
ART & PERFORMANCE NOTES

Marina Abramovic
in her performance
*The House with the
Ocean View*, 2002.

Photo: Courtesy
Steven P. Harris and
Sean Kelly Gallery,
New York.



MARINA ABRAMOVIC ON THE LEDGE

Johannes Birringer

Marina Abramovic, *The House with the Ocean View*, Sean Kelly Gallery, New York, November 15–December 21, 2002; living installation: November 15–26, 2002.

For many years, Marina Abramovic has been a prominent practitioner of site-specific action and performance art, and like some of the other pioneer women in body art (Carolee Schneemann, Yoko Ono, Valie Export, Ana Mendieta, Lygia Clark), she had used her body deliberately—to expose it to certain pressures, dangers, and contingencies, or to present it, make it present, as subject and object in specific relationships to the world. During the 1970s and 1980s, when she performed together with her partner Ulay (Uwe Laysiepen), these actions were both intensely relational and durational. In *Nightsea Crossing* she sat motionless and silent for seven hours at one end of a long table, facing Ulay. In *Relation in Space*, performed at the Venice Biennale in 1976, their naked bodies crashed into each other repeatedly for one hour. The catalog described the action bluntly as a task: “In a large, empty space, repeatedly two bodies touch each other frontally at high speed.” In 1988, Abramovic parted from Ulay;

their final performance was a crossing of the Great Wall of China, starting at opposite ends and walking towards each other.

Since then Abramovic has performed alone, shifting her attention ever more relentlessly to the exploration of states of presence and consciousness, while also pursuing more explicitly her fascination with shamanic energies and spiritual practices, perhaps influenced by her visits to Tibet and Brazil and her research into minerals. The masochism of the earlier work, or her explicit confrontation of violence against bodies (as in her 1997 video/performance *Balkan Baroque* at the Venice Biennale), has shifted from the symbolic to a highly reduced, minimalist existentialism which, to some, may be infuriatingly close to an uncritical and unreflected new age spiritism. The asceticism of fasting and silence now belong to her strategies of creating works which ritualize very basic actions of everyday life like lying, sitting, standing, dreaming,

and thinking. The asceticism, as a ritualized practice of being hyper-present, separates her work from merely task-oriented actions, in the tradition of the Judson Church performers, the phenomenological interests of anthropological art, or the neo-concretist focus, in Lygia Clark's actions, on the manipulation of objects (through the body). This Zen-influenced practice also stands at the opposite end of the highly theatricalized actionism of the Viennese Orgien-Mysterien-Theater (Herrmann Nitsch, Otto Muehl, Günter Brus), or the violent action-paintings of the Japanese Gutai group.¹

In *The House with the Ocean View*, performed at Sean Kelly Gallery as a continuous, 12-day "living installation" of such a form of pure presence, Abramovic gives a new and unexpected twist to the art world's current oversaturation with cacophonous multimedia environments and conceptual installations. The gallery becomes her "house," a sanctuary for a limited period of time in a city smitten with paranoia and fear of terror. We attend her imaginary ocean front, watch her in silence as she watches us. We become the ocean, so to speak, and Abramovic needs us in order to concentrate her energies. The visit to the "house," three specially constructed living units—bedroom, sitting room, bathroom—halfway up the wall at one end of the open white space, is subject to a strict agreement that we enter when coming inside. As she subjects herself to fasting and silent meditation, interrupted only by banal actions of showering, peeing, and drinking water, she expects us to respect the discipline and the restrictions of such an ordeal and observe her

in equal silence. In a wall text, we read the conditions she has set for herself during the fast, and the conditions for the public: (1) remain silent, (2) establish energy dialogue with the artist, (3) use telescope.

In an adjacent room, she also offers a contractual participatory piece, *Dream Bed*, a coffin-like wooden box in which a visitor can lie down and sleep/dream for one hour. In *Dream Bed*, the visitor may wear the same cotton shirt and pants, dyed in different colors, which she has constructed for each day of the week during her fast. The tone for this exploration of waking and dreaming states is set by the video piece we see when entering the front of the gallery; *Stromboli* is a single channel video with basically one long frame which shows the artist lying at the edge of the ocean, her face touching the waves as the sea meets the land.

How does the interrelational space of the gallery for *Ocean View* choreograph our meeting with the artist? Abramovic lives in one end of the space, in her elevated rooms, which she is unable to leave. Three ladders lead up to the rooms, but the rungs are made of large butcher knives, their blades turned upward. There are gaps between the elevated rooms, so when she climbs from the center to the side, she has to watch her step. The furniture in the rooms is beautiful, refined, and sculptural; her elegant elongated pine-wood chair and bed have a crystal pillow and headrest, respectively. The wooden fixtures in the bathroom are complemented by a copper bucket. A metronome sits on her table in the living room and ticks out the seconds. When I entered the space,

she was standing motionless on the edge of the middle room, looking out at us. Then I noticed the small platform at the entrance, exactly opposite her. Ascending the steps, one can peek through a high-powered telescope and train it on her, scrutinize her nose or eyes, see every pore of her skin close-up. Perhaps even more disturbingly, three digital video cameras hang high on the back wall focused at the three rooms. I did not read about this piece being Webcast, so 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 and direct action. After all, *Ocean View* is clearly structured to be interrelational, intersubjective—the artist’s presence and her intense overview invites the audience to return her gaze, but this return is magnified by the function of the telescope and the implicit (and equally silent) operations of the surveillance cameras.

Abramovic’s action thus raises numerous vexing questions. Her invitation to us suggests that the work cannot exist or be complete without the presence of the audience and the desired transfers of energy. Her performance, in this sense, is interactive, and our actions or presences may affect her continuing ability to focus and maintain the willpower to go through the exhausting ritual fast. 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. Several days into the fast, one noticed that Abramovic began to look thinner and more vulnerable; her movements looked heavier, and when there were only few

people present, she appeared to fade off into some kind of reverie. On the first day, when the gallery was packed, she seemed more energized and exploratory. Several times she would engage specific visitors who had stepped closer to the knife ladders in long exchanges of staring, as if to establish an intimate connection—something that everyone else in the room could feel and become aware of.

There were different energies circulating in the room, and I became personally quite interested in the telescope users. *Ocean View* thus also stages or creates a social scenario: the observers become self-conscious of their public act of scrutinizing this woman who takes her shower and pees in full view of an anonymous crowd. Although none of Abramovic’s performances have dealt explicitly with gender or sexuality, it has been noted by feminist theorists that her body art provokes questions about power and sexual difference, especially in relation to the issue of who controls the effects of energy transference or the terms of the seduction. It is clear, after all, that such a “purifying ritual” cannot stand outside of 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 Abramovic 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.

In Body and the East: From the 1960s to the Present, an exhibition of body art

created by Zdenka Badovinac at Moderna galerija in Ljubljana (1998), the outlook on body art as a transgressive and self-endangering practice under politically repressive regimes had a decidedly darker and more painfully existential quality. Much of the work that was shown (including *Rhythm 5*, a 1974 action done by the Yugoslav-born Abramovic at the Student Center in Belgrade) also revealed how the self-torturing and heroically individualized enactments of body art, particularly under the political conditions in the East which sometimes forced the artists to perform in privacy or within a closed circle of friends, changed in the 1980s, turning towards irony and self-parody, and how subsequent political upheavals during the 1990s (the dissolution of communism, the Balkan war, globalization, and the creation of a new Europe which also fostered new nationalisms) precipitated new approaches to the performance of self, the formation of identity, and the experience of real bodies in the social realm of the hypermediated twenty-first century.²

Abramovic's *The House with the Ocean View* is an interactive performance without the use of any computer-assisted technologies; unlike earlier endurance work that was often relational to the exclusion of the audience, *Ocean View* declares itself non-narcissistic and dependent on the interpersonal relations with the audience as 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. But this communal aspect is under-

mined, perhaps, by the mystic dimension that Abramovic strives at, even if it is not acknowledged. Her self-purification, just as in the meditative self-absorption of *Nightsea Crossing*, is enacted as a stripping away; it is self-involved yet interdependent on our contractual approval, while appearing like a Buddhist journey of the spirit, offered to us, the absorbedly disarmed observers, with the highest degree of sincerity and presumption. We are not to doubt the sincerity, there is not the slightest room for irony, nor an allowance of the paradox of the telescope as an intrusive instrument of the panopticon prison.

Abramovic walks a thin line, standing there, for hours, on the edge of her rooms without walls. An act of faith and perseverance? She does create a space in which this experience, whatever it means to us, becomes possible. I would call it the creation of a certain buoyancy, a lightness in the head caused by fasting but also by the slowing down of time which we barely notice, initially, until it takes us by complete surprise. In spite of the uneasiness I feel, being drawn into the ritual without undergoing the stringent conditions for making deeper contact with my mental or physical self (thus remaining a voyeur on the surface), I grant Abramovic a provocative edge that distinguishes the work from much of the trivia we see all around us in popular and artistic cultures. Her journey may be futile unless we refuse to ignore that the underlying principle—reducing physical choices and emptying the self out—has larger cultural ramifications in today's paranoid world than we may care to accept.

NOTES

1. For a comprehensive critical study, with a very valuable international perspective on the connections between different performance and body art movements, see *Out of Actions: Between Performance and the Object, 1949–1979*, Thames and Hudson, 1998. For discussions of this book and exhibition, see PAJ 61.

2. A unique document, the catalogue, with introductory essays by Badovinac and Kristine Stiles, features performance artists from eastern European countries. First published by the Moderna galerija Ljubljana in 1998, it is available in a bilingual edition (Slovene/English) published by MIT Press, 1999.

JOHANNES BIRRINGER is a contributing editor of this journal.