

THE ABRAMOVIĆ METHOD:  
THE PERFORMANCE ART OF MARINA ABRAMOVIĆ,  
2010 TO PRESENT

by

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A THESIS

Presented to the Department of the History of Art and Architecture  
And the Graduate School of the University of Oregon  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements  
for the degree of  
Master of Arts

June 2015

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## THESIS ABSTRACT

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June 2015

Title: The Abramović Method: The Performance Art of Marina Abramović, 2010 to Present

This thesis examines the performance art of Serbian artist Marina Abramović from 2010 to today following her emergence into mainstream media with the success of her performance *The Artist is Present* (2010). This thesis investigates Abramović's approach to performance and how the roles of artist and viewer change in face of increased fame, documentation, and age. The thesis argues that as Abramović ages, she is becoming increasingly preoccupied with her fame and with securing her legacy and that this concern is reflected by her increased documentation and self-promotion, as well as her interest in transitioning into the role of teacher rather than artist. This thesis ends with an optimistic look at the opening of The Marina Abramović Institute in late 2015 as a new type of institute in which Abramović's presence and legacy will be mediated not through the static and limited representation of photographs and relics but by the experiences and actions of the visitors themselves.

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## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The writing of this thesis would not have been possible without the steady support, guidance, encouragement, and patience of Kate Mondloch. I would also like to thank the members of my thesis committee, Jenny Lin, Tyras Warren, and John Fenn, for their support, ideas, and time with the thesis process. Special thanks to the Department of the History of Art and Architecture at the University of Oregon for their generous grant funding that made thesis research travel possible.

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## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION

“There’s something female about performance itself, I think because of how it is ephemeral and close to the unconscious—involving display, use of self.”  
--Carolee Schneemann, 1989.<sup>1</sup>

“The performance is a process. The public as well as the artist has to go into it. They must meet in a completely new territory, and build from that timeless time spent together. ...it's really feeding an audience who doesn't have time. I don't have time in my life, but I have time in my performance. I always have time in my performance.”  
--Marina Abramović, 2006.<sup>2</sup>

Marina Abramović was born in 1946 in Belgrade, Yugoslavia. Growing up in a household run by strict, Partisan war-hero parents, Abramović’s impressive self-control over her mental and physical consciousness surfaced early on.<sup>3</sup> Abramović left home in 1965 to study drawing and painting at the Academy of Fine Arts in Belgrade, where she was drawn to expressionistic body imagery, inspired by Picasso’s bulbous nudes and brooding portraits (Figs. 1-2: See Appendix A for all figures).<sup>4</sup> Over the next five years Abramović grew increasingly frustrated with the limitations of painting for expressing her emotions. In 1970, Abramović proposed her first performance piece, in which she planned to hold a loaded gun to her head and pull the trigger. This piece was rejected by

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<sup>1</sup> Christy Sheffield Sanford, *Red Bass: Journal of Politics and Art*, New Orleans, 1989, 18.

<sup>2</sup> Chris Thompson. "Pure Raw: Performance, Pedagogy, and (Re)presentation." *PAJ: A Journal of Performance and Art*, no. 1 [82] (2006): 7.

<sup>3</sup> As a child, despite being fully capable, Abramović resisted walking until she was nearly four years old. In another instance, Abramović’s grandmother Milica, recalls leaving Abramović alone with instructions not to move from her seat at the kitchen table. Upon her return to the house two hours later, Milica found Abramović sitting in the exact same position, without even having taken a sip from the glass of water she had left her. James Westcott, *When Marina Abramović dies: a biography*, Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 2010, 13.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid*, 33-34.

the committee at Belgrade's cultural center Doma Omladine for its absurd level of risk. Although Abramović would not return to performance for another three years (with her celebrated *Rhythms* series in 1973-74), her proposed focus on the body as a medium as early as 1970 has guided her practice ever since.

The 1960s and 1970s are heralded as the “golden age of performance art.”<sup>5</sup> During this period the rise in political activism, especially related to the second wave of the Women's Liberation Movement, created a platform for widespread experimentation by women artists by opening a dialogue about the nature of female identity. Through such experimentation the body was revealed as a medium through which women could explore their gender, sexuality, and race in simultaneously intimate and aggressive ways.<sup>6</sup> In particular, feminist artists used body art and performance to submit their own bodies to often uncomfortable circumstances in their attempts to challenge masculine, voyeuristic viewership and to redefine gender norms. It was during this period of feminist revolution and body politics that Marina Abramović first entered the field of performance art. During this time Abramović, along with Carolee Schneemann, Ana Mendieta, Yoko Ono, and other women artists, turned to the physical presence of the body in performance as an attempt to activate passive viewers. Even though the feminist revolution had not reached Yugoslavia in the 1970s, Abramović's work from the 1970s to today is strongly linked to the performances of these feminist artists through their shared interest in emphasizing

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<sup>5</sup> Ingrid Pfeiffer, *Yoko Ono: Half-a-wind Show: A Retrospective*. 2013, 30.

<sup>6</sup> Erika Fischer-Lichte's "Performance Art — Experiencing Liminality." RoseLee Goldberg's, *Performance: Live Art since 1960*, and Amelia Jones' *Body Art/Performing The Subject* each provide useful overviews of the emergence of body art, and especially feminist body art in the 1970s as a reflection of a period of mass experimentation and political activism, during which women embraced the use of their own bodies in performance as a means to both challenge the male-dominated “white cube” gallery system, and to re-define female gender identity. In these body art performances, Fischer-Lichte, Jones, and Goldberg emphasize a blurring of the distinctions between artist and audience, body and mind, and art and life.

female presence through the use of their own bodies as charged objects to question gender identities and spectatorship. During this time performance through the medium of the body, especially the naked body, became a place to acknowledge issues linked to women's agency, and to question the trope of the passive female nude as an object for male pleasure and visual consumption.<sup>7</sup>

Over the past forty years, Abramović has used her body as a tool to test both physical and emotional limits. In many ways, the artist's practice has been to challenge passive viewership, a challenge that reflects a form of rebellion against her strict upbringing in Yugoslavia. By breaking the divide between viewer and performer in her performances, Abramović empowers herself through the discomfort and confusion of her audience.<sup>8</sup> Abramović's oeuvre is characterized by the recurring themes of endurance and pain of the body and mind, as well as by repetition, duration, and an emphasis on audience interaction and spectatorship.<sup>9</sup> In this thesis I will reflect on the development of

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<sup>7</sup> Women performance artist's interest in the use of the body in performance as a tool to reclaim agency reflects the raised gender awareness spurred by the beginning of second-wave feminism in the 1970s. In particular, the publication of Betty Friedan's *Feminine Mystique* (1963), and of Laura Mulvey's "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" (1975) were highly influential on women artist's increased interest in combatting passive viewership and female victimization. Friedan is credited with inspiring the start of second-wave feminism, while Mulvey drew attention to the tropes found in film of the passive female role contrasted to an active male consumer.

<sup>8</sup> During the 1970s the publication of Mulvey's previously mentioned "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" resulted in increased scrutiny of the roles of the passive versus active viewer. In Abramović's performances beginning in the 1970s, she increasingly blurs these lines between viewer and performer by making the viewer necessary in an interactive performance in which the viewer directly influences the outcome of the piece.

<sup>9</sup> Top-ranking scholars of performance art and feminist studies, Roselee Goldberg, Amelia Jones, Peggy Phelan, Rebecca Schneider, and Nancy Spector, have all been monumental resources in the discussion of Abramović's role in the history of performance art, and how her oeuvre has developed around the themes of duration, repetition and audience interaction, themes that rose to prominence in the art of the 1970s alongside the development of second-wave feminism and political activism. These women have written not only about these themes in relation to Abramović herself, but also about how these themes are found in the work of many feminist artists of the 1970s, making this period of time highly influential on the development of what is today considered Abramović's definitive style of performance art.

Abramović's own "brand" of performance from 2010 to today, and how the development of this "Abramović brand," and her increased institutionalization has affected her approach to the roles of the artist and the viewer.<sup>10</sup> Before considering Abramović's present-day role as an icon of performance art however, it is important to first reflect on Abramović's initial discovery of performance art in the 1970s, when she and other female artists were using performance as a means to emphasize a powerful and diverse female presence through the use of the body, spectatorship, ritual, and duration. I will begin by discussing the use of the body, in particular the artist's own body, in female performances of the 1970s. Next I will analyze the second, equally definitive theme of Abramović's career: duration. I will look at Abramović's development of long-durational performance, and how earlier feminist performances influenced her use of time as a tool to both combat passive viewership and to test one's endurance. Finally I will turn to two themes that have regularly accompanied Abramović's use of the body and duration: spectatorship and ritual, in which the use of repetition and duration create a theatrical and ritualistic spectacle.

### **The Body**

Throughout Abramović's career her body has been both the medium and the subject of her art. The subject of the body fascinated Abramović early in her artistic career, when she was still studying painting at the Academy of Fine Arts in Belgrade.

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<sup>10</sup> By defining Abramović as both a brand and an institution, I am referring to her reflection of New Institutionalism, a term that rose to popularity with artists and curators in the 1990s in which institutions were proposed to have the capacity to be self-critical and create change within. New institutionalism also emphasizes the needs of a participatory audience, one that has been essential to Abramović throughout her career, and which she is placing as central to practices to be implemented at The Marina Abramović Institute. Claire Doherty, "The Institution is Dead! Long Live the Institution! Contemporary Art and New Institutionalism," *Engage: Arts of Encounter*, Issue 15, Summer 2004, pp. 1-9, 2004.

Abramović's desire for unrestricted expression of her mental and physical self led her into increasingly conceptual work, gradually moving into sound installations before enacting her first performance piece, *Rhythm 10* (Fig. 3) at the Edinburgh Festival in 1973. In this piece she adapted the Slavic knife game "five finger fillet," in which the player places their palm facing down on the table and attempts to stab a knife back and forth between their fingers at an increasing speed.<sup>11</sup> Over the next year Abramović performed four more pieces, in a series called *Rhythms*, in which she tested the psychological and physical limitations of her own body, as well as the comfort of her audience.<sup>12</sup> Arthur C. Danto describes the decade of the 1970s as a period of performance addicted to playing the line between life and death.<sup>13</sup> In her *Rhythms* series, Abramović continued the trend of what Danto refers to as "disturbatory art" by placing her body at risk as an uncomfortable spectacle to test both her own and her audience's limits.

At the same time that Abramović was using her body in grotesque and violent ways as a form of rebellion against her oppressive communist upbringing in Yugoslavia,

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<sup>11</sup> In *Rhythm 10*, Abramović, in her adaption of the game, increased risk by introducing a selection of ten different knives<sup>11</sup> of various sizes and shapes. Two tape recorders sat on the floor next to her, recording the rhythms of the knives. Once Abramović had inflicted ten wounds on herself, she stopped the recorder and listened to the results. She then returned to the knives and attempted to replicate the exact movements and cuts she'd inflicted the first time. The performance was not over until Abramović has used every single knife twice. In late 1973 Abramović performed *Rhythm 10* again in Rome. For this performance she increased the number of knives from ten to twenty.

<sup>12</sup> In this series of performances: *Rhythm 10*, *Rhythm 5*, *Rhythm 2*, *Rhythm 4*, and *Rhythm 0*, Abramović tested her mental and physical endurance in various ways over increasing periods of time. She stabbed repeatedly at her hands with a series of knives, lay at the center of a burning star, ingested medication for schizophrenia and catatonia, forced herself to pass out in front of an industrial fan, and finally, in *Rhythm 0*, placed herself as a passive object to the actions of her audience for six hours. These performances represent her turn away from traditional media to instead focus on her own body as art. By putting herself through physically and mentally excruciating performances Abramović tested her own endurance, but also challenged passive, pleasurable viewership.

<sup>13</sup> Danto describes performance art of the 1970s as: "infected by shed blood at the decade's outset, and the shadow of death haunted the boundary between life and art." Marina Abramović and Klaus Biesenbach, *Marina Abramović: The Artist is Present*, New York: Museum of Modern Art, 2010, 31.

other women artists in the United States were joining second-wave feminism by using their bodies erotically rather than violently, in celebration of womanhood and of female pleasure. While Abramović wasn't involved in the feminist movement in the 1970s, (and continues to deny affiliation today) she shares an important bond with these feminist artists through their dedication to representing female presence in their art through consideration of the issues of gender, identity, and sexuality.<sup>14</sup> These shared interests and approaches to performance art are ones that have become definitive of Abramović's oeuvre, and have repeatedly linked Abramović's name to a list of highly influential feminist artists, despite her repeated denial of the title.<sup>15</sup>

Beginning in the 1970s, women artists took various stances on the significance of the female body. Poet Adrienne Rich defined the female body as either an "impure and dangerous body of corruption" or a "sacred, nurturing body of motherhood."<sup>16</sup> In response to this polarizing definition of womanhood, some female artists, like Mary Kelly, rejected representation of the body, instead favoring psychoanalysis and gaze theory, which emphasized the process of sexual differentiation formed by social

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<sup>14</sup> Abramović claims the gender equality of Yugoslavia as partly responsible for her disassociation with feminism: "I never had anything to do with feminism. This comes from my Yugoslav origin. In our country, the female, the woman, is very strong. She is at the same level as the men...I think that all energy, all power is so much in the hands of women and it has always been genetically like that." However, the equality she claims is present in Yugoslavia reflects the very goals of feminism that she refuses to identify with. *Ibid.*, 24.

<sup>15</sup> In an article by ARTFCITY, Mira Schor discusses the absurdity of Abramović's reluctance to be associated with feminism despite her clear representation of feminist themes and approaches: "All artists reject limited readings of their work. But when the work clearly deals with gender and gendered power relations, when it deals with femininity, when it explores female sexuality and the female body, when the work uses the vocabulary of gendered tropes developed by the first generations of the feminist art movement—the ones in WACK! and the ones left out of the history proposed by WACK!—how is it not feminist art? Why is it still such a problem?" Whitney Kimball, "Marina Abramović, Still Not a Feminist," ARTFCITY, Published June 13, 2012, <http://artfcity.com/2012/06/13/marina-abramovic-still-not-a-feminist/>

<sup>16</sup> Joanna Frueh, *Hannah Wilke A Retrospective*, Edited by Thomas H. Kochheiser, University of Missouri Press, Columbia, 1989, 41.

structures, and making art that depicted gender via text and abstract forms.<sup>17</sup> Others, such as Carolee Schneemann, Hannah Wilke, and Yoko Ono, took an opposing stance by using their bodies to create an erotic discourse on female sexuality. Abramović, herself stifled by the strict upbringing by her mother, was unable to explore her sexuality until well into her twenties, when she carefully created a plan to lose her virginity in a manner that eliminated emotion.<sup>18</sup> It is partially through this detached experience of sex that Abramović first discovered an interest in separating her emotions from her body, a key component in her experimentation with pushing her mental and physical limits.

In performances such as Abramović's 1975 *Art Must Be Beautiful, Artist Must Be Beautiful* (Fig. 4) or *Lips of Thomas* (Figs. 5-6) both performed completely nude, Abramović subverts passive viewership of the eroticized, idealized female nude by submitting herself to extremely violent actions, the brutality of which denies pleasurable viewing of her naked female body.<sup>19</sup> This strategy of refusing to be pleurably objectified reflects the increasing dominance of feminist activism at the time, supported by Betty Friedan's recent critique of gender roles in her highly influential *The Feminine*

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<sup>17</sup> Mary Kelly's rejection of the female form in her art is reflected in her *Post-Partum Document* series (1973-79) in which addresses the role of motherhood through a series of documents recording her son's upbringing. Mary Kelly, "Re-Viewing Modernist Criticism," in *Art after Modernism: Rethinking Representation*, by Wallis, Brian, *Documentary Sources in Contemporary Art*; v. 1. New York: Boston: New Museum of Contemporary Art; D.R. Godine, 1984.

<sup>18</sup> Abramović had a 10:00 p.m. curfew, strictly enforced by her mother. When Abramović plotted to lose her virginity, she told her mother she was going to the cinema on a Sunday morning: "so I was always thinking: Okay, I will never lose virginity with someone I love. I have to lose virginity like a matter of fact." James Westcott, *When Marina Abramović dies: a biography*, Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 2010, 45-46.

<sup>19</sup> In *Art Must Be Beautiful*, Abramović violently combs her hair for 50 minutes, during which she repeatedly chants: "art must be beautiful, artist must be beautiful." A typically feminine action becomes one of violence and discomfort for both the artist, and the viewer, through which Abramović criticized conventions for female beauty in art and culture. In *Lips of Thomas*, over two hours, Abramović eats a pound of honey, drinks a liter of red wine, carves a five-pointed communist star into her abdomen, then whips herself until she can't bear it.



*Mystique* (1963). At the same time that Abramović was brutalizing her own body in Yugoslavia and Western Europe as a challenge to communist power, women in the United States were using their bodies to disrupt a power structure that denied gender equality. Feminist artists such as Hannah Wilke and Carolee Schneemann used their bodies erotically as a means to challenge issues of passive viewership and gender inequality that discriminated against women's rights. In Schneemann's 1975 *Interior Scroll* (Fig. 7), Schneemann, after applying paint to her face and body, and enacting a series of "life model action poses," gradually drew a scroll of paper from her vagina and read aloud from it a feminist text from Kitch's *Last Meal*.<sup>20</sup> By embracing core imagery through the physical presence of her naked body, Schneemann rejected the phallus in favor of female sexual empowerment.<sup>21</sup>

Using my body as an extension of my painting-constructions challenged and threatened the psychic territorial power lines by which women, in 1963, were admitted to the Art Stud Club, so long as they behaved enough like the men, and did work clearly in the traditions and pathways hacked out by men.<sup>22</sup>

Abramović, in explaining the influences for *Art Must Be Beautiful, Artist Must Be Beautiful*, sympathized with Schneemann's criticism of the limitations placed upon women artists in the 1970s, saying "If the woman artist would apply make-up, or put on nail polish, she would not have been considered serious enough."<sup>23</sup> While Schneemann's

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<sup>20</sup> Carolee Schneemann, *Imaging Her Erotics: Essays, Interviews, Projects*. Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2002, 153-55.

<sup>21</sup> Schneemann believed in female empowerment through depiction of "vulvic space," in which the vagina could be thought of as the site of a vast "interior knowledge" that unified spirit and flesh. Carolee Schneemann, *Imaging Her Erotics: Essays, Interviews, Projects*. Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2002.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 55.

<sup>23</sup> Abramović, Marina, and Klaus Biesenbach. 2010. *Marina Abramović: the artist is present*. New York: Museum of Modern Art, 25.

*Interior Scroll* is much less of an assault on the viewer as Abramović's self flagellation in *Lips of Thomas*, both women's actions criticize gender classification and reject interpretations of the female form as nothing more than a nude object of beauty to be gazed upon pleasurably.

Hannah Wilke also emphasized the female body in art, calling it "respecting the objecthood of the body."<sup>24</sup> She consistently used her body as a sculptural form and was one of the first artists to use vaginal imagery to directly engage with feminist issues. Wilke received immense criticism from fellow feminists who believed she was prostituting herself as a sexed object rather than challenging objecthood.<sup>25</sup> For Wilke, similar to Abramović, this emphasis on female sexuality was a means to validate the female body, such as in *S.O.S.—Starification Object Series* (1974) (Fig. 8) in which she posed for a series of photographs that satirized stereotypical depictions of femininity and sexuality.<sup>26</sup> Wilke understood that her erotic display of her body was problematic for other feminists, yet for her this unapologetic display of her body affirmed her sexuality, and her presence, rather than hiding the female body like a disembodied spirit.<sup>27</sup>

Abramović, Schneemann, and Wilke all used their bodies in performance as a form of rebellion against a society that repressed their sexuality. For Schneemann and Wilke this

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<sup>24</sup> Joanna Frueh, *Hannah Wilke A Retrospective*, Edited by Thomas H. Kochheiser, University of Missouri Press, Columbia, 1989, 41.

<sup>25</sup> Kockheiser, Thomas H. *Hannah Wilke: A Retrospective*. Columbia: University of Missouri Press. 1989.

<sup>26</sup> In *S.O.S.—Starification Object Series*, Wilke posed half-naked for a series of photos, adopting poses of female fashion models. The image of Wilke's body as an idealized nude is interrupted by numerous pieces of chewing gum shaped into tiny vulvas, stuck all over her body. The chewing gum interrupts the viewer's voyeuristic gaze, calling attention to the objectification of woman's bodies, emphasizing the "perfect" female nude as a victim.

<sup>27</sup> Amelia, Jones, *Body Art/Performing The Subject*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1998, 151-157.

repressive force was political; for Abramović her controlling, militaristic mother was the enemy.<sup>28</sup>

### **Spectatorship**

In 1974 Abramović performed *Rhythm 5* (Fig. 9) in which she constructed a five-pointed star from wood and wood shavings, and then soaked it in 100 liters of petrol. After setting fire to it, Abramović ceremoniously paced in a crucifixion pose, around the burning star. She then proceeded to cut her hair, followed by her fingernails and toenails. As she paced repeatedly around the burning altar, she fed bunches of the hair and nails to each point of the star like sacrificial offerings. She then lay down, and as Abramović lay at the center of the burning star, the severity of the fire quickly absorbed the oxygen, causing her to lose consciousness. Upon realizing Abramović was unconscious, two audience members intervened, and removed her from the flames, prematurely ending the performance. Following the unexpected failure to complete *Rhythm 5*, Abramović's fascination with testing her own limitations opened into an exploration of the shared experience between herself and her audience. Abramović credits the failure of *Rhythm 5* as the moment she officially dedicated herself to her career's focus on the limits of the body:

I was supposed to stay there, till it burned down, but as I was lying there the fire took up all the oxygen and I passed out. Nobody knew what was happening till a

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<sup>28</sup> Abramović's mother was not happy with her daughter's display of her body in her performances. Westcott describes one incident that occurred soon after Abramović completed her Rhythms series in 1974, in which she arrived home to find her mother furious about Abramović performing naked. Danica shouted "I gave you life, and now I will take it away," after which she threw a glass ashtray at Abramović's head. Despite her mother's threats Abramović continued to use her body in her art. James Westcott, *When Marina Abramović Dies: A Biography*, Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 2010m, 77.

doctor in the audience noticed it and pulled me out. This was when I realized that the subject of my work should be the limits of the body.<sup>29</sup>

Following this realization, in the final three performances of the *Rhythms* series, Abramović advocated a planned loss of control.<sup>30</sup> A key component that emerged in Abramović's embrace of loss of control is her incorporation of her audience. This is especially emphasized in her final *Rhythms* performance, *Rhythm 0* (1974) (Fig.10), performed at the Studio Morra Gallery in Naples, Italy. Over six hours (from 8pm to 2am), Abramović stood passively as an object to the whims of her audience, who had the chance to manipulate her body in any way they wished, using a selection of seventy-two props ranging from honey and perfume, to needles, and gun with one bullet (Fig. 27). For this piece she placed her life in the hands of her audience, and over six hours Abramović tested her physical endurance while simultaneously testing her viewer's capacity to harm what has been presented to them as a passive female object.<sup>31</sup>

Another female artist who was incorporating the viewer as a vital component in performance art in the 1960s and 1970s is Yoko Ono. Over a decade before Abramović would enter the performance scene, Ono and other avant-garde artists were already exploring experimental approaches that challenged the limits of traditional art forms by promoting a "living art."<sup>32</sup> The popularity of performance art rose out of an interest in interdisciplinary art set beyond the commodified gallery setting. A new series of non-

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<sup>29</sup> Abramović, Marina, and Klaus Biesenbach. 2010. *Marina Abramović: The Artist is Present*. New York: Museum of Modern Art, 32.

<sup>30</sup> James Westcott, *When Marina Abramović dies: a biography*, Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 2010, 69.

<sup>31</sup> On one of the gallery walls Abramović posted a label on which she stated: "I am the object. During this period I take full responsibility." Abramović, Marina, and Klaus Biesenbach. 2010. *Marina Abramović: The Artist is Present*. New York: Museum of Modern Art, 74.

<sup>32</sup> Haskell and Hanhardt, *Yoko Ono*, 2.

traditional, free form performances called “happenings” extolled the freedom of the artist to combine media as a challenge to traditional divides. In their Fluxus happenings, Ono and other artists advocated the potential beauty of the commonplace, and the importance of audience interaction.<sup>33</sup> In 1964 Ono performed *Cut Piece* (Fig. 11), a work she performed six times between 1964 and 2003. For this performance, while Ono sat passively on a stage, fully clothed, she invited her audience to engage in the performance by mounting the stage and cutting off a piece of her clothing using the scissors she placed on the floor beside her. Each of the six performances of *Cut Piece* began by following the same scripted guidelines written by Ono, but the development of the performances were controlled by the actions of the audience members:<sup>34</sup>

Traditionally, the artist’s ego is in the artist’s work. In other words, the artist must give the artist’s ego to the audience. I had always wanted to produce work without ego in it. I was thinking of this motif more and more and the result was *Cut Piece*. Instead of giving the audience what the artist chooses to give, the artist gives what the audience chooses to take.<sup>35</sup>

For both *Rhythm 0* and *Cut Piece*, the actions and reactions of the audience define the piece, making each performance unpredictable and full of risk. In these performances Abramović and Ono both willingly sacrificed themselves as martyrs to the will of their audience, and both women, despite working ten years apart, discovered that the passivity

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<sup>33</sup> Avant-garde artist and composer John Cage called for a blurring of the divide between life and art, emphasizing an art of the everyday. Cage was an extremely influential artist of the Fluxus movement. Brill, *Shock and the Senseless*, 108-110.

<sup>34</sup> Yoko Ono’s *Cut Piece* is a groundbreaking work, especially as it was performed in the 1960s, before the general public was aware of feminist issues, and feminist theories had yet to be established. Ono paved the way for investigation of gender, following this performance by writing *The Feminization of Society* in 1971. Ingrid Pfeiffer, Hollein, Max, and Schirn Kunsthalle Frankfurt, *Yoko Ono: Half-a-wind Show: A Retrospective*, 2013, 31-32.

<sup>35</sup> Ingrid Pfeiffer, Hollein, Max, and Schirn Kunsthalle Frankfurt, *Yoko Ono: Half-a-wind Show: A Retrospective*, 2013, 30.

of the female body triggered increasing aggression from the spectators.<sup>36</sup> In Ono's first performance of *Cut Piece*, in Kyoto in 1964, she recalls one man who mounted the stage and used the scissors to make threatening stabbing motions over her.<sup>37</sup> Similarly, in Abramović's *Rhythm 0*, her submissive demeanor provoked her audience to perform increasingly extreme and dangerous manipulation of her body. When an audience member placed a loaded pistol in Abramović's hand and pointed it at her chest the performance was finally stopped. In the years following *Rhythm 0*, Abramović relegated her audience's participation into a much less physically active and aggressive role. However, to this day she has continued to be dependent on her spectators as engaged witnesses to her feats of mental and physical endurance through which she, similar to Ono's *Cut Piece*, challenges her viewers to reconsider their roles as spectators to become instead participants.

In 2010, by which point she was no longer an unknown avant-garde artist, Abramović created a performance that returned to the extreme dual agency of performer and viewer found in *Rhythm 0*, but with one major difference: Abramović stared back. In Abramović's *The Artist is Present* exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA), the risk and violence of *Rhythm 0* or Ono's *Cut Piece*, is replaced with an atmosphere of

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<sup>36</sup> Despite the similarities between the pieces, Abramović claims she was unaware of Ono's *Cut Piece* at the time she conceived of *Rhythm 0*. James Westcott, *When Marina Abramović dies: a biography*, Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 2010, 76.

<sup>37</sup> "One person came on the stage...He took the pair of scissors and made a motion to stab me. But the hand was just raised there and was totally still. He was standing still...with scissors...threatening me." Ibid., 31.

love, shared through a silent gaze between the now famous artist and each visitor, and carefully monitored by the MoMA's extensive security team.<sup>38</sup>

### **Duration and Ritual**

Throughout the 1960s and 1970s Abramović built her performances rituals of self-sacrifice through her adherence to strict rules, the act of repetition, and the embrace of chance. This fascination with the sacrifice of the body as a spiritual act of self control, is also seen in the 1970s performances and earth art works of Cuban American artist Ana Mendieta. In the fall of 1971 Mendieta was finishing her master's in painting at the University of Iowa when she discovered a fascination with using her body as her primary material: "The turning point in art was in 1972, when I realized that my paintings were not real enough for what I want the image to convey and by real I wanted my images to have power, to be magic."<sup>39</sup> Between 1973 and 1978 Mendieta created a series of *Silueta* works in Iowa and Mexico (Figs.12-14), in which she incorporated her female form into the earth through various materials, including blood, fire, mud, and flowers symbolic of the rites of the Cuban religion of Santería.<sup>40</sup> These body images reflect Mendieta's search for identity in the US after being exiled from Cuba when she was thirteen:

The making of my silueta in nature keeps the transition between my homeland and my new home. It is a way of reclaiming my roots and becoming one with

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<sup>38</sup> In *The Artist is Present*, every day between March 14 and May 31, Abramović sat in silence six days a week, for seven hours a day, and gazed at whoever sat across from her, for however long they wished to stay. This piece will be discussed in full in the following chapter.

<sup>39</sup>This comment perfectly mirrors Abramović's own expressions of frustration with the limits of painting while a student in Belgrade in 1970. It is interesting to note that Abramović, Mendieta, and Schneemann all began their artistic careers as painters before discovering the body in performance as their preferred medium of expression. Olga M. Viso, and Ana Mendieta. 2004. *Ana Mendieta: earth body: sculpture and performance, 1972-1985*. Washington, D.C.: Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, Smithsonian Institution, 144.

<sup>40</sup> Abramović and Mendieta both used blood and fire in their ritualistic performances of the 1970s.

nature although the culture in which I live is part of me, my roots and cultural identity are a result of my Cuban heritage.<sup>41</sup>

Mendieta and Abramović both struggled with feelings of alienation and displacement, and they both addressed these issues in the 1970s through the use of their bodies in ritualistic and spiritual acts that reflected their individual cultures.<sup>42</sup> Abramović describes her youthful self in former-Yugoslavia as a “black sheep,” disconnected from the communist beliefs of her strict Partisan parents. Abramović’s frustration and alienation from her parents and her communist government is expressed in the previously mentioned *Rhythm 10* (1974) (Fig. 3) and *Lips of Thomas* (1975) (Figs. 5-6) through the incorporation of communist symbols, in particular the communist star.<sup>43</sup> Similarly, in her *Silueta* series, Mendieta used acts of self-sacrifice to the land as an expression of protest against her exclusion in the United States, both as a woman, and as a foreigner. During the feminist activism of the 1970s, Mendieta was one of many women whose “otherness” was left unrepresented by a middle-class, white majority.<sup>44</sup> Abramović and Mendieta both addressed their feelings of alienation by using their own bodies in ritualistic acts that

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<sup>41</sup> Ibid., 169-170.

<sup>42</sup> Olga M. Viso notes that Mendieta frequently distanced herself from other women performance artists in the 1960s and 1970s. Her “othered” status reflected in her art made her relate much more strongly to her international peers (such as Abramović, Teresa Hak Kyung Cha, and Mona Hatoum) rather than those feminist colleagues in the United States. Olga M. Viso, Mendieta, Ana, Hirshhorn Museum Sculpture Garden, and Whitney Museum of American Art. *Ana Mendieta: Earth Body: Sculpture and Performance, 1972-1985*, 2004, 74-75.

<sup>43</sup> In *Rhythm 10* Abramović lay down inside a burning communist star, while in *Lips of Thomas* she started the performance by wearing a partisan cap and waving a bloodied white flag, then carved a five-pointed communist star into her stomach. By referencing the iconography of her upbringing with the Communist Party she attempts to free herself of the burden of her homeland and its ideological rituals. Abramović, Marina, and Klaus Biesenbach. 2010. *Marina Abramović: The Artist is Present*. New York: Museum of Modern Art, 24-25.

<sup>44</sup> Japanese artist Yayoi Kusama, working in New York during the 1970s, struggled with similar issues of exclusion due to a “doubled otherness” as both a woman and a foreigner, issues she played with in her performances through purposely exaggerated exoticism and sexuality. Amelia Jones, *Body Art/performing the Subject*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1998, 5-9.



asserted their own distinct feminine presences through a spiritual connection to mother nature, while also subverting the male gaze by sacrificing their bodies, or in the case of Mendieta, by fusing her body into the landscape.<sup>45</sup>

Marina Abramović, today considered one of the most influential figures in the history of performance art, entered the performance scene in the mid 1970s as a means to challenge the suppression posed by her communist upbringing. At the same time, women like Schneemann, Wilke, Ono, and Mendieta in the United States were using their art to challenge gender inequalities in response to the Women's Liberation Movement.

Abramović's feminism may be mythical rather than political; nonetheless, her work is undeniably in dialogue with feminism.<sup>46</sup> She and this group of feminist artists are linked through their shared dedication to emphasizing female presence in the 1970s through the issues of gender, identity, and sexuality through the application and consideration of the body, spectatorship, duration, and ritual, themes that have become increasingly definitive of Abramović's performance art between the 1970s and today.

In this thesis I shall develop my argument in three parts; in each section I will address seminal works from Abramović's oeuvre from 2010 onward, and will examine Abramović's representation of presence through the recurring themes of duration, body,

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<sup>45</sup> Olga M. Viso and Ana Mendieta, 2004, *Ana Mendieta: earth body: sculpture and performance, 1972-1985*, Washington, D.C.: Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, Smithsonian Institution, 56-57, 74-75.

<sup>46</sup> "I never had anything to do with feminism. This comes from my Yugoslav origin. In our country, the female, the woman, is very strong. She is at the same level as the men..." Jovana Stokić, "The Art of Marina Abramović: Leaving the Balkans, Entering the Other Side" Marina Abramović: The Artist is Present, Klaus Biesenbach, New York: Museum of Modern Art. 2010. RoseLee Goldberg, a leading curator and historian of performance art, noted that for American women of Abramović's generation "being a feminist meant joining the party. That kind of solidarity—or of conformity—signified something different to Marina. By the time she became an artist, she wanted freedom on her own terms." Judith Thurman, "The Artist is Once Again Present," *The New Yorker*, Published June 18, 2012, <http://www.newyorker.com/culture/culture-desk/marina-abramovic-the-artist-is-once-again-present>.

and spectatorship, and how these methods have been affected by Abramović's growing fame and participation in commercial endeavors since 2010. These three themes have been instrumental to Abramović's performances since the 1970s, and therefore provide a basis for comparison between Abramović's early promotion of her physical, bodily presence, and the increasingly mediated presence of Abramović's latest projects through the use of photographs and props. In my analysis of each performance I will structure my discussion equally between cultural and theoretical analyses of feminist performance and body art, and how the public perceived these performances.<sup>47</sup>

I will begin my analysis of Marina Abramović's increasingly mediated presence by jumping ahead from her entrance, and rapid rise into prominence in the performance field in the 1970s, to look at her work made in the years after she had established herself as one of the most influential performance artists alive. I will focus on her work from 2010 to today, following Abramović's emergence into the mainstream after her 2010 retrospective at the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) in New York, *The Artist is Present* (Fig. 15) in order to observe how increased fame and wealth have influenced her most recent endeavors. Much as Abramović's *Rhythm 0* performance secured her a place as a prominent performance artist in 1974, *The Artist is Present* (performed at arguably one of the most influential art institutions) secured Abramović the title not only of iconic artist, but also of celebrity, whose style of performance can now be defined as its own brand called The Abramović Method. This thesis investigates the development of Abramović's consideration of "presence," and how these developments in her performances and collaborative projects from 2010 onward reflect their social and historical context as

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<sup>47</sup> Amelia Jones' *Body Art/Performing The Subject* (1998), and Helena Reckitt's *Art and Feminism* (2001) have been extremely informative in my research of the development of women's performance and body art from the 1960s to today.

Abramović has grown from a respected but relatively unknown performance artist in the 1970s and 1980s, to a mainstream celebrity, designer, and business woman today (Figs. 16-17). I will argue that Abramović's application of presence has developed from one of aggressive self-objectification and sacrifice in the atmosphere of activism in the 1970s, into one of intimacy and self-reflection shared between herself and an audience that has grown from interactive viewer to primary subject, and on whose shoulders rides the future of Abramović's legacy.

Presence and absence are defined as fundamental states of being defined as either the condition of being "present, or a state of "absence."<sup>48</sup> In my discussion of presence in Abramović's performance art, I will refer to Plato's consideration of presence as achieved by a physical state of being, or one mediated through images or writing, as Plato's clear distinction between live or mediated presence is complicated by Abramović's performance art, especially in consideration of her use of re-enactments as a form of mediated presence.<sup>49</sup> Through my investigation of the role of the artist's presence in these works I will demonstrate how Abramović is questioning the necessity of the artist's physical presence in performance as she increasingly blurs the line between viewer and performer. I will argue that Abramović's increasingly mediated and commercialized presence in her performances and projects between 2011 and present represents her experimentation with new approaches to "preserve" the essence of performance art in face of her impending retirement. The Marina Abramović Institute

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<sup>48</sup> "absence/presence," The Chicago School of Media Theory, accessed March 16, 2015, <https://lucian.uchicago.edu/blogs/mediatheory/keywords/absence-presence/>

<sup>49</sup> Plato argues for unmediated presence over mediated presence, which is dependent on representation through writing, images, etc. Plato. *The Republic of Plato*. Trans. Benjamin Jowett. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1908.

(MAI), which will open in late 2015, symbolizes the culmination of Abramović's attempts to preserve performance art, in particular her own specific brand of long-duration performance art, in which the artist's presence will be mediated not through images or writing, but by the experiences and re-enactments of the visitors themselves.

In the first chapter, I will study Abramović's retrospective at the MoMA, *The Artist is Present* (2010). This retrospective was the MoMA's first performance retrospective, thus officially promoting Abramović as a major contributor to the field of performance art. This exhibition also marks a key shift in Abramović's manipulation of the role of the spectator from one of aggression to one of collaboration. In this chapter I will emphasize the vital importance of the physical presence of both the artist and her spectators. Abramović depends on a shared agency and self-sacrifice between herself and her audience, as well as the impressive space of the MoMA in order to achieve her spectacle.<sup>50</sup> In this section I will compare Abramović's sacrificial relationship between herself and her audience with Georges Bataille's discussion in "Extinct America" of sacrifice as a theatrical spectacle shared between the viewer and performer.<sup>51</sup> I will argue that, in this piece, Abramović places herself in a position of equal vulnerability between performer and viewer through an intimate stare. In my analysis of the use of the gaze in this performance as an equalizer, I will reference Laura Mulvey's gaze theory regarding voyeuristic viewership, a prominent theory that influenced Abramović's performances in

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<sup>50</sup> By emphasizing the importance both of the space of the institution, the participation of the viewers, and the production of spectacle by the artist, *The Artist is Present* at the MoMA demonstrates 'new institutional' values in which the artists and curators are attempting to move beyond collections-based museum practices by instead promoting equal emphasis between the presentation, analysis, research, and production of contemporary art. Alex Farquharson, "Bureaux de change." *Frieze Magazine*. Published on February 9, 2006, pp. 2-3, [http://www.frieze.com/issue/article/bureaux\\_de\\_change/](http://www.frieze.com/issue/article/bureaux_de_change/)

<sup>51</sup> Bataille, Georges, and Annette Michelson. "Writings on Laughter, Sacrifice, Nietzsche, Un-knowing." October. 36: pp. 3-9. The MIT Press. 1986.

the 1970s, and which continues to be reflected in her work to this day.<sup>52</sup> I will also analyze the impact of the physical presence of Abramović downstairs in the MoMA atrium compared with the mediated presence of Abramović upstairs, represented via reenactments as well as by photographic and filmed documentation of the artist (Figs. 18-19).<sup>53</sup>

I will structure my analysis of *The Artist is Present* through discussion of the performance in relation to Abramović's recurring themes of duration, the body, and spectatorship, as well as the impact of site. In my analysis I will reference the writings of art historian Amelia Jones on the impact of the documentation and reenactment of performance works, specifically discussed in her essay "The Artist is Present: Artistic Re-enactments and the Impossibility of Presence."<sup>54</sup> Klaus Biesenbach, curator of *The Artist is Present* will also provide invaluable insight into both the performance itself, as well as the process of building the exhibition. In discussing the perceived successes and failures of *The Artist is Present* and its presentation in the MoMA, I will also consider theory on New Institutionalism, through which the highly participatory and dialogic nature of the exhibition breaks with conventional museum practices and can be seen as a kind of Gesamtkunstwerk.<sup>55</sup> Throughout my discussion of *The Artist is Present*, I will

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<sup>52</sup> In Laura Mulvey's formative essay "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," (1975) she discusses the gaze in relation to film in which a passive female is depicted for the pleasure of an active, voyeuristic male viewer.

<sup>53</sup> Documentation of *The Artist is Present* included film and photo documentation of the entire exhibition, including the in-depth documentation of Matthew Akers and Jeff Dupre for their documentary on the exhibition: *Marina Abramović: The Artist is Present* (2012). There was also free online streaming of the event available on the Museum of Modern Art's website.

<sup>54</sup> Amelia Jones, "The Artist is Present": Artistic Re-enactments and the Impossibility of Presence" TDR: The Drama Review, Volume 55, Number 1, Spring 2011 (T209), pp. 16-45, MIT Press, 2011.

<sup>55</sup> Alex Farquharson describes new institutionalist practices as being "a total work of art," in which equal

address the significance of presence as a reflection of both its historical and theoretical context in an increasingly technological, mediated society.

My second chapter will build off of the growing fame of Abramović following *The Artist is Present*, by addressing the role of the artist as institution. An art institution has typically been understood as consisting of a core group of collectors, curators, and dealers, while the artist has been limited to the role of making art for a passive audience.<sup>56</sup> With her increasing fame and wealth Abramović poses a challenge to these exclusive terms and reflects the interests of New Institutionalism by becoming a creator of art, but also a curator, a designer, and a businesswoman who uses an interactive and interdisciplinary approach to create a dialogue between herself and her audience about long-duration performance art.<sup>57</sup> She is blurring lines between viewer and performer, but also between art worlds by placing herself as her own art institution. In this chapter I will begin by briefly addressing criticisms of *The Artist is Present* exhibition. I will then discuss growing condemnations of Abramović in the years following her retrospective: accusations such as being characterized as a villain and sell-out due to her recent

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emphasis is placed on multiple functions through which a dialogue between the artist and the viewers can be accomplished. This approach echoes the rejection of white cube ideals begun by Abramović and other artists as early as the 1970s. Alex Farquharson, "Bureaux de change." *Frieze Magazine*. Published on February 9, 2006, pp. 2-3, [http://www.frieze.com/issue/article/bureaux\\_de\\_change/](http://www.frieze.com/issue/article/bureaux_de_change/)

<sup>56</sup> These definitions of institution and artist are based off of revisions made in 1997 to theorist George Dickie's analysis of art and aesthetics. George Dickie, *Art and the Aesthetic: An Institutional Analysis*. Ithaca: NY: Cornell UP, 1974. *Art Circle: A Theory of Art*. Chicago: Spectrum Press, 1997.

<sup>57</sup> Claire Doherty defines New Institutionalism as a concept that: "responds to (some might even say assimilates) the working methods of artistic practice and furthermore, artist-run initiatives, whilst maintaining a belief in the gallery, museum or arts center, and by association their buildings, as a necessary locus of, or platform for, art." She also emphasizes the importance of transient, temporary encounters and participation, all of which are reflected in Abramović's use of institutions as the hosts of her performances, through which she is attempting to spread her dialogue about durational performance art to the widest audience possible. Claire Doherty, "The Institution is Dead! Long Live the Institution! Contemporary Art and New Institutionalism." *Engage: Arts of Encounter*. Issue 15, Summer 2004, pp. 1-9. 2004.

collaborations with celebrities like Jay-Z and Lady Gaga (Figs. 20-21), as well with major consumer brands, such as the Adidas franchise (Figs. 22).

I will organize this chapter in three sections, each of which will address primary issues that have been raised by critics and the public in the years following *The Artist is Present*: celebrity collaborations, artist as brand, and presence in absence. Through these sections I will investigate the division between Abramović's avant-garde career and her mainstream fame. Theoretical writings on New Institutionalism, as well as Guy Debord's analysis in *The Society of the Spectacle* (1967) of the issues of spectacle related to commodity fetish in the 20<sup>th</sup> century will provide a framework through which to gain perspective on Abramović's growing "brand" of art.<sup>58</sup> I will close this chapter with consideration of two of Abramović's most recent performances, both performed in 2014: *512 Hours* at the Serpentine Gallery in London (Fig. 23), and *Generator*, at the Sean Kelly Gallery in New York (Fig. 24). In my discussion of these most recent works I will emphasize the limited physical presence of Abramović as she becomes increasingly dependent on her audience to fulfill a dual role as both viewer and performer.

Finally, my thesis concludes with an introduction to Abramović's current work in progress, the Marina Abramović Institute (MAI) in Hudson, New York (Fig. 25); a school that will be dedicated to teaching Abramović's own brand of long-duration performance art called The Abramović Method. Through my discussion of the institute, I will question the significance of the artist's presence once the artist is no longer physically able to contribute to her work. I will argue that the MAI reflects Abramović's

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<sup>58</sup> Guy Debord discusses the problems of the spectacle of art as alienating viewers through "commodity fetish," in which experiences and the real world are mediated through images and therefore cheapened: "everything is merely represented." Debord, Guy. *The Society of the Spectacle*. New York: Zone Books, 1994, 5-7.

concern with securing her legacy in the art historical canon, much like Marcel Duchamp with his 1963 Pasadena retrospective.<sup>59</sup> Drawing from my analysis of Abramović as a sell-out in my previous chapter, here I will contend that “selling out,” and becoming increasingly dependent on a mediated presence is a common dilemma for performance artists whose entire careers have been based off the ephemerality of their work. With this in mind, I will argue that through Abramović’s incorporation of the recurring themes of her career into interactive experiments to be experienced by visitors at the institute, she is attempting to re-conceptualize the museum setting to be a place that educates its visitors through audience interaction and experience rather than through photo documentation and archived remnants.<sup>60</sup> At the MAI, visitors will have the opportunity to see through Abramovićian eyes.<sup>61</sup>

In this thesis, I will contend that as Abramović ages, she is becoming increasingly preoccupied with her fame and with securing her legacy and that this concern is reflected by her increasing documentation and self-promotion, as well as her interest in transitioning into the role of teacher rather than artist. While I am critical of Abramović's attempts to preserve her name through documentation and commercial endeavors, I do

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<sup>59</sup> October 8-November 3, 1963, Marcel Duchamp was featured in a retrospective of his art at the Pasadena Art Museum in which he played chess against a nude woman, Eve Babitz, at the Pasadena Museum in 1963. Claudia Mesch theorizes that Duchamp attempted to reconnect with high art in an effort to secure his spot in the canon of modern art. For this performance Duchamp places himself as a chess player *within* art, in direct contradiction to his previous separation of the two domains. Claudia Mesch, “Serious Play: Games and Early Twentieth-Century Modernism,” in *From Diversion to Subversion: Games, Play, and Twentieth-century Art*, 2011, ed. David Getsy, 60-72.

<sup>60</sup> Once again, this interest in “re-conceptualizing” collections-based practices in favor of participation and education reflects the ideals of New Institutionalism. Claire Doherty, “The Institution is Dead! Long Live the Institution! Contemporary Art and New Institutionalism.” *Engage: Arts of Encounter*. Issue 15, Summer 2004, pp. 1-9. 2004.

<sup>61</sup> Helen Walters, “Marina Abramović on Humor, Vulnerability, and Failure,” *Ideas.Ted.Com*, Accessed March 17, 2015, <http://ideas.ted.com/marina-abramovic-on-humor-vulnerability-and-failure/>



believe that she is still committed to testing her mental and physical limitations, as well as those of her audience. The means by which she accomplishes this, however, is tied to her own goals of self-preservation; therefore between 2010 and 2015 Abramović's once physical, challenging presence has become more of guiding force, increasingly mediated through photographs, relics, and even the fans themselves, that represent the "Abramović brand" of performance. While many Abramović's recent performances fall flat due to their reliance on documentation or the removal of the artist, the opening of the MAI in 2015 represents a monumental step forward for the preservation of performance art. At the MAI Abramović's presence will be mediated not through photographs or film, but through the very bodies of her visitors whose participation in her long-duration experiments will complete Abramović's forty-year process of dissolving the line between viewer and performer. Abramović's institute, through its emphasis on the live experiences of its visitors, has the potential to achieve what many artists and curators have failed to achieve before, which is the preservation of the ephemeral medium of performance art in a new type of art institute where the presence of the artist can live on in the actions of the viewers.

## CHAPTER II

### THE ARTIST IS PRESENT

“I have arrived at the conclusion that...the performance has no meaning without the public because, as Duchamp said it is the public that completes the work of art. In the case of performance, I would say that public and performer are not only complimentary but almost inseparable.”

--Marina Abramović, 2012.<sup>62</sup>

In 2010 Marina Abramović was honored as the focus of the MoMA's first retrospective of performance art: *The Artist is Present*. Abramović sat in silence in the museum's Donald B. and Catherine C. Marron Atrium for six days a week, seven hours a day. Each day between March 14 and May 31, Abramović sat and silently engaged with whomever sat across from her, for however long the participant wished to stay (Fig. 26). In this performance, Abramović was continuing to develop her early interest in challenging passive modes of viewership through the use of duration, and by questioning the distinction between the viewer and performer. However, the ways in which Abramović, and her viewers are tested mentally and physically in *The Artist is Present* are markedly different from the often threatening and violent interactions of her performances from the 1970s.

In contrast to Abramović's previous works such as the earlier mentioned *Rhythm Series* (1973-74) (Figs. 3, 9-10) or *Lips of Thomas* (1975) (Fig. 5-6), *The Artist is Present* challenges passive viewership in a welcoming rather than confrontational manner, by

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<sup>62</sup> “The Abramović Method,” Sean Kelly Gallery, <http://www.skny.com/artists/marina-abramovi/>

inviting each visitor to sit across from Abramović and receive her “unconditional love.”<sup>63</sup> By placing herself in one of two identical chairs and locking eyes with the person across from her, Abramović sets herself allegedly on equal ground with the viewer. Instead of a table of props for pleasure or pain as used in *Rhythm 0* (Fig. 27), in *The Artist is Present* the viewer and performer are limited to a psychological interaction in the present moment through their shared gaze. However, the now well-recognized celebrity status of the artist complicates the proposed equality between performer and viewer. Nearly fourteen hundred people chose to sit across from Abramović between March and May 2010, some for a couple of minutes, and others for hours, or even the entire day. The artist’s physical presence in this performance was crucial, and is the factor that drew massive crowds to the exhibition.<sup>64</sup>

Even though *The Artist is Present* represents a departure from the more physically aggressive tactics of the artist’s performances from the 1970s and 1980s, distinct themes have carried through from Abramović’s very first performances to the present, premised on her continued use of her body. In my discussion of Abramović’s retrospective at the MoMA I will consider her performance in relation to the categories of duration, body, spectatorship, and site in order to demonstrate the increasingly dual role of performer and viewer, as well as to question Abramović’s somewhat paradoxical reliance on documentation to preserve her oeuvre. I will argue that the growing emphasis on the role of the viewer reflects the changing role of Abramović’s presence in her long-duration

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<sup>63</sup> Emma Brockes, “Performance artist Marina Abramović: ‘I was ready to die.’” *The Guardian*, May 12, 2014, <http://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2014/may/12/marina-abramovic-ready-to-die-serpentine-gallery-512-hours>

<sup>64</sup> A few visitors returned to sit with Abramović so many times they were termed “mini-celebrities,” a shared fame that supports Abramović’s interest in the dual agency between performer and viewer.

performances from one of physical aggression to one of openness as an educator in preparation for the day she can no longer personally lead the physically and mentally draining performances around which her career is built.

### **Duration: And the Issue of Re-Performance**

An attraction to endurance, risk, and spirituality has been inherent in Abramović's life and works since her childhood.<sup>65</sup> In 1974, following her loss of consciousness amongst the flames during her performance *Rhythm 5* (Fig. 9), Abramović's fascination with risk and suffering transitioned into an interest in testing the limits of the mind and body through long-duration performances, performances she defines as being six hours or more.<sup>66</sup> In an interview with Amelia Jones, Abramović declared that a successful performance "demands duration."<sup>67</sup> Between 1974 and today, Abramović has become the spokesperson for long-duration performance, the artist goes as far as to define the Abramović Method of performance art as that which "trains the audience with the skills to observe long duration performance."<sup>68</sup> *The Artist is Present* is Abramović's longest-

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<sup>65</sup> In the catalogue for *The Artist is Present* exhibition, Arthur C. Danto notes that Abramović's fascination with risk and suffering as one that she began to explore when she was as young as fourteen, when she would play Russian roulette in her room: "When I was in Yugoslavia, I was always thinking that art was a kind of question between life and death, and some of my performances really included the possibility of dying." Abramović, Marina and Klaus Biesenbach. 2010. *Marina Abramović: The Artist is Present*. New York: Museum of Modern Art, 31.

<sup>66</sup> *Rhythm 5* (1974): In this piece Abramović built a communist five-pointed star from wood, set it on fire, then lay at the center of it. The severity of the flames caused Abramović to lose consciousness, and she had to be rescued by members of the audience. Her failure to complete this performance inspired Abramović to make the limits of the body and mind the focus of her performance art, a focus that she has continued to today through long-duration performances. In her recently published catalog for MAI, Abramović defines long-duration performance art as performances that are six hours or more. Marina Abramović, Shohei Shigematsu, Thomas Berloff, and Serge Le Borgne. *Marina Abramović Institute*. ORE Cultura srl, Milan. 2013.

<sup>67</sup> Amelia Jones, 2011, "'The Artist is Present': Artistic Re-enactments and the Impossibility of Presence," TDR: The Drama Review, Volume 55, Number 1, Spring 2011 (T209), p.32 MIT Press.

<sup>68</sup> Marina Abramović, Shohei Shigematsu, Thomas Berloff, and Serge Le Borgne. *Marina Abramović*

running performance work, and the exhibition emphasizes the important role of duration not only through the three-month period of the performance itself, but also through the very act of waiting in line. Abramović emphasized that waiting was very important to the performance.<sup>69</sup> If one never made it to the front of the line before the museum closed, this was not to be interpreted as a failure on the part of the visitor. Instead, by waiting in line potentially for hours, Abramović intended that visitors use that time to focus on being “present” in the space. Additionally, by allowing visitors to sit with Abramović for however long they wished, Abramović wanted each visitor to have sufficient time to adjust to the overwhelming spectacle of the piece. Only after the visitor became comfortable under the scrutiny of both Abramović’s and the surrounding audience, could they fully look inward and be fully present with themselves in the space. While Abramović’s claims of the importance of waiting in line in order to adjust to the spectacle of the performance are valid, it is questionable how many visitors could actually achieve the quiet, inner presence Abramović urged her visitors to grasp while they were surrounded by hundreds of other visitors awkwardly crammed together in line. If nothing else, the lengthy periods of time waiting in line reinforced the spectacular spectacle of Abramović’s celebrity presence in the atrium for which such crowds would endure hours waiting for the mere chance of a viewing.<sup>70</sup>

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*Institute*. ORE Cultura srl, Milan. 2013, 43.

<sup>69</sup> Marina Abramović, "Marina Abramovic: The Artist Is Present: The Legacy of Performance." Museum of Modern Art, New York. June 2, 2010. DVD.

<sup>70</sup> These immense crowds of people who lined up, and even camped out outside MoMA for the chance of sitting with Abramović have been called members of the “Abramović Cult,” a perhaps fitting title for anyone willing to wait up to seven hours in line to sit across from the artist. Vartanian, Hrag. “MoMA’s Abramović Ends with a Bang.” *Hyperallergic*. Published June 1, 2010. <http://hyperallergic.com/6611/moma-abramovic-line-ends/>.

The emphasis on duration in *The Artist is Present* extends beyond Abramović's silent repose in the MoMA atrium. The larger exhibition includes re-enactments of her many iconic performances through photographs, films, and props in the exhibition galleries on the sixth floor (Figs. 28-29). Quantifying the duration of *The Artist is Present* is complicated by the attempts made to extend Abramović's previous performances into the present through re-performance.<sup>71</sup> In preparation for *The Artist is Present*, Abramović selected thirty-six performers to take on the task of re-enacting some of her most famous works. Prior to the exhibition these performers attended an intensive four-day retreat where they were trained in Abramović's long-durational method of performance that they would later apply to their own re-enactments at the MoMA.<sup>72</sup>

This was not Abramović's first experimentation with re-performance. In 2005 Abramović presented *Seven Easy Pieces*, at the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum in New York, where she re-enacted five performances by other prominent performance artists from the 1960s and 1970s, as well as one piece of her own (Figs. 30-36).<sup>73</sup> Each day the selected performance took place over seven hours, emphasizing Abramović's trademark of durational performance. On the sixth day Abramović re-performed her own

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<sup>71</sup> Thirty-six dancers and performers took turns re-enacting Abramović's iconic 1970s performances such as *Imponderabilia* and *Relation in Time*. These performances, as well as the use of documentation have received criticism as contradictory to the living presence of Abramović downstairs, as well as to the ephemeral nature of performance. Amelia, Jones "The Artist is Present": Artistic Re-enactments and the Impossibility of Presence" *TDR: The Drama Review*, Volume 55, Number 1, Spring 2011 (T209), pp. 16-45. MIT Press. 2011.

<sup>72</sup> Klaus Biesenbach describes the activities of the retreat as follows: "Participants slept outside, consumed only green tea and water, remained silent, and engaged in a structured series of individual and communal exercises, such as walking in slow motion, counting grains of rice, and observing a single object for hours." *Ibid.*, 18. These activities draw strong parallels to the exercise currently being promoted alongside Abramović's Marina Abramović Institute, called the Abramović Method.

<sup>73</sup> Abramović selected Bruce Nauman's *Body Pressure* (1974), Vito Acconci's *Seedbed* (1972), VALIE EXPORT's *Action Pants: Genital Panic* (c.1969), Gina Pane's *The Conditioning* (1973), and Joseph Beuys' *How to Explain Pictures to a Dead Hare* (1973).

1975 work, *Lips of Thomas* (Figs. 34-35), before ending the exhibition with a new performance titled *Entering the Other Side* (Fig. 36), in which she appears to first get the idea for *The Artist is Present*, by declaring that “The artist is present, here and now.”<sup>74</sup> Abramović’s re-performances at the Guggenheim received mixed reviews from her audience due to the controversial nature of attempting to recreate famous performances by not one, but five iconic artists. But unlike the re-performances upstairs at *The Artist is Present*, at *Seven Easy Pieces* and Abramović’s performance in the MoMA atrium, viewers were able to watch the artist herself demonstrate the trials of extended performance. While Abramović’s re-enactments at the Guggenheim were not original or entirely unpredictable, the artist’s presence could not be questioned. Indeed, by attempting to replace the role of famous artists such as Nauman and Beuys with her own body, Abramović symbolically promoted herself as the most important presence of all. In contrast, on the sixth floor of the MoMA, visitors were limited to watching Abramović’s protégées take turns re-creating some of Abramović’s most famous works. Neither duration nor the artist’s presence is reflected in the re-performances, a lack that starkly contrasts with the highly charged, embodied experience of artist-viewer exchange in the atrium of the museum.

While I was unable to attend either of these performances in person, the extensive documentation of both events in the form of photographs, documentaries, and interviews, has allowed me access to details of both the performances beyond what the average

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<sup>74</sup> For this performance, Abramović emerged from a tent-like, blue ball gown that covered the stage at the center of the Guggenheim, and lifted her raised Abramović almost to the height of the second floor of the museum. For the entire seven hours of the performance she simply turns slowly from side to side and looks kindly upon her audience, ending the week of physically brutal performances with one of serenity and appreciation for the presence of herself and her audience. *Marina Abramović: The Artist is Present*, directed by Matthew Akers; Produced by Jeffrey Dupre (2012; Chicago, IL: Music Box Films), DVD.

viewer would have obtained from attending the live event. Of course, analysis of photographs, film, and viewer reactions cannot fully recreate the original, living spectacle of the artist performing. As an outsider, one is left to speculate what the actual experience of the performance would be like, thus underscoring the necessity of a new, more interactive means for preserving performance in art institutions, as is advocated by New Institutionalism. Abramović herself claims, “The only real way to document a performance art piece is to re-perform the piece itself.” Despite this declaration, Abramović’s performances over the last five years have become increasingly reliant on documentation and self-promotion to preserve the ephemeral experience.<sup>75</sup>

While Abramović’s live performance in the MoMA atrium drew record crowds, the re-performances in the galleries received some scathing reviews.<sup>76</sup> Jones describes the failure of these re-enactments as a representation of the common issue of performance artists trying to freeze time: “The re-enactment both testifies to our desire to know the past in order to secure ourselves in the present, and the paradox of that knowledge always taking place through *repetition*. It thus exposes the paradox of that knowledge, proving our own inexorable mortality: the fact that we are always reaching to secure time, and always failing.”<sup>77</sup> Jones’ criticism of re-enactments as failed attempts to stop time rings true with the placement of the re-enactments at the MoMA surrounded by ephemera from Abramović’s life and works. The placement of a van that Abramović and Ulay lived in in

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<sup>75</sup> Marina Abramović, 2007, *7 Easy Pieces*, Milan: Charta, 11

<sup>76</sup> In the New York Times article “700-Hour Silent Opera Reaches Finale at MoMA,” Holland Cotter criticizes the re-enactments of Abramović’s 1970s performances as “falling flat” due to their lack of unpredictability and ephemerality, saying, “without them you get misrepresented history and bad theater.”

<sup>77</sup> Amelia Jones, 2011. ““The Artist is Present”: Artistic Re-enactments and the Impossibility of Presence” TDR: The Drama Review, Volume 55, Number 1, Spring 2011 (T209), pp. 18. MIT Press.



the same room as a re-enactment of their piece *Relation in Time* (1977) comes off as contrived rather than successfully grounding the visitor in the time in which the piece was originally conceived. This question of the capacity of re-enactments to preserve performance also applies to Abramović's current project, the MAI, where re-enactments have been reconceived as experiments that will be enacted by the visitors themselves. Perhaps if the MAI's participatory approach were applied at *The Artist is Present* visitors would have felt more of a connection to the re-enactments upstairs.

Abramović is by no means the only performance artist who has attempted to recreate or repeat her performances. Yoko Ono's *Cut Piece*, for example, was performed a total of six times between 1964 and 2003. As I will discuss, the question of an artist's ability to successfully capture the essence of performance is especially important considering Abramović's current project, the MAI—the artist's ongoing attempt to preserve the legacy of her long-duration performance art for future generations through re-enactments and a classroom-like setting. The integration of performance art into art institutions is still relatively new, and the issue of presenting and preserving the ephemeral medium has proved challenging for both artists and curators. Conventionally, to institutionalize performance into a collections-based museum one would need to treat performance as a typical art object like a drawing or painting, that can be displayed and safely stored away. The transient nature of performance complicates this "white cube" approach, one that performance artists vehemently combatted in the 1960s and 1970s. Thus the dialogic and participatory approach of New Institutionalism becomes important

towards including performance art as part of museum practices without excluding the open-ended, ephemeral, and participatory elements that define the medium.<sup>78</sup>

### **Artist Body: Mental and Physical Exertion in Abramović's Performances**

The artist's physical presence appears to be crucial for the full effectiveness of performance, as is suggested by the widespread critiques of the artist's re-enactments at the MoMA. If the successful presentation and preservation of performance in a museum signifies maintaining the open-ended, ephemeral, and participatory elements of performance, the re-enactments upstairs were not complete failures, as they did advocate audience participation. However, these re-performances were trying to replicate works that most Abramović fans would have been familiar with, therefore affecting the unpredictability of the piece. Different performers also performed these works repeatedly in cycles, a repetition that ruined the unpredictability, and significantly lowered the impact of mental and physical endurance Abramović's original pieces emphasized. Due to these inconsistencies the re-enactments failed to fully preserve the performances into an institutional setting, but rather created well intentioned but superficial displays.<sup>79</sup> In

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<sup>78</sup> Doherty and Crow describe how artists beginning in the 1960s began to combat the exclusive and limiting nature of the white cube of institutions, and began creating works that emphasized audience participation. Doherty promotes the increased interest in participation began in the 1960s-70s became definitive of New Institutionalism starting in the 1990s. Claire Doherty, "The Institution is Dead! Long Live the Institution! Contemporary Art and New Institutionalism." *Engage: Arts of Encounter*. Issue 15, Summer 2004, pp. 1-9. 2004. Thomas E. Crow, *The Rise of the Sixties: American and European Art in the Era of Dissent*. Perspectives (Harry N. Abrams, Inc.). New York, N.Y.: Harry N. Abrams, 1996, pp. 105-133.

<sup>79</sup> A similar failure to preserve performance is found in another MoMA exhibition, also held in the Donald B. and Catherine C. Marron Atrium: the Björk Retrospective (March 8-June 7, 2015). The exhibition received widespread criticism, including an especially harsh review *Artnet's* Christian Viveros-Fauné who called the exhibition a fiasco for which Klaus Biesenbach should be fired. The Björk exhibition once again demonstrates the downfall of attempting to preserve the ephemerality of performance through photographs and props. In the case of Björk, it was the reliance on a series of what one critic referred to as "creepy mannequins" and ephemera that failed to replicate the "experience" of Björk. Christian Viveros-Fauné, "MoMA Curator Klaus Biesenbach Should Be Fired Over Björk Show Debacle," *Artnet*, Published March 24, 2015, <https://news.artnet.com/art-world/how-will-momas-bjork-debacle-impact-klaus-biesenbach->

direct contrast to the varied responses to the re-enactments upstairs, enthusiastic spectators waited in line for hours for the mere chance of sitting with Abramović and becoming a part of her original performance. These lines of visitors were so extensive that they inspired a drawing by artist Jason Polan (Fig. 37) and an *Artist is Present* video game by Pippin Barr (Figs.38-39).<sup>80</sup> While neither of these men appear to criticize the performance through their depictions, (in particular Barr was later commissioned to design a video game for the MAI) Polan, with his crowded line drawing, and Barr through his video-game rendition of the exhibition, emphasize the ridiculousness of the spectacle created by the simple act of waiting in line to see the famous artist.

For Abramović, the body, and specifically her own body, has been the means through which she has connected to, and drawn her audience over the last forty years. When Abramović turned from painting to performance in the 1970s, she shocked her audiences by placing her own body at risk for serious injury in her attempts to test her mental and physical limits. During the 1970s many women artists turned to body art in performance as a means to question spectatorial norms, a concern reflected in Abramović's *Rhythm 0* (1974) (Fig. 10) in which she intensified her previous acts of self-sacrifice by making herself as a passive object subject to the whims of her audience. In this performance there was a real risk of physical harm to Abramović at the unpredictable hands of her viewers, however, this is practically nonexistent forty years later in *The*

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279582. Ben Davis, "Ladies and Gentlemen, the Björk Show at MoMA is Bad, Really Bad," *Artnet*, Published Tuesday, March 3, 2015, <https://news.artnet.com/art-world/ladies-and-gentlemen-the-bjork-show-at-moma-is-bad-273020>

<sup>80</sup> In *The Artist is Present* video game, players attempt to survive the massive lines in order to enter the museum and eventually make it to the chair across from Abramović before the museum closes for the day. The game reflects Abramović's long durational performance, in that it could likely take hours to even enter the museum, much less meet the artist. Pippin Barr was also recruited to design a video game for The Abramović Institute. Both games can be found on Barr's website: <http://www.pippinbarr.com/category/games/>

*Artist is Present*. Sitting quietly in her chair, Abramović is separated from the crowds by ropes and protected from any possible risk of verbal or physical harassment by security guards stationed throughout the space. Judith Thurman of *The New Yorker* called these museum security guards the “unsung heroes of the piece.”<sup>81</sup> Despite immense opportunities for problems, attempts to disrupt the performance were minimal, and the overall mood of the retrospective was described as that of a spectacular festival attended by some bizarre characters, rather than a risky or controversial performance (Fig. 40).<sup>82</sup>

A crucial part that lent to the more festive atmosphere of the performance is the same factor that inspired the feelings of discomfort and anxiety in Abramović’s early performances: the body of Abramović herself. In 1970s performances such as *Lips of Thomas* (1975) (Figs. 5-6) or *Rhythm 10* (1973) (Fig. 3), Abramović created a charged environment by performing nude and by physically harming herself.<sup>83</sup> In contrast, in *The Artist is Present*, Abramović is fully clothed and sits calmly in her chair (Fig. 41). In her performances from the 1970s, the intimacy and vulnerability of Abramović’s exposed flesh confronted the gaze of the viewer. She subsequently disturbed them through the acts of violence she inflicted upon herself. In *The Artist is Present*, the connection between

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<sup>81</sup> Judith Thurman, 2012. “Marina Abramović: The Artist is Once Again Present.” *The New Yorker*. June 18, 2012. <http://www.newyorker.com/culture/culture-desk/marina-abramovic-the-artist-is-once-again-present>.

<sup>82</sup> The rules of *The Artist is Present* asserted that visitors must sit silently across from Abramović and not attempt to engage her physically. While largely this rule was obeyed, there were those who attempted to connect with Abramović further. On the last day of the performance, one woman attempted to strip her clothes off. Another person threw pamphlets down from the balconies, and a final man managed to make himself throw up just inside the ropes of the atrium. These events were uncommon, and quickly resolved by security who escorted members from the premises. Hrag Vartanian, “MoMA’s Abramović Ends with a Bang.” *Hyperallergic*. Published June 1, 2010. <http://hyperallergic.com/6611/moma-abramovic-line-ends/>.

<sup>83</sup> In *Lips of Thomas*, Abramović stood naked and cut a five-pointed star into her stomach using a razorblade after which she whipped herself repeatedly. In *Rhythm 10*, Abramović, stabbed repeatedly at her hands with a selection of ten different knives. After using each knife once, she repeated the task again, this time attempting to replicate her original movements and cuts. The performance was over when each knife was used twice, by which time the white paper on which Abramović kneeled was splattered with her blood.

the viewer and the performer is no longer one of aggression and confrontation, but one of shared intimacy through the gaze. Rather than using her averted gaze to question passive objectification as in her 1974 *Rhythm 0*, in *The Artist is Present* the visitor becomes an ally who, through a returned gaze, shares responsibility for the outcome of the performance. Abramović described the 2010 performance as an act of unconditional love between herself and the public: “I understand that you can bring out the worst in people and the best. And I found out how I can turn that into love. My whole idea at MoMA was to give out unconditional love to every stranger, which I did.”<sup>84</sup> Further emphasizing Abramović’s change in approach to her relationship with her spectators, she now critiques the aggressive nature of some of her performances from the 1970s as tactics that were meant to provoke in a period of political activism, and resulted in violent reactions.<sup>85</sup> Abramović no longer looks at her audience as enemies to be punished with violent spectacles, but as allies who will help secure her fame and preserve her legacy.

Sitting in her chair in the Donald B. and Catherine C. Marron atrium of the MoMA, Abramović basked in the acknowledgement of her significance to the field of performance art, a fact confirmed by her representation as the main attraction in a major art institution, and by the constant crowds attending the show. For each person who sat across from her, Abramović gave herself to them martyr-like, however, her experience is unlike her martyrdom in *Rhythm 0*, or Ono’s in *Cut Piece*, in which their submissive stances and averted gazes resulted in aggression from the audience. In *The Artist is*

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<sup>84</sup> Emma Brockes, “Performance artist Marina Abramović: ‘I was ready to die.’” *The Guardian*, May 12, 2014, <http://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2014/may/12/marina-abramovic-ready-to-die-serpentine-gallery-512-hours>

<sup>85</sup> “the other one was a challenge to every bad energy possible; if you give the guy a chain saw...you are provoking him.” Ibid.

*Present* Abramović's posture remains passive, but is accompanied by a returned gaze, on the other side of which, over three months, sat thousands of adoring fans. Not a single visitor is documented as attempting to harm the artist. In fact, the most aggressive actions by visitors were still ones of love and adulation enacted by enamored fans.<sup>86</sup> More than Abramović it was these fans that truly practiced the artist's goal of giving unconditional love, making multiple trips to the chair, some sitting for hours in rapt attention. By removing the aggressive tactics of her past performances and just sitting, Abramović placed herself as a blank canvas to be approached and to connect with.

In *The Artist is Present* Abramović rejected the aggressive and discomfiting visual tactics of her previous performances in favor of a spectacle built completely from the exhibition of her own celebrity presence. Abramović's interest in creating an atmosphere of love and acceptance follows one of the Serbian artist's other interests, that of teaching. Through the act of sitting silent and still each day over the three months of the performance, Abramović emptied herself in a similar manner as she did for *Rhythm 0*, but without becoming a passive object for the audience's manipulation. In *The Artist is Present* Abramović described her role as a mirror through which the shared, mutual gaze allowed the viewers to share and reflect upon their own role in the performance.<sup>87</sup>

Whether or not Abramović was able to actually achieve a mirror-like state between

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<sup>86</sup> Some Abramović fans showed up in wedding dresses or matching gowns, and one woman attempted to strip off her clothes to be naked in front of Abramović. But none of these actions were violent or intended to be harmful, but rather appeared as attempts by these visitors to convey their adoration of a highly influential artist. Judith Thurman, 2012. "Marina Abramović: The Artist is Once Again Present." *The New Yorker*. June 18, 2012. <http://www.newyorker.com/culture/culture-desk/marina-abramovic-the-artist-is-once-again-present>.

<sup>87</sup> In the documentary "The Artist is Present," Abramović describes her role in her 2010 performance as that of a mirror of the viewer. By placing herself as a mirror, Abramović indicates that the viewer is a reflection of the performer and vice versa. The experience of the both artist and the spectator becomes one of mutual reflection.

herself and her visitor is difficult to know. The portraits of sitters taken by Marco Anelli throughout the exhibition depict a variety of reactions ranging from seeming indifference or skepticism, to joy, serenity, and finally anguish, tears running down their faces. But these portraits fail to depict the actual source of the resulting emotions. Abramović herself emphasized the importance to the performance of waiting, both in line and in the chair, in order to overcome the distractions and feelings of self-consciousness that understandably accompanied sitting at the center of attention watched not only by hundreds of visitors at the museum, but also by security guards, photographers, and the most famous performance artist alive. For the average person these factors would be very hard to overcome in order to achieve the state of shared reflection and education in long-duration performance that Abramović proposed.

This is not to say that Abramović and her audience did not also experience physical discomfort during the course of the nearly three-month performance. During this period of time Abramović logged over seven hundred hours on her chair. The act of sitting motionless in a simple wooden chair becomes excruciating. Mentally, the act of emptying oneself to a completely passive state is exhausting, and requires immense physical and mental endurance. *The Artist is Present* draws parallels to *Nightsea Crossing* (Fig. 42-43), a series of twenty-two performances between 1981 and 1987 by Abramović and fellow artist Uwe Laysiepen, or Ulay, in which they sat silently across from each other in chairs for seven hours a day.<sup>88</sup> Through this series of performances Abramović and Ulay attempted to portray the continuation of inner consciousness despite exterior motionlessness. The immense self-discipline to simply sit, quiet and still for

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<sup>88</sup> Ulay even made a special appearance at *The Artist is Present*, a surprise that caused Abramović to break from her Zen stillness for the only time in the three-month exhibition, in order to reach out and take Ulay's hand.

extended periods of time, reflects the ritualistic tendencies that have followed Abramović through her career.<sup>89</sup> In Abramović's adaption of *Nightsea Crossing* in *The Artist is Present*, Abramović replaced Ulay with the changing multitude of museum visitors, and in doing so redefined the powerful presence of the artist's body to include and encompass the audience and to be viewed as a whole. Artist and spectator became entwined as shared offerings to the overall spectacle of the performance. However, despite Abramović's attempts to replace Ulay's role with any museum visitor, Abramović clearly retains the upper hand. In no way can one claim that Abramović and her average visitor were equals in their roles as viewer and performer, due once again, to the fact that the average visitor would not have accomplished the self-discipline that both Abramović and Ulay had when they sat together in *Nightsea Crossing*. This lack of training is an important aspect Abramović's institute for long-duration performance art will address. Unlike in *The Artist is Present*, where visitors of any background could attempt to replicate Abramović's methods using as much time as they wished, at the MAI visitors will be required to spend six hours at the institute during which they will be given the education necessary to participate and to fully appreciate the mental and physical endurance required for a performance like *The Artist is Present*.

### **Spectatorship**

In *The Artist is Present* the shared agency between performer and viewer is complex. Their interaction is not limited to the two of them, but also extends to those waiting in line at the museum, and the thousands of people who watched the event

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<sup>89</sup> Through Abramović's strict adherence to the rules, the act of repetition, and by embracing risk of possible physical and psychological suffering, Abramović has repeatedly experimented with ritualized acts of sacrifice in her performances.



through the MoMA's live feed online.<sup>90</sup> Audience interaction has been a major component of Abramović's performance since the 1970s. *The Artist is Present* is the culmination of an increasingly liberated and active viewer, in which the visitor is no longer merely interacting in the performance, but is in fact a physical part of the performance, a role emphasized through the documented photographs of each sitter, captured by photographer Marco Anelli (Fig. 44).<sup>91</sup> Through these portraits, people who sat with Abramović became themselves art objects, each representing that particular visitor's absorption of Abramović's presence.<sup>92</sup> Of course, these photographs are also another element of the exhibition that contradicts the living, ephemeral nature of performance art. Much like the photographs and relics displayed upstairs alongside the re-enactments, the portraits of sitters reflect Abramović's contradictory relationship with documentation, in which she simultaneously argues for ephemerality and a focus on the present moment in performance, while also attempting to fit her work within a collections-based art institution. This contradictory use of documentation illustrates Guy Debord's argument in his influential *Society of the Spectacle* (1967) in which he criticizes

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<sup>90</sup> Shared agency is a concept that can be traced back to Dada and the idea of collaborative art. In my discussion I define "shared agency" as reflective of Joyce Cheng's description of Dadaist Sophie Taeuber's dual agency in dance between herself and her puppets. Dual agency refers to a shared vital role in performance in which each member is equally dependent on the other in order for the performance to succeed. In the case of Taeuber and her marionettes this is seen in the successfully fluid movement between doll and dancer. For Abramović this duality is shared between viewer and performer. In *The Artist is Present*, I argue that the shared agency is not just between Abramović and the person seated across from her, but that she is equally dependent on every single viewer, both at the museum and online to fulfill the spectacle of the performance. Cheng, Joyce. "Cardboard Toys and Dancing Marionettes: Play, Materiality and Agency in Zurich Dada." in *Virgin Microbe: Essays on Dada*. Edited by David Hopkins, 275-309. 2014.

<sup>91</sup> The liberation of the viewer will increase even more upon the opening of the Marina Abramović Institute where the visitors' experience of various durational exercises will stand in place for the physical presence of Abramović. The visitor will become simultaneously viewer and performer.

<sup>92</sup> In a symposium held following *The Artist is Present*, Abramović and curator Klaus Biesenbach described the portraits taken by Anelli as "another artwork within the artwork." "Marina Abramovic: The Artist Is Present: The Legacy of Performance," Museum of Modern Art, New York, June 2, 2010, DVD.

the mediation of experiences through images, an issue he refers to as “commodity fetish,” an issue that has only worsened since the 1960s with the development of social media.<sup>93</sup>

*The Artist is Present* represents the beginning of Abramović’s experimentation on how to incorporate her audience into her performances as a means to preserve her legacy in a participatory manner; however, the exhibition still falls back on conventional museum and gallery practices of preserving performance through photographs and film.<sup>94</sup>

In the thirty years since Abramović first stood passively in front of her audience in the Galleria Studio Morra in Italy, Abramović has risen in prominence, now widely regarded as one of the most influential figures in the history of performance art. *The Artist is Present* retrospective officially confirmed Abramović’s iconic status in the realm of performance. The theatrical spectacle succeeded in drawing immense crowds to the museum. Many visitors lined up outside the museum, even camping out in order to ensure a greater chance at getting a seat across from Abramović. This performance secured Abramović’s celebrity status, a position she warmly welcomed with her collaborations in the years following this exhibition. While the museum estimates that half a million people visited all or part of the retrospective, the spectacle of Abramović and her hoards of fans also drew crowds online. The museum’s daily live feed on

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<sup>93</sup> Debord argues that spectacles are increasingly reliant on images to mediate reality and to earn a profit: “everything that was directly lived is now merely represented.” The idea of life represented through images is emphasized in contemporary society through the sharing of endless images through social media sites, shared not only by audience members, but promoted by the museums and galleries themselves. Guy Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle*, New York: Zone Books, 1994, 7.

<sup>94</sup> In contrast to the collections-based museum that relies on objects that can be displayed and archived, the MAI will be an institute built around live performance and education. The education-based practices of the MAI replace material preservation through photographs and relics, with immaterial preservation through direct experience. These participatory and educational practices reflect the aims of New Institutionalism by balancing a range of museum functions rather than placing a singular performance or exhibition on a pedestal. Alex Farquharson, “Bureaux de change.” *Frieze Magazine*. Published on February 9, 2006, pp. 2-3, [http://www.frieze.com/issue/article/bureaux\\_de\\_change/](http://www.frieze.com/issue/article/bureaux_de_change/)

*moma.org* drew nearly 800,000 hits, while a Flickr site that posted headshots of the sitters, was accessed almost 600,000 times.<sup>95</sup>

Abramović cannot escape the spectacle her celebrity instantly creates, and apparently has no desire to do so. Each day Abramović adorned herself in a costume both subdued and glamorous. The long, formal gowns she wore changed each month based on her energy. The first month she wore a blue gown for tranquility, followed by a red gown for energy and strength. The final month Abramović wore white as a symbol of purity<sup>96</sup>. Her hair was consistently braided over her shoulder, her skin pale and natural (Fig. 45). While Abramović rarely appeared to react to the actions of those sitting before her, she claims that the experience between herself and her visitors was an intense give and take initiated by the artist: “Unconditional love with someone you’ve never met is a straightforward feeling that is so overwhelming and fulfilling. It’s not easy to do. I was trying to set up a zone where I was really empty. I am receiver and sender at the same time.”<sup>97</sup>

Abramović’s influence over her audience as well her superior level of preparedness for the piece is undeniable, however, as was the case in 1974 with *Rhythm 0*, the performances fulfillment is equally dependent on her audience’s participation.

Through the simple act of engaging through a silent gaze, Abramović attempted to place

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<sup>95</sup> Cotter, Holland, “700-Hour Silent Opera Reaches Finale at MoMA,” *The New York Times*, Published May 30, 2010, <http://www.nytimes.com/2010/05/31/arts/design/31diva.html>

<sup>96</sup> The final month Abramović also removed the table that originally sat between her and her visitor, literally removing a barrier that limited the viewer’s interaction with the artist. Julia Kaganskiy, “Visitor Viewpoint: Marina Abramović,” *Museum of Modern Art*, March 29, 2010, [http://www.moma.org/explore/inside\\_out/2010/03/29/visitor-viewpoint-marina-abramovic/](http://www.moma.org/explore/inside_out/2010/03/29/visitor-viewpoint-marina-abramovic/)

<sup>97</sup> Alicia Eler, “The Artist is not Present but the Brand Sure is,” *Hyperallergic*, July 17, 2013, <http://hyperallergic.com/75766/the-artist-is-not-present-but-the-brand-sure-is/>

herself and her visitor on the same level. Whoever decided to take the chance to sit in the chair across from Abramović allowed themselves to become equally on display, exposed not only to those immediately around them, but also to those hundreds of thousands of viewers checking in online. For some this exposure was titillating, and resulted in a few visitors returning multiple times, subsequently becoming referred to as “mini celebrities.”<sup>98</sup> This inclusion of her audience as equal participants, however superficially, is an important reflection of Abramović’s attempts to use the MoMA as a ‘new institution,’ in which the visitors are not just viewers, but also participants. By allowing any visitor to sit across from the artist and participate, the MoMA presented itself as an institution interested not only in the production of contemporary art, but also in creating an open dialogue between the museum’s visitors and art and artist’s on display. By emphasizing a shared experience between the artist and viewer, both Abramović and the MoMA embraced New Institutional practices. While this participatory approach was accompanied by the old institutional materialism through photographs and relics from Abramović’s past works, it was a step in the right direction.

However, despite the MoMA’s attempts to create a shared experience between viewer and performer, the sight of Abramović, slightly bent forward in her chair in the museum atrium day after day, is a spectacle of theatrical proportions, a distinction that, for some critics, detracted from Abramović’s purported goal of “unconditional love”:

That’s that classic diva dynamic. And what we’re seeing in the MoMA atrium is basically a 700-hour silent opera. Ms. Abramović, with her extravagant costume, her bent shoulders and her mournful gaze is the prima donna. Visitors are cast as rapt audience, commenting chorus, supporting soloists. Unpredictability is in the

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<sup>98</sup> One visitor named Paco, returned to sit with Abramović twenty-one times. Cotter, Holland, “700-Hour Silent Opera Reaches Finale at MoMA,” *The New York Times*, Published May 30, 2010, <http://www.nytimes.com/2010/05/31/arts/design/31diva.html>

air: Will she make it through the day? Will she faint from pain? Will she cancel at the last minute?<sup>99</sup>

Despite Abramović's claimed devotion to the increased role of the viewer, the excessive theatricality and documentation of the piece makes *The Artist is Present* more of a seductive spectacle rather than a performance truly aimed at sharing agency with the viewer. Georges Bataille, in his writings on sacrifice and ritual in "Extinct America," (1986) represents the Aztec tribe's relationship to sacrifice as one of theatrical spectacle and violent celebration.<sup>100</sup> Much like the Aztecs, Abramović has never appeared to fear death, but rather has embraced the elements of risk and sacrifice in order to explore her own physical and psychological limits. Bataille also emphasizes the essential role of the spectator in ritualistic sacrifices. He describes scenes of Aztec sacrifice as entertaining, performative spectacles celebrated with thousands of victims, who, prior to their sacrifice, jubilantly danced and smoked.<sup>101</sup> In *The Artist is Present*, the endless lines of people winding through the MoMA are similar to the Aztec's sacrificial parades. In this case, the destination for the final "sacrifice" is the chair placed innocently across from Abramović.

Each of the approximately fourteen hundred visitors who sat across from Abramović "sacrificed" themselves to aid the theatrical spectacle of Abramović's performance. Much like the Aztec processions, the atmosphere at the museum has been described as festive and jovial; however, many of those who sat before Abramović were

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<sup>99</sup> Ibid.

<sup>100</sup> Georges Bataille, and Annette Michelson, 1986, "Extinct America," October, v.36:3-9.

<sup>101</sup> Ibid.

brought to tears by the experience. To enter the Donald B. and Catherine C. Marron Atrium was both exciting and overwhelming, an experience that was intensified through the visual power of Abramović's presence, as well as by the carefully constructed theatricality of the space. The artist was present, and the MoMA was determined to make that fact abundantly, and dramatically clear.

### **Site**

The sites in which Abramović has enacted her performances over the years are very diverse. Over the last forty-one years of her career, Abramović has performed in many of the most prestigious museums and galleries around the world. In a performance called *The Great Wall Walk* (1988) (Fig. 46-47), Abramović and her then artistic partner and lover, Ulay, spent ninety days walking towards each other from opposite ends of the Great Wall of China as a means to end their relationship, both professionally and personally. With each performance, Abramović has managed to transform her space into a stage for spectacular spectacle, and *The Artist is Present* is no different. The location of the retrospective in the MoMA in New York, a major institution, and highly regarded worldwide, immediately demands attention. Abramović and chief curator of the Department of Media and Performance Art at the MoMA, Klaus Biesenbach, ensured that each detail of the performance space aided the theatricality of the piece. The open, abstract space of the Donald B. and Catherine C. Marron Atrium emphasized the dramatic presence of Abramović at the center of the empty room (Fig. 48). Chrissie Iles describes the overwhelming power of the minimalist space as one that encourages the viewer to approach the silent Abramović, while simultaneously the grand location reminds the viewer of the importance of this event as the first performance retrospective

in the history of the museum: “The large space soars upward, drawing in visitors from several entrances and allowing numerous vistas down onto the space from cutaway balconies and long vertical windows on multiple floors above...the vistas and height evoking the open reading of a theatrical spectacle.”<sup>102</sup> The atrium is a space that cannot be missed upon entering the museum, and this prime, dramatic location set Abramović’s performance on center stage.

This is not the first time that Abramović has placed herself in the center of an atrium space, exposed from all sides, as well as from many levels up above. In Abramović’ *Seven Easy Pieces* exhibition at the Guggenheim in 2005, she was placed in a central position in the atrium, from which the artist could easily be observed from anywhere along the museum’s iconic winding ramps. The immense openness of the space, paired with hushed chatter of the crowds of visitors, and the photographers on hand to document each detail of the performances, all added to the spectacle of the exhibition.<sup>103</sup>

In one sense, by placing herself at the center of these soaring, open spaces, completely on display, Abramović dramatically declares her undeniable physical presence. However, while Abramović is literally present, such dramatic spaces within massive institutions draw away from the intimate and jarring connection Abramović claims to strive to achieve with her audiences.<sup>104</sup> Rather than an intimate, unpredictable

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<sup>102</sup> Chrissie Iles, “Marina Abramović and the Public: A Theater of Exchange,” in *Marina Abramović: The Artist is Present*, 2010, ed. Mary Christian (The Museum of Modern Art, New York, 2010), 40.

<sup>103</sup> The question of documentation and commodification of performance art, and performance as brand will be addressed in full in chapter three: Artist as Institution.

<sup>104</sup> The soaring and immaculate spaces of major art institutions crammed with visitors highly contrast the small galleries and school auditoriums Abramović performed in at the beginning of her career, to much

experience, like those achieved in Abramović's shocking early works of the 1970s, *The Artist is Present* at the MoMA, and *Seven Easy Pieces* at the Guggenheim, are both unquestionably rehearsed, and promote theatricality rather than genuine spontaneity. The presence of theatrical elements in performance art is undeniable, but there is a distinct difference between "theater," which is rehearsed and scripted, and Abramović's "performance," which is supposedly dependent on spontaneity and unpredictability. This growing dependence on documentation to mediate her presence in instructing visitors unable to attend her live performances reflects Abramović's insecurity, as she grows older about how to preserve her legacy in still largely collections-based, objects-based art institutions. Despite the growing presence of performance art in art institutions, curators are still grappling with how to handle the ephemerality of the medium. This uncertainty was raised in a symposium following *The Artist is Present* exhibition during which Biesenbach and Abramović discussed the MoMA's ownership of the rights of *The Artist is Present*, meaning that if they wanted to, the MoMA could re-create the piece. While Biesenbach expressed his uncertainty on how this would be accomplished, Abramović proposed a form of re-enactment completely enacted by viewers. This important comment highlights an early stage in Abramović's conception of the MAI which she would officially propose a year later.<sup>105</sup>

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smaller crowds often comprised of fellow students and artists. Marina Abramović: *The Artist is Present*, Klaus Biesenbach, New York: Museum of Modern Art. 2010, 211.

<sup>105</sup> In the symposium Abramović proposes setting up ten sets of chairs in which visitors could sit and connect through a shared gaze for an extended period of time. This idea has since then been applied to one of the chambers in the MAI, known as the Eye Gazing Chamber. Abramović, Marina. "Marina Abramović: The Artist Is Present: The Legacy of Performance." Museum of Modern Art, New York. June 2, 2010. DVD.



At the Guggenheim, tiny microphones were distributed among some of the visitors to the exhibition. From these microphones the conversations of other audience members were recorded, giving insight into their reactions, ranging from positive, to negative, to utter confusion. Whereas some found certain performances, such as Abramović's re-enactment of her own piece, *Lips of Thomas*, shocking and compelling, others questioned the significance of re-enacting such iconic performances of the 1970s. One woman is recorded in the midst of a conversation with another man, discussing Abramović's re-enactment of Joseph Beuys' *How to Explain Pictures to a Dead Hare*:

So...she's going to re-create these pieces, re-creating them so they could be documented or so that people could see them, but then wouldn't you be losing a lot of the original intent?" "You're losing, you are, and adding a whole overlay of all sorts of stuff. And I think again, I think she's very conscious of it.<sup>106</sup>

*The Artist is Present* retrospective was also thoroughly documented, largely due to the dedicated work of filmmaker Matthew Akers in preparation for his documentary "The Artist is Present," which was released in the United States in 2012 (Fig. 19). Akers spent three years trailing Abramović, taking over fourteen hundred hours in film.<sup>107</sup> Akers' memorialization of *The Artist is Present* equals the theatrical nature of the original performance, with Abramović like a queen presenting herself to her loyal subjects.

The immaculately styled space of the MoMA is a far cry from the informal performances Abramović herself describes from the 1970s, where often performances were in alternative spaces and private studios, observed by small audiences frequently made up of groups of friends and other artists: "if twenty people showed up, the

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<sup>106</sup> Ibid., 191.

<sup>107</sup> Judith Thurman, "The Artist is Once Again Present," *The New Yorker*, Published June 18, 2012, <http://www.newyorker.com/culture/culture-desk/marina-abramovic-the-artist-is-once-again-present>

performers would consider themselves lucky. Most of the time there were only about four or five friends there.”<sup>108</sup> With the over half a million people estimated to have attended some or all of *The Artist is Present* exhibition, Abramović must strain to achieve an intimacy once so easily achieved amidst friends and in small galleries and schools. By focusing her energies of “unconditional love,” towards each individual, one at a time, who sat across from her, Abramović used the strongest tool at her disposal, her striking physical presence as one of the most iconic figures in the history of performance art.

With a large institution like the MoMA, Abramović’s giant “presence,” wasn’t limited to one room. Biesenbach described the retrospective as “an overdue version of *The Biography* finally held at a major museum.”<sup>109</sup> Biesenbach also claimed that the performance, video, audio, and photographic works on the sixth floor sufficiently exuded the artist’s presence, yet these pieces rely heavily on the Abramović’s celebrity to give them power. If *The Artist is Present* retrospective was to truly reflect Abramović’s aim, described by Biesenbach as the tension between theatricality and “no rehearsal, no predicted end, no repetition,” then the grandiose documentation displayed on the sixth floor of the museum was unnecessary. It directly exposes one of the many contradictory actions by Abramović, whereby she criticizes photographic documentation of performance as insufficient, while simultaneously seeking to secure her legacy in the art history canon through these very elements of documentation. To truly represent Abramović’s oeuvre of long-duration performance art, *The Artist is Present* exhibition should have emphasized the key elements of the artist’s career: the body, duration, and

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<sup>108</sup> Marina Abramović, 2007, *7 Easy Pieces*, Milan: Charta, 10.

<sup>109</sup> Marina Abramović, and Klaus Biesenbach. 2010. *Marina Abramović: The Artist is Present*. New York: Museum of Modern Art. 19.

most importantly, the spectator. While Abramović's original performance in the Donald B. and Catherine C. Marron Atrium successfully incorporated these elements through emphasis on participation and the live presence of the artist, the re-enactments and photographs in the upstairs galleries fell flat due to their reflection of collections-based, conventional museum practices.

This yearning to secure one's legacy is a common one for artist's as they grow older, and it is an especially difficult task to accomplish when one's medium is immaterial. Marcel Duchamp is an iconic example of an artist who later in life relied heavily on the patronage of major institutions and documentation of his performances made his work more easily accessible to museums and academic publications.<sup>110</sup>

Duchamp's desperation to preserve his legacy was especially emphasized when he famously played a game of chess with a naked Eve Babitz at the Pasadena Art Museum in 1963 (Fig. 49). Similarly, now we see Abramović, who turned sixty-eight in November, 2014, is seeking security for her own legacy. Soon enough, the mentally and physically exhausting long-duration performance works through which Abramović has earned her fame will not be feasible for the artist. Abramović must now consider what will happen once she is no longer able to be physically present for her performances.

Abramović's completion of the *Artist is Present* performance secured her name as the queen of performance art. Her constant presence was matched throughout the exhibition by the presence of cameras and monitoring via the museum's social media team. In continuation of the highly theatrical style of the entire exhibition, Abramović

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<sup>110</sup> Mesch notes that by playing chess against a nude female in a museum setting, he reconnected his art to the high-art tradition of the female nude in Western painting. Claudia Mesch, "Serious Play: Games and Early Twentieth-Century Modernism," Reprinted in David Getsy, ed., *From Diversion to Subversion: Games, Play, and Twentieth-Century Art* (University Park: Pennsylvania State Press, 2011).

and Biesenbach delivered an appropriately dramatic conclusion. On May 31, Biesenbach took the final seat across from Abramović (Fig. 50). Upon exiting his chair, Abramović also stood, then quickly collapsed to the floor (Fig. 51). She then picked herself up, twirled around, and, to use Hrag Vartanian's phrasing "worked the crowd, just like a R-O-C-K-S-T-A-R." (Figs. 52-54) <sup>111</sup>

In *The Artist is Present* Abramović embarked upon a journey of transforming herself into a dual role as artist and teacher of performance art. For Abramović performance is all about presence:

The performance is really about presence. If you escape presence, your performance is gone. It is always you, the mind, and the body. You have to be in the here and now, one hundred percent. If you're not, the public is like a dog: they sense the insecurity. Then they just leave. <sup>112</sup>

The question is, with the MAI projected to open in late 2015, will Abramović be able to achieve the level of presence she achieved in *The Artist is Present*, or will the public perceive the institute as "insecure," and leave it as yet another failed attempt at documenting an ephemeral medium? This question, one that will not be able to be fully answered until after the MAI is open, is crucial to understanding the complex role of the artist's presence in performance art, and in particular, how Abramović's presence has been affected over the last few years as she has increasingly marketed herself as her own brand or style of performance through documentation, celebrity collaborations, and commercial endeavors. Some of these endeavors, which I will elaborate on in the following chapter, have earned Abramović criticism both from critics and fans who see

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<sup>111</sup> Hrag Vartanian, "MoMA's Abramović Ends with a Bang," *Hyperallergic*, Published June 1, 2010. <http://hyperallergic.com/6611/moma-abramovic-line-ends/>.

<sup>112</sup> Marina Abramović and Klaus Biesenbach. 2010. *Marina Abramović: The Artist is Present*. New York: Museum of Modern Art, 211.

these attempts to increase her fame as “selling out.” The MAI is Abramović’s most recent, and most expensive attempt to secure her legacy. Without the physical presence of the artist, however, the institute will rely on the Abramović name to draw crowds. What Abramović is therefore risking with her increasingly mediated presence via commercial projects, is soiling her iconic name and subsequently losing her followers, on whose experience of her long-durational experiments her presence and legacy depend on.

## CHAPTER III

### ARTIST AS INSTITUTION

“I have moved from an art structure to a larger one. *The Artist is Present* somehow took me into that other territory. This is not a public who usually go to museums, they are super-young, and I become for them some kind of example of things they want to know. I think there is an enormous need to be in contact with the artist. It is huge responsibility, there are huge expectations. It does not make my ego bigger, it gives me more to do.”

--Marina Abramović<sup>113</sup>

“One can’t help but wonder what that younger woman would think of her older self cannibalizing her oeuvre to sell sportswear.”

--Sarah Cascone, *Artnet*<sup>114</sup>

As Marina Abramović’s fame has grown, her name has become representative of Abramović’s own “brand” of performance art called The Abramović Method that trains the audience with the skills necessary to achieve long-duration performance.<sup>115</sup> The name Abramović has become synonymous with long-duration, physically and emotionally draining performances. Abramović’s celebrity has been growing since the 1970s, but high-profile exhibitions like *Seven Easy Pieces at the Guggenheim* (2005), and *The Artist is Present* (2010) at the MoMA, helped introduce Abramović into mainstream media. Abramović has become an artist-celebrity whose name can instantly sell tickets and draw massive crowds. As succinctly noted by Jay Michaelson of *The Atlantic*, at *The*

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<sup>113</sup> Roslyn Sulcas, “Marina Abramović, Making Art in an Empty Space,” *The New York Times*, Published June 11, 2014, <http://www.nytimes.com/2014/06/12/arts/international/marina-abramovic-making-art-in-an-empty-space.html>

<sup>114</sup> Sarah Cascone, “Marina Abramović Flogs Adidas in World Cup Advertisement,” *Artnet*, July 9, 2014, <http://news.artnet.com/people/marina-abramovic-flogs-adidas-in-world-cup-advertisement-57889>

<sup>115</sup> Abramović states that: “the method exposes the mind-set of the performer to the public and involves a series of exercises to heighten the physical and mental experience of the participant.” Abramović, Marina, Shohei Shigematsu, Thomas Berloff, and Serge Le Borgne. Marina Abramović Institute. ORE Cultura srl, Milan. 2013, 42.

*Artist is Present* in 2010, Marina Abramović “got discovered.”<sup>116</sup> By the end of the exhibition Abramović was no longer just a “pioneering performance artist,” but also a celebrity, sought after not just by major art institutions, but also by mainstream brands, and A-list celebrities including James Franco, Jay-Z, and Lady Gaga.<sup>117</sup> While some of this fame has earned Abramović’s criticism as a sell-out and a villain, her collaborations with other celebrities and institutions have only added to her fame and influence. What I find especially concerning about Abramović’s growing fame is that the money and celebrity connections are corrupting the sincerity of her experiments with endurance into trendy events of pure spectacle.<sup>118</sup>

In 2011 discussion of Abramović as a villain became especially heated following her controversial direction of the MOCA Gala which was criticized by fellow performance artist Yvonne Rainer as a “grotesque spectacle” and “exploitative.” Abramović was accused of mistreatment and severe underpayment of the hired performers who served as shocking centerpieces at the \$2,500 a seat gala (Figs. 55-56).<sup>119</sup>

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<sup>116</sup> Jay Michaelson, “Yes, Marina Abramović is Selling Out—and That’s OK.” *The Atlantic*, Published December 18, 2013, <http://www.theatlantic.com/entertainment/archive/2013/12/yes-marina-abramovi-is-selling-out-and-thats-ok/282476/>

<sup>117</sup> Roslyn Sulcas, “Marina Abramovic, Making Art in an Empty Space,” *The New York Times*, Published June 11, 2014, <http://www.nytimes.com/2014/06/12/arts/international/marina-abramovic-making-art-in-an-empty-space.html>

<sup>118</sup> This is an issue that even Ulay, Abramović’s ex-partner attests to in an interview in the documentary *The Artist is Present*, in which he comments somewhat cynically about Abramović’s current wealth and celebrity as reflected in her taste for designer clothes and her decision to get breast implants. Ulay, still a lesser-known artist, seems to imply that Abramović has sold out while he has remained a “true,” struggling artist. Marina Abramović. "Marina Abramovic: The Artist Is Present: The Legacy of Performance." Museum of Modern Art, New York. June 2, 2010. DVD.

<sup>119</sup> The performance, for which performers were paid only \$150 plus a year-long MOCA membership, required extreme self-control and endurance: ““The performance will last over three hours,” the Yugoslavian-born, New York performance artist warned a group of hopefuls at an audition early this week. “You will not be able to pee. Holding the position will involve a certain amount of pain. You will be vulnerable — someone might try to feed you or touch you.” For some, like Rainer, the extremity of the

Yet many others came to Abramović's defense, including the performers themselves, who called it an honor to work with the iconic artist. In the end, the gala's controversy only strengthened her reputation as a shocking performance artist, and the publicity maintained Abramović's celebrity status. Today Abramović is one of the most sought-after performance artists alive. In 2014 alone, there were retrospectives of her work in London, England, Jevnaker, Norway, and Málaga, Spain, each drawing thousands of visitors to their openings.<sup>120</sup> Yet has Abramović's celebrity status already taken its toll on her performances? Where once audiences were shocked by acts of mental and physical torture, now they are ushered into minimalist spaces and instructed to empty their minds. One may interpret this drastic change as a reasonable progression reflective of the artist's increasing age, however, these meditative performances also give the impression of an artist who is testing how far her fame alone can get her as she prepares for her eventual retirement.

In this chapter I aim to investigate some of the more high-profile celebrity and institutional projects that Abramović has been involved in in the four years following *The Artist is Present*. I wish to question how these more mainstream collaborations affect the interpretation of Abramović's performances, as well as how these projects correlate with Abramović's interest in a shared experience between viewer and performer. My discussion of Abramović's celebrity will consider Abramović as a brand name and as an

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performance and the lack of pay for performers represented gross mistreatment and manipulation on Abramović's part. *Finkel*, Jori, "MOCA gala's main dish is performance art," *Los Angeles Times*, Published November 12, 2011. <http://articles.latimes.com/2011/nov/12/entertainment/la-et-moca-gala-abramovic-20111112>

<sup>120</sup> Roslyn Sulcas, "Marina Abramović, Making Art in an Empty Space," *The New York Times*, Published June 11, 2014, <http://www.nytimes.com/2014/06/12/arts/international/marina-abramovic-making-art-in-an-empty-space.html>: Lucas cites that over 3,000 people showed up for the opening in Málaga, Spain in May, 2014.



institution, while also investigating the contradictory nature of Abramović's increased commodification of her performance through excessive use of documentation and self-promotion. This issue of Abramović as a brand and a "sell-out" is especially prevalent when addressed in relation to the common concern of aging artists, and in particular performance artists seeking preservation in collections-based art institutions. Since her emergence into the mainstream after *The Artist is Present* in 2010, Marina Abramović has been using her growing fame to experiment with new ways to secure her legacy as the grandmother of performance art. She is increasingly distancing herself from the more physically brutal performance of her youth, and is using her celebrity status to promote her new role as teacher of performance art, a role that will become official with the opening of the MAI. While several of the projects that follow emphasize attempts at preservation through documentation and commodification, the MAI signifies Abramović's intended departure from the conventional methods of institutionalized performance to instead create a new type of museum in which audience participation and education are the primary methods of preservation.

### **Celebrity Collaborations**

Abramović's increasing fame over the last four years has earned her both an increasingly diverse audience, as well as an increasing amount of criticism for appearing to relish the connections her newly acquired fame has awarded her. However, Abramović's interest in celebrities is something that was already apparent at her "break-out" exhibition at the MoMA in 2010. Hrag Vartanian of *Hyperallergic* criticized the performance retrospective for its blatant favoritism of friends, celebrities and other elite members of the art world: "Every day by 10:30, when the museum officially opens, ten to

fifteen people are already waiting inside, having taken advantage of the early access granted to employees. And they aren't even first on the list, because just before the show begins, Abramović's assistant brings in a handful of VIPs who skip the line altogether... Last Thursday, for instance, only nine people sat with the artists, and Björk and her family accounted for a third of them."<sup>121</sup> This blatant favoritism for an elite crowd of celebrities and art patrons highlights an issue with institutionalized performance in which it is not only the artist's reputation at stake but also the institution itself. For the MoMA, clearly the presence of an iconic artist wasn't enough, that they decided enhance the spectacle with the addition of celebrity sitters to entertain the masses. This favoritism of celebrity visitors is an example of a problem with many art institutions, in which exhibitions are treated as showrooms where visitors attend a curated spectacle rather than participating in an open-ended dialog. For supporters of New Institutionalism, such as curator Alex Farquharson and museum director Charles Esche, the focus of art institutions should be to create a dialogic and participatory space for experiencing art, not the creation of a single spectacle to be documented through curated photographs and exhibition catalogues.<sup>122</sup>

*The Artist is Present* drew over half a million people to the MoMA, and thanks to Abramović's warm embrace of documentation, the entire exhibition is preserved. The

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<sup>121</sup> Hrag Vartanian, "Is Marina Abramović an Undemocratic Insidery Artist?" *Hyperallergic*, May 25, 2010, <http://hyperallergic.com/6459/marina-abramovic-undemocratic-insidery-art/>

<sup>122</sup> Farquharson expands on his criticism of the dominance of museum exhibitions by noting a recent abandonment of catalogues. He describes how 'new institutions' are increasingly replacing exhibition catalogs with journals that pull together different programmes from the museum that share a common frame or help produce a dialog surrounding certain ideas. Examples of 'new institutional' journals include Kunstverein München's *Drucksache*, Shedhalle's *Zeitung*, and CAC Vilnius' *Interviu*. Alex Farquharson, "Bureaux de change." *Frieze Magazine*, Published on February 9, 2006. [http://www.frieze.com/issue/article/bureaux\\_de\\_change/](http://www.frieze.com/issue/article/bureaux_de_change/)

three month exhibition was thoroughly documented through the museum's live online feed, photographs taken of each individual who sat across from Abramović, and through the documentary by Matthew Akers (Fig. 19), on which Akers worked for three years, following Abramović everywhere, on trips to India and Italy, to and from the museum, to her home, and even to her bathtub. The final product is a hundred and five minute documentary cut down from over fourteen hundred hours of footage. The documentary has been described as a celebration of Abramović rather than a critical analysis of her performance. However, while it places Abramović on a pedestal above an adoring public, Judith Thurman of *The New Yorker*, describes the documentary as one of contradictions that raises the question of what separates performance and authenticity:

But if Akers celebrates Abramović (and celebrates her celebrity) a bit too uncritically, he also captures her vital contradictions. The film conveys that what she does, as an artist and a woman, is to break down boundaries even as she resists being broken (by her terrifying mother; by her self-inflicted pain; by love and its loss; by her struggle for legitimacy; and finally, at sixty-five, by age). And the film raises, even as it dramatizes, a conundrum inherent in all forms of art: Where are the boundaries between performance and authenticity?<sup>123</sup>

Thurman's observation provides a refreshingly balanced perspective on Abramović and how she is represented by Akers in his film. Rather than condemning Abramović as a villainous sell-out or celebrating her as an artistic genius, Thurman points to the artist's multiple contradictions that reveal her struggle as she grows older with how to continue to create controversial work that pushes mental and physical limits, and how to preserve the essence of these works for after she is gone. Indeed, while Akers' film does exude a general attitude of celebration of Abramović's achievements, several scenes, in particular the ones filmed of Abramović in her New York City apartment or her Hudson home,

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<sup>123</sup> Judith Thurman, "The Artist is Once Again Present," *The New Yorker*, Published June 18, 2012, <http://www.newyorker.com/culture/culture-desk/marina-abramovic-the-artist-is-once-again-present>

present a much more multi-faceted character. She is shown cooking and laughing with friends about love, she is in the midst of training for *The Artist is Present*, waking up in the middle of the night to drink tea to stay hydrated, and she is exhausted, lying in bed in her red silk pajamas. In these scenes Abramović is revealed as a woman completely dedicated to her role as an artist and an educator of long-duration performance art, but also as someone yearning for love, a love she is attempting to secure through projects that increase her fame and promote her image as a performance icon. What Abramović risks losing in trying to play so many roles, however, is her authenticity as an artist and as a woman as her life begins to look as much like a performance as her art.

The question of authenticity resonates strongly with the current debate about Marina Abramović as a “sell-out” of her former self who performed in small venues and lived in a van with her boyfriend, artist Ulay. While in the years since *The Artist is Present*, Abramović’s integrity has been questioned due to her increasingly mainstream presence, Abramović refuses to be shamed for her projects with celebrities like Lady Gaga and Jay-Z, or with corporations like Adidas. Of course, Abramović is far from the first successful artist to have been accused of selling out in the course her career in an attempt to increase her fame and secure her legacy. Today celebrities’ faces adorn the surfaces of countless products, and the identities of these celebrities have widened from actors and musicians to also include celebrity chefs and celebrity artists. While celebrity chefs may sell out by endorsing their own lines of cookware, celebrity artists have ventured into fashion and home goods.<sup>124</sup> However, Abramović defends her actions as

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<sup>124</sup> Yayoi Kusama’s 2012 collaboration with Louis Vuitton is one prime example of an artist taking advantage of her fame by expanding her polka-dot presence into the field of fashion where her signature pattern can now be reproduced countless times. Similarly, one can now buy Abramović’s dinnerware line at the MoMA Design Store.

being an evolution of art patronage: “Can I just ask, who sponsored the art in the 17<sup>th</sup> century, 18<sup>th</sup> century, in all other centuries? Kings, popes, aristocrats. Who’s sponsoring the art now? The industry, the collectors, and the businesses and the banks. So what’s the difference?”<sup>125</sup> While Abramović’s is correct in her argument that the wealthy have long been the major patrons of the arts, what is earning her accusations of “selling her soul,” or becoming an “insider artist,” is her shameless self promotion through celebrity and commercial cameos.<sup>126</sup> Two of these examples of self-promotion took place in 2013.

The first piece was a collaboration with singer-songwriter Lady Gaga from which Abramović released a video of Gaga practicing a series of physical and mental exercises that promoted what Abramović has labeled The Abramović Method. The video shows Gaga, dressed in a white outfit with the MAI logo, completing such exercises as standing in a river wearing yellow cones over her eyes, walking naked and blindfolded in a field, and submerging herself in a pile of crystals (Figs. 21, 57-60). The video comes off more as a satirical spectacle of celebrity rather than a serious promotion of the Abramović Method and the MAI, yet Abramović defends her work with Gaga: “Lady Gaga has been incredibly beneficial for me. She brought me a huge audience. She has 35 million on her Facebook.”<sup>127</sup> Here Abramović points to celebrities as a monumental resource to bring attention to her current institute. However, while she is clearly aware of how her association with celebrities like Gaga can help increase her profile among a younger crowd, she is quick to deny any claims that she is actively seeking out these connections

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<sup>125</sup> Zoë Lescaze, “‘Nobody Questions Other Artists’: Abramović Strikes Back, Blinds Gallerygoers,” *Art in America*, Published October 24, 2014.

<sup>126</sup> Hrag Vartanian, “Is Marina Abramović an Undemocratic Insider Artist?” *Hyperallergic*, May 25, 2010, <http://hyperallergic.com/6459/marina-abramovic-undemocratic-insider-art/>

<sup>127</sup> *Ibid.*

and collaborations: “I’m not a celebrity sucker. They’re coming to me, I’m not going to them.”<sup>128</sup> Abramović may not have initiated the contact with Gaga that resulted in the filming of the somewhat comical YouTube video, but it is hard to believe she was ignorant of the fact that a video of Gaga, naked, and with yellow cones covering her eyes in the middle of a field, would garner vast attention.<sup>129</sup>

Another 2013 venture of seemingly shameless self-promotion by Abramović was her participation in rapper Jay-Z’s performance of “Picasso Baby” in Pace Gallery in Chelsea, New York (Fig. 61). In an ode to the duration of Abramović’s *The Artist is Present*, Jay-Z spent six hours continuously performing his song “Picasso Baby” to the delight of a specially selected audience of visual artists, museum directors, gallerists, actors, and fittingly, Pablo Picasso’s granddaughter, Diana Widmaier Picasso (Fig. 62-65).<sup>130</sup> Besides the lengthy duration of the performance, very little of “Picasso Baby” alluded to the mental and physical stamina Abramović has built her career on. Yet Abramović appears to have had no qualms associating herself with the rap performance, coming off like a middle school fan in describing her admiration for the musician: “I love his music... It’s so good. It’s like a volcano.”<sup>131</sup> However, while Abramović’s

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<sup>128</sup> Zoë Lescaze, “‘Nobody Questions Other Artists’: Abramović Strikes Back, Blinds Gallerygoers,” *Art in America*, Published October 24, 2014.

<sup>129</sup> Currently a YouTube video of Lady Gaga learning the Abramović Method has over 63,000 views, and the *Vimeo* posting has nearly three hundred comments. Sites ranging from Mashable, to Access Hollywood, and Huffington post all wrote about the video, in particular about the fact that Lady Gaga “gets naked” for the video.

<sup>130</sup> Other notable names included on the guest list included art historian Roselee Goldberg, artist Andres Serrano, actor Alan Cumming, art dealer Sandra Gering, and designer Jenna Lyons.

<sup>131</sup> Emma, Allen, “The Rapper is Present,” *The New Yorker*, Published July 11, 2013, <http://www.newyorker.com/culture/culture-desk/the-rapper-is-present>

participation in Jay-Z's performance may be considered proof of Abramović's selling out, it is also proof of the power of the artist's presence. Emma Allen, a journalist for the *New Yorker*, was able to attend "Picasso Baby," at the Pace Gallery, and described an immediate change in atmosphere at the arrival of Abramović: "When Abramović appeared, serene, in a voluminous black gown, the room fell silent." The crowd was stunned. Allen goes on to describe the interaction between the artist and musician: "What followed was a slow, seductive dance, the artist and the rapper pacing around, staring intently into each other's eyes, occasionally pressing their foreheads together, the mind-meld complete"(Fig. 66).<sup>132</sup> Allen's emphasis of the shared gaze between Abramović and Jay-Z calls attention to an important theme in Abramović's career: the connection between viewer and performer.

*Picasso Baby* may be manipulative through its use of celebrity presence to draw a crowd, however, the one on one connection between viewer and performer, or in the case of Jay-Z and Abramović, rapper and artist, maintains Abramović's interest in creating participatory performances that include the viewer as a vital component. This connection was also noted by art historian and curator Roselee Goldberg, who was photographed dancing with Jay-Z at the performance (Fig. 63): "Both performances, Marina's and Jay-Z's, encourage you to look somebody in the eye, which we don't do enough of, and it's daring to do that."<sup>133</sup> While in 1974 in *Rhythm 0*, Abramović used a passive gaze to encourage her audience to treat her as an object, in her performances from 2010 to present Abramović uses an active, shared gaze as a means to achieve dual agency

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<sup>132</sup> Ibid.

<sup>133</sup> Ibid.

and awareness between herself and her viewers. In the case of her participation in *Picasso Baby*, Abramović and Jay-Z transformed the conventional white cube of the Pace Gallery into a new, participatory performance space in which the celebrity presences of the two iconic artists may have initiated the performance, but the subsequent interactions that occurred over the following six hours were a result of a shared dialog between the viewers and the performers rather than a one-sided spectacle.<sup>134</sup> As reflected by Goldberg's comment, over the last forty years, and in particular from 2010 to today, Abramović has never stopped challenging passive viewership. What has changed is that her tactics for challenging her viewers have gone from aggression through discomfort, to inclusion through intimate, one on one connections between herself and her audience.

In recent years Abramović's interest in a connection between herself and her audience has changed from the often shocking and violent approaches of her work in the 1970s and 1980s, to a new interest in a more psychological, "loving" approach.<sup>135</sup> This interactive gaze utilized in *Picasso Baby* raises the question of whom, between Abramović and Jay-Z is the performer, and who is the viewer in this scenario? Is Abramović challenging Jay-Z's authority with her solemn presence? Or is she sacrificing herself to another opportunity for self-promotion and celebrity patronage? Many would argue the latter. Art magazine *Hyperallergic* referred to the performance as "the day

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<sup>134</sup> The transformation of the Pace Gallery into a participatory performance space mimics a miniature transformation of the gallery into a 'new institution' where participation and a dialog between the artist and the audience is emphasized. Alex Farquharson, "Bureaux de change." *Frieze Magazine*. Published on February 9, 2006. [http://www.frieze.com/issue/article/bureaux\\_de\\_change/](http://www.frieze.com/issue/article/bureaux_de_change/)

<sup>135</sup> In 1974 in her iconic performance *Rhythm 0*, Abramović presented herself as an object and voluntary victim to the will of her audience. Through her act of submission Abramović challenged passive viewership and female objectification. This challenging stance against her audience is also seen in Abramović's 1975 Lips of Thomas performance in which her self-mutilation was meant to shock viewers out of passivity. Emma Brockes, "Performance Artist Marina Abramović: 'I was ready to die,'" *The Guardian*, Published May 12, 2014, <http://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2014/may/12/marina-abramovic-ready-to-die-serpentine-gallery-512-hours>.



performance art died.<sup>136</sup> *The New York Times* pointed to it as the most recent proof of Abramović's evolution from avant-garde experimentalist to celebrity darling.<sup>137</sup> Indeed, *The Artist is Present* symbolizes the start of a period of transformation for Abramović. Since the 2010 performance Abramović has increasingly distanced herself from works of physical pain and suffering. Instead of attempting to shock her audience out of passivity, Abramović now appears more concerned with preserving her legacy by appealing to the mainstream market. Abramović hasn't completely abandoned her controversial tactics of the 1970s and 1980s, however, her own role has changed to one of designer, educator, and producer of durational performance art in which she has the power to employ others to enact feats of mental and physical endurance in the name of the Abramović brand.

### **Artist as Brand**

"I feel like I have become a brand, like Coca-Cola or jeans. When you say Marina Abramović, you know it's about performance art — hardcore performance art."<sup>138</sup>

Nowhere is Abramović's interest in marketing herself to a broader (and younger) audience, more clearly displayed, than in Abramović's recent collaboration with the Adidas franchise. Adidas released a short film as a promotion for the 2014 Fifa World Cup, under the premise of demonstrating teamwork. The short is filmed in black and white and is set to atmospheric music similar to that which played during the Lady Gaga video collaboration (Fig. 22). Abramović, who appears dressed in a lab coat emblazoned

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<sup>136</sup> Thomas Micchelli, "The End of Performance Art as we Know it," *Hyperallergic*, Published May 12, 2012, <http://hyperallergic.com/51300/the-end-of-performance-art-as-we-know-it/>

<sup>137</sup> Jay Michaelson, "Yes, Marina Abramović is Selling Out—and That's OK." *The Atlantic*, Published December 18, 2013, <http://www.theatlantic.com/entertainment/archive/2013/12/yes-marina-abramovi-is-selling-out-and-thats-ok/282476/>

<sup>138</sup> Jillian Steinhauer, "Is Marina Abramović Trying to Create a Performance Art Utopia?" *Hyperallergic*. Published May 7, 2012. <http://hyperallergic.com/51149/is-marina-abramovic-trying-to-create-a-performance-art-utopia/>

with the MAI logo, narrates the film solemnly, as if the piece being depicted was as close to her heart as the original performance it was based on, Abramović and Ulay's 1978 *Work Relation*, rather than it being piece of promotion both for herself and for her institute.<sup>139</sup> Abramović appears like a phantom standing solemnly to the side to supervise the performance. Eleven men and women transport piles of stones back and forth across an empty room using buckets or their bare hands while dressed in identical MAI lab coats and pairs of Adidas sneakers (Fig. 67-69). Thus the performance which aims to promote the importance of teamwork on the soccer field, presents a collaborative venture both between the men and women carrying the buckets of stones, but also between Abramović and Adidas in their equal promotion of their individual products: for Adidas, their sportswear, and for Abramović her upcoming institute for long-duration performance art.

Judging from art magazine editorials, as well as top YouTube comments, this short film received two primary reactions: one being that of disgust at Abramović as a sell-out, and the other as a defense of the artist for her right to earn money by working with a large company, as long as it means she is reaching a wider audience. Sarah Cascone of *Artnet* is one of the critics of the Abramović-Adidas venture, saying: "One can't help but wonder what that younger woman would think of her older self cannibalizing her oeuvre to sell sportswear."<sup>140</sup> Looking back over Abramović's oeuvre, her recent endeavors still resonate under the theme of long-duration performance, but

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<sup>139</sup> *Work/Relation* (1978) was a performance in which Abramović and her then partner Ulay, transported stones back and forth across a room using buckets for as long as they can bear it. Abramović and Ulay performed the piece several times, with the longest performance lasting eight hours.

<sup>140</sup> Sarah Cascone, "Marina Abramović Flogs Adidas in World Cup Advertisement." *Artnet*. July 9, 2014. <http://news.artnet.com/people/marina-abramovic-flogs-adidas-in-world-cup-advertisement-57889>

the intensity of the avant-garde artist seems to have been replaced with entrepreneurship. However, some would argue that this is a natural progression, one that has been seen many times before, from Marcel Duchamp, to Andy Warhol, and Jeff Koons. Jay Michaelson of *The Atlantic*, is one such person to question the issue with Abramović's having "sold out." Michaelson points to an entire history of artists who have built their careers on commercial opportunities that earned them money and fame: "Never mind that Warhol guy, or Keith Haring, or Takashi Murakami, or the plethora of artists who have thrived at the intersections of popular and elite culture. For that matter, maybe Michelangelo 'sold out' when he took that commission from the Medici's."<sup>141</sup> Selling out in the art world is not a new concept, however, part of the issue is that performance art, as part of the art historical cannon, is still relatively new. There is still debate over the ephemerality of performance, and how it can be effectively preserved in a museum setting.

These are the issues that are likely in the forefront of Abramović's mind when she decides to collaborate with a celebrity or corporation, and when she decided to build her own performance institute to instruct the public. In the face of the limits of collections-based museums, Abramović is creating her own, new institution where she will attempt to preserve her legacy of performance without depending on photographs or relics to replicate the experiences. Abramović is transforming herself from shocking, avant-garde performance artist, into a teacher of her very own "brand" of performance, The Abramović Method. As is succinctly summarized by Michaelson, Abramović is effectively retiring as the star player, and taking a seat on the board of directors. She's

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<sup>141</sup> Jay Michaelson, "Yes, Marina Abramović is Selling Out—and That's OK." *The Atlantic*, Published December 18, 2013, <http://www.theatlantic.com/entertainment/archive/2013/12/yes-marina-abramovi-is-selling-out-and-thats-ok/282476/>

saying “‘bye bye’ to pain, fear, death, and perhaps art itself. She’s moving upstate, starting a school. Maybe even gardening.”<sup>142</sup>

### **Looking Inward: Recent Performances of “Inner Presence”**

As Abramović’s grows older, she is taking a step back from her earlier emphasis on the physical presence of her own body, and is rather emphasizing an inner presence, and an aura founded upon her growing fame. In 2014 Abramović completed two performances in which the element of challenging her physical and mental limits, a key aspect of Abramović’s performances of the 1970s and 1980s, is focused into an increasingly Zen, silent repose. Abramović’s body is no longer an “object” through which to challenge passive viewership.<sup>143</sup> In fact, Abramović’s body is increasingly absent.

In the summer of 2014 Abramović completed her first major performance since *The Artist is Present*. This performance, titled *512 Hours*, performed at the Serpentine Gallery in London, continued Abramović’s experimentation with the relationship between performer and viewer.<sup>144</sup> This theme of performer-viewer interaction is one that Abramović has been interested in since her earliest performances in Belgrade in the 1970s. As Abramović’s fame has spread, the emphasis of her performances have become increasingly about the viewer. In *The Artist is Present*, the relationship between viewer and performer was a collaborative venture, with the visitor and Abramović dependent on one another’s presence to achieve the performance. In *512 Hours* the relationship

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<sup>142</sup> Ibid.

<sup>143</sup> In Abramović’s infamous *Rhythm 0* performance in 1974, she posted a label on the gallery wall in which she stated: “I am the object. During this period I take full responsibility.” Marina Abramović, and Klaus Biesenbach. 2010. *Marina Abramović: The Artist is Present*. New York: Museum of Modern Art, 74.

<sup>144</sup> *512 Hours* is named after length of time Abramović spent in the gallery.

between viewer and performer becomes one-sided, in which the visitors, hearing impaired by noise-cancelling headphones, become pawns to the artist's will as they wandered around the empty, square gallery space (Fig. 70-71). It is an exact reversal of the roles from *Rhythm 0*, (1974) in which Abramović submitted herself to the will of her audience.

Between June 11 and August 25, 2014, Abramović stood in the minimalist space in the Serpentine Gallery from 10am to 6pm, six days a week, and interacted with her visitors.<sup>145</sup> This format follows that set by *The Artist is Present*, both in the hours spent in the gallery space, but also in the use of social media to document the visitor's experience.<sup>146</sup> For this performance, Abramović claimed the audience as integral to the performance, describing them as her "material": "the public are my material, and I am theirs...I want to understand how I can be in the present moment, be with the public."<sup>147</sup> The premise of this exhibition was to achieve "nothingness," a description that has earned Abramović criticism from some sources that saw this exhibition as Abramović's own "Emperors New Clothes," claiming that she was using her fame to fool the public into believing in her proposed spiritual experience.<sup>148</sup> The Serpentine promoted the exhibition as a unique opportunity for visitors, where "the public will become the performing body,

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<sup>145</sup> Sometimes these interactions were limited to Abramović's observation of her visitors, but often it included her manipulation of participants by guiding them to various spots in the room.

<sup>146</sup> Participants in the *512 Hours* performance were encouraged to document their experience with a note, which was subsequently archived on a *tumblr* site: <http://512hours.tumblr.com/>

<sup>147</sup> Roslyn Sulcas, "Marina Abramovic, Making Art in an Empty Space," *The New York Times*, Published June 11, 2014, <http://www.nytimes.com/2014/06/12/arts/international/marina-abramovic-making-art-in-an-empty-space.html>

<sup>148</sup> Ibid.

participating in the delivery of an unprecedented moment in the history of art.”<sup>149</sup> The exhibition enticed viewers through the famed name of Abramović, and through their mysterious description of the event as one of achieving “nothingness.” More than 600,000 people visited the exhibition, with huge lines filing out the door of the gallery (Fig. 72). The hype of the exhibition even inspired British comedian and performance artist Hannah Ballou to restage *The Artist is Present* in the park across from the Serpentine, using a pug in place of Abramović (Figs. 73-74).<sup>150</sup>

If one peruses the visitor entries on the exhibition’s *tumblr* site, one finds multiple exaltations of achieving feelings of “oneness,” “serenity,” and “absolute presence”(Fig. 75).<sup>151</sup> These experiences had very little to do with the actions of the artist herself, who primarily circulated the room, occasionally leading a visitor to a blank wall. In this long-duration performance, the mystical presence of the artist both drew visitors to the gallery, and elevated the visitor’s experience of an empty room into one of serene energy, or, as one visitor put it: “Marina has turned the Serpentine Gallery into a House of Love.”<sup>152</sup> But not every visitor was entranced by Abramović’s exhibition of nothingness. Adrian Searle of *The Guardian* described his experience as stifling and miserable rather

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<sup>149</sup> “Marina Abramović: 512 Hours: The Serpentine premieres a new durational performance by Marina Abramović,” Accessed November 19, 2014, <http://www.serpentinegalleries.org/exhibitions-events/marina-abramovic-512-hours>

<sup>150</sup> Hannah Ballou’s Abramopug project has since become a media sensation, and has resulted in multiple photographed reenactments of Abramović’s performances. Ballou claims that her inspiration for creating a “pug version” of Abramović was because she felt that “Marina was at a point in her career where she really needed to be present with her public.” *512 Hours* inside. Katherine Brooks, “Marina Abramopug Is The Puppy Version Of Marina Abramovic We Never Knew We Needed,” *Huffington Post*, Published July 20, 2014, [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2014/08/20/marina-abramopug\\_n\\_5693060.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2014/08/20/marina-abramopug_n_5693060.html)

<sup>151</sup> “512 Hours,” Accessed November 19, 2014, <http://512hours.tumblr.com/>

<sup>152</sup> *Ibid.*

than serene and inspiring.<sup>153</sup> These mixed reviews call into question whether *512 Hours* falls into the same trap of *The Artist is Present*, in which viewers lacked the training to fully comprehend the experience prepared for them. Or it could be evidence in support of the criticism of the exhibition as being likened to the story of “The Emperor’s New Clothes,” with the average visitor too embarrassed to admit they don’t understand.

While in *512 Hours*, Abramović was consistently at the gallery space to interact with her visitors, in her most recent performance, *Generator*, at the Sean Kelly Gallery in New York, Abramović leaves the question of the artist’s physical presence uncertain.

*Generator*, on display at Sean Kelly Gallery October 24 to December 6, was Abramović’s first exhibition back in New York since her 2010 retrospective at the Museum of Modern Art. Once again stemming from the idea of “nothingness” projected in *512 Hours* in London, *Generator* is an exhibition without objects. In her artist’s statement, Abramović describes the space as one of “full emptiness,” and states: “*Generator* will be a unique environment for visitors to push the boundaries of their self-awareness and inner-consciousness, as they are confronted with nothing but themselves and the palpable energy in the room.”<sup>154</sup> The exhibition reflects the influence of the legacy of Minimalism through its rejection of material and commercial society found in Abramović’s goal of “nothingness.” The location of the exhibition in Sean Kelly Gallery also reflects the paradox of minimalist aspirations of the 1960s during which artists aspired to reject the “white cube” conventional display and authorship of art but were

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<sup>153</sup> Adrian Searle, “Halfway Through 512 Hours of Marina Abramović: no one to hear you scream,” *The Guardian*, Published July 18, 2014, <http://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2014/jul/18/marina-abramovic-halfway-through-512-hours-serpentine>

<sup>154</sup> *Sean Kelly Gallery*, Press Release, Accessed November 24, 2014, [http://www.skny.com/exhibitions/2014-10-24\\_marina-abramovi/pressrelease/](http://www.skny.com/exhibitions/2014-10-24_marina-abramovi/pressrelease/)

simultaneously dependent on these spaces for survival. But unlike critics of Minimalism like Michael Fried who criticized theatricality and reliance on spectatorship to complete a work of art, Abramović's embrace of the experience rather than observation of art exalts the participatory role of the viewer to fill the emptiness of the room.<sup>155</sup>

*Generator* is also an exhibition without sound, as visitors to the exhibition space are blindfolded and supplied with noise-cancelling headphones before entering the space (Fig. 76). By limiting the senses of her viewers, Abramović invites her viewers to achieve the stated "self-awareness," and to focus on the present. This goal of achieving emptiness and "presence," is defined as part of the Abramović Method as Abramović's hope for "the possibility to experience and reflect upon emptiness, time, space, luminosity, and void...I hope that the observer and the observed will connect with themselves and with the present- the elusive moment of the here and now."<sup>156</sup> This goal of focusing on the "here and now," once again rejects Fried's interest in art as a means to achieve a transcendental experience away from the everyday. Instead, in *Generator*, Abramović applies Minimalist reductivism to create a space to be shaped by the experiences of each individual visitor who walked through.

While the loss of sight and hearing forces visitors to focus on the moment in order to avoid running into a wall or fellow viewer, the one person whose presence is questioned is Abramović herself (Fig. 77). The reason for Abramović's absence from the

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<sup>155</sup> In "Art and Objecthood" Fried considers Minimalist art using the Greenbergian formalist framework through which he rejects Minimalism for its dependence on the spectator and theatricality to complete the work. Fried supported instead artworks that offered an instantaneous, transcendental experience away from the here and now. This goal is the opposite of Abramović's focus on the present moment and her reliance on audience interaction. Michael Fried, *Art and Objecthood: Essays and Reviews*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998, 73-84.

<sup>156</sup> Marina Abramović and Shohei Shigematus, 2014, *Marina Abramović Institute*, Ore Cultura Srl (Acc), 43.



exhibition is purportedly linked to Abramović's increased celebrity status. According to Abramović, it was during her daily presence in the Serpentine Gallery for *512 Hours*, that she decided that in order for her audience to truly focus on the present moment and on themselves, she needed a way to remove herself as a celebrity spectacle in her work. Abramović states that her experience with *512 Hours* inspired her to place the focus of her work increasingly on the viewer by anonymously joining them in the experience: "In *512 Hours* I was there every single day, but the last two weeks I understood, that I turn like a key into generator and the generator is working without me."<sup>157</sup> So in *Generator*, unlike *512 Hours* or *The Artist is Present*, Abramović is not guaranteed to be there. Instead, Abramović is alluded to in different ways, such as the allowance of sixty-eight people in the space at once: a reference to Abramović's current age. While Abramović did make exceptions for a few celebrity friends such as musician Rufus Wainwright and curator Klaus Biesenbach, for the most part, the average participant did not bump into Abramović in the gallery. This serves as yet another example of celebrity favoritism by Abramović, such as was criticized previously for her creation of celebrity VIP lines for her 2010 exhibition at the MoMA. Due to the fact that the average visitor to *Generator* would not see or physically feel the presence of the artist whose name drew them to the space, Abramović's "presence" became more of an aura of curiosity. Through this "Abramović aura," visitors were constantly held in a state of wonder and excitement at the chance that the person who just stepped on your foot, or stumbled into your shoulder, just maybe was the great "grandmother of performance art" herself.

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<sup>157</sup> Melena Ryzik, "Marina Abramović, Feeling Her Way Forward, Draws a Crowd," *The New York Times*, October 24, 2014, <http://artsbeat.blogs.nytimes.com/author/melena-ryzik/>

Following the issue of the lack of physical presence of Abramović in *Generator*, is the continued issue of the documentation and commodification of performance art. Over the last four years Abramović's performances have become increasingly interactive, but also increasingly dependent on documentation. In *The Artist is Present*, the performance was documented thoroughly through photographs, a *flickr* account, live-feed, video games, and most notably, an in-depth documentary. In *512 Hours*, this documentation came in the form of a *tumblr* account of uninspiring photos of participants wandering blindly through the gallery, and handwritten notes from the visitors (Figs. 75, 77).<sup>158</sup> Abramović's use of documentation in *Generator* contradicts her statement of wishing for the performance to be of "nothingness," and of being in the moment.<sup>159</sup> By photographing the event and posting the images online, Abramović attempts to preserve a moment in time, while simultaneously claiming the importance of being "present." Unfortunately these photographs and written notes from visitors cannot fully recreate the experience of the performance, and only serve to emphasize the problems with collections-based art institutions that rely on objects to preserve the ephemeral experiences of performance. They are simply relics of past experiences that spark curiosity but are unable to bring the performance back to life. As Abramović has acknowledged herself as early as 2005 with *Seven Easy Pieces*, the only way to preserve the essence of performance is through re-enactments.<sup>160</sup>

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<sup>158</sup> Images of visitors wandering around the minimalist gallery space can be found on Sean Kelly's website at [http://www.skny.com/exhibitions/2014-10-24\\_marina-abramovi/](http://www.skny.com/exhibitions/2014-10-24_marina-abramovi/), as well as on *Generator's tumblr* at <http://generatorskny.tumblr.com/tagged/photo>. These images also show a rare appearance of Abramović herself blindfolded and with headphones, interacting with other visitors. For the most part, however, the photographs consist of often-blurry figures walking cautiously around the gallery.

<sup>159</sup> In contrast, in *512 Hours*, no photos were allowed besides the select few taken for promotional purposes.

<sup>160</sup> Marina Abramović, *7 Easy Pieces*. Milan: Charta. 2007, 11.

The problem Abramović is currently confronted with in her work is the conflict between the ephemerality of performance art, and the necessity of an object in order for it to be preserved in a museum or gallery. The artist is faced with the reality that she cannot sustain the physically and mentally aggressive performances that made her famous, for much longer. Abramović has already begun preparing for her “retirement” from performance art with the building of the MAI. But alongside Abramović’s increasingly passive role in her performances, and her transition from performer into teacher, Abramović has also continued to support projects that profit from the power of the Abramović’s brand. Jones notes that the relationship between the performance artist and the document is a reciprocal one: “The body art event needs the photograph to confirm its having happened; the photograph needs the body art event as an ontological “anchor” of its indexicality.”<sup>161</sup> Nowhere is this dependence on the documentation of Abramović’s career clearer than in the fundraising Abramović has supported towards funding the MAI. She has sold photographs of her performances, earned over a thousand dollars from giving fans hugs, and on November 25, 2014, Abramović signed limited edition “Abramović scarves” at the MoMA in New York (Fig. 16).<sup>162</sup>

But what will happen when the doors to the MAI open, and Abramović finalizes her transition from controversial performance artist, to director of her own school of durational performance art. In the years since Abramović began her performance art

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<sup>161</sup> Amelia Jones, 1997 “‘Presence’ in Absentia: Experiencing Performance as Documentation,” *Art Journal* Volume 56, Number 4 (Winter), 16.

<sup>162</sup> Alexandra Wolfe, “Marina Abramović Is Still Pushing Buttons and Limits,” *The Wall Street Journal*, Published October 24, 2014, <http://online.wsj.com/articles/marina-abramovic-is-still-pushing-buttons-and-limits-1414185514>. According to Alexandra Wolfe of The Wall Street Journal, more than one thousand people gave a dollar for a hug from Abramović, citing that on a recent weekend in Brooklyn Abramović gave out six hundred hugs.

career in the 1970s she has played many roles: the aspiring artist, the student, the rebel, the hippie, the celebrity, the villain, and more recently, the teacher. However, when the institute opens, Abramović claims she will be stepping into the shadows of her new role as administrator. The dual agency between performer and viewer that has been so essential to Abramović's performances in the past will still exist, but it will be altered. The viewer will still be present, but the role of artist will be substituted by a presence represented by the immense documentation of Abramović's oeuvre, and by the experiences of visitors to the institute. The question is, as the artist's physical presence is replaced with archives, will the sheer power and influence of Abramović's name alone be enough to carry on the artist's legacy? Without the promise of an "Abramović sighting," will crowds the likes of *The Artist is Present* and *Seven Easy Pieces* wind around the corners in Hudson, New York to preserve Abramović's legacy through their participation in her long-duration experiments? If the continuous flurry of fundraising associated with the Institute is any indicator, it seems the Institute's administration is planning on creating a spectacle so grand that perhaps their visitors won't even notice the missing presence of the woman whose name drew them there.

## CHAPTER IV

### THE MARINA ABRAMOVIĆ INSTITUTE

“I got a vision, like three-dimensional in my head, of something that I had to make right now... This is to create a new institute for humanity. I understood the need is no longer about the kind of art that I’m creating. We need a place, some kind of laboratory where we can combine art and science and technology, and spirituality in a new context. Where the public is no more the public anymore. Anybody who comes to the institute is an active participant.”

--Marina Abramović<sup>163</sup>

“Hello, welcome to the digital Marina Abramović Institute. Here at the digital institute you are able to participate in exercises designed by Marina Abramović as well as view a performance. On completing the exercises you will receive an official certificate of completion.”<sup>164</sup> This is the message that greeted me as I entered the digital Marina Abramović Institute, an online game designed by Pippin Barr, the same artist who designed the video game of *The Artist is Present* in 2011 (Figs. 38-39, 78). When I first proposed writing about the changing role of the artist’s presence in the performance art of Marina Abramović, I had hoped to culminate my research with a visit to the Marina Abramović Institute (MAI) in Hudson, New York, to experience her latest project in person. Unfortunately, the MAI remains under construction, so that my experience of the activities to be offered at the institute has been limited to the study of architectural renderings, MAI prototypes, and Barr’s digital simulation. The information I have gathered on the MAI is made possible by the extensive promotion and fundraising Abramović has spearheaded over the last few years, of which Barr’s game is just one.

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<sup>163</sup> Quote from Marina Abramović’s Kickstarter video promoting the MAI: “Marina Abramović Institute Kickstarter Video,” Vimeo video. Posted by the Marina Abramović Institute, 2014. <https://vimeo.com/71115439>

<sup>164</sup> “The Digital Marina Abramović Institute,” Video game, posted 2014. <http://www.pippinbarr.com/games/dmai/>

Other fundraising efforts include a dramatic *Kickstarter* video from which Abramović earned over \$600,000 (Fig. 79), as well as the recent official publication from the MAI. This manual describes the mission of the institute, and also provides a tour of each experimental chamber.<sup>165</sup>

### **The MAI Mission**

Abramović cites the monumental public response to *The Artist is Present* in 2010 as the experience that made her realize that the public desired the opportunity to slow down and be in the moment, but that they lacked a place to learn how. The MAI is intended to be that place, a new type of institution dedicated to the teaching of long durational performance for the public.<sup>166</sup> The MAI is designed as a laboratory for ideas that combine art, science, technology, and spirituality in a context where long-durational performance and community involvement is key. Abramović credits her interest in public interaction and community to groups like Dada and the Bauhaus, “where great minds come together to achieve miracles.”<sup>167</sup> The MAI is intended to be Abramović’s legacy of time-based and immaterial art and will focus on the preservation of long durational performance including, but not limited to, the media of dance, theater, film, video, opera, and music. This experimental approach to the preservation of performance art strongly reflects the conversations of supporters of New Institutionalism who, in their questioning of the role and function of the art institution have proposed a more self-reflexive, even

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<sup>165</sup> This book, along with Pippin Barr’s digital institute and the multiple promotional videos released by Abramović since 2012, have been monumental resources in my investigation of the institute’s philosophy before the institute officially opens. Marina Abramović, Shohei Shigematsu, Thomas Berloff, and Serge Le Borgne. *Marina Abramović Institute*. ORE Cultura srl, Milan. 2013.

<sup>166</sup> “Marina Abramović Institute” Kickstarter fund. Posted by the Marina Abramović Institute, 2014. <https://www.kickstarter.com/projects/maihudson/marina-abramovic-institute-the-founders/description>

<sup>167</sup> Ibid.

scientific approach to experiencing art. Charles Esche, Director of Van Abbemuseum in Eindhoven described his vision for new institutions as a hybrid of different functions of which exhibition-making was just one:

Now, the term 'art' might be starting to describe that space in society for experimentation, questioning and discovery that religion, science and philosophy have occupied sporadically in former times. It has become an active space rather than one of passive observation. Therefore the institutions to foster it have to be part-community center, part-laboratory and part-academy, with less need for the established showroom function.<sup>168</sup>

Indeed, it seems fitting that the building that will host the MAI was previously a community center and now will become a center that epitomizes Esche's 'new institutional' goals by conducting itself as both a laboratory and an academy for the learning of The Abramović Method of performance art.

In order to combat prior static and material approaches to the preservation of performance art in old art institutions, such as the relics and staged re-enactments at *The Artist is Present*, Abramović declares the MAI will be a new type of institute where art preservation will occur, not through documentation, but through the live performances and shared experiences of durational works by the visitors themselves.<sup>169</sup> At the MAI, Abramović will further implement the focus on a back and forth between reception and participation that she first attempted through the shared gaze at *The Artist is Present*, however, this time the artist's physical presence will be removed, mediated by a the shared dialog between the institute's visitors about long-durational performance.

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<sup>168</sup>Claire.Doherty, "The Institution is Dead! Long Live the Institution! Contemporary Art and New Institutionalism," Engage: Arts of Encounter, Issue 15, Summer 2004, pp. 1-9, 2004, 2.

<sup>169</sup> The cover page of the Marina Abramović Institute book emphasizes the focus of the institute on its visitors "dedicated to human beings." Marina Abramović, Shohei Shigematsu, Thomas Berloff, and Serge Le Borgne. *Marina Abramović Institute*. ORE Cultura srl, Milan. 2013.

The skills that visitors will build during their time in the institute will reflect the teachings of The Abramović Method, a method which trains visitors with the skills Abramović has deemed necessary to successfully participate in long durational performance.<sup>170</sup> Through a series of exercises experienced over a six-hour period of time, visitors will be exposed to the mindset of the performer.<sup>171</sup> These exercises are meant to heighten the mental and physical awareness of the participants, who, through their participation, are no longer considered “the public” or as “viewer,” but instead occupy the role of performer among a community of fellow protégées of The Abramović Method of performance.

Abramović’s focus on the experience of the public will be intensified at the institute by the fact that the artist herself will not be there to lead the long-durational exercises. Abramović’s role is replaced by the viewer, who she describes as a mirror, (a term she applied to herself in *The Artist is Present* in 2010) through which the observer and the observed will attempt to connect with one another and with the present moment.<sup>172</sup> Through the training offered at the MAI, Abramović is attempting to extend her influence beyond the powerful presence of her physical body, into an educational force that can entice an audience even without the promise of a celebrity artist sighting. The MAI will stand as a new type of institute in which the museum becomes more of a

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<sup>170</sup> Ibid., 42.

<sup>171</sup> The choice of six hours is important, it denotes the period of time Abramović has decided constitutes duration. This six-hour period also reflects the amount of time Abramović spent as a passive object to her audience in her iconic *Rhythm 0* performance in 1974.

<sup>172</sup> “The viewer will function as a mirror to the public, participating in the installation. During the experience, I hope that the observer and the observed will connect with themselves and with the present-the elusive moment of the here and now.” Marina Abramović about the role of the visitor at the institute. Ibid., 43.



social space than a showroom, and where the voyeuristic viewer is replaced with a participatory one. However, for this new institute to survive it will rely on Abramović's infamous name and legacy alone to draw the crowds to Hudson, New York, because unlike at her monumental 2010 exhibition at the MoMA, at the MAI the artist will not be present.

### **The Exercises**<sup>173</sup>

Upon entering the institute, visitors will be greeted by a receptionist and asked to sign an agreement to stay at the institute for six hours (Fig. 82).<sup>174</sup> They will receive an official MAI lab coat, special boots, and a pair of noise-cancelling headphones to aid in concentration.<sup>175</sup> They will then check in their personal items, including watches, phones, ipods, cameras and computers into a safety deposit box, where they will remain for the duration of the visit (Fig. 83). During a visit to the institute, participants will take part in a series of six exercises designed to aid visitors to focus on themselves, and on the present moment.

The first exercise takes place in an "Exercise Chamber," in which the participants are instructed in a variety of simple exercises meant to prepare the visitor for the mindset of the institute (Fig. 84). These include various breathing and stretching exercises. Next is

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<sup>173</sup> Due to the MAI still being under construction and no personal observation or experience was therefore possible, the following description of the exercises to be taught at the institute is based on the first physical introduction of the Abramović Method at the PAC Padiglione d'Arte Contemporanea in Milan, Italy in 2012, as well as from a prototype of the institute built in 2014 by Dutch architect Siebe Tettero (Figs 80-81).

<sup>174</sup> In Pippin Barr's digital version of the institute, the duration is reduced to one hour.

<sup>175</sup> Abramović describes the use of lab coats to limit distractions and add to the aura of experimentation: "At MAI, lab coats are not intended to repress participants' individuality, but rather to create a shared experience, bolstering empathic connection between participants. By acting as both a blank slate and common experience, MAI's lab coats support an audience's ability to absorb long durational works." "Marina Abramović Institute" Kickstarter fund. Posted by the Marina Abramović Institute, 2014. <https://www.kickstarter.com/projects/maihudson/marina-abramovic-institute-the-founders/description>

the “Water Drinking Chamber,” where participants will be instructed to sit on a stool and observe four containers of water each containing a different mineral (Fig. 85). Each visitor must select a container to drink from, take a glass, then focus on slowly drinking the water in small sips, focusing intently on each of the senses. The activity continues until a bell is heard, signaling the end of the exercise. From here, one will be led to the “Eye Gaze Chamber”(Fig. 86). Similar to *The Artist is Present* experience, in this chamber participants sit in wooden chairs and focus on engaging in a “mutual gaze” with the participant seated opposite them, breathing slowly, and blinking as little as possible.<sup>176</sup> This experiment, more than others, gives the visitor a unique look into the approach and mindset of Abramović during her three-month MoMA performance. Visitors not only re-enact the piece (granted, for a much shorter period of time), but they also receive the instructions that Abramović herself followed during her own performance.

According to the MAI prototype, the next room is the “Electricity Chamber” (Fig. 87), named after scientist Nicola Tesla.<sup>177</sup> Here there will be a wooden table with eight apparatus elements. Participants pick up one or two of the apparatus elements and play with them in order to experience being the conductor and transmitter of electricity. At the sound of the gong, participants will walk to the “Luminosity Chamber,” where they will

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<sup>176</sup> The full instructions for this chamber read: “Please sit on the chair for human use of your choice. Place your hands on the arms of the chair or on your lap. Take a few deep, relaxing breaths with closed eyes. Open your eyes, and focus on the eyes of the participant in front of you. Engage in mutual gaze. It is important to be as motionless as possible. And to blink as little as possible. And to breathe as slowly as possible.” Marina Abramović, Shohei Shigematsu, Thomas Berloff, and Serge Le Borgne. *Marina Abramović Institute*. ORE Cultura srl, Milan. 2013.

<sup>177</sup> In plans for the institute, this has also been indicated as the “Crystal Cave,” a large room filled with crystal where visitors attempt to absorb mineral energy and focus their mental and spiritual forces. Also described are a Levitation Chamber, a Sound Chamber, and a Magnetic Towers Chamber, but these were not used in the prototype. *Ibid.*, 47.

lie on a “bed” and place their heads on crystal pillows (Fig. 88). The goal is to relax and focus on achieving a “timeless state of mind.”<sup>178</sup> The final chamber will be the “Writing Chamber.” In this room, set up much like a classroom, participants have the opportunity to share their thoughts on their experience of The Abramović Method. In her explanation of the prototype, Abramović emphasizes that the comments received in this chamber will be extremely influential on the final decisions made for the experiments in the institute.

In the prototype, the visitor’s experience ends after the writing chamber, but plans for the MAI indicate an extended experience beyond the six required exercise chambers. Abramović describes the participant’s experience following the luminosity chamber as a flexible one. In a promotional video, Abramović describes the time following the experiments as providing the visitors an opportunity to watch performances enacted in the main performance hall, rest in a “sleepers parking lot,” attend a lecture in the lecture hall, or spend time in the institute’s library or café, all of which will overlook the main performance space (Figs. 89-91).<sup>179</sup> The central location of the performance space serves as a reminder to visitors of the types of long-duration performances each chamber is training them to be able to achieve, however, in a break from conventional museum practices, the performance space does not serve as the sole spectacle of the institute. By surrounding this space with the experimental chambers as well as a library and lecture halls, Abramović is creating a new type of institution that supports the vision of New

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<sup>178</sup> A timeless state of mind refers to a mindset completely focused on the present moment. *Ibid.*, 185.

<sup>179</sup> This description of the various other rooms and activities available to visitors to the MAI strongly reflects Esche’s description of an ideal ‘new institution,’ in which the space would be part-community center, part-laboratory and part-academy. There is still going to be a central performance space where different artists will take turns performing, but this is only one element of the institute rather than the main spectacle as it would be in a typical art institution. Claire Doherty, “The Institution is Dead! Long Live the Institution! Contemporary Art and New Institutionalism,” *Engage: Arts of Encounter*, Issue 15, Summer 2004, pp. 1-9, 2004, 2.

Institutionalists like Esche, in which visitors are no longer visitors, but are participants in an educational dialog about art.

### **The MAI and The Artist's Presence**

As has been the case for Abramović's projects since the 1970s, the themes of duration, the body, and spectatorship remain as key elements in each of the exercises designed for the MAI. However, the one element that is blatantly missing at the MAI is the physical presence of the artist. Through the entirety of these experiments in the MAI, Marina Abramović will not be present. Instead, visitors will learn how to apply skills of The Abramović Method through their own experiences of long-durational experiments. In the introduction to her *Kickstarter* video, Abramović declares that for this project her own creation of art is no longer important. In a continuation of Abramović's forty-year dedication to participatory and durational art, the MAI is a site for collaborative dedication to durational performance through which past performances can be remembered and new ideas forged. Abramović states that: "This is going to be something that has never been built before. Because in the entire world there is nothing like this institute, because there is nothing long-durational in that way, and there's nothing as immaterial as this place." Through the creation of this institute, Abramović aims to provide a new, *immaterial* space in which visitors no longer need to depend on photographs or history books to explain the concepts behind performances. Instead, visitors will learn through experience.

Although the purported plan for the MAI appears to achieve immateriality through a lack of documentation or dependence on the iconic presence of the artist, the means by which the institute has been founded is completely material, and highlights

Abramović's celebrity status. On the MAI *Kickstarter* website Abramović offers a variety of incentives to the public to donate to the institute. So far over one thousand people have pledged a dollar for a hug from the famous artist, and six people have paid ten thousand dollars for a home-cooked dinner with Abramović. Proceeds from sales of Abramović-designed dinnerware and silk scarves, both sold at the MoMA Design Store, also support the institute (Figs. 16-17). While Abramović contends that the institute will be free to the public, she notes that low or free admission depends on the funds raised.<sup>180</sup>

The “materiality” required to create this immaterial institute came to head in the spring of 2014 when a list of unpaid volunteer positions was posted on the MAI website, resulting in a flurry of angry responses, including a commentary by *Hyperallergic's* Jillian Steinhauer, who claimed that Abramović's actions make Jeff Koons look like a saint in comparison.<sup>181</sup> Many criticized Abramović for using her celebrity to lure talented individuals into unpaid positions, an issue she was previously criticized for in her treatment of performers at the MOCA gala in Los Angeles 2011. In the end, whether the means by which Abramović earned the funds to open the MAI reflect poorly on her as a villain or diva, it is whether the institute is able both draw visitors and significantly affect their understanding of long-duration performance art that will ultimately decide if the MAI is a significant step forward for the preservation of performance art, or simply an arrogant spectacle. The big question everyone will have to wait to discover is whether the

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<sup>180</sup> Marina Abramović *Kickstarter* page for MAI: <https://www.kickstarter.com/projects/maihudson/marina-abramovic-institute-the-founders/description>

<sup>181</sup> Jillian Steinhauer, “Marina Abramović Institute Seeks So Much Unpaid Work.” *Hyperallergic*. Published July 31, 2014. <http://hyperallergic.com/140998/marina-abramovic-institute-seeks-so-much-unpaid-work/>

MAI will be able to preserve performance and the artist's presence where previous attempts have failed.

## **Conclusion**

The MAI stands as a symbol of the progression of Marina Abramović from a relatively unknown avant-garde artist who used her art to escape the barriers of her Communist upbringing in Serbia, to a performance icon, known equally for her celebrity friendships and collaborations as she is for her own brand of durational performance art. On May 31, 2010, Abramović rose from her chair in the Donald B. and Catherine C. Marron Atrium of the MoMA to a standing ovation, and in that moment she claims she was inspired as to what she must do next: "When I stood up from that chair I was not the same anymore. Something really changed in me. It was the first time I really understood of this enormous need of the public to be a part of the total experience...I got a vision in my head of something that I have to make right now, and this is to make an institute for humanity."<sup>182</sup> *The Artist is Present* represents the first major step in the last five years of Abramović's focus on re-defining her role from artist to educator. The new subject of her art is her audience, on whom she depends to carry on her legacy of durational performance.

Within a year of *The Artist is Present*, Abramović began planning the MAI. In her performances over the last five years, from her controversial mentoring of Lady Gaga, to her recent exhibition of "nothingness" at the Sean Kelly Gallery in New York, Abramović has increasingly focused her attention on the role of the spectator as a dual agent: simultaneously a student and a performer of her method of performance. Whereas

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<sup>182</sup> "Marina Abramović Institute Kickstarter Video," *Vimeo* video. Posted by the Marina Abramović Institute, 2014. <https://vimeo.com/71115439>

in previous performances Abramović has been physically present to guide her subjects, between 2010 and 2015, as her fame has increased, her presence has become increasingly mediated through documentation and commercial ventures that attempt to represent the essence of Abramović and her performance art as a brand that can be replicated and mass-produced. At the MAI the absence of the artist will reach its climax. Participants will be left on their own to complete the experiments, guided only by instructional videos and trained MAI staff. Unlike Abramović's *512 Hours* in which the artist was present to interact with her visitors, or *Generator*, in which the prospective appearance of the artist titillated blindfolded gallery-goers, in the MAI, Abramović's legacy of pushing mental and physical endurance falls directly on the shoulders of the public. The retraction of the celebrity-artist presence may result in two outcomes: it may deter those only interested in celebrity spectacle, and therefore draw out only those truly dedicated to learning The Abramović Method; or two, the pure spectacle of this monumental space, dedicated to Abramović's oeuvre, will call crowds to Hudson by merit alone. It will be a true test of the ability of an artist whose own body has been central to her life's work, to transfer her art's subject from her own now iconic but aging form, to the bodies of her viewers, on whom she will depend for the continuation of her influence and presence as the grandmother of performance art.

Over the years as Abramović has grown both older, she has become increasingly preoccupied with spreading her fame and influence beyond select art circles. This concern has resulted in a struggle with the use of documentation and self-promotion to preserve her legacy in face of the ephemeral nature of performance. From befriending A-list celebrities including James Franco and Lady Gaga, to designing dinnerware and

selling hugs, Abramović has spent the last five years since *The Artist is Present* experimenting with ways in which to leave a lasting presence. While some of these materialistic projects have earned Abramović criticism for “selling out,” they have simultaneously earned her the fame and funds necessary to assist her in transitioning from the role of artist to that of teacher. This transition began with the shared gaze between Abramović and her audience at *The Artist is Present* in 2010 and has continued to develop in her performances in the five years since then. During this time Abramović has attempted to place the spectator as the focus of her work, with herself as a guiding force.

The MAI will be the peak of these efforts to both instruct her audience and to save her legacy without depending on the exclusionary and object-dependent approaches of conventional art institutions. Here, Abramović’s presence will be mediated not through photographs and relics from past performances but through The Abramović Method, and it will be preserved through the experiences of the participants. Abramović acknowledges that this experiment could be a complete failure. However, she argues that for her to continue to do the same thing over and over only creates habit; in order to progress, she feels one must be adventurous and experiment.<sup>183</sup> Indeed, with the opening of the MAI, Abramović is refusing to continue complacently relying on the static preservation and representation of performance in conventional institutions through photographs or even professional re-enactments. Instead she is drawing from a resource that has been crucial to her entire career: her audience. Their interactive presence has been a key element to Abramović’s performances since the 1970s, and thus it is fitting that they be the same

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<sup>183</sup> Ibid.



ones to bring life back into her performances after she is gone. If Abramović's institute succeeds, and fans line down the streets of Hudson, the MAI will be her legacy, and will be a monumental step forward for institutional representation of performance art. If it fails, Abramović will exit her career as controversially as she entered it in 1974, only now she will be dressed head to toe in Givenchy, and perhaps a MAI lab coat too.

## APPENDIX A

### FIGURES



Fig. 1 Marina Abramović at the opening of an exhibition of her abstract cloud paintings, c. 1970, Belgrade, Serbia. Image taken from: Westcott, James. *When Marina Abramović Dies: A Biography*. Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press. 2010, 44.

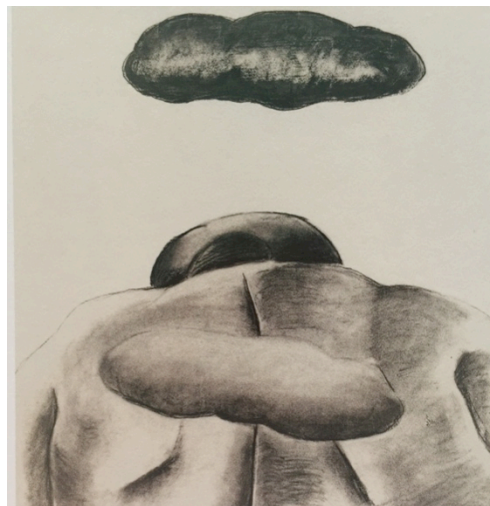


Fig. 2 *Clouds with Shadow*, 1970. Charcoal on paper, 60 x 50 cm. Image taken from: Abramović, Marina, and Klaus Biesenbach. *Marina Abramović: The Artist is Present*. New York: Museum of Modern Art. 2010, 46.



Fig. 3. Marina Abramović, *Rhythm 10*, 1973.  
Performance, 1 hour  
Museo d'Arte Contemporanea Villa  
Borghese, Rome.  
Image taken from: Abramović, Marina, and Klaus Biesenbach. *Marina  
Abramović: The Artist is Present*. New York: Museum of Modern Art. 2010, 61.



Fig. 4. Marina Abramović, *Art Must Be Beautiful, Artist Must Be Beautiful*,  
1975.  
Performance. 1 hour. Charlottenburg Art Festival, Copenhagen.  
Image taken from: Abramović, Marina, and Klaus Biesenbach. *Marina  
Abramović: The Artist is Present*. New York: Museum of Modern Art. 2010, 80.



Fig. 5. Marina Abramović, *Lips of Thomas*, November 14, 1975.  
Performance. Original duration: 2 Hours.  
Galerie Krinzinger, Innsbruck.  
Image taken from: Abramović, Marina, and Klaus Biesenbach. *Marina Abramović: The Artist is Present*. New York: Museum of Modern Art. 2010, 196.



Fig. 6. Marina Abramović, *Lips of Thomas* (star on stomach), 1975.  
Photograph from performance (detail). 29 <sup>3</sup>/<sub>4</sub> x 39 <sup>1</sup>/<sub>2</sub>". Original duration: 2 Hours.  
Image taken from: Abramović, Marina, and Klaus Biesenbach. *Marina Abramović: The Artist is Present*. New York: Museum of Modern Art. 2010, 28.



Fig. 7. Carolee Schneemann, *Interior Scroll*, 1975.  
Performance. East Hampton, New York.  
Image taken from: Reckitt, Helena, and Phelan, Peggy. *Art and Feminism*, 2001,  
82.



Fig. 8. Hannah Wilke, *S.O.S. Starification Object Series*, 1974-79.  
28 Gelatin silver prints with chewing gum sculptures.  
Image taken from: Reckitt, Helena, and Phelan, Peggy. *Art and Feminism*, 2001,  
107.



Fig. 9. Marina Abramović, *Rhythm 5*, 1974.  
Performance, 1 ½ hours.  
Student Cultural Center, Belgrade.  
Image taken from: Westcott, James. *When Marina Abramović Dies: A Biography*.  
Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press. 2010, 68.



Fig. 10. Marina Abramović, *Rhythm 0*, 1974.  
Performance. 6 hours (8pm-2am).  
Studio Mona, Naples, Italy. Image taken from: Abramović, Marina, and Klaus  
Biesenbach. *Marina Abramović: The Artist is Present*. New York: Museum of  
Modern Art. 2010, 76.



Fig. 11. Yoko Ono, *Cut Piece*, 1964.  
Performance at Yamaichi Concert Hall,  
Kyoto, Japan.  
Image taken from: Munroe, Alexandra, Ono, Yoko, Hendricks, Jon, Altshuler,  
Bruce, and Walker Art Center. *Yes Yoko Ono*, 2000, 156.



Fig. 12-14. Ana Mendieta, *Untitled (Silueta Series, Iowa and Mexico)*, 1973-78. Color photographs. Original documentation: 35 mm slides. 19 3/8 x 26 9/16 in. each

Images taken from: Viso, Olga M., Mendieta, Ana, Hirshhorn Museum Sculpture Garden, and Whitney Museum of American Art. *Ana Mendieta: Earth Body: Sculpture and Performance, 1972-1985*, 2004.





Fig. 15. Marina Abramović, *The Artist is Present*, 2010.  
Museum of Modern Art, New York.  
Performance. 716 hours and 30 minutes.  
Image taken from: Abramović, Marina, Shohei Shigematsu, Thomas Berloff, and  
Serge Le Borgne. *Marina Abramović Institute*. ORE Cultura srl, Milan. 2013, 13.



Fig. 16. Marina Abramović designed scarf (signed), 2014.  
100% Silk. 35.4 w x 35.4” h.  
Limited edition of 75.  
Image taken from the Museum of Modern Art Store online.



Fig. 17. Marina Abramović: Misfits for the Table Dinnerware Set. 2015.  
Porcelain.  
Image taken from: Arikoglu, Lale. “Talking with Marina About Loneliness, and  
Dinner Plates.” *The Observer*. Published February 5, 2015.  
[http://observer.com/2015/02/talking-with-marina-abramovic-about-loneliness-  
and-dinner-plates/](http://observer.com/2015/02/talking-with-marina-abramovic-about-loneliness-and-dinner-plates/)

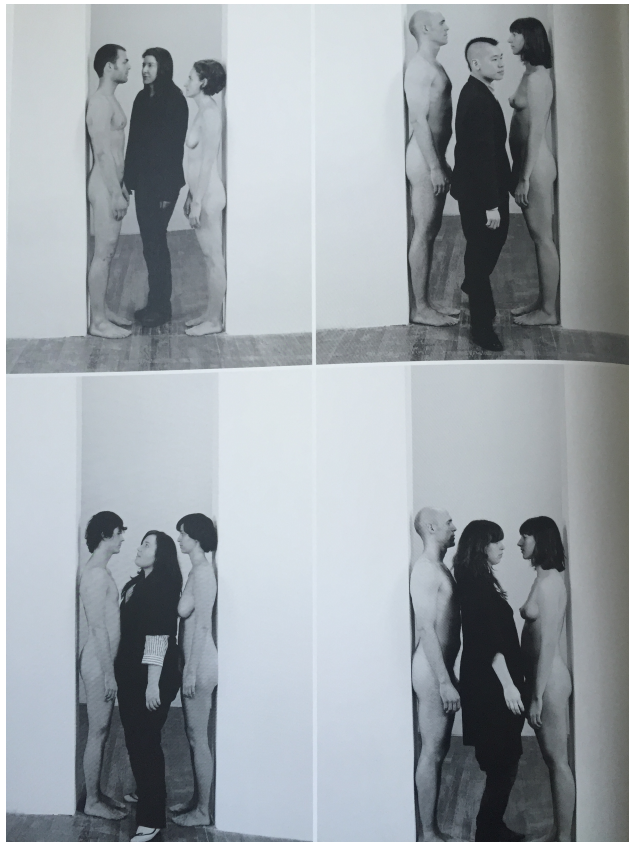


Fig. 18. Concept photograph for re-performances of *Imponderabilia* (1977), 2010. Museum of Modern Art, New York.  
Image taken from: Abramović, Marina, and Klaus Biesenbach. *Marina Abramović: The Artist is Present*. New York: Museum of Modern Art. 2010, 102.



Fig. 19. *The Artist is Present*. 2012.  
Film.

Promotional poster for documentary *The Artist is Present*, directed by Matthew Akers and Jeff Dupre.  
Image taken from IMDB.



Fig. 20. Marina Abramović and Jay-Z. *Picasso Baby*. 2013.  
Performance. Pace Gallery, New York.  
Photo: David Velasco.



Fig. 21. Lady Gaga and the Abramović Method.  
“The Abramović Method Practiced by Lady Gaga.”  
Screenshot from *Vimeo* video. Posted by the Marina Abramović Institute.  
<https://vimeo.com/71919803>



Fig. 22. Marina Abramović Institute and Adidas, *Work Relation*, 2014.  
“Work Relation 2014 - A film by Marina Abramović, in collaboration with  
Adidas.”  
Screen shots from YouTube.  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=B2KKfgYGOuU>



Fig. 23. Marina Abramović, *512 Hours*, 2104.  
Performance. Serpentine Gallery, London.  
Duration: 512 hours.  
Photo by Rune Hellestad/Corbis for *The Telegraph*.



Fig. 24. Marina Abramović, *Generator*, 2014.  
Video surveillance of performance.  
Sean Kelly Gallery, New York.  
Image taken from: <http://generatorskny.tumblr.com>



Fig. 25. The Marina Abramović Institute. 2015.  
Architectural rendering.  
Designed by Shohei Shigematsu and Rem Koolhaas.  
Image taken from: Abramović, Marina, Shohei Shigematsu, Thomas Berloff, and Serge Le Borgne. *Marina Abramović Institute*. ORE Cultura srl, Milan. 2013, 116-117.



Fig. 26. Marina Abramović, *The Artist is Present*, 2010.  
Museum of Modern Art, New York.  
Performance. 716 hours and 30 minutes.  
Image taken from: The Marina Abramović Institute Kickstarter website:  
<https://www.kickstarter.com/projects/maihudson/marina-abramovic-institute-the-founders?ref=2ukiec>



Fig. 27. Marina Abramović, *Rhythm 0*, 1974.  
Performance. 6 hours (8pm-2am).  
Studio Mona, Naples, Italy. Image taken from: Abramović, Marina, and Klaus Biesenbach. *Marina Abramović: The Artist is Present*. New York: Museum of Modern Art. 2010, 75.



Fig. 28. Concept photograph for re-performances of *Relation in Time* (October 1977), 2010. The piece was performed continuously by different performers for the entire exhibition, totaling in 600 hours.  
Museum of Modern Art, New York.  
Image taken from: Abramović, Marina, and Klaus Biesenbach. *Marina Abramović: The Artist is Present*. New York: Museum of Modern Art. 2010, 110.





Fig. 29. Concept photograph for re-performances of *Luminosity* (1997), 2010. The piece was performed continuously by a group of re-performers for the entire exhibition, totaling in 600 hours. Museum of Modern Art, New York. Image taken from: Abramović, Marina, and Klaus Biesenbach. *Marina Abramović: The Artist is Present*. New York: Museum of Modern Art. 2010,160.



Fig. 30. Marina Abramović, *Seven Easy Pieces: Bruce Nauman's Body Pressure* (1974), 2005. Performance, 7 hours. Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York. Image taken from: Abramović, Marina, and Klaus Biesenbach. *Marina Abramović: The Artist is Present*. New York: Museum of Modern Art. 2010, 186.



Fig. 31. Marina Abramović, *Seven Easy Pieces: Vito Acconci's Seedbed* (1972), 2005.

Performance, 7 hours.

Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York.

Image taken from: Abramović, Marina, and Klaus Biesenbach. *Marina Abramović: The Artist is Present*. New York: Museum of Modern Art. 2010, 189.



Fig. 32. Marina Abramović, *Seven Easy Pieces: VALIE EXPORT's Action Pants: Genital Panic* (1969), 2005.

Performance, 7 hours.

Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York.

Image taken from: Abramović, Marina, and Klaus Biesenbach. *Marina Abramović: The Artist is Present*. New York: Museum of Modern Art. 2010, 191.



Fig. 33. Marina Abramović, *Seven Easy Pieces: Joseph Beuy's How to Explain Pictures to a Dead Hare* (1965), 2005. Performance, 7 hours. Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York. Image taken from: Abramović, Marina, and Klaus Biesenbach. *Marina Abramović: The Artist is Present*. New York: Museum of Modern Art. 2010, 194-95.



Figs. 34-35. Marina Abramović, *Seven Easy Pieces: Lips of Thomas* (1975), 2005. Performance, 2 hours. Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York. Image taken from: Abramović, Marina, and Klaus Biesenbach. *Marina Abramović: The Artist is Present*. New York: Museum of Modern Art. 2010, 198-99.



Fig. 36. Marina Abramović, *Seven Easy Pieces: Entering the Other Side* (2005). Performance, 7 hours. Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York. Image taken from: Abramović, Marina, and Klaus Biesenbach. *Marina Abramović: The Artist is Present*. New York: Museum of Modern Art. 2010, 201.



Fig. 37 Jason Polan, *Every Person in New York: People outside The Museum of Modern Art at 10:23pm, May 30, 2010.*

Illustration.

Image taken from Jason Polan's website:

<http://everypersoninnewyork.blogspot.com/2010/05/people-outside-of-museum-of-modern-art.html>



Fig. 38-39. Pippin Barr, *The Artist is Present*, 2011.

Video game.

Screen shots from video game taken from:

<http://www.pippinbarr.com/games/theartistispresent/TheArtistIsPresent.html>



Fig. 40. In this image, artist Amir Baradaran visits Abramović dressed in a similar dress, as part of his own artwork *The Other Artist is Present*.  
Marina Abramović, *The Artist is Present*, 2010.  
Performance, 716 hours and 30 minutes. The Museum of Modern Art, New York.  
Image taken from Baradaran's website:  
[http://amirbaradaran.com/ab\\_toaip\\_act\\_I.php](http://amirbaradaran.com/ab_toaip_act_I.php)



Fig. 41. Marina Abramović, *The Artist is Present*, 2010.  
Performance, 716 hours and 30 minutes.  
The Museum of Modern Art, New York.  
Image taken from HBO Documentaries: *Marina Abramović: The Artist is Present*.  
<http://www.hbo.com/documentaries/marina-abramovic-the-artist-is-present#/>



Fig. 42. Marina Abramović and Ulay, *Nightsea Crossing*, 1981-87. Performance.

Image taken from: Abramović, Marina, and Klaus Biesenbach. *Marina Abramović: The Artist is Present*. New York: Museum of Modern Art. 2010, 142.



Fig. 43. Marina Abramović, *The Artist is Present*, 2010. Performance, 716 hours and 30 minutes.

The Museum of Modern Art, New York.

Image taken from Russeth, Andrew and Andrew M. Goldstein "Present and Past." *Artinfo*: <http://www.blouinartinfo.com/news/story/34097/present-and-past>

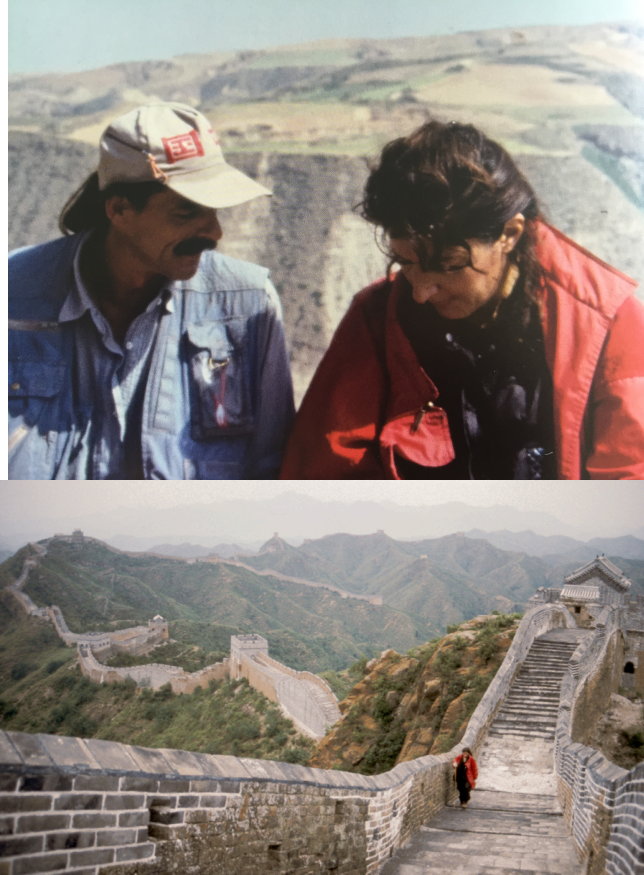


Fig. 44. Marina Abramović, *The Artist is Present*, 2010.  
Performance, 716 hours and 30 minutes.  
The Museum of Modern Art, New York.  
Photographs by Marco Anelli.  
Images taken from The Museum of Modern Art Flickr account:  
<https://www.flickr.com/photos/themuseumofmodernart/sets/72157623741486824/>



Fig. 45. Marina Abramović, *The Artist is Present*, 2010.  
Performance, 716 hours and 30 minutes.  
The Museum of Modern Art, New York.  
Image taken from Plataforma de Arte Contemporáneo:  
<http://www.plataformadeartecontemporaneo.com/pac/abramovic-espejo-de-si-misma-marina-abramovic-holding-emptiness-cac-malaga/>





Figs. 46-47. Marina Abramović and Ulay, *The Great Wall Walk*, March-June, 1988.

Performance, 90 days.

The Great Wall of China.

Image taken from: Abramović, Marina, and Klaus Biesenbach. *Marina Abramović: The Artist is Present*. New York: Museum of Modern Art. 2010, 147.



Fig. 48. The Museum of Modern Art, designed by Yoshio Taniguchi, The Donald B. and Catherine C. Marron Atrium. The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Mrs. Simon Guggenheim Fund. Image taken from: Abramović, Marina, and Klaus Biesenbach. *Marina Abramović: The Artist is Present*. New York: Museum of Modern Art. 2010, 40.



Fig. 49. Marcel Duchamp and Eve Babitz at the Pasadena Art Museum during Duchamp's retrospective exhibition, 1963. Exhibition photograph by Julian Wasser. Image taken from: Mesch, Claudia. "Serious Play: Games and Early Twentieth-Century Modernism." In *From Diversion to Subversion: Games, Play, and Twentieth-century Art*, 2011, edited by David Getsy, 69. 2011.



Fig. 50. Marina Abramović, *The Artist is Present*, 2010.  
Performance, 716 hours and 30 minutes.  
The Museum of Modern Art, New York.  
Image taken from: Vartanian, Hrag. “MoMA’s Abramović Ends with a Bang.”  
*Hyperallergic*. Published June 1, 2010. <http://hyperallergic.com/6611/moma-abramovic-line-ends/>.



Fig. 51. Marina Abramović, *The Artist is Present*, 2010.  
Performance, 716 hours and 30 minutes.  
The Museum of Modern Art, New York.  
Image taken from: Vartanian, Hrag. “MoMA’s Abramović Ends with a Bang.”  
*Hyperallergic*. Published June 1, 2010. <http://hyperallergic.com/6611/moma-abramovic-line-ends/>.



Fig. 52. Marina Abramović, *The Artist is Present*, 2010.  
Performance, 716 hours and 30 minutes.  
The Museum of Modern Art, New York.  
Image taken from: Vartanian, Hrag. “MoMA’s Abramović Ends with a Bang.”  
*Hyperallergic*. Published June 1, 2010. <http://hyperallergic.com/6611/moma-abramovic-line-ends/>.



Figs. 53. Marina Abramović, *The Artist is Present*, 2010.  
Performance, 716 hours and 30 minutes.  
The Museum of Modern Art, New York.  
Image taken from: Vartanian, Hrag. “MoMA’s Abramović Ends with a Bang.”  
*Hyperallergic*. Published June 1, 2010. <http://hyperallergic.com/6611/moma-abramovic-line-ends/>.



Fig. 54. Abramović works her crowd following the end of *The Artist is Present* performance.

Marina Abramović, *The Artist is Present*, 2010.

Performance, 716 hours and 30 minutes.

The Museum of Modern Art, New York.

Image taken from: Vartanian, Hrag. "MoMA's Abramović Ends with a Bang." *Hyperallergic*. Published June 1, 2010. <http://hyperallergic.com/6611/moma-abramovic-line-ends/>.



Figs. 55-56 Marina Abramović, MOCA Gala, 2011.  
Performance. 3 hours.  
Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles.  
Images taken from: Finkel, Jori, "MOCA gala's main dish is performance art,"  
*Los Angeles Times*, Published November 12, 2011.  
<http://articles.latimes.com/2011/nov/12/entertainment/la-et-moca-gala-abramovic-20111112>



Fig. 57. Lady Gaga and the Abramović Method.  
"The Abramović Method Practiced by Lady Gaga." Screenshot from *Vimeo*  
video. Posted by the Marina Abramović Institute. <https://vimeo.com/71919803>



Fig. 58. Lady Gaga and the Abramović Method.  
“The Abramović Method Practiced by Lady Gaga.” Screenshot from *Vimeo*  
video. Posted by the Marina Abramović Institute. <https://vimeo.com/71919803>



Fig. 59. Lady Gaga and the Abramović Method.  
“The Abramović Method Practiced by Lady Gaga.” Screenshot from *Vimeo*  
video. Posted by the Marina Abramović Institute. <https://vimeo.com/71919803>



Fig. 60. Lady Gaga and the Abramović Method.  
“The Abramović Method Practiced by Lady Gaga.” Screenshot from *Vimeo*  
video. Posted by the Marina Abramović Institute. <https://vimeo.com/71919803>



Fig. 61. Marina Abramović and Jay-Z. Picasso Baby.  
Performance. Pace Gallery, New York.  
Image taken from: Thurman, Judith. “The Artist is Once Again Present.”  
*The New Yorker*. Published June 18, 2012.  
<http://www.newyorker.com/culture/culture-desk/marina-abramovic-the-artist-is-once-again-present>.





Fig. 62. Diana Widmaier Picasso at Picasso Baby performance.  
Marina Abramović and Jay-Z. Picasso Baby.  
Performance. Pace Gallery, New York.  
Image taken from: Thurman, Judith. "The Artist is Once Again Present."  
*The New Yorker*. Published June 18, 2012.  
<http://www.newyorker.com/culture/culture-desk/marina-abramovic-the-artist-is-once-again-present>.



Fig. 63. Roselee Goldberg dances with Jay-Z at Picasso Baby performance.  
Marina Abramović and Jay-Z. Picasso Baby.  
Performance. Pace Gallery, New York.  
Image taken from: Thurman, Judith. "The Artist is Once Again Present."  
*The New Yorker*. Published June 18, 2012.  
<http://www.newyorker.com/culture/culture-desk/marina-abramovic-the-artist-is-once-again-present>.



Fig. 64. Andres Serrano and Jay-Z at Picasso Baby performance.  
Marina Abramović and Jay-Z. Picasso Baby.  
Performance. Pace Gallery, New York.  
Image taken from: Thurman, Judith. “The Artist is Once Again Present.”  
*The New Yorker*. Published June 18, 2012.  
<http://www.newyorker.com/culture/culture-desk/marina-abramovic-the-artist-is-once-again-present>.



Fig. 65. Alan Cumming at Picasso Baby performance.  
Marina Abramović and Jay-Z. Picasso Baby.  
Performance. Pace Gallery, New York.  
Image taken from: Thurman, Judith. “The Artist is Once Again Present.”  
*The New Yorker*. Published June 18, 2012.  
<http://www.newyorker.com/culture/culture-desk/marina-abramovic-the-artist-is-once-again-present>.



Fig. 66. Marina Abramović and Jay-Z. *Picasso Baby*.  
Performance. Pace Gallery, New York.  
Image taken from: Thurman, Judith. “The Artist is Once Again Present.”  
*The New Yorker*. Published June 18, 2012.  
<http://www.newyorker.com/culture/culture-desk/marina-abramovic-the-artist-is-once-again-present>.



Fig. 67. Marina Abramović Institute and Adidas, *Work Relation*, 2014.  
“Work Relation 2014 - A film by Marina Abramović, in collaboration with  
Adidas.”  
Screen shots from YouTube.  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=B2KKfgYGOuU>



Fig. 68. Marina Abramović Institute and Adidas, *Work Relation*, 2014.  
“Work Relation 2014 - A film by Marina Abramović, in collaboration with Adidas.”

Screen shots from YouTube.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=B2KKfgYGOuU>

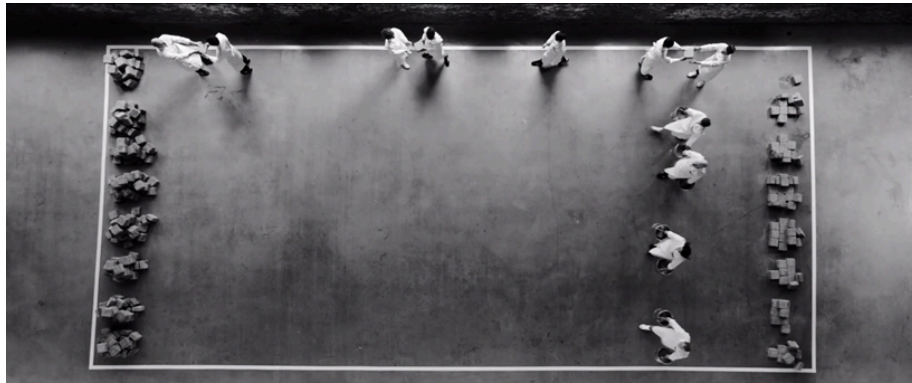


Fig. 69. Marina Abramović Institute and Adidas, *Work Relation*, 2014.  
“Work Relation 2014 - A film by Marina Abramović, in collaboration with Adidas.”

Screen shots from YouTube.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=B2KKfgYGOuU>



Fig. 70. Abramović interacts with her participants in *512 Hours*.  
Marina Abramović, *512 Hours*, 2014.  
Performance, 512 hours. Serpentine Gallery, London.  
Image taken from: Searle, Adrian. "Halfway through 512 Hours of Marina Abramović: no one to hear you scream." *The Guardian*.  
<http://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2014/jul/18/marina-abramovic-halfway-through-512-hours-serpentine>



Fig. 71. Abramović interacts with her participants in *512 Hours*.  
Marina Abramović, *512 Hours*, 2014.  
Performance, 512 hours. Serpentine Gallery, London.  
Image taken from: Sulcas, Roslyn. "Marina Abramovic, Making Art in an Empty Space." *The New York Times*. Published June 11, 2014.  
<http://www.nytimes.com/2014/06/12/arts/international/marina-abramovic-making-art-in-an-empty-space.html>



Fig. 72. Crowds lined up outside Serpentine Gallery for 512 Hours.  
Marina Abramović, *512 Hours*, 2014.  
Performance, 512 hours. Serpentine Gallery, London.  
Image taken from: Dama, Francesco. "Experiencing Marina Abramović's  
Nothingness." *Hyperallergic*. Published June 26, 2014.  
<http://hyperallergic.com/132663/experiencing-marina-abramovics-nothingness/>



Fig. 73. Abramopug re-enacts Abramović's *The Artist is Present* in the park  
across from the Serpentine Gallery.  
Hannah Ballou and Abramopug. *The Artist is Present*. 2014.  
Performance.  
Image taken from: <http://marinaabramopug.tumblr.com/>



Fig. 74. Abramopug re-enacts Abramović's famous photograph Portrait with Scorpion (Closed Eyes)(2005).

Photograph.

Image taken from: <http://marinaabramopug.tumblr.com/>

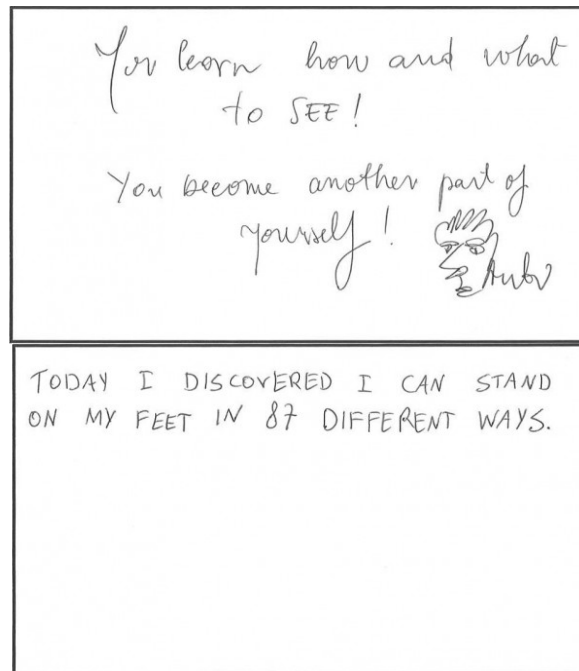


Fig. 75. Comments by participants of *512 Hours* performance.

Marina Abramović, *512 Hours*, 2014.

Performance, 512 hours. Serpentine Gallery, London.

Images taken from *512 Hours tumblr* account: <http://512hours.tumblr.com/>



Fig. 76. Visitor is blindfolded in preparation for Abramović's performance, *Generator*.

Marina Abramović, *Generator*, 2014.

Sean Kelly Gallery, New York.

Image taken from: Ryzik, Melena. "Marina Abramovic, Feeling Her Way Forward, Draws a Crowd." *The New York Times*. Published October 24, 2014.

<http://artsbeat.blogs.nytimes.com/2014/10/24/marina-abramovic-feeling-her-way-forward-draws-a-crowd/>



Fig. 77. Visitors feel their way around Sean Kelly Gallery.

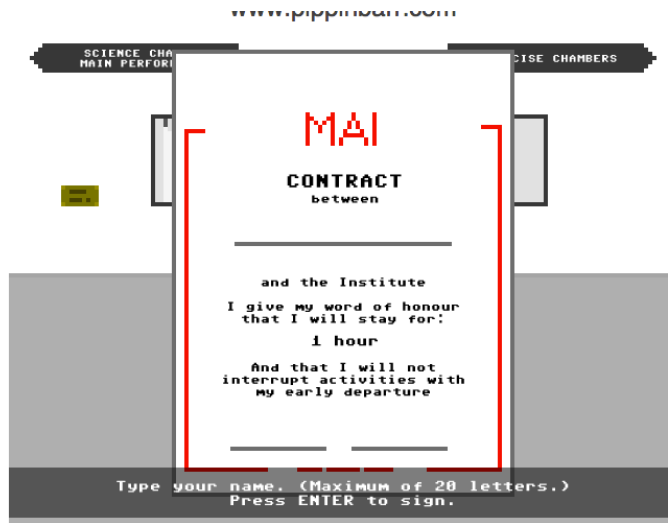
Marina Abramović, *Generator*, 2014.

Sean Kelly Gallery, New York.

Image taken from: Ryzik, Melena. "Marina Abramovic, Feeling Her Way Forward, Draws a Crowd." *The New York Times*. Published October 24, 2014.

<http://artsbeat.blogs.nytimes.com/2014/10/24/marina-abramovic-feeling-her-way-forward-draws-a-crowd/>





If you enjoy your digital experience of the Institute, please help to [make MAI a reality by supporting here](#).

Fig. 78. Contract for the Digital MAI.  
 Pippin Barr, The Digital Marina Abramović Institute, 2014.  
 Video game.  
 Screenshot from: <http://www.pippinbarr.com/games/dmai/>

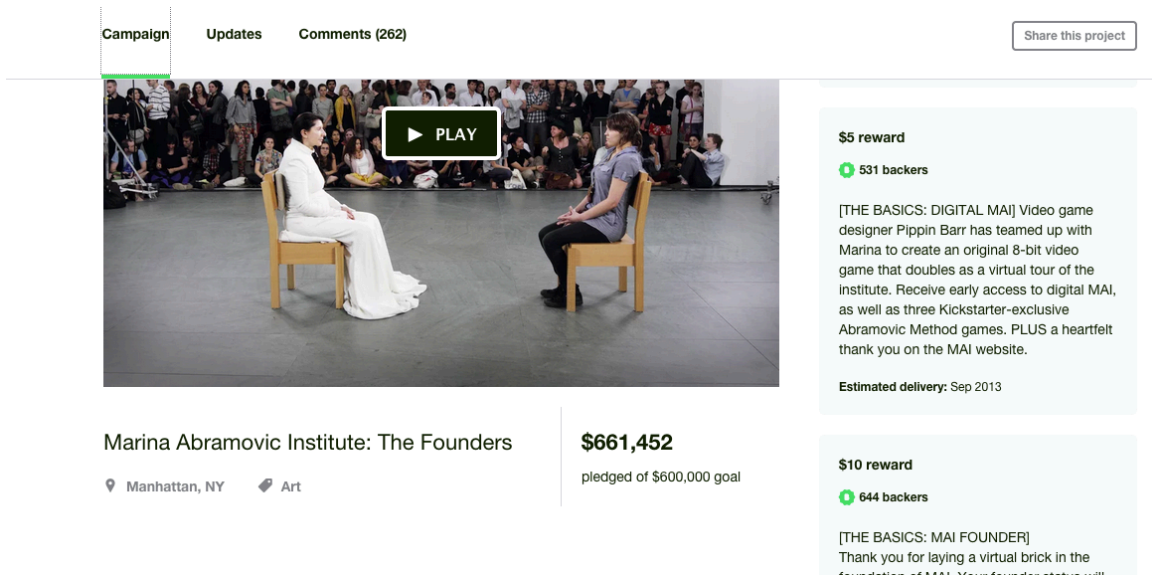


Fig. 79. Kickstarter page for the Marina Abramović Institute.  
 Screenshot. <https://www.kickstarter.com/projects/maiHUDSON/marina-abramovic-institute-the-founders/description>



Fig. 80. Marina Abramović Institute Prototype.  
Designed by Siebe Tettero.  
Image taken from: Abramović, Marina, Shohei Shigematsu, Thomas Berloff, and Serge Le Borgne. *Marina Abramović Institute*. ORE Cultura srl, Milan. 2013, 180.

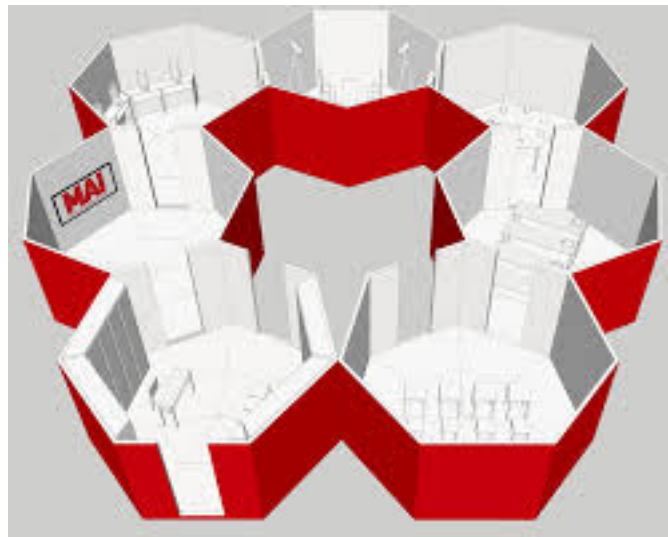


Fig. 81. Marina Abramović Institute Prototype.  
Designed by Siebe Tettero.  
Image taken from: Abramović, Marina, Shohei Shigematsu, Thomas Berloff, and Serge Le Borgne. *Marina Abramović Institute*. ORE Cultura srl, Milan. 2013, 182.



Fig. 82. Official contract for participation in the MAI.  
Image taken from: Abramović, Marina, Shohei Shigematsu, Thomas Berloff, and Serge Le Borgne. *Marina Abramović Institute*. ORE Cultura srl, Milan. 2013, 129.



Fig. 83. Orientation hall, Marina Abramović Institute.  
Image taken from: Abramović, Marina, Shohei Shigematsu, Thomas Berloff, and Serge Le Borgne. *Marina Abramović Institute*. ORE Cultura srl, Milan. 2013, 130-31.



Fig. 84. Exercise Chamber, MAI Prototype, 2013.  
Screenshot from: “Marina Abramović Describes the MAI Prototype,” *Vimeo*  
video, 5:10. Posted by the Marina Abramović Institute, 2014.  
<https://vimeo.com/71165004>



Fig. 85. Water Drinking Chamber, MAI, 2013.  
Architectural rendering taken from: Abramović, Marina, Shohei Shigematsu,  
Thomas Berloff, and Serge Le Borgne. *Marina Abramović Institute*. ORE  
Cultura srl, Milan. 2013, 134-35.



Fig. 86. Looking into the Eyes Chamber, MAI, 2013.  
Architectural rendering taken from: Abramović, Marina, Shohei Shigematsu, Thomas Berloff, and Serge Le Borgne. *Marina Abramović Institute*. ORE Cultura srl, Milan. 2013, 130-31.



Fig. 87. The Electricity, or “Tesla” Chamber, MAI Prototype, 2013.  
Screenshot from: “Marina Abramović Describes the MAI Prototype,” *Vimeo* video, 5:10. Posted by the Marina Abramović Institute, 2014.  
<https://vimeo.com/71165004>



Fig. 88. Luminosity Chamber, MAI, 2013.  
Architectural rendering taken from: Abramović, Marina, Shohei Shigematsu,  
Thomas Berloff, and Serge Le Borgne. *Marina Abramović Institute*. ORE  
Cultura srl, Milan. 2013, 88-89.



Fig. 89. Library, MAI, 2013.  
Looking into the Eyes Chamber, MAI, 2013.  
Architectural rendering taken from: Abramović, Marina, Shohei Shigematsu,  
Thomas Berloff, and Serge Le Borgne. *Marina Abramović Institute*. ORE  
Cultura srl, Milan. 2013, 174-75.



Fig. 90. Main Performance Space, MAI, 2013.  
Architectural rendering taken from: Abramović, Marina, Shohei Shigematsu, Thomas Berloff, and Serge Le Borgne. *Marina Abramović Institute*. ORE Cultura srl, Milan. 2013, 162-63.



Fig. 91. Sleepers Parking Lot, MAI, 2013.  
Looking into the Eyes Chamber, MAI, 2013.  
Architectural rendering taken from: Abramović, Marina, Shohei Shigematsu, Thomas Berloff, and Serge Le Borgne. *Marina Abramović Institute*. ORE Cultura srl, Milan. 2013, 170-71.

## APPENDIX B

### TIMELINE

#### A Select Chronology of the Performance Art of Marina Abramović, 1973-Present

*Rhythm 10*, 1973, 1 hour, Edinburgh Festival, Edinburgh, Contemporanea Villa Borghese, Rome (Fig. 3)

*Rhythm 5*, 1974, 1-½ hours, Student Cultural Center, Belgrade (Fig. 9)

*Rhythm 2*, 1974, 7 hours, Galerija Suvremene Umjetnosti/ Gallery of Contemporary Art, Zagreb

*Rhythm 4*, 1974, 45 min., Diagramma Gallery, Milan

*Rhythm 0*, 1974, 6 hours, Studia Morra, Naples (Figs 10, 27)

*Lips of Thomas*, 1975, 2 hours, Galerie Krinzinger, Innsbruck (Fig. 5-6)

*Art Must Be Beautiful, Artist Must Be Beautiful*, 1975, 1 hour, Art Festival Charlottenburg, Copenhagen (Fig. 4)

Marina Abramović and Ulay, *Imponderabilia*, 1977, 90 min., Galleria Comunale d'Arte Moderna, Bologna

Marina Abramović and Ulay, *Work Relation*, 1978, 2 hours, Theater aan de Rijn, Arnhem Festival, The Netherlands; 3 hours Palazzo dei Diamanti, Ferrara; 8 hours, Badischer Kunstverein, Karlsruhe

Marina Abramović and Ulay, *Nightsea Crossing*, 1981, 16 days, Art Gallery of New South Wales, Sydney; 1982, 1 day, Skulpturenmuseum, Marl; 3 days, Kunstakademie, Düsseldorf; 3 days, Künstlerhaus Bethanien, Berlin; 5 days, Kölnischer Kunstverein/Molkerei, Cologne; 12 days, Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam; 5 days, Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago; 1 day, A Space/Town Hall, Toronto; June 1982, 7 days, Documenta 7, Kassel; August 1982; 7 days; Documenta 7, Kassel; 1983, 4 days, Sonesta Koepelzaal/Museum Fodor, Amsterdam; ARS 83, 2 days, The Museum of the Ateneum, Helsinki; 1984, 4 days, Museum voor Hedendaagse Kunst, Ghent; 1 day, Galerie/Edition Media, Furkapass, Furka; 1 day, Städtisches Kunstmuseum Bonn; 1 day, Forum, Middleburg, 1985, 2 days, Dialogo, Fundação Calouste Gulbenkian, Lisbon; 1 day, First International Biennale, Ushimado, Japan; 2 days, XVIII Bienal de São Paulo, São Paulo; 1986, 3 days, The New Museum, New York; 1987, 2 days, Musée Saint-Pierre Art Contemporain, Lyons (Fig. 42)

Marina Abramović and Ulay, *The Great Wall Walk*, 1988, 90 days, The Great Wall of China (Figs. 46-47)



*Seven Easy Pieces*, 2005, 7 days of 1 performance a day, 7 hours each, Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York (Figs. 30-36)

*The Artist is Present*, March 14-May 31, 2010, 716 hours and 30 minutes, The Museum of Modern Art, New York (Figs. 37-45, 50-54)

MOCA Gala, 2011, Performance, 3 hours, Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles (Figs. 55-56)

Matthew Akers and James Dupre, *Marina Abramović: The Artist is Present*, 2012, documentary, 1 hour and 46 min. (Fig 19)

Marina Abramović and Lady Gaga, *The Abramović Method*, 2013, 3-day retreat, Hudson, New York (Figs. 57-60)

Marina Abramović and Jay-Z, *Picasso Baby*, 2013, 6 hours, Pace Gallery, Chelsea, New York (Figs. 61-66)

Marina Abramović and Adidas, *Work Relation*, 2014, short film of performance, 2.38 mins., Brooklyn, New York (Figs 67-69)

*512 Hours*, 2014, 512 hours, Serpentine Gallery, London, England (Figs. 70-72)

Marina Abramović and Hannah Ballou, *The Artist is Present*, 2014, performed daily outside the Serpentine Gallery during the 512 Hours exhibition, London, England (Figs. 73-74)

*Generator*, 2014, October 24-December 6, 2014, Sean Kelly Gallery, New York (Figs. 76-77)

*The Marina Abramović Institute*, proposed opening 2015, Hudson, New York (Figs. 80-91)

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