



Photo: Abigail Levine

## **Marina Abramović's Time: *The Artist is Present* at the Museum of Modern Art**

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*Marina Abramović: The Artist is Present*. Museum of Modern Art. New York City, NY, United States. March 14-May 31, 2010.



Marina Abramović: The Artist Is Present (2010)

Video Still: *Freeing the Memory*, 1976.

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Her gaze fixed, Marina recites, “vaporetto, value, bishop, humidity, Anastasia, euthanasia...” (Abramovi? 1976). On the corner of a gallery wall, under the persistent cries of “The Artist Must Be Beautiful” and sandwiched between the remains of the iconic “Rhythm 0” (72 objects for an audience to use to act on Abramovi?’s body) and the two naked bodies of the reperformance of “Imponderabilia,” is the video documentation of “Freeing the Memory.” Abramovi?’s face fills the video. She is almost completely still (a humorous challenge to video, which she often employs). Over the course of eight hours, she speaks every word she can think of, ostensibly until she has no more left in her mind. It is a simple yet mystical proposition—to empty the mind of words. Her mouth forms each word roundly, slowly. Her eyelids flicker up and down in pauses for thought. The subtitles snap into place on their own rhythm: “embroidery, hem, Blessing, Brenda Lee, bukalo, wasteland, thug, plagiarism...” The piece works on you, its various time signatures and plays with meaning evoking a disorientingly flexible experience of time. In many of her works, through the use of durational performance, practiced concentration, and simple, direct contact with her audience, Abramovi? is able to facilitate an experience of time that is like few we have in contemporary life. For brief moments, time seems malleable, moving with no clear speed or direction. Her new work for the New York Museum of Modern Art retrospective of her career, titled like the exhibition, *The Artist is Present*, is largely about experience in time. Abramovi?’s goal was, essentially, to remain present, to remain “in the present” for the approximately 731 hours and 30 minutes that the performance lasted. The work invited audience members to both witness and join in this present. A teenage visitor to the show was reported as observing of those who sat with Abramovi? in the work, “I think they lose all perception of time when they get up there” (Dwyer 2010).

More than 750,000 viewers visited the exhibition and many more followed Abramovi?’s performance via a real-time webfeed. The show garnered a storm of critical and popular media coverage, including process pieces about inappropriate touching of the human art, and the *New York Post*’s coyly titled “Squeezy Does It.” This show played on a huge scale, and its organizers were obviously invested in “telling the story” of Abramovi?’s career clearly and dramatically. This required a simple narrative of her career that, in some ways, undermined the radical experience of Abramovi?’s performed time. Abramovi? did not disavow the presentation of her work in this past-present-future organization. How her legacy will be established and preserved is, also, of considerable concern to her. She has set forward “reperformance” as a model for preserving her work, one which she extends problematically to the entire field of performance art. As one of the 39 reperformers who took part in the exhibition, I confronted the issues brought up by the retrospective and reperformance from a perspective deeply embedded in the experience of Abramovi?’s performance works. I spent more than 120 hours in near stillness in the galleries, as others made their way through the experience of the show.<sup>1</sup> As Marina reminded us in an email after the first month of the show, the only way to make it through our task was day by day, to remain (in the) present.

## Atrium



Marina Abramović: The Artist Is Present (2010)

Photo: Abigail Levine

The architecture of the recently redesigned MoMA shepherds entering visitors towards the museum's sculpture garden and up a slate staircase into a six-story atrium. At the center of this space, from March 14 to May 31, one encountered the deceptively simple vision of Marina Abramović sitting quietly. As most of her works, the setup of Abramović's new work for the exhibition, "The Artist is Present," contains few elements. The artist sits facing an empty chair (for two months of the show there was a table between the two seats). Everyone else in the museum (except the numerous security guards scattered through the space) is "encouraged to sit across from her for a duration of their choosing" ("The Artist is Present" 2010). Surrounding this ordinary intimacy is an expanse of (initially) empty space, cordoned off by a white tape on the floor and a Hollywood flood of lights from four stands at the corners of the box.

The spatial design of the piece reflected one of the ongoing debates about the work. Was it a work of humble generosity and sacrifice that opened a space for unique experience for an audience, or was it a literalization of a recent art world tendency to put star power center stage? Writing in *Artforum*, Carrie Lambert-Beatty notes this double reading: "I imagine from the inside, there's only a sincere interest in sharing the special mental and physical states made possible by intense concentration. But I know from out here, it looks like performance art is entering the Museum of Modern Art in the form of unabashed celebrity worship" (Lambert-Beatty 2010). These competing spheres of the art experience and the art world and the contradictions they create produced tensions throughout the exhibition and throughout Abramović's career, especially visible in the period since her separation from Frank Uwe Laysiepen (Ulay). The briefest ruffle through *The New York Times* coverage of the exhibit and its run-up confirm this: articles debate the merits of Abramović's vision of the future of performance art just before listing the top celebrities who have come to sit opposite her; in another, the history of Yugoslav communism is invoked in a

spread about Abramović's SoHo loft and country home (Louie 2010).

Abramović approaches these contradictions as if they were complementary colors in a single palette. She does not see a call for a rigorous, often ascetic art practice—one that draws from spiritual and religious traditions—as incompatible with a successful (increasingly lucrative) career and the lifestyle it brings with it. This dichotomy of art and career practice can be understood as a substantial departure from her and Ulay's "Art Vital" declarations and lifestyle or, simply, as a humorous recontextualization of them.<sup>2</sup> Or, perhaps, Art Vital, like her more recent statements on reperformance ("Reperformance is the new concept, the new idea! Otherwise it will be dead as an art form") stand as usefully rigid markers to bounce life and art practices against (Kino 2010). As her biographer James Westcott makes evident, Abramović has never completely adhered to her proclamations, prioritizing, instead, the efficacy of her stories and performances.

My experiences of "The Artist is Present" were more quotidian. I, and many of the performers, "visited" Marina regularly, in part as a way to be reminded of the calm and singularity of focus from which to approach our own performances. As the weeks passed, I found it a humorous reassurance that I would, without fail, find Marina in her place, available anytime in some way. I would greet the security guards, the documentary film crew and, increasingly, some of the "regulars," those who came daily to the museum during the run of the show. The atrium became a space of uncurated animation and community. Marina and her rotating partner would sit, unresponsive to the din, at the center. If one made the effort, it was possible to join the couple's energetic exchange at a distance and drop into their slower rhythms, as the museum and the city raced on.

## The Line



Marina Abramović: The Artist Is Present (2010)

Screenshot: Portraits on Flickr

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Unexpectedly, one of the most charmed spaces in the exhibition was the line waiting to sit with Abramovi?. Writer and dramaturge Alisa Solomon devoted her critique of the exhibit to the line, having, herself, waited an entire day, unsuccessfully, to sit with Abramovi?. Solomon writes of “a calm, collaborative, meditative clarity I hadn't felt in an art museum in ages” (Solomon 2010). She suggests that, in the waiting, the effects produced within Abramovi?'s work were flipped outwards onto the line—“relations among strangers were framed and magnified... Being radically present herself, the artist invited us to be present to each other.” Solomon's point was underlined on the last day of the exhibition, when it became clear that even some who had camped out all night to sit with Abramovi? were not going to get the chance. A woman set herself up on the periphery of the atrium with a sign to the effect of: “Another Artist is Present,” offering to sit and share a gaze with anyone willing. Many sat with this “other artist” throughout the day. Abramovi? managed to turn an act of waiting into a collective, creative experience. This vectoring of the experience of the piece and the multiplication of the artists present may or may not have been Abramovi?'s initial intent with the work, but it was certainly an atmosphere that she fostered in this space, and has throughout her career.

## Retrospective Galleries



Documentation of Art Must Be Beautiful, Artist Must Be Beautiful (1975).

Photo: Juri Onuki

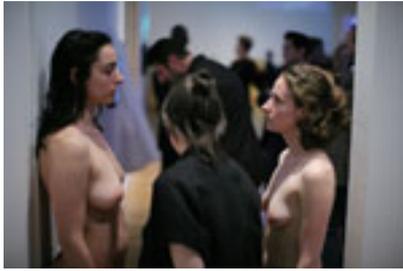
It can seem a long way up to the sixth floor galleries, which contain the retrospective elements of the exhibit. As has been catalogued by numerous press accounts, the viewer proceeds through Abramovi?'s career, divided into the surprisingly coherent periods of her work/life/philosophy: gallery one, her early solo works, which primarily challenge her own body and mind; gallery two: her twelve year-long “Art Vital” collaboration with Ulay, which tested the possibilities of one person in relation to another (specifically, a woman with a man); two more galleries cover Abramovi?'s second solo period, during which a focus on her relation with her own body is exchanged for an engagement with her audience, and durational presence is prioritized over pain as mode of transcendence. This later work speaks of struggles to accept

impermanence, to feel proximity to death with confrontation.

The documentation in the show—largely a mix of photographs, video, and digital displays that fall somewhere in between—was itself an interesting experiment in how to bring digital media closer to the effectiveness of performance art. The most successful documentation of the show seemed to stand on their own as works of art. In their revisiting, they created something new. The most effecting was a room dedicated to the twelve day-long performance *The House With the Ocean View*. In the original work, Abramović lived, fasted and shared eye and energetic contact with her audience from three cube-rooms ten feet off the ground. The presentation at the MoMA placed the empty cubes up on one wall, while a three-channel video of the entire performance played on another. Heard throughout the space was a 20-plus hour soundtrack of Abramović reading a transcript of everything she did during the twelve days: “I let my arms hang down straight by my sides. My fingers curve towards my thighs and there is a gap between them and my thumbs. I stand straight and still and remain looking at the audience. I blink. I breathe” (Abramović 2010). The incantatory pace of Abramović’s reading, the lack of synchronization between visual image and description, and the absence of a human presence in the set opened a space that invited the audience in, making it as much of an experiential work as those she had designed as participatory, such as the “Green Dragon” (a jade bench to lie on to absorb the mineral energy).

The last gallery was turned over to video of Abramović’s 2005 reperformances of seminal performance art works at the Guggenheim Museum in New York City. The Guggenheim program, entitled “Seven Easy Pieces,” embodied Abramović’s proposal for how to re-perform works of performance art.<sup>3</sup> The model proposed study of the “original” work, some reinterpretation or change of the work, display of documentation of the original work and, most importantly and controversially, securing permission from the artist or their estate to perform the work and paying for it (Abramović 2010). (In the MoMA show, Abramović referred to “Seven Easy Pieces” as reperformances. However, the original exhibition text stated that Abramović was “reenacting” the works presented in the show) (“Seven Easy Pieces” 2005). The text went on to highlight the extent to which Abramović positioned these works as an answer to inadequate documentation, as well as locating performance art within the visual arts, rather than the performing arts world. This gallery, the exit point of the show, seemed to direct viewers towards a vision for the future of performance art within the linear, archival project of the art museum.

## Reperformances



Maria S.H.M. (left) and Abigail Levine reperforming *Imponderabilia*, Marina Abramović: *The Artist Is Present* (2010)

Photo: Scott Rudd



*Imponderabilia* performed by Marina Abramović/Ulay, 1977.

In between the galleries or cut out of their spaces, were the five “reperformances” that were a part of the MoMA retrospective. These works, taken from the two later periods of Abramović’s career, produced an ongoing conversation among the performers, as well as viewers and critics. What exactly constitutes a work of performance art? Is it necessarily anchored to a particular social, historical context? In her essay “Performance Remain”, Rebecca Schneider argues that “[i]n performance as memory, the pristine sameness of the ‘original’... is rendered impossible—or, if you will, mythic” (Schneider 106). How would these reperformances stand next to the mythology of Marina and Ulay’s performances, as well as the material-documentary remains of the works? We struggled with these issues for their theoretical and historical interest, but more immediately in our commitment to create affecting experiences for our audience within the structures we were given. In the day-to-day work at the MoMA, the central question for the reperformances was: Do these performances, regardless of their historical referents, achieve relevance within their current context? Or, put another way, do these reinterpretations work?

Reperformance must, essentially, become performance, an exchange in the present. If the

reperformances become effective only in relation to the “original” performance of the work, then they become a fragmentary form, another document. The curation of the MoMA show moved the reperformances, to an extent, towards reception as documentation. Of course, the very nature of a retrospective, a look back at an artist’s career, points to this historical, at times didactic, focus. Additionally, each performance was placed next to video documentation of Abramović performing the work, as well as explanations of the original context and, at times, the changes made to the work.<sup>4</sup> This juxtaposition was often a disempowering one for the performers and, I would suggest, for the audience as well. How much more difficult to bring an audience member into an experience in the present when it is preceded and followed with the definitive example, already in the past, of what that experience should look like and mean. The most striking curatorial pull towards reperformance as document was the lack of space for audience to sit and observe the performances. Considering the emphasis on duration in Abramović’s work and recognizing the importance of a community of observers to the success of the work *The Artist is Present*, it seemed a remarkable hamstringing of the works to rob them of the ability to effectively perform time in Abramović’s model. Finally, the museum’s management of risk in the performances, while unavoidable in such a setting, suggested that the uninterrupted image of the performers was paramount.

Abramović’s selection and training of performers, however, pointed the works much more in the direction of reinterpretation, of creating performances, than faithful display. Many of the reperformers are practicing artists, more involved in creating their own work than performing in the work of other artists. Marina’s instructions were minimal, leaving much more room for us to make choices and formulate our own understanding of the works than is characteristic of most directors. *Imponderabilia*, for instance, was explained in the following manner: “You stand in the doorway, looking at the eyes of your partner. When someone passes through the door, you may look at them.”<sup>5</sup> Our four-day training by Abramović, detailed by Judith Thurman in *The New Yorker*, focused not on imparting the details of her works, but on exercises that gave us the opportunity to find our interest and strength in durational activities, meditations, and pared-down existence. In an email to the reperformers (that also serves to illustrate her flair for the dramatic in the same breath as she distances her work from theatre), Marina wrote, “My position about rehearsal is the following: Rehearsal is the enemy of performance art. In my entire life, I never rehearsed any performance I made. The preparation will be more focused on your state of mind than on your physical body. Long durational work is the most demanding type of performance, but it’s also the most transforming.”<sup>17</sup> And, then, we were left to do our work. Although there were many “official eyes” on the reperformance, Abramović never came to the galleries to assess our work.

## Three Months

In performance art, discovering what is being done and why it is happening has, logically,

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always been an important part of the audience's experience: What is Vito Acconci doing under that ramp? Why is Carolee Schneemann pulling that scroll out of her vagina? What will happen to Marina in that flaming star? In reperformance, because the work has already been performed, the question of what will happen has largely been answered. It may be additionally foreclosed by a presenting institution's need for things to go as planned. The “why” gets fractured when the performance is divorced from the artist's initial impulse and context and, additionally, when the creating artist and performer were once, but are no longer, the same person.

What remains is the *how* of the work, the experiencing of the way the work is unfolding in time, the way the structure of the work is in dialogue with its context and the way it is being performed. Duration makes the *how*, the moment-to-moment experience of the work, as potent as the *why* or *what*. Duration was an issue often raised in regard to *The Artist is Present*, but never in relation to the reperformances. This, however, was arguably the greatest transformation of the works from their originals and, certainly, where the presence of risk, singularity, and transformation reemerges. It was also over time that the *what* and *why* of the performance were re-opened as questions. As the performers became attuned to the subtleties of crossings through the *Imponderabilia* doorway, contact with each passerby became a singular event, each with its own reasons and consequences. It was in the weeks of proximity and exchange that the security staff became active collaborators in the fulfillment of the works.<sup>6</sup> It was over the course of the exhibit that these reperformances became works in their own right, for those performing and for many who viewed them.

In *The Body as Archive*, André Lepecki opens up another way to consider reperformance. Writing on recent reenactments of twentieth century dance works, he conceives “the dancer’s body as an endlessly creative, transformational archive” (Lepecki 2010, 46). This notion offers an understanding of Abramovic's interest in reperformance that is consistent with her teaching work with younger artists, and casts the MoMA show as a success in a manner not considered by most critics. From this perspective, reperformance becomes less about enlivening the image of the original work and more about continuing to activate and develop its meanings in and through artists’ bodies. Marina’s body is the ultimate archive of her performances; through our work at the MoMA, there are now forty additional bodies that carry and create from a particular understanding of her performance works and principles.

The future of performance art remains, happily, an open question. Reperformance may or may not become a definitive model in the future of performance art. However, it is clear that the 731 hours of these (re)performances—the practiced and concentrated energy of 39 performing artists in combination with Abramovic’s own formidable performance—had a literally exciting effect on the expansive space of the museum and those who worked in and visited it. No matter the ability of new media to keep works effectively animated, this exhibit was a strong case for keeping conversations about these works, about the art form, and about the issues they raise active between bodies.

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**Abigail Levine** is a dance and performance artist from New York. She has performed most recently with Marina Abramović at the New York MoMA, with Carolee Schneemann, and with Cuban choreographer Marianela Boán. Her own performance works bring together the rigors and resources of dance's bodily specificity with performance art's experiments with time and human action. They have been shown in the US, Cuba, Venezuela, Mexico, Brazil and Taiwan. Abigail lived in Havana, Cuba from 2001-2004. She is completing a Masters at NYU in Dance and Performance Studies.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> I performed each of the five works, although I spent most of my time in *Imponderabilia* (two naked performers in a doorway with space for audience to pass through) and *Luminosity* (a woman, by self-definition, nude and perched on a bicycle seat above the heads of the public), more than 50 hours occupying each piece during the ten weeks of the exhibition.

<sup>2</sup> “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, no repetition.” From her [bio](#) in Media Kunst Netz.

<sup>3</sup> It is important here to note that this discussion is limited to performance art works that were not envisioned as structures to be repeated. There is also a tradition of works within the discipline of performance art that are open to repeat performance, many of them taking the form of “instruction pieces,” works that the creating artist may never have intended to perform.

<sup>4</sup> A particularly baffling sign just before the entrance to *Imponderabilia* read: “the doorway has been widened due to museum regulations.” Daily, there were questions to the guards and to the silent performers as to what regulation governed such a situation. I know there were many negotiations that went into the allowing of nude performers in the exhibit, but none of us could figure how the wider doorway figured into the compromise.

<sup>5</sup> This raises the issue of whether we were figuring them out to make the performance work or to make it what Marina would want. In an article in *New York Magazine*, Deborah Wing-Sproul suggests that it was the latter that drove her performances. While the originals were evoked often in conversation, my experience was that it was only one of many reference points in making performance choices.

<sup>6</sup> It is, perhaps, the subject of another piece, but I think every discussion of this exhibit must acknowledge the remarkable role that the MoMA security staff played in its realization. From a starting place of seeming insurmountable incongruity of our “jobs” to the development of a creative and practical collaboration, this piece of the performance experience was one of the most unexpected and transformative. Marina set an important tone for these relationships. She was the only artist in memory who has met with the entire MoMA security staff to discuss the meaning of her work and their role in it. As oppressive a notion as security has become in our

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societies and daily life, this performance period drew out the expressions of security tied more to mutually responsibility and care.

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