Marina Abramović: Between Life and Death

SUE SCOTT

In November of 2002 I participated in House with Ocean View (opposite) by Marina Abramović at Sean Kelly Gallery in New York City. In the performance Abramović lived in the gallery for twelve days in a structure consisting of three open white boxes suspended at one end. Each minimal cube functioned like rooms in a house—bathroom, living room, and bedroom connected by an open space of about eighteen inches so the artist could walk between them. Descending from each space were ladders with butcher knives instead of rungs. This was not just to evoke a visceral response from the audience; Abramović wanted an image about one’s ability to control the body through spiritual transformation. She had in mind a Brazilian shaman she knew of who could walk on the blades when in an altered, meditative state. As she wrote in her outline for the project: “This performance comes from my desire to see if it is possible to use simply daily discipline, rules and restrictions to purify myself. Can I change my energy field? Can this energy field change the energy of the audience and the space?”

The rules for Abramović’s confinement were relatively straightforward. She fasted during the twelve days, drinking only mineral water. Sleep was restricted to seven hours a day and she could not talk, write, or read, though she could sing if she wanted. Bodily functions—defecation, urination—were done in full view of the gallery audience; she could shower three times a day. Her costume of loose pants and buttoned shirt, in colors of yellow, orange, blue, black, white, or purple that she changed daily, was inspired by Alexander Rodchenko.

As with most of her performances, Abramović had expectations of the public. She asked them to remain silent, to establish an “energy dialogue” with her, and to use the high-powered telescope in the gallery for close observation of her activities. In an ancillary performance in an adjacent room, volunteers had been recruited to spend one hour inside a rectangular box, wearing a cloth jumpsuit with magnets on the feet and hands. As she has often done with performances involving the audience, Abramović requested that her volunteers sign a contract agreeing to the relatively undemanding terms of the event: show up at a predetermined time, spend one hour in the box, and write about the experiences in a dream book.

The day I was to participate was extremely hectic and I barely made it to the gallery on time. It was only the second or third day of the performance. I glanced into the gallery where she was preparing to shower and was immediately captivated. She was nude, facing the audience, still as a statue. Abramović held her hand under the shower head and the water splashed down on her hand. She held the pose for
several minutes. I thought not about a woman showering in a New York City art gallery, but of a Renaissance painting, a single figure standing in mid-gesture. I put on a loose purple jumpsuit and got into the box—an oblong shape resembling a casket. I lay there for a moment, thinking more about the demands of my day than about the performance; time slowed down as I could hear some moving and murmurings from the other room; I was awakened when it was time to do the next step, write the journal entry.

“Nobody’s life is changed by somebody else’s experiences.” Abramović had said, “I want more from the public. I want them to be involved and go through changes as I do. It’s very difficult and it’s a pioneering job because for so long there have been set rules: the artist performs, the public observes. They are not used to the new role I am giving them.” It is now generally agreed that House with Ocean View was the most significant performance to have taken place in New York since Joseph Beuys’s I Like America and America Likes Me at Rene Block’s gallery in May 1974. In 2003 Abramović was given a Bessie Award, honoring New York dance and performance, for the piece.

This transformative experience of performance art on body, mind, and soul has been at the heart of Abramović’s work since the early 1970s. Calling herself “the grandmother of performance art,” she alone of the pioneers—among them Chris Burden, Vito Acconci, and Dennis Oppenheim—continues to execute dangerous, painful, and psychologically challenging works. Her influence is far-reaching not only because of these performances but because she teaches at academies and universities around the world, demanding that her students go through rituals called “cleaning the house,” often involving silence and fasting not only as a purification, but as a way to learn to control the body. As she sees it, these extremes are at the heart of the performance, “that energy on the other side of the pain that transforms the way you see. Pain is the obstacle. It’s the door each of us goes through one way or another. And you can grow from this.”

Abramović learned that process trumps the tangible at an early age. When she was barely a teenager she wanted to paint her dreams using only green and blue. Her father arranged for lessons from a local artist, who arrived at her small studio, put an irregular strip of canvas on the floor, covered it with glue; sand; red, yellow, and black pigments; then poured gasoline on it and lit a match. As the canvas exploded, the artist observed, “this is sunset” and left. Abramović nevertheless placed the work on the wall like a proper picture and left with her family for vacation. By the time she returned, the picture had disintegrated into dust. “Later on I understood why it was so important, because to me the process has always been more important than the result, the performance more important than the object.”

By the time she was sixteen Abramović was painting her dreams in blue and green, an activity that evolved into painting truck accidents, then sky paintings that tracked the dissolution of clouds. She saw in the transient process of skywriting a
metaphor for drawing and went to the military requesting fifteen planes to help
make her drawings. Her father, a general in the army, was called to bring her home.
Abramović then became interested in sound, and wanted to recreate the sound of a
bridge collapsing. She recorded the sounds from a building demolition and installed
it on the bridge where it played every three minutes. This experience altered her
perception of her art, which she came to realize could never return to a two-dimen-
sional format and would always focus on the body.

Clearly, Abramović’s rebellion was apparent from an early age with her
worldview formed by an extreme and restrictive upbringing. Born in Belgrade,
Yugoslavia, in 1946, she came of age in the Tito era. Both her parents were partisans
in World War II. Her father, Vojo Abramović, was a war hero in the Serbian army
and her mother, Danica, a major in the army, was named director of the National
Museum of Revolution and Art in Belgrade in the mid-sixties. Her grandfather, a
patriarch in the Serbian Orthodox Church, had been murdered by the state—he was
rumored to have been poisoned by diamond dust mixed in his wine—and was later
granted sainthood and embalmed at St. Sava’s church in Belgrade. Abramović’s
father left his family in 1964, when she was eighteen, and her mother took strict con-
trl of her daughter and son, enforcing a firm ten o’clock curfew that lasted until she
finally left home at twenty-nine.

Rhythm 10.
Performance, Museo
d’Arte Contemporanea,
Villa Borghese, Rome,
1973
Abramović’s life had always been one of excessive punishment and self-abuse, as her childhood diaries attest, and in those pages are many clues as to why her art developed as it did. As a student at the Academy of Fine Art in Belgrade (1965–70), she made performances that involved cutting, whipping, and putting herself in perilous situations, all before curfew. One night her mother received a telephone call: “your daughter is hanging naked in the museum.” When Abramović came home, her mother threw a heavy crystal ashtray across the room at her, saying, “I gave you life and now I am taking it from you.” At the last minute she ducked, but it is not surprising that Abramović has more than once quoted Bruce Nauman, who said, “Art is a matter of life and death.”

Abramović’s early extreme performances were executed while she was living not only under the repressive Tito regime, but also in the abusive situation at home with her mother. For *Rhythm 10* (p. 103), a performance for the 1973 Edinburgh Festival, she used ten knives (later twenty) and two tape recorders. She laid the knives on a large sheet of paper, turned on the recorder, and reenacted a Russian game of rhythmically stabbing at the spaces between the fingers on her hand as quickly as possible. Each time she cut the flesh, she changed knives. After using all of the knives—or rhythms—Abramović replayed the tape, attempting to repeat the actions of stabbing exactly as she heard them thus, synchronizing “the mistakes of time past and time present.”
In 1974 at the Student Cultural Center in Belgrade, Abramović enacted a performance in which she not only placed herself in a life-threatening situation but the performance reached a crisis where the intervention of the audience was crucial. In Rhythm 5 (p. 104), she built a huge five-pointed communist star on the floor, covered it in gasoline, and lit a fire. As the star was burning, she ritualistically cut her hair, fingernails, and toenails and threw them into the fire. She then jumped across the fire into the center of the star and lay down. Amidst the smoke and fire, the audience could not discern she had lost consciousness due to lack of oxygen until she did not move when the fire touched her leg. A doctor finally noticed she was inert and with the help of other observers, pulled her from the flames. The performance was a turning point for the artist: “That was when I realized that the subject of my work should be the limits of the body. I would use performance to push my mental and physical limits beyond consciousness.”

Abramović further investigated the power of the audience in what is perhaps her most famous work, Rhythm O (p. 105), performed at Studio Morra, Naples, in 1974. Here she assumed a passive role. She placed seventy-two items—as varied as blue paint, perfume, a feather, chains, a gun, a bullet, a whip, needles, nails, flute, alcohol, flowers, and wire—on a table along with a sign instructing the audience to use the items any way they wanted. Initially during the six-hour performance, members of the audience were passive and calm, but they became
more aggressive as the night wore on. During the performance she was alternately caressed, written on, chained, blindfolded, had her shirt torn off, and was threatened with the gun, all the while remaining passive. This performance was not only about switching roles with the audience, it also incorporated the unpredictability of chance. At the end of the six hours, Abramović, who had been detached and unresponsive during the entire performance, once again engaged and approached the audience, which quickly dispersed once the power had shifted. Though she continues to demand participation from her audience, she never again relinquished so much control to the audience. One critic saw the piece as exploring a female tradition of submission and passivity, but for Abramović, the courage to complete the performance was more about male energy. Following the performance, there was also a certain amount of controversy about using props so blatantly, and they become the residue of the performance—with their own tie to the market.

One of her most visceral early works is *Thomas Lips* from 1975 (p. 106), performed at Krinzinger Gallery, Innsbruck. Abramović was nude, seated in the corner of a gallery, behind a small table covered by a tablecloth. She ate a kilo of honey with a silver spoon and then drank a kilo of red wine from a crystal wine glass. After breaking the wine glass, she slowly cut a five-pointed star on her abdomen with a razor, whipped herself repeatedly, and then lay down on blocks of ice with a heater suspended above. The heater caused Abramović to bleed more profusely even as the ice froze the backside of her body. The audience interceded ending the performance by dragging Abramović from the ice and wrapping her in coats. Though the period of *Thomas Lips* coincides with important developments in feminist art, the content is more informed by life under Tito’s regime and Abramović’s awareness of other performance art than by the politics of feminism. And Abramović herself does not see a connection to feminist body art. “When feminism became an issue, I was in Yugoslavia. In Yugoslavia women were pariahs, absolutely in power, in control, from the government level to any other level. When I began my career in Italy after I left Yugoslavia, there was not a single woman artist on the scene, but I had everything I ever needed. I never felt that I didn’t have things because I was a woman.”

One might, however, see feminist overtones in *Role Exchange*, also from 1975, in which Abramović traded places with a prostitute from the red-light district in Amsterdam. Each had been a “professional” for the same period of time; each performed an action in exchange for money. For a four-hour period, they acted as each other’s alter ego; the artist sat in the window of the red light district while the prostitute attended the gallery opening. They split the artist’s fee of 300 dollars. Though the exchange might raise questions of gender roles and control, for Abramović, the performance was about spectacle, power, and commerce.

Likewise in *Art Must be Beautiful, Artist Must be Beautiful* (p. 107) Abramović confounds the boundary of performance and fashion as it relates to gender. In a performance at the Charlottenburg Art Festival in Copenhagen in 1975, she
violently brushed her hair with a metal brush in her right hand and a metal comb in her left hand for an hour, repeating the words “art must be beautiful, artist must be beautiful,” until she had completely damaged her hair and wounded her face. Though at the time Abramović had no interest in fashion, the piece nevertheless speaks to the feminine desire for beauty. Abramović is not only asking if a woman needs to be beautiful to make art. She is questioning the very nature of it: does art need to be beautiful to be effective? In retrospect, this piece is prescient in terms of later cross-pollination between art and fashion. Hair has its own mythology: Mary Magdalene washed Christ’s feet with her hair in a gesture of love and servitude; cutting of hair can symbolize loss of power; in the Hassidic tradition, women shave their heads on their wedding day. In Abramović’s own *God Punishing*, 1993, she used hair from Korean virgins. In *Loving Care* (p. 107), performed in 1992 by
Janine Antoni, an artist who has been particularly influenced by Abramović, the artist dipped her hair in dye and mopped the gallery floor, an activity that references both the act of painting and domestic activity.

Abramović met Ulay (Uwe Luyseipen) in 1975 in Amsterdam, where he and other performance artists, among them Vito Acconci, had come together for the filming of a television special on performance art. There was an immediate connection between the two, beginning with their shared birth date of November 30. Within three months and after many hours of talking on the phone, Abramović left home and met Ulay in Prague, an event that had a profound effect on Abramović’s work, which evolved from aggressive assaults on the body to explorations of relationships. In many ways, it was a relief for Abramović, who felt that her work had become so masculine and intense that she was on a trajectory that could lead to her death.

The early Relation performances were concerned with the way people interact and connect in space. In *Relation in Space*, 1976, they passed each other quickly and repeatedly until the collisions became increasingly intense and painful. In
Breathing Out Breathing In, performed at the Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam, in 1978, Ulay and Abramović kneeled, facing each other, fully clothed and breathed in each other’s exhaled air. Although the action appeared loving and erotic, this “deadly kiss” was toxic as oxygen was very quickly replaced with carbon dioxide. Imponderabilia, from 1977 (p. 109), was one of the most effective performances of the Relation works because of the way it involved the public. Abramović and Ulay stood naked, facing each other, at the entrance to the Modern Art Museum in Bologna. The opening was narrow, so people entering the museum not only had to squeeze between the two artists, they had to decide which naked artist to face as they sidled by. The performance lasted ninety minutes before the police stopped it.
Ulay and Abramović performed together for more than a decade, with most of their work revolving around their connection—literally, in *Relation in Time*, 1977, for which they sat back to back tied together by their hair, without an audience, for sixteen hours. In *Light/Dark* (p. 110), performed only once, in 1977, Abramović and Ulay knelt and slapped each other in turn for twenty minutes. The ongoing series NightSea Crossing was performed at locations all around the world, including Documenta VII in Kassel, Townhall in Toronto, the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam, and the Art Gallery of New South Wales in Australia. They sat across a table from each other, with an object between them that would change with each location—one time a snake and a boomerang, another time a pair of Chinese scissors. Abramović remained silent for the duration (which could last for days), looked only at each other and abstained from food, with the intention of transcending through presence. In 1987, after twelve years together as partners and lovers, the artists realized that had come to a place that was more defined by differences than similarities, and they parted. A staged walk along the Great Wall of China symbolized the end of their love and collaboration (p. 111). They walked the entire length of the Great Wall from opposite ends, eventually meeting in the middle to say goodbye. Over a period of 90 days, each artist walked a grueling 2,000 kilometers—Ulay started in the west in the Gobi Desert and Abramović started at the eastern terminus at the Yellow Sea.

Abramović’s first solo performance after her breakup with Ulay in 1988 was inspired by her walk along the Great Wall, when she learned it had been built along the earth’s energy lines and was referred to as a dragon or snake. While researching the piece, Abramović discovered that snakes and other reptiles move along magnetic energy lines of the earth. In the first performance of *Dragon Heads*, Abramović sat in a red chair surrounded by a large circle of ice (p. 112). Five large, hungry pythons were placed on her body and allowed to follow her own energy lines. The artist remained stationary regardless of the movements of the snakes. The performance, in 1990 at the Edge Festival 90 in New Castle, Great Britain, lasted sixty minutes. Abramović performed numerous other times with the snakes, sometimes naked and sometimes wearing a conservative blue dress, stockings, and pumps. The python is not poisonous, but kills its prey by constriction. Typically, its prey are not larger than a rabbit or a chicken and although the viewer understands Abramović is probably not in danger, everyone has a natural horror of the notion of snakes crawling around one’s body. The mythology of snakes often symbolizes female power and fecundity, as well as evil.

In 1983, while at a residency in Florence, Abramović collaborated with Michael Laub in telling the story of her life in a fifteen-minute performance using one sentence for each year she had lived, a work eventually also performed at the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam. Working with Charles Atlas, she made a four-minute version of it for Spanish television and has performed it several times since, varying each performance with added “chapters” and slides, video, monologues,
singing, dancing, and interaction with the public. Abramović used objects of danger—knives and whips—as well as the more mystical minerals and crystals, which for her are about energy and light—"simplified computers of the planet." From 1989 to 1992 she visited mines in Brazil that held great caches of crystals. In places where she found extremely large ones, she would request permission to spend the night near the crystals. Numerous performances during this time period involved meditating or sleeping near crystals. In *Shoes for Departure*, 1994 (below), two large amethyst crystals were carved to resemble rocket ships or medieval peasant shoes, implying a journey, perhaps to another world.

At the 1997 Venice Biennale, Abramović performed *Balkan Baroque* (p. 113), for which she won the Golden Lion Award for Best Artist. In the performance, she was surrounded by 1,500 pounds of fresh cattle bones, which she cleaned with disinfectant as she sang. The bones were covered with blood; the stench filled the gallery. Behind her were three video screens, two with images of her parents, who fought for the unification of Yugoslavia, and the other showing the artist herself in a white lab coat explaining how Balkans rid themselves of rats by turning them against each other. This was her attempt to come to grips with a life lived under communism and the recent Balkan war and as well as a comment on ethnic cleansing.

Abramović's influence is extensive, yet there are few artists who would go as far as she did to put themselves in such perilous and painful situations. Over the past thirty years, she has created a body of work singular for the depth, breadth, and extremes of performance. While her work can be associated more with certain strains of performance art of the 1970s, many of her underlying premises and motivations in fact share certain characteristics with some feminist artists whose work was a long-term response to various body issues and deep psychological wounds.

6. Ibid., p. 111.
7. Ibid.
9. Ibid., p. 15.