



# Marina Abramovic Presents: Architectural Experience as Critical, Self-reflective Practice

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## Performative responses to space and architecture

Within her performance-based artistic practice, spanning from the 1970's until the present, the Belgrade-born artist Marina Abramovic has produced diverse work in different media, from artistic live performances to installations including sculptures, photos and video pieces. An important aspect of this practice is the artist's consistent concern with establishing a direct engagement with audiences; as she claims in her essay *Body Art*, "What's very important about performance is the direct relationship with the public, the direct energy transmission between public and the performer" (Abramovic, 2002: 27). Most interestingly, Abramovic does not wish to address audiences as part of a typical performer and audience-as-spectator structure, where the artist or the live work is preconceived and prioritized over the audience's response. In her own words:

First of all: what is performance? Performance is some kind of mental and physical construction in which an artist steps in, in front of the public. Performance is not a theatre piece, is not something that you learn and then act, playing somebody else. It's more like a direct transmission of energy...The more the public, the better the performance gets, the more energy is passing through the space. (Abramovic, 2002: 27)

Rather the artist's intention is to create live work, which encourages—or even requires—the audience's direct engagement with the performance through developing non-hierarchal relationships between artist, audience, and space.

This particular performance philosophy attitude was further evidenced in Abramovic's most recent live event in the UK, called Marina Abramovic presents..., which the artist curated and performed for the Manchester International Festival in July 2009. Abramovic led audiences to experience thirteen long-durational works by several former students of hers currently performing in the contemporary live arena, such as UK-based artists Kira O'Reilly and Alastair MacLennan. These performance artists have attracted a lot of critical attention in the UK, notably the Daily Mail's outrage at O'Reilly, for "hugging a dead pig on stage – and in a public gallery, at the taxpayers' expense!" (in Westcott, 2009: 98). However provocative the performances were, the focus of the event was not entirely on the art pieces. As Abramovic stated prior to the event, she intended to encourage and enable audiences to get involved in a highly specific way with the work (Abramovic, 2010). Requesting their commitment to participate in lengthy performances as they developed in different gallery spaces, the artist would take them first through a series of performance-based exercises. In this way, audiences would be brought to a certain state, which would enable them to turn from passive spectators to constituting active participants: interacting with the work in an experimental and improvised manner. As Abramovic has claimed, "in performances...it is very important not to rehearse, not to repeat, and not to have a predicted end" (Abramovic, 2002: 27). As I will argue further on, such unpredictable conditions allow audiences to participate in the event in a performative and

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improvisatory manner, as “actors” themselves: neither as “spectators”, as passive viewers, nor as “agents”, acting in a preconceived or instrumental way.

Spatial experience has played an important role in creating such a performative interrelationship between artist and audience. According to Abramovic, “Many things are happening and the space becomes different when it is charged with a lot of energy, and the public is confronted with it when they come in.” (2002: 33) Early in her career Abramovic was preoccupied with the idea of space and its role in bringing people to a particular state of mind. The context for this approach was set in the early 1970’s, when Abramovic produced installations exploring the idea of “empty space”. For *Project – Empty Space* (1971) she set up a circular projection of a panoramic sequence of large black and white images of Belgrade around the walls of a small room. As the sequence progressed, the photographs showed less and less of the city, until the final image revealed only people in an open space. In her essay on Abramovic entitled *Cleaning the Mirror*, Chrissie Iles describes this “liberating” of the horizon as being evocative of Yves Klein’s ideas of the sky as representative of both the immaterial and the infinite; or, in Klein’s own words, of “the realm of freedom and creativity, a space where sensibility is evoked and endlessly recognized, a zone of nothingness and everything, where there are no names, rules, boundaries or definitions” (in Iles, 1995: 22). In a subsequent artwork called *Spaces* (1973), Abramovic explored further this transformative relationship between “space” and “self” through a performance, during which she herself encountered seven empty rooms in the Museum of Contemporary Art in Zagreb and translated what she felt into metronomes placed on the floor of each room.



In later work developed and performed with Ulay (German artist Frank Laysiepen, Abramovic’s partner in life and co-performer for thirteen years), the concern about how the self relates to space translated into performances that explored the relationship between the physical body and architecture. Abramovic (2002: 32) claims that these performances had a “very architectural relationship to the space” and describes them as follows:

Our first performance, *Relation in Space*, took place at the Venice Biennale in 1976: two bodies running for one hour to each other, like two planets, and mixing male and female energy together into a third component we called ‘that self’. In ‘Interruption in Space’ we ran to each other in different directions and there was always space in between. With our full force, we ran against the wall between us. *Expansion in Space* took place at Documenta in Kassel, in 1977: we tried to expand our bodies in the space by moving two large columns of 140 and 150 kilos respectively, twice the weight of our own bodies. The piece was very important because there was an audience of almost one thousand people. It was the first time that we experienced what the energy of the audience means and we went over our limits – physically and mentally. (Abramovic, 2002: 33)

Another work of the same period called *Imponderabilia* (1977) employs more explicitly specific formal architectural elements. During an opening at the Galleria Comunale d’Arte Moderna in Bologna, Italy, the artists stood naked in the main entrance facing each other, so that visitors passing through the entrance of the museum would have to choose to face one of them.

These performances deploy architectural space to create complex situations of endurance, in which the body itself performs in extreme intimacy with formal architectural elements of the gallery, often as if it is part of this architecture itself. Abramovic (2002: 33) said regarding *Imponderabilia* that herself and Ulay “wanted to be the door of the museum for three hours”. The two artists were at that time preoccupied with ideas of duration, presence, and stillness, which they had developed when they retreated into the central Australian desert to live with Aboriginals. In their subsequent performances, they tried to recreate such experiences in the gallery or museum setting, through developing intense and intimate situations that involved the body of the performer and space. In these pieces architectural space was deployed through embodiment and identification, hosting situations that confronted audiences of performance art and the public with their own attitudes about the body, gender, and sexuality. Additionally, rather than working against architecture, as in the earlier works



of “emptying” or “freeing space”, for these performances Abramovic deployed interiors and specific architectural elements, such as the portico in *Imponderabilia* (1977); as well as walls and columns, in the performances *Relation in Space* (1976) and *Installation One* (1979).

### Experience as critical, self-reflective practice

Still the audience’s involvement was limited in these early performances, as there was little active participation by others in the experiences of endurance and concentration performed by the artists. Attempting to find ways to engage audiences more directly with the work rather than confronting them with it, Abramovic created her first exhibitions and installations based around what she called “transitory objects”. The first exhibitions of this kind were inspired by her *Great Wall of China walk*, completed with Ulay shortly before they separated in 1988. In a subsequent interview to Pablo Rico, she claimed:

After walking the Chinese Wall I realized that for the first time I had been doing a performance where the audience was not physically present. In order to transmit this experience to them I built a series of transitory objects with the idea that the audience could actively take part. (Rico, 1988: 85)

Abramovic further explained (in Rico, 1988: 36), that these objects were called “transitory”, because they were not conceived as sculptures but as objects that would “trigger experience”; once experience had been triggered, they could be removed and used in everyday life. The “transitory objects” were made with a particular concern for materials, which were selected for their ability to contain certain energies; for example, she used copper, iron, wood, minerals, pig blood, and human hair. They were also arranged in such a way that people could experience them in typical positions, for example while sitting, standing, or lying down. This work, with its particular concern for materiality and its body-centric approach to objects, further demonstrates Abramovic’s ongoing interest in experience as a vehicle for engaging the audience in live situations that encourage self-reflective attitudes.



The transitory objects projects also signaled an important shift in Abramovic’s practice. Abramovic (2002: 49) has classified her diverse work into three groups: the “Artist Body” works, the early performances developed around the use of her own body in the 1970’s; the “Public Body” works, the interactive performances and installations developed in galleries and public spaces from the late 1970’s onwards; and the “Student Body” works, the performances that relate to her tutelage of young artists how to perform during the last decade. Following this classification, she claimed in “Body Art” that, with the ‘transitory objects’ exhibitions she moved from “Artist Body” to “Public Body” works:

where the public is performing. I was thinking that it is not just enough that I am performing and the public is a kind of voyeur, passive, somewhere in the dark, looking at me. The public has to take this historical step and really become one with the object and get much more life-experience for themselves. (Abramovic, 2002: 34-35)

In this passage, Abramovic is explicit about her intention to create ‘experiences’, which will challenge and change the audience. As she claimed further on in the same passage: “...nobody will ever be changed just by reading a book. People get changed only by their own experience. It’s only the personal experience which really matters” (Abramovic, 2002: 36). I will now focus on this idea of experience, as it is described by the artist and is manifested in her practice, by drawing upon Walter Benjamin’s philosophical concept of experience. In my subsequent discussion of Benjamin’s philosophy, the term artwork will be employed in the broad way that Benjamin employed it, referring to diverse cultural manifestations, such as literature and architecture.

Benjamin’s philosophy and critical theory developed largely around issues of epistemology, especially the relation between knowledge and experience. As discussed by contemporary critics of Benjamin within the English-speaking academy—such as Andrew Benjamin and Peter Osborne (2000), Howard Caygill (1998), and Grahame Gilloch (2002)—in his diverse and eclectic work Benjamin drew upon Kantian and Romantic ideas to propose an epistemology, which would combine intuition and understanding in an undivided manner. In doing so, as Howard Caygill argues in *Walter Benjamin: The Colour of Experience* (1998), Benjamin essentially transformed Immanuel Kant’s concept of experience, questioning the basic assumptions that: a) there is a distinction between the subject and the object of experience, and b) that there can be no experience of the absolute (Caygill, 1998: 2). Caygill further argues that, in this way:

Benjamin not only extended the neo-Kantian attempt to dissolve the distinction between intuition and understanding, but went further in seeking a concept of ‘speculative experience’. This recast the distinction between intuition/understanding and reason into an avowed metaphysics of experience in which the absolute manifests itself in spatio-temporal experience. (Caygill, 1998: 2)

Caygill (1998: xiv) also explains that for this reason, experience in the Benjaminian sense is not primarily linguistic, it does not take place within the field of linguistic



signification.

In his thesis on *The Concept of Criticism in German Romanticism* (1920), Benjamin drew upon early Romantic ideas, which presumed the inseparability between reflection and cognition (Benjamin, 1996: 121), while, by reference to Johann Gottlieb Fichte, Friedrich Schlegel, and Novalis, he further explored reflective thinking as an infinite transformative activity that occurs on a formal level. Taking observation as an example, Novalis in particular described a mutually transformative encounter during which the object observed is brought to self-consciousness and revealed to the observer, who, through the heightening of his own consciousness, gets nearer to the object and finally drawing it into himself (Benjamin, 1996: 151-152).

Experience in this sense precludes critical reflection from a fixed subjective position, since the subject is constantly reconfigured and transformed through the experience of the object. Some interesting possibilities for art interpretation and practice emerge within this schema, which fosters the emergence of a certain open attitude through the experience of the artwork. Influenced by the Romantics, Benjamin proposed practicing immanent criticism: a kind of criticism which would not follow the established descriptive or analytic approaches deriving from a distancing view of the artwork, but rather one that would unfold the essence of the artwork from within itself at the moment it is experienced. A proponent for anti-historicist critical methods, Benjamin discussed these ideas in various writings based on immersion and immanence; among them, in his 1936 essay *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*, in which he advocated for modern reproducibility as a means for eliminating the distance between the artwork and the public, which sustained the artwork's value based on its 'aura', its authentic uniqueness, and which further promoted the appreciation of art on a ritualistic, cult basis. Overall, Benjamin's critical theory suggests that art criticism or artistic practices based on immanence and experience push beyond the elitist aesthetics of the expert or the authority of intention of the artist; instead, they allow art to be an emergent and enlightening experience for the public.

In this context, conceptual parallels can be traced between Abramovic's work and Benjamin's philosophy of experience. Her preoccupation with the idea of space as 'empty' or 'liberated' in the early works *Project—Empty Space and Spaces* can be interpreted as her search, not only to represent the abstract concepts of the 'immaterial' and the 'infinite', but also to explore the interrelationship of the self to those concepts. Furthermore, her later performances can be considered as representations of the idea of the 'absolute' as spatio-temporal experience: comprised of architectural space (the spatial) and performance (the temporal). Finally, her work with objects, while showing a concern for the material (as in the 'transitory objects' exhibitions), also combines a metaphysical, almost mystical view of materiality (the 'transitory objects' transmit 'energy' and 'experience').



Critics of Abramovic have attempted to situate her work conceptually in a similar context. Iles (1995: 21) has referred to her preoccupation with eastern ideas of emptying and transforming the self as being related to Romantic idealism and early Enlightenment philosophy. In a recent article, James Westcott (2009: 98) also discussed the artist's intention to create experiences of 'empathy' that are evocative of Romantic ideas about the inseparability between 'subject' and 'object'. I would like to further these discussions and argue that central to Abramovic's work, in all its different forms, is the idea of self-transformation through experience; this experience is created or transmitted via the works themselves and their key components: space, architectural form, and materiality. Following Benjamin's conception of experience as containing an infinite transformation that occurs through the reflective/cognitive encounter with form, I consider Abramovic's art practice as self-reflective and self-transformative, since it constructs the works as vehicles for transformation.

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In the context of Benjamin's discussion that such practice supports an anti-historicist attitude, which is critical of ideas that artistic authenticity and value are based on the dissociation of art from the public's experience, I believe that Abramovic's work signals also a decidedly critical practice. In such context, architecture, as interior and contained space, as well as as building and formal architectural elements (such as



walls, doors, or materiality), is deployed in a radical way that supports this critical practice. Considered in this broad sense, architecture is treated as a transmitter and a trigger of experience, and so as a vehicle for the self-transformation and enlightenment of the public, through spatio-temporal and constantly reconfigured responses to the artwork. Within such practice, the audience and the artist do not occupy pre-determined, fixed positions, but they constantly perform their positionality. Audiences are neither spectators nor agents, but become active participants in non-hierarchical, emergent, and open-ended situations, in which they can be in dialogue with their formal context and with each other.

### The Artist is (Made to Be) Present



An increasingly prominent subject within current Anglo-American publications, performance art has provoked controversial criticism. Skeptics have argued for a more multimedia-based approach in the contemporary live arena, considering Abramovic's performance art as "unfashionable" and "too demanding on the audience" (Westcott, 2009: 103); while others, such as David Ebony (2009), less concerned with the reductive tendencies in the artist's work, focus upon the social and political aspect of recent projects. More broadly speaking, the socio-political aspect of contemporary performance art practices is discussed by Claire Bishop in *Participation: Documents of Contemporary Art* (2006). Bishop distinguishes this approach from the more popular interactive art, which aims to activate the individual viewer, arguing for "an aesthetic of participation" that "derives legitimacy from a causal relationship between the experience of a work of art and individual/collective agency" (Bishop, 2006: 12). Furthermore, she sees value in the less familiar artistic practices since the 1960s that "strive to collapse the distinction between performer and audience, professional and amateur, production and reception" (Bishop, 2006: 10). This collapse has also been discussed in relation to its impact on criticism and historiography by Amelia Jones and Andrew Stephenson in *Performing the Body/Performing the Text* (1999), who acknowledge that visual art practices from the 1960's onwards have:

opened themselves to the dimension of theatricality in such a way as to suggest that art critics and art historians might reassess our own practices of making meaning through an engagement with the processes of art production and reception as performative, so that 'artistic meaning can be understood as enacted through interpretive engagements that are themselves performative in their intersubjectivity. (Jones and Stephenson, 1999: 1)

As part of her recent MoMA retrospective, Abramovic invited visitors to take turns to occupy a seated position opposite her, within her gaze, and to gaze back at her. The piece named *The Artist is Present* is evocative of its conceptual origins within Abramovic's practice: the artist is made to be present, and her presence is enacted by the presence of her partner-in-performance, the audience and is constantly reconfigured through this enactment. This performative attitude towards the artwork is further evocative of the artist's belief in spatial experience as vehicle for enlightenment and critical self-reflection. As stated in her past interview to Rico, the idea of the 'space-in-between' is very important to her:

Because in the space-in-between we are able to leave our old patterns of behavior and ways of living... We find ourselves in a permanent state of traveling. We are always in the space-in-between, like airports, or hotel rooms, waiting rooms or lobbies, gyms, swimming pools... all the spaces where you are not actually at home... This is where our mind is the most open. We are alert, we are sensitive and destiny can happen... [this] means that we are really completely alive and that is an extremely important space. (in Rico, 1988: 50)

Abramovic has demonstrated within her own practice that live artistic events can form environments that encourage improvisational, emergent responses, and therefore can provide the "spaces-in-between", where we can be reflective, creative, and open to possibilities. I also see a unique opportunity offered by such events for critical reflection on contemporary art and architectural practices of production and interpretation. Immediacy, creative participation, and improvisation can reinvigorate the passive spatial practices of designed environments, deviating from prescribed patterns of meaning, thus fostering a critical aesthetics of experience that is, like Abramovic's work, transformative.