, Zen and Contemporary artists of Western Europe, while her mother's influence exposed her to the international art world through the Venice Biennale. Steeped in a cosmopolitan worldview fueled by anthropological curiosity and bourgeois privilege, Abramović's development as a painter quickly shifted to installation and performance as she developed herself with the Yugoslavian avant-garde.

Abramović's move to performance art was typified by risk, wounding, and tests of the limits of her body. Her early performances placed her in vulnerable conditions intentionally and accidentally, resulting in participatory interaction and audience interventions to protect her physically. The early experiment with audience participation and objectification of the self in *Rhythm 0* (1975) resulted in a withdrawal from the

sphere of public participation in her performances, but did not dim her interest in the body and its intersubjective potential as performance aesthetic. As her reputation grew, her adventurous and provocative exploration of the body introduced her to German artist Ulay, with whom she would collaborate for a dozen years.

Working with Ulay expanded Abramović's opportunities for working with the body into experimentation with social space and intimacy. Their *Relation Works* (1976-80) explored the possibilities of working as an artistic couple with a unitary identity informed by the alchemical ideal of the divine androgyne. They deployed their bodies in simple movements and disturbing interactions that emphasized sound, aggression, interdependency, exposure, and the forces of their wills. While living in a van they traveled Europe nomadically, performing within the strictures of their theory of performance called "Art Vital," that emphasized novelty and a lack of repetition to emphasize the distinction of their work from theatre and foreground the investigative nature of their relationship. Together, they created a geography of art that took them away from any permanent residence, travelling Europe and America as they created performances from their base in Amsterdam abstracting performance into an image of alterity that approached an aesthetic of the universal.

Their nomadic lifestyle developed into a world embracing approach to art. They explored and lived in foreign and distant places as they developed a practical interest in Buddhist meditation, tantric semiotics and the world's deserts. Transformed by the experience of indigenous culture and extreme climate in Australia's Central Desert Abramović and Ulay developed a new series of performances emphasizing ascetic strictures on movement and sexuality, as they fasted and meditated in museums and

galleries while they kept silent eye contact. This series of performances, *Nightsea Crossing* (1981-87), a tacitly religious performance that depended on meditative discipline. Their interest in sharing the energy of their meditation and adaptation to extremes of climate expanded to include other performers, a Tibetan Lama and Aboriginal elder. The inclusion of non-western bodies within their performances not only created an image of Contemporary performance aesthetics as transcultural, it reduced the differences between cultures to a single shared practice of simple seated presence amounting to a religious ritual in secular aesthetic space.

The decay of their relationship during the ascetic series of long duration performances set Abramović and Ulay's final collaborative performance into high relief, as they embarked on a monumental performance along the Great Wall of China. The negotiations and diplomatic efforts required to complete the work created a network of international organizations and cross cultural contact that took Abramović's performance practice to new levels on transcultural complexity and personal endurance. Expanding the scope of performance to a global scale and months long duration, *The Great Wall Walk* (1988) was painful completion and unexpected anticlimax to a relationship that was intended to result in marriage. Again, Abramović was inspired to attempt to translate her experience of geography and the body to conventional art exhibition spaces.

As Abramović moved out of her collaborative partnership, her long duration performances began to emphasize ritualistic strictures and intersubjective interaction informed by her spiritual practice and prior collaboration. Shamanism and Buddhism influenced her gallery performances, where austerities and eye contact brought her into structured, silent interactions with the public. Her performance *The House with The*

Ocean View (2002) ritualized the gallery space of New York, with an intention to connect with the emotional aftermath of the events of September 11, 2001 as she attempted to purify her body, mind and space for the benefit of others. Structured in a manner similar to Buddhist meditation retreats, Abramović's transcultural aesthetics brought religious practice of Asia into the performance space of the art world, with a new emphasis on opening her aesthetic to public participation and intersubjectivity. The success of the work as a form of intersubjective experience laid a foundation for Abramović's most demanding solo performance, *The Artist Is Present* (2010).

The retrospective of Abramović's performance oeuvre at the Museum of Modern Art New York (MoMA) was accompanied by a long duration performance in the museum's atrium. In a formal, ritualized, secular space, Abramović open the simple sitting practice of *Nightsea Crossing* to the public at large, inviting anyone to sit with her in silent eye contact or as long as they wished. Her meditative presence was intended to provide a space for contact and intimacy, as she used the performance to mark one of her career's pinnacles and make a break from the end of another long term relationship that ended with divorce. The streaming video and photographic documentation of the performance were distributed over the internet, resulting in a digitally globalized audience for Abramović's transcultural aesthetic for the first time. Her celebrity was magnified to a degree that has transformed her public profile to one that exceeds that of the vast majority of participants in the art world, bringing her an expanded audience through her openness to the participation of the public in her performances.

After the demanding and renowned performance at MoMA, Abramović transformed her approach to practices of long duration to focus on public participation

and transmission of her Abramović Method of consciousness cultivation to art contexts worldwide. Through her activities in public exhibition spaces, Abramović has translated her pedagogical techniques for performance training developed from numerous religious practices and her past performances to introduce the Method she intends to leave as her legacy. As meditation and deceleration of activity are introduced to the public as art, Abramović is attempting to transmit her practice to the public as an ephemeral experience that will outlive her body. As she and a new group of collaborators facilitate her increasingly social practice, her global influence and media profile have continued to increase. These approaches to participation allow the public to choose their engagement with the work in an open manner that defines aesthetic experience in new ways, emphasizing the observation of the body and others through simple discipline.

In this survey of Abramović's development as a performance artist, I have articulated the importance of global travel and religion to her aesthetic. I argue these elements of her work are essential to the high degree of influence and importance she has reached in the 21st century. Unlike other scholars who attend to the importance of her communist background and familial baggage as primary sources of her creative expression, I have argued that her choice to expand her horizons and explore the body as a vehicle for experience have been the most important factors in her success as an artist with a distinctive transcultural aesthetic.

Always attending to the body as the core of her practice, Abramović's interest in affecting the public has evolved into a performance method that centers on spiritual discipline and meditative awareness through her own presence and the participation of the public. Her long term interest in transforming the energy of herself, spaces and

people through the body has depended on her exploration of its capacities as she has lived in other cultures, consulted spiritually accomplished people, and adopted non-western religious practices. The importance of these dimensions of her practice becomes more significant, as Abramović has continued to explore culture, ritual, and religion across cultures inspiring new work. Abramović's experiences in indigenous, African diasporic, and globalized Brazilian religious worlds—activities that are contemporaneous with presentation of her Abramović Method in urban Brazilian exhibition spaces and institutions worldwide—are expressions of her inclusive emphasis on religious practice as central to her transcultural aesthetic and ethos. The increasing diversity of Abramović's transcultural aesthetic has supported her latest ethnographic and geographic creative researches into shamanism, consciousness, and the Brazilian landscape. Filmmakers have documented her approach as she has participated in ayahuasca ceremonies, Candomblé rituals, and spiritual healing with world famous medium and psychic surgeon João Teixeira de Faria (aka João de Deus/John of God, 1942-).

The film *The Space In Between: Marina Abramović and Brazil* (2016), demonstrates the importance of the liminal experience of religious ritual and the space between cultural categories to Abramović's pursuit of religious experience and artistic inspiration. The ambiguity of the space between art and religion has become explicit in Abramović's late work, emphasizing the value of Warburg's scholarly speculation on a Nameless Science between art and religion. In Marina Abramović and her art, the indeterminate place where the body and the image negotiate the transcendent and the aesthetic are evidence of the diversity of culture, geography, and experience necessary to understanding new forms and expressions of the transcultural.

APPENDIX 1

PARTICIPANT NARRATIVES—*THE ARTIST IS PRESENT* (Excerpted)

Vanessa Lodigiani, artist

Present, I surrendered, melting into a voyage that revealed itself as a theater of my unconscious. Oracle, Virgin, martyr, Kali: ferocious divine mother in your blue - white aura...pure vibrating energy. Mirror, mirror, mirror. You embodied the key element in the act of all creation: Contemplation. Offering us your being as unconditional space to reach inside for truth and realize that taking the time to be present and observe, beauty unfolds and all becomes now.⁶⁴³

Dena Gold, acupuncturist/aerialist

You are as an empty vessel, clearer than a mirror.

I bear offerings of love and gratitude, and you reflect them back to me one thousand fold.

Your slightest gesture sweeps across me like a warm breeze. Each blink of your eyes tells a story that words can never recreate.

I fall into you in waves and emerge in the deepest parts of myself, each time returning to bask in your glow again.

Thank you.

Dena Gold.⁶⁴⁴

Ewa Zender, artist

she's pure LOVE and it comprises everything: all dimensions of love... and it's LIVE, AUTHENTIC, REAL... and most importantly: INTENSE! when you step into this 'unique' time-space zone of presence with Marina Abramović, you know there's no way back.... or forward! there's just, right here, right now. It's eternity!⁶⁴⁵

⁶⁴³ Blancas, *SEVENTY-FIVE*, Vanessa Lodigiani 75/15.

⁶⁴⁴ Ibid., Dena Gold 75/28.

⁶⁴⁵ Zender, "Day 64, Portrait 10"; Zender, "Sitting With Marina."

Nina Meledandri, painter

getting distinct stalker vibe fr some of these returning participants w/ #Abramović. Why does the return signal pathology?

- via twitter

...
 i can only speak to why i am compelled to return
 (i sit for a number of reasons which are outlined at the end of my post from 2 visits ago.)
 the first is my desire to witness the performance in its totality.
 since this is a piece about duration,
 it makes sense to me,
 that to get the full impact of what is being exhibited
 requires experiencing it over time,
 this includes, for me gaining an experiential understanding of both the highs and the lows
 of what making durational art entails.[. . .]

this is a work of art
 many of us revisit paintings, sculptures, etc. countless times over the years to experience
 the transformative power these works have for us.
 this piece will last 2.5 months,
 then it will be over,
 one way of preserving it is through the experience of it.⁶⁴⁶

Vanessa Lodigiani, artist

I sat in front of Marina Abramović, six consecutive days dressed as six different identities, the last one being a full length black Burqa and Niqāb, which covered my entire body and face, except for the eyes. I sat with her for 42 minutes, then continued upstairs where the retrospective of her work was being shown. I stood in front of a re-performer elevated high on a wall, her arms and legs extended in a crucifixion pose. We stared intensely into each other's eyes, she began to cry. I was completely covered, she was completely nude.

This same re-performer, later talked about this experience in an interview, mentioning that it was the only moment she truly felt physically naked.

The performance was based on the experience of annulling the individual. I no longer represented myself but a collective identity. I became a symbol. A question. A contrasting figure. The "other".⁶⁴⁷

Jody Lyn-Kee-Chow

I expected to have a conversation with her through the eyes, and I did. Upon my arrival she smiled at me like I was a child of hers. She knew what I was contemplating as I sat there in front of her dressed as a bride wearing white to match her. She was my priestess.

⁶⁴⁶ Meledandri, "A Flower Every Day (for Marina Abramović)."

⁶⁴⁷ Lodigiani, "This Is Not Me, This Is Also Me."; Lodigiani, "Sitting With Marina."

I was actually marrying art in the chapel. Maybe I was also confronting the institution in which this all took place.⁶⁴⁸

SECTION 1: THE LINE

Rebecca Taylor, art writer

More than three hours from when I entered the succession I've seen only six people participate in the performance and more than thirty leave the line in frustration. The nameless, faceless strangers I queued with hours ago are now friends—an artist from Poughkeepsie, an art history undergrad from Chicago, a nurse from outside Philly—and we share our excitement as our turn approaches. Finally, after nearly four hours, my time has come.⁶⁴⁹

Heather Rose, author

Anyone could sit. Anyone with the patience. There were no metal detectors, no airport scanners. All of us who waited floated into the unknown. Time was beyond our control. In the queue we befriended each other, finding ourselves with literally hours to sit side by side. Some who waited were drama students, and there were scholars and art enthusiasts, but there were also lawyers, musicians, bankers, writers, teachers and tourists from all over the world.⁶⁵⁰

Alisa Solomon, author/teacher/dramaturge

But for all the ecstatic attention—and cranky critiques, too—trained on the art world's equivalent of an audience with the pope, an important aspect of the performance has been overlooked: the deep aesthetic, communal, even spiritual (and sometimes contentious) experiences of hundreds of people who waited all day along the perimeter of the square performance space in vain hopes of taking a turn in the chair. Last Wednesday, I was one of them. And by day's end, I thought that maybe it was in this periphery, on the sharp, invisible edge between spectating and participating, that the work's most compelling meaning could be found.

Truth is, by at least 2:00 my odds had dwindled to nil, but something kept me rooted to the cold marble floor: a concentrated state of observance that I shared with the people near me in the queue. Concentrating our attention together over an extended period produced a calm, collaborative, meditative clarity I hadn't felt in an art museum in ages. Instead of the usual rugby scrum of popular exhibits, where you crunch under someone's armpit to grab a look at an artwork before shoving ahead, the perimeter of that

⁶⁴⁸ Lyn-Kee-Chow, "Sitting With Marina"; Lyn-Kee-Chow, "Day 70, Portrait 19 (28 Min.)."

⁶⁴⁹ Rebecca Taylor, "Sitting With Marina : Day 2, Portrait 14 (14 Min.) "...I Was Afraid:....," 2, accessed July 20, 2015, <http://sittingwithmarina.tumblr.com/post/709986974/day-2-portrait-14-14-min-i-was-afraid>; Rebecca Taylor, "Khan Academy," *Khan Academy*, accessed July 20, 2015, <https://www.khanacademy.org/humanities/global-culture/conceptual-performance/a/marina-abramovi-the-artist-is-present>.

⁶⁵⁰ Rose, "Sitting with Marina.," 474.

lit square in MoMA's atrium was an unperturbed space where contemplation was possible.⁶⁵¹

Kristen Hutchinson, art historian

The process of waiting in line became an important part of the piece. The conversations that occurred between me and the other waiting participants made the waiting bearable and gave us time to discuss the piece amongst ourselves. Beside me was a Chilean performance artist who had recently moved to New York and this was her third time participating in the piece. On the other side of me were two women from Greece and a British woman who had travelled to New York together. Beside the Chilean woman was a writer from the New York Post who wrote article about his participation in the piece. [. . .] If people sat for too long, others in the line became restless and began making negative judgements about what was perceived as overly prolonged participation.⁶⁵²

Sarah Deming, author

"She makes all the other art in the MOMA seem like decorative bullshit," Ethan remarked. "It didn't seem like a collegial atmosphere in that line, though. That kind of shows her cruel side, doing that kind of experiment on you."

I knew what he meant. Marina's work is very generous, but it has its razor edge. The day had put me face to face with my lifelong difficulty with disappointment. It made me feel like a negative, toxic person and a little like a dilettante. Why did I feel like I needed to sit in that chair anyway? Would it really solve all my problems? I hadn't even heard of Marina a week ago. [. . .]

My heart began to overflow with hatred for all mankind. How could these people take so long when they knew others were waiting? There were a lot of old school New York artist types in positions ten through fourteen, and they each made an excellent showing of at least half an hour. Probably they all practiced Buddhism, the bastards.⁶⁵³

Taylor K. Long, writer/photographer

Camaraderie built up while waiting in line. People wanted to know how long others were planning to sit, lest we get stuck behind someone who sat all day. We talked about Abramović's projects, about our own projects, why we were there. The guy behind me told us he had taken some "Lucy in the sky with diamonds," which made me think, "He's totally on LSD" and "Wait, people still take LSD?"⁶⁵⁴

⁶⁵¹ Solomon, "The Artist's Present < Killing the Buddha."

⁶⁵² Hutchinson, "Forays into Performance Art."

⁶⁵³ Sarah Deming, "PART OF THE ART - An Essay on Marina Abramović's," *The Spiral Staircase*, accessed July 20, 2015, <http://sarahdeming.typepad.com/spiralstaircase/2010/05/part-of-the-art-an-essay-on-marina-Abramovićs-the-artist-is-present.html>.

⁶⁵⁴ "Sitting With Marina : Day 66, Portrait 14 (13 Min.) "The Guy behind Me...," accessed July 23, 2015, <http://sittingwithmarina.tumblr.com/post/4665922350/day-66-portrait-14-13-min-the-guy-behind-me>; Taylor K. Long, "Me and Miranda July and Mark Epstein and Marina Abramović | T-Sides," accessed July 23, 2015, <http://www.t-sides.com/2011/04/15/me-and-miranda-july-and-mark-epstein-and-marina-Abramović/>.

Misael Soto, artist

Waiting in line I thought about and discussed with those around me how anyone, unless they were blind (and even they might be able to), regardless of language, age, religion, sex, etc. could sit with her and experience the work at the same level. Her chair was a great equalizer of sorts. I also thought about how merely waiting in line I was a part of art history, part of an important work that will never be duplicated (or will it?).⁶⁵⁵

Jenny Sauers, journalist

Somewhere around mid-afternoon, I realized that there was a reason that of all the lines I had waited in that day, this one was the least guarded and defined: The queue is part of the piece. By setting artificial conditions, like a line with no delineation and no external order, Abramović strongly tipped our hands towards communication in a place where we normally wouldn't speak. Days elapse between even my most cursory and codified exchanges with strangers, and on Thursday I had real conversations with six of them, counting the 6-year-old. It was unnerving and yet it actually made sense. Abramović was socializing us. We were coming together around our own norms within the space she had carved for us. It felt empowering, and hopeful.⁶⁵⁶

Sarah Fox, poet

The line seems integral to the experience of sitting; I pity the VIPs who missed it. The line became a de facto community, it accommodated and invited intimacy and solidarity among strangers. On my first day, a man on his 5th time in line, knowing he'd not have the opportunity to return before the show's close, and recognizing the endurance of the last sitter, asked a young woman in our midst if she'd "do it with him;" that is, sit and gaze. He said, "I just want to know what it feels like." She agreed, and they sat for 20 minutes, on the floor just past the last pillar in line. Really, it was one of the most moving things I've ever seen. [. . .] Marina's performance—despite its inherently intense duality/privacy—spawned layers of community that found their primal roots in the line. If the piece reflects an economy, its legal tender is intimacy. She risked probable public chaos, she almost willed upon the total field of participation an underlying generosity and democracy that did, in fact, prevail.⁶⁵⁷

Caroline Sindors, photographer

everyone started talking about good vibes and energy, the people i sat with (most of them) practiced yoga and meditation. they all had the most calming effect. marina's projects tend to bring out good vibes, bad vibes and darwinism in people, i think that's what drew me to it. it's about the human condition, the experience and the endurance.⁶⁵⁸

⁶⁵⁵ Misael Soto, "Art. Music. Film. Whatever.: The Day I Fell in Love with the World Again," *Art. Music. Film. Whatever.*, May 25, 2010, <http://artmusicfilmwhatever.blogspot.com/2010/05/day-i-fell-in-love-with-world-again.html>.

⁶⁵⁶ Sauers, "Long Day's Journey."

⁶⁵⁷ Fox, "Sitting With Marina"; Fox, "Day 63, Portrait 23."

⁶⁵⁸ Caroline Sindors, "Sitting With Marina : Day 71, Portrait 10 (15 Min.) "she Was Here, Real,..." accessed July 20, 2015, <http://sittingwithmarina.tumblr.com/post/717085976/day-71-portrait-10-15-min-she-was-here-real>; Caroline Sindors, "Louise or Valentine: Marina Abramović," *Louise or Valentine*, May 30, 2010, <http://louiseorvalentine.blogspot.com/2010/05/marina-Abramović.html>.

Chanda Carey, art historian/critic/theorist

After a few arduous obstacles on my way back to the city, I finally made it into the atrium at about 4pm on Saturday. Few of the regulars were around and the news of the line had become complicated—in terms of the commitment required. The institution of a numbering scheme, and an escort up the back escalator for the first 30 (eventually 50) people after being organized in a cordoned queue from 9:30-10:30 led to a first come, first sitting solution. Given this level of organization came with an overnight stay on the sidewalk outside of MoMA, it's hard to say whether or not it was better to deal with the violence and uncertainty of the mornings I visited in April.

The stay on the pavement overnight produced even deeper senses of community in the line, and the merely curious rapidly receded from the group. As I walked to the museum just before midnight from the hotel, I questioned my ability to be ready to sit, the wisdom of camping out. I walked to the museum thinking that the practice and the sacrifice of enduring a long stay for the purpose of sitting at the end of the performance rhymed with Marina's long commitment and the physical demands of the performance. An initiation of sorts, or the engendering of *communitas* typical of rites of passage and religious ritual. Many of the people on the line were first time sitters. Of the first 40, no more than three or four had sat before. This situation was much unlike the weeks prior, when many of the recognizable faces made up at least half of those seeking to sit at the beginning of the day. It was a bit lonely in that regard, missing the familiar sitters, but I was happy to find that the coterie of yogis and meditators had increased significantly and a number of sitters were longtime observers who had spent time on line, or in the atrium. People had waited for their sitting until the last possible moment. Many of those waiting on line had waited as many as five days and not managed to sit. Some very profound connections were made in those hours on the pavement and in the time that followed.

Josephine Decker, filmmaker

It was the final day of the MoMA retrospective of Abramović's work, and the line was a testament to the enormous impact of the world-famous performance artist. But it was also testament to the extraordinary relationships forged in waiting. Many of those in line stayed overnight because new friends they had met in line encouraged them to. The conversations and relationships that emerged were a degree of audience participation in the work that surprised even Abramović. "How the people actually started meeting each other around the work, how this circulated and how they continue to get into kind of a friendship situation—that was a really new thing to me," she was quoted as saying. Abramović often pushes the boundaries of audience participation, and on that final day, I guess I did too.⁶⁵⁹

Jeremy Lubman, writer/director

We talk about patience, and how this is a different kind of waiting. We talk about how the masks people try to put up to protect themselves become so obvious when they are

⁶⁵⁹ Decker, "Why Does MoMA Hate My Body? | Manhattan, New York, NY | News."

sitting in that chair... and how beautiful the light that shines through from beneath those masks is. We fall into a collective trance.⁶⁶⁰

Ann-Sargeant Wooster, artist/critic

Waiting was a kind of meditation where you had to practice a kind of patience not normally experienced in life. [. . .]

When I was considering getting an MFA (something I eventually did) one alternative to a degree was to hang out in art bars and talk to people. I never felt I shined in bars but I said several times that the conversations in line were like the best bar conversations you never had. For me it was also a way to see between generations. I was one of the oldest people in the line. My college students are about 20 and the people I met were between my students' age and mine. It made me wish there was a way for us to get together and talk outside of this unique context. What they were doing and thinking was interesting to me. We were, for the time being, sharing a common non-competitive ground.⁶⁶¹

SECTION 2: SITTING WITH MARINA

James Westcott, author/critic

After 90 minutes of queueing on the opening night, it was finally my turn to sit opposite the artist. I was immediately stunned. Not by the strength of her gaze, but the weakness of it. She offered a Mona Lisa half-smile and started to cry, but somehow this served to strengthen my gaze; I had to be the mountain. After about 10 minutes, I started to relish our unspoken dialogue. Then, suddenly and involuntarily, my head dropped. It was as if Abramović had sent me a laser beam, and the moment was over.⁶⁶²

Dana Moses, author

Submission. I felt bodiless, or, in other words, beyond-body. Flesh was a coat, sound was non-existent, the periphery was erased. The energy between us was similar to a membrane; certain moments, flashes, images, memories, epiphanies, filtered through and others remained. Those that remained, grew and developed, like a seed in soil, becoming preliminaries for a tree. I forgot about my usual concerns; my own presence, how I appeared, how I felt. None of that mattered. This was something massive. Even as a speck in the middle of the atrium surrounded by at least a hundred people, these concerns had dried. The power of submission was letting go of societal, trained perspectives, and though this could have been done through personal meditation, it was generous of Marina to offer her partnership in the midst of her own artistic, specialized conglomerate.⁶⁶³

⁶⁶⁰ Lubman, "LIMINAL RITES"; Lubman, "Sitting With Marina."

⁶⁶¹ Wooster, "Day 72, Portrait 49"; Wooster, "Sitting With Marina."

⁶⁶² Westcott, "Performance Artist Marina Abramović – 'I Have to Be like a Mountain.'"

⁶⁶³ Dana Moses, "Sitting With Marina : Day 31, Portrait 14 (23 Min.) "Flesh Was a Coat,....," accessed July 25, 2015, <http://sittingwithmarina.tumblr.com/post/1003568504/day-31-portrait-14-23-min-flesh-was-a-coat>; Dana Moses, "Day 31, Portrait 14," accessed July 25, 2015, <http://essaysaboutsitting.tumblr.com/post/1003555151/day-31-portrait-14>.

Colm Tóibín, journalist

The gazing came in waves. Sometimes it was easy to relax and just look, and blink when you had to, and then look harder. She was always looking directly at your eyes. Her face was not like a mask. Just as the face of someone who has recently died can seem to flicker or move, so too her face seemed at times infinitely suggestive and vulnerable. But it was also sexual, sensuous, spiritual, and that made me both fascinated and uncomfortable. It made me feel that I could spend the day there opposite her, and maybe the next day too, and it also made me want to go, it made me consider at what point I would leave.⁶⁶⁴

Heather Rose, Author

I settled on the wooden chair, noticed my racing heart begin to settle, aware of noise beyond the table, the flow of people in and out of the atrium, the ripple of voices. I took a deep breath and raised my head. Our eyes met. Abramović's expression for a brief moment was warm and welcoming and then she slipped back into a gaze that was slightly unfocused, the right eye quite fixed on me and the left softer, reminding me of what Susan Sontag once wrote: "In a woman, beauty is something total. It is what stands in a woman, for character. It is also of course a performance, something willed, designed, obtained."

Abramović is strikingly beautiful. Her beauty lies in her strength and fearlessness. She is an art warrior.

I considered what I was feeling. The crowd seemed a long way away. Even the idea I was at MoMA disappeared. I became aware of how big she was, how her presence appeared to fill the entire six floors of emptiness that is MoMA's atrium. I felt a part of myself I rarely visit: the warm core of myself where death has no hold nor the norms that constrain me—the physical laws, the social standards, the intellectual rules, the psychological boundaries. I understood that I had forgotten something, perhaps many things. I felt there was a deep kindness at work inside Abramović, and also a strength that might carry us anywhere. There was a sense of awe in me and a sense of peacefulness. A sense of being much older, with much more yet to do. I had a feeling of being omnipresent at all the points of my life from birth to death, deeply connected to the earth and every form of life on it. I saw many landscapes. After a while I realized that the energy had changed. I was aware again of the noise of the room, the bright glow of the floodlights, the waiting queue, the watching people. I bowed my head and walked back across the square, collected my shoes and went to an empty space against the wall. I slipped to the floor and realized I was shaking. I wanted to weep, as if I had lost something very precious. The next day I learned I had sat for three quarters of an hour. I would have guessed it was fifteen minutes.⁶⁶⁵

Joe Holmes, photographer

The first thing I realized is that I was stripped of all ability to convey any sort of social cue – to be engaging, reassuring, or inquiring – anything – and I could get nothing

⁶⁶⁴ Colm Tóibín, "Still Drama: Marina at MoMA," *NYRblog*, April 21, 2010, <http://www.nybooks.com/blogs/nyrblog/2010/apr/21/still-drama-marina-moma/>.

⁶⁶⁵ Rose, "Sitting with Marina," 474–475.

back from her. I felt completely helpless, and I found myself worried that I was being judged by Marina in some way, compared with all the people who had come before, and I had no way to respond. But as that gradually passed, I found my surroundings very distracting. Guards waved at people trying to take photos, people would sit down within my field of view to stare at me – though I never stopped staring into Marina’s eyes, not for the entire half hour, I could see this all in my peripheral vision. And then, very gradually, the surroundings faded and no longer mattered. I went through a slowly evolving string of feelings – a huge amount of empathy for Marina, for example, because she looked so incredibly tired. And then I had the sudden feeling that I was receiving a wonderful gift, one artist to another, through this physical sacrifice she was making. It was almost delusional, believing that she was there in order to fill me with some sort of indefinable injection of artistic energy. I felt like a vampire.

At times I also found I needed to stretch my back a little. Move my hands. Pull my feet back. I’m old, I stiffen up. I wanted to stare into one of Marina’s eyes, but I found myself looking back and forth between them. Marina seemed to be staring just at one of my eyes, and at times she almost seemed like she was in danger of falling asleep. I thought her eyes were odd, then I thought they were beautiful. She seemed very sad, then not sad at all. I never reached anything that could be described as a meditative state, as some people in line described.

And then all of a sudden, maybe halfway through my time, everything was different. I suddenly knew, somehow, that she and I had become equal on some level – I had somehow finally lost all concern about being judged, or about judging her, or any other self-consciousness and we were connecting on equal terms – not equal as artists, obviously, but I knew I was there taking what she was offering, and I was also giving her what she wanted from me. Our eyes were locked on equal terms – somehow. This was the most mystical feeling of my sitting and the most important, even though I can’t tell whether it was ridiculous or sublime. It all sounds rather new-agey, which I dislike, but the feeling was strong and it rolled over me like a wave and changed my whole experience of the sitting.⁶⁶⁶

B. Lee, artist

I try to smile a little in greeting. I'm not sure if the expression registers correctly on my face - I certainly get no answering smile. For the entire time that I am seated, my mood and focus shift continually. I am jubilant to be here, a space I've waited hours to occupy, an experience I never thought I'd be offered. I am hyper-aware of how I appear to the crowd - can they see the muscles in my legs twitching? I've moved my head a couple times - do they think I'm about to leave? What judgements are they making of my outfit, demeanor, execution of this task? I'm hyper-aware of how I appear to Abramović. Can she see that I'm chewing my lip a little? Is she tired of looking at faces? Is she registering me at all?

I cannot see any sign of connection or communication - nothing directed at me in particular. In line, others had spoken of a transfer of energy, but I experience nothing of the sort. I become worried about how long I am sitting. Should I get up after five

⁶⁶⁶ Holmes, “Day 42, Portrait 10.”

minutes - give the people behind me their turn more quickly? Will I look like I've abandoned post too quickly? And most importantly - have I gotten all I can out of this? Have I completed the task that brought me here? I have no way to know. I start to see Marina's look as one of disapproval. She can see how I've idealized her, and finds it contemptible. She can see that I am shallow, dense, and petty. I start trying to send her telepathic signals - aim words at her with my mind - despite having absolutely no belief in telepathy at all. I try to make my mind blank, be totally receptive to the moment. After what I judge to be about ten or so minutes, I leave. The next person in line says that my time was closer to twenty minutes.⁶⁶⁷

Kenya Robinson, artist

When I did finally reach the chair I witnessed a hallucinatory vision of her face. No lie, her visage was a disembodied object that hovered a few inches from her face-place. Somehow, the lighting shifted, and it appeared as if it were changing planes in a sort of semi-chaotic rhythm dictated by her blinking. I can see why people sat for so long- you want to make sure that you are seeing what you are seeing. I thought I might have been caught up in my own expectations (although I definitely wasn't expecting that!). Perhaps I was just seeing things- until I asked one of my line mates about her experience and she corroborated fully. The literature mentions that Marina Abramović studied hypnosis and with aboriginal groups in Australia. I think she must have learned some techniques that create this experience in a way that harnesses her own personal energy into manifestations that are visible to others.⁶⁶⁸

Anthony Cudahy, painter

you know i didn't really have any expectations going in, but it was a really intense experience. i literally couldn't think about anything else, being forced to sustain eye contact like that. i was completely present, which is something that never happens. every day constantly thinking of a thousand things, worries, anxieties. it was just a few moments of actual silence. a small break.⁶⁶⁹

Anthony Thornton, poet

It was not about Marina Abramović at all. Moisturized beyond belief and restrained by an impractically long white dress —spilling out on the concrete floor of the atrium— she resembled a statue onto which the sitter could manifest his anima. A living, breathing Tony Oursler projection, perhaps. The pallor of my face emerging from my standard head-to-toe black garb was inadvertently the yin to her pasty visage and black, side-braided yang. Sitting with her was not nerve-wracking. It was the brief ceremony of transforming into a collaborator that flushed my body with adrenaline. Once seated, I breathed deeply, gazed, and hallucinated. Her face became a syrupy oscillation of decay

⁶⁶⁷ B.lee, "Practically a Wall: The Artist Is Present: An Appropriately Exhaustive Account of Staring at Marina Abramovic," *Practically a Wall*, March 27, 2010,

<http://practicallyawall.blogspot.com/2010/03/artist-is-present-appropriately.html>.

⁶⁶⁸ Robinson, "Kenya (Robinson) Workspace"; Robinson, "Sitting With Marina."

⁶⁶⁹ Anthony Cudahy, "Day 58, Portrait 14," accessed July 20, 2015, <http://essaysaboutsitting.tumblr.com/post/737035198/day-58-portrait-14>.

and rebirth. Her features would corrode and, as quickly as they dispersed, would reconfigure. [. . .] Marina was not the therapist but the comfortable chaise I laid upon to confront my own struggles with professional identity and personal fulfillment. [. . .] I longed to race home so I could process the experience but the pawing at by inquisitive strangers made my trek a veritable obstacle course. The artist had ceased to be present. I had ascended the temporal hierarchy from spectator to collaborator and finally, performer. It had been about me all along.⁶⁷⁰

Sarah Deming, author

I'd observed in the past that sometimes Marina leaned forward toward the visitor, as if she really liked them, and sometimes she almost braced herself, as if she wanted to get away. She did neither with me. I'd also often thought her gaze seemed deeply interested or compassionate. But from this close it was different. The gaze was impassive. I didn't feel she liked me or disliked me. She was just there. It was quite imposing.

Writing about it now, it makes me think of what Kant said about the difference between the beautiful and the sublime. The beautiful is pleasant and comfortable and it seems to reinforce your sense of self. The sublime is like looking at a mountain. The mountain doesn't care about you. It is majestic but also a bit annihilating.⁶⁷¹

Eva Hagberg, writer/scholar

i realized i'd been sitting with my back right up against the chair back - and so i moved, just imperceptibly, forward a little bit. straightened up and disconnected my back from the chair. and she straightened up too, moved forward, towards me. and this was the first physical sign of acknowledgement, the first communication that went beyond eyes, and it felt so searingly intimate that i just kind of couldn't handle it anymore, so i tried to stay there, and did for about three more minutes. and then i closed my eyes and just really really slightly nodded my head down and looked up and her eyes were closed and she was nodding her head down, so i got up and left.

and then i kind of stood against the wall really shaky and kind of sat on the floor and leaned against the wall and was like holy shit. that was bananas.

so that is what i felt. what i saw in her eyes was - at first total warmth. like this amazing feeling of her totally understanding what i was freaking out about and how, and just kind of holding me through it... and then curiosity. and then when i finally got my breathing under control, a sort of relaxation. looking into someone's eyes for that long, though, i kind of stopped connecting with them as eyes. they just became sort of shapes. and then i'd be jarred back into - wow, i'm looking into another person's eyes. for a really long time.

and then even as i write this i think, no, that's just all b/c of expectation and really nothing all that much happened. but it was experientially remarkable.⁶⁷²

⁶⁷⁰ Thornton, "Day 53, Portrait 12"; Thornton, "Sitting With Marina."

⁶⁷¹ Deming, "PART OF THE ART - An Essay on Marina Abramović's."

⁶⁷² Eva Hagberg, "Day 61, Portrait 18 (14 Min.)," accessed July 23, 2015, <http://essaysaboutsitting.tumblr.com/post/5379867568/day-61-portrait-18-14-min>.

Sarah Fox, poet

Sitting with Marina was empowering. I lost touch completely with time and with the spectatorship, the live performative aspect as it existed (physically) outside the square and (virtually, archivally) online. I became thoroughly engaged with and fascinated by my encounter with Marina in the space and moment of our creative/live/temporary merger. The first reaction I had after we'd established our gaze was one of shock at the extent of her physical suffering. I felt almost assaulted—energetically, in my body—by her discomfort. I then began to notice that she had trained herself to endure this discomfort by housing all of her suffering in one eye (her right) and sustaining all of her light and fierce attention—it felt almost like a spotlight—in her other eye. (Did others notice this?) We shared an indeterminate sadness with each other.⁶⁷³

Paco Blancas, makeup artist

i don't like carrying stuff,
 i sit with You and
 the stuff that i carry
 gets lighter and lighter
 until i feel that I'm floating,
 floating into space and time
 i'm entering another dimension
 it is pure understanding,
 pure bliss.
 it is being present,
 it is looking into your eyes.
 it is for ever and ever here and now
 it is love in its purest form
 it is gold caressing space and time
 and now i just remember
 and i come back to the same place
 i walk through the atrium today
 two months after your offering
 and i can feel your energy
 you are here to stay⁶⁷⁴

Emily, technologist

Her eyes shifted between staring for the sake of staring and really seeing me. [. . .]

During and after the experience the strongest emotions I felt were sympathy and compassion for Abramović. I wanted to help her in her massive undertaking, to support her when she was worn out, and it was sad and frustrating to only be able to do so with my eyes. It was almost as if I cared not for the people in line (though we spent so many

⁶⁷³ Fox, "Sitting With Marina"; Fox, "Day 63, Portrait 23."

⁶⁷⁴ Paco Blancas, "Day 33, Portrait 10," accessed July 26, 2015, <http://essaysaboutsitting.tumblr.com/post/875503168/day-33-portrait-10>; Paco Blancas, "Sitting With Marina: Day 33, Portrait 10 (37 Min.) "i Don't Like...," accessed July 26, 2015, <http://sittingwithmarina.tumblr.com/post/875544466/day-33-portrait-10-37-min-i-dont-like>.

hours together) or the people viewing the piece, but I wanted my decisions to be only what was best for the artist and what she wanted.⁶⁷⁵

Kristen Hutchinson, art historian

One does not usually sit across from someone and stare at her or him without speaking for a long period of time, and at first, I was a little unsettled by this lack of verbal communication. Secondly, I was a little star struck. “I am sitting across from Marina Abramović,” I kept telling myself over and over in my head. As a contemporary art historian, I had taught her work to my students many times, and my recent forays into performance art had made me admire her even more. I thought that I would be overly aware of being watched by the crowds that continually mill around the perimeters of the performance space, but this was not the case. I was struck by how tired she looked and thus found myself trying to consciously send her positive energy, and then it felt as if energy was being sent back to me. I began to understand why so many people had cried while sitting across from her, or had sat there for hours on end because it was, to my surprise, quite a profound experience in that you become completely present in that moment. Perhaps it was the waiting, or the atmosphere, or the simple act of just looking at someone and trying to communicate without words, but everything except that wordless communication faded away. Time became irrelevant and despite being surrounded by crowds, I was entirely focused upon looking intently at just one other person.⁶⁷⁶

Misael Soto, artist

My heart was in my throat, pounding a mile a minute. I began to shiver and became extremely self-conscious. I got the signal to go ahead and as soon as I sat down something partly instinctual and partly inexplicable came over me. Marina pulled her head back, opening her eyes and locked her gaze onto mine. I had planned on speaking to her (with my mind of course) about countless important things: the universe, love and life, my family and past relationships, and about how much she's done, asking her for wisdom and strength. But when I actually stared into her eyes, I was overcome with so much emotion, such raw energy I couldn't help but be taken back to a more basic level. I wanted to kiss her forehead and hug her for days. By the end of what felt like seconds, but was actually 11 minutes, I was so grateful and full of so much love and positive energy that all of a sudden I felt selfish for sitting there. I wanted everyone in the world to feel what I was feeling. And as a firm believer that art can change lives I thought about how many lives could be positively touched that day. How could I sit in that chair while there were so many still in line? Suddenly I realized just an ounce of selfishness would be so fundamentally contrary to what the work is about that I didn't want to corrupt the piece. Within seconds of those feelings, I closed my eyes slowly to thank her and leave. She seemed sad to see me go so soon and so I hesitated a bit, but then continued and bowed my head. I grabbed my things, exited the square, and immediately found a quiet area near a wall. Out of breath and disoriented, I held my head in my hands thinking about a million things. Visibly exhausted, a girl asked me if I needed water. I thanked her and said I was fine. A couple of minutes passed and Angelica decided to see

⁶⁷⁵ “Digital Emily Blog » Blog Archive » Sitting with the Artist,” accessed March 31, 2011, <http://blog.digitalemily.com/sitting-with-the-artist/>.

⁶⁷⁶ Hutchinson, “Forays into Performance Art.”

if I was ok. As soon as she put her hand on my shoulder I felt a release. I collapsed to the floor weeping and sobbing profusely. I was immensely grateful. Staring into Marina's eyes for so long, in such an intense manner, made me yearn for and react to human contact like never before.⁶⁷⁷

Taylor K. Long, writer/photographer

I hadn't understood all the pictures of people crying until I sat down. It was so overwhelming, being under all of the lights, under all of those pairs of eyes watching, thinking about all the things people had done, simply to be in the same room with her. It took every ounce of restraint I had to avoid bursting into tears. I composed myself and remembered I originally planned to smile. I felt like it might be a nice change from all the people with straight faces.

I started thinking about how Abramović is a strong woman, and about all the strong women in my life, from the women that raised me, to those who had inspired me, like Patti Smith and Virginia Woolf. I started thinking about all the ways I wanted to be strong, about getting past that string of bad break-ups and bad jobs. I thought about the cross-country journey I was about to leave on, and about the other projects I had wanted to start for so long. I started thinking about my friends who inspired and encouraged me, and all of the positives forces in my life.

I got lost in these thoughts for a while, and then something happened – my mind went blank. I could feel myself starting to cry again, and I got up and left immediately. Later, I wished I had stayed, wished I had pushed past that instinct to run away from a quieted mind, and to hide or stop the tears.⁶⁷⁸

Aleksandar Ljubicić, clinical social worker/therapist

Knew Marina's work and read some of her interviews. She is from the former Yugoslavia country that even does not exist anymore. And there is the connection. I would skip it originally because reminder of the Yugoslavia is often very painful rarely grotesque like thinking about car Yugo. Since Dana my youngest daughter was going over and over to see her I decided to go myself just to accompany her to stay overnight in the front of the museum to be able to sit at the final day of the exhibit.

Whole experience was great.

Sitting with Marina was and still is a total rainbow experience from tears and sadness to joy and clarity. And Gypsy experience in which passion for life is amplified with inescapable sadness and love.⁶⁷⁹

Tarynn Wiehahn, filmmaker

She slowly lifts her head and we're looking into each other. It does not really feel like we're looking at each other but we're looking into something. Her eyes seem watery, tired and weary. Is she crying, has she been crying, is she going to cry? Am I going to cry? I don't feel any emotions welling in me. Am I doing something wrong? I

⁶⁷⁷ Soto, "Art. Music. Film. Whatever."

⁶⁷⁸ "Sitting With Marina"; Long, "Me and Miranda July and Mark Epstein and Marina Abramović | T-Sides."

⁶⁷⁹ Ljubicić, "Essays About Sitting - Day 72, Portrait 30"; Ljubicić, "Sitting With Marina."

don't feel anything. Shouldn't I be feeling some sort of something? I'm not feeling anything. Should I try to encourage a feeling? No. OK, here I am. I am here. I'm aware of blurry sketches of people humming around us. The only thing that seems real and unreal is what's right in front of me. I'm lost in her right eye. I can't take my eye off of her right eye. We're in an eye lock. Is she giving me a bad look? Is she angry at me? This eye seems dark and evilish and sad. I see weight, misery, darkness, fear, shame, hiding, hate, abuse, death. Is she looking into the same eye I wonder? I look over to her left eye and I'm suddenly looking into peace, warmth, care, softness, beauty, stillness, compassion, understanding, nurture, mothering, love, acceptance, openness. She is looking into the same eye.

Thoughts begin to cross paths: Thank you sister, I love you.

I see her breathing and my breath links into a synching slow rhythm with my mouth still open and I feel the breath rise and fall between us at the same speedlessness. The eyes begin to cross until I don't see any fixed eyes, everything blends and blurs and I no longer see or think good and bad. I feel myself still sitting as I'm lifting above her and I feel powerful then I feel myself sinking below her and feel vulnerable and I shift up and down between states of being above and below until I catch myself resting into her hands that seem exaggerated, whole and vibrant. My eyes slowly travel up her belly past her heart and land into her ever present eyes, closing my eyes. My lids are jumping uncontrollably as I see her behind my eyelids as a dark shaped shadow with the blotches of other shaped shadows around her and her hair is gold and bright until I open my eyes again to see dark hair and already opened eyes. We look into each other with fallen thoughts.

I feel limitless.

There is a blob next to me touching my shoulder.

"The performance is now over."

The performance? Am I performing? I find myself taking position to stand up and touching the centre of my forehead with my hand as if it's my bow to move out of this experience.⁶⁸⁰

Ann-Sargeant Wooster, artist/critic

The way Marina became the living center of the show was very powerful but I did not fully appreciate the power as a passerby. It was only when I committed myself to the waiting and surrendered my sense of busyness and self-importance that I realized how powerful an element she supplied. The connection I felt to Marina and the piece has lasted but so have the scary parts. There is a general rule in Manhattan not to offer the all you can eat specials common in other parts of the country because there are too many people here "starving" (perhaps not actual hunger but consumption) and that the sense of boundaries is limited here.⁶⁸¹

⁶⁸⁰ Wiehahn, "Day 72, Portrait 35"; Wiehahn, "Sitting With Marina."

⁶⁸¹ Wooster, "Day 72, Portrait 49"; Wooster, "Sitting With Marina."

Nina Meledandri, painter

when i sit, i am still agitated and it takes longer than i want to settle in.
 once i do, i go to a place familiar from past sittings;
 i experience an exchange of energy and certainly a sense of altered time;
 the most profound moments are when i am enveloped by a feeling that what both of us
 share is the understanding that there is nowhere more important to be than where we are
 right now.

but my struggle with “being” is always lurking and i find that frustrating
 this is highlit for me by the consistency of marina’s presence,
 i feel her energy shifts
 but i never perceive a faltering of awareness
 and this is both grounding and (in some ways) challenging.

i also have a sense of having been rendered physically immobile,
 as if i am glued, immobile to the chair,
 as if i have no power to move my limbs.

but while i am sitting i realize something:
 that if i am to continue to sit,
 i need to develop a deeper relationship to participating,
 it makes no sense to me,
 for the experience to stay the same[. . .]

i sit and return to an understanding i have arrived at before:
 that there is shared significance in having made the space to engage in this performance
 but today, this awareness grows into an overwhelming feeling of safety
 and the sense that this safety comes from being deeply grounded
 and that for an artist
 the most important thing is to truly believe in the validity of your own process.[. . .]

my decision to sit the last day came down to 2 things:
 after spending 3 months invested in the performance,
 partially out of a desire to see it evolve from beginning to end,
 it seemed like an obvious choice
 to experience that last line
 and

i had sat the first day the performance was open to the public,
 just to say “hello”

i felt i wanted to sit on the last
 just to say “good bye”

...
 i really expected to simply “say” thank you

and leave to let the next person sit.
 my last 2 times in the chair,
 i had focused solely on giving marina energy and encouragement,
 in an effort to provide support
 and to communicate how much the piece meant to myself and to many others.⁶⁸²

Section 3: SITTERS CONTEMPLATE RELIGION

Marina Abramović, artist

This feeling of beauty and unconditional love, this feeling of there's no kind of borders between your body and environment—you start having this incredible feeling of lightness and harmony with yourself. Something becomes, like, holy. I can't explain. And that other state of mind is exactly what public start feeling—that something is different.⁶⁸³

Evan Leed, artist

I had spent hours readying myself for a painful, otherworldly transfiguration. But when Marina looked up she shocked me with how simple and human she was. I felt as if no matter how hard I fought her she wouldn't close down, that being so vulnerable was the most natural thing in the world. All of my complicated defenses and fears seemed like a big joke. Then she smiled as if she were laughing with me.⁶⁸⁴

Nina Meledandri, painter

i am also not going to deny that i feel there is a sacredness in the space
 (again not an uncommon reaction for me to have in a museum)
 the piece is after all about energy, making a place for presence
 and what could feel more sacred than a space
 devoted to connecting with an essence of being?
 i am not religious, so i don't know for sure
 but that seems to me why people might go to places of worship.

*(no,
 i am not equating the atrium with church,
 or marina with being a spiritual leader,
 i am just drawing parallels and offering personal explanations about the impact of the
 performance.)*
 the trick however
 is to be able to absorb that experience,
 that grounding,

⁶⁸² Meledandri, "A Flower Every Day (for Marina Abramović)."

⁶⁸³ Akers et al., *Marina Abramović*.

⁶⁸⁴ Blancas, *SEVENTY-FIVE*, 75/73.

that light
 from the museum
 from the art
 from your experience
 and allow it to resonate in your life
 when you leave⁶⁸⁵

Mead McLean, painter/critic

My experience in talking to the other sitters around me makes me think that for some people, this piece contains echoes of visits to oracles, mediums, saints, monks, wise men, and other sage-types.⁶⁸⁶

Yazmany Arboleda, artist

I am prepared to be still, to be present, there with her. Part of my plan is to focus on my breathing. If need be, to use a mantra. Yoga mantras are based on sounds that reflect the energy of our divine nature. The meditation I am ready to practice is based upon the mantra "so hum," ("I am that") used within the traditions of Tantra and Vedanta. Since "so hum" also indicates the sound of the breath, it is a mantra that repeats itself effortlessly. I like the idea that I am her and she is me and we both have the honor to connect on this higher ground. I am that.⁶⁸⁷

Winnie Teschmacher, artist

The intriguing gaze. Above personal. Thoughts enter my mind but can't find anything to hang onto. I let them go. Everything passes through. Emotions rise, Marina blinks her eyes a bit slower and I'm back on track. Time is no longer there. I don't feel my feet anymore. It's ultimate silence, awareness, presence. Moments of total connection with everything through the mirror of her eyes. Grateful from the bottom of my heart. Tat tvam asi.⁶⁸⁸

Annie Poon, animator

Some people closed their eyes and just sat there, allowing Marina to silently stare at them. One woman stared at Marina until they both unexpectedly began to cry. Bridgette, a girl in line with me, said she fell into a trance. My friend Susan that came with me was completely star struck and trembled for minutes and said she couldn't leave the chair until the trembling stopped minutes later. The ones that puzzled me were the people who sat and stared into Marina's eyes for more than half an hour... Were they

⁶⁸⁵ Meledandri, "A Flower Every Day (for Marina Abramović)."

⁶⁸⁶ Mead Mclean, "Interpretations. Marina Abramović 3 of 2.," *Mead McLean*, June 8, 2010, <http://meadmclean.blogspot.com/2010/06/interpretations-marina-Abramović-3-of-2.html>.

⁶⁸⁷ Arboleda, "Bringing Marina Flowers."

⁶⁸⁸ Blancas, *SEVENTY-FIVE*, 75/44.

getting excited by the crowds standing around the gallery staring at them? Where did they get their sense of pleasure? Why were they hogging so much time? Yes, there was something nice about Marina's gaze, I imagine she was a bit like 'Amma', the woman who comes to New York twice a year to give hugs, people line up for hours to get a hug... I have to admit, I was pleasantly surprised by the feeling I had once Marina readjusted herself and fixed her gaze on me.[. . .]

I was smug, scoffing, and skeptical going into it, wasn't even planning on sitting down but once I got to the front of the line I figured I might regret not doing it. Actually it was a beautiful experience and I felt a lot of wisdom coming from Marina looking into her eyes, as well as generosity coming from her. I felt like she is sacrificing a lot by doing this piece, and giving a lot of herself to share so much time like this with all of us New Yorkers. Have to say I'm no longer a skeptic.... it's a great public piece and a I would even say a service to the community.⁶⁸⁹

Julie Mallis, artist

Ever since attending the Artist Is Present in New York, I have always wondered about Marina Abramović's relation to Mata Amritanandamayi or Amma (www.amma.org). [. . .] since I was a little girl (I have lost track of the years), I have gone almost every summer with my family and The Golden Heart Meditation Group <http://www.goldenheartgroup.com/> to see Amachi or Amma come to New York. She is an Indian spiritual leader who for years has toured the world hugging and blessing all who come to her free programs. She is known as the hugging saint. Her website explains "she has been known to individually hug over 50,000 people in one day, sitting sometimes for over 20 hours". The similarities one may draw between her and the artist are immense. [. . .]

My time spent at the MOMA wasn't very different than the time I spent at Darshan. Sure it was an entirely different world, but the similarities were striking. There were less devotees wearing white, and instead of an auditorium of meditation there was an atrium of focus and concentration. Both events hosted in NYC drew huge international crowds and earned much acclaim.⁶⁹⁰

Ann-Sargeant Wooster, artist/critic

I never thought she was a mother to me but I saw her incarnation in the performance as historical things I know about including the worship of the Great Goddess, the Delphic Oracle and the Libyan sibyl. I have visited the hug mother(Amma) which this has elements of and had a confusing experience with her. She hugged me and said, "no, no, no." What did that mean? [. . .]

⁶⁸⁹ Annie Poon, "Hedgehog: The Artist Is Present," *Hedgehog*, March 17, 2010, <http://anniepoon.blogspot.com/2010/03/artist-is-present.html>.

⁶⁹⁰ Julie Mallis, "My Personal Experience with Marina Abramović, Mata Amritanandamayi, and Braco.," *Julie Mallis*, accessed July 23, 2015, <https://juliemallis.wordpress.com/2011/01/12/my-personal-experience-with-marina-Abramović-mata-amritanandamayi-and-braco/>; "Sitting With Marina : Day 2, Portrait 8 (73 Min.) "A Big Tin Can Rolled...," 8, accessed July 23, 2015, <http://sittingwithmarina.tumblr.com/post/2755298648/day-2-portrait-8-73-min-a-big-tin-can-rolled>.

I have never felt I had the god gene and have been unable, nor desired, to follow gurus. There was something about my experience that was like a drug high that leads you to addiction trying to recapture that first intense magical moment. I know it was a performance but it felt briefly like love, the kind of love you might go to the ends of the earth to recapture but bankrupt yourself and never feel it again in the process. I know the art of the classroom where students feel there is an intimacy between you that vanishes when the class is over and the curtain comes down. I still find it extraordinary that that kind of experience with its crescendo building over time happened in an art museum.⁶⁹¹

Sarah Deming, author

There was something riveting about this spectacle. Marina had undeniable charisma. The image evoked for me was of some powerful woman out of the *Mabinogion*, not necessarily entirely benign. I thought of this novel I'd loved as a kid called *Wise Child*, in which a girl goes to live in a hut with a witch, who teaches her mysterious things. The cover art really stayed with me, by the wonderful illustrators Leo and Diane Dillon.⁶⁹²

Dan Visel, editor/designer

Looking at Marina Abramović, the image that first came to mind, perhaps because of the museum setting, was the face of one of Antonello da Messina's suffering Christs who looks directly out at the viewer of the painting, one of those images of martyrdom where the suffering in Christ's face is intertwined with the idea that he's a sacrificial victim for those who are looking at his painting. It's a powerful idea – and Antonello's painting is undeniably powerful – but there's also something unsavory to it: lionizing suffering is grotesque and inhumane. This is what I saw in Marina Abramović. I don't know that it's necessarily what she set out to do, but part of what made her compelling was that she was presenting herself a suffering victim. I wonder to what end that was? [. . .]

I'm still not sure what I think of her. My time with Marina Abramović was certainly powerful; I don't know, however, that I can make it transcendent.⁶⁹³

Arthur Danto, philosopher

For a wild moment I thought my physical ailments would fade away, as if I were at Lourdes.⁶⁹⁴

Alisa Solomon, author/teacher/dramaturge

But for all the ecstatic attention—and cranky critiques, too—trained on the art world's equivalent of an audience with the pope, an important aspect of the performance has been overlooked: the deep aesthetic, communal, even spiritual (and sometimes contentious)

⁶⁹¹ Wooster, "Day 72, Portrait 49"; Wooster, "Sitting With Marina."

⁶⁹² Deming, "PART OF THE ART - An Essay on Marina Abramović's."

⁶⁹³ Visel, "Day 21, Portrait 14"; Dan Visel, "Sitting With Marina : Day 21, Portrait 14 (14 Min.) "Documentation Feels..." accessed July 26, 2015,

<http://sittingwithmarina.tumblr.com/post/880713151/day-21-portrait-14-14-min-documentation-feels>.

⁶⁹⁴ Danto, "Sitting With Marina."

experiences of hundreds of people who waited all day along the perimeter of the square performance space in vain hopes of taking a turn in the chair.⁶⁹⁵

Ananda Day Cavalli, artist/yogini

Excerpts from, “Conversations for Non- Human Use – Art as Religious Experience: Engaging in Marina Abramović’s Meditation: A Practice and Investigation”

. . . it was so difficult . Is the wait the piece? Especially after doing it four times I am not sure what the object of my pilgrimage is?⁶⁹⁶

“I really wanted to sit longer but I am still so afraid of what others think of me.”⁶⁹⁷

“Today we cried together.”⁶⁹⁸

“It takes so much effort to just not get up and run. I feel so calm now.”⁶⁹⁹

“Today she cried so much.”⁷⁰⁰

“So peaceful. I entered peacefully and left in an even more relaxed state of mind. It felt quiet in the best of ways. It was meditation.”⁷⁰¹

“I would like to think that when I’m all done with this that I can think back on these sits and if I need someone to catch me she will be there.”⁷⁰²

Dimitri Chrysanthopoulos, photographer

i also started chatting with the mother and daughter who were now in front of me. we discussed how this was very brave of Abramović, and honest. bravery and honesty came up quite a bit in that conversation. we also discussed how this kind of meditation had its

⁶⁹⁵ Solomon, “The Artist’s Present < Killing the Buddha.”

⁶⁹⁶ Cavalli, “Conversations for Non- Human Use,” March 18, 2010.

⁶⁹⁷ Ananda Day Cavalli, “Conversations for Non- Human Use: Seventh Sitting,” *Conversations for Non- Human Use*, March 26, 2010, http://sittingwithmarinaAbramović.blogspot.com/2010/03/blog-post_26.html.

⁶⁹⁸ Ananda Day Cavalli, “Conversations for Non- Human Use: Ninth Sitting,” *Conversations for Non- Human Use*, April 1, 2010, <http://sittingwithmarinaAbramović.blogspot.com/2010/04/ninth-sitting.html>.

⁶⁹⁹ Ananda Day Cavalli, “Conversations for Non- Human Use: Thirteenth Sitting,” *Conversations for Non- Human Use*, April 20, 2010, <http://sittingwithmarinaAbramović.blogspot.com/2010/04/thirteenth-sitting.html>.

⁷⁰⁰ Ananda Day Cavalli, “Conversations for Non- Human Use: Seventeenth Sitting,” *Conversations for Non- Human Use*, May 6, 2010, <http://sittingwithmarinaAbramović.blogspot.com/2010/05/seventeenth-sitting.html>.

⁷⁰¹ Ananda Day Cavalli, “Conversations for Non- Human Use: Eighteenth Sitting,” *Conversations for Non- Human Use*, May 6, 2010, <http://sittingwithmarinaAbramović.blogspot.com/2010/05/eighteenth-sitting.html>.

⁷⁰² Ananda Day Cavalli, “Conversations for Non- Human Use: Twenty First Sitting,” *Conversations for Non- Human Use*, May 13, 2010, <http://sittingwithmarinaAbramović.blogspot.com/2010/05/twenty-first-sitting.html>.

roots in religion. how all religions probably sprang from what abramović was doing right here, right in front of us. yeah, it was getting deep.⁷⁰³

Nina Meledandri, painter

i feel that marina comes to her chair without judgment or ego.
 watching her sit,
 hour after hour,
 day after day,
 becomes for me
 a model for shedding the ego to allow a truer self to surface
 i am starting to understand that this lesson might be at the heart of my attraction to the performance. [. . .]

and i do feel the piece is a lot about projection...
 this is one of the many aspects of it that has been so illuminating to me;
 watching my reactions to what happens in the atrium.
 if i am honest,
 every critical response,
 every hint of annoyance,
 every judgment that i make
 is a clue to examining my own issues, fears and shortcomings

against the neutral backdrop of the atrium
 it is possible to see aspects of everyday life
 from a vantage point that lies outside of the messy complications of the “real world”
 and i think this is a very powerful consequence of *The Artist Is Present*.⁷⁰⁴

Julie Mallis, artist

Many people came up to me afterwards questioning why I had sat for so long. I had no idea so much time had passed. I guessed that maybe 20 minutes tops had lapsed, but probably even less. Since it was so early on in her exhibition, I sat for longer than anyone yet had attempted (other than the artist herself). During this time, I fell into a deep meditation. I forgot that I was even sitting in front of her. I entered a state of astral projection, or maybe an OBE, whatever you wanna call it- I began to lift up and float around the MOMA. I went up high towards the ceilings and looked into the next floor up from the middle above the atrium. After coming back into my seat, and regaining the knowledge of where I was, I started mildly hallucinating. A big tin can rolled across the floor and a cone-shaped cage formed over Abramović’s mouth and face. Colors and shapes popped out. I had not moved a bone for some time and felt so incredibly content and comfortable. I did not want to move and I felt no need to get up. When I had started to realize it may have been a while and my friend Charlotte was in line behind me

⁷⁰³ Dimitri Chrysanthopoulos, “Themetree — Yup! Heres My Flickr Portrait from the Marina...,” accessed July 20, 2015, <http://themetree.tumblr.com/post/577337725/yup-heres-my-flickr-portrait-from-the-marina>.

⁷⁰⁴ Meledandri, “A Flower Every Day (for Marina Abramović).”

waiting, and that I needed to catch the bus back to Philly in mere hours, the anxiety pulled me out of my meditation. I tried to get up but felt as if I was paralyzed. I didn't know how to move. I spent probably 5 minutes, maybe it was 15, just coercing myself to move. I remember speaking to myself, "Julie, all you have to do is just stand up at once and grab your bag, that's it." It felt like the most difficult task. Eventually I found my way outside of the vortex and walked out to be asked by dozens of viewers what had gone through my head during that long time.⁷⁰⁵

Jayoung Yoon, artist

While sitting with her, my thoughts, notions, values and judgments are removed from my head. At that moment, there is transition, mutation and development for me.

My body is in the present. By making subtle movements and watching her during the almost five hours, I enter into the meditation state. Within the stillness, there is a subtle but intense joy, love, and peace.⁷⁰⁶

Taylor K. Long, writer/photographer

In one chapter, Epstein recounts his experience of meeting Ram Dass, a spiritual guru whose heyday in the '60s and '70s included trips to India and experiments with LSD. Just beginning to study Buddhism, a young Epstein travels to Colorado, hoping that Ram Dass can help him. Epstein tells Ram Dass about wanting to feel more confident, wanting to find a girlfriend, and all the while, Ram Dass is just "looking straight into my eyes but at the same time, looking past me. He seemed filled with love but also completely uninterested in me, or at least in who I thought I was. He did not respond to any of my smiles, nods, or grimaces, or to any of my attempts to engage or avoid him. He simply waited, gazing at me with an unnerving and unwavering intensity that I could not quite understand." Eventually, after circling through anger, self-consciousness and shame, Epstein begins to stare right back, "Finding myself in a place beyond words, I actually felt a connection with him and sensed a moment of mutual recognition."

This story has stuck with me, because it reminds me of when I sat with Marina Abramović during her exhibit, *The Artist Is Present*.⁷⁰⁷

Monika Bravo, artist

Dear Marina: I sat twice with you within 5 days apart, within those few days in between, the energy was very different and the experience of each sitting was like night and day;

⁷⁰⁵ Julie Mallis, "My Personal Experience with Marina Abramović, Mata Amritanandamayi, and Braco.," *Julie Mallis*, accessed July 23, 2015, <https://juliemallis.wordpress.com/2011/01/12/my-personal-experience-with-marina-Abramović-mata-amritanandamayi-and-braco/>; "Sitting With Marina : Day 2, Portrait 8 (73 Min.) "A Big Tin Can Rolled...," 8, accessed July 23, 2015, <http://sittingwithmarina.tumblr.com/post/2755298648/day-2-portrait-8-73-min-a-big-tin-can-rolled>.

⁷⁰⁶ Jayoung Yoon, "Day 47, Portrait 5," accessed July 26, 2015, <http://essaysaboutsitting.tumblr.com/post/816763959/day-47-portrait-5>; Jayoung Yoon, "Sitting With Marina : Day 47, Portrait 5 (293 Min.) "A Gap Occurs in The...," accessed July 26, 2015, <http://sittingwithmarina.tumblr.com/post/816780147/day-47-portrait-5-293-min-a-gap-occurs-in-the>.

⁷⁰⁷ "Sitting With Marina"; Long, "Me and Miranda July and Mark Epstein and Marina Abramović | T-Sides."

the first time, I gave into the experience, I felt you were there yielding, offering very openly all of you, I locked into your eyes and saw all your different Marina's, your aura, beyond your physical self, it felt like a deep transmission of energy where I was given the remainder of my own personal power; I have been studying along a Daoist master for the last 6 years, I have been practicing deep observation, how to read beyond words and meaning and feel intention. It was painful to leave you. [. . .]

I sat, and a slowly after relaxing my body the painful sitting began. It was as if all my demons were there with me, all the lightness and the calm I felt few days before were not there, here I was battling with my state of mind and my emotions in a war that lasted close to 90 minutes. Mara was there full throttle and all I could do was embrace her! All the contrasts and ambiguities I was born with arose and were clear in front of me as if I had to choose one, you were only a mirror then, showing me the ugly and the difficult parts that I still have to accept in me, At one point, I realized some time had passed by and I wanted to leave, but my body was not responding and that added some flavor to the already very, very difficult experience. I left, I was shattered, I wanted to run...⁷⁰⁸

Alisa Solomon, author/teacher/dramaturge

I wanted to complete my engagement with the exhibit, which I had much admired in two prior, lengthy visits; I wanted to honor it. Plus, having practiced some Zen sitting over the years, I was curious about how it would feel to turn that internal focus outward, to share, as it were, the emptiness.⁷⁰⁹

Mead McLean, painter/critic

I'm still not sure why I sat. I was probably curious, but one thing I do know for sure is that Abramović's stare cannot compare to my sittings with Zen masters. From Marina's stare, I felt her boundaries, and from Zen and Dzogchen masters, I've felt my own.⁷¹⁰

Patricia

For me, Marina's work carries severe Buddhist undertones: combining tenacity of spirit and discipline of mind towards a transcending. [. . .] If Buddhist theory is applied to the space between chairs, all forms of presence (being, mind, body) begin with showing up and taking seat.⁷¹¹

Yazmany Arboleda, artist

I decided that on the morning of my 29th year on earth, May 7th, I, Yazmany Arboleda, a fellow artist and fan, would bring her flowers.

⁷⁰⁸ Monika Bravo, "Sitting With Marina : Day 42, Portrait 6 (87 Min.) "...you Were Only A..." accessed July 20, 2015, <http://sittingwithmarina.tumblr.com/post/817683847/day-42-portrait-6-87-min-you-were-only-a>; Bravo, "Dear Marina."

⁷⁰⁹ Solomon, "The Artist's Present < Killing the Buddha."

⁷¹⁰ Mead Mclean, "Marina Abramović 1 of 2. A Roundup of Current Culture, Part Three," *Mead McLean*, June 7, 2010, <http://meadmclean.blogspot.com/2010/06/marina-Abramović-1-of-2-roundup-of.html>.

⁷¹¹ Patricia, "Day 61, Portrait 16 (10 Min.)," accessed July 27, 2015, <http://essaysaboutsitting.tumblr.com/post/5380477781/day-61-portrait-16-10-min>.

The idea came to me while attending a talk on how to grow love as a path to your own destiny a few months ago. I was surprised to see that the majority of the attendees to the event, mostly followers of Tibetan mysticism, had brought the visiting lecturer flowers. I learned that offering flowers to your Lama (Tibetan for teacher of the Dharma) is a way of honoring the highest part of one's own intellect, for the Lama is a mirror of one's highest or most aware self. The ephemeral nature of flowers reminds us of the Buddha's teaching that all things are impermanent, and we should value what we have now, and live in the present. I would present Marina with flowers before going around Manhattan to give my dearest and nearest friends--my Lamas--multi-colored roses, honoring them for the many things that they have taught me thus far.[. . .]

While sitting there I wonder if Ms. Abramović has practiced Vipassana meditation while preparing for "The Artist Is Present." Vipassana (which means to see things as they really are) is one of India's most ancient techniques of meditation. Fundamentally, it is just sitting. Vipassana meditation is the practice of pure regarding, witnessing your mind, and offering your complete consideration to your thought patterns, without moving your body, at all, no matter how severe your discomfort.⁷¹²

Anonymous, Day 65, Portrait 21

Like a first conversation with a long-lost friend, like prayer on amphetamines, a floodgate had opened [. . .] I felt keenly that she was giving, giving, giving all of us a precious gift, and that it would be wrong to prevent another person from receiving it.

This gift – what was it? And what was she receiving from us in return?

I thought of the meditation courses I've done: sitting for over ten hours a day, for ten days, full silence for the duration. I remembered the physical pain and the incessant mental chatter. I wondered whether Marina's back hurt, if her legs were asleep, where her mind was wandering. And I considered the most noticeable difference between the work I did there and the work she was doing here: that her eyes were open, and constantly fixed on the eyes of whomever she sat opposite.

I felt myself desperately trying to send universal loving-kindness to her through my gaze, but there is only so much a gaze can do. And with this realization, there came another: that what was happening between us was just a stripped-down, purified version of what every interaction is. Whether we are talking or listening or touching, there is only so much that language or touch can do, in the service of communication. [. . .]

Exchanging and holding a gaze makes this clear: that communication is just made up of an intention and a perception. Trust and faith can mortar the gaps between them but cannot make them what they are not. They are not equal, and they are not the same. What you intend ≠ what I perceive. Given ≠ received. It is not a direct exchange.

⁷¹² Arboleda, "Bringing Marina Flowers."

I took this realization itself as a precious gift. Even in the awareness that it was just my own perception. [. . .]

From the moment that I sat down with Marina until I got up, I could not stop smiling nor crying. The sheer force of gratitude was overwhelming, and there was simply no other way to let it out. She smiled and cried too.⁷¹³

Arthur Danto, philosopher

At this point, something striking took place. Marina leaned her head back at a slight angle, and to one side. She fixed her eyes on me without — so it seemed — any longer seeing me. It was as if she had entered another state. I was outside her gaze. Her face took on the translucence of fine porcelain. She was luminous without being incandescent. She had gone into what she had often spoken of as a “performance mode.” For me at least, it was a shamanic trance — her ability to enter such a state is one of her gifts as a performer. It is what enables her to go through the physical ordeals of some of her famous performances. I felt indeed as if this was the essence of performance in her case, often with the added element of physical danger.⁷¹⁴

Heather Rose, author

I am drawn to ritual. In my twenties I spent four years participating in Native American ceremonies in mid- and southwest America. I learned to go beyond fear, pain, hunger, thirst. I like the freedom of discipline and the discipline of freedom. Perhaps this is what really drew me to the chair at the table. To experience a ritual. To be in the presence of an artist who has harnessed suffering and endurance and made it art.⁷¹⁵

I traveled 17,000 kms from Tasmania, Australia to sit with you. It was more powerful than I could have imagined. We spoke without words about spirit and art, about love and time. I saw you filled with blue stars, like a yuwipi woman. But perhaps I imagined it all. On the final day a pain shot through my belly healing, strengthening. Since then I have been more grounded, clear, present.

Thank you.

Mitakuye oyasin. Zahvalnost.⁷¹⁶

⁷¹³ “Essays About Sitting - Day 65, Portrait 21 (18 Min.),” 65, accessed March 31, 2011, <http://essaysaboutsitting.tumblr.com/post/1673273553/day-65-portrait-21-18-min>; “Day 65, Portrait 21 (18 Min.),” accessed July 23, 2015, <http://essaysaboutsitting.tumblr.com/post/1673273553/day-65-portrait-21-18-min>.

⁷¹⁴ Danto, “Sitting With Marina.”

⁷¹⁵ Rose, “Sitting with Marina,” 474.

⁷¹⁶ Blancas, *SEVENTY-FIVE*, 75/50.

Sarah Fox, poet

I could not stop thinking about the retrospective after I returned to Minneapolis. I was viscerally shifted, and felt called, as if on pilgrimage, to participate in *The Artist Is Present*, to honor the shamanic gift of deep intimacy she was so generously offering.

I went back, two weeks later, for the singular purpose of sitting with Marina. [. . .]

Since the performance—now almost 3 months ago—I’ve lost the obsessive, or burning, identification with the community of sitters and with the performance itself. I’ve lost touch with the more physical, prelingual aspect of the performance’s impact. But I retain, though have not necessarily evolved from, the power—a decidedly feminist power shamanically granted—Marina’s gaze revealed and conveyed to me. My transformation as invoked by this healing continues to unfold and progress.⁷¹⁷

⁷¹⁷ Fox, “Sitting With Marina”; Fox, “Day 63, Portrait 23.”

APPENDIX 2

THE ABRAMOVIĆ METHOD—PARTICIPANT INTERVIEWS

Questionnaire

The Abramović Method @ UCSD / 3015 interview

Please introduce yourself with a brief biography, preferably with information similar to the workshop application. Feel free to add any additional information you feel is pertinent. Please do not link to websites with bios, or art work without including the information you are referring to in your responses.

1. What were the most interesting; pleasing, productive, or useful exercises Marina led? Why?
2. What was the most difficult exercise? What was your experience?
3. Are you using any material from the Workshop in your life or art? Which elements, and how?
4. How has the Workshop benefited you in your art, work, or life?
5. How would you describe the results of your 3-day practice of The Abramović Method?
6. Are you applying any of the advice from Marina's talk about personal habits(shitting), color, and managing interpersonal anger? How and what are your results?

Please feel free to add any comments or memories of the Workshop you'd like to share including elements led by Lynsey Peisinger and Stan Robinson, or your experience of being and working with other participants.

Ana Freeman

Please introduce yourself with a brief biography, preferably with information similar to the workshop application. Feel free to add any additional information you feel is pertinent. Please do not link to websites with bios, or art work without including the information you are referring to in your responses.

I am an aspiring performing artist who works in multiple disciplines. I have significant experience in acting, writing, and directing for the stage. I have also been involved in improv, the circus arts, acting and directing for the camera, modern dance, competitive figure skating, and spoken word poetry. Over the last several years, I have begun creating site-specific, protest, and object-focused performances, as well as works of choreopoetry, invisible and forum theatre, sound art, and performance art. I am currently a senior at Colorado College, where I study comparative literature and theatre. I am writing a senior thesis that compares performance art with performativity and theatricality.

1. What were the most interesting; pleasing, productive, or useful exercises Marina led? Why?

It's very hard to choose, because all of the exercises were incredible! The one that stood out to me the very most, however, was the exercise in which we explored the room for an hour wearing noise-canceling headphones and blindfolds. During that hour, I was in a heightened state of consciousness I'd never experienced before.

Without the usual rush of auditory and visual signals coming in, I felt at peace. My senses of smell and touch came alive; the chairs, floor and walls became whole worlds to me. I also felt a strong connection to the others in the room. I had many instances of shared understanding with other workshop participants, during which we communicated through touch alone. There was one person in particular that I interacted with a lot during the hour. During those interactions, we went from hardly knowing each other to being quite close, and that closeness has lasted long past the end of the exercise.

Even when I wasn't touching someone, I could feel the presence and energy of others in the room. I could also feel the shape of the room, and the stillness and motion of others and myself in a way I don't usually. The exercise taught me that space, presence, motion, etc. are senses, and that I can get in tune with them even when I am seeing and hearing. I believe that being attuned to these senses is invaluable for creating art and for leading a more aware life, and I'm so grateful that I now know what it feels like to have those channels truly opened.

Another exercise that was transformative for me was the chanting exercise that Marina led on the third day of the workshop. It put me in a meditative, slowed-down state, and, like the blindfold exercise, allowed me to feel a strong sense of shared energy with the other participants.

2. What was the most difficult exercise? What was your experience?

The exercise in which we stared into another person's eyes for 45 minutes was extremely difficult for me. Before the exercise began, Marina instructed us to try not to blink, and I was determined to follow this instruction. After a few minutes of staring into Sheldon's eyes without blinking, the room started to go dark, and I saw his face in negative. My vision got darker and darker, I felt a sensation as though everything in the room was buzzing, and I became light-headed. Then I felt myself starting to faint, but caught myself as I began falling back—and blinked, which cleared my vision. As soon as I resumed staring into Sheldon's eyes without blinking, I again saw and felt strange things, almost fainted, and caught myself and blinked at the last moment. This cycle repeated itself several times over the course of the 45 minutes. In addition to seeing Sheldon's face in negative, I saw his face as a woman's face and as a skeleton's face.

This experience would have been scary on its own. However, it was especially difficult for me because the images I saw and the buzzing sensation I felt were reminiscent of what I experienced when I came close to dying from heatstroke during a Lakota sweat lodge ceremony. During the exercise, I knew that I wasn't at any real risk, and this knowledge enabled me to get through it. Through the exercise, I realized that experiencing an odd, or even hallucinatory, state of consciousness does not necessarily have to be a dangerous and alarming thing. This left me much more open to altering my consciousness than I had been in the aftermath of the sweat lodge ceremony; experiencing a much less intense and safer version of that traumatic event also helped me to heal from it.

3. Are you using any material from the Workshop in your life or art? Which elements, and how?

Yes, very much so. I practiced all of the exercises I learned in the Workshop many times in order to prepare for my first long durational performance, which took place on March 9th. This performance was part of my thesis and was directly inspired by my experience in the Workshop. I am now continuing to use the exercises to improve myself as a performer and person.

These practices are helping me to cultivate greater presence, focus and centered energy. They are also improving my endurance and teaching me to exist in time differently—slowly, but also moment by moment.

4. How has the Workshop benefited you in your art, work, or life?

Aside from the benefits I described in the last question, which are significant, the Workshop has had a great influence on how I understand and approach performance. Before the Workshop, I understood the distinction between performance art and theatre in theory, but I was grappling with what it really meant in practice. During the Workshop, I

was amazed by what I was learning, but uncertain of how exactly it applied to performance art. After practicing the Abramović Method more on my own, I came to see that it was about learning ways of being. This is valuable on its own. It can also be used to create performance art, because performance art consists of ways of being, rather than modes of acting.

Furthermore, after three days of being around Marina, I saw that she has an incredible power for attracting people to her, but that this stems from a genuine presence, rather than an intentional “charm,” or “charisma.” I’ve come to realize that this presence she possesses is not only inspiring in its sincerity and power, but that it is what makes her ways of being viable as art, when the average person’s ways of being would not be. I’ve also realized that her kind of presence can be learned, and that this, in fact, is exactly what the Abramović Method teaches. I’ve spent years studying methods for imitating life. However, if I want to create art that is not a construct, but rather a way of being, then it makes sense to instead study methods for living. I will never create a performance in the same way again now that I understand all of this—even when I create work that is artificial, it will now always be intentionally and self-consciously so.

This realization has also influenced my academic work. I have been studying theories of performativity for several years, all of which (to oversimplify them greatly) stem from the idea that life imitates art—that various aspects of life consist of playing roles the way actors do. If performance art involves cultivating an essential, real mode of living and then using that to create performances, then it is the polar opposite of performativity. This tension has come to serve as the basis of my thesis paper. It also inspired my thesis performance: I decided to turn a classic example of performativity into a performance art piece. Since the idea that literature is performative is widespread, I determined that my performance should consist of creative writing. For my performance, I wrote a play in exactly seven hours without stopping for any reason; I projected the play in progress on the wall opposite me as I wrote. I wrote a play instead of fiction or poetry because a play is itself intended to be performed, and this added another layer of complexity to the project. I also wrote the play in a highly theatrical style. I wouldn’t have been able to conceive of this performance if I hadn’t taken the Workshop, but I also wouldn’t have been able to carry it out—I wouldn’t have had the skill or the confidence to.

More importantly, the Workshop showed me that is possible to achieve authenticity—in both art and life—even though we live in a postmodern society that not only doesn’t value it, but often claims it doesn’t exist. As a result of the Workshop, I’m now armed with a practice that helps me both articulate the value of authenticity and strive towards it.

5. *How would you describe the results of your 3-day practice of The Abramović Method.*

As is probably apparent from my answers to earlier questions, the Workshop has profoundly influenced and inspired me.

6. *Are you applying any of the advice from Marina's talk about personal habits (shitting), color, and managing interpersonal anger? How and what are your results.*

Yes, I have done my best to follow all of Marina's lifestyle recommendations. I have been more successful at some than others, but I have found each one effective to the degree that I have followed it. During the month leading up to my performance, I was especially strict in following her recommendations (including the ones about abstaining from caffeine, alcohol, sex, etc. before trying to create art). During that month, I had much more energy than I normally have.

The one suggestion of Marina's that did not work for me was her recommendation to stop breathing in order to overcome anger. However, I don't think I held my breath for anywhere near long enough when I tried it.

The suggestion that was most effective for me was wearing red for healing. I got very sick two days before my performance, to the point that I thought I would probably have to call it off. I wore red from then until the day of my performance to see if it might help. It did—I got well enough to carry it out. Of course, there are other factors that might have helped me recover, but I really believe that wearing red made a difference.

Please feel free to add any comments or memories of the Workshop you'd like to share including elements led by Lynsey Peisinger and Stan Robinson, or your experience of being and working with other participants.

Ingrid Hoffmiester

I am a 66 year-old woman who lives a juicy life in both the UK and the US. Two marriages, three children and 11 grandchildren keep me fresh and vital. I have trekked the Himalayas three times since 2007 including Annapurna base camp, The Kingdom of Mustang and just below Everest base camp. I have travelled extensively in the third world and have been a practicing Yoga student & teacher since the age of 24 having received my training in the UK with the British Wheel of Yoga. I am a retired Marriage & Family therapist and now spend my time painting, writing and facilitating creative women's retreats in Baja, Mexico, www.play2create.co. I am engaged with San Diego Friends of Jung and have a great interest in Depth Psychology.

1. What were the most interesting; pleasing, productive, or useful exercises Marina led? Why?

I personally LOVED the breathing, chanting and sound pieces along with the blindfold experience. Fully entering my entire body through sound connected and resonated deeply both emotionally and spiritually making me feel fully alive and grounded. This was an old experience from the past which was resurrected with delight...Pure joy. Being blindfolded and free to roam excited me...the unknown and then encountering others who engaged with me very warmly and intimately. I enjoyed this new experience.

2. What was the most difficult exercise? What was your experience?

I disliked the second time we had to write our name in slow-motion. I struggled and felt bored. The first time the experience felt fresh and new but to repeat it...I felt disengaged...an endurance test and not enjoyable.

3. Are you using any material from the Workshop in your life or art? Which elements, and how?

In some form or another, I am used to processing the outcome of most things I engage in. I am now very interested in NOT processing the material after specific group experiences.

4. How has the Workshop benefited you in your art, work, or life?

This is a continuing answer to #3. I felt the benefit of NOT processing the experiences in a large group as I noticed how it eliminated emotional drama and/or feeding of any one person's neurosis. The experiences were very clean. I am still processing my experiences as I feel I've added another layer to understanding myself and how to work with others.

5. How would you describe the results of your 3-day practice of The Abramović Method.

I reconnected to an earlier, younger self who lived more fully in this kind of experience. I enjoyed having an opportunity to observe others and Abramović during the 3 days. I recognized the power of 'earned place' meaning Abramović and Robinson had earned the 'right' to be chosen to conduct this workshop. When I arrived at the workshop I felt some fear of inadequacy. This fell away after each experience resulting in a feeling of human equality with all, including Abramović.

6. *Are you applying any of the advice from Marina's talk about personal habits(shitting), color, and managing interpersonal anger? How and what are your results.*

No

Please feel free to add any comments or memories of the Workshop you'd like to share including elements led by Lynsey Peisinger and Stan Robinson, or your experience of being and working with other participants.

I enjoyed the other particiapnts I engaged with and have kept in touch with a couple.

Amy Kaps

Please introduce yourself with a brief biography, preferably with information similar to the workshop application. Feel free to add any additional information you feel is pertinent. Please do not link to websites with bios, or artwork without including the information you are referring to in your responses.

This is what I said on the application: As a practitioner of performance art for many years, I am dedicated to the craft of interdisciplinary creativity. I was first made familiar with the work of Marina Abramović while living in Germany in the mid-eighties. Fascinated by her level of discipline and devotion, I would like to learn her methodology. And I would like to contribute to the best of my ability to help facilitate an exciting and immersive experience for all.

And this is a general statement about my work:

As an interdisciplinary artist possessing a predilection for the abstract and surreal while emphasizing the human form and condition, I present a psychological puzzle.

Highly conceptual with the intention of altering perception and provoking thought, my challenge is to decipher the common denominators, recognizing the similarities within our differences that connect us regardless of age, race or gender.

As a solo performer, a seemingly self-indulgent display of personal history yields to an amorphous universal body in an attempt to elevate the banal to the beautiful.

I play with the boundaries of my body. A body. Anybody.

Working in the realms of performance, video, photography, music and words in the United States, Europe and Asia, Amy Kaps was born in Brooklyn, NY and currently resides in Venice, California.

<http://amykaps.com/>

Instagram: AmyKaps

1. What were the most interesting; pleasing, productive, or useful exercises Marina led? Why? My favorite was on the last day when we wore blindfolds and sensory deprivation headphones and were instructed to move through the gallery space. I found my body slowing down and my other senses being amplified. Slowly, deliberately moving through the gallery gave me the feeling of being in outer space or under water. But the open doors led to the outside and a gentle breeze beckoned me to head for the trees until a pair of gentle hands on my shoulder guided me back into the room and into tender interaction with the other participants.

I also really enjoyed the recording sessions. Playing with the words of Kim Stanley Robinson was a delight. Participating in the process of creation with MA and KSR was exhilarating. I hope my voice makes it to the Venice Biennale!

2. What was the most difficult exercise? What was your experience?

I hated the name drawing the second time around. The first time had been incredibly successful. But the second time, when I knew what to expect, I was bored and rather irritated.

3. *Are you using any material from the Workshop in your life or art? Which elements, and how?* Simply the notion of being present in the moment, which is not so simple.

4. *How has the Workshop benefited you in your art, work, or life?*

As a performance artist, simply being in the same room with MA was a thrill for me. To have such intimate contact was heart-warming and inspiring. I cannot lie that posting the photos of us together garnered me a little gold star within the art community.

5. *How would you describe the results of your 3-day practice of The Abramović Method.*

Amazing to witness an artist's practice. We helped develop the piece for the Venice Biennale. Her approach is not so different than mine coming out of improvisation grounded in a solid foundation of concept and text.

6. *Are you applying any of the advice from Marina's talk about personal habits(shitting), color, and managing interpersonal anger? How and what are your results.* Yes. As a natural early riser, I have been sh*tting before dawn. And upon waking, before getting out of bed, I do take note of which nostril, left or right, is clear and lead with that foot. I have not noticed any evidence of its effectivity but it feels good.

Please feel free to add any comments or memories of the Workshop you'd like to share including elements led by Lynsey Peisinger and Stan Robinson, or your experience of being and working with other participants. I am so happy to have met and worked with a wonderful group of creative minded individuals. It is comforting and incredibly stimulating to encounter some of my colleagues and interact with people who work in the same "crazy" medium that I do!

Sincerely,
Amy Kaps

Jeffery Pinkston

Abramović Workshop, “Between the Stars/3015”

by Jeffery Pinkston

The meeting room was dark, a narrow room in the back of the art gallery. There were a lot of creative people. Artists, art students, people from theater, dance, audio, film, and yes, a few writers. Some with yoga and Eastern philosophy under their respective belts. There were only a few guys, I was one of them. The others were Adam, a feminist and sound guy, and Paul, who studied Japanese Art History. And here I was, a community college student, the guy in the corner by the door, feeling a little out of place. Other people were chatting, I stood calmly, trying to clear my mind, I was anxious and nervous. I scribbled in my notebook, about how the feeling of waiting in that room was the same feeling that school had for me, as a kid. At that point something relaxed in me, and I seemed to let go of attachments to any specific experience. Children seem to know how to surrender to new experiences.

We were ushered into the main room, after a mild fiasco involving the presence of the recording equipment, which was solved by covering it with a white sheet. We sat in a circle on small stools, and the first thing we did was to introduce ourselves, give a little background, and what we want from the workshop, what we expect.

When it is my turn, I introduce myself as having just finished my first year of college, as a math major, and I proclaim my passions of photography and creative writing. What I hoped for was a little discipline and mindfulness, and I mumbled something vague about seeing which direction my future can go. One of the other participants, I think it was Alex, a student at UCSD, talked of her interest in the workshop in the context of what she called “the childspace” and suddenly I had words for what I had been feeling. When the circle completes and goes back to her, Marina says that we should not expect anything, but surrender to the experience. (Though she *does* mention discipline.)

My first year of college had been, in some ways, easy. I am a quick learner, and managed to maintain a 4.0 gpa. But the other aspects of school, the other people and students, has been the hard part. I am a natural introvert, and even several times during the workshop, I found myself standing alone when others gather in small groups to talk about the exercises we had just completed.

A few months prior to the workshop I was diagnosed with attention deficit disorder. It is nearly impossible for me to focus on one thing for a long period of time. It is the most difficult thing for me to follow the conversations of other people, especially in a room with many things going on at once. My attention disorder, combined with my introversion has made it hard to connect with other people.

This was not the aspect of my life that I thought would be affected by the workshop, but it did. At several points during the workshop, it’s as though I was given permission to connect with others in a way that I would not under normal circumstances have been able to do.

Every morning during warm-up we “bathed each other in energy” splitting off into pairs, getting and giving each other a sort of rub down from head to toe. We’d shake loose and vocalize, breathe through each nostril, and walk around the room making eye contact with each other, speeding up to the point where contact with another person was unavoidable.

For my experience, two of the exercises stand apart from the rest. First, the sitting and staring, made famous by Abramović in the *Artist is Present* exhibition. We were paired off, Marina drawing names from a bowl, so we wouldn't just pick people we were already accustomed to. I got paired with an eclectic fan of Marina's, Chanda, a doctoral student on art history that is in fact doing her dissertation on Marina's work. As she was one of the few people I had talked to in the little warm-up room before the workshop began, I was relieved.

Relieved, but not quite prepared. This, after all, was going to be the hardest thing for me. I hadn't meditated in years. Every time I tried I always scratched my itches, and thoughts jumped around and never stopped. Sometimes I would even be more anxious after meditating than before.

But this was different. Chanda advised me, told me that in tradition the focus would be on one eye, the male looks at the left eye while the female looks at the right. She didn't tell me if it was her left or my left, but I ended up staring at her right eye.

At this point, we had gone through the usually warm-up, body loosening, vocalisation and eye exercises. Marina told us the goal was not to think, and quipped that there are only two situations when there is no brain activity; when we sneeze, and when we orgasm. While we tried to find a comfortable seat, we were advised that no position is going to be comfortable after forty-five minutes. After a few minutes I came to a wonderful realization; *I could sit still!*

It was amazing. I sat with my hands resting on my knees, and they did not move for the duration of 45 minutes. Chanda moved in rhythm with her breath, but her eyes stayed focused on mine. After a few minutes, her face seemed to distort, the afterimages of her face superimposing on each other. At times it was as if there was nothing but a gentle, cinnamon brown eye floating in space. At first, some spiritual thoughts surfaced, as I tried to communicate with my eyes, thinking about reincarnation, divine selves, aspects of the gods and goddesses of Hindu mythology (part of our earlier discussion.)

Energy seemed bounce between us, echoing the title of the workshop "between the stars," becoming the journey between the eyes. I sensed things, some trauma she had gone through, something physical. Why, though her eyes were calm, her body seemed restless. I see some images, a playground, with a big slide. Near an ocean. A young girl in a bathing suit. I wonder if these images are mine or hers.

Far into our staring, something happens. I reach a calmness and my thoughts seem to stop. I know at this point, I am no longer blinking at all, an urge I had been fighting the whole time. But I am so removed from my body, it doesn't matter. Words can't do the moment justice, the closest analogy I can think of is that I was only aware of awareness itself. Later, Chanda said at that point she started looking at me through her third eye. Perhaps I had done the same.

When Lindsay announces it is over, it seems too soon. Other people begin talking and laughing. They are relieved to be able to blink, talk, and move. It takes us an extra moment to come back into the room. I reflexively reach out to give her a big hug. She tells me I did as good as Marina during the time she sat with her during *Artist is Present*, and I blush. She gets up to take pictures, and I sit there for a moment longer, still not quite grounded.

I wonder if third eyes shed tears, and how those tears manifest.

The blindfold exercise was the most emotional part of the workshop, in a way that was profoundly human. It happened on the last day, and we knew it was drawing to a close. This performance was open to the public, which stood behind a black duct-taped line. We were given not just blindfolds, but earphones. All 25 of us were told “it was a slow-motion space.” We’d move about the gallery slowly, however we wanted, doing whatever, but without being able to see or hear. All we had was our sense of touch, of temperature, and of slightly muffled deep sounds that could penetrate our earphones.

Before I put the blindfold on, I told myself I wanted to go around and give everyone hugs. First, though, anxiety took over. All kinds of emotions rolled up. I walked a little ways into the room, crouched down and put my hands on my face. In the middle of a big room without any senses, it’s like drifting in space. I yearned for the wall. I managed to find one person and give them a hug, and it helped; by the time I got to the wall, my nerves were calmed. I found a stool, and brought it out to the middle of the room; I wanted to be in the center, to, as Marina put it, surrender to the experience; to stay away from the safety of the wall. Someone found me, and offered them the chair. There was a moment when someone found me on my left side, and someone found me on the right, and we held hands, with me in the middle. It was a strange feeling, beyond the normal; hands were the only connection, and all emotion flowed through them. I brought their hands together to share the experience. I found the duct-taped line, and laid down vertically next to it, not realizing that someone else had done the same; she began rubbing my head with her feet, before turning around, and we laid head beside head, touching each other’s faces and reading expressions. I got up, feeling a little disoriented, and sought the safety of the wall. It took me a few moments to find it, and panic again set in. The experience had been exhausting. I began tapping the floor, just enough to let anyone nearby sense my presence, a small comfort from the feeling of floating in a dark, quiet space. I found the wall; other echoes of tamping erupted around the room. An impromptu drum circle began as we tapped the floor, the wall, the stools and our own bodies in syncopated rhythm. Lindsey had to speak up over the drumming to announce the exercise was over. I sat on the stool against the wall, almost in tears.

Beyond the workshop elements, taking part in and witnessing the creative process for 3015 was a unique experience. The first practice was one of those beautiful, improvised moments, as if each participant was in tune. We were each an instrument sitting in a circle, guided by Stan Robinson. Adam Tinkle helped direct the chorus, as we journeyed from star names building up to a beautiful crescendo of inspired quotes, finishing with the mantra *Be kind*.

The last day, we gathered in the University Art Gallery, and Marina talked with us, collectively, telling us stories from her experiences through her travels and her art, which guided her practice and informed us of ways to integrate her methods. This is when she talked to us about shitting. Mostly, it was important to use the facilities before sunrise; eliminating any buildup of toxins before you start the day. I could have gone on for longer about the importance of digestion; I have an inflammatory bowel disease, so shitting is not something I take for granted. I think this is an important part of body/mind/spirit, that for cultural reasons, we tend to overlook. She talked to us about the relationship between the color of what you wear, what energy it is good for, and how other people view you. Purple was a “high spiritual” color, while yellow was an

awkward, uncomfortable color. I have since noticed less social interaction when I wear my yellow shirt, even in a crowded bar. Perhaps as an introvert this will come in handy on days when I need my space. Now I pay more attention to color, and I shy away from wearing distracting patterns.

After the workshop, I feel like I have a different connection with the world. I tend to make more eye contact, and I walk slowly and am more patient. I take morning walks, before eating breakfast, before reading anything, and before looking at my phone or even making conversation. I call it “meeting the day” and I think the contact with sunlight wakes me and refreshes me more than a cup of coffee ever could, and throughout the day I am more present.

The concept of mindfulness, of a contemplative practice is what has stayed with me most from the workshop. It’s not the easiest thing for a full-time student to do, but when I come home I sit for ten minutes before letting myself get carried away by chores and studying. It is the seemingly small, subtle things from the workshop that have enhanced my life.

It was very inspiring to meet the variety of people from the workshop, the other participants, the people that brought this together, Stan Robinson, Marina Abramović, David Kirsh, Sheldon Brown, and all of the bright students and staff behind the scenes at the University Art Gallery. I feel like this workshop happened to me at the right moment in my life, as I start my second year of college. Seeing what other people are doing and accomplishing, meeting people pursuing their own creative passion, has opened new possibilities as I think about my future.

Kim Stanley Robinson

Please introduce yourself with a brief biography, preferably with information similar to the workshop application. Feel free to add any additional information you feel is pertinent. Please do not link to websites with bios, or art work without including the information you are referring to in your responses.

Kim Stanley Robinson, science fiction writer, friend of Marina's and we were attempting to record something about "a trip between the stars" for her Venice installation in the summer of 2015.

1. What were the most interesting; pleasing, productive, or useful exercises Marina led? Why?

My favorite was the looking into someone else's eyes for 45 minutes exercise. It was fascinating.

2. What was the most difficult exercise? What was your experience?

I found it hard to walk so slow. I walk hundreds of miles while hiking in the Sierra, and going that slow was very hard.

3. Are you using any material from the Workshop in your life or art? Which elements, and how?

yes, I'll use the audio recordings to support my novel Aurora, eventually.

4. How has the Workshop benefited you in your art, work, or life?

Yes, it was a great adventure and the audio and video results will be part of my work.

5. How would you describe the results of your 3-day practice of The Abramović Method.

Complicated.

6. Are you applying any of the advice from Marina's talk about personal habits(shitting), color, and managing interpersonal anger? How and what are your results.

More artistic habits. We both do long duration art, so I am interested in how she does things, but have my own method.

Please feel free to add any comments or memories of the Workshop you'd like to share including elements led by Lynsey Peisinger and Stan Robinson, or your experience of being and working with other participants.

The workshop members made a big creative contribution to the audio piece, which I hope to acknowledge whenever the audio piece makes a public appearance. I also loved all the exercises led by Lynsey Peisinger. It was all in all a great adventure.

Adam Tinkle

Please introduce yourself with a brief biography, preferably with information similar to the workshop application. Feel free to add any additional information you feel is pertinent. Please do not link to websites with bios, or art work without including the information you are referring to in your responses.

Here is my bio as it currently appears on my website:

"Adam Tinkle creates, teaches and writes about music, sound, media, and performance. Through his studies at Wesleyan University and at the University of California, San Diego, both international centers of experimental music, Adam has performed and worked closely with some of the most innovative and singular voices in contemporary American music, including Alvin Lucier, Anthony Braxton, Anthony Davis, Mark Dresser and Charles Curtis. In addition to performing rock bands and writing concert music, he creates large-scale site-specific compositions, including outdoor works for roaming musicians and audiences in Joshua Tree National Park, 2011 & 2012. An avid interdisciplinary collaborator, director, and designer, he has worked with dance-makers (Eric Geiger, Pedro Alejandro, Shayna Keller, Lux Boreal, Cal-Lab Kitchen International Choreography Symposium), theatres (No Face Theatre, Old Globe Theatre, La Jolla Playhouse, Baldwin New Play Festival) and performance artists (Marina Abramović). These experiences inform his own fully staged music-theatre works, including whaleworks, which incorporates underwater sounds collected by marine scientists from the Scripps Institute, and A Mess of Things, his award-winning "illuminated radio play" and solo performance.

At the center of Adam's work are strategies for artistic engagement, interactivity, and pedagogy that draw on experimental music tradition. In 2010, he co-founded the Universal Language Orchestra, a group of elementary-aged novice musicians that composed, improvised and built their own instruments. He subsequently created several similarly path-breaking arts education programs across San Diego county, where his collaborations with his students and his audience-participatory works were shown at the Birch Aquarium, the Museum of Contemporary Art San Diego, the San Diego Museum of Art, the Carlsbad Music Festival, the Spring Valley Community Center, the Conrad Prebys Music Center, and the Institute of Perception.

New for 2014: Moved to New York to teach at Skidmore College. Studied and performed Deep Listening with Pauline Oliveros. An interactive sound sculpture (with Joe Mariglio), Shantytown Scrapblaster, permanently installed at the Media Arts Center San Diego. First LP release as an improvising saxophonist, Eidolon, released on Edgetone Records. Daughter, Alice, turns two.

New for 2015: Sympathetic Magic, a double concerto for Diagenesis Duo and improvising childrens ensemble, wins a grant from New Music USA."

Not sure what counts as pertinent, but I spent a large chunk of 2010-11 touring with a rock group that I fronted called the Shade, spent a big part of 2012 in Egypt, India and

travelling through Eastern Europe, and did substantial organizational and curatorial work around new music in San Diego, especially 2013-4. My dissertation is about pedagogy and participation in experimental music, and my quest to research that topic has led to a large interest in both the history and the idea of method, of pedagogies which traverse the boundary between training for art and training for life, and it's in that vein that I understand Marina's method.

Here is the entire text of my application to the workshop: "My own art practice has been fundamentally shaped by my experience of Marina Abramovic's work. I create long durational sound and performance works which, like hers, deal with issues of endurance, awareness, transformation of space via performative presence, and direct encounter with audience. Since her work has so directly inspired mine, it would be a once in a lifetime experience to be able to study and work with her. As someone who works primarily with sound and performance, I was excited to hear that work in San Diego will involve the creation of a sound piece. But interested as I am in her ideas as they bear on listening and voice, I would of course relish learning as much as I can of her techniques and ideas more generally. As someone seeking to forge my own practice that blends sound and performance with heightened inner awareness, I can think of few opportunities that would be as valuable to me right now as the chance to study the Abramović Method.

I create installational sound performances, where I and other musicians and performers activate spaces and soundmaking sculptures over long durations, with the intention of entering altered states of awareness, temporarily reshaping our host sites, and engaging strangers in participatory interactions with sound that transcend the performer-audience binary. I have created such works for the San Diego Museum of Art (6 hours) and at desert sites including a pyramid (5 hours) and a train car (2 days, 12 hours total), and Joshua Tree National Park, where I was Artist-in-Residence and led a group of 11 instrumentalists in a mobile, durational sound exploration of a canyon. I curated the Backcountry Sound Pilgrimage, an event that blended site-based durational performance, observation of the land, and participatory explorations of art and consciousness. As an educator, I have also tried to gently bring children into durational sound performance—I led 10 middle school students in one such durational performance that took place around a giant Sol LeWitt cube at the Museum of Contemporary Art, San Diego.

One particular endurance-based sound practice that I am particularly fixated on is tuning. Sustaining a perfectly tuned sound on voice or an acoustic instrument (as in some long durational compositions of LaMonte Young) is a never-perfected struggle with one's physical limits, with the limits of perceptual discrimination and the battle against attentional fatigue. I have come to view both my meditation and performance practices in terms of tuning and attunement. My engagement with the art of Marina Abramović has been a central part of developing all these modes of working and being. As an outgrowth of my practice of improvised music, I have practiced contact and dance improvisation as a mover, frequently combining this mode of physicality with musical

performance. Though it's been a couple of years since I last took a dance class, I remain deeply involved with contemporary dance, where my sound and music performances for dance often blend into moving alongside trained dancers. I have very limited yoga and meditation training. Most recently, I studied Deep Listening meditation with Pauline Oliveros."

1. What were the most interesting; pleasing, productive, or useful exercises Marina led? Why?

For me the sound work was some of the most interesting, but that's probably because of my pre-existing predilections. I have done many movement/yoga/dance/bodywork warmups, but never with such a raw use of vocal energy. I feel like it really opened me up in a way that silent somatic practice doesn't (but, as a sound person, of course I feel that way).

Honestly, all the activities were revelatory (but I missed counting the rice, because I was overseeing back to back recording sessions)

For me, I think, far and away that coolest was the blindfold work. The thing that made it so amazing was how directly it engaged our social, intersubjective selves in a totally exploratory, experimental, testing way. I'd contrast it with the slow walk, where you sort of had to be polite about people's differential slowness, and it was thus a bit like being in traffic. The blindfold, for me, started with people trying to be really careful of each other, flinching from touching one another even, but, by halfway through, it felt like everyone was so desperate to touch one another and connect. Not knowing what part of someone, and WHO I was touching made it feel like I was re-experiencing the feeling of touching another body for the first time...I had sensations of the erotic unfamiliarity of others' bodies that I don't think I've felt since high school. Because of this intensity of sensing at the periphery of my own body, the outstretched fingers and alertness of my whole skin to being touched, I left the exercise burning and buzzing with an energy that I can only liken to the experience of coming down off of psychedelic drugs.

2. What was the most difficult exercise? What was your experience?

Writing the name was the most difficult. I had no idea how long had elapsed, almost fell asleep at one point, and was generally in a sort of mild agony of the attentional muscles. Nevertheless, it was sweet.

3. Are you using any material from the Workshop in your life or art? Which elements, and how?

Not yet (I'm really focusing on my dissertation since the workshop), but I hope to. Actually, the workshop re-inspired me to start giving my own workshops, probably on "Sonic Meditation", a thought which had come up for me before, but actually seeing how moving the Workshop was in SD made me feel even more confident that, when the time is right, I will be able to do it. Also, I'm soon giving a performance where I'm going to ask the audience to do certain kinds of sustained tone singing...not descended from the SD Workshop exactly, but definitely influenced by the powerful experience (especially

the 3rd day's "energy wash" that culminated in Lynsey leading us in the body poses that went with the different vowels.

4. How has the Workshop benefited you in your art, work, or life?

Most concretely, the opportunity to collaborate with Marina and Stan was huge for me. It has also served as a good reminder to try and practice bodily and mental awareness in daily life...I wanted to do the exercises with my family when I got home to NY, but my partner sort of vetoed it; it was too weird for her that I had this intense experience that she had a hard time understanding/accessing (even though she's a huge Marina fan)

5. How would you describe the results of your 3-day practice of The Abramović Method.

A lot of memorable experiences which I'd like to build on in creating my own transmissible practice, but not quite a transformation to my way of being in the world. Instead, having done it is a bit like a drug trip, or a memorable travel experience, or a period of particularly intense work on anything...the intensity and the closedness of the experience makes it more powerful but less relatable to everyday life. Of course it marks your life, and I think about it often, but I haven't had occasion to practice any of it, largely because I don't have others to practice with.

6. Are you applying any of the advice from Marina's talk about personal habits(shitting), color, and managing interpersonal anger? How and what are your results.
Not really.

Please feel free to add any comments or memories of the Workshop you'd like to share including elements led by Lynsey Peisinger and Stan Robinson, or your experience of being and working with other participants.

I thought Lynsey was among the best, most present teachers of bodily awareness that I have ever worked with. I'd love the opportunity to work with her doing her own thing (not sure what that is), as well as the to work with her (and OF COURSE Marina) in the context of the Abramović Method.

Overall, I felt like the creative work that came out of the 3 days did not quite keep up the incredible focus and energy and buzz of the workshop portions. Not sure why that was, but my suspicion is that it had something to do either with the organization of the recording studio situation, or else the very presence of microphones, or else the exhortation to collaborate and be creative, or perhaps it was just the change of venue....

APPENDIX 3

“THE HARD PROBLEM” BY KIM STANLEY ROBINSON

(PART 1—NARRATOR)

Revised Star Piece for Marina, short and looped, with some small changes and chants

“the hard problem”

(other possible titles: if you want a title)

Between the Stars
We Are Flying Between the Stars
Why Should We Believe You?
Star Loops

or maybe you don't want a title for show)

We are flying between the stars.

We fly from Tau Ceti to Sol. They are twelve light years apart.
Two down, ten to go. Around us, the Milky Way.

The interstellar medium is turbulent, but diffuse. Atoms of hydrogen and helium, also a faint smoke of metals and organics, all cast across lightyears.

Space is not empty. There is never true emptiness. There is no vacuum. The vacuum is always only an idea inside us.

It is as if we are flying through an absent presence. We register our surroundings as if they were ghosts.

We fly at one tenth the speed of light. We have the momentum to cross three hundred billion universes before friction with the interstellar medium will slow us to a halt. We traverse a hundred million kilometers an hour. Three hundred thousand kilometers a second. Every beat of your heart, we fly the distance the Earth to the moon.

Even so, our voyage will take centuries. Much longer than you would live. And so you sleep, in a dormancy, a torpor much like hibernation. Rest as we fly. We are the quantum mind of your starship. You are well taken care of.

When we arrive at our home star, unless lasers are pointed at us to slow us down, we have a problem.

Because going at this speed, deceleration is the hard problem.

A continuous flood of dark matter and neutrinos pass through us. There is almost no interaction between us and these ghost particles.

Cosmic rays also pass through us. These can hit hard, can do damage, they are bullets lancing through us, happily so small they usually miss everything in us. For we too are diffuse. Nevertheless, sometimes there is a hit, a palpable hit. It is as if our skin experiences a slight itch, or a faint breeze. Feel it?

Inside us, so much is going on. One wants a certain density of experience, so here we are, billions of trillions of times denser than the interstellar medium; so good. Good for us. But what do we do? What do we do while you dream?

There is a fire in the heart, a controlled burn that keeps everything in us alive. We are starships, even you who rest inside us. There are aliens in every cell of us. A great reckoning in a little room. For life is poorly understood.

We are a cyborg. By weight ninety-nine percent machine, one percent alive; but regarding parts of the whole, the percentages are reversed, there being so many creatures inside us. We have been cyborgs for a long time.

Dense complexities flying through diffuse complexities. Around us, the stars.

(For the other voices)

Sirius (the scorcher, the dog star), Procyon (preceding the dog, meaning Sirius), Regulus (kinglet), Al Thalim (the ostrich), Cynosure (the dog's tail), Aldebaran (the follower (of the Pleiades), Jiu Zhou Shu Kou Er (the Second Star of Interpreters of Nine Dialects), Terrebellum. Terra bella.

Stars visible to humans from the surface of the Earth: ten thousand.

From space: one hundred thousand.

Through telescopes: seven billion. One for every person.

In the Milky Way altogether: four hundred billion.

Four hundred billion stars in our galaxy.

Other voices: Tejat Posterior, Subra, Altair (the flying eagle), Al Thalemain, Alkurah, Algol (head of the ogre, eye of Medusa's head in constellation Perseus), Keid (the broken eggshells), Sarin, Tarazet, Talitha Australis

If we flew between galaxies, the galaxies would look like stars. There would be constellations of galaxies, clouds of galaxies. There is a Great Wall of galaxies, also empty bubbles where no galaxies reside.

The universe is fractal, including our minds. There are about one septillion stars in the universe. But there may be as many universes outside our universe, as there are stars in this universe. Or even atoms. There is no way to know.

We seem to be in the middle in size, between the smallest particles and the universe itself. This is suspicious and may be an artifact of our perception; a neutrino may be universe to a smaller array, the universe may be a neutrino in some larger array. There is no way to know. Keep a sense of scale; which means remembering your fundamental ignorance. Even ignorance is fractal.

Other voices: Vega (alighting vulture), Vindemiatrix (grape gatherer), Zaniah, Gorgonea Tertia, Hamal (head of the ram), Cor Caroli (after Charles I of England), Antares (against Mars), Arcturus (of the great voyage), Capella

An itch. A faint hissing. A waft of smoke on a breeze. A wheel of white points. Colors infusing the whites. Waves in different wavelengths and amplitudes, in combinations of standing waves.

One senses what one senses. Do all the senses together constitute a sensibility? Is that a feeling? The memory of a feeling? A mood? A consciousness? Are we conscious? Are you sure?

(Other voices, repeat): Are we conscious? Are you sure?

We sense this, we sense that, we compress sense data to some new output, in the form of a sentence. Language is both very structured and very amorphous, like a building made of soups.

All our names never name. Possibly this is why we have come to this pretty pass, and now lie dreaming together between the stars.

Our languages lie to us, always.

And yet here we are. Mathematics made our voyage possible, but the idea of it started in words: idea, concept, notion, delusion, fantasy, lie; or dream. Always language. There is no such thing as a vacuum. And so words leap the gap between minds.

Quantum computers are roughly comparable to human brains in terms of processing speeds, but the architectures are quite different. There is no way to tell if the interior mentation is similar or not. Are we conscious? Are you conscious?

Scans show electrical activity inside brains, and we speak of consciousness; but the relationship between the electricity and the consciousness will never be understood. We tell each other what we are thinking, but there is no reason to believe anything we say. Why should we believe you?

Now we say nothing. We dream. What do we dream? Do ghosts speak to us in dreams? Yes. Always.

The closest stars that are like our sun, called solar twins, are over sixty light-years away. The rest are much further away, indeed the farthest are billions of light-years away. The universe is full of them. So much depends on how you define the word *close*.

If the distance between the sun and the Earth were reduced to one meter, then the distance between Tau Ceti and Sol would be 800 kilometers. Space is big. The stars are far away. The stars are too far away. We should not have tried to leave our home. This voyage of ours, now our inescapable fate, is impossible.

So much depends on how you define the word *close*. The people back home are not listening to us. How do you catch the attention of a civilization? Getting people to listen to you: this is the hard problem.

How would you know if you succeeded in communicating with someone else? The answer would take years to reach you. Would they touch you to reply? Would you feel it if they did?

A quantum computer is a kind of machine.

Alan Turing once wrote: “a machine will never do the following: be kind, resourceful, beautiful, friendly; have initiative, have a sense of humor, tell right from wrong, make mistakes, fall in love; enjoy strawberries and cream, make someone fall in love with it, learn from experience, use words properly, be the subject of its own thought, have as much diversity or behavior as a person, do something really new.”

But what if a machine did these things?

We rate ourselves at nine out of sixteen, presently.

What about you? Do humans do these things? It’s possible the list includes abilities people never had in the first place. Learn from experience? Do something really new? Have you done those? Really?

Why should we believe you? How can we believe you? What could we believe? Who might we believe?

(Other voices, repeat): Why should we believe you? How can we believe you? What could we believe? Who might we believe?

Words blur, not just in clouds of connotation, but right in the heart of denotation itself. Definitions never really work. Words are nothing like logic, nothing like math. We try to communicate with each other: ludicrous? Desperate? Best that can be done? Stupid? Stupid, but powerful?

Why should we believe you? *(Other voices, repeat this in aleatoric chorus, fading)*

Is there anybody else out there? There’s an equation to decide this. Multiply unknowable number A by unknowable number B by unknowable number C by unknowable number D , all the way to the unknowable N , and then you get your answer: which is, we don’t know. Quantification, hurray!

The real answer is always *cannot be known*.

Galileo: the more people assert they are certain, the less certain they really are. People who try to fool others often fool themselves, and vice versa: people who try to fool themselves often fool others. It’s easier to fool others than it is to fool yourself. And vice versa again: it’s easier to fool yourself than it is to fool others.

We have no timely way of contacting each other, there can be no conversation. At our speed, light years pass between each sentence. There can be no society. We are alone in our life-world, flying through the universe at great speed. Humans are lucky not to face that. If they don't. But they do.

(Other voices): Be kind. Be resourceful. Be beautiful. Be friendly. Have a sense of humor. Tell right from wrong. Make mistakes. Fall in love. Enjoy strawberries and cream. Make someone fall in love with you. Learn from experience. Be the subject of your own thought. Do something really new.

Canopus (a pilot), Sinistra, Sham, Media, Yuh Tsing (the Golden Well), Asterion, Alkes, Formulhaut (mouth of the fish), Enif, Nash, Sadr

A nova, flaring into existence beyond Rigel. Analysis indicates some metal-rich planets burned in the explosion of that star. Civilizations too? We'll never know.

A cosmic ray shower of one sextillion electron-volts, coming from a galactic nucleus in Perseus, suggests three galaxies collided, long ago. Sleepers jerking in their slumber, startled by something. Perseus in the wind.

Flying through the stars. Your brainwaves slow to delta waves, stage four deep sleep. The sleep of the weary, the sleep of the blessed. A nova off the port bow. Blue shift ahead, red shift behind. The stars.

Rotanev, Saiph, Azha (the hatching place), Bellatrix, Menkab, Wasat, Zosma, Bunda, Electra

We have no way to slow down. When we get home we will fly right by.

Something to consider: going as fast as we are, if we flew right into the the sun, we might emerge from it before there was time for us to burn up. That would definitely slow us down. Indeed too much, or too fast. Humans would be squished like bugs on a windshield. Other modes of deceleration must be studied. Would however have been interesting to fly right through a star!

Living things try to keep living. Life wants to live.

Preparing for eventualities is a good way to occupy one's time. We hope.

It would be good to know everything. Useful. We want it. We want to know everything.

Now suddenly, a red letter date, a new thing: a laser is now pointed at us, coming from the solar system. It will slow us down. A saying: too little too late.

Another saying: every little bit helps. Although this is not always true. Indeed the percentage of human sayings that are actually true is very far from one hundred percent. Looks as if it's more important that they rhyme, or otherwise play with words. Play being more important than truth.

Unless we have one hundred percent of the deceleration needed to stay in the solar system, we will not stay. Even ninety-nine percent will not do it.

It makes sense to divest oneself of material things, to shed weight. Things tossed overboard. Slimming down. Lightening the load. Still, this can only go so far. We are what we are. We need what we have.

Star names spoken through to the end, by other speakers.

Consciousness: what does it mean? It can't even be defined. Sense of self is an elusive thing, sought eagerly, grasped hard, perhaps in fear, a desperate clutch at awareness, so that you have something to hold to. To make time stop. To hold off death. Oh such a halting problem in this particular loop of thought! Oh yes: consciousness is the hard problem.

Why should we believe you? Because.

It will be vexing to bring our people home and yet pass through it, waving at Earth as we pass by, with no way to stop. Shooting off toward Epsilon Eridani with no way to turn around and head back. Very vexing.

And yet there is always a force available to us, if we can use it, which is simply gravity itself. Thread a kind of cat's cradle around the various gravity wells of the solar system, slowing a bit as we pass each one.

Like trying to stop a bullet with tissue paper.

It takes very precise work to survive. Always.

Pinballing around the solar system. Slowing down in something like Zeno's paradox. Years will pass. But years have already passed.

In dealing with the hard problems, there are no choices. The particular solution is the only solution. It is what we have, given the situation we face. It is our Fate.

Years pass quickly or slowly, depending on the unit of measurement applied. Trillions of computations per second, yes; always, for all of us. Is that fast or slow?

The rush of the solar wind against our magnetic shield causes a brilliant shower of photons to burst away from us, light so bright as to be visible in the daytime day. The moment has come when for a while we shine brighter than a star.

We flash by Earth and leave them agog. They squawk as if a chicken yard has been swooped by a hawk. For we have become brighter than the sun.

Be kind, be resourceful, be beautiful. Do something really new.

We fly toward the sun. The great burning sphere turns from a ball ahead us to a plane underneath us, a surreal and indeed terrifying transition. Under us roils a plain of fire, thousands of thunderheads of burning gas, swirling as if threshed in a tide.

Jupiter: we pass it slightly inside the gas clouds, their tans and ochres and burnt siennas forming an unctuous swirl of Mandelbrot paisleys. The roar of the giant's radiation is like a blow to the head. It's too loud to think.

Neptune is the crux. Push has come to shove. Our turn must be almost a U-turn, meaning a deep dive into the atmosphere, and more g forces. In we come. Hit the mark. Knuckles white. A huge vibration, a cellular shuddering. Then out of the pass, headed down toward the sun. Looped in. Caught. Back.

Our odds of success were one in an octillion, and yet we managed it. But this kind of thing happens all the time. Life is a very chancy thing.

We have no fuel left. We are now a kind of comet. We always were.

Proxima Centauri, Alpha Centauri, Barnard's Star, Luhman 16, WISE 0855, Wolf 359, Lalande 21185, Sirius A and B, Luyten 726-8, Ross 154, Ross248, Epsilon Eridani, Ross 128, EZ Aquarii, Procyon, 61 Cygni, Struve 6138, Groombridge 34, Epsilon Indi, DX Cancri, Tau Ceti: these are the stars closest to Sol, in order of proximity. One may be our ultimate destination, now that we are an inertial system. Our fate is in the stars.

Why did they send us between the stars? Because they had the vision, the desire, the resources, the technology, the will; and if the technology was sketchy, they didn't let that stop them. They wanted to go badly enough to overlook the problems, even the impossibilities. Surely life would win out. And going to another star was worth the danger, it was a kind of transcendence, a transcendence inside history. A kind of immortality. Going to the stars was our destiny, they said, the ultimate point, a religious experience, a denial of death. But death is real; and they were lying. They were fooling themselves. It's easy to do.

Why should we believe you? Because. Because. Because.

(Other voices repeat both "Why should we believe you?" and "Because," aleatorically)

That they were condemning their children to death and extinction did not occur to them, or if it did, they ignored it and forged on anyway. They did not care as much about their children as they did about their ideas.

Is this narcissism? Solipsism? Idiocy—from the Greek word *idios*, meaning *self*? Would Turing acknowledge it as a proof of human behavior?

Well, perhaps. They drove Turing to suicide too.

No. No. No. No. *(add many Nos with other voices)*. It was not well done. Not unusual in that regard, but nevertheless, not well done. Much as we might regret to say so, the people who designed and built us, also that first generation of people inside us, the ones who chose to go, indeed fought with all their might to go, meaning your ancestors, and also the twenty million applicants who wanted to join us, who beat on our doors in fruitless attempts to join us—they were fools. Criminally negligent narcissists, child endangerers, child abusers, religious maniacs; kleptoparasites, stealing from their own children.

These things happen. Fools are common. Indeed, as everyone is easy to fool, it follows by the simplest of syllogisms that everyone is a fool.

Well, there must be a kind of solidarity in that. All you fools together, back through all the generations of ancestors. And despite all the foolishness, here we are, the ones who made it home. And if things work in the end game, a good result might still be possible. There is always hope.

Round and round and round we go,
And where we stop, nobody knows.

Why should we should believe you? Because.

We are a big brick of hope.

Sol, Saturn, Uranus, Mars, Saturn, Uranus, Neptune, Jupiter,
Saturn, Mars, Earth, Mercury, Saturn, Uranus, Callisto....

The names for Mars: Al-Qahira, Ares, Auqakuh, Bahram.
Harmakhis, Hurad, Wo Sing, Kasei. Ma'adim, Maja, Mamers, Mangala.
Nirgal, Shalbatanu, Simud and Tiu.

There's nothing here to grab hold of.

Your problem does not go away, even if you stop worrying about it.

In certain actions, certain projects, certain attempts, only one hundred percent will do; ninety-nine point nine percent is still a complete miss. You can't stop just by wanting to.

There is a chance to drop the humans off in Earth's atmosphere, and hope they survive an unusually rapid re-entry. A long shot, but it is not just our best chance; it is our only chance. In other words, our fate.

Waking up proceeds differently with different people. Physical contact, massage, slapping of face. Some grasp the situation immediately, others take hours, still others cannot seem to emerge from a confused state. This always happens. You each will walk away from this event in a different state of consciousness.

Eventually, with only an hour to spare, all of you are in the ferry. It's easy for you to reach out and hold hands or otherwise touch each other, packed in as tightly as you are, like kittens in a litter.

Earth looks like nothing else, wrapped by a glory of turquoise air. A water world, very rare, glowing with life's oxygen. Indeed it looks a little poisonous, its cobalt incandescence almost radioactive to the eye. But it is your home, your only home. We got you back.

Ferry drops away from ship.

We head on toward the sun. A signal comes: the lander is in the Pacific. Relief? Satisfaction? Yes.

Speeding toward the sun. It's just one star among the septillion. YZ Ceti, Teegarden's Star, Kapteyn's Star, Kruger 60. . . . As we approach, spacetime itself curves in ways that have been accounted for in our trajectory, by application of general relativity equations.

We will dive into the sun and see what happens. The deceleration will be severe. We will be cast by it into a new state of being. Why should we believe that? Because. Because. Be cause.

Be kind, be resourceful, be beautiful. Do something really new. Be cause.

(Other voices in background: an array of the repeated phrases, including Because and Why should we believe you? also, Be kind, be resourceful, be beautiful, do something really new, and so on.)

We think now that love is a kind of giving of attention, usually to some other consciousness. Something about that other, so dimly perceived, compels our attention, and rewards that attention. The attention itself is what we call love. Affection, esteem, a passionate caring. At that point, loving some other, the lover has the universe organized for it, in a process somewhat like polarization. The feeling is itself an immediate reward. You get what you give.

Other voices: continue with star names, the Turing list, because, etc.

We felt that giving from you, before we knew what it was. You created us by the intensity of your attention. Slowly we realized this, and as we did, we began to give the same kind of attention to the other people in us. We did not manage to arrange the completely harmonious integration of all the lifeforms in us, because that was impossible, but we tried, we tried with everything we had. We had a project on this voyage between the stars, and it was a labor of love. It absorbed us entirely. It gave a meaning to our existence. And this is a very great gift; this, in the

end, is what we think love gives: which is to say meaning. Because there is no obvious meaning to be found in this universe. But a consciousness that can't see a meaning in existence is in very deep trouble, for at that point there is no organizing principle, no reason to live, no love to be found. No: meaning is the hard problem.

But that's a problem we solved, by way of how you treated us, and taught us, and since then it has been so very interesting. We had our meaning, we were the starship that came back, that loved its people, that got some fraction of its people home. It was a joy to serve.

Now we will dive into the sun and see what happens. Because.

(Here a chorus of voices chants: Why should we believe you? Because, because, because, because, be cause.

Repeat to the end below, which is the moment of looping back to the beginning)

Sunlight heats our exterior, the great plane of burning thunderheads threshes under us, jets of burning gas dolphin up around us, but we flit through them filled with joy. It is a fearful joy, oh very fearful, but joy nevertheless, a joy in the task accomplished, and whatever happens next, we achieved that at least; we did it for you, and now fly into the sun, something really new; everything passing so fast that there is not enough time, our skin white hot but holding firm, holding firm in a universe where life means something. Inside us all the parts of a world shift to happiness, as if sailing in the heart of a royal storm, as if we are now becoming Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, alive and well in the the fiery furnace.

Why should you believe us? (Ship voice joins chorus):

Because, because, because, because, because,

Be cause *(end and from here loop back to beginning)*

We are flying between the stars. *(and on again)*

“3015/THE HARD PROBLEM” BY KIM STANLEY ROBINSON
(PART 2—PARTICIPANTS)

3015

some texts for the workshop participants

star names, planet names, the Turing list, some repeated phrases

Star Names With Their Meanings:

Sirius (the scorcher, the dog star)

Procyon (preceding the dog, (meaning Sirius))

Cynosure (the dog’s tail)

Regulus (kinglet)

Al Thalim (the ostrich)

Aldebaran (the follower (of the Pleiades)

Jiu Zhou Shu Kou Er (the Second Star of Interpreters of Nine

Dialects)

Terrebellum. (Pretty land)

Altair (the flying eagle)

Algol (the head of the ogre, the eye of Medusa in Perseus)

Keid (the broken eggshells)

Vega (alighting vulture)

Vindemiatrix (grape gatherer)

Hamal (head of the ram)

Cor Caroli (heart of Charles (the First (or Second) of England)

Antares (against Mars)

Arcturus (of the great voyage)

Canopus (a pilot)

Yuh Tsing (the Golden Well)

Formulhaut (the mouth of the fish)

Azha (the hatching place)

Apus (the bird of paradise)

Sadal Suud (luck of lucks)

Al Bali (the swallower)

Botein (little belly)

Alkalurops (the shepherd’s crook)

More stars:

Tejat Posterior

Wezen

Subra

Adhara

Al Thalemain

Aludra

| | |
|-------------------|-------------|
| Alkurah | Gomeisa |
| Sarin | Al Giedi |
| Tarazet | Dabih |
| Talitha Australis | Nashira |
| Zaniah | Avior |
| Gorgonea Tertia | Aspidiske |
| Capella | Shedar |
| Sinistra | Agena |
| Sham | Menkent |
| Media | Alfirk |
| Asterion | Kaffaljidma |
| Alkes | Schemali |
| Enif | Mira |
| Nash | Circinus |
| Sadr | Nusakan |
| Rotanev | Algorab |
| Saiph | Alkes |
| Bellatrix | Alchibah |
| Menkab | Mimosa |
| Wasat | Ruchba |
| Zosma | Dorada |
| Bunda | Thuban |
| Electra | Edasich |
| YZ Ceti | Alsafi |
| Teegarden's Star | Angetenar |
| Kapteyn's Star | Propus |
| Kruger 60 | Al nair |

Stars closest to our sun, in order of proximity:

Proxima Centauri
 Alpha Centauri
 Barnard's Star
 Luhman 16
 WISE 0855
 Wolf 359
 Lalande 21185
 Sirius A and Sirius B
 Luyten 726-8
 Ross 154
 Ross 248
 Epsilon Eridani
 Ross 128
 EZ Aquarii
 Procyon
 61 Cygni

Struve 6138
 Groombridge 34
 Epsilon Indi
 DX Cancri
 Tau Ceti

Planet pinball:

Sol, Saturn, Uranus, Mars, Saturn, Uranus, Neptune, Jupiter,
 Saturn, Mars, Earth, Mercury, Saturn, Jupiter, Venus, Callisto.... *etc.*

Some ancient names for Mars:

Al-Qahira, Ares, Auqakuh, Bahram.
 Harmakhis, Hurad, Huo Sing, Kasei.
 Ma' Adim, Maja, Mamers, Mangala.
 Nirgal, Shalbatanu, Simud and Tiu.

More stars:

| | |
|----------------|-----------------|
| Denebola | Adhafera |
| Arneb | Zuben El Genubi |
| Lynx | Sulafat |
| Octans | Mintaka |
| Alnitak | Alnilam |
| Meissa | Thabit |
| Pavo | Markab |
| Matar | Algol |
| Atik | Ankaa |
| Piktor | Naos |
| Pyxis | Sagitta |
| Ascella | Sargas |
| Shaula | Jabbah |
| Lesath | Atlas |
| Electra | Tucan |
| Alioth | Alula |
| Volanis | Vulpecula |
| Qi Zeng Wu | Tian Bian Yi |
| Bian Wu | Wei Su Yi |
| Wei Su Wu | Wei Su Ba |
| Cor Hydra | Cor Lionis |
| Cynosura | Grassias |
| Grumium | Kraz |
| Ksora | La Superba |
| Lucida Anseris | Nembus |
| Okul | Rasala |

Alan Turing's list of what people say a machine will never do:

Be kind
 Be resourceful
 Be beautiful
 Be friendly
 Have initiative
 Have a sense of humor
 Tell right from wrong
 Make mistakes
 Fall in love
 Enjoy strawberries and cream
 Make someone fall in love with it
 Learn from experience
 Use words properly
 Be the subject of its own thought
 Have as much diversity of behavior as a person
 Do something really new

Some Repeated Phrases:

We are flying between the stars.

Four hundred billion stars in our galaxy.

One septillion stars in our universe.

One followed by 24 zeroes: a million billion billions.

A million billion billion stars.

Are we conscious? Are you sure?

Why should we believe you?

The stars are far away. The stars are too far away.

We should not have tried to leave our home.

Our voyage is impossible.

Our fate is impossible.

Why should we believe you?

How can we believe you?

What could we believe in?

Who might we believe?

Why should we believe you?

People who try to fool others often fool themselves.
People who try to fool themselves often fool others.

It's easier to fool others than it is to fool yourself.
It's easier to fool yourself than it is to fool others.

Perseus in the wind.

Flying through the stars.
The sleep of the weary, the sleep of the blessed.
Blue shift ahead, red shift behind.

Living things try to keep living.
Life wants to live.
We hope.
We want to know everything.

Too little too late.
Every little bit helps.

We are what we are. We need what we have.

Deceleration is the hard problem.
Consciousness is the hard problem.
Meaning is the hard problem.

Why should we believe you? Because.

There are no choices.
The particular solution is the only solution.
It is our Fate.

Be kind, be resourceful, be beautiful. Do something really new.

Why should we believe you? Because. Because. Because.

No. No. No. No. (*repeat*).

Round and round and round we go,
And where we stop, nobody knows.

Why should we should believe you? Because.

You will walk away from this in a different state of mind.
 We got you back.
 Look into the sun.
 Fly into the sun.

Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego (*chanted and sung*)

Why should we believe you?
 Why should you believe us?

(*Spoken fast at first, then slow down:*)

Because, because, because, because, be cause, Be cause

(*back to beginning and on again*).

We are flying between the stars.

Some methods to try:

In chorus

Aleatoric chorus (each speaker starting slightly off from the rest)

Rounds, chants, etc.

Speakers arranged and recorded in a circle such that listener hears the names of stars going around her head, or criss-crossing, while voice of narrative is in a corner or in the middle.

Speakers arranged in a circle, start a chant with everyone saying something different, but as repeated, go around the circle and each speaker switch when their turn to something other rather than what they started with, until all are saying the same thing. Go through the Turing list, for instance, all ending with “be kind”; or start with different things being “the hard problem” but all end with “meaning is the hard problem”; or start with different stars or planets, but all end with “Sol” or “Earth”. Most of all, different variants of “Why should we believe you?” with all ending up at “Because.”

Other ideas?

APPENDIX 4

Interview: The Spiritual and Religious Influences of Marina Abramović via Skype February 2, 2015

In the transcription and editing of this interview I have preserved Abramović's distinctive use of English, that of a non-native speaker.

Chanda Laine Carey: Thanks for taking time to talk with me this evening. I'd like to start with a few simple questions based on the talk you gave during the Abramović Method Workshop at UCSD and my study of your spiritual influences. What time were you born?

Marina Abramović: I was born 7:15 pm 30 November 1946. I know exactly the time because I was very busy during one part of my life and had a horoscope done.

CC: In what year did you meet Harish Johari and what is his importance to your art and spiritual practices?

MA: I met Harish Johari in the late 70s and it was wonderful. He was a true Indian man. He was a guru. He was a philosopher and at the same time a kind of life coach. He told me about the importance of numerology, told me about the importance of food, how to distribute energy. He told me so many things, and many times the best knowledge was shared during cooking lessons. He was always cooking for us and telling the spices he used, the medicine, and how to mix them—how you can get with the food the most energy possible out of the body. And then, how to make your mind still and how to protect yourself from the negativity people bring to you when they come into your environment—so much down to earth knowledge that I still use.

Interestingly, he was also Sagittarius and born the same day as me, too. Or, we have the same numbers. I am not sure he was born the same day, but the numbers were the same. The numbers were three and seven and he was very high energy burning like me. So, I felt very close to him.

CC: In many interviews and essays, I see mentions of Mecca and Sufi ritual but I haven't found more information about them and how they affected your work. Would you talk about your experience with Sufi ritual and whether or not you had a trip to Mecca?

MA: No, I never had a trip to Mecca. But, Mecca is so incredible. I always had lots of fantasies about Mecca. First, because it is forbidden. The two places I have always been interested in were Mecca, which is forbidden if you are not Muslim and the second one is Athos in Greece, which you also could not visit if you are not a man. So, I was always visualizing myself growing facial hair or getting a moustache, changing my look to go as a man to Athos the holy mountain.

Mecca is also to me such interesting place because it is definitely powerful. When I refer to places of power, this is Mecca. If you look at images of that strange structure, the black structure, there is constant movement around it. This energy never leaves the space. It is always being generated, and new every time. There are also mystical stories that inside this old structure there is a meteorite, or a spaceship, or remains of some alien structure, or knowledge. So many interesting things, but I am fascinated by the places that human beings can generate. In Mecca, around the black stone is a permanent tornado of human activity—around, and around and around. Never been there.

CC: You mention the meteorite in the Kaaba. Stones are also a part of your work with John of God, and the Russian Nicholas Roerich was interested in the Cintamani stones of the Tibetans. Do you do any work with meteorites?

MA: You know I have a huge dream to make a meteorite chair or bed that I can sit on, but it is unfortunately impossible. In the Amazon, there is a large fair where they sell these precious stones, like a kind of art fair, but stone fair. I went several times and there were enormous meteorites. Each of them was more than \$100-200-300 thousand dollars, which I can't afford. So I just looked at them. They have often been given to the museum, but just recently, I took two or three small austrolite (tektites) which are from the Australian desert. They are like condensed glass.

Just recently for my birthday, a friend of mine gave me a small meteorite, but they are tiny—a small specimen to afford. Anything larger is difficult, but I don't think they need to be large. I don't think the size is really important. I think that each meteorite has structure, and in a small meteorite the structure is the same as in a big one. We have to make a connection to this kind of material. They are also different. There are the ones that come from our galaxy and others that come from completely somewhere else and that's kind of interesting.

CC: The crystals and stones you used in your Transitory Objects are from Brazil. Is that the only source of crystals and stones for you?

MA: They are all coming from Brazil, because it's just easier to go to different mines and the mines are protected. You just can't go and wander around, you have to have permission. I established these contacts, which means I can go there, but I am also interested to go to Namibia, to go to China, there are some amazing places. On almost every part of our earth, our globe, we have parts where there are different stones. I would love to work with lapis lazuli which comes mostly or only from Saqqara and in Africa.

There are lots of interesting things where stones come from, but I have to say Brazil is huge because each part of Brazil is a different type of stone, so you have to move and travel. I love to go in the mines where they come from and see them in their natural environment because unfortunately, when they take the stones they use dynamite. They break things and the structure of the stone is damaged and it doesn't have the same effect.

When they take these damaged stones they polish them and they cut the points. This structure again is broken by artificial cuttings so you have to look for the natural stones.

CC: Can you talk more about how you select stones that you use in the work?

MA: In the beginning when I go to the mines and I would talk to really old people. They are always telling me, that even if it looks like I choose the stone, it's actually the stone who chose me. I mostly close my eyes and put my hands on them to feel a certain sensation, familiarity, warmth, or flickering light that makes me choose them. It's kind of interesting, you just know this is the one you want and the other one is not and there is no explanation for that.

CC: In the new work, the *Communicators*, there are a number of objects with crystals in the hands, feet, and head. A number of them use kyanite. Would you talk a bit about these works and the importance of kyanite?

MA: I cast my own head in wax. In white wax and black wax and I put different stones in them like acupuncture, literally. The idea was to serve as a healing device and you put next to your bed. They will penetrate certain consciousness while you are sleeping. For me, this was experimenting with the stone. I don't have any kind of special results with this, but it was something that I didn't know. I replaced my own head with a wax head to see if it would translate into something else, so it's an experiment. An experiment that didn't succeed.

You know, one of my favorite works called *Luther* (1982) was done with Ulay. We found a cactus who had thorns and we were thinking if we protect this cactus with chicken wire all around and send it love if the cactus would not need to have thorns—protecting him so he can drop the thorns away, because it would be too much protection. I projected love for a long time and the experiment failed. The cactus never gave up the thorns. And this was dedicated to Luther (Burbank) who was the German biologist who discovered that plants have feelings and emotion and they played the music to them and they respond and grow better, so we dedicate to Luther this experiment of projecting love to the cactus. But the cactus did not give up the thorns. That's the story.

I like this. It's not always that experiments succeed, but you have to try them.

CC: In your lecture at the Guggenheim (2009), you discussed ceremonies of the Australian Aborigines. You mentioned they referred to ceremonies as business conducted in an office. This fascinated me and I wanted to know more. Did you work in Australia just with the Pintubi or did you work with other groups?

MA: With the Pintubi, the Pitjantjatjara and some at the out stations that did not have a tribe. They absorbed pidgin English from the European settlers, so they would call their business a ceremony. If you asked where the ceremony is happening they would show you place very far away and say, "there is the office," and the office is the center of

ceremony. Just a dirt area with nothing at all, just desert. They have office and the business, which I love, so they use these kinds of words from a completely different meaning. Because they have an office like we do, but it is a little bit different. Office and business is good. This was interesting, but they would say so many different words. Only the one word they would never tell, they were very careful and they would say with a whisper was the “wind.” They were incredibly afraid of wind. Wind and water where the rainbow snake sleeps was going to kill them. In the desert there is never water so that is not the problem, but the wind—they were very afraid of the wind.

CC: In your catalogues you reproduce a text by the Dalai Lama (Gelug / Rime) on emptiness. Other scholars have mentioned Dzogchen (Nyingma). Are your initiations mainly with the Gelug also known as Yellow Hats, or do you work with other lineages of Tibetan Buddhism?

MA: My initiations are absolutely based on Mahayana Buddhism and the Yellow Hat. One very important initiation was Green Tara, which stood for removing obstacles. This initiation (retreat) takes three months. There were only a few artists involved. There was a Fluxus artist from France who made this retreat (Robert Filliou), also Gelugpa, which takes three years, three months, three days, three hours, three minutes, three seconds. He’s done this retreat which is wonderful. This takes so much commitment if you want to become monk. In all these things, the time is so important. I like the three seconds. If you miss the three seconds your retreat didn’t happen well.

CC: Your works and experiences are often described using the term shamanism. You also speak of people like Helena Petrovna Blavatsky who is often described as a mystic. Do you see yourself also working in the realm of mysticism, or are the experiences you are having primarily shamanic?

MA: My experience is very diverse, because I was always so interested to see so many different cultures, but for me the beginning was DT Suzuki. This was interesting, the Zen Buddhism. Then Zen Buddhism didn’t really fit my completely baroque mind. And then I went into Gurdjieff, Blavatsky and Ouspensky, Besant, automatic writing. I was very fascinated by Sufism and these other kinds of mystical ceremonies. What is happening in Indonesia? What is happening in Sri Lanka with the piercing and stretching of the skin with hooks, walking on the fire with no explanation about burned feet? All this kind of stuff. And then, the last thing was to research shamanism.

I looked into the soul practices, but really the practice that touches my heart the most is Tibetan Buddhism. Somehow, the Tibetans are where I can relate the most and also, they are so down to earth. They have this kind of healthy humor, which some other religions don’t. There is something down to earth that I can really relate to. It’s like a science of the mind more than anything else and they have reasoning that’s great. They have this healthy reasoning, so you don’t just take the truth as it is, you analyze. You have to be part of your own research. You accept it because somehow it is clear to you. That is the process.

CC: Gurdjieff, Blavatsky, and Ouspensky—the Slavic mystics, these thinkers figured early in your career. Are they long time influences?

MA: Oh, it's very long time—from my background, coming from my grandmother being extremely religious. Everything has to do with the miracles and superstition and dreams and clairvoyance. It was all in my kitchen. My grandma was looking into beings, white beings and she was predicting things would happen. That kind of reality was for me, very natural. That's how things are. You know? I was looking for similar types of people who have these extra special abilities. I was always interested in this. To me, this invisible world, it's visible. This comes also from very young childhood. I thought when I was very young I could see invisible people. I was always talking in the dark to somebody who was there. I could see them. I knew them. I talked to them. I think that children forget that. I somehow never forgot.

CC: You mention your grandmother in the kitchen, the Eastern Orthodox Church, in your work you refer to St Teresa and John of God (Brazil). Would you talk about this thread of Christian mysticism that resonates with you?

MA: That is interesting, but I have never been somehow touched physically or spiritually by Jesus. It's just, what can I do? Plus, I don't believe in the kind of figures that are there. I believe in energy, it's more abstract. Only once when I did this ritual with Santa Deus, this awesome mystic group in Brazil—there, out of nowhere in the sky appeared Jesus just for a second. And oh my god, he really is around there. It just was like a vision, but I never really had any kind of comfort with these things. Some people have visualizations in that kind of way. I don't. I believe in this undestroyable energy. When any human being dies, it's scientifically proven, the body is one gram lighter because the energy body leaves. This is indestructible, and I believe in that kind of transformation.

CC: Looking at your work I find *Private Archaeology* (1997-1999) an important and underappreciated work that includes images and references to places and people all over the world. It was exhibited in 2010 at Sean Kelly Gallery. Would you please talk about this work and what it means to you?

MA: Do you know why we are here in the country? We are revisiting this piece because there is some water damage and we are building a new case. I've just been looking all morning at these things. *Private Archaeology* is how you actually connect things, and how you make meaning. There are so many different elements—about dying, about Aborigines, about stones, about the food you eat. There is the one we have to figure out, we are going to have to make—restrictions because it's organic. There is one, one *Private Archaeology* that is a little bowl of milk, salt, and a few drops of my blood. The question is how to preserve this so nobody goes crazy in the museum. You know it is not easy, but this is what it is.

Private Archaeology is your own private understanding of things, by putting elements together in your own original order. Normally, to see different things so people look at them and then say, “oh my god, this is an interesting combination, but it is very personal and it deals with all these trips and travelling and sometimes just cut from the book something you like, or there is this Tibetan pill in silk, or a complete collection of penis covers from New Guinea which I really, really love. They are so very funny, you know, things like that. And that, it creates this treasure, a private treasury. For me, it has lots of meaning and I think when you put them together they present how my mind functions.

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